Sociological Analysis of Religious Neo-Thinking Discourse in Iran: Case of study; Ali Shariati, Seid Mahmood Taleghani, and Mehdi Bazargan

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The last two decades leading up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 are particularly noteworthy regarding the conflict of political and social ideas in Iran. This conflict in the realm of thought vividly reflects the social upheaval that culminated in the Islamic Revolution 1979. Religious neo-thinking is one of the intellectual currents designated as a school of thought during this period. Prominent figures such as Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Taleghani, and Engineer Mehdi Bazargan were among the religious reformists who played a significant role in intellectual discourse and social and political action, much like their predecessors. Although this study is not a historical research project and aims to provide a sociological analysis of the discourse of religious neo-thinking, the personalities of reformists and religious intellectuals are an integral part of this discourse and warrant attention. Examining these figures is essential both for their roles during the historical period in which they lived and for their impact on the discourse of religious neo-thinking, as well as the long-term effects of their lives and thoughts on social life. This research investigates explicitly a turbulent and significant period in the intellectual life of religious reformists and analyzes the sociological discourse of religious reformists from this era.

Method

This study is theoretical and fundamentally research-oriented in its objectives. The research philosophy is based on rationalistic studies, grounded in the power of thought and analysis, with the fundamental assumption being that reason can understand all phenomena. In terms of strategy, this study is descriptive-analytical. Regarding the nature of the research data, it is a qualitative study conducted through library-documentary methods. Finally, the research techniques used for data analysis fall under discourse analysis studies. Specifically, this research employs the critical discourse analysis approach of Laclau and Mouffe. Considering the vast amount of textual data from the three examined reformists, purposeful sampling was conducted, selecting more prominent texts about the research topic for analysis. The validity and reliability of the research were ensured through the accessibility of the analysis process for other researchers and through the coherence and usefulness of the findings, which are methods for determining the credibility of results in discourse analysis research.

Results

During this period, religious reformists such as Shariati, Bazargan, and Taleghani had a simplistic interpretation of religion. From their perspective, Islam provided solutions to all social and political problems in Iranian society. They believed Islam could establish a religious government to promote justice in Iranian society. Furthermore, they held a backward-looking view, primarily addressing the masses. They believed that many manifestations of modernity, which were solidified in rival discourses such as Marxist and liberal discourses through the signifiers of justice and freedom, had been fundamentally present in Islam long before the modern era. The dominance of strategic reformism over the current religious neo-thinking during this period reflects the reality that, although there was a serious conflict with the absolute modernist discourse of the second Pahlavi Shah, which was dominated by ancient nationalism, this conflict also represented a discursive struggle among rival sub-discourses that sought to present their formulations of social and political issues and draw the system of knowledge into their epistemological sphere.

In simple terms, the religious reformists of this period faced more than just an oppressive regime or the threat of colonialism, as their predecessors did. They encountered a profound intellectual divergence that seemed to replace religion and its epistemological sphere with intellectual and doctrinal pluralism, which had been prevalent until the Constitutional Revolution but was undermined by its occurrence. Although religious neo-thinking was not aligned with traditionalism, it could not tolerate movements that aimed to oppose religious knowledge completely. Most prominently, it reinterpreted religion as an alternative epistemological system to modern schools of thought. For example, Abrahamian believes that "Shariati had an affectionate relationship with Marxism and, although he considered Marxism a suitable perspective for understanding the social transformations of his time, he believed that the struggle was not over material means of production but over political power, stating that 'since the time of Abel and Cain, humanity has been divided into two opposing factions: the oppressed

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(the people) and the oppressors (the rulers)'" (Abrahamian, 2020: 575). Shariati was greatly indebted to the religious reformists before him, such as his father, Mohammad Taghi Shariati, and the God-worshipping socialists and Nakhshab.

Conclusion

The actions of these religious reformists ultimately aimed at establishing a kind of intellectual school that could enable religion to compete with the great ideologies of the time. In an era when Marxist ideology was gaining popularity among educated youth, they sought to create a doctrinal interpretation of religion that could compete with such enthusiasm and attract social forces, especially the youth, the urban middle class, and intellectuals, to religion. The continuity of the religious reformist movement between traditional and radical interpretations of religion provides a more solid epistemological and knowledge-based foundation for social development in the modern era. It is important to note that religion is a significant cultural and historical element of Islamic societies, and no development program can be envisioned without considering this foundation and cultural tradition. Therefore, a reformist reading of religion more aligned with development can serve as an essential epistemological basis for advancing these societies.