

## Philosophical Study on Two Contemporary Iranian Muslim Intellectual Responses to Modern Science and Technology

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### ABSTRACT

Iranian modern thinkers in either of the two categories: Western-minded and religious. The most prominent aspect of Western minded thinkers is their emphasis on separation of tradition and modernity. On the other hand, religious thinkers look forward to combining the two. The Western-minded thinkers believe that the most important burden on development in Islamic countries is in the Islamic culture itself. Therefore, they try to minimize the impact of religion on culture and society. The other group which is more religious put the emphasis on encountering the negative responses to modernity by the religious society. They also have the concern for maintaining the religious identity and at the same time pushing the society toward development. The rise of such religious thinkers was also simultaneous with the Persian Constitutional Revolution. In this article I will discuss in detail the views of Murteza Mutahhari and Mehdi Golshani on modern science and technology.

### KEYWORDS

Muslim Intellectual, Murteza Mutahhari, Mehdi Golshani, Modern Science, Technology

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## Introduction

Being formed around a century ago, modern intellectual thinking has been divided into religious and pro-Western modern thinking. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the pro-Western thinking in Iran is the belief in separation between religion and politics [secularism]. The religious thinkers on the other hand are trying to draw a connecting line between the two. One can say that the pro-Western thinkers assume that the most important reason behind the maladies of the Islamic world in fact is the Islamic and local traditions of such

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societies. Therefore, they introduced religion as the single most important problem in the Islamic societies and tried to decrease the role of religion in their societies so as to minimize its aspect on the society and development. Their endeavor peaked in the 19th century in Iran. On the other hand, the religious thinkers attempted to repel the impact of the modern world on the traditional societies hence, 38 some of them accepted in some ways or the other the idea of influences of the modern world. This group, known as reformist-traditionalist such as Dr. Golshani and the reformists, such as Ayatollah Mutahhari.

*Traditionalists* try to repel the influence of the modern world on Islamic society's altogether. They stand firmly against any attempt to introduce any Western like influence or ideology in the Islamic societies, justifying their action by saying that the products of the West are completely against Islamic teachings, rejecting any attempt to make them Islamic. Therefore they are anti-modernization and uncompromising (Yousefi Eshkevari, 1997). They also consider democracy, liberty and human rights as Western and therefore anti-Islamic (Mesba Yazdi, 2000). *Reformists* on the other hand are a lot more aware of the necessities and the events of the modern world and therefore they are trying to represent religion with its old functions in the context of the modern world. They lean against tradition and look forward to modernity. They constantly attempt to put a religious cap on the modern products of the West and introduce them as religious, forming a totally new social necessity. Although, they believe modernity, but they still consider a vital role for tradition in Islamic societies. In other words, they try to find the new necessities and meanings of the modern world in the context of old, religious texts and imply that the new concepts, such as democracy, freedom, human rights etcetera indeed existed in the religious context long before the Western civilization came up with them (Kazemi, 2008). *Modernists* do not accept the position of reformist on modernity, and they reject the notion of extracting modern concepts from religious texts. They believe that it is religion which should make up its mind and be present in the modern day lives by renewing and regenerating itself, not the modern concepts. They believe that not every Western product is corrupt and in fact we can import the new, modern ideas on technology, science and philosophy without doing any harm at all to religion and traditions (Borojardi, 1996). In the remaining of this chapter will concentrate on the ideas of Soroush, Ayatollah Mutahhari, Golshani and Nasr on science. Ayatollah Mutahhari is the representative of the reformist, both Golshani and Nasr are representatives of traditionalism who are concerned with reviving the Islamic tradition in the modern day by reintroducing religious concepts using modern idioms, and Soroush is a modernist who believes in a regeneration of society and religion based on modern concepts are they be. They believe at the same time in religious reforms suitable to present day necessities.

### ***The Relationship between Science and Religion***

Muslim scholars believe that there are different ways to react to modern science in the Islamic World. According to Golshani (Golshani, 2004):

1) A small group of Muslim intellectuals believe that, modern science is incompatible with Islamic knowledge. Islamic world must have their own knowledge.

2) Some Muslim scholars accept modern science in its totality. They believe that acquiring modern science is the only form of salvation against the decline of the Muslim world and they say that science is the only means of genuine enlightenment.

3) In addition, some Muslim intellectuals believe that science is responsible for the progress of the West and therefore they defend the attractiveness of modern science. This group has several proponents:

a) Some Muslim scholars such as Seyyed Jamal al-Din and Rashid Reza, (d.1935) have tried to justify modern science on religious grounds. They tried to convince Muslims to obtain modern knowledge to protect their independence and to protect their communities from the criticism of Orientalists and Muslim intellectuals.

b) Some Muslim thinkers have attempted to trace all innovation and discoveries to the Quran and Islamic tradition, and refer to modern science to explain different aspects of faith.

c) Some Muslim scholars advocated a reinterpretation of Islamic theology based on modern science. For example, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d.1898).

4) Finally, some Muslim thinkers defend the mystery of the revelation of nature by way of experimentation and theoretical work, and science can show aspects of the physical world. Nevertheless, they say science alone is not enough. They believe that in order to know reality, science should be viewed from an Islamic perspective.

### ***Iranian Muslim Intellectual Responses to Modern Science and Technology***

In this article I will discuss in detail the views of Murteza Mutahhari, Mehdi Golshani on modern science and technology.

### ***Ayatollah Murteza Mutahhari on the Encounter between Modern Science and Religion***

Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari a renowned intellect of his time was born on February 2, 1920 in Fariman near Mashhad. Given Mutahhari's position, he was a powerful thinker and was one of the architects of the Islamic Republic of Iran which created a huge level of awareness in Iran (Algar, 1985). He was amongst the best intellectual that created Islamic ideology in the plight of Islamic Revolution in Iran. He also served as a reformer, radical and a distinguished political theorist (Martin, 2000). According to Ayatollah Khomeini, 'Mutahhari is a high ranking thinker, philosopher, jurist and a rare Islamologist' (Khomeini 1961) .

Mutahhari tries to trace the roots of conflict between religion and science in 'Western ideology' and while discussing the subject in a 'social and religious' context, he reveals the Islamic point of view on the matter. He first emphasized that this conflict can be attributed to the action of two groups: first, irresponsible educated elite class and second, unaware clergy (Kashefi, 1997). In tackling the very reasons behind this conflict, he notes three main points:

(a) The how-being of religion,



- (b) That of Western science and,
- (c) That of philosophy.

He believes that the main reason behind rejection of religion and its existential conflict with science originated in the 'interpretations of religion' given by the 'clergy of Church' in the West. Those interpretations popular in medieval times had structural conflicts and drawbacks which had no compatibility with human wisdom and knowledge.

Mutahhari saw the reasons in four areas:

1. Distorted religious texts,
2. A wrong image of Christian God,
3. Putting the accepted Greek philosophy in place of religious rituals and beliefs,
4. Church-led violence and atrocities.

He says the Christian God at that time was a 'row of natural causes' and therefore belief in God and natural science were certainly incompatible with each other (Mutahhari, 2000). The misunderstanding between philosophical concepts has affected the relationship between science and religion in three different ways: first, the philosophical concepts had no compatibility with the modern discoveries and concepts. Second, reducing the concept of God to natural reasoning was another reason for the insufficiency of the contemporary religious philosophies. Third, the thinking of the Middle Ages defined empirical science as an enemy of religion. God in this world view, like other natural causes was a 'factor' in line with other factors, and this factor was an 'unknown and mysterious' phenomenon that should be given credit for the existence of all other simultaneous 'unknown factors' (Mutahhari, 1994).

About the church violence, one can say that in those times, church would not be satisfied just by giving sentence of 'apostasy', and segregating a sinner from Christian society, but it used all its power with no hesitation in harsh inquisitions to find the very roots of smallest 'opposition' (Kashefi, 1997). Therefore, he believes: When the religion is named the enemy of science and scholars and scientists be thrown in the fire and guillotined in religion's name, surely and certainly people will be pessimistic (Mutahhari, 1994).

Thus, he believes that the 'misunderstanding' between the two has resulted in three deadly consequences for religion. First is the fact that religious and philosophical concepts did not match the natural realities. In other words, minimizing the meaning of God to just a reason for being and looking for it in the utmost of mysteries was in apparent conflict with science. The second result was interpretation of some of scientific discoveries and philosophical concepts of medieval times as though they were reasons to reject the existence of God. The third and the most important impact was that with the rise of the new science which was based on empirical research methods, the old philosophy and religion were put aside all together, which was a result of ineffectiveness of medieval philosophy (Kashefi, 1997).

About the science factor, he believes that there were two sufficient reasons which led to 'enmity' between science and religion in Medieval times and a

catalyst for intolerance between the two. First was the fact that science was, in that era, only based on and nurtured in anti- religious contexts. In this process, science got detached from religion and took the responsibilities of religion, i.e. spirituality, by its own. As Mutahhari puts it, they escaped from faith by replacing it with science, as though it is the answer to all question (Mutahhari, 1994).

The ultimate result of this separation, was the retreat of religion and rise of a new materialistic science which ended up in absolute separation of church and science, and consequently, between religion and science, and ultimately alienation of human being from God. Therefore, the new science ended up in a new type of definition of the universe, human and God which had no reliance on religious and philosophical overviews of them at that time.

Meanwhile, Mutahhari sees no conflict between science and religion and even put it in a way that science and religion are 'complementary' to each other. Therefore, he considers the separation between science and religion as the greatest loss and says:

For humanity nothing is worse than separation between science and religion as this separation deteriorates the social balance of humanity and we have seen this happening in the Old and New World as well. People looked for their way out of religion for ages and this is what is happening now again, in our era. Many deviations and miseries with which today's human is dealing with are the direct result of separation of science and religion. Ultimate prosperity is only attainable through deep understanding of the need for both the entities, at the same time. In other words, if the balance between religious and scientific belief is blared the modern disease of the time will appear which is the search for a science without religion. Many of the moral and social issues of the world are the direct result of such a science. Humanity needs to understand that science without religion is not moral and they are like two wings which required to function together to let a bird (human salvation) fly (Mutahhari, 2001). Mutahhari believes that religion can 'deepen and fertilize' scientific and philosophical concepts, and use them in 'its own way'.

Therefore, he considers three actions necessary for this aim to be achieved:

(a) For science, because it cannot give a comprehensive and coherent account of God, spirituality and eternity, it needs to keep its borders. In other words, it is not its duty to limit the interpretation of being and of the universe based on a particular world view and it cannot change the goals of humanity based on rational expectations (Kashefi, 1997).

(b) 'Interpretation' has a pivotal point in the view of Mutahhari. He believed that many of the conflicts between science and religion are rooted in wrong interpretations. Therefore, they are avoidable. Other than that, he believed that interpretation has a very crucial role in spiritual and metaphysical representations. Also, he believes that philosophy has a very important role in scientific discoveries because in every scientific 'identification', there is a reasonable, inductive argument which is the reliance point of the 'empirical knowledge'. Thus, science needs causality to describe the scientific procedures (Mutahhari, 1999, p. 10). Therefore, because there are two types of philosophical concepts, i.e. purely philosophical and partly philosophical, in Mutahhari's view,



we need to differentiate between the two and know that it is only the latter one which has relationships with science, i.e. the partly philosophical concepts and not the former one, and scientific conclusions not the former one, and we need not to mix the two. That is, one must not try to examine the purely philosophical concept, i.e. life and reasons beyond it, by using the conventional scientific tools. By avoiding this, the contrast between science and pure philosophy, i.e. religion, will not arise.

(c) Religion is not in conflict with science in Mutahhari's view. This idea shows itself particularly, in Islam, which has admired science and scientists throughout its existence. Therefore, we need to understand this idea that being educated has no defensible relationship with rejecting religion but rather, it is a cultural issue in the West. Therefore, human being needs religion both in social and human contexts. In other words, Man take science to wherever he wants it to go, and uses it whichever way he wishes, but a religion takes control of one's life and changes it to a great extent (Mutahhari, 2008).

Therefore in Mutahhari's view, both science and religion have appeared to give humans enough means to know. The difference is that science is a set of tools by which human takes over nature, i.e. has a vertical development. On the other hand, religion gives directions to human and describes the eternal life to us. So religion does not omit anything from the greatness of the universe, but adds to it by describing it to us (Mutahhari, 1989).

In conclusion we can say that in Mutahhari's view, there is no conflict between religion and science and therefore between religion and wisdom. Conflict only arises when we over shoot one's boundary or try to invoke the wrong resource to solve our problem. Therefore, the ultimate aim of reason is to strengthen religious beliefs and to represent the scientific reasons. So the role of science is to unlock the natural realities and to strengthen the religious beliefs using those scientific logics.

Science, religion and philosophy each unveils a particular side of the universe to us and for better understanding of each and their internal relationship we need the resources and tools designed for this reason. For this, an epistemological view helps a lot.

Fig 1. Synopsis of the Views of Mutahari

<b>Name of the Thinker</b>	<b><i>Ideas on Science</i></b>	<b><i>Ideology</i></b>
Murteza Mutahari	No Conflicts between science and religion	Reformist

### ***Truth in the Eyes of Islam in Golshani's View:***

Mehdi Golshani was born in Isfahan, Iran in 1939. He was awarded the John Templeton Award for Science and Religion Course Program in 1995, and has been a judge for the John Templeton Award for Progress in Religion (Richardson & Slack, 2001).

Mehdi Golshani, believes that science is more than just physical knowledge:

“No science at all is condemned in the eyes of Islam,” he wrote in his book called *From Secular to Religious Science*. He adds “In other words, it is because of the ‘transversal’ or marginal reasons, why some knowledge is convicted, that is, it is because that certain knowledge can be a source of harm, it is criticized. Science is religious in itself and it is not correct to divide it into two—religious and non-religious science (Golshani, 1998).

He supports his claim in favor of science by the following arguments:

(1) It has been clearly defined in religious narrative and in the Holy Text: “Do you think those who know are the same as those who don’t? It’s only those who know, who accept.” (Quran, 39:9)<sup>1</sup>

(2) Prophetic narration:

لَا وَالَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ الَّذِينَ يُسْتَوِي هَلْ كُلُّ رَبِّهِ رَحْمَةً وَيَرْجُو الْأَجْرَةَ يَخْذَرُ وَقَائِمًا سَاجِدًا اللَّيْلِ أَنَاءَ قَانَتْ هُوَ أَمَّنْ " ١  
" الْأَلْبَابِ أَوْلُوا يَتَذَارُ إِنَّمَا يَعْلَمُونَ "

“If you take up learning, God will pave your way to Heaven.”

Even some verses in Quran imply that science does not solely mean the juridical science”. This is clearly implied in “seek knowledge by even going to China, for seeking knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim”(Al-Suyuti, ?, p. 143). Here, China is an ironical word to mean a far, distant and foreign land.

(3) It is easily understood from the very rich inheritance which is left from the first generation of Muslims that their science has not been limited to juridical understanding.

(4) For an Islamic society to survive, as any other society may feel, there is a need for a certain amount of required knowledge. And it is compulsory for Muslims to learn those sciences(Golshani, 1997).

Therefore, Golshani considers learning a sort of worship, as any activity which makes you feel close to God is a form of worship, and learning will expose us to the hugeness of creation, thus paving the way for worshipping the Omnipotent Creator (Golshani, 1998). He also believes that:

We have not done enough to gain scientific independence and as a result, we have not fully subscribed to what Imam Ali (Ali bin Abi Talib), who was respected for his courage, knowledge, belief, honesty, and unbending devotion to Islam, believed. He says there is no worship like reflection on God’s creation.(Rayshahri, 1996) We study just as a habit, and we imitate the West, but we should know that in Islam science has a form of originality, and it has clear borders and limitation which the Western science has introduced (Golshani, 1999a) .

Therefore, he considers the meaning of science, a lot broader than just the physical knowledge, and he believes that science needs a sort of theology to be fulfilled as many scientists believe that it is not possible to live without religion(Golshani, 2003).



### ***Relationship between Science and Religion in Golshani's View:***

As he believes, their relationship falls under one of these categories:

- (a) Conflict,
- (b) Independence,
- (c) Interaction,
- (d) Unification (Golshani, 1998).

In defining the exact relationship between science and religion, he introduces a fifth option which is interconnection of the two: "I believe that science is indeed a part of religion and learning is just as a religious ritual but this ritual has to be performed with its proper tools (experimental, theoretical word, etc.)" (Golshani, 2003).

He considers science to be as a column for religion not just an adjacent: One of the contributions of Muslims is discovering the nature around them; scientific activity is a part of religion, of course using its own tools. The tool is experience. I believe a Muslim should not discriminate between sciences, since he can get experiences and judge based on his own world view. The reason why we talk about religious and non-religious science is that in our society, the living based on scientific experiences is very much familiar, but we want to explain the exact planning that Islam has from the very beginning to the end, one part of that planning is science (Golshani, 1998).

The conclusion of such thinking is:

- (1) In practice, a Muslim does not utilize his knowledge to destroy the humanity or the environment, and
- (2) In deduction, he is concentrated to make sure he is not breaking the very cannons and principles he believes in, against which he can never practice (Golshani, 1999b).

### ***What is Religious Science in Golshani's Opinion?***

Dr Mehdi Golshani in on Islamic science (Golshani, 2004) believes: the Idea of Islamic science has been around for the last thirty years. The usual argument against this concept is that science is free of values and ideologies. Thus, it makes no sense to talk about 'Islamic science' or 'Christian science'. This argument, however, neglects the fact that all theories of science, especially all fundamental theories, involve some metaphysical presuppositions and these are rooted in the scientists' worldview.

Recent work in the philosophy and sociology of science supports this claim. Thus, one can define 'Islamic science' as a kind of science in which our knowledge about the physical world is embedded in the Islamic worldview. There is another area where the difference appears: it is in the domain of the practical applications of science. The Islamic worldview orients, as do other theistic religions, the applications of science in the direction of spiritual welfare of humanity and prevents its usage for destructive purposes.

Religious or Islamic science is the one which is useful for wellbeing of Islamic believes: "It is basically incorrect to have such a division, i.e. Islamic



and non-Islamic, since this implies that some knowledge is against religion, yet it is not always true, any useful knowledge is Islamic, as long as it is serving Islamic society” (Golshani, 1998). As mentioned before, science is a lot broader than the physical realm and they can all actually be put under a metaphysical department, : What we mean by religious science is the one which holds the place of God as The Creator, which does not limit being to materials and believes in morality (Golshani, 1999a). Therefore, he considers Islamic science as a sort of metaphysically driven science which has its own terminology and methods. On the other hand, we should not try to extract the physical sciences out of the Quran; but rather try to place science in a metaphysical context (Golshani, 1998).

### ***Religion Affects Science in Several Forms, According to Golshani:***

In his view such effects can fall under one of these categories:

(1) Metaphysical understandings which resulted from science might have religious backgrounds. In other words he believes that generalizing the empirical findings to metaphysical phenomena is blocked by empirical science. Therefore, we need a metaphysical framework to be able to explain such phenomena (Golshani, 1999b).

(2) Religious views help to orient the scientific enterprise in a moral direction. In other words, presently, there is no limitation on how to practice science, i.e. by making biological bombs or even weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the creator of such arsenals won't even oversee any moral issues. A religious minded scientist, would however, never practice his science in a way in which hurts humanity or environment, but he believes that science is a way for our salvation in both worlds (Golshani, 1999a) .

### ***The Reason behind Opposition to Religious Science in Golshani's Judgment:***

The expansion of science and its effects on faith, has led to the rise of secularism which has had its own consequences (Golshani, 1998, pp. 35-39), including an opposition to religion, Golshani suggests the following reasons behind such opposition:

(1) Misusing the scientific facts: With the recognition which science give to its bearer [scientist], the Muslim scientists thought that whatever they say, although it is out of their professional limit, is recognized to be truthful .Using this recognition, sometimes they even get brave enough to criticize the religious canons and principles (Golshani,1998).

(2) Identity crisis: Many Muslim societies have lost faith in what they are and come to the conclusion that they need to 'import' Western science, in whatever way they can. Therefore because of the secular nature of Western science, this secularism has affected the Muslim societies (Golshani, 1998).

(3) Rise of relativism in religious beliefs, as it was mentioned before, has the direct result of secularism is relativism in religious identity, although there are discrepancies in canons and religious principles (Golshani, 1998).



(4) Limiting the religious leadership to moralities: Some believe that we have to lead the world by science and leave moralities to religion (Golshani, 1998).

There are two approaches taken in the Islamic World based on what has been said:

(1) Some forget their identity and leave their culture behind, follow the West, and turn a blind eye at the drawbacks (Golshani, 1998), and

(2) Some reject development and stick to protectionism which results in ultraconservatism (Golshani, 1998).

Fig 2. Synopsis of the Views of Golshani

Name of the Thinker	<i>Ideas on Science</i>	<i>Ideology</i>
Mehdi Golshani	Approves a theistic world view underlying science	Reformist- Traditionalist

## Conclusion

This article has looked at the discussions on the matter through the eyes of the prominent Iranian thinkers. The first which is popular in the writings of Ayatollah Murteza Mutahhari, is the idea that Islam and science have no conflict at all. He firmly believes that it is wrong to divide a line between Islamic and non-Islamic science, since Islam is containing science and it is not precise to divide a line between science and Islam. He objected to those who try to describe science in this form and said that he does not recognize a difference between Islamic and non-Islamic science as long as the science under discussion is useful for Islamic society.

In Mehdi Golshani's view, he believes that:

1- Limiting the Islamic science to Islamic text, *Fiqh* and etcetera is not fair to religion and has no trace in the holy text either. He considers Islamic science to be more than that.

2- Abandoning the modern science which humanity has gained during the recent past is neither possible nor desirable.

3- Quran and other holy texts have no trace of the details of science; therefore we have to learn and gain by research in the natural world and through human rationality and discover the laws governing them. It might be very misleading and wrong to assume that religion can help us in all aspects of science. Often, the reason behind opposition to religious science is because of the wrong interpretations which some people give. I do not agree with some of them either. But this should not lead us to believe that all kinds of religious science are farfetched and out of reach.

4- Many opponents of Islamic science believe that because of methodological reasons, it is impossible to have religious science. Golshani believes that such opposition is because of having wrong definitions. For example, limiting the religion to supernatural and apocalyptic usages is one of those wrong definitions in Golshani's idea. This is not the reality of religion, as many secular thinkers suggest. The other thing is being unaware of the limitations of science. Some seem to have forgotten that science itself has its limitation and empirical research cannot find the reality to everything possible.

The other wrong definition in his view is assuming that all the paradigms and assumptions of science have a reality in the world outside science which is wrong. For example, atoms, electrons, genes, and energy are all scientific paradigms or assumptions which are needed to further science.

5- Maintaining a proper understanding of religious science. It seems to me that there is a strong tendency among the believers that a good religious science is one which pursue the study of nature in the frame of religious metaphysics and see the holistic totality of the phenomena in religious world view. In other words, the science which is more useful in fulfilling personal and social needs of the believers. If we can accept the impacts of metaphysical worldview on the understanding of various phenomena, we can then see that it will definitely fulfill the needs of the society as well. In other words, the practice of the Islamic science will be Islamic itself. Fundamental sciences should form before forming the industry and technology. Beyond the fundamental science there is a metaphysical entity upon which the practice of industry can take an Islamic or non-Islamic form. The religious science is a science in which a Godly worldview rules, to minimize the harmful impacts of the modern science. Religious science is nothing but the impressions of metaphysical principle on the scientific activities of the scientists. Therefore it is not merely limited to rules and principle mentioned in Quran and other holy text, but it is an empirical science which has based its foundation on Islamic metaphysics.

Therefore, we can not see any conflict in their ideas of two Iranian muslim intellectuals about relationship between Islam, science and Modernity.

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