

Iranians 'Turning To Secularism' and Mesbah Despairs

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As unrest and anger at the regime continue in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is illuminating to recall [a report last year](#) from Radio Farda, which shows that the Islamic revolution wasn't doing too well even then, and clearly its situation has not improved since then.

Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, a top Shiite cleric and the spiritual father of Iran's hardliner conservatives, says the Islamic Republic's leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is aware that Iranians are evading religious teachings and turning to secularism.

In an extensive interview with hardline weekly "9 Day," in late December, Mesbah tried to explain why the ideals promised by clerics at the onset of Iran's Islamic revolution some 40 years ago have not materialized. These promises included political freedom, equality and economic progress.

But in fact Mesbah does not manage to explain why those ideals "promised by clerics" did not materialize. As for "political freedom," when was that ever part of the Islamic Revolution's program? And when it comes to the unmet promise of "equality," Mesbah never mentions the rampant corruption, nepotism, appropriation of public property, by the mullahs themselves. He does not discuss the fact that Ayatollah Khamenei possesses a business empire worth \$95 billion, or that many other leaders – Rafsanjani became a billionaire – also fabulously enriched themselves. And as for "economic progress," Mesbah does not explain that five million people, including most of the country's technocrats, fled Iran after the Revolution, and that since then, many of those helping direct the economy have been clerics. Nor does he mention the money spent in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and "Palestine," that has been such a financial drain on Iranians..

While Mesbah appears to be pessimistic about the future of the Islamic Republic as it is, in an article published on Radio Farda's Persian website, prominent Iranian analyst Akbar Ganji has compared Mesbah's views to Khamenei's insistence that Iranians have been increasingly embracing Islamic teachings.

On why the Islamic Republic's ideals have failed to materialize, Mesbah says "All ideals are not supposed to materialize in this world which is a place to test different ideas," stressing that "Ideals did not materialize even at the time of the prophet." Indeed, he sounds more like a biblical Christian who scorns materialism and believes that this world is a temporary station on the way to a higher

existence.

Why didn't those "ideals...materialize"? Because they "weren't supposed to materialize in this world." Oh, that's okay then.

Ganji says Mesbah must have forgotten Khomeini and other clerics' promises about Islam being "a guideline for man from birth to death."

Mesbah says it is a mistake for Iran to follow the example of Japan and the United States to focus on economic progress. Islam is not there to bring about development, he said. "It is there to bring about eternal happiness."

But Mesbah just finished saying that among the ideals of the Revolution was "economic progress." Apparently a good many Iranians don't believe in "eternal happiness," but would like a little more money here below. For Mesbah, who lives in a fantasy world, their priorities are skewed. And to judge by the grasping behavior of some of his fellow clerics, they aren't waiting for "eternal happiness" either, but are helping themselves to those base material rewards that they are supposed to scorn.

Ganji challenges Mesbah's statement and says it contradicts Khamenei's position about the importance of the economy and his order that calls on state officials to invest all of their energy on improving the economy.

Mesbah in his interview says that Khamenei's idea is pragmatic. "If he does not say that he wants to improve people's economic situation, Marxists might take advantage and hijack the economy mantle. You already see Marxist ideas becoming popular at Tehran's universities including Islamic schools."

Mesbah had also said in a December 27 speech to women that the reason why Khamenei attaches importance to the economy is

that "in most countries economic inequality has made Marxism popular."

"This could have happened in Iran too if Ayatollah Khamenei did not control the situation by hijacking Marxists' slogans."

According to Mesbah, an Islamic hardliner, Khamenei has to demonstrate concern for the economic situation in order to steal the thunder of "Marxists" in Iran: he is merely "hijacking" their slogans for political purposes.

Ganji concludes that, "So, Khamenei is not concerned about people's livelihood. He is concerned winning against political rivals."

According to Ganji, while Khamenei says today's youths are more religious than the generation who was active in the 1979 Islamic revolution, Mesbah is seriously concerned that young Iranians are turning away from Islam.

All reports in the last two years from Iran confirm that Christianity is that country's fastest growing religion. Furthermore, there are many in Iran who are disaffected from Islam without become Christians; they've given up on religion altogether. Khamenei has to pretend to believe, and has to make the clerics believe lest he lose their support, that the young are not turning away from Islam, but are even more religious than those who supported Ayatollah Khomeini's ascent to power. Mesbah knows this to be whistling in the dark.

The people and university professors ask, "What if we do not wish to go to heaven? Can we say we have nothing to do with heaven and hell and Islam? And what about freedom and human rights? Didn't you say freedom will come with the Islamic Republic? What if I don't want to be a Muslim?" said Mesbah.

Mesbah warned that "every regime official is trying to

improve the economic situation like Marxists and liberals based on Khamenei's words, and in the meantime, our spiritual values are being destroyed."

According to Ganji, contrary to Khamenei's ideas, Mesbah says that in young Iranians' minds, 'religious teachings and values are fading out and are being replaced by freedom, democracy, human rights, progress and technology. This threatens the future of the Islamic revolution. One day we open our eyes and see that we have lost the revolution.'"

That's quite an admission by Ayatollah Mesbah. He's alarmed by the wrong choices being made by those Iranians who, instead of loyally supporting the Islamic revolution, are more interested in all those things that shouldn't matter to a devout Muslim, that are even in opposition to Islam as he understands it – "freedom, democracy, human rights, progress, and technology." Who needs those things when you have Islam? Apparently the Iranian people do, which is why Mesbah forlornly predicts that one day "we [will] open our eyes and see that we have lost the revolution."

Mesbah says Khamenei is aware that the next generation wants a Western-style democracy even if they have to forget about religion, adding that nevertheless, Khamenei makes decisions based on pragmatism and he wishes that "we should simply obey what he says."

For Mesbah, Khamenei is so eager to remain in power that he will do whatever it takes to win the support of the young, who want a "Western-style democracy" and are willing, even eager, to "forget about religion" (anathema to Mesbah). He scornfully calls Khamenei's lack of loyalty to Islamic principles his "pragmatism." And Khamenei demands blind loyalty – "we should simply obey what he says" – when Mesbah wants loyalty not to a wily political operator but only to Islam.

Mesbah named pluralism and secularism as the two biggest threats against Islam, adding that most intellectuals say that religion is not necessary for man's life. "We see traces of secularism even among the country's top officials. This is the case even in the seminaries."

Mesbah is quietly despairing. The intellectuals, the college professors, the people who think, who grew up under a regime supposedly based completely on Islamic principles, have weighed the experience and found Islam wanting. Instead of supporting the Islamic Republic they have concluded that "religion is not necessary for man's life." And it's not only they who think this way; it's people in high positions, it's even seminarians in Qom. Mesbah sees support draining away from the Islamic Republic, but he has no solution to offer. How can people want to trade away precious Islam for those shiny valueless trinkets of "freedom, democracy, human rights"?

Elsewhere in the interview, Mesbah said: "Our officials chants slogans saying the U.S. cannot do anything to us. What do we have to help us stand against America? Officials say they want to bring prices down, but what they really want to do is compromising [sic] with the U.S. They say to Americans, we give you this concession and you lift that sanction."

This is part of the "pragmatism" Mesbah deplores – Iran possibly making deals with the leader of the Unbelievers, America, the Great Satan. But what can be done against the compromisers, with the Supreme Leader at their head?

According to Ganji, Mesbah as "the Islamic Republic's most prominent ideologue" is saying that the country's situation is "critical." When he looks deep into the society, "he does not see anything left from Islam, as if secularism has encompassed the entire regime, and Khamenei is going ahead in the same direction driven by pragmatism."

What is this if not a voice of complete despair? The Islamic Republic has lost the support of the young, of the intellectuals and professors, even of some of the leaders, even seminarians who ought to be the most fervent in their support. Mesbah does not have any solutions, other than to wish that people would focus on the “eternal happiness” that Islam offers, rather than on happiness in this life, right here, right now. But few seem to be takers. The Iranians have endured for forty years the bullying of the morality police. They have seen the mullahs – their corruption, their nepotism, their divvying up of public spoils for private gain – enriching themselves. They have watched as the economy collapsed under clerical misrule. They have seen the middle class decrease by half. They have watched the billions misallocated to foreign adventurism in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, “Palestine,” that brings no benefit to the Iranian people. They have demonstrated their fury in public protests, and been clubbed into submission. Now, a forlorn Ayatollah Mesbah fears what so many others in Iran now hope: for the Islamic Republic, the end is nigh.

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