

5-1-2013

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### Recommended Citation

Panjwani, Imranali (2013) "Ori Goldberg. Shi'i Theology in Iran: The Challenge of Religious Experience. New York: Routledge. 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 14. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol4/iss2/14>

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**Ori Goldberg. *Shi'i Theology in Iran: The Challenge of Religious Experience*. New York: Routledge. 2012.**

Ori Goldberg's *Shi'i Theology in Iran: the Challenge of Religious Experience* critically explores theological Shi'i discourse in Iran from 1940 – 2000, with particular focus on carefully selected works by Murtada Mutahhari, Ruhullah Khomeini, and Mohammed Mojtahed Shabestari. Goldberg's main argument is that Shi'i theology in Iran cannot be interpreted solely historically or politically. Instead, he says, theology must be interpreted "experientially." As such, the aim of the book is to offer the reader an experiential reading of Shi'i theology through the scholarly works Goldberg has selected, which are connected to events building up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and to its aftermath. To provide this experiential reading, Goldberg offers the reader an analysis of "the three main categories of religious experience" that mediate Shi'i followers' personal relationship with God and their role in society as God's servants: "crisis, anxiety and faith" (p. 26).

Goldberg first explores the notion of crisis as a shaper of theology. He claims that the roots of Shi'i theological discourse lie in an existential crisis for the Iranian Shi'a, who had to re-evaluate their own history (particularly in the physical absence of the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi) and their theological doctrines in light of the growing Pahlavi dynasty. This need for religious re-evaluation is not negative; rather, it shows the dynamism of religious experience and illustrates that change can facilitate the production of new meaning, connecting tradition with the evolving present. The creation of new theological meaning was accomplished in this case by the relationship between the Iranian public and the scholars Mutahhari, Khomeini, and Shabestari, who wrote accessible books on Shi'i theological identity in order to revitalize and change Shi'i theological discourse. Because the masses were able to derive new meanings for their personal lives through these texts, they were able to transform their relationship with God and God's relationship with humanity. As Goldberg argues, "Only once this world is created in and through a text, can thoughts of application be entertained. It is in texts that this language of mediation is fully accessible, weaving myth and life experience, the traditional and psychological" (p. 35). Indeed, believes Goldberg, texts and the experiential reading of texts are significant in Goldberg's analysis; they provide the thrust of his main arguments and constitute his unique contribution to studies on the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the theology surrounding it.

Goldberg has chosen the following texts to illustrate how the theological experience of reading gave new perceptions to the Iranian Shi'a of their faith: Mutahhari's *Dastan-e Rastan* (Tales of the Righteous), Khomeini's *Chehel Hadith* (Forty Narrations), and a question and answer session with Shabestari, a current scholar at the University of Tehran. Goldberg's analysis is aided by his inclusion of lengthy narrations involving the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Shi'i Imams, Ja'far al-Sadiq and \_Ali b. Musa al-Ridha, who both have intriguing conversations with mystics and sages. All of these source materials serve to highlight how Iranian Shi'i scholars subtly wove tradition and history with context and social vision to encourage readers to create new theological meanings for themselves. There is also an acknowledgement by the author of the inspiration of Mulla Sadra's ideas on Mutahhari and Khomeini, though, oddly, there is little or no deliberation on his concept of *tashkik al-wujud* (gradation of existence), which is also crucial in creating a holistic view of God that is both transcendent and connected to the creation. Goldberg provides translated excerpts from these texts and then infuses his own analysis of them, but as he clearly states, he "refrains" from specifically describing [his] hermeneutic "move" in the study proper" (p. 25). This is deliberate by Goldberg, and I have interpreted his intention as in keeping with his methodology and his desire for the reader to create his or her own meaning from the book—the process of creating meaning from text being Goldberg's fundamental thesis behind the evolution of Shi'i theological discourse in Iran. Despite the book's technical nature, I feel this is a viable and effective approach, allowing the reader to engage with the excerpts the author provides. On a

side note, however, it would have been interesting to see his analysis on Ali Shariati's works, which may fit into the experiential paradigm Goldberg is creating.

Goldberg adds a further dimension to the book, which is to offer some comparisons to Jewish and Christian theology. I think the addition of these perspectives would be valuable for any Shi'i scholar, as these perspectives enable a cross-comparison with other theologies that have gone through similar experiences or employ similar methods in trying to reinterpret theology in new contexts. Goldberg quotes extensively from Soren Kierkegaard (particularly using his work *Repetition*), Karl Barth, and Hans Urs von Balthasar and uses the Jewish text *Likutei Moharan* by Nachman of Breslav and the Christian text *The Glory of the Lord* by Hans Urs von Balthasar to substantiate his arguments. The inclusion of these texts enables the reader to more deeply appreciate and analyze the key Shi'i texts the author uses. For example, rather than simply saying that Mutahhari's *Dastan-e Rastan* were just a collection of moral anecdotes, a point argued by Hamid Dabashi, Goldberg states that the work helped create a new "Shi'i ethical discourse." This discourse, he says, became "a potentially subversive cultural medium," which was "occupied with the constant translation of divine language into human tongue and vice versa" (p. 26). A similar analysis can be applied to Khomeini's *Chehel Hadith*, which at "its moment of inception is fraught with paradox" and of which Goldberg states:

Man creates his own meaning the more he decreases; God's perfection grows the more it is fragmented and broken down into human endeavour. Anxiety, the metaphorical quality of man, plays a key role in the formation of this discourse. It offers the initial mediation between the ethereal and the corporeal. Anxiety and its lack of endurance cause man to look critically at his reality. (p. 117)

Like crisis, anxiety, therefore, says Goldberg, helps man create new meanings, making existence a continuous and dynamic process.

Goldberg's final concept, faith, is the organizing principle that channels crisis and anxiety into a transformative experience for the individual. Goldberg asserts that it is the combination of crisis, anxiety, and faith that allows the individual to revitalize his relationship with God and society. (Interestingly, however, Goldberg argues that the faith that is necessary for this sort of revival cannot be the faith of the Sufis,<sup>1</sup> "disconnected," as it is, he says, from the real world.) Rather, he believes, faith must be rooted in the acknowledgement of human imperfection and the engagement in constant mediation with God's perfection. Goldberg states:

On the one hand, God offers a complete, holistic view of the world and of created beings. Every human is perfectly situated within the all-encompassing networks of divine meaning. On the other hand, God offers human identity a chance for affirmation through the casting of humanity as that which is not God . . . . [T]he difference is one of essence. God and his perfection are outside the grasp of humanity even while they are responsible for humanity's creation. God is, in fact, present for humanity in his absence. (p.121)

This constant discourse between imperfection and perfection is the place of new theological meaning, but quoting Shabestari, Goldberg explains that such discourse nonetheless requires situating, as "experience [is] the most inward level of religious existence. One might say it is the nucleus of religion" (p. 135). Thus, according to Goldberg, Shi'i theological discourse in Iran during 1940 – 2000 would benefit from an experiential approach rather than only a political or

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<sup>1</sup> Sufis are defined by their adherence to the inner, mystical dimension of Islam. This involves traversing various spiritual stations by practising techniques such as *zuhd* (asceticism), *tafakkur* (meditation) *riyadah* (self-discipline) and *tawbah* (repentance) in order to develop *ma'rifah* (definite knowledge), *yaqin* (certainty) and *mahabbah* (love) which enables a person to annihilate (*fana*) himself/herself in God with *tawakkul* (trust) and *taslim* (submission). *Ilm al-Irfan* (the science of mysticism) is the broad discipline of the practice of gnosis in Islam whilst Sufism, though similar, is a specific branch of it which carries its own identity, philosophy and unique spiritual methods.

historical one, which would see the Iranian Revolution of 1979 as linked only to class-struggle, Marxism, or political activism.

I found Goldberg’s thoughts insightful, and the strengths of the book are the excerpts he includes of scholars such as Mutahhari and Khomeini, which give the reader another angle by which to understand how faith is revitalized in new contexts. I believe Shi‘i scholars themselves would benefit from this analysis as at times, in current scholarly circles, issues such as *taqlid* (imitation), *marja’iyyah* (being the source of imitation), political quietism, conceptions of God, the role of mysticism, and the disconnect between intellectual texts and grassroots problems are typically analyzed through the lens of a static, linear history, as if scholastic positions on all of these issues have remained the same and are disconnected from the personal experience of the people’s theological relationship with God and God’s relationship with humanity. The book will be of benefit to those that may underestimate Shi‘i theology or the intellectual insight of the Shi‘i Imams and Iranian scholarship, which has a rich legacy of philosophy and mysticism. In itself, this book puts the Iranian Revolution of 1979 in a different light than the usual political treatment it is given—one that stems fundamentally from a re-evaluation of man’s personal relationship with God and the vision he wants for a Godly society. Thus, as Goldberg argues, “Human time becomes meaningful in and of itself, and not necessarily as a weak version of divine time” (p. 123).

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