

Art, Religion, and Modernity in Contemporary Iran: A Philosophical Inquiry^{*}

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Abstract

Within the broader context of the encounter between tradition and modernity, the relationship between art and religion in contemporary Iran has developed into a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. This study examines and analyzes the relationship between religion and art in Iran over the past four decades from a philosophical perspective. The principal approaches to this issue may be categorized into three broad intellectual currents: the conservative approach, the secular approach, and the approach of religious intellectualism. Each of these approaches is characterized by its own theoretical assumptions and distinctive features. The findings of this study suggest that, over time, theoretical and practical debates concerning the relationship between art and religion have become increasingly concentrated within specific intellectual circles, particularly among conservative thinkers and certain proponents of contemporary Islamic philosophical traditions, including the school of Transcendent Philosophy (al-Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah). By contrast, this issue has occupied a less central position in the intellectual agendas of secular thinkers and contemporary religious intellectuals.

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Introduction

Throughout the history of philosophy, a number of conceptual pairings have generated extensive and enduring discussions. The relationship between religion and art constitutes one such area of inquiry, particularly within contemporary Islamic societies. Debates concerning the relationship between religion and art have not only played an important role in the intellectual history of the Islamic world but have also been significant in many non-Islamic cultural traditions, especially during the medieval period, when complex interactions emerged between religious institutions and artistic practices¹. Although certain parallels may be drawn between medieval societies and contemporary Islamic contexts in this regard, such comparisons remain controversial and should be approached with caution. Contemporary Islamic societies, including contemporary Iran, possess distinctive historical, cultural, and intellectual characteristics that differentiate their experiences from those of medieval Europe.

During the last two centuries, discussions concerning art and religion in Iran have been profoundly shaped by the broader encounter between tradition and modernity. Consequently, the relationship between religion and art may be understood, to a considerable extent, within the framework of this wider intellectual and historical transformation. Similar to other Islamic societies, Iran has experienced sustained intellectual engagement with questions concerning the compatibility of traditional religious frameworks and modern cultural developments.

Following the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the gradual introduction of modern intellectual currents into Iranian society, a new phase in these discussions emerged. The Constitutional Revolution marked a turning point in the social, political, and intellectual history of modern Iran, giving rise to diverse responses to the challenges posed by modernity. One of the most significant dimensions of this transformation was philosophical in nature. Following the Constitutional period, not only Western artistic movements but also Western philosophical traditions gradually attracted increasing attention among Iranian intellectuals and the educated middle classes. Consequently, the broader encounter between tradition and modernity in Iran also generated a distinct set of debates concerning the relationship between art and religion.

Against this broader intellectual background, the present study aims to examine and analyze the relationship between religion and art in Iran during the last four decades from a philosophical perspective. First, it reviews the principal philosophical approaches that have emerged within contemporary Iranian intellectual discourse regarding this issue. Second, and more importantly, it investigates the causes, characteristics, implications, and transformations of these debates.

¹ Émile Mâle, *Religious Art from the Twelfth to the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 65-79

At the outset, it is necessary to distinguish between two related but distinct issues: the relationship between art and religion, on the one hand, and the relationship between artists and religious individuals or institutions, on the other. While the latter may be explored within disciplines such as the sociology of art or the psychology of art, the present study is primarily concerned with the former, namely, the philosophical dimensions of the relationship between art and religion.

It should also be emphasized that tension and disagreement represent only one aspect of the broader relationship between art and religion. Throughout Islamic history, art and religion have maintained complex and dynamic interactions, influencing and transforming one another in various ways. Numerous studies have examined these interactions and mutual influences. Therefore, by focusing on debates and tensions concerning art and religion, this study does not intend to overlook the substantial historical and cultural connections that have existed between these two domains.

1. A Brief History of the Relationship between Art and Religion in Iran

From a historical perspective, discussions concerning the relationship between art and religion in Iran may be divided into three major periods: the period before the Constitutional Revolution, the period extending from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution, and the period following the Islamic Revolution. The present study is primarily concerned with the third period, whose intellectual and philosophical atmosphere differs considerably from that of the preceding periods. During this era, new interpretations of Islamic philosophy, particularly Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy (*al-Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah*), provided an important framework for scholars and academic institutions seeking to develop localized approaches to a wide range of philosophical and humanistic disciplines. Consequently, concepts such as engagement with Islamic and Iranian intellectual traditions, comparative philosophy, localization, and critical evaluation have become prominent features of contemporary Iranian philosophical discourse.

Prior to the Constitutional Revolution, the relationship between religion and art was not a major subject of philosophical inquiry. Classical Iranian Muslim philosophers and thinkers frequently reflected on artistic and aesthetic issues without explicitly addressing their religious dimensions. In this respect, the intellectual landscape of Iran was broadly similar to that of other Islamic societies in the Middle East. Philosophical inquiry was primarily concerned with metaphysics, mysticism, and the relationship between philosophy and theology. As a result, traditional discussions of aesthetics rarely focused on tensions between art and religion. Instead, philosophical literature concentrated on themes such as the faculty of imagination, the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds, the analogy between the artist and the prophet, the relationship between Forms and artistic creation, and the connection between art

and wisdom¹. Within this intellectual framework, a relatively stable understanding of the nature and function of art shaped philosophical reflection, leaving little room for explicit debate concerning the relationship between art and religion.

At the same time, some religious scholars expressed reservations regarding particular forms of artistic expression, while generally accepting others, such as architecture and calligraphy. Thus, although philosophical discussions rarely emphasized tensions between art and religion, various forms of negotiation and occasional disagreement could be observed within social and cultural life. The nature and intensity of these interactions varied significantly across different historical periods.

It may therefore be argued that a degree of intellectual separation existed between philosophical reflections on art and religious jurisprudential discussions. Neither philosophers nor religious scholars generally regarded the relationship between art and religion as a central subject of systematic inquiry. It was only in contemporary Iran that scholars from both philosophical and religious backgrounds increasingly engaged with this question.

Furthermore, despite certain idealized representations of premodern Islamic societies that appear in some contemporary intellectual discourses, historical evidence suggests that artistic activities were widely practiced and supported by rulers, elites, and other social groups, and that sustained institutional tensions between artistic practice and religious authority were relatively limited. With some exceptions, therefore, the relationship between art and religion in Iran prior to the Constitutional Revolution was not characterized by systematic theoretical confrontation. Unlike certain historical experiences in medieval Europe, religious institutions in Iran did not generally seek to establish a comprehensive framework for regulating artistic production. However, following the Constitutional Revolution, and particularly after the Islamic Revolution, debates concerning the relationship between art and religion became increasingly visible and intellectually significant.

This development may partly be understood in relation to the emergence of intellectual movements that sought to articulate comprehensive interpretations of the role of religion in modern society. Thinkers associated with both religious reformism and conservative religious thought, including figures such as Talebof, Seyyed Jamal al-Din Afghani, Ali Shariati, Hassan Modarres, and Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri, emphasized, albeit in different ways, the relevance of religious principles to various aspects of social and cultural life, including artistic activity. Many of these thinkers also engaged critically and selectively with modern Western intellectual traditions while maintaining confidence in the intellectual resources of Islamic thought. This

¹ Hassan Bolkhari, *The Islamic Philosophy of Art (Falsafeye Honare Eslami)* (Tehran: Elmi Farhangi, 2011).

orientation has continued to influence certain conservative approaches to the humanities and philosophy in contemporary Iran.

Within this broader intellectual context, debates concerning the relationship between art and religion became increasingly connected to discussions regarding the role of religion in modern social and cultural life. In particular, some contemporary Islamic intellectual currents sought to formulate theoretical perspectives on a broad range of social, cultural, and philosophical questions. Following the Islamic Revolution, these intellectual efforts expanded considerably, resulting in extensive scholarly engagement with issues arising from the encounter between tradition and modernity and with attempts to conceptualize the place of religion within contemporary society.

Unlike earlier generations of religious scholars, many contemporary religious thinkers and intellectuals have actively engaged with artistic and aesthetic questions. Consequently, discussions concerning the relationship between religion and art have acquired both theoretical and practical dimensions. As noted previously, however, the present study is concerned primarily with their theoretical and philosophical aspects. The following sections examine these debates in greater detail.

It should also be emphasized that the philosophical landscape of contemporary Iran is not shaped exclusively by conservative thinkers. Religious intellectuals, secular intellectuals, and numerous academic scholars have all contributed significantly to contemporary philosophical discourse. Nevertheless, debates concerning the relationship between art and religion have been developed most extensively within conservative intellectual circles, which therefore constitute the principal focus of the present study.

2. The Main Approaches to the Relationship between Art and Religion in Contemporary Iran

2.1. The Conservative Approach

The conservative approach to the relationship between art and religion encompasses a wide spectrum of positions, ranging from strict jurisprudential interpretations to more philosophical and theological perspectives. The strictest positions may be found among certain clerical authorities, such as Ayatollah Bahjat and Ayatollah Dastgheyb, who regarded many forms of artistic expression, including music and painting, as religiously impermissible¹ Such approaches generally rely on jurisprudential reasoning rather than philosophical reflection on art.

By contrast, conservative thinkers who approach the relationship between religion and art from philosophical and theoretical perspectives tend to adopt more nuanced positions.

¹ Abdolhossein Dastgheyb, *The Great Sins (Ghonahan-e Kabire)* (Tehran: Daftar-e Entesharat-e Eslami, 1993), 45

Influential figures such as Mohammad Taghi Jafari and Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi devoted considerable attention to questions concerning the place of art within religious thought. Although only a limited number of scholars within this intellectual tradition addressed the relationship between art and religion directly, many others discussed it implicitly within broader theological and philosophical frameworks.

A common feature of many conservative approaches is the distinction between religiously acceptable and religiously unacceptable forms of art. While some conservative scholars adopted restrictive positions toward artistic expression, many contemporary theorists associated with Islamic thought sought to formulate theoretical frameworks for understanding the religious dimensions of artistic activity. These frameworks have often been derived primarily from jurisprudential considerations. However, the criteria proposed for distinguishing between different forms of artistic expression have varied considerably and have not always been systematically articulated. In contrast, proponents of Islamic and revolutionary art have attempted to develop theological and, in some cases, philosophical foundations for their understanding of artistic legitimacy.

It is precisely at this point that extensive theological and philosophical discussions concerning art emerged. Contemporary literature contains numerous studies devoted to the characteristics of Islamic art and to the criteria by which Islamic and non-Islamic artistic forms may be distinguished. Some conservative philosophers have explored the philosophy of art within religious frameworks and have emphasized the mystical dimensions of artistic experience¹. In many respects, these discussions draw upon long-standing traditions within Islamic philosophical aesthetics. Contemporary interpretations of this mystical tradition, however, often remain closely connected to their historical antecedents.

Within conservative intellectual discourse, the concept of "religious" or "Islamic" art occupies a central position. In the broader philosophy of art, the term "religious art" generally refers to the religious origins of artistic expression and the historical relationship between art and religious traditions². In some contexts, traditional Iranian artistic forms such as *Ta'ziyeh* have also been classified as forms of religious art³. However, within contemporary conservative discourse, the concept of religious art frequently refers to the normative characteristics and religious boundaries of artistic production.

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

² Diana Apostolos, "Religion and Art," in *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (London: Macmillan, 1998), 138

³ Peter J. Chelkowski, "Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran," *Performing Arts Journal* 2, no. 1 (1977): 31–40.

Nevertheless, substantial differences exist among conservative thinkers regarding the precise definition of religious art. Some scholars maintain that authentic art must reflect transcendent realities and guide human beings toward spiritual and moral perfection.¹ Similarly, Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi argued that religious art contributes fundamentally to human perfection². Despite these formulations, however, explicit and universally accepted criteria for distinguishing religious art from other forms of artistic expression have remained elusive.

Among conservative scholars who have reflected on the philosophy of art, several broad criteria for religiously acceptable art frequently recur. These include the view that art should avoid excessive sensuality, should not promote beliefs considered incompatible with Islamic teachings, and should remain consistent with the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and religious values.

Within this framework, music and cinema have often occupied particularly important positions in contemporary discussions concerning art and religion. According to some conservative thinkers, religious art should be analyzed in terms of three principal components: the religious character of the artist, the religious content of the artwork, and its religious form³. However, many studies adopting this approach tend to rely on broad and general descriptions of religious art rather than on precise philosophical definitions. Statements such as "the truth of art is the straight path leading toward the perfect human being" and descriptions of art as harmonizing reason, sensation, religion, and existence,⁴ illustrate the symbolic and metaphysical language frequently employed in this literature. Translating such formulations into clear philosophical concepts remains a significant challenge.

One important implication of these approaches has been a critical engagement with modern Western art and aesthetics. Many conservative thinkers have sought to formulate localized Islamic approaches to aesthetics that would reflect their broader intellectual commitments. At the same time, some scholars within this tradition have engaged selectively with aspects of modern art and contemporary aesthetic theory.

For example, Mohammad Taghi Jafari argued that artistic activity, like all dimensions of human life, should be guided by rational and ethical considerations. According to him, the constructive role of art depends upon the guidance of reason⁵. Similarly, Ayatollah Javadi

¹ Mohammad Mohammadrezai, A. Norouzi, and M. Shiravand, "The Realism of Religious Art," *Philosophical Knowledge* 76 (2022): 97–114.

² Jafari, *The Philosophy of Culture and Art (Falsafeye Farhang va Honar)*, 12.

³ Mohammad Haghigi-e Kaffash et al., "Characteristics of Islamic-Iranian Product in the Field of Art and Culture," *Studies on Soft Power* 7, no. 16 (2017): 132–150.

⁴ H. Khademi and S. Masoudian, "Religious Art from the Perspective of Ayatollah Javadi Amoli (Honar-e Dini az Manzar-e Allameh Javadi Amoli)," *Hekmat-e Asra* 6, no. 3 (2013): 10.

⁵ Jafari, *The Philosophy of Culture and Art (Falsafeye Farhang va Honar)*, 51–88.

Amoli, a prominent interpreter of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy, maintains that authentic artistic creativity is fundamentally connected to spiritual and mystical experience.

Some conservative thinkers have gone further by arguing not only that religious art is possible but also that the notion of "art for art's sake" is philosophically untenable, and that religious art represents the highest form of artistic expression within a religious worldview¹. Nevertheless, such maximalist interpretations remain relatively uncommon, and most conservative scholars adopt more moderate positions regarding religious art.

Within this literature, one may also find attempts to extend religious interpretations to modern cultural phenomena. For example, studies have been conducted on the relationship between religious art and computer games². While such studies demonstrate the broad scope of contemporary religious discussions concerning culture, their methodological and theoretical foundations remain subjects of scholarly debate.

Since Shi'ism constitutes the predominant religious tradition in contemporary Iran, some scholars have identified a particular form of religious art that may be described as Shi'i art. According to Kousari³, Shi'i art reflects not only religious beliefs but also the historical interaction between Shi'i traditions and broader Iranian cultural narratives. Consequently, some conservative thinkers regard Shi'i art as a distinctive expression within the wider category of Islamic art.

It should be noted, however, that the expression "conservative philosophers of art" may itself be somewhat misleading, since the philosophy of art has generally remained a secondary concern for most conservative thinkers. A more accurate description might therefore be "conservative thinkers who have occasionally addressed questions in the philosophy of art."

A particularly significant group within contemporary conservative thought consists of Iranian traditionalists, who differ substantially from proponents of contemporary Islamic political thought and have often remained critical of them. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is the most influential representative of this intellectual tradition. Although traditionalist approaches to art share certain features with conservative thought, they place considerably greater emphasis on mystical and metaphysical dimensions. Traditionalists generally criticize modernity, including modern art, because of what they perceive as its neglect of the sacred dimension of existence⁴. Their

¹ Aliakbar Reshad, "Imported Humanities Shape the Mind of Society (Oloum-e Ensani-ye Varedati Zehn-e Jame'era Mohandesi Mikonad)," accessed July 2, 2026, 190

² Ali Razi Zadeh, "The Relationship between Religious Art and Computer Games," *Studies on Art and Media* 1, no. 2 (2019): 119–142.

³ Masoud Kousari, "The Shiite Art in Iran," *Sociological Journal of Art and Literature* 3, no. 1 (2012): 34.

⁴ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).

philosophy of art is grounded in key traditionalist concepts such as sacred knowledge, tradition, and spiritual symbolism.¹

Interestingly, although this traditionalist approach remains largely detached from political concerns, it nevertheless maintains a critical stance toward many aspects of modern Western art. Furthermore, unlike jurisprudential approaches, traditionalists do not regard Islamic law as the central component of religious life. Instead, they emphasize spiritual and mystical interpretations of religion. While their criticisms of modern art have had limited practical influence on artistic life in contemporary Iran, their intellectual legacy has influenced a number of conservative thinkers and scholars.

3. Analysis

The emergence of extensive debates concerning the relationship between art and religion in contemporary Iran can be understood within the broader intellectual and social transformations that have shaped Iranian society during the last century. In particular, intellectual currents that sought to articulate comprehensive religious interpretations of social and cultural life played a significant role in bringing artistic questions into the sphere of religious and philosophical inquiry. As a result, discussions concerning art increasingly became connected to broader debates about the role of religion in modern society.

In this respect, the nature of contemporary debates differs substantially from earlier historical discussions concerning art and religion. In traditional settings, jurisprudential considerations often served as the principal framework for evaluating the permissibility of particular artistic practices. In contemporary discussions, however, a wider range of considerations has become relevant, including philosophical, cultural, social, political, and ideological concerns. Consequently, the relationship between art and religion in contemporary Iran cannot be reduced exclusively to questions of religious law; rather, it constitutes a multidimensional intellectual and cultural phenomenon.

From a philosophical perspective, several intellectual traditions have demonstrated particular interest in the relationship between art and religion. Among these are traditionalist thinkers, Marxist intellectuals, and certain contemporary interpreters of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy (al-Hikmah al-Muta'aliyah). Although these traditions differ substantially in their assumptions and objectives, they share a common concern with the social, metaphysical, or spiritual significance of artistic expression. Nevertheless, among contemporary Iranian intellectual currents, conservative thinkers have devoted the greatest attention to the possibility of formulating a religious philosophy of art.

¹ Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone Jr., eds., *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, vol. 28 of *The Library of Living Philosophers* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

One important consequence of this intellectual development has been the emergence of attempts to construct theoretical frameworks for what is commonly described as "religious art" or "Islamic art." Such efforts have sought to extend religious and philosophical reflection to artistic production and aesthetic experience. From this perspective, theoretical engagement with art has often been understood as part of a broader effort to formulate normative criteria for evaluating artistic activity within a religious worldview.

At the same time, many secular intellectuals and religious intellectuals have approached these developments from a different perspective. Rather than attempting to establish comprehensive religious criteria for artistic production, they have generally emphasized the relative autonomy of artistic practice and aesthetic experience. In this respect, one may identify two broad orientations within contemporary debates on art and religion in Iran. The first emphasizes the possibility and desirability of religiously grounded or ideologically informed artistic expression, while the second gives greater priority to the autonomy of artistic creativity and to the plurality of aesthetic experiences.

However, these two orientations should not be understood as entirely homogeneous or mutually exclusive categories. Within both approaches, considerable diversity exists regarding the nature of art, the role of religion, and the relationship between aesthetic and ethical values. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of contemporary Iranian debates concerning art and religion is their internal diversity and complexity.

Another important feature of these discussions concerns the changing meaning of the concept of "religious" art itself. The boundaries of what may be considered religious art have never remained fixed and have often varied according to historical, social, and intellectual contexts. Consequently, attempts to formulate a definitive conception of Islamic art or a comprehensive Islamic philosophy of art have encountered substantial theoretical difficulties.

First, contemporary Islamic thought itself encompasses a broad spectrum of intellectual positions. Within conservative circles alone, one may identify a wide range of perspectives regarding the nature of religion, culture, aesthetics, and modernity. This diversity inevitably leads to multiple and sometimes competing conceptions of Islamic art. Some approaches advocate strong and comprehensive definitions of religious art, while others propose more limited, symbolic, or interpretive understandings.

Second, despite extensive theoretical efforts, it remains difficult to identify a fully developed and systematically articulated localized Islamic philosophy of art in contemporary Iran. Although numerous studies have addressed the religious dimensions of artistic expression, relatively few have succeeded in constructing a comprehensive philosophical framework capable of addressing the complexity of contemporary artistic practices.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, a considerable gap appears to exist between theoretical discussions concerning religious art and the actual practices of artists and artistic communities. Any philosophy of art ultimately requires some degree of correspondence between theoretical reflection and artistic experience. Consequently, an important question arises: to what extent do the aesthetic preferences and artistic practices of contemporary Iranian artists correspond to the normative conceptions of religious art proposed by conservative philosophers and theorists?

Of course, such a discrepancy is not unique to contemporary Iran. Throughout the history of aesthetics, substantial differences have frequently existed between philosophical theories of art and actual artistic practices. Philosophers of art often seek universal principles and normative frameworks, whereas artists tend to engage with concrete historical, social, emotional, and aesthetic experiences. Nevertheless, in the Iranian context, this gap appears particularly significant because of the broader intellectual and cultural debates concerning tradition, modernity, religion, and identity.

At the social level, moreover, philosophical and theological debates concerning art have generally remained confined to intellectual and academic circles. For ordinary people, art, religion, and philosophy frequently function as relatively autonomous domains of experience. This does not imply that philosophical or theological questions are unimportant in contemporary Iranian society. On the contrary, philosophical and religious literature continues to attract substantial public interest. Likewise, various forms of artistic expression, including both traditional and modern artistic practices, enjoy considerable popularity.

However, for many individuals, artistic experience is not necessarily mediated through philosophical or theological frameworks. Even among intellectuals, except for certain conservative circles, artistic and religious questions are often treated as distinct domains of inquiry. This observation raises an important question: does the limited public engagement with theoretical debates imply that tensions between art and religion have largely disappeared in contemporary Iranian society?

The answer to this question depends largely on the perspective from which it is approached. From a strictly philosophical and theoretical standpoint, it may be argued that tensions between art and religion have gradually become less central to contemporary intellectual life. This is partly because alternative approaches to religion, culture, and aesthetics have emerged and partly because contemporary artistic practices have become increasingly diverse and autonomous.

From a broader cultural perspective, however, the situation is more complex. Like many other societies undergoing rapid social and cultural transformation, contemporary Iran has experienced various forms of negotiation and tension concerning the relationship between tradition and modernity, religion and culture, and authority and creativity. Nevertheless, over

time, many of these tensions have diminished in intensity or have been reformulated in new intellectual and cultural terms.

Several factors have contributed to this transformation. On the one hand, theoretical developments within philosophy, theology, and religious thought have encouraged more pluralistic and nuanced approaches to art and culture. On the other hand, social changes, including the expansion of higher education, the development of modern media, increased cultural exchange, and the diversification of artistic practices, have altered the context in which debates concerning art and religion occur.

As a result, contemporary discussions concerning the relationship between art and religion have become increasingly specialized and restricted to particular intellectual circles. Today, sustained theoretical engagement with this issue is found primarily among certain conservative thinkers and philosophers, especially among some interpreters of contemporary Islamic political thought and adherents of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy. For many other intellectuals and for large segments of society, the relationship between art and religion no longer constitutes a central theoretical problem. Instead, art and religion are increasingly understood as distinct yet potentially overlapping domains of human experience, each possessing its own forms of meaning, authority, and expression.

4. A Comparative Perspective: The Relationship between Art and Religion and the Relationship between Science and Religion in Contemporary Iran

A comparative examination of the relationship between art and religion, on the one hand, and science and religion, on the other, reveals important similarities and differences in the intellectual history of contemporary Iran. Both sets of debates have developed within the broader context of Iran's encounter with modernity and have been significantly shaped by philosophical, theological, and sociopolitical transformations during the last century.¹

At a general level, both the relationship between art and religion and the relationship between science and religion emerged as major intellectual concerns only after the Constitutional Revolution and the subsequent introduction of modern institutions, concepts, and forms of knowledge into Iranian society. Prior to the modern period, neither art nor science was generally perceived as constituting an autonomous domain fundamentally separate from religion. Traditional Islamic scholarship had developed sophisticated approaches to philosophy, natural sciences, medicine, astronomy, architecture, and artistic production without systematically conceptualizing them as independent spheres opposed to religious authority.²

¹ Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Tradition and Modernity in Iran* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004)

² Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

However, the encounter with modernity transformed the intellectual landscape. Modern science and modern art both entered Iranian society as relatively autonomous systems of knowledge and practice, each carrying distinctive epistemological assumptions and institutional structures. Consequently, questions concerning their compatibility with religious thought gradually became central to contemporary intellectual debates.¹

Despite this shared historical background, important differences distinguish the two fields. The relationship between science and religion in contemporary Iran has generally been characterized by attempts at theoretical reconciliation and integration. In contrast, discussions concerning art and religion have often focused on questions of cultural legitimacy, aesthetic norms, and the social functions of artistic expression.

One important reason for this difference lies in the historical status of science within Islamic civilization. Since the classical Islamic period, various scientific disciplines had been regarded as legitimate forms of knowledge and had often developed within religious and philosophical institutions themselves². Consequently, contemporary Iranian thinkers have usually approached modern science not as an inherently alien phenomenon but rather as a field requiring reinterpretation, localization, or philosophical reconstruction.

This tendency can be observed across diverse intellectual traditions. Traditionalists such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr have criticized certain philosophical assumptions underlying modern science while simultaneously emphasizing the existence of sacred and traditional forms of knowledge³. Conservative thinkers have often sought to formulate Islamic approaches to the humanities and social sciences, while many religious intellectuals have attempted to reconcile scientific rationality with religious belief⁴.

By contrast, art occupied a more ambiguous position within traditional Islamic intellectual history. Although artistic production flourished throughout Islamic civilization, systematic philosophical reflection on art remained relatively limited compared to philosophical discussions concerning metaphysics, theology, and natural philosophy⁵. Consequently, when modern artistic movements entered Iranian society, debates concerning their religious significance often lacked the extensive historical and theoretical resources available in discussions of science and religion.

¹ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

⁴ Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*.

Another important difference concerns the role of religious jurisprudence. In debates concerning science and religion, jurisprudential considerations have generally played a relatively limited role. Questions regarding modern physics, biology, mathematics, or engineering have rarely been evaluated primarily through jurisprudential categories. By contrast, discussions concerning artistic practices, including music, painting, cinema, theater, and literature, have frequently involved jurisprudential considerations regarding permissibility and religious norms. As a result, debates concerning art and religion have often acquired a stronger normative and practical dimension than discussions concerning science and religion.

At the philosophical level, however, important similarities may also be identified. Both debates reflect broader concerns regarding the relationship between tradition and modernity, the authority of religious knowledge, and the possibility of constructing indigenous or localized forms of knowledge. In both fields, conservative thinkers have sought to develop theoretical frameworks grounded in Islamic intellectual traditions, while secular intellectuals have generally emphasized the autonomy of scientific and artistic practices. Religious intellectuals, in turn, have often attempted to mediate between these two positions by proposing more pluralistic and interpretive approaches to religion and modernity¹

Furthermore, both debates reveal the significant influence of Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy on contemporary Iranian intellectual life. During the last four decades, several scholars have attempted to employ Sadrian metaphysics as a philosophical framework for understanding both modern scientific knowledge and artistic experience. Nevertheless, the outcomes of these efforts have differed considerably. In discussions concerning science and religion, Sadrian philosophy has often been employed as a means of establishing metaphysical compatibility between religious and scientific worldviews. In discussions concerning art and religion, however, it has more frequently served as a foundation for normative theories of religious art and aesthetic experience.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two debates concerns their social reception. Questions concerning science and religion have occupied a central position in contemporary Iranian intellectual discourse because of their direct relevance to education, technology, economic development, and social modernization. Consequently, these discussions have attracted sustained attention from philosophers, theologians, scientists, and policymakers alike.

By contrast, philosophical debates concerning art and religion have remained relatively confined to specialized intellectual circles. While artistic practices themselves have enjoyed widespread social popularity, theoretical discussions concerning the religious foundations of art

¹ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*.

have generally attracted less public engagement. For many members of Iranian society, artistic experience and religious belief coexist without necessarily requiring comprehensive philosophical reconciliation.

This comparison suggests that the relationship between religion and science in contemporary Iran has generally been characterized by efforts toward philosophical integration and theoretical accommodation, whereas the relationship between religion and art has more frequently involved questions of cultural authority, aesthetic legitimacy, and normative evaluation. Nevertheless, both sets of debates ultimately reflect a broader intellectual challenge confronting contemporary Iranian thought: namely, how to negotiate the relationship between inherited religious traditions and the institutions, concepts, and practices associated with modernity.

Moreover, developments during recent decades indicate that both debates have gradually become more pluralistic and less polarized. The diversification of intellectual approaches, the expansion of higher education, and increasing cultural and intellectual exchange have contributed to the emergence of more nuanced understandings of the relationship between religion, science, and art. As a result, contemporary Iranian intellectual life increasingly reflects not a single dominant paradigm but rather a plurality of competing and complementary perspectives regarding the role of religion in modern society.

From this comparative perspective, it may be concluded that while the debates concerning science and religion and those concerning art and religion have followed different historical trajectories and have addressed different types of questions, both represent important dimensions of the broader intellectual encounter between tradition and modernity in contemporary Iran.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis suggests that philosophical debates concerning the relationship between art and religion in contemporary Iran have been pursued most extensively by traditionalist and conservative thinkers, particularly by scholars influenced by Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy. By contrast, both secular intellectuals and contemporary religious intellectuals have generally devoted less direct attention to this issue, often treating artistic and religious experience as relatively autonomous domains.

At the same time, broader intellectual and social transformations have contributed to reducing the centrality of tensions between art and religion in contemporary Iranian thought. The diversification of philosophical approaches, the expansion of artistic practices, and changing social and cultural conditions have all played important roles in this process. Consequently, while debates concerning art and religion continue to occupy a significant place within certain

intellectual traditions, they no longer constitute a dominant concern in contemporary Iranian philosophical and cultural discourse.

Rather than representing an enduring and comprehensive opposition, the relationship between art and religion in contemporary Iran increasingly appears as a dynamic and evolving field of intellectual negotiation, shaped by historical change, philosophical pluralism, and the continuing encounter between tradition and modernity.

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