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Religious Modernists and the “Woman Question”: Challenges and Complicities

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In Iran at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the “woman question” (*mas’aleh-ye zan*) continues to be a contested issue between the forces of traditionalism and modernism. The pattern was set early in the twentieth century when the “woman question” entered the political discourse of the emerging nation-state. The dividing lines and positions were then clear-cut: those who raised the issue and argued for women’s rights were identified with secular discourses and modernism; those who avoided the issue adhered to religious discourses and traditionalism. By the 1960s, the issue had become more complicated. Subsequently, the rise of political Islam and women’s massive participation in the 1978-79 Revolution and since then in the political life of the Islamic Republic changed the context and dynamics of the “woman question” and opened a new phase in the politics of gender in Iran.¹

There were two crucial elements of this politics: it placed women themselves—rather than the “woman question”—at the heart of the battle between modernism and traditionalism; and it opened a space where a critique of gender biases in Iranian/Islamic culture can be sustained in ways that were previously impossible. By the 1990s, a quiet revolution in women’s rights was under way in Iran. There were clear signs of the emergence of a new line on women, one that had the potential to bring about much wider changes. It not only challenged the hegemony of orthodox interpretations of the *sharia* but also questioned the very legitimacy of the laws enforced by the Islamic Republic.

In the 1970s, women’s issues were still a taboo subject in Qom and no respectable seminary scholar could address them in his work. When Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari published a book in 1970 on women’s presence in society, *Mas’aleh-ye hejab* [The problem of veiling], his seminary colleagues received it harshly because it raised an issue that they considered inappropriate. Within twenty years, the Qom seminaries—the bastion of traditionalism—were trying, slowly and painfully, to come to terms with social reality. By the late 1980s, ayatollahs such as Ahmad Azari-Qomi, Yusef Sane’i, Abdollah Javadi-Amoli, and Ibrahim Amini—all members of the state’s political elite—were addressing the “woman question” in their scholarship. Among the publications financed by the Propagation Office of the Qom Seminaries [*Daftar-e tablighat-e houzeh-ye ‘elmiyeh-e Qom*] is a women’s journal, *Payam-e Zan* [Women’s message], intent on finding an Islamic solution to the “woman question.” Launched in March 1992, and run by young male clerics, the journal contains “state-of-the-art” clerical thinking on women’s rights as well as mapping the evolution of the official discourse of the Islamic Republic on gender.²

For clerics, the seminal text on the “woman question” continues to be Motahhari’s *System of Women’s Rights in Islam*, which had its origins in a series of articles published in *Zan-e ruz*

¹ See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Iran: Emerging Feminist Voices,” in *Women’s Rights*, edited by Lynn Walter (Westport CT: Greenwood, 2001); and Parvin Paidar, “Feminism and Islam in Iran”, in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 51-68.

² See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[Today's woman], the popular woman's magazine of the Pahlavi era. Rooted in the divisive debate between traditionalists and secular modernists over reforms in *sharia* family laws in the 1960s, these articles reflect the position of modernist clerics on the eve of the Revolution. *Zan-e ruz* had supported a campaign that led to the enactment of the 1967 Family Protection Law. Motahhari responded, putting forward the modernist Islamic position. He dismissed gender equality as a Western concept with no place in Islam and proposed, as a new justification for *sharia* family law, the notion of complementarity in gender rights and duties, both in marriage and in society.³

By the early-1990s, this notion of complementarity of rights began to be seriously challenged, even by those women who had once subscribed to Motahhari's position and helped to translate it from rhetoric into policy. Some of them no longer see any contradiction between fighting for equal rights and remaining good Muslims, arguing that there is no inherent or logical link between patriarchy and Islamic ideals. These views, now found in a variety of fora, first were aired in the journal *Zanan* [Women]. Its founder and editor, Shahla Sherkat, played an important role in the Islamization of the press in the early years of the Revolution. In 1982, she joined the Kayhan Publishing Institute as editor of *Zan-e ruz*, and remained its chief editor until 1991, when she left "because of unresolved disagreements".⁴ The first issue of *Zanan* appeared in February 1992. While advocating a brand of feminism that takes Islam as the source of its legitimacy, *Zanan* made no apologies for drawing on Western feminist sources and collaborating with Iranian secular feminists. In the early years, two of its regular contributors were a secularist female lawyer, Mehrangiz Kar, and a male cleric, Seyyed Mohsen Sa'idzadeh, who in their articles took issue with the very premises of the official Islamic discourse on women, laying bare their inherent gender bias. Sa'idzadeh's articles, written in the language and mode of argumentation of *fiqh*, transported *Zanan*'s message to the heart of the clerical seminaries. In fact, *Payam-e Zan* was in many ways a response to *Zanan*.

Zanan was a voice of dissent surfacing after over a decade of experience of Islam in power. It was part of a modernist and reformist tendency that remained dormant during the years of war with Iraq (1980-88); its re-emergence coincided with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death and was marked by increased tension between different visions of Islam. Supporters of this tendency, referred to as "new religious thought" [*now-andishi-ye dini*], show a refreshingly pragmatic vigor and willingness to engage with non-religious perspectives and to seek dialogue with secular intellectuals. They no longer reject an idea simply because it is Western, nor do they see Islam as a blueprint with a built-in and fixed program for social action. They argue that human understanding of Islam is flexible, that Islam's tenets can be interpreted to encourage pluralism and democracy, and that Islam allows change in the face of time, space, and experience. Debates stemming from their ideas are now aired in a variety of journals and periodicals, some of which are close to the seminaries and government.

Yet, among these new religious thinkers, no influential man has yet addressed the issue of gender in Islam. This silence was challenged eloquently by Mehrangiz Kar in her address to Akbar Ganji, the editor of the weekly *Rah-e now* [The new way], one of most radical organs of the reformists whose alliance helped to bring Mohammad Khatami to the presidency.⁵ Kar opened her address with a revealing observation about the pathology of the "woman question" in Islamic discourses. She noted that the front page of each of the first 15 issues of

³ In 1995, I discussed Motahhari's thesis with the clerics of *Payam-e Zan*; see *Islam and Gender*, pp. 86-143 and 170-209.

⁴ *Zanan* 1 (Bahman 1370 [February 1992]), p. 2.

⁵ "Roshanfekri-ye dini va mas'aleh-ye zanan" [Religious intellectuals and the problem of women] *Rah-e now*, vol. 1, no. 16 (17 Mordad 1377 [August 1998]): 32-33.

the magazine featured a close-up photograph of a male intellectual, whether Islamic or secular, embellished by an impressive quotation. The editor seemed unaware that half the population were women; neither their voices nor their issues seemed to be part of the New Way for which the editor and his colleagues were fighting.

In the remainder of this article I consider reasons for this silence on the part of male intellectuals and seek to shed light on their gender perspectives. The central question I ask is this: How far have they moved on this issue since the Revolution? I shall answer this question by examining two texts by Ali Shariati and Abdolkarim Soroush, the two most influential lay intellectuals before and after the Revolution. Their ideas and writings created varied passions and reactions. Before discussing their views, however, two caveats are in order.

First, I focus on the views of religious intellectuals because, in my view, secularist discourses—at least on the issue of gender—have little to offer in the battle between modernism and traditionalism. Secularist discourses on gender played an important role during and after the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11, paved the way for women's entry into politics and society, and prepared the ground for women's massive participation in the 1978-79 Revolution. Since then, with the convergence of religious and political authority, the battle has been conducted largely in a religious framework and language. Women's legal rights in Iran now must be raised and addressed within a religious framework, where the jurisprudential construction of gender can be re-examined and gender inequality can be redressed. There can be no sustainable gains for women until the *fiqh* model of the family and gender relations is debated openly and directly in the context of current realities and placed in the context of contemporary discourses, such as those of human rights and civil society. Otherwise the “woman question” will remain hostage to the fortunes of various political tendencies and discourses and a battleground between the forces of modernity and traditionalism, as has been the case in this century in Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world.⁶

Secondly, I focus on Shariati and Soroush because there are some interesting parallels and differences between them, which can tell us something of the continuities and changes in religious and political thought since the Revolution, particularly in relation to the “woman question.” Both men have been immensely popular with the youth, distrusted and opposed by the clerical establishment, and dismissed by secular intellectuals as light-weights. Nevertheless, their visions and conceptions of Islam are fundamentally different. For Shariati, the most important dimension in Islam was political; he sought to turn Islam into an ideology to galvanize revolutionaries and to change society. For Soroush, however, Islam is, as he puts it, “broader than ideology;” all his thinking and writing are aimed at separating the two. What they have in common is that neither considered the ‘woman question’ as central to their religious project; both addressed it reluctantly, producing vague and contradictory statements.

Ali Shariati and the “Woman Question”

If the clerical establishment is still under the spell of Motahhari's *System of Women's Rights in Islam*, the ‘new religious thinkers’ appear to be equally mesmerized by Shari'ati's seminal text on women: *Fatima is Fatima (Fatemeh Fatemeh ast)*.⁷ Their silence on these

⁶ For an insightful discussion of the issues, see Nayereh Tohidi, *Feminism, Democracy and Islamism in Iran* [in Persian] (Los Angeles: Ketabsara, 1996).

⁷ His three other texts on women contain the same arguments, but they are shorter and less substantial. *Women in the Heart of Muhammad* (n.d.) deals with polygamy and the reasons behind the Prophet's marriages. *The Expectation of the Present Era from the Muslim Woman* (a public lecture delivered in June 1972; Tehran: n.d.) and *The Islamic Modest Dress* (transcription of a talk in a private gathering in winter 1976) contain the same line of argument that Shari'ati developed in his seminal text. In 1982, his writings on women were published

questions today and their failure to provide an alternative suggest that *Fatima is Fatima* remains uncontested for them. Shari'ati's text embodies the religious intellectuals' approach to women's questions on the eve of the Revolution. I shall discuss it only briefly as it is available in English and has been extensively discussed by others.⁸

Fatima is Fatima is an expanded version of a public lecture Shari'ati delivered in April 1971 in the Hosseiniyeh Ershad, a celebrated religious institution which became a centre of opposition to the Pahlavis during the 1960s and 1970s. Although it came to be regarded as an Islamist treatise on women, it reads more as a critique of Iranian society and its values in the early 1970s.⁹ The preface reveals that the 'woman question' was not an issue on which Shari'ati had done any serious thinking; however, aware of his audience, he chose to address it and adjusted his original lecture accordingly.

[T]o begin with, I had wanted to comment upon the research of Professor Louis Massignon concerning the personality and complicated life of Fatima. I had wished to refer to the deep and revolutionary influence her memory evokes in Muslim societies and the role she has played in the breadth of Islamic transformation ...

As I entered the gathering, I saw that, in addition to the university students, many others had come. This spoke of the need for a more urgent response to the problem. I agreed to answer the pertinent question of womanhood, so extremely important today in our society.

Women who have remained in their 'traditional mould' do not face the problem of identity while women who accept the 'new imported mould' have adopted a foreign identity. But in the midst of these two types of 'moulded' women, there are those women who can neither accept their hereditary, traditional forms nor can surrender to this imposed new form. What should they do?

They want to decide for themselves, want to develop themselves. They need a model, an ideal example, a heroine. For them the questions "who am I? and who do I become?" are urgent. Fatima through her own 'being' answers these questions.¹⁰

The edited text of *Fatima is Fatima* can be divided into two parts. In the first part (pp. 6-108), which contains the expanded version of Shari'ati's lecture, he defines the 'woman question' and the dilemmas that contemporary Muslim women face.¹¹ He criticizes both Muslim women who unquestioningly accept their traditional role and modern, Westernized women who, by aping the West, become mindless consumers. He sees the latter as conforming to an imposed definition of femininity: "woman is a human being who shops." He

as a collected volume which has gone through many reprints: Ali Shari'ati, *Zan (Woman)*, Collected Work 21 (Tehran: Jahanbakhsh Press, 7th edition, 1994).

⁸. For his writings on women, including the full text of *Fatima is Fatima*, see Laleh Bakhtiar, *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman* (ABC International, Inc. USA, 1996). For analysis of Shari'ati's views on women, see A. K. Ferdows, "Women and the Islamic Revolution." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15, no. 2 (1983), pp. 283-98; M. K. Hermansen, "Fatima as a Role Model in 'Ali Shari'ati,'" in *Women and Revolution in Iran*, edited by Guity Nashat (Boulder: Westview, 1983); Nahid Yeganeh, "Women's Struggle in the Islamic Republic of Iran," in *In the Shadow of Islam*, edited by Azar Tabari and Nahid Yeganeh (London: Zed Press, 1982). For a bibliographical sketch and a sample of his lectures in English, see Ali Shari'ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, translated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan, 1979); on his ideas and their role in the revolution, see Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993); on his life and his influence, see Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998).

⁹. His *The Expectation ...* expresses similar views.

¹⁰. Bakhtiar, *Shariati*, p. 79.

¹¹. This comprises over 100 pages in the Persian text, corresponding to pp. 83-146 in Bakhtiar's translation.

blames the colonial policies of the West; having understood women's pivotal role in maintaining the fabric of Islamic societies, the West set out to alienate them from Islam so that Muslims could be dominated. But Muslim men and the narrow-minded clergy, who continued to misrepresent Islam, are equally to blame: they also conspired to deny Muslim women their truly Islamic rights. Educated women, denied their humanity, were left with little option but to look to the West for an alternative. The solution, Shari'ati suggests, is to be found in the person of Fatima: daughter of the Prophet, wife of 'Ali, and mother of Hasan and Hossein.

In the second part (pp. 108-205), which was added when the text was published, Shari'ati presents an account of Fatima's life.¹² The picture he draws of Fatima's life is romanticized but rather gloomy: more than offering a clear and tangible model for emulation, it epitomizes Shi'i ideals of silent suffering and covert defiance. As he portrays her, Fatima died of grief over the injustice following her father's death, when 'Ali was denied his right to the Caliphate, her patrimony was taken from her, and she failed to gain support for 'Ali's claim.

The text ends without providing a coherent answer to the crucial question Shari'ati considered to be facing Iranian women of the 1970s. He offers no concrete solution, only a romanticized, revolutionary vision of Islam. His rhetorical style and revolutionary tone arouse the emotions without seriously examining the question of women in Islam, a subject dealt with directly on less than ten of the 200 pages. Even then, Shari'ati neither elaborates on women's position in sharia, nor does he engage with proponents of sharia discourses on women. Instead, he uses the occasion to elaborate his own interpretation of Shi'i history, to condemn those in power for distorting it, to denounce Iranian society as one of pseudo-Muslims whose ways have little resemblance to true Islam, and to blame clergy and intellectuals alike for not enlightening people about true Islam. Although he criticizes narrow interpretations of the *sharia*, he remains imprecise and evasive himself.

This is not the case with respect to his critique of Iranian society of the 1970s. Here he is quite precise, and at times his language becomes sensational. His text is replete with passages which strongly condemn the non-Islamic state of society is, and commend the *sharia* law and its gender rules. In these passages, his language and logic resemble that adopted by the Islamic Republic on gender rules. To give a flavour of this, I quote a few passages.

This is why the veiled woman who wants to give birth to her children, screams, "Why men physicians? Why should women not be treated by women physicians?" She wants to have her child to go school and to the university. Her cries increase - is this the faculty of literature or a fashion show? Is this an Islamic university? Is this an Islamic society? Does this school smell just a bit of Islam? Does it contain a bit of ethics and meaning? Is this the radio of a religious country or just a noise box?¹³

When modernism came and found a place for itself, when it began to work, you were absent. You ran away. When you, a pious man, a religious, ethical Muslim (sensitive to people's feelings, responsible for the spirits and thoughts of society, preserver of Islamic culture) sulk and retire into a corner, you allow Reza Khan to bring a new civilization into effect and to employ a new industry and science¹⁴

They said, "Women will be freed - not by books or knowledge or the formation of culture or clear-sighted vision by raising the standard of living, or by common sense or

¹². This corresponds to pp. 149-210 in the English translation.

¹³. Bakhtiar, *Shariati*, p. 114.

¹⁴. Bakhtiar, *Shariati*, p. 115.

by a new level of vision of the world - but rather with a pair of scissors. Yes. Putting scissors to the modest dress!! This is how they think that women will all at once become enlightened!¹⁵

Passages of the text in which Shari'ati holds clerics and their distortion of true Islamic values responsible for Muslim women's attraction to 'imported ideologies' were deliberately set aside, but passages such as those quoted above, in which he denigrates 'modernity', found their way into the early gender discourse of the Islamic Republic.

Shari'ati's text betrays the ambivalence and confusion of lay Muslim intellectuals, not only on the issue of women's rights but also on their conception of the West and its relation to modernity. This ambivalence, and their inability to go beyond rhetoric, made their vision of Islam irrelevant when the Revolution succeeded in toppling the Pahlavi regime and put their discourse at the service of the clerical establishment who were intent on imposing their legalistic notion of Islam on society. It is a sharp irony that Shari'ati, the main critic of the clerical establishment, became the main ideologue of a Revolution that eventually brought the clerics into power.

Abdolkarim Soroush on Gender

As with Shari'ati, most of Soroush's books are edited collections of the texts of public lectures, delivered in various fora. If read chronologically, these volumes reveal the development not only of his ideas but also of his relationship with the Islamic Republic. His seminal articles on the historicity and relativity of religious knowledge, "The theoretical expansion and contraction of the *sharia*,"¹⁶ appeared intermittently between 1988 and 1990 in *Kayhan-e farhangi*. In these articles, Soroush distinguished religion from religious knowledge, arguing that while the first was sacred and immutable, the latter was human and evolved in time as a result of forces external to religion itself. The heated debate that followed the publication of these articles led to his departure from *Kayhan* and to the birth of *Kiyan*, a monthly journal in which Soroush's writings form the centerpiece. They reveal the concerns and thinking of a deeply religious man who is becoming increasingly disillusioned by the domination in the Islamic Republic of what he calls "*fiqh*-based Islam."¹⁷

In the vast corpus of Soroush's published work, there are only two paragraphs on women, both merely asides commenting on the incongruity between texts taught in the seminaries and the current state of knowledge and world-views.¹⁸ However, he has not been able to avoid the issue of women in his lectures, notably in those on *Nahj ol-Balagheh*, the collection of Imam 'Ali's sermons and letters, which contains the Imam's harsh views on

¹⁵ Bakhtiar, *Shariati*, p. 144

¹⁶ Published in book form in 1991, by 1994 it had gone through four editions, selling over 20,000 copies; Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'urik-e Shari'at* [Theoretical contraction and expansion of the *sharia*] (Tehran: Serat Institute, 3rd ed., 1994).

¹⁷ For his political thought, see Valla Vakili, *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Washington: Council of Foreign Relations, 1996); Robin Wright, "Islam and Liberal Democracy: Two Visions of Reformation," *Journal of Democracy*, no. 2 (1996): 64-75. For his contribution to modern Islamic discourse, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Afshin Matin-asghari, "Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 30, nos. 1-2 (1997): pp. 95-115; J. Cooper, "The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of 'Abd al-Karim Soroush,'" in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, ed. by J. Cooper, Ronald L. Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998). For a collection of his writings in English translation, see *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*, translated and edited with a critical introduction by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmed Sadri (Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Soroush, *Qabz va Bast*, pp. 81-83, and *Farbehtar az Ide'uluzhi* [Sturdier than Ideology] (Tehran: Serat Cultural Institute, 2nd ed. 1994), p. 39.

women. These lectures, recordings of which are in circulation, are revealing in many ways. In the first one, delivered in January 1989 at Tehran's Imam Sadeq mosque, Soroush uses the occasion of Women's Day to comment on Imam 'Ali's famous *hadith* that women have three deficiencies when compared to men. First, they are deficient in belief because they do not pray or fast during menses. Secondly, they are deficient in wisdom because the testimony of two women equals that of one man; and thirdly, they are deficient in material gain because their share of inheritance is half that of a man.

As Soroush recites and translates Imam Ali's *hadith*, women present in the mosque start to cry out in protest, only to be promptly silenced by a man, saying "this is the word of Imam. How can you object and not accept it?"¹⁹ But the protests continue and only stop when Soroush asks to be allowed to finish his commentary and explain. His commentary betrays his ambivalence on the issue of women in Islam and also suggests that he was not prepared for such a reaction nor for a man to shout the women down. He intended to confine his discussion of women to one session, but the reaction persuaded him to continue the following week. He repeated and elaborated the content of the discussion in 'Isa Vazir Mosque in 1992, as part of an extended commentary on Imam Ali's letter to his son, known as "The Will". In the closing sentences the Imam tells his son not to consult women because their view is weak and their determination unstable, to keep women under the veil and to restrict their movements because strict veiling and seclusion keep them good, and so on.²⁰ Again, Soroush had intended to devote only one session to the theme of women, but at his audience's request he continued the lecture for four more sessions. So far, neither of these lectures has appeared in print.²¹

Elsewhere, I have translated passages from Soroush's 1992 talk, and the text of my own interview with him in London in October 1996, when I was able to discuss the 1992 sessions with him.²² Here I shall give selected passages, which reveal Soroush's gender perspective and his approach to sacred texts. As we shall see, they have several layers of meaning and contain contradictory discourses, which make it difficult to come to a single, simple reading of his views on gender. On the one hand, one cannot help but be impressed by Soroush's rational approach to the sacred texts, his willingness to see different sides to an argument, and his courage in opening up and speaking of taboo subjects in a mosque. On the other hand, when it comes to gender, his own reading and understanding of the sacred texts are not that different from those that inform the legal rules of *fiqh*. This is demonstrated in the extensive quote from his lecture below.

In an earlier discussion of *Nahj ol-Balagheh*, we said that it contains words which are uncongenial to women, and infringe cultural notions and democratic values that have come to fill human societies in the past two centuries. For this reason, words that once were acceptable, that no commentator found forbidding to interpret or to justify, are now problematic.

¹⁹. I later asked Soroush who the man had been; he said he was sitting close by but he thought it was the first time he had come to the mosque. He had asked Soroush to talk to his son, who had a number of questions to ask, but he never came again.

²⁰. *Nahj ol-Balagheh: Sermons, Letters of Imam Ali* (Qom: Ansariyan, 1981), pp. 434-35, Letter 31 (Will).

²¹. Earlier parts of his commentary on the Imam's Will have appeared in Abdolkarim Soroush, *Hekmat va Ma'ishat* [Wisdom and Life] (Tehran: Serat Cultural Institute, vol. 1, 1995 and vol. 2, 1997); perhaps later volumes will include the texts of his lectures on women.

²². See Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, pp. 222-37 for his 1992 lecture; and *ibid.*, pp. 239-46, for a text of my interview with him. In 1995, Zanan gave me an abridged transcript of a text prepared earlier for publication as "The Perspective of the Past on Women," covering both Soroush's 1989 and 1992 talks; but it was never published.

They demand a new interpretation or a new defense. Our forebears had no qualms in either interpreting or defending such words. ... As such a position for women wasn't contested, no one doubted these words ... The *Nahj ol-Balagheh* contains two kinds of statements on women: those that are based on reasoning and those that are not. Taken at face value, both are offensive to women. Among the latter, for instance, is the Imam's address to the people of Basra after the Battle of the Camel. He says: "You were the army of a woman and in the command of a quadruped. When it grumbled you responded, and when it was wounded you fled away."²³ Or: "Woman is evil, all in all; and the worst of it is that one cannot do without her."²⁴ These statements contain no reasoning. But in other statements the Imam has reasoned. They include those famous ones, that women are deficient in belief, in reason, and in worldly gain, because they do not pray or fast during menses, the testimony of two women equals that of one man, and their share of inheritance is half that of a man ... Put together, these statements suggest that seeking women's advice and involving them in the affairs of society should be avoided; that is, it's Muslim men's duty to keep their women secluded, to control them, and not to allow them a say. If we add *fiqh* rulings, the picture that emerges is even more devastating for women. There's no denying that in an Islamic society women are granted fewer rights and fewer opportunities than men.

... There have been several reactions to these *hadith* of the Imam and similar ones. These reactions are instructive, too. Specific justifications have been made; for instance, some of our clerics say that the Imam's comment on women's deficiencies was made after the Battle of the Camel and was due to the insidious role that Ayesha played in it. Such *hadith*, they argue, refer only to Ayesha or women like her. Some say the Imam uttered such words about women because he was upset and angry. Neither argument works. We must remember that reason derives its validity and universality from its own logic, not from what its user wishes to impose on it. That is, once we contend that a certain *hadith* of the Imam was influenced by anger or an event, then we have to admit the probability that other emotions and events influenced other *hadith*.

In that case, no *hadith* ever again can be used in the sense that they have been so far. Likewise, we can't say this *hadith* referred only to Ayesha. Its logic and content convey universality: it's not only Ayesha but all Muslim women who inherit half a man's share, and so on ... But the explanation we gave [in 1989] about those *hadith* of the Imam that are based on reasoning was that, once a *hadith* is based on reasoning, then it must be approached through its own reasoning. In fact, the credibility of such a *hadith* is contingent on the force and validity of its reasoning, not on the authority of its utterer. This has been our method in dealing with all sacred texts. For instance, we read in the Qur'an: "If there had been in them any gods but Allah, they both certainly would have been in a state of disorder" [sura Anbia, verse 22]. This is a reasoning whose acceptance doesn't rest on its being the word of God but on its force and soundness, so that it can become a backbone for our thinking ...

One can take issue with the Imam's reasoning and say that, if women don't pray or don't fast at certain times [during menses], this isn't a token of deficiency in their faith. It's, in fact, the very proof of their faith, as His Prophet tells them not to pray at such times. Obeying His prohibitions is like obeying His commands. In God's eyes what matters is the spirit of an act, not its form ... As to women's deficiency in

²³. *Nahj ol-Balagheh*, Sermon 13, p. 81.

²⁴. *Ibid.*, Saying 235, p. 539.

material gain, it's true that their share in inheritance is less, but this isn't proof that they're less than men, and we can't conclude from it that women shouldn't be consulted or assigned certain social and political status. No logical connection can be made here. If they inherit less, it's because they are told so.

Such an approach might work, of course, with *hadith* based on reasoning. But what about the others that aren't? Our solution here is to say that these *hadith* are "pseudo-universal propositions" (as logicians have it); that is, they reveal the conditions of women of their time. In addition, since what an Imam or a sage says is in line with the society in which he lives, we need a reason to extend it to other epochs ... Here we're faced with two jurisprudential principles and positions: one holds that *sharia* rulings, whether legal or ethical in nature, speak of societies of their time, and thus we need a reason for extending them to other societies or times; and the other argues the opposite, that we need a reason *not* to apply such *hadith* and rulings to all other societies and times. These two positions can't be reached from the words [of sacred texts] but only when we examine them from outside and apply our own reasoning to them.

... Anyway, these words exist in *Nahj ol-Balagheh*, and solutions must be sought for them. The search for solutions, as I said already, is decisive and can't be confined to words. If we challenge their authenticity, then our entire [corpus of] sacred sources will come into question. If we say they're pseudo-universal propositions, then not only women but men and many other rulings based on them will be affected. If we accept them as they are, then we must resolve the consequences of their incongruity with our present society. What we can say is that there's a kind of absolute neglect regarding such *hadith*. They aren't addressed seriously, so no serious solutions are found for them. This is because the hold of democratic values and notions of human rights is so strong that men and women don't allow themselves to think of contradicting them and prefer to keep silent in the face of incongruities. This isn't limited to our time, nor to religious knowledge, but [it's true of] all times and all branches of knowledge. It's also the case in science. A cultural view, a theory, sometimes takes such hold and captures minds and imaginations to such an extent that no one dares think otherwise. So, in every era, part of religious thought, views, or *hadith* is overshadowed and ignored, and another part is highlighted and welcomed. All we can say is that such issues must be left for history to resolve, in time. When our minds tell us not to think about this issue [women in sacred texts], then we can't hope to find a suitable solution. In the past, this and many other issues were so much in line with popular culture that there was no need for thinking. In our time such *hadith* have been dealt such devastating blows that no one finds it expedient to tackle them or to confront such a formidable torrent. The most we can do is to become familiar with the problem and its cause and leave the solution to time and later thinkers.

On this note, Soroush brings the session to an end. He has repeated essentially what he said in 1989 about the Imam's famous words on women's deficiencies, applying his theory of the "Expansion and Contraction of *Sharia*": descriptive, explanatory and normative, all at once. He argues both that understanding of sacred texts is time-bound and that the ulama's rulings are influenced by what he calls "extra-religious knowledge." Changes in knowledge render natural and Islamic matters that once were considered "unthinkable" and "non-Islamic." He despairs at the ulama's unwillingness to admit this at a theoretical level and to take consciously planned steps to revise their understanding in the light of current realities.

Despite this heady stuff and fresh approach, Soroush, like Shariati, seems to avoid any discussion of women's legal rights in Islam. He continues the discussion on women for four more sessions, because "some friends, especially sisters, asked for more." He skirts around *fiqh* and moves instead into religious literature to shed light on the sources from which jurists derive their conceptions of women's rights. He frames his discussion in the context of changing conceptions of the human role and place in the universe and asks why there is such a focus on women's rights in Muslim societies. He demonstrates that there is nothing sacred in our understanding of the *sharia*, which is human and evolves in time and is filtered through our own cognitive universe.

... in our time certain views have emerged about mankind, women included. In our society in recent decades, these views have centered on women's legal rights. The problem facing our thinkers has been to explain to believing Muslim women why certain differences in rights between women and men exist in Islamic thought. Confronted with the notion of gender equality, they try either to explain these differences away or to argue that Islam upholds sexual equality but rejects similarity in rights. Some have argued for differences, not in rights but in the duties of each sex, stemming from the differing abilities of each sex and the natural division of labor. Others have tried to explain by connecting differences in rights to physical, psychological and spiritual differences between the sexes ...

The nub of the matter is that it's assumed that equality between men and women—which women demand in our time in various parts of the world—means equality in legal rights. Here I want to explain the exact meaning of this [notion of] equality between men and women in the sense that some now are seeking and then see whether the common understanding of women's rights and duties in Islam admits such a notion of equality; and how most of our ulama, thinkers and jurists have conceptualized women and their status and the basis for their views. I stress, it's not for me to judge but only to offer a historical report of understandings that have existed to date. Nor do I claim that the door of understanding is closed, that no other understanding will emerge on this issue. Nevertheless, what has existed so far must be recognized and known.

We can have two views, both of which are rooted in our conception of women's purpose in creation ... In a nutshell, one holds that woman is created for man: her whole being, disposition, personality, and perfection depend on union with man. The other view denies such a relationship and holds that a woman has her own purpose in creation, her own route to perfection ... The first view—that woman is created *of* and *for* [man]—sums up past perspectives, including those of Muslims. Both qualifiers [of and for] are important.

In poetic and mystical language, Soroush discusses at some length what these qualifiers entail, how they create asymmetry in rights and shape relations between the sexes. A woman is created to mediate man's perfection, to prepare him to fulfil his duty, to enable him to manifest his manhood, to make him worthy of God's call. This is the essence of womanhood, and that is why she attains perfection through union with a man. But for a man, union with a woman is not the end but only the beginning of his path to perfection. Soroush opens two caveats: to say that woman is created of and for man does not mean she is created for, or to be at the mercy of, man's whim. To say that woman's perfection rests on union with man does not necessarily imply marriage, although formation of a family is one manifestation of such connection and an arena for complementarity and mutual perfection. On the second view,

which he says has captured the hearts and minds of Muslim women of our time, Soroush is less eloquent or forthcoming:

[The] second view, demanding equality between the sexes, says nothing more than that woman is not created *of* and *for* man. This philosophical and existentialist conception, of course, defines the scope of women's legal rights, shapes their status and the relations between the sexes, and so on. Here I don't want to discuss the implications of such a conception for women in the sphere of gender relations, nor shall I enter philosophical and legal discussions. These are to be found in the works of the late Motahhari and other thinkers such as Allameh Tabataba'i. Perhaps what can be said in defense of difference and non-similarity [of gender rights] has been said in these works, and I don't intend to add anything here. Nevertheless, I will make one point. One of those who judiciously understood yet denied [the implications of the two views] was Ayatollah Motahhari. In his book, *Women's Rights in Islam*, he clearly states that in the Islamic view woman isn't created for man. But I should say that this is not the general presumption of our ulama.

An understanding of equality between man and woman won't be possible unless we understand the basis correctly and know contemporary men's and women's understanding of it. This is the formulation of the problem, the two claims that confront each other ...

Having identified the core contradiction in the gender discourses of contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Motahhari, Soroush delves into religious literature to show the kinds of theories and master narratives on which they are based. He observes that, although no Muslim thinker has said explicitly "woman is of and for man," they all subscribe to the thesis. He offers three kinds of evidence for this; first, that religious sources are male orientated: whatever their genre, they solely or primarily address men, even when they deal with apparently genderless themes, such as rules for praying, or ethical issues such as lying or cheating. In this, Soroush says, scholars have followed the example of the Qur'an, which most often addresses men. For instance, many of the blessings promised in paradise, such as black-eyed perpetual virgins, appeal only to men.

The second kind of evidence is the way religious literature describes marriage. Here again, men are treated as the main beneficiaries, even though marriage is by definition a joint affair. He examines legal and ethical sources to list the kinds of benefit Muslim scholars identify in marriage, ranging from immunity from Satan's temptations to achieving the peace of mind that enables men to prepare for greater duties in life, such as gaining knowledge and serving God. He also relates a *hadith* of the Prophet that says: "Women are among Satan's army and one of its greatest aids." And retells a story from Rumi's *Mathnavi* about how Satan rejoiced after God created woman: "Now I have the ultimate weapon for tempting mankind," meaning, of course, men.

Similar is the sort of advice given to men on how to respect women's rights and pay them their dues. Soroush reads a passage from Feiz Kashani's *al-Mohajjat ol-Beiza* [The Bright Way], a book on ethics and morals. Feiz, a 16th-century Shi'i scholar, defines marriage as a kind of enslavement, and a wife as a kind of slave, advising men: "Now that you have captured this being, you must have mercy on her, cherish and respect her, etc." Soroush points out that it was in the light of such a conception of marriage and women's status that scholars read and understood the *hadith*, and he shows the internal flaw in such understandings. He recites *hadith* attributed to Shi'i Imams, telling men not to teach women

Sura Yusef from the Qur'an, but Sura Nur instead, and to forbid women to go to upper floors of the house, in case they are tempted to look down at unrelated men passing in the street.

The point is not what the real meaning of these *hadith* is, nor whether they are authentic. The point is, what meanings have been attributed to them [by] our religious scholars [who] have taken them seriously. My point is phenomenological, not theological. I don't judge, I simply say that in Islamic culture and history they've been taken seriously, and religious scholars have based their views on them ...

Soroush's final argument, about the absolute hold of the "woman is for man" thesis, is from mystical and philosophical literature. He cites two contrasting passages, one from the celebrated Sufi Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), the other from the philosopher Molla Hadi "Hakim" Sabzevari (d. 1878), and argues that they reveal the same conception of women, although expressed in two different idioms. Inspired by a *hadith* about the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, Ibn 'Arabi says that, like a rib, woman has the inborn ability to bend in her love without breaking: she is the symbol of divine love and mercy, created from "affection," and love toward man is implanted in her essence. Thus, woman's role and destiny is to bend in love; in so doing she joins man and makes him whole again. Man's love for woman, on the other hand, is like the love of the whole for a part; looked at this way, man's love for woman does not infringe his love for God. Compare this, Soroush tells his audience, with Hakim Sabzevari's view that women are in essence animals; God gave them human faces so that men will be inclined to marry.

Soroush concludes his excursion into religious literature with three further points.

First, in the sphere of women's rights we cannot think and talk only in *fiqh* categories of forbidden and permitted acts; we also must think in terms of interpreting religious texts, of man's and woman's purposes in creation, of traditions and social customs. Secondly, if Muslim scholars defined women's status in a way we find unacceptable today, it is not because they wanted to humiliate women or undermine their status, but because that is how they understood and interpreted the religious texts. Women in the past accepted their status not because they were stupid or oppressed but because they had no problems with such understanding and interpretation. In the past two centuries, however, the myths and theories that made such understandings acceptable to men and women have been challenged by scientific theories, including evolution. Changes in our worldview also have made women's legal rights an issue in Islam. Finally, the problem cannot be resolved by providing new justifications to defend an outmoded world view, hoping women will be lured back into accepting them; after all, acceptance is a matter of belief rather than reasoning. What we can do is try to understand the basis for, and the implications of, old and new views on women ...

In the remaining three sessions, Soroush is more discursive in style. He pursues neither a central argument nor a sustained critique of old readings of the sacred texts but tries instead to provide the basis for debate and a new positioning. This he makes clear at the outset. In his summary of the previous discussion, Soroush repeats his criticism of current understandings of the sacred texts, voices his skepticism of the new view, which he sees as seeking to "put women in men's place", then continues:

The old view has passed its test, and religious societies that lived by its rules have revealed what they entail for men, women and the family. On the other hand, societies that have opted for the new view, putting women in men's place, also have shown

their hand. In both camps, many now feel the need for revision. But since these views aren't philosophically neutral, revision is always slow and painful. They're tied up with a mass of baggage, and it's impossible to remain impartial when dealing with them ...

Until very recently in the West too, men have been the main theorists on women's nature and role in creation and society. This must make us cautious. When women replace them, they too are tied to their own baggage, however different. This is one of those rare cases where the door of judgement is closed to us, as both science and reason can be influenced by our emotions. You can't apply cold reason to an issue in which your entire being is immersed. There can be no guarantee that mistakes made in previous centuries won't be repeated. I say all this to affirm that we must rely here on Revelation and seek guidance in the words of religious leaders and those pious ones who are free of such baggage. The path of human reason here passes through the path of divine Revelation; if we explore and invest in this path, perhaps we'll obtain worthwhile results.

Having set the tone and the theme, Soroush returns to the closing sentences of Imam 'Ali's letter to his son²⁵ and relates them to the concepts of *hejab*, sexual honor and jealousy [*gheirat*], and worth [*keramat*]. On *hejab* he is brief, confining himself to two points: that its form and limits always have been bound up with culture and politics; and that what God permits, man should not forbid. To drive both home, he relates what Motahhari told him about how he began research for his book on *hejab*. Motahhari said he was afraid to enter a minefield of divergent opinions, but, as his research progressed, he found an astonishing degree of consensus among Shi'i and Sunni jurists: all, except one Sunni, held that women's hands and faces need not be covered. He also found that all *fatvas* recommending stricter covering were issued after Reza Shah Pahlavi had begun his unveiling campaign in the 1930s.

On the second concept, jealousy [*gheirat*], Soroush is more explicit. He first defines jealousy as "preventing another sharing what one has" and distinguishes it from envy [*hesadat*], which he defines as "wanting what belongs to another." The first is a positive ethical value that is extra-religious and should be encouraged, he argues, but the second is negative and should be controlled. He refers to another *hadith* of Imam 'Ali: "the jealousy of a woman is heresy [*kofr*], while the jealousy of a man is part of belief,"²⁶ and tries to shed light on what heresy can mean in this context. It has an ethical rather than religious connotation, arising from the asymmetry inherent in the way the sexes relate to each other. Women are entrusted to men, they become not only part of men but part of their honor. He then moves the discussion to love, and weaves his own narrative into a rich body of mystical concepts and poems to make a case for love.

He first observes that, although love is the main theme in Persian literature, yet one is never sure whether the writer is talking about divine or earthly love. He talks about the role of earthly love in the lives of poets such as Ibn 'Arabi and Hafez and recites poems in which they state their love. He relates the story about Ibn 'Arabi falling in love with a learned and

²⁵. Ibid., pp. 434-35, Letter 31 (Will), which reads: "Cover their eyes by keeping them under veils because strictness of veiling keeps them [good]. Their coming out is not worse than your allowing an unreliable man to visit them. If you can manage that they should not know anyone other than [you], do so. Do not allow a woman [to decide] matters other than those about herself because a woman is a flower, not an administrator. Do not pay her regard beyond herself. Do not encourage her to intercede for others. Do not show suspicion out of place because this leads a correct woman to evil and a chaste woman to deflection."

²⁶. Ibid., Saying 123, p. 515.

beautiful Esfahani woman in Mecca and her influence on his mystical development.²⁷ Love still dominates our poetry and occupies our poets' minds, he says, but its manifestations are no longer pure and spiritual. In the past the poet was part of a closed world defined by religious values: "even if the poet chose to fix his gaze on the earth, the sky above him cast its shadow on his world."

Soroush then presents a broad review of love in the history of Islamic thought. On the one hand are the moralists who denounce love and tolerate no mention of it; on the other hand are those who recognize its blessing and power and resist denouncing it in the name of religion. Mystics argue that earthly love is a passage to divine love, a metaphor leading us to the Truth; but this is also an attempt to theorize a successful experience. The force of their argument is such that even philosophers have to contemplate love, although some reduce it to the sex drive.²⁸ Those who readily issue *fatvas* dividing love into *halal* and *haram* not only mistake lust for love but also forget that love, as Sufis argue, is involuntary; it is in its nature to undermine the will, and thus it is not a matter on which there can be a *fiqh* ruling. Instead of condemning it, our thinkers should contemplate love—whether earthly or divine—and propagate it. We must not let love be treated as a disease, something which defiles. It is healing and purifying, and it can cure both individuals and societies of many afflictions and excesses. *Fiqh*, more oriented to piety than love, must approach mysticism, which is more inclined to love than piety. Then they can overcome the duality, the rupture, in our cultural history and moderate the excesses of both.²⁹ Concluding his review, Soroush returns to *gheirat*:

Thus, man's jealousy toward women isn't only about honor but also is about love. It's said that women are the repository for love and men the repository for wisdom; we can put this better and say that women are objects of love, but men are not. If we accept that great loves have led to great acts in history, then we must admit that women have played a great role, and it's unwise for women to try to be men; they can't, they can only forfeit their womanhood. This is to negate one's blessing. It does [neither sex] any good if someone—or a group—doesn't appreciate his/her worth and place and also if others try to dislodge him/her from his/her place.

In the final session Soroush concludes his commentary on Imam 'Ali's words about women with a discussion of *keramat*, which he glosses as "the limit, the purpose, the proper place of each being." He approaches the concept from a philosophical angle, placing it in the context of the two competing worldviews discussed earlier. The first, to which the Imam's words belong, accepts the world and its order as designed by the Creator and has no dispute with the place assigned to His creation. The second, which makes the Imam's words difficult to digest, sees the world and its order as accidental and wants to define the role of creation. The first view (that of Islamic thinkers) sees women as created for men and the roles of the sexes as non-interchangeable. In the second (that of modern times), women aspire to men's place in the order of things. Soroush embarks on a long discussion, examining the pros and

²⁷. On his return from Mecca (in 1214), Ibn 'Arabi wrote a small collection of love-poems, celebrating their mutual friendship and her beauty and learning, but a year later he found it advisable to write a commentary on these poems, explaining them in a mystical sense. See R. A. Nicholson, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (Interpreter of Desires): A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muhyi'ddin Ibn al-Arabi* (London: Theosophical Publication House, 1911), p. 8.

²⁸. He refers to Molla Sadra's *Asfar*, which has a chapter on love, and to Molla Hadi Sabzevari, who defines love as sexual gratification.

²⁹. In 1998, in a series of lectures, "Dinshenasi-ye Hafez" [Hafez's religious epistemology], Soroush developed and expanded on this theme and related it to forms of governance and civil society.

cons of each of these worldviews. Critical of both, but not totally rejecting either, he resorts to the Qur'an to shed light on women's place in the divine order of life. As he continues, it becomes clear that his own understanding of the Qur'anic position is in line with that of the same Islamic thinkers whose texts he earlier analyzed critically. He recites and elaborates on a Qur'anic verse: "And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect" (Sura al-Rum, verse 21).

The most important role for women, as understood from this verse and as recognized by most of our ulama, is to restore to man the peace he has lost, to correct the imbalance that prevents him from fulfilling his role. This is the role assigned to woman; this is the status bestowed on her by creation. You, of course, can disagree and believe that woman is malleable and can assume whatever role she is given, and man likewise; who says woman should be confined to this role? She can have better roles in society ... Fine, this is a theory that some maintain today. But as I said, what we find at the root of Islamic thought is that men's and women's roles are assigned, defined, and not interchangeable. In this view, woman fulfils her role in society through man, that is, she restores to men, the main actors in society, their lost balance and peace.

If we accept this as a proper understanding of religious texts, then, when the Imam says: "Don't allow a woman matters other than those about herself, because a woman is a flower, not an administrator," he means that [gender] roles in society are not changeable. Those who say otherwise are those who say we [are the ones who] define roles, that people can be prepared for roles through socialization, education, etc.

Typical to his style, Soroush now poses a question and a counter-argument that subvert the claims of conventional understandings.

But if we accept the view that [gender] roles are defined and their limits set, we face the question: What are these limits? Who says these limits have been correctly defined? How do we know the roles men and women have played so far are the male and female roles they should have played? This is an important question. In theory, we might accept that man should remain man, and woman should remain woman, but who has defined what men should do, and what women should do? We have three sources to consult: religion, science, and history.

To find the answer, Soroush invites his audience to consult each of these sources, telling them to focus on history, which he sees as natural, as reflecting human nature, in which men and women have shown their characteristics.

I know you'll object that women weren't allowed to find their own status. But this objection isn't valid, whether in this case or in others. We must ask why and how men succeeded ... We can look at history from an ethical angle and reach certain conclusions, but if we suspend ethical judgment and look at history in terms of possibilities, we'll reach different ones. I suggest that, if women occupied a position we now see as oppressed, then they saw this as their proper place in life; they didn't see themselves as oppressed and didn't ask for more, as they saw their *keramat*, their worth, as being women, not as being like men. We can't impose our own values on the past, and assume that what now we consider to be injustice, or essential rights, were

valid then; that's the worst kind of historiography. I suppose we're at the start of a new epoch. In fact, it began almost two centuries ago, with the rise of protesters, who see themselves as making and designing their own world. It remains to be seen how.

Although science, the second source, Soroush argues, can tell us more about the characteristics of each sex, it cannot give us the final answer. Religion, whose answer he has been exploring in these lectures, is no longer consulted, since:

Men and women of this age, whether religious or not, now inhabit a world where they give an absolute value to expressing dissatisfaction and protesting against their lot. They're not prepared to hear the clear answer of religion, nor does any one tell them. So we must only wait for the third source, history, to make our places clear to us. It's only then that humans can hear and understand the delight of surrender to God's will.

With this, Soroush's discussion of women and gender roles ends. His position and approach to gender issues are exactly the same as those taken by Shari'ati thirty years before. That is to say, both of them are critical not just of traditional understandings of women's status in Islam but also of feminist advocates of equal rights, yet both refuse to enter the realm of *fiqh*, and thus they avoid the issue of gender inequality. But Soroush differs from Shariati in that his conception of Islam and his approach to sacred texts have the potential to open space for a radical rethinking of gender relations, among other issues. By reintroducing the element of rationality, Soroush enables his audience to be critical without compromising their faith, to re-examine hallowed concepts, and to ask new questions of sacred texts. No doubt, it is this rationality that has enabled the women at *Zanan* to frame their feminist demands within an Islamic framework. And it is in response to challenges implicit in Soroush's ideas that establishment clerics are having to admit that their understanding of the *sharia* is subject to change and that they must find new arguments in *fiqh*.

Conclusion

Let us return to the question whether the religious discourse on gender has moved since the Revolution. For the clerical establishment now in power, the "woman question" is no longer a taboo subject but instead a "problem" for which a religious solution must be sought. In this respect, the clergy has come a long way since the early 1970s, when Motahhari's book on *hejab* was received so harshly by his seminary colleagues. However, the case is different with the male lay intellectuals, who have remained silent, at least in print; any meaningful discussion would inevitably take them into the domain of *fiqh*, which they are avoiding at this stage. They have so internalized the code of gender segregation, which informs and regulates gender relations as constructed by *fiqh*, that they even have left thinking on the issue to their female counterparts in *Zanan*. Their fear of losing legitimacy in the eyes of the clerical establishment is so strong that they are not prepared to take the risk and break their silence, although they have done so on other taboo subjects, even crossing the red line, for instance, in discussions of *velayat-e faqih*.

In 1998, *Zanan* printed a series of roundtable discussions on women's issues, in which secular and religious intellectuals—male and female—debated the main problems facing women. Two male "new religious thinkers" voiced revealing opinions. 'Abbas 'Abdi, for example, argued that there is no serious gender discrimination in law and that voicing feminist demands would not serve women's interests because such demands could be appropriated by conservatives. 'Ali Reza 'Alavi-Tabar dismissed feminism as an ideology that aims to put women at the top, and instead he argued for equality of opportunity, pointing out that we

live in a world in which ideology is a bad word.³⁰ It is telling that the only regular male contributor to *Zanan* has been a cleric, Hojjatolislam Seyyed Mohsen Sa'adzadeh. He seems to be the only one who is prepared to address the issue of gender in Islam. Equally telling is what happened to him in June 1998, following the publication of an article in the liberal daily newspaper *Jame'eh* (now closed) in which he compared the gender views of religious traditionalists in Iran to those of the Taleban in Afghanistan. He was arrested, and detained for five months; his crime was never announced, but he lost his clerical position and is forbidden to publish his writings.

The same dynamics, although different in style and degree, exist in secular views on gender, as aired in journals such as *Jame'eh Salem* and *Adineh* (both of them now closed). Secular male intellectuals, too, have not moved from their pre-Revolutionary position: they are still trapped in leftist discourses that only can accept feminism as part of wider socialist goals. These journals do publish articles on women, but they are written by secular feminists such as Shirin 'Ebadi and Mehrangiz Kar.

The silence of secular intellectuals on gender can be excused to some extent: It is a token of their rejection of the Islamic Republic, and with it, of the religious establishment's current pre-occupation with gender issues. But religious intellectuals must realize that their vision of Islam cannot be realized without addressing core problems of power relations; one of these is gender inequality. They must understand that as long as the inequality within the family as constructed by *fiqh* is left unchallenged, Islam cannot be reconciled with democracy and pluralism. Gender inequality not only embodies but also reproduces other kinds of inequality. This is the core issue that needs to be debated in the process of reconciling Islam with modernity and creating a civil society.

Clearly, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, gender equality is a notion to which male intellectuals—whether religious or secular in their perspective—still do not subscribe, so they implicitly agree with the gender model embedded in *sharia* legal rules. For them, gender is not an issue urgent enough to address, but part of a larger problem, and they hope it will go away when their political vision is realized. It seems that they have not yet come to terms with the current realities of gender in Iranian society and politics. The presidential elections of 1997 showed that no political tendency can ignore the new generation of women who have come of age during the Islamic Republic and are demanding equal opportunities and rights on all fronts. Women are now a force that must be reckoned with.

³⁰ *Zanan* 33, Farvardin 1376 [March-April, 1997], p. 14; and idem, 34, Ordibehest 1376 [April-May 1997], p. 16. For an incisive discussion of these views, see Farideh Farhi, "Religious Intellectuals, the 'Women's Problem' and the Struggle for the Creation of a Democratic Public Sphere in Iran," in *Intellectual Discourse in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, edited by Ahmad Ashraf, Special Issue of *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Winter 2001, forthcoming.