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Interview with Mohammed Sadegh Abdollahi,

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1) Tell us briefly about your new book and its results:

The new book is entitled *Critical Theory of Religion: From the Frankfurt School to Emancipatory Islamic Thought*. This is the first book published by Ekpyrosis Press, which is a publishing house I established earlier this year. This book is a collection of articles that pertain to the Frankfurt School's determinate negation (*aufhaben*) of prophetic religion, especially Judaism and Christianity. The first generation of Critical Theorists saw in religion certain elements that could be "translated" into secular-political philosophy. I work from this basis and apply it to Islam, where I look deep into the Islamic tradition, both Sunni and Shi'a, and see what elements of the tradition can be translated into post-metaphysical language, wherein it can fertilize contemporary political theory with prophetic thought without modifying Islam itself. I've written on this subject in many other places, but this book is the first attempt to bring a variety of my articles together in one volume.

2) Why do you call the "Hosseinieh Ershad" a school of thought and especially an "emancipatory" school?

Much like the Frankfurt School, the Hosseinieh Ershad is both a physical place and a "school of thought," i.e. a group of non-conforming intellectuals working with many of the same intellectual sources, both Islamic as well as non-Islamic. Although the scholars, best represented by Ali Shariati, do not always agree with each other on subjects, the trajectory of their work is always directed towards the emancipation of people. When we say "emancipatory," we do not necessarily mean the rejection of tradition, religion, etc., as it is often understood in the West. Rather, much of what such thinkers attempted to do is recover the prophetic non-conforming spirit of original Islam – the Islam that rebelled against oppression, injustices, and inequality. The Hosseinieh Ershad was especially important prior to the Revolution of Iran, as it was a place where Ali Shariati, working both with Islamic and revolutionary Western sources, could formulate such philosophy into language that was easily accessible to the masses.

3) Do you consider Shariati as a thinker or a preacher? Why?

One shouldn't mistake Shariati simply for a great orator; his speeches were merely his philosophy in popular form. He would not have been able to help prepare the mentality of the masses for massive social change had he remained "untranslated" from the academic language of non-religious scholars, social scientists, etc. We academics, just like any other profession, have a vocabulary that is not readily accessible to the everyday person. One of the brilliant facets of Shariati was that he, like Malcolm X, could distill highly complex thought into language that the masses could understand, especially by the

“Islamization” of certain concepts he learned while studying in Europe. However, it wasn’t the case that Shariati smuggled non-Islamic ideas into Islam via his philosophy, but rather he rediscovered them in Islam through his study in the West. He brought them together in his own way and reconciled them, applied them to the situation in Iran, and popularized them through his speeches. For example, Islam has a deeply ingrained concern for class antagonisms – this is evident in the *seerah* (biography) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his struggle against the ruling elites of Mecca and the political-economic system that ruled through. However, that concern for systemic class domination got lost in the Muslim world when Islam became the basis of empire, much like what happened to Christianity when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE. Shariati, in his encounter with Marxian and other Leftwing thought, rediscovered that element of Islam and brought it back to the forefront of his philosophy. This does not mean he was a Marxist, but rather he saw in Muhammad’s (PBUH) concern for the poor, the workers, the marginalized, etc., what Marx centuries later “discovered” about society.

In my opinion, Shariati was a world class social philosopher and sociologist, one that still teaches us in the Muslims World and the West what prophetic Islam looks like once the layers of routinization have been peeled away. His philosophy is a form of *geist* (spirit) recovery and geist reactivation (*tajdid*).

- 4) How do you know the role and relationship of Ayatollah Motahhari and Dr. Shariati in the Hosseinieh Ershad?

I understand Ayatollah Motahhari’s suspicion of “non-Islamic material” being presented as Islam as being especially problematic. To a certain degree he is right. One should always be careful not to assign something to Islam that is not a part of it. However, it is also dangerous to “fear” truth, reality, and facts, simply because one doesn’t believe the origins of such knowledge is correct. That is a form of “fallacy of origin.” Even the most horrific liar can occasionally speak the truth. If one categorically denies everything the liar says as being a lie, one will then deny the truth they occasionally say. It is clear from Muhammad’s (PBUH) example that he did not fear information coming from outside of the burgeoning Islamic tradition; he was willing to appropriate it if he thought it was truth itself – even from Salman al-Farsi. Truth is truth; Islam has never feared the truth, but Muslims have. This antagonism began early in Islam, when some scholars learned from Greco-Roman and Indian civilizations – philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, etc. While some traditional scholars refused the truth in these subject due to their “non-Islamic” origin, most scholars did not. Can you imagine what the Muslim world would have been like had they categorically denied such truths; it would have looked like the European Middle Ages.

In my opinion, it is very important that Islam remain open to knowledge outside of inside, so it does not close itself up fundamentalistically, and become needlessly antagonistic towards the non-Muslim world. While at the same time, it must remain guarded about that which it cannot relinquish. There are things that are constitutional in Islam, and there are things that are conditional. The constitutional must be guarded, the conditional must always be rethought.

As for Ayatollah Motahhari’s critique of materialism, I find it similar to Said Nursi’s: he doesn’t seem to understand the *dialectical nature* of it, so it’s not very well thought out. Crass materialism is of course a challenge to any religious tradition that believes that something exists beyond the “given,” i.e. Allah, angels, revelation, hellfire, paradise, etc. Those cannot be accounted for by a materialist philosophy, as what has no material existence cannot exist according to materialism. However, materialism that recognizes the limits of its own method, realizes that the scientific method cannot account for that

which doesn't have material existence, is quite helpful in understanding human society and history. That which doesn't have material existence includes love, justice, solidarity, peace, etc. All those things materialize in the family, society, government in some forms, but the concepts themselves have no material existence. When materialist transgress the bounds of their own method, and say such things don't exist, they are mistaken. Not all that exists have material existence. On the other hand, when we disregard materialism altogether, especially dialectical materialism, we disregard the dialectical materialism that existed within early Islam, especially among the Prophet, his Sahaba, and family. Again, much of the materialist philosophy of Marx and the Frankfurt School is prefigured by Islam, and Christianity and Judaism for that matter. Crass materialism, as was often pushed by the Soviet Union, is foreign to the Frankfurt School, who attempted to determinedly negate, i.e. identify, preserve, and fulfill those elements of prophetic religion that could migrate from religion into secular philosophy, including theological elements. At the core of the Critical Theory is the "bilderverbot," the "image ban" – i.e. the forbidding of making anything material thing into a god. This idea is also at the core of Islam: *Tawhid*.

5) Why is Dr. Shariati important in academic circles, especially for human sciences?

Dr. Shariati is not well known outside of the Muslim world, unfortunately. Part of what I want to do with Ekpyrosis Press is remedy that situation. I would like to translate more of his work into English for Western readers, scholars, activists, etc. Shariati is a world of knowledge – in many ways a bridge between the Muslim world and the increasingly secular West. He demonstrates that there are overlapping consensuses between the West and the Rest if one cares to look. For academics, Shariati shows a way of being authentically religious without succumbing to mere imitation (*taqlid*) of those who came before us, no matter how holy they were. As such, his work is both religious and academic, which is less of a problem in the Muslim world than it is in the West, where to be religious and an academic is increasingly taboo. It is assumed that religious people have gone through *sacrificium intellectus* (the "sacrifice of the intellect") and therefore cannot be scholars. Shariati shows that that is mistaken. Also, Shariati's work is saturated with under-developed concepts, which I think should keep scholars working for quite some time, especially as those concepts are applied to different parts of the world, time, political-economic situations, etc.

6) What do you think about the reason Dr. Shariati's thoughts are permanently attractive for the youth?

Youth is a blessing; ideals, values, and principles matter to the young. When the youth have internalized that which "ought" to be the case in the world, and then realize that those "oughts" are not normative in our societies, they either become 1) cynical or they 2) rebel against the status quo that has failed to embrace, embody, and fulfill those values, principles, and ideals. Shariati's thought is in many ways the same. Che Guevara once said that revolutionaries "refuse to grow up." What he meant by that is that they refuse to accept the world as-it-is, in all its brokenness and unnecessary suffering, and will continue to struggle to make it as it should be. Again, such a way-of-being in the world is Prophetic; the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was troubled by the world he lived in, its oppression, its domination, its exploitation, and with the help of Allah he changed his society. Shariati, while not a prophet, is "prophetic," in that he falls within the mold of the prophets: he pushes against the world as it is and the acceptance of the world as it is. Being so, the youth will always be attractive to him until he is forgotten. Thus, for so many in powerful position, is the reason why they want Ali Shariati forgotten. He must not be.

7) Is it possible to speak of Neo-Shariati as a school against liberalism?

Yes, it is possible to speak of a Neo-Shariati school, especially as the conditions of neo-liberalism continue to devour the world, traditional worldviews and cultures, etc., turning every aspect of life into a form of market exchange. Shariati's work can, and should, help us in our struggle against such a capitalist totally administered society.