

**Abdolrahim Gavahi**

## **Religion and International Challenges<sup>1</sup>**

First, I would like to thank the organizers of this esteemed meeting, especially the International Center of Religious Dialogue of Tehran University and the Iranian branch of UNESCO. Also, I would like to welcome our foreign guests, especially my very dear friend professor Itagaki who so kindly accepted my invitation.

At this very outset of my presentation, may I make a few introductory comments.

### **Introduction**

1. I am a graduate of Uppsala University-Sweden, in the field of Comparative Religious Studies (1986). Since then, I have been teaching foreign religions, history of religion, and comparative religious studies at different colleges and universities of Iran. Also, I have authored or edited more than 35 books and 50 articles in the areas of religious studies, Orientalism, Occidentalism, philosophy, mysticism, etc.
2. In order to discuss “Religion and International Challenges” rather thoroughly, first we have to give a true definition of religion. As we all know, along many different definitions and classifications of religion and religions, one such classification is to study religions from a national/international point of view. Certainly the way a national religion (like Shintoism) faces international challenges differs from that of an international religion (such as Buddhism or Christianity).

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper delivered by Dr. Abdolrahim Gavahi at International Seminar of Religion and Peaceful Coexistence, Tehran, Dec. 12-13, 2009.

3. The third point relates to the very nature of the international challenges we intend to discuss. Such challenges may be scientific, technological, cultural, economic, and political ones, thus deserving different reactions or interactions in different situations and by different traditions.
4. The fourth point concerns the structure of such challenges and if they are in the form of a “process” or “project” per se. In other words, if they are spontaneous developments or pre-mediated projects apt to prevention.
5. Finally, the last point is that, in order to save time and reach a reasonable summary and conclusion, we will only address Abrahamic religions and refrain from entering into any detailed discussion about other great traditions.

## **I. Definition of Religion**

Robert Hume, the great English theologian and religious specialist of the middle of twentieth century, in his renowned work “World Living Religions” provides different definitions for religion from historical, psychological, philosophical, social, aesthetical, ethical, and personal points of view<sup>2</sup>. Finally, he chooses the following as a more comprehensive definition:

By religion is meant the life of man in his superhuman relations; that is, his relation to the power on which he feels himself dependent, the authority to which he deems himself responsible, and the unseen being with whom he is capable of communing. In the idea of religion dependence, responsibility and communion belong together<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the nature and structure of religion, in addition to the well-known traditional classifications such as divine/non-divine, Eastern/Western, living/dead, Asian/non-Asian, racial/non-racial, national/international, ... religions, there is one more, rather new, division of religion, or religious reading that divides religious outlook into “static” and “dynamic” ones; in other words, a

---

<sup>2</sup> . Hume, Robert E, *The World Living Religions*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924, 1959.

<sup>3</sup> . *Ibid.*, p. 8, quoting Professor William Adams Brown.

backward, non-transformative, petrified reading of religion well against innovative science and technology and a civil society based on human rights, vis-à-vis a rather modern and dynamic reading quite susceptible to progressive science and technology of modern world along with its foundations on civil society and human rights<sup>4</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that a rigid and backward reading of religion is, in no ways, in a position to face and deal with the international challenges, and is set to oppose and confront any modern developments whatsoever, believing in the contradiction between science and religion or, in modern words, in the clash of civilizations. Nevertheless, we, in Shiite branch of Islam, along with many learned Western scholars of Islamology and Oriental studies<sup>5</sup>, believe in Islam being a rational, dynamic religion which, while preserving the very principal tenets and foundations of its religious teachings, is capable of going along with most of the social, economic, and cultural developments of the modern age. Although, in our opinion, such a sound and correct understanding of Islam and other Abrahamic religions, which, because of their divine (non-human) nature are intrinsically apt to contemporary adaptations and modifications, requires a thorough understanding of the relation between intellect and faith, or science and religion, which, in turn, is one of the valuable achievements of the historically long human religious culture<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, while discussing the very nature and structure of religion, we should also briefly address the subject of unity and plurality of religion. In Quran, religion is addressed in both terms, sometimes referring to it as a single entity<sup>7</sup>, and at other times talking about more than one single religion<sup>8</sup>; Sometimes referring to the single religion of Abraham and other Abrahamic prophets, i.e. the universal Islam or submission against God<sup>9</sup>, and at other times referring to the particular religions of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and prophet Mohammad<sup>10</sup>.

Although we will discuss religious pluralism in more details under global challenges, let us briefly mention that according to Islam and the Holy Quran,

---

<sup>4</sup>. For details see Mohammad Mujtahid Shabestari, *A Critique of Official Reading of Religion in Iran*, Chapter four, *Civil Society and two kinds of readings of the Book and tradition*, pp. 99-106.

<sup>5</sup>. For example see Annemarie Schimmel, *An Introduction to Islam*, State University of New York Press, 1992.

<sup>6</sup>. See Allamah M.T Ja'fari; *Ta'avon u-Din va al-Ilm (Cooperation of religion and Science)*, Heydari Publication, Tehran, 1958.

<sup>7</sup>. For example in Quran 3/19 which says: "The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to God's will)".

<sup>8</sup>. For example in Quran 109/6 which says: "To you be your Religion, and to me mine".

<sup>9</sup>. Quran 22/78

<sup>10</sup>. Quran 2/136.

there is only one single God of Islam, Christianity and Judaism (nevertheless called by different names of Allah, the Father, and YHWH)<sup>11</sup>, and the religion is submission vis-à-vis this common universal God<sup>12</sup> and obedience of the religious commandments revealed by all great Abrahamic prophets, sent to mankind within a period of more than five thousands years<sup>13</sup>. The common universal “message” and call of all the said prophets is that: “I am your Lord, then worship Me”<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Very Nature of the International Challenges**

In the light of the wide and rapid scientific and technological developments of the last century, and the huge amount of information now available to mankind, and also the unbelievable growth in the field of communication and mass transportation of data, on the verge of twenty-first century, man is confronted with serious questions and challenges not only in the field of religion, but also in other areas of human knowledge such as history, sociology, psychology, etc. Nevertheless, for the sake of brevity and focusing on our main topic, we will limit ourselves to challenges against religion and religious belief only.

With respect to global challenges facing religion nowadays, let us make the following observations:

1. Challenges are of two kinds: Conceptual-theoretical, and practical. Sometimes the very beliefs and tenets of a religion are challenged, beliefs without which that religion loses its coherence and integration; and some other times only the usefulness and practicality of such and such rituals are questioned. Naturally, the very practices and rituals of each and every religion are more apt to appropriate challenges and changes, without seriously disturbing the main body of that tradition, than its fundamental beliefs and principles.

2. The second observation concerns the national vs. international nature of challenges. In this respect, a certain nation with a certain religion may see something as a challenge, while another nation, even with the same religion, may

not see it so. To substantiate this point, one may notice that nowadays in Iran, at least from official (government) point of view, issues such as liberalism, liberal-democracy, secularism, and even civil society and human rights, sound as

---

<sup>11</sup>. Unity of the God Almighty is mentioned in more than 50 verses of the Quran; for example see 2/163, 4/171, etc.

<sup>12</sup>. Quran 20/12.

<sup>13</sup>. Quran 3/84

<sup>14</sup>. Quran 21/92.

serious challenges to the regime. While, in a neighboring Islamic country like Turkey, none of these issues is viewed as a threat to political establishment.

3. Thirdly, sometimes the challenge as such denies the very existence or legitimacy of the established religion of the community, and some other times it is only asking for change and reform and betterment of the welfare of the society. Sometimes it rejects the whole religion, and some other times demands a more rational and practical set of beliefs ready to answer, in a very rational and justified way, the intellectual demands of twenty-first century.

4. Fourthly, Sometimes the proposed reform is of the nature of “فقه زمان و مکان” i.e. expressing religious legal opinion or jurisprudence in accordance with the requirements of the time and location of the religious decree or *fatwa*), mainly concerned with the form and formality of a religious injunction, asking for the reappraisal and revaluation of a traditional practice or tenet, and some other times it demands a general restructuring or even destructuring of a certain tradition to the extent of denying or abrogating its fundamental doctrines.

5. Sometimes the suggested change and reform is the product of the new world order or “process-like” by nature, seemingly compulsory and inevitable, and some other times it looks as if it is voluntarily designed by other (super) powers, intended to hegemonize the world and invade the weaker countries by cultural and other sorts of invasion, thus, to a large extent, pre-mediated and so evitable. This second type is usually called a “project-like” challenge designed for some specific purposes.

6. Finally, some challenges deserve understanding, interaction, and dialogue, and some other challenges are a well-thought project in order to overthrow a regime (usually an outspoken, revolutionary one) and bring about a more obedient regime suited to the desires of world powers, thus deserving reaction, enmity, and sometimes forceful resistance.

In view of such general considerations, each and every challenge has to be considered and analysed separately, so that one does not make hasty generalizations against all of them.

## **Religion and International Challenges**

As stated before, providing a comprehensive list of all challenges faced by the followers of different religious communities in different corners of the world is rather impossible, especially since some people see something as a challenge, while the others do not. Certainly, the list of challenges, and especially their importance and priorities, differ near different religious communities of the world. Here what will be discussed below, is the preliminary list of such challenges near the more traditional sector of the Iranian clergy who is now running the country.

### **1. Liberal Democracy**

Although the undersigned does not believe this to be a real challenge, yet in the Iranian present situation, some intellectuals and clergies consider liberal-democracy, and its sister concepts of civil society and human rights, as an imported concept from the West and so as a challenge to the official reading of religion prevailing in government circles. That is why some official papers and preachers attack this concept harshly.

### **2. Secularism**

Like liberal-democracy, and exactly on the same ground, secularism is also not well understood near some ulama (clergies) and scholars and thus resisted and attacked as a Western challenge. While in our opinion, secularism is not equivalent to the mere denial of God or the supernatural world, but is rather providing a secular (profane) interpretation of worldly matters. Nevertheless, some clergies and intellectuals have (wrongly) understood it to be equivalent to the denial and rejection of the idea of God, and the Prophet and the Book, and so a challenge to religion and religiosity<sup>15</sup>.

### **3. Pluralism**

Religious pluralism, or multiplicity of religions, too is one of subjects which is not quite well understood not only in some of the Islamic countries such as Iran, but also near some orthodox Christians in the West. As we all know, John Hick,

---

<sup>15</sup>. This position is taken by some scholars and intellectuals as well. For example see Seyyed Husain Nasr, *The Young Muslim and the Modern World*.

the founder of this idea, lost his “Doctor of the Church” title and also his university post for proposing and supporting this idea, and hence had to leave his country for this reason<sup>16</sup>.

Certainly, believing in religious pluralism did not mean that John Hick had abandoned any of his Christian beliefs and doctrines. Instead, it was meant to show that other people than Christians may gain salvation and enter into the heavenly paradise of the saved souls. Nevertheless, some fanatic Christians understood his idea wrongly and attacked and expelled him, the same way that some Iranian Muslim scholars are interpreting pluralism to be against the finality of Islam as the last religion in the row of Abrahamic Religions, and so as a Western imported concept which has to be rejected and denied<sup>17</sup>.

But along these challenges, which have more a local-national dimension for countries like Iran, or religious communities such as Muslims, there are other challenges which are by far more global or international and face every religious person, be it a Jew, Christian

or Muslim, at every corner of the world. Following we will briefly mention some of them:

#### 4. Scientism

Development of science and technology in Europe, especially after Renaissance and the advent of industrial revolution, apart from positive results in promoting material welfare of mankind, has had the negative impact of somehow weakening or even negating the spiritual dimension of human life, the sacred, and the divine nature of man and the whole universe and creation<sup>18</sup>. This over-estimation and self-assurance of science, especially in the light of huge scientific discoveries of recent centuries, reached a stage that, unfortunately, some people tried to deify science and substitute it in place of God, thus promoting scientism in place of theism<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, nowadays, amongst many different new cults and denominations, or the so-called “New Religions” which we will discuss shortly, we are also witnessing the advent of “Church of Science” and other science-related sects and castes. Although, recently, this excessive scientism is

---

<sup>16</sup>. See John Hick, Pluralism, introductory section.

<sup>17</sup>. Surprisingly, one of the earnest opponents of pluralism in Iran is a Western (American) scholar now studying and living in Qom, Mohammad Legenhausen!

<sup>18</sup>. S. H. Nasr, *ibid.*, Persian translation, pp. 264-81

<sup>19</sup>. For a wonderful analysis see Mary Midgley’s Science as Salvation.

gradually waning out, with a new emergence of combination of science and religious belief, yet the destructive effects of that high belief in science as salvation will remain for some time.

## 5. Globalization

Although the concept of globalization, in a sense, has always been present in the dominant culture of the more powerful human societies, yet its culmination in the second half of twentieth century, and especially globalizing the Western culture and civilization in other parts of the world and in particular third world developing countries, has been a matter of concern not only for the religious leaders and communities, but also for the men of culture and scholars and intellectuals at large. As a result, UNESCO has shown sensitivity and has attempted to preserve the divergent living cultures of different human societies.

Nevertheless, since the “process” and “project” aspect of this phenomenon, i.e. “globalization” and “globalizing” aspects of it, are not yet fully known, and so no one is quite sure about the goods and evils of it, the affected societies have not yet reached a unified position on how to react or rather interact with globalization. Anyhow, any attempt of the world powers to culturally dominate other states is an obvious challenge to the latter’s independent existence as a political entity and hence has to be resisted<sup>20</sup>.

## 6. New Religions

One of the new challenges to all great traditions, including the Abrahamic ones, is the emergence of the so-called “New Religions”, a term designated for the new cults and sects within already established religions.

These “New Religions” are not only prevailing in such developed countries as Japan and United States, but also in quite underdeveloped communities of Africa and Asia<sup>21</sup>. It is worth mentioning that, although some of these “new religions” have originated from within the traditional beliefs of their respective societies, and in fact are more like a new á la mode reading of the old tradition, coloured by modern scientific, artistic, and cultural trends –a situation well apparent in

---

<sup>20</sup>. See Mehdi Golshani and Reza Gholami, A National Research on Globalization: A Strategic Study on Cultural Encounter of Iran with Globalization, Tehran, 2008.

<sup>21</sup>. For details see John R. Hinnells, Living Religions, Penguin Books, 1997, Part I, chapters 14-16.



modern Japanese society<sup>22</sup>-yet most of them have a deconstructionist nature, such as the Church of Satan movement in America, directly opposing the clergy-church establishment of that society.

## 7. New Problems and Calamities of Human Society

In recent years, especially after the rapid industrial growth of developed societies and so the unlimited use, or rather misuse, of nature, and consequently the destruction and devastation of natural environment by the creation of metropolitans and annihilation of local and indigenous life and practices, and the spread of capitalism, resulting in economic disparity between social classes<sup>23</sup>, has created new problems and calamities for human society not witnessed before, problems such as warming of the earth, destruction of the forests, pollution of rivers, shortage of drinking waters, widespread poverty, weakening of family and social bonds, organized crimes in big cities, drugs, etc. Not only the mere existence of such problems is a big challenge to many religious beliefs which advocate equality, fraternity, the rule of God, and peaceful coexistence of human beings, etc., but certainly any attempt to ease or eradicate these calamities and fight them in a unified front with a shared resolution requires serious cooperation of all religious people of the world.

Let us not forget that especially Islam and Christianity, two of the largest traditions in Abrahamic religions each with more than one and a half billion followers, before entering into a period of mistrust and enmity for more than a thousand years<sup>24</sup>, have long been cooperating and interacting in a very constructive manner way<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup>. See A. Gavahi, *Shintoism* (Persian edition), Iran, 2008, part 2, chapter. 4, pp. 193-206.

<sup>23</sup>. See H. Namazi, *Economic Systems*, Tehran, 2008, Chapt. on income distribution, pp. 192-8.

<sup>24</sup>. Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction*, State University of New York Press, 1992, p.1.

<sup>25</sup>. See Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*, Columbia University Press, 2004.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

1. We are of the opinion that, before addressing “Religion and International Challenges”, it is necessary to give a sound and correct definition of both “religion” and “challenge”.
2. We also believe that, with a correct understanding of religion and the sacred, and a logical-rational approach to the subject of “science and religion” and “tradition and modernity”, there seems to be no inherent contradiction between these two essential elements of human understanding. We are of the opinion that there may well be a constructive cooperation between “science” and “religion” rather than mere contradiction and oppositions.
3. Finally, we hold that the present challenges to the religion and religiosity are not necessarily oppositional by nature. Rather, we may establish some kind of understanding and interaction with most of them.

In fact, the present world, from many respects and especially the fast growth of telecommunication and data transfer, is rapidly changing. In this exciting process of constant change and rapid development, we may and should have an active, positive, constructive, promising and assuring approach towards religion and spirituality, always seeing the door open for mutual understanding and cooperation for the material as well as spiritual advancement of mankind. Finally, we believe that those who speak of “Clash of Civilizations”, civilizations like Islam and Christianity so deeply founded on genuine divine teachings, are very far from the true spirit of Islamic, Christian, and other religious civilizations.