



# Hermeneutics, Revelation, and the Critique of Religious Authority: Understanding Shabestari's Intellectual Reform Project

**Abstract:** This study aims to examine Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari's intellectual reform in post-revolutionary Iran by investigating how the *qerā'at-e rasmi* (official reading) becomes plausible and how it can be theologically dismantled. Using a qualitative conceptual-textual analysis of Shabestari's major works, supported by selected secondary literature, the article reconstructs his shift from a dictation model of *wahy* to revelation as dialogical prophetic experience (*blick*) and the Qur'an as the Prophet's historically mediated reading of the world. It then explicates a dual-layer hermeneutics (prophetic and communal) and argues that hermeneutics functions as a foundational epistemic framework for *tafsir*, *fiqh*, and *kalām*. The findings indicate that Shabestari's project delegitimizes interpretive monopoly, enables contextual *ijtihād*, and supports interpretive pluralism and political minimalism centered on freedom of faith. A procedural reading of *qisāṣ* illustrates how the model can yield restorative, dignity-oriented normative outputs. The novelty lies in integrating Shabestari's revelation theory and authority critique into a single hermeneutical canvas with demonstrable ethical, legal, and political consequences.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics of Revelation, Prophetic Experience, Dialogical Theology, Epistemic Historicity, Religious Authority

**Abstrak:** Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji reformasi intelektual Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari dalam konteks Iran pasca-revolusi, dengan menginvestigasi bagaimana *qerā'at-e rasmi* (pembacaan resmi) menjadi masuk akal dan bagaimana ia dapat dibongkar secara teologis. Melalui analisis kualitatif konseptual-teksual terhadap karya-karya utama Shabestari yang dielaborasi dengan sejumlah kajian sekunder, artikel ini merekonstruksi pergeseran Shabestari dari model wahyu sebagai dikte linguistik menuju wahyu sebagai pengalaman profetik dialogis (*blick*) serta Al-Qur'an sebagai pembacaan Nabi terhadap dunia yang termediasi secara historis. Selanjutnya, artikel ini menjelaskan hermeneutika dua lapis (hermeneutika profetik dan hermeneutika komunal) serta menegaskan bahwa hermeneutika berfungsi sebagai kerangka epistemik fondasional bagi *tafsir*, *fikih*, dan *kalam*. Temuan artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa proyek Shabestari mendekitimasi monopoli *tafsir*, melegitimasi *ijtihād* kontekstual, serta menopang pluralisme interpretasi dan politik minimalisme yang berporos pada kebebasan beriman. Pembacaan prosedural terhadap *qisāṣ* menggambarkan bagaimana pemikiran hermeneutik Shabestari dapat melahirkan makna normatif yang restoratif dan berorientasi martabat. Adapun kebaruan dari riset ini terletak pada integrasi teori wahyu Shabestari dan kritiknya terhadap otoritas ke dalam satu kanvas hermeneutik yang berdampak pada ranah etika, hukum, dan politik.

**Kata Kunci:** Hermeneutika Wahyu, Pengalaman Profetik, Teologi Dialogis, Historisitas Epistemik, Otoritas Keagamaan.

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## Introduction

In several Muslim societies, most vividly in contexts of post-revolutionary political Islam such as Iran, religion has undergone a significant transformation that is both intellectually productive and morally fraught. Religion, which initially served as an emancipatory idiom and a shared moral language for resisting tyranny, has gradually evolved into a grammar of exclusive truth claims authorized by institutions that now speak in its name.<sup>1</sup> During this revolutionary period, the Qur'anic discourse was utilized as a mobilizing force for a public ethic.<sup>2</sup> It served as an interpretive catalyst that transformed sacred language into a vehicle for critique, solidarity, and hope.<sup>3</sup> However, with the institutionalization of Islam as a political system, the discourse underwent a transformation. The central question shifted from whether Islam could serve as the foundation for the state to who possesses the authority to define Islam, how the meaning of revelation is acquired, and how interpretation can remain legitimate within a plural and rational public sphere.<sup>4</sup> In this paradigm shift, conflicts over scripture are manifestations of more than just political competition; these conflicts become a struggle over the conditions under which meaning itself can manifest in public.<sup>5</sup> It is within this post-revolutionary context, where regulation

supplants resistance and orthodoxy is susceptible to hardening into administration, that Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari's reform project begins to reveal its enduring significance.

Shabestari's distinctive wager is to address the modern crisis of religion not as a crisis of piety, nor even primarily as a crisis of institutions, but as a crisis in the structure of understanding. He received clerical education in the traditional hawzah of Qom, yet his perspective underwent a significant transformation upon his exposure to modern hermeneutics and Protestant theology during his academic years in Hamburg.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, he occupies a unique position at the intersection of classical Islamic scholarship, contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, and the intricate contradictions of a religious state.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, his critique cannot be categorized as a mere external dismissal of tradition or a political rebuttal of clerical authority. Instead, he reopens a theological gap that becomes visible only when one takes prophecy seriously as an event of meaning.<sup>8</sup> While the state may claim to enact a "final divine will," prophetic history suggests that revelation arrives through a human subject who speaks, understands, and interprets.<sup>9</sup> The article's central argument, derived from this insight, asserts that the crisis of religion in the era of the religious state is, in essence, a

<sup>1</sup> Farzin Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* (London: Anthem Press, 2015), 162-163.

<sup>2</sup> Najibullah Lafraie, *Revolutionary Ideology and Islamic Militancy: The Iranian Revolution and Interpretations of the Quran* (London & New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009), 20-57.

<sup>3</sup> Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 131-135.

<sup>4</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian Shiism under Debate," *Middle East Policy* 10, no. 2 (2003): 102-12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4967.00109>.

<sup>5</sup> Saïd Amir Arjomand, "Modernity, Tradition, and the Shi'ite Reformation in Contemporary Iran," in *The Moral Fabric in Contemporary Societies*, ed. Grażyna Skapska and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2003), 241-61.

<sup>6</sup> For brief discussion on Shabestari's intellectual biography, see Yann Richard, "Un Théologien Chiite,

Mojtabah Shabestari," *La pensée de midi* (Marseille) 27, no. 1 (2009): 109-18, <https://doi.org/10.3917/lpm.027.0109>; Mohsen Mottaghi, "Dīndārī Momenāneh Dar Jahān-Rāzzodā'i Syode: Zendegīnameh Fekrī Mojtabah Shabestari (A Pious Life in a Demystified World: Mojtabah Shabestari's Intellectual Life)," *Āzādī Andīsyeh: The Association for Freedom of Thought*, no. II (February 2016): 149-73.

<sup>7</sup> Farzin Vahdat, "Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 16 (March 2000): 50-54.

<sup>8</sup> Katajun Amirpur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Freedom, Democracy and Women's Rights* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 188-198.

<sup>9</sup> Ali Akbar, "A Contemporary Muslim Scholar's Approach to Revelation: Mohammad Mojtahed Šabestari's Reform Project," *Arabica*, 6, vol. 63 (November 2016): 661-666.

hermeneutical crisis. This assertion is based on the premise that as long as revelation is perceived as a static and complete text, religious and political institutions maintain the capacity to monopolize meaning.<sup>10</sup> The phenomenon that Shabestari targets, which he refers to as the *qerā'at-e rasmī az dīn* (official reading of religion), is introduced in this context as a manifestation of a more profound epistemic disorder. This is characterized by the distortion of the dialogical space wherein revelation becomes comprehensible.

In contemporary Islamic thought, hermeneutics has emerged as a pivotal domain for the renegotiation of the dialectic between text, history, and the interpretive subject. Fazlur Rahman's "double movement" placed historical consciousness at the core of Qur'anic interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd radicalized the linguistic and cultural historicity of the text through his "*mafhūm al-naṣṣ*".<sup>12</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush distinguished revelation as sacred from religious knowledge as historical, thereby creating space for epistemic humility and interpretive freedom.<sup>13</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl foregrounded moral responsibility (dignity, justice, and reasonableness) as criteria for hermeneutical engagement with the Qur'an.<sup>14</sup> The present article situates Shabestari within this broad family resemblance, yet also insists that his intervention marks a distinct conceptual deepening. While concurring with the rejection of literalism and affirming historicity of understanding, he "goes further" by reformulating the very concept of revelation through the resources of philosophical hermeneutics. According to Shabestari, revelation is not a "descending text" that arrives

in final linguistic form; rather, it is a dialogical event: a prophetic experience in which God grants the Prophet a *Blick* (a vision or horizon of meaning) articulated through the language and world of seventh-century Arabia.<sup>15</sup> This shift is not cosmetic. It recasts the Qur'an as the Prophet's interpretive responses to divine encounters, thus situating hermeneutics not merely as a method of reading scripture, but as the theological foundation upon which the very possibility of religious knowledge must be reconstructed.

In light of the aforementioned context, the article proposes two fundamental inquiries. *First*, how does Shabestari's critique of the "official reading" of religion arise from, and depend upon, his reformulation of revelation as an intersubjective, prophetic experience rather than a closed transmission of divine words? *Second*, how does his dual-layered hermeneutical architecture (prophetic interpretation and communal interpretation) operate and what consequences does it generate for Islamic law, ethical pluralism, and the relationship between religion and the state? The thesis can be succinctly expressed as follows: By reconceptualizing revelation as a dialogical prophetic experience and the Qur'an as the Prophet's worldview, Shabestari deconstructs the epistemic credibility of official reading and unveils a theological foundation for contextual legal renewal, interpretive pluralism, and a non-exclusive political ethos of belief.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative, conceptual-textual analysis of Shabestari's major works, complemented by selective engagement with secondary scholarship to clarify both the internal coherence

<sup>10</sup> Ali Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qur'anic Hermeneutics: An Analysis of Four Discourses* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 121-122.

<sup>11</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhūm Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah Fī 'Ulum Al-Qur'ān* (Kairo: al-Markaz al-Šaqafī al-'Arabi, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Abdolkarim Soroush, *Al-Qabḍ Wa al-Baṣṭ Fī al-Syārī'ah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Fakhri Afif, "Horizon Baru Hermeneutika Islam: Studi Pemikiran Hermeneutika Filosofis Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari" (MA Thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, 2023), 146-148.

and the wider stakes of his project. Instead of regarding hermeneutics as an auxiliary tool appended to theology, my analysis seeks to interpret Shabestari's hermeneutics as a systematic reconfiguration of the epistemology of Islamic sciences and the grammar of religious authority. This reconfiguration attempts to reconceive revelation as a living divine-human dialogue that continues within history as the source of faith, freedom, and moral responsibility.

The article is organized into four sections. The first section provides a comprehensive analysis of the post-revolutionary context, emphasizing the emergence of authority as the prevailing challenge. This analysis culminates in Shabestari's hermeneutical "detour," which marks his initial critique of state-sanctioned interpretation. The second section delves into the thinker's reinterpretation of revelation as a prophetic experience and the Prophet's interpretive agency. The third section elucidates the foundational principles of his hermeneutics—its dual-layer structure and its assertion of being a foundational framework rather than a mere exegetical technique. The fourth examines the socio-religious implications for law, pluralism, and religion-state relations, including a focused Qur'anic case that demonstrates the practical consequence of the framework. The conclusion synthesizes the argument, states the contribution, and offers a brief critical reflection and directions for further research. The issue at hand is a historically generated tension, and therefore, my discussion will commence at the point at which the tension becomes visible. That is to say, I will begin with

the post-revolutionary transformation of authority and the rise of the official reading as an epistemic temptation within the religious state.

## Hermeneutical Reform: Context and Authority

### a. The Post-revolutionary Context

The post-revolutionary condition must be understood as a distinctive regime of meaning production.<sup>16</sup> In revolutionary periods, scripture frequently serves as a mobilizing force, providing a unifying perspective and a sense of purpose. The Qur'anic idiom, or mode of expression, functions as a shared ethical language that enables society to recognize injustice, imagine liberation, and narrate collective dignity.<sup>17</sup> However, once Islam is established as a political system, the same idiom is drawn into a different economy—one governed by regulation, administrative coherence, and the demand for legitimating certainty.<sup>18</sup> The pivotal transformation, therefore, does not lie in the shift from religious symbols to a different rhetorical cadence. Instead, it is a transition in which religion evolves from serving as a medium of resistance to becoming a conduit that legitimizes established order, delineates orthodoxy, and enforces conformity.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the fundamental inquiry shifts from the feasibility of establishing an Islamic state to the legitimacy of defining Islam, the authority to interpret divine texts, and the conditions under which meaning can be acquired within a plural public sphere.<sup>20</sup>

This process effectively transforms the "right to speak" into a political-theological technology. Institutional religion does not

<sup>16</sup> Saïd Amir Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 4 (2002): 719–31.

<sup>17</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy, and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): From Bāzargān to Soroush* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 140–143.

<sup>19</sup> Naser Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 30–42; Hamid Mavani, *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2013), 192–204.

<sup>20</sup> Yadullah Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism in Iran: An Intellectual History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 111–166.

merely impart knowledge; it also adjudicates. The institution produces an authorized voice that claims competence to name what counts as Islam—and, by implication, what counts as deviation. The struggle over interpretation, therefore, becomes a struggle over who is permitted to interpret and under what epistemic conditions.<sup>21</sup> The post-revolutionary moment has been shown to intensify this struggle, as the state's need for stability has been demonstrated to invite closure.<sup>22</sup> In this context, interpretive plurality is reframed as fragmentation, and ambiguity is treated as a threat. It is precisely at this juncture that the seeds of hermeneutical conflict take root: when revelation is conceptualized as a static repository whose meaning can be considered definitive, institutional power can legitimately assert a monopoly over that meaning.<sup>23</sup> The context, therefore, is a machine that engenders the very problem of authority.

b. Shabestari's Stance: Intellectual Trajectory and "Internal Exile"

Shabestari's response to this machine is noteworthy for its refusal to succumb to two common temptations that frequently dominate post-revolutionary critique. The initial approach entails the reduction of the crisis to a purely political pathology—an abuse of clerical power that could be remedied by constitutional adjustment alone. The second approach pertains to the staging of reform primarily as an epistemological slogan, which entails

affirming the historicity of religious knowledge without undertaking a reconstruction of the underlying theological premises that serve to legitimize interpretive monopoly.<sup>24</sup> In the post-revolutionary context, prominent thinkers such as Kadivar and Soroush exemplify two distinct intellectual trajectories. Kadivar's critique is juridico-political in nature, deconstructing the legitimacy of governance claims and challenging doctrines such as *velāyat-e faqīh*.<sup>25</sup> Soroush, by contrast, foregrounds the evolution of religious knowledge and distinguishes revelation from fallible human understanding.<sup>26</sup> Shabestari's strategy diverges from these approaches by exploring the hermeneutical underpinnings that facilitate the establishment of any definitive Islam. Specifically, it delves into the mechanisms of understanding itself, along with the constraints that prevent any interpretation from equating with God's ultimate will.<sup>27</sup>

This posture is not formed in abstraction; rather, it is inseparable from a biographical and political experience that paradoxically deepened philosophical labor. Following the imposition of limitations on his public engagements, Shabestari embarked on what Katajun Amirpur characterizes as an "internal exile": not physical banishment, but rather enforced muteness—an exclusion from public

<sup>21</sup> Naser Ghobadzadeh and Ali Akbar, "A Typology of Shī‘ī Discourses and Possibilities of Democracy," *Critical Research on Religion* 11, no. 2 (August 2023): 187–204, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032231174203>.

<sup>22</sup> Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 165–175.

<sup>23</sup> Ali Akbar, "Political Theology in Iran: Critiques of the Guardianship of Jurist in Light of Reformist Iranian Scholarship," *Political Theology* 0, no. 0 (January 2022): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317X.2021.2022069>.

<sup>24</sup> Rotraud Wielandt, "Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*,

ed. Sabine Schmidtke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 707–64.

<sup>25</sup> Yasuyuki Matsunaga, "Mohsen Kadivar, an Advocate of Postrevivalist Islam in Iran," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (December 2007): 317–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530190701388333>.

<sup>26</sup> Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam & Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 221–225.

discourse within his own society.<sup>28</sup> This imposed silence, however, became an unusual condition of productivity. In the solitude of intellectual withdrawal, he composed the core texts that articulate his reform project—works explicitly devoted to hermeneutics, faith and freedom, and a sustained critique of state-sanctioned interpretation. The political implications of this trajectory are subtle: rather than directly confronting power with polemic, he disarms power by challenging its epistemic self-image.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, his critique is foundational, aiming to demonstrate that institutional absolutism is founded on a flawed conception of revelation, language, and the interpretive subject.<sup>30</sup>

The intellectual formation of Shabestari in his earlier years is also a relevant factor to consider. Shabestari's work is noteworthy for its preservation of continuity with the clerical tradition and with the pre-revolutionary moral sensibility that is often characterized as Islamic humanism. Islamic humanism is characterized by an insistence that human dignity is not external to religion but rather constitutive of moral agency.<sup>31</sup> Concurrently, he becomes acutely aware of how theomorphic rhetoric—especially revolutionary ideals of “becoming like God”—can be weaponized into new absolutisms.<sup>32</sup> This double consciousness—a

term used to denote continuity without captivity—is precisely what equips him to critique authority from within tradition while refusing the state's claim to embody the tradition's final meaning.

### c. The Hermeneutical Detour

A core element of Shabestari's reform is what I characterize as a “hermeneutical detour,”<sup>33</sup> which can be understood as an epistemological redirection from ontotheology to hermeneutics. In his earlier writings, he employed a metaphysical idiom characteristic of modern Shi'i thought, including the notion of the four prisons (history, language, society, and the body) marking existential limits on human understanding.<sup>34</sup> This idiom, significantly influenced by his intellectual legacy, aimed to preserve transcendence and articulate the spiritual journey toward God.<sup>35</sup> However, the post-revolutionary condition exposed a limit intrinsic to such language: metaphysical and theomorphic vocabularies, however elevated, could no longer adequately address the concrete intellectual and social challenges of modernity—especially the problem of institutionalized authority and the politics of meaning.<sup>36</sup> The detour, therefore, is a re-siting of theology's center of gravity. Shabestari's intellectual project transitions from an

<sup>28</sup> Katajun Amirpur, *An Intellectual Biography of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari* (London: Routledge, 2025), 117-128.

<sup>29</sup> Mahmoud Sadri, “Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15, no. 2 (December 2001): 257–70, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1012973118615>.

<sup>30</sup> Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, 176-177.

<sup>31</sup> Farzin Vahdat, “Metaphysical Foundations of Islamic Revolutionary Discourse in Iran: Vacillations on Human Subjectivity,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 8, no. 14 (March 1999): 49–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669929908720140>.

<sup>32</sup> Vahdat, “Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity,” 34-36.

<sup>33</sup> I borrow this terminology from Paul Ricoeur, see Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 93–106; Paul Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics (1965),” in *Hermeneutical Inquiry: The Interpretation of Existence*, II, ed. David E. Klemm (Georgia: Scholars Press for The American Academy of Religion, 1986), 185–202.

<sup>34</sup> Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, *Al-Imān Wa al-Hurriyyah*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabani (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Intisār al-'Arabī, 2013), 60.

<sup>35</sup> Vahdat, “Metaphysical Foundations of Islamic Revolutionary Discourse in Iran,” 72-73.

<sup>36</sup> Vahdat, “Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity,” 35-36.

examination of the concept of revelation in relation to the divine to a consideration of how revelation is understood by human beings within the context of historical evolution.<sup>37</sup>

This shift entails two consequential implications. *Firstly*, it transposes religious knowledge from metaphysical abstraction to human finitude: if humans exist within historical, linguistic, and cultural horizons, then revelation—communicated in human language—must also enter those horizons as something to be understood, not merely received.<sup>38</sup> *Secondly*, it renders the interpretive subject unavoidable. For Shabestari, understanding is not a discrete phenomenon; it is shaped by pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*), existential horizon, and intellectual orientation.<sup>39</sup> This assertion carries significant theological implications: once revelation is recognized as text-in-language that necessitates interpretation, the pursuit of a singular, definitive interpretation becomes epistemically unsound.<sup>40</sup>

From this perspective, hermeneutics is not a late-modern addition to Qur'anic studies; rather, it serves as the philosophical articulation of a fundamental theological reality: divine communication enters the world through the human phenomenon of meaning.<sup>41</sup> Subsequent to this recognition, the foundation upon which authority is traditionally established, namely, the notion of interpretive finality, becomes invalid.<sup>42</sup> It is imperative to rethink authority as accountable, dialogical,

and historically situated, rather than as a sovereign voice that closes the conversation.

#### d. Critique of the “Official Reading” (*Qerā'at-e Rasmī*)

The hermeneutical detour culminates in Shabestari's sustained critique of what he calls the *qerā'at-e rasmī az dīn*—the official reading of religion institutionalized by the state and clerical authorities. The aforementioned official reading must not be regarded exclusively as an authoritarian policy; it is, rather, an epistemological model of revelation and meaning.<sup>43</sup> The cornerstone of this approach is the notion that revelations are bestowed in their entirety as a linguistic construct, and their true meaning can be ascertained through the discernment of authorized interpreters. In this model, the Prophet is reduced to a passive transmitter of divine words, a conduit devoid of interpretive agency.<sup>44</sup>

Shabestari's critique is predicated on an analysis of language and communication. If revelation is to be conveyed in human language, then the Prophet cannot be an inert channel; he must be an active subject who articulates divine experience into human speech.<sup>45</sup> To refute this claim would be to refute the fundamental conditions that enable linguistic meaning to exist. The official reading, from this perspective, distorts the underlying structure of meaning by suppressing the inherently dialogical nature of revelation. The monopolization of interpretive authority and

<sup>37</sup> Constance Arminjon, “Acclimater l’Herméneutique Philosophique en Islam: Shabestarī, de la Critique des Méthodes Exégétiques à la Théorie de l’Historicité du Coran,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, no. 236 (March 2019): 236, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhr.9437>.

<sup>38</sup> Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari, “Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Hirminūtīk,” *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu’āṣirah* 4 (1998): 123–42.

<sup>39</sup> Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari, “Hirminiyūtīqā Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah,” *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu’āṣirah* 6 (1999): 90–132.

<sup>40</sup> Akbar, “A Contemporary Muslim Scholar’s Approach to Revelation: Mohammad Mojtahed Šabestari’s Reform Project,” 669–670.

<sup>41</sup> Amirpur, *An Intellectual Biography of Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari*, 128–134.

<sup>42</sup> Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari, *Ta’ammulāt Fī al-Qirā’ah al-Insāniyyah Li al-Dīn*, trans. Haidar Najaf (Tunisia: Dār al-Tanwīr li al-Tibā’ah wa al-Nasyr, 2014), 9–24.

<sup>43</sup> Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari, *Naqd Al-Qirā’ah al-Rasmiyyah Li al-Dīn*, trans. Ahmad al-Qabanji (Beirut: Mu’assasah al-Intisyār al-‘Arabī, 2013), 11–12.

<sup>44</sup> Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qur’anic Hermeneutics*, 97–98.

<sup>45</sup> Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari, “Nazariyyah Al-Qirā’ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Al-Kalām al-Nabawī,” *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu’āṣirah* 53–54 (2013): 304–40.

the possibility of hermeneutical dialogue itself—the ongoing exchange between the human and the divine within history—are of particular concern.<sup>46</sup> When a state or institution asserts exclusive authority over Islam, it effectively disregards the historical complexity of the religion and forecloses the open exchange through which revelation continues to speak.

The upshot of this investigation is that the crisis of interpretation is therefore inextricably linked to the crisis of authority. Shabestari contends that the most salient issue in contemporary religious discourse is not the literal interpretation of the Qur'an, but rather the monopolization of interpretive authority, which results in a stagnant interpretation of religious texts.<sup>47</sup> The unfolding of revelation through human language necessitates its entry into historical consciousness, wherein human beings possess both the right and the obligation to interpret.<sup>48</sup> In this sense, Shabestari's hermeneutics can be regarded as a form of philosophical renewal and a subtle political resistance. It relocates the struggle for religion from the control of institutions to the dignity of human understanding, from enforced certainty to responsible interpretation.<sup>49</sup>

## Re-imagining Revelation

If the plausibility of interpretive monopoly, as I argued above, is sustained by conceptualizing revelation as a completed verbal deposit (e.g., a closed, administrable, and therefore possessable corpus) then the pivotal reform cannot commence at the level of political

<sup>46</sup> Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran," 724.

<sup>47</sup> Amirkur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Freedom, Democracy and Women's Rights*, 183-188.

<sup>48</sup> Ali Akbar, "Towards a Humanistic Approach to the Quran: New Direction in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Culture and Religion* 20, no. 1 (January 2019): 98.

<sup>49</sup> Magdalena Rodziewicz, "The End of Traditional Islamic Jurisprudence in Hermeneutics of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (January 2017): 207-30, <https://doi.org/10.1353/isl.2017.0013>.

slogans or institutional rearrangements. The process must begin at the deepest level, where authority first acquires its theological legitimacy: the way revelation itself is understood. At this juncture, Shabestari's intervention is radical precisely because it treats the political crisis of contemporary Muslim societies as the surface symptom of a more fundamental epistemic disorder: the lingering assumption that revelation is a literal "text that descended from heaven," verbally dictated once and for all between God and the Prophet.<sup>50</sup>

### a. From Dictation to Prophetic Experience

The conventional conception of revelation, particularly as it has been reinterpreted in modern political theology, often portrays *wahy* as a completed form of communication: divine utterances transmitted to the Prophet as a linguistic dictation, whose meaning is considered inherently fixed.<sup>51</sup> Shabestari's hermeneutical observations reveal a hidden yet consequential political implication inherent in this imagery. If revelation is considered a completed divine message, then the scope of interpretation can be constrained in the interest of fidelity. Ultimately, closure emerges as a virtue, and institutions can reasonably assert that divergent interpretations do not merely represent disagreements but rather constitute violations of God's ultimate directive.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, the stagnation of modern Islamic theology originates in a theological premise

<sup>50</sup> See also Oddbjørn Leirvik, "Wahy and Tanzil," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 69, no. 2 (July 2015): 101-25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2015.1081617>.

<sup>51</sup> Hoseyn 'Ali Montazeri, *Safir-e Haq va Safir-e Vahy* (Qom: Kherad Āvā, 2009); Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Zarqānī, *Manāhil Al-'Irfān Fī 'Ulūm Al-Qur'Ān*, ed. Ahmad Syamsuddin (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, *Naqd-e Bonyād-Hāye Fiqh va Kalām* (Tehran: Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari: Markaz Nasyr Āsār wa Afkār, 2015).

that quietly authorizes interpretive closure and makes reform appear as disobedience.<sup>53</sup>

Shabestari's proposal entails a shift in perspective, replacing the prevailing model with a novel understanding of revelation as a prophetic experience. This concept encompasses a divine-human event in which transcendence is preserved, while the mode of its presence is reconceived.<sup>54</sup> The imperative for preservation does not pertain to a literalist metaphysics of descent; rather, it concerns the transcendent initiative of God—revelation as genuinely bestowed, not contrived.<sup>55</sup> In this context, the fundamental reinterpretation of the notion that the divine gift is conveyed as an independent set of sentences, devoid of human mediation, is imperative. In Shabestari's hermeneutical reformulation, revelation is illumination: an opening of meaning granted by God to the Prophet, which the Prophet then articulates through the language, culture, and social realities of seventh-century Arabia.<sup>56</sup> At this juncture, the Qur'an is not considered to be detached from transcendence or reduced to the mere work of human authorship. Instead, it is re-situated as the Prophet's responsive articulation of a divine encounter—historical in form, transcendent in source, and communicative in function.<sup>57</sup>

This shift also redefines what counts as "theological relevance" in the present day.

<sup>53</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse: Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini*, trans. Jonathan Wright (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Abbas Poya, "How the Prophet Saw the World: On the Qur'anic Exegesis of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari," in *Unity and Diversity in Contemporary Muslim Thought*, ed. Abbas Poya and Farid Sulaeman (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 208–27.

<sup>55</sup> Compare it with Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, ed. Forough Jahanbakhsh, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> Shabestari, "Nazariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyah Li al-Ālam: Al-Kalām al-Nabawī."

<sup>57</sup> Akbar, "A Contemporary Muslim Scholar's Approach to Revelation: Mohammad Mojtahed Šabestari's Reform Project," 661–663.

Shabestari posits that the crux of the contemporary crisis in prophetic theology lies in the ability of prophetic discourse to maintain its intelligibility and significance for contemporary individuals, who inhabit distinct historical contexts.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Revelation should not be approached as a set of frozen metaphysical propositions, but as a historical and communicative event of understanding—an event whose meaning emerges through interpretation and whose continuity depends upon the ongoing renewal of interpretive responsibility.

#### b. Blick and Intersubjectivity

In order to conceptualize prophetic experience, Shabestari employs a term derived from his encounter with German philosophical vocabulary: *Blick*, a term that can be translated as "vision," "glance," or more precisely, "way of seeing."<sup>59</sup> During his Hamburg years, exposure to hermeneutics and Protestant theology prompted him to place the believing subject at the centre of religious experience, with *Blick* becoming his key to reconceiving revelation.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, the act of revelation may be defined as the bestowing of a new dimension of meaning. The Prophet is said to have been granted a transcendental insight by God, enabling him to perceive human and worldly reality in the context of the Divine.<sup>61</sup> The phenomenon that unfolds is the radiance

<sup>58</sup> Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, "Religion, Reason, and the New Theology," in *Shī'ite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions*, ed. and trans. Linda Clarke (New York: Global Publications, 2001), 243–60; Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, "Ma'nā al-Mā'ānī," in *Al-Hirminiyūtiqā Wa al-Tafsīr al-Dīnī Li al-Ālam*, ed. Abdul Jabbar al-Rifa'i (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr li al-Tibā'ah wa al-Nasyr, 2017), 483–510.

<sup>59</sup> Shabestari, "Ma'nā al-Mā'ānī."

<sup>60</sup> Amirpur, *An Intellectual Biography of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari*, 228–236.

<sup>61</sup> Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'ān and Its Interpretation in Iran* (London: Routledge, 2020), 75–86.

of illumination—an opening of intelligibility that the Prophet translates into speech.

At this juncture, Shabestari's hermeneutical theory becomes explicitly, what Farzin Vahdat termed, intersubjective.<sup>62</sup> Revelation is neither absorbed into the Prophet's subjectivity (as if the divine were merely psychological) nor detached from the Prophet's historicity (as if the Prophet were a neutral device). The act of giving is characterized by its relational nature, involving a transcendent Giver and a historical receiver who also functions as an interpreter.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the role of the Prophet is redefined in a fundamental way: he is not merely a passive container of words, but rather the first hermeneutical subject within the revelatory event itself.<sup>64</sup>

Shabestari substantiates this assertion through a philosophical approach to language that unveils the inconsistencies inherent in the "sound-channel" model. Drawing on Albert Keller, he notes that every linguistic event requires multiple components: a speaker, a listener, a context, a linguistic community, and meaning.<sup>65</sup> The absence of any one of these elements, Shabestari further argues, results in the collapse of communication.<sup>66</sup> If the Prophet were merely a "sound channel" (*kānāl-e sūtī*) through which God's words pass, the human dimension of language would vanish, contradicting the very nature of communication. The notion of language as a passive conduit for the transmission of prepared content is a fallacy. Rather, it is a dynamic process that engages the converging realms of consciousness, social context, and historical trajectory, collectively contributing to the creation of meaning. Therefore, if

<sup>62</sup> Vahdat, "Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojahed Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity," 36-39.

<sup>63</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Īmān Wa al-Ḥurriyyah*, 41-43.

<sup>64</sup> Abbas Poya, "Muhammad Mujahid Shabistari," in *Handbook of Qur'ānic Hermeneutics*, 5: Contemporary Qur'ānic Hermeneutics, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2025), 249-67.

revelation is expressed in human language, the Prophet cannot be reduced to passivity; he must actively articulate transcendence through structures and symbols intelligible to his community.<sup>67</sup>

This intersubjective structure elucidates the rationale behind Shabestari's reconceptualization, which cannot be categorized as either secularization or relativism. The theological impulse to disassociate revelation from history—as though transcendence necessitated historical absence—is also rejected, yet an epistemological scepticism that wholly eradicates transcendence is likewise eschewed. The divine remains inherently unknowable; the human remains unavoidable. The dialectical space of conversation that emerges enables faith to remain rational, dynamic, and open to renewal.<sup>68</sup> This is in contrast to the fantasy of a final, administrable meaning that can often confine faith.

### c. The Qur'an as the Prophet's Hermeneutical Reading of the World

Subsequent to reconceiving revelation as a prophetic experience articulated in language, Shabestari advances to a further step: reconceptualizing the Qur'an's textuality itself. The Qur'an, according to him, is not a literal transcription of divine reality; rather, it is a human text inseparable from a divine encounter. In other words, it is a prophetic interpretation of the divine experience—an act of meaning in which the Prophet responds linguistically to the light granted in

<sup>65</sup> Albert Keller, *Sprachphilosophie*, Second Edition (München: Verlag, 1989).

<sup>66</sup> "Naṣariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Kalām Allah Wa Kalām al-Basyar," *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 57-58 (2014): 320-49.

<sup>67</sup> Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qu'ranic Hermeneutics*, 100-101.

<sup>68</sup> Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, 167-168.

revelation.<sup>69</sup> This assertion highlights Shabestari's position that the act of reading the Qur'an invariably constitutes an "interpretation of an interpretation." The community interprets a text that already embodies the Prophet's interpretive articulation of divine encounter.

In this respect, Shabestari sets forth what I perceive to be the fundamental principle of his notion of Qur'anic textuality: the Qur'an is *qerā'at-e nabavī az jahān* (the Prophet's hermeneutical reading of the world) emanating from his *tajrobeh-ye hermenūtik-e nabavī* (prophetic hermeneutical experience).<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the Qur'an does not offer a purely factual depiction of reality "as it is"; rather, it is a prophetic reflection on how the world appears from within the divine horizon.<sup>71</sup> This encounter provides a vision that unifies moral and spiritual understanding, with each verse reflecting the Prophet's endeavor to harmonize divine will with the tangible social realities of the *Hijāz*.<sup>72</sup>

A significant consequence of this perspective is that the Qur'an cannot be regarded as a comprehensive "cosmic encyclopedia." Shabestari systematically rejects apologetic projects that attempt to "prove" the Qur'an's scientific accuracy by employing modern empirical methods within the text, as the Qur'an was never intended to

function as an empirical explanation of the universe.<sup>73</sup> Its objective is to cultivate a religious understanding of the world through the process of orientation.<sup>74</sup> In Shabestari's formulation, it is a *visio theologica*—a prophetic vision that interprets reality through the lens of divine unity (*tawhīd*).<sup>75</sup> The aforementioned principle also deconstructs a purely legalistic interpretation of the Qur'an as a definitive statute book. According to Shabestari, the legal verses ought not to be interpreted as universal decrees applicable unchanged across temporal and geographical contexts; rather, they are best understood as contextual responses to human problems within the Prophet's world.<sup>76</sup> The concept of eternal in this context refer to the moral orientation—the ethical spirit of justice, mercy, and human dignity that underlies the command.

Shabestari extends this worldview approach beyond law to Qur'anic narrative itself. The coherence of Qur'anic stories is not primarily chronological but rather moral-performative, with narratives serving to organize meaning rather than time.<sup>77</sup> The narrative of Adam, for instance, is not presented as a biological account of origins but rather as a spiritual drama of fall and redemption. Its purpose is to awaken moral consciousness rather than to convey empirical knowledge. In this sense, the Qur'an

<sup>69</sup> Akbar and Saeed, *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'ān and Its Interpretation in Iran*, 76-77.

<sup>70</sup> Shabestari, "Nażariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Al-Kalām al-Nabawī"; Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari, "Nażariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Insāniyyah al-Naṣṣ Al-Qur'Ānī Wa Ḥaqīqah al-Tajribah al-Muhammadiyyah," *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 67-68 (2017): 368-401.

<sup>71</sup> Afif, "Horizon Baru Hermeneutika Islam: Studi Pemikiran Hermeneutika Filosofis Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari," 154-156.

<sup>72</sup> Mansooreh Khalilizand, "Revelation, Prophetic Reading of the World, and the End of Fiqh. Shabestari's Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur'ān," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Islamic Thought*, ed. Sylvain Camilleri and Selami Varlik (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 123-32.

<sup>73</sup> Ali Akbar, "Islam-Science Relation from the Perspective of Post-Revolutionary Iranian Religious Intellectuals," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 1 (January 2019): 104-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1383882>.

<sup>74</sup> Amirpur, *New Thinking in Islam: The Jihad for Freedom, Democracy and Women's Rights*, 196-197.

<sup>75</sup> Amirpur, *An Intellectual Biography of Mohammad Mojtahehd Shabestari*, 229.

<sup>76</sup> Akbar, "Towards a Humanistic Approach to the Quran," 97.

<sup>77</sup> Shabestari, "Nażariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Al-Kalām al-Nabawī"; Shabestari, "Nażariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Kalām Allah Wa Kalām al-Basyar."

establishes a moral horizon through which reality can be reinterpreted.<sup>78</sup> According to Shabestari, the Qur'an, being a human text derived from a divine experience, can be interpreted through the lenses of the humanities and social sciences.<sup>79</sup> This assertion posits that hermeneutics, linguistics, literary theories, and historiography are not external impositions but legitimate frameworks for understanding how revelation appears within language and history.<sup>80</sup>

### Foundations of Shabestari's Hermeneutics

Shabestari's intervention is best understood as a reconstruction of the conditions of possibility for religious knowledge, rather than as a proposal for a new exegetical method among others.<sup>81</sup> The pivotal of his hermeneutical apparatus entails a strategic shift in focus from the question of the text's conclusive message to the inquiry into the manner in which meaning becomes manifest when revelation enters the historical realm through the medium of language.<sup>82</sup> Once revelation is conceived as a communicative event—mediated, addressed, and historically situated—interpretation no longer appears as a secondary activity appended to a completed text. Rather, it is the inherent logic of revelation itself. In this context, the Qur'an must be regarded as a crystallization of a preliminary interpretive act, and consequently, every subsequent reading constitutes an interpretation of an interpretation. This theoretical engine serves as the foundation for Shabestari's project, comprising what I identify as a dual-layered hermeneutics. This

hermeneutics elucidates the origin of meaning in prophetic articulation and its perpetuation through communal re-actualization across temporal domains.

#### a. Dual-layer Hermeneutics: Prophetic and Communal Hermeneutics

The dual-layer model can be articulated with conceptual sharpness. **Prophetic hermeneutics** is defined as the initial instance in which the Prophet interprets an encounter with the Divine within the framework of human language and logic. In this context, revelation is not confined to a series of independent propositions that exist independently of language; rather, it becomes intelligible precisely by assuming linguistic form.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, the Prophet is not merely a passive channel of transmission; rather, he is the primary interpreting subject, tasked with the responsibility of perceiving, discerning, and articulating the divine message.<sup>84</sup> In Shabestari's conceptualization, the revelatory event bestows a *Blick*—a horizon of meaning that reconfigures the Prophet's perception of reality—and the Qur'anic discourse is the Prophet's historically embedded response to that vision. It is evident that prophetic speech is inherently interpretive in nature. It organizes moral significance, identifies injustice, implores compassion, and reconfigures the world according to *tawhīd*. Therefore, the Prophet's hermeneutical understanding is an

<sup>78</sup> Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari, "Al-Hirminiyūtīqā Wa al-Tafsīr al-Dīnī Li al-'Ālam," in *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā Wa al-Tafsīr al-Dīnī Li al-'Ālam*, ed. Abdul Jabbar al-Rifa'i (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nasyr, 2017), 423–47.

<sup>79</sup> Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, 162.

<sup>80</sup> Compare it with Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Ishkāliyyāt Al-Qirā'ah Wa Āliyyāt al-Ta'wil*. (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Šaqafi al-'Arabī, 1992).

<sup>81</sup> Afif, "Horizon Baru Hermeneutika Islam: Studi Pemikiran Hermeneutika Filosofis Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari," 3–7.

<sup>82</sup> Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, ed. Abdul Jabbar al-Rifa'i, trans. Haidar Najaf (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nasyr, 2014), 5.

<sup>83</sup> Shabestari, "Nazariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-'Ālam: Kalām Allah Wa Kalām al-Basyar."

<sup>84</sup> Shabestari, "Nazariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-'Ālam: Al-Kalām al-Nabawī."

integral component of the very act of revelation manifesting through language.<sup>85</sup>

The initial layer is of paramount importance because it precludes a theological fiction: the notion that the Qur'an is a timeless deposit, completed in an untouched realm, merely "delivered" into human hands. Shabestari, however, advances a divergent perspective, positing that meaning is derived from the convergence of transcendence and finitude. The concept of revelation engages and activates the human subject.<sup>86</sup> Accordingly, the Prophet's horizon—comprised of his language, culture, and historical context—is not merely an arbitrary amalgamation that can be divested of its superfluous layers to expose a fundamental essence. It is the medium through which the Divine is communicated within human life.<sup>87</sup> To refute the notion of transcendence in mediation is to disregard the fundamental principles of language and guidance.

The second layer, **communal hermeneutics**, originates precisely at the point where the first layer concludes: once prophetic articulation has taken textual form and entered the domain of history. If the Qur'an is indeed a text of prophetic interpretation in language, then it follows that the community's task is never to replicate a finished meaning as if history were irrelevant.<sup>88</sup> The community interprets the prophetic text as an address that must be heard anew, under changing conditions of knowledge, power, and social reality.<sup>89</sup> Communal hermeneutics, then, is a term that describes the ongoing process by which Muslims, across generations, engage in the following practices: posing questions to the

text, evaluating the validity of interpretive claims, and re-actualizing meaning in new circumstances.<sup>90</sup> In other words, the Ummah participates in the text's ongoing disclosure over time.

The relationship between these two layers is characterized by genealogical and dialogical processes. Prophetic hermeneutics is defined as the initial translation of divine discourse into a historical-linguistic context, while communal hermeneutics signifies the ongoing interpretation of that prophetic message within the context of subsequent readers. Once this genealogy is recognized, two extremes become equally untenable. **Absolutism**—the notion that one can bypass history and possess the text's final will—is rendered moot by the text's inherent nature as a living entity that is sustained by interpretation. Conversely, a **relativism** devoid of constraints also tends to falter, as the community's interpretive liberty is not autonomy from the text's moral weight, but liberty within a discourse that remains aligned with the prophetic revelation. Thus, I argue that this dual-layer model establishes a distinctive equilibrium: meaning is both open and renewable, yet not arbitrary; plural, yet not anarchic.

#### b. Gadamerian Toolbox

Shabestari's approach diverges from Gadamer's in that he does not employ Gadamer's concept of "stage" to provide an academic detour into European hermeneutical theory. Rather, he utilizes a modest selection of conceptual frameworks to elucidate the rationale behind interpretive finality, demonstrating that this impossibility is a

<sup>85</sup> Poya, "How the Prophet Saw the World: On the Qur'anic Exegesis of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari," 221-224.

<sup>86</sup> Vahdat, "Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity," 43-44.

<sup>87</sup> Akbar, "A Contemporary Muslim Scholar's Approach to Revelation: Mohammad Mojtahed Šabestari's Reform Project," 666-667.

<sup>88</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 191-196.

<sup>89</sup> Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, "Naṣariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Al-Fardīyyāt al-Musbiqah Li al-Tafsīr Ghair al-Jazmiy Li Al-Qur'ān: Naṣariyyah Ṣadr al-Muta'allihīn Wa Istihālah Fahm Al-Qur'ān," *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 59-60 (2014): 290-317.

<sup>90</sup> Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, 162-166.

condition of understanding.<sup>91</sup> A concise exposition of three concepts is sufficient for the purposes of this discussion.

**First, pre-understanding.** Each reader brings to the text a unique set of pre-understanding shaped by their own language, moral intuitions, social conflicts, and the epistemic norms of their particular historical moment.<sup>92</sup> Shabestari employs this insight to dispel the myth of the “blank” interpreter, who is perceived to merely extract what is present. Reading, by its very definition, never commences at the beginning; rather, it begins in *medias res*, within a lived world.<sup>93</sup> The objective is not to endorse bias, but rather to acknowledge situatedness as the ontological precondition for understanding. This phenomenon, as Ricoeur eloquently termed “conflict of interpretations,”<sup>94</sup> emerges not due to a deficiency in revelation *per se*, but rather as a consequence of interpreters’ situatedness within distinct historical contexts.

**Second, dialogue as a question–answer structure.** The act of understanding cannot be reduced to the mere mechanical reproduction of an original meaning. Instead, it is an event in which the text becomes articulate in response to the questions posed by the reader’s horizon.<sup>95</sup> The text “speaks” only when it is interrogated—when contemporary concerns press upon it and demand intelligibility.<sup>96</sup> This hermeneutical postulate refutes the notion that interpretation is the passive reception of a pre-

packaged message. Rather, it resembles a living conversation, where the reader poses a question, the text provides a response, the response in turn refines the reader’s initial question, and the cycle persists.<sup>97</sup> In this context, the primary threat to religious faith does not lie in the act of questioning itself; rather, it is the prohibition of such questioning. Thus, the act of prohibiting questioning effectively freezes revelation into a static object, thereby transforming religion into a matter of administrative certainty.

**Third, fusion of horizons.** Given that the reader and the text belong to different historical horizons, understanding cannot be reduced to a simple migration into the past or the imposition of the present onto the past.<sup>98</sup> This concept signifies a productive encounter, wherein the text’s and reader’s horizons interpenetrate (*indimāj al-ītar/tadārub al-ufuq*), giving rise to a third space where meaning becomes newly apparent.<sup>99</sup> In this fusion, the text is not a museum artifact or a ventriloquist’s dummy. The text exhibits a retention of resistance—that is, its own claims and moral direction—yet it becomes intelligible only through a contemporary horizon.<sup>100</sup> This perspective prompts Shabestari to posit that attaining “final meaning” necessitates relinquishing truth, as the “final” would demand a perspective from an infinite vantage point, akin to a divine viewpoint within the

<sup>91</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 11-26; See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Paperback edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> Shabestari, “Hirminiyūtīqā Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah.”

<sup>93</sup> Shabestari, “Al-Tafsīr Wa al-Hirminūtīk.”

<sup>94</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

<sup>95</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 14-18.

<sup>96</sup> Vahdat, “Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity,” 36-37.

<sup>97</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. and trans. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1976), 72-88.

<sup>98</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 23.

<sup>99</sup> Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 198-201.

<sup>100</sup> Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), 115-117.

temporal realm, which is beyond the capacity of human comprehension.<sup>101</sup>

These three concepts elucidate the imperative nature of hermeneutical openness as a fundamental component of contemporary intellectual frameworks, underscoring its indispensability for effective comprehension. However, these very tools also delineate a boundary against “wild relativism.” In the event that pre-understanding is unavoidable, it does not necessarily follow that all readings are equal. Rather, it follows that readings must justify themselves publicly through means such as argument, coherence, and accountability to language, context, and ethical consequences.<sup>102</sup> If meaning emerges in the context of dialogue, it does not necessarily imply that any response is deemed acceptable.<sup>103</sup> Instead, it is essential that responses remain in alignment with the assertions made in the text and the collectively held rational standards of the community. In the event of horizons fusing, it suggests that the present must undergo transformation through the encounter with the text’s otherness.<sup>104</sup> At this juncture, Shabestari’s appropriation of Gadamer underwrites a disciplined plurality: openness without nihilism, historicity without capitulation.

### c. Hermeneutics as Foundation

At this juncture, Shabestari’s project reveals itself as more than a refined theory of

interpretation; it becomes a sustained critique of the epistemic hierarchy that has long governed the religious sciences. His appeal to hermeneutics is not a supplementary methodological move designed to modernize *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, or *kalām*, but a deliberate epistemological reorientation.<sup>105</sup> Hermeneutics precedes these disciplines as the foundational theory of understanding through which they are constituted, interrogated, and evaluated.<sup>106</sup> *Tafsīr*, *fiqh*, and *kalām* do not emanate transparently from divine speech; they are historical crystallizations of communal hermeneutics, shaped by specific intellectual vocabularies, social struggles, and power configurations. When these disciplines forget their historical genesis, they present themselves as timeless embodiments of divine will; when they recall it, they become revisable, reformable, and accountable.<sup>107</sup> This is why Shabestari resists any epistemic model that isolates religious knowledge from philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences: such isolation, for him, is not a sign of piety, but a symptom of a theology that has converted revelation from an open moral address into a closed doctrinal enclosure.<sup>108</sup>

The deeper stake of this inversion, however, is theological rather than merely methodological. Shabestari contends that the modern crisis of religion is not primarily a crisis of legal technique but a crisis of faith’s freedom.<sup>109</sup> Faith (*īmān*) names an existential,

<sup>101</sup> Shabestari, *Naqd Al-Qirā'ah al-Rasmiyyah Li al-Dīn*, 51-53.

<sup>102</sup> Vahdat, “Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity,” 50-53.

<sup>103</sup> Ali Akbar, “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Contemporary Muslim Scholars’ Approaches to Interpreting Scripture,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 4 (June 2020): 1-28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453720931912>.

<sup>104</sup> Lawrence K. Schmidt, *Understanding Hermeneutics* (Durham: Acumen, 2006), 107-114.

<sup>105</sup> Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari, “Al-Hirminiyūtīqā Wa al-Tafsīr al-Dīnī Li al-Ālam,” *Qadāyā Islāmiyyah Mu’āṣirah* 53-54 (2013): 15-42.

<sup>106</sup> Arminjon, “Acclimater l’herméneutique philosophique en islam.”

<sup>107</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 27-33.

<sup>108</sup> Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari, “Al-Ḥadāṣah Wa al-Ma’rifah al-Dīniyyah,” *Qadāyā Islāmiyyah Mu’āṣirah* 45-46 (2011): 86-103.

<sup>109</sup> Roman Seidel, “Mohammad Mojtahed Šabestari: Freiheit Und Sittliche Autonomie Als Bedingung Für Den Glauben,” in *Kant in Teheran: Anfänge, Ansätze Und Kontexte Der Kantrezeption in Iran* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 302-13.



supra-historical orientation of the human subject toward the divine, whereas creed ('aqidah) represents a historically situated articulation of belief.<sup>110</sup> Theology's task, therefore, is not to freeze divine meaning into immutable dogmas, but to interpret the ever-renewing encounter between God and humanity.<sup>111</sup> Drawing on a relational ontology resonant with Martin Buber's distinction between "I-Thou" and "I-It," Shabestari reconceives the human-divine relation as dialogical rather than hierarchical.<sup>112</sup> Faith, in this framework, cannot be coerced into existence by institutional authority; it must be freely affirmed.<sup>113</sup> Hence his provocative insistence that criticism of religion is not a threat to faith but a condition of its vitality.<sup>114</sup> Only a belief tested by reason and chosen in freedom can remain genuinely religious rather than ideologically enforced.<sup>115</sup>

This theological vision carries decisive epistemological consequences for Islamic normativity. If *fiqh* is acknowledged as a product of communal hermeneutics rather than a direct transcript of divine command, its rulings cannot function as final closures of moral deliberation.<sup>116</sup> They must instead be understood as historically situated judgments, responsive to the epistemic resources and moral sensibilities of their time, and therefore open to revision as those resources expand. *Kalām*, similarly, cannot retain the posture of an impregnable fortress immune to historical

<sup>110</sup> Roman Seidel, "Mohammed Motschtaheh Schabestari: Die Gottgefällige Freiheit," in *Der Islam Am Wendepunkt: Liberale Und Konservative Reformer Einer Weltreligion*, ed. Katajun Amirpur and Ludwig Ammann (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 73–81.

<sup>111</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Imān Wa al-Hurriyyah*, 53–59.

<sup>112</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

<sup>113</sup> Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, "Al-Imān Wa Ḥurriyyah al-Fikr Wa al-Irādah: Qirā'ah Fī Mafhūm al-Imān Ladai al-Mutakallimūn Wa al-Falāsifah Wa al-'Urafā," *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 16–17 (2001): 183–94.

<sup>114</sup> Ori Goldberg, *Shi'i Theology in Iran: The Challenge of Religious Experience* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2012), 133–156.

consciousness; it becomes a reflective articulation of faith within evolving horizons of meaning.<sup>117</sup> In this sense, hermeneutics functions as the grammar of religious knowledge: it discloses how religious sciences emerge, how they transform, and why no particular configuration can legitimately claim exhaustive access to absolute truth. Farzin Vahdat's notion of "intersubjective hermeneutics" is instructive here: religious meaning arises through the dialogical interaction of two subjects—God as transcendent source and humanity as historical interpreter—rather than through unilateral transmission.<sup>118</sup> Each era is therefore not only permitted but obligated to approach scripture through new intellectual frameworks, not to diminish revelation's sanctity, but to preserve its intelligibility.

A final set of guardrails is essential to prevent misunderstanding. Hermeneutical foundationalism does not entail interpretive permissiveness or relativistic license. On the contrary, it intensifies responsibility. Interpretive claims must be articulated within the horizon of public rationality: reasons must be shareable, arguments contestable, and conclusions open to critique.<sup>119</sup> Given the inescapably human mediation of religion, interpretation must also satisfy ethical coherence. Readings that systematically violate dignity, normalize injustice, or sacralise domination cannot be shielded by appeals to

<sup>115</sup> Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari, "Al-Imān Wa al-Tajribah al-Dīniyyah Wa al-Ḥurriyyah," *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 51–52 (2012): 132–59.

<sup>116</sup> Ashk P. Dahlén, *Islamic Law, Epistemology, and Modernity: Legal Philosophy in Contemporary Iran* (New York & London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>117</sup> Shabestari, "Religion, Reason, and the New Theology."

<sup>118</sup> Vahdat, "Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtabah Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity," 40–41.

<sup>119</sup> Paul Healy, "Truth and Relativism," in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2022), 287–98.

"textual certainty." Shabestari's pluralism is therefore not anarchic but disciplined: it affirms freedom of interpretation only insofar as that freedom is bound to justification before reason, conscience, and the moral horizon that revelation itself seeks to awaken.<sup>120</sup> In this sense, hermeneutics becomes not merely an academic framework, but a mode of religious responsibility—relocating authority from institutional finality to accountable participation in the ongoing, dialogical pursuit of truth between God and humanity.

### Socio-Religious Implications

a. Islamic Law: History, *Ijtihād*, and Reform

The concept of revelation is understood differently when described not as a "finished dictation" but as a dialogical event—that is, God's bestowal of a monotheistic and moral vision articulated by the Prophet within a concrete social horizon. Consequently, Islamic law can no longer be imagined as a timeless code hovering above history.<sup>121</sup> The normative force of the Qur'an, while not completely annulled, is subject to displacement, moving from a fixed legal form to ethical orientation, from static templates to moral teleology.<sup>122</sup> Shabestari's dual-layered scheme renders this shift intelligible. As prophetic articulation is inherently interpretive, subsequent jurisprudence inherently becomes an interpretation of an interpretation. Therefore, *fiqh* must be understood not as a direct transcript of divine will, but as a historically situated, communally reasoned practice shaped by evolving horizons of understanding.

In this framework, *ijtihād* ceases to function as an emergency mechanism for modern disruption and instead becomes the ordinary

grammar of fidelity. A tradition that equates loyalty with repetition mistakes archival literalism for moral seriousness. Once the Qur'an is recognized as the Prophet's hermeneutical response to divine encounter—expressed through the language and culture of seventh-century Arabia—legal injunctions appear as ethical interventions in a living social world rather than as timeless legal fossils. Accordingly, the notion of reform does not signify a secular subtraction from religion; rather, it is an internal continuation of the prophetic task, characterized by a re-reading of reality through the lens of *tawhīd*, justice, mercy, and human dignity.<sup>123</sup>

Shabestari's account of religion clarifies how legal transformation can occur without eroding normativity itself. Normative continuity is preserved not through the repetition of inherited legal forms, but through fidelity to the moral orientation that originally justified their emergence.<sup>124</sup> Legal rules, on this view, function as historically situated instruments through which ethical commitments were first rendered socially operative within particular contexts.<sup>125</sup> The outcome is a disciplined flexibility: moral values remain binding as guiding purposes, while juridical configurations remain open to revision as practical techniques. Shabestari's implication is both clear and forceful: the uncritical preservation of inherited legal structures, when severed from the moral vision that animated them, does not amount to faithfulness to revelation, but risks undermining its ethical intent by mistaking form for meaning.<sup>126</sup>

This reconceptualization also reconfigures legal authority. If understanding is dialogical

<sup>120</sup> Poya, "Muhammad Mujtahid Shabistari."

<sup>121</sup> Khalilizand, "Revelation, Prophetic Reading of the World, and the End of Fiqh. Shabestari's Hermeneutical Approach to the Qur'an."

<sup>122</sup> Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qu'ranic Hermeneutics*, 114-116.

<sup>123</sup> Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, 174-177.

<sup>124</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 197-224.

<sup>125</sup> Shabestari, "Nażariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyyah Li al-Ālam: Al-Kalām al-Nabawī."

<sup>126</sup> Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran." 724-725.

and realized through a fusion of horizons between text and reader, as is the case in juristic reasoning, the claim of a view from nowhere is invalid.<sup>127</sup> However, this does not imply an endorsement of subjectivism. This approach is predicated on a call to public reason within the tradition, wherein arguments must be articulated, criteria made explicit, and moral claims rendered accountable to both the Qur'an's ethical trajectory and contemporary knowledge of human wellbeing.<sup>128</sup> The risk is genuine—law can devolve into subjectivity or become a tool of oppression—however, it is mitigable through the implementation of principled criteria. These criteria encompass the following: coherence with fundamental Qur'anic values, compatibility with rational moral argumentation, demonstrable correlation to the initial societal problems addressed, and receptiveness to modification when circumstances evolve.<sup>129</sup> When evaluated through this lens, historicity transcends mere rhetoric, assuming the form of a meticulous and accountable reform approach.

#### b. Pluralism as a Theological Necessity

Once revelation is grasped as dialogical and linguistically mediated—an encounter articulated within history—the plurality of interpretation will no longer be considered a regrettable sociological residue. Rather, it will become a theological implication with ethical force.<sup>130</sup> This is due to the fact that understanding always proceeds from historically situated pre-understandings.

<sup>127</sup> Shabestari, *Ta'ammulāt Fī al-Qirā'ah al-Insāniyyah Li al-Dīn*, 55-77.

<sup>128</sup> Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari, "Ab'Ād al-Qirā'ah al-Insāniyyah Li al-Dīn," *Qadāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 31-32 (2006): 27-52.

<sup>129</sup> Poya, "How the Prophet Saw the World: On the Qur'anic Exegesis of Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari," 224-225.

<sup>130</sup> Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qur'anic Hermeneutics*, 117-119.

<sup>131</sup> Vahdat, "Post-revolutionary Discourses of Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar: Reconciling the Terms of Mediated Subjectivity," 38-39.

Consequently, different communities and generations inevitably pose different questions to the same text and receive different answers.<sup>131</sup> This plurality does not emerge solely from bias; rather, it is a consequence of evolving ethical frameworks influenced by novel forms of vulnerability, dignity, and harm.<sup>132</sup> When understood through the framework of ethical pluralism, such diversity does not represent an inherent threat to revelation but rather constitutes a vital condition for its perpetuation. This concept delineates the realm wherein moral universals—including justice, mercy, and the protection of life—are perpetually evaluated, refined, and implemented. Within a religious tradition, it facilitates the convergence of divergent interpretations toward a shared ethical end, despite historical differences. Across religious traditions, it transforms difference into a moral framework for cooperation rather than an obstacle to be eradicated.

However, it is imperative to delineate pluralism with precision, particularly in its interpretation, as opposed to a dissolution of truth into relativism.<sup>133</sup> The Qur'an's dialogical character does not permit arbitrary decisions, as dialogue presupposes publicly defendable standards of justification. Shabestari, therefore, emphasizes the necessity of rational-ethical constraints, asserting that interpretations must be substantiated, evaluated in the context of the Qur'an's moral directives, and assessed based on their implications for life and humanity.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Mohammad Mojtaheh Shabestari, "Ihyā' al-Dīn Wa Taṭawwurāt al-Tajribah al-Dīniyyah," *Qadāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 16-17 (2001): 60-80.

<sup>133</sup> Reza Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur'an and the Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2006); See also Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>134</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirmāniyyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 167-177.

Pluralism thus rejects the notion of interpretive monopolies of meaning while maintaining the presence of evaluative criteria. The hermeneutical field remains open yet structured by ethical universals—non-domination, fairness, compassion, and the safeguarding of the vulnerable—that function as regulative ideals.<sup>135</sup> Within Islam, these constraints transform disagreement into a mode of moral cultivation. Across religious traditions, they facilitate collaborative deliberation on convergent moral imperatives without obliterating difference.

To this end, pluralism ought to be conceptualized not merely as a matter of tolerance, but rather as a theological imperative.<sup>136</sup> Tolerance frequently manifests in a paternalistic manner, thereby preserving the inherent imbalance of power that is embedded within the official reading.<sup>137</sup> In contrast, Shabestari's hermeneutics employs theological pluralism, recognizing that divine meaning transcends any individual formulation and is perpetually influenced by historical context, linguistic mediums, and judicious interpretation. Within this horizon, plurality should not be regarded as an embarrassment to be managed, but rather a vocation: a moral arena in which communities compete for the realization of justice, mercy, and human flourishing.<sup>138</sup> The true danger, therefore, lies not in plurality itself, but in the political will to terminate plurality through the use of coercion and closure.<sup>139</sup> This anti-hermeneutical move reduces faith to

administrative obedience, thereby transforming moral difference from a resource for the common good into a pretext for exclusion.

### c. Religion and State: Political Minimalism and Freedom of Faith

Shabestari's hermeneutical theology yields a political ethic that is restrained yet demanding. If revelation is not considered a closed legal deposit but rather a living moral horizon, then the state cannot plausibly present itself as the executor of a final, singular divine will.<sup>140</sup> In this case, the state's assertion of a monopoly on interpretation constitutes a fundamental conceptual error, stemming from the misapprehension of the distinction between governance—a human, empirical endeavour, and revelation—a dialogical occurrence that presupposes interpretive liberty.<sup>141</sup> This phenomenon is particularly salient in the context of the religious state, where the fundamental question undergoes a shift from the content of Islamic doctrine to the authorities responsible for its interpretation.

In this sense, political minimalism does not entail a secular expulsion of religion from public life. This assertion suggests that the state should abstain from the production of orthodoxy, instead focusing on the safeguarding of the conditions that facilitate faith.<sup>142</sup> The primary function of public power is to guarantee freedom of belief, freedom of interpretation, and the institutional space for deliberation—so that faith can remain an existential choice rather than a coerced

<sup>135</sup> Shabestari, *Naqd Al-Qirā'ah al-Rasmiyyah Li al-Dīn*, 15-39.

<sup>136</sup> Mohammad Mojtabed Shabestari, "Al-Ta'addudiyyah al-Dīniyyah," *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 22 (2003): 131-72.

<sup>137</sup> Shabestari, *Naqd Al-Qirā'ah al-Rasmiyyah Li al-Dīn*, 467-485.

<sup>138</sup> Sajjad H. Rizvi, "Oneself as the Saved Other? The Ethics and Soteriology of Difference in Two Muslim Thinkers," in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others*, ed. Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Oxford University Press, 2013), 180-204.

<sup>139</sup> Mohammad Mojtabed Shabestari, "Al-Hirminiyūtīqā al-Falsafiyyah Wa al-Ta'addudiyyah," *Qaḍāyā Islāmiyyah Mu'āṣirah* 19 (2002): 40-64.

<sup>140</sup> Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Disenchanting Political Theology in Post-Revolutionary Iran: Reform, Religious Intellectualism and the Death of Utopia" (DPhil Thesis, The Queen's College, University of Oxford, 2013).

<sup>141</sup> Shabestari, *Naqd Al-Qirā'ah al-Rasmiyyah Li al-Dīn*, 41-72.

<sup>142</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Īmān Wa al-Hurriyyah*, 100-124.

identity.<sup>143</sup> Shabestari's argument is straightforward: compelled faith is not authentic faith; it is a theological corruption of faith, because genuine faith presupposes freedom.

From this perspective, the evaluation of an "Islamic" politics is less dependent on symbolic expressions of religiosity and more concerned with the moral outcomes and procedural safeguards that emerge from the application of Sharia.<sup>144</sup> These outcomes include principles such as justice, dignity, and the protection of vulnerable groups. Additionally, the constitutional constraints that are in place serve to prevent any single interpretive class—be it clerical or political—from assuming exclusive control over the interpretation of religion.<sup>145</sup> The state has the capacity—and the responsibility—to facilitate moral discourse; however, it must refrain from exercising exclusive authority over the divine voice. This perspective enables Shabestari's discourse on protective secularity from a religious perspective.<sup>146</sup> State neutrality, in this context, is regarded as a safeguard against religion's instrumentalization for the purpose of domination.<sup>147</sup> Consequently, the critique of the religious state in this context is pragmatic, not merely theoretical. When a regime asserts a definitive understanding, opposition is stigmatized as heresy, and the public sphere contracts into a form of surveillance.<sup>148</sup> Hermeneutical theology, however, reverses

this tendency. It transforms the public sphere into a domain of accountable discourse rather than enforced unanimity, thereby repositioning religion within its proper ambit: not as a means of coercion, but as a moral compass for society.

#### d. Illustrative Qur'anic Case: Re-reading *Qisās* through Shabestari's Hermeneutics

The Qur'anic discourse on *qisās* (e.g., Q.2:178-179) emerges within a concrete historical horizon marked by tribal retaliation and cycles of escalating vengeance, where a single killing could unleash limitless reprisals across clans. In this context, the text does not function as an abstract penal theory but rather as a moral intervention into an already-existing social pathology.<sup>149</sup> The primary objective of this intervention is to arrest excess, impose proportionality, and redirect violence toward restraint.<sup>150</sup> The Qur'an enters a world saturated with blood feuds not to sanctify retaliation as such, but to discipline it—transforming an unbounded practice into a regulated response that gestures toward the preservation of life rather than its endless destruction.

In Shabestari's theoretical model, this intervention is to be interpreted through the lens of prophetic hermeneutics. The Qur'anic articulation of *qisās* does not constitute a mere mechanical transmission of a divine statute; rather, it signifies the Prophet's translation of a

<sup>143</sup> Meysam Badamchi, "An Unorthodox, Islamic, Full Justification for Liberal Citizenship: The Case of Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari," in *Post-Islamist Political Theory: Iranian Intellectuals and Political Liberalism in Dialogue*, Philosophy and Politics-Critical Explorations (Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 63–93.

<sup>144</sup> Naser Ghobadzadeh and Lily Zubaidah Rahim, "Islamic Reformation Discourses: Popular Sovereignty and Religious Secularisation in Iran," *Democratization* 19, no. 2 (April 2012): 334–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.605627>.

<sup>145</sup> Shabestari, *Naqd Al-Qirā'ah al-Rasmiyyah Li al-Dīn*, 137–150.

<sup>146</sup> Amirpur, *An Intellectual Biography of Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari*, 13.

<sup>147</sup> Ali Akbar, "The Political Discourses of Three Contemporary Muslim Scholars: Secular, Nonsecular, or Pseudosecular?," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 393–408, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12084>.

<sup>148</sup> Sadri, "Sacral Defense of Secularism," 260–262.

<sup>149</sup> Akbar, "A Contemporary Muslim Scholar's Approach to Revelation: Mohammad Mojtahed Šabestari's Reform Project," 674–675.

<sup>150</sup> Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, "Interpretation and Mutability: Socio-Legal Texts of the Quran; Three Accounts from Contemporary Iran," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 3 (May 2018): 442–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1426569>.

divine moral vision into legal forms that are comprehensible to his community.<sup>151</sup> At this juncture, the Prophet's actions extend beyond mere reporting; he reorients a violent social practice toward justice and the sanctity of life. This phenomenon is discernible in the internal structure of the verses themselves. While the principle of retaliation is limited ("life for life"), the text simultaneously creates a space for mitigation through forgiveness and compensation. In this context, law serves as a moral pedagogy, representing an ethically charged reconfiguration of social practice that is enacted through the medium of juridical language.<sup>152</sup>

The transition to communal hermeneutics becomes inevitable when the historical context undergoes transformation. Contemporary societies differ fundamentally from the Prophet's world in several key ways.<sup>153</sup> State control over legitimate coercion has become pervasive. Institutionalized criminal justice systems have emerged. Human rights norms have come to prioritize due process, equality before the law, and the inherent dignity of all persons. The harms of retributive violence have become increasingly visible.<sup>154</sup> Communal hermeneutics, therefore, does not merely update the text in a superficial sense; rather, it interrogates the text through questions generated by these new conditions.<sup>155</sup> These include the following: how to prevent miscarriages of justice, avoid discriminatory application of punishment, protect victims without reproducing violence, and repair social trust. Interpretation in this context unfolds as a historically situated moral inquiry,

rather than as the mere repetition of inherited forms.

This understanding proceeds by distinguishing between the moral purposes that give *qisāṣ* its justificatory force and the historically specific penal arrangements through which those purposes were first implemented. The normative core of *qisāṣ* lies in the ethical ends it seeks to secure: affirming the sanctity of life, restraining cycles of vengeance through proportionality, securing justice for victims, and reducing social violence—captured succinctly in the Qur'anic claim that "in *qisāṣ* there is life." The juridical form in which these aims were realized, however, emerged within a seventh-century tribal order marked by retaliatory norms and limited institutional alternatives. Under changed social conditions—where modern legal institutions may better protect life, ensure due process, and prevent systemic harm—fidelity to the Qur'an's moral direction requires transformation in legal technique rather than preservation of inherited form. A contemporary *ijtihād* attentive to the Qur'an's ethical trajectory can therefore orient itself toward restorative paradigms, including victim-centered justice, proportional accountability, social repair, and robust procedural safeguards, without relinquishing the non-negotiable claims of life and justice.<sup>156</sup> The resulting legal-ethical architecture exemplifies law as a historically situated, communally reasoned practice aimed at realizing the Qur'an's moral telos within contemporary conditions, rather than as a static transcript of metaphysical command.<sup>157</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Shabestari, "Nażariyyah Al-Qirā'ah al-Nabawiyah Li al-Ālam: Al-Kalām al-Nabawī."

<sup>152</sup> Compare it with Tareq H. Moqbel, *Ethics in the Qur'ān and the Tafsīr Tradition: From the Polynoia of Scripture to the Homonoia of Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

<sup>153</sup> Shabestari, *Al-Hirmīniyūtīqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, 143-147.

<sup>154</sup> Shabestari, *Naqd Al-Qirā'ah al-Rasmīyyah Li al-Dīn*, 16-23.

<sup>155</sup> Shabestari, *Ta'ammulāt Fī al-Qirā'ah al-Insāniyyah Li al-Dīn*, 22-23.

<sup>156</sup> Akbar and Saeed, *Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'ān and Its Interpretation in Iran*, 160-168.

<sup>157</sup> Akbar, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Contemporary Muslim Scholars' Approaches to Interpreting Scripture."

## Concluding Remarks

Given the overall trajectory of the article, one conclusion is unavoidable: Shabestari's reform project can be interpreted as an effort to shift the focus of the religious state crisis from the realm of power to the domain of meaning. This shift involves examining how revelation is conceptualized, how language facilitates the interaction between the divine and the human, and how authority is established through the regulation of interpretation. The argument has evolved in a deliberate arc: from the monopolization of official reading and the reduction of the Prophet to a mere channel, to the reconstruction of revelation as a dialogical prophetic experience; from there, to a dual-layered model in which prophetic hermeneutics generates a historically situated Qur'anic discourse and communal hermeneutics continues that discourse in new horizons. In this context, Shabestari's pivotal transition—from perceiving religion as a rigid legal framework to understanding it as an expansive ethical paradigm—emerges not as a mere political slogan but as a theological consequence.

The contributions of this study are threefold. Theoretically, it elucidates the manner in which “prophetic experience” and “the Qur'an as the Prophet's hermeneutical understanding of the world” function as more than mere interpretive devices: they reframe revelation as historically mediated without collapsing transcendence into mere historicism. Analytically, it refracts the question of religious authority through the lens of hermeneutics, demonstrating how interpretive finality becomes institutionally actionable when revelation is treated as a finished linguistic object. Practically, it illuminates how Shabestari's framework can underwrite contextual *ijtihād*, ethical pluralism, and a minimalist political theology in which the state protects freedom of conscience rather than manufactures orthodoxy.

Yet it is precisely at this point that Shabestari's bold reconstruction invites critical scrutiny. *First* is the problem of normativity: if

the “moral spirit” of revelation functions as the criterion for re-evaluating legal-historical forms, by what publicly defensible standards is that spirit identified, and how can one prevent the covert importation of arbitrary norms under ethical rhetoric? While Shabestari appeals to rational-ethical constraints, their procedural specification remains insufficiently articulated. *Second* is the problem of authority: although the pluralization of interpretation dismantles monopolised power, it also risks fragmentation unless clearer mechanisms of interpretive accountability are offered—mechanisms capable of adjudicating disagreement without reverting to coercive closure. *Third* is an unavoidable theological sensitivity: describing the Qur'an as the Prophet's understanding and linguistic response to divine encounter may be received, particularly within *kalām* discipline, as approaching an ontological reduction of the Word of God. The distinction between the divinity of the revelatory event and the human mediation of its articulation therefore demands sharper clarification if the model is to remain persuasive across theological horizons.

Finally, this study has clear limitations. It has been primarily conceptual-textual, and thus has not tested how Shabestari's hermeneutics is received, contested, or operationalised within concrete clerical, legal, and institutional ecologies. Future research could (a) extend the model through multiple fiqh case-comparisons (gender justice, freedom of religion, criminal law), and (b) position Shabestari more tightly against parallel reform trajectories (Rahman, Abu Zayd, Wadud, Abou El-Fadl), to map where “dialogue” becomes a shared premise and where it becomes a decisive divergence.

## Competing Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

## Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to established academic and ethical standards. It did not involve any direct interaction with human participants, personal data, or the use of animals.

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## Disclaimer

The views and interpretations expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institutions.

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