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Secular Spirituality in Contemporary Iran: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This study critically examines the emerging phenomenon of secular spirituality within the context of contemporary Iran, a society historically characterized by deep-rooted religious adherence. While traditional, Sharia-based religiosity has long shaped Iranian identity, current trends suggest a transformation in religious observance that no longer fully satisfies many believers. This shift has paved the way for the rise of "modern spirituality", emphasizing a blend of Eastern religious heritage and Western rational traditions to offer a novel, meaning-oriented approach to transcendence. Drawing on the insights of Professor Mostafa Malekian, this research elucidates the origins and historical context of modern spirituality in Iran and explores the factors contributing to its emergence. The analysis reveals that this modern paradigm, by largely overlooking supernatural dimensions and the transcendent aspects of human identity, presents fundamental limitations. Consequently, the study concludes that secular interpretations of spirituality may ultimately fall short in fulfilling the profound spiritual needs of contemporary Iranians.

Keywords: Religiosity; Secular Spirituality; Rationality; Modernity; Worldliness.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, religion has been a cornerstone of Iranian social life, profoundly shaping its cultural and societal fabric. This deep-seated religiosity has been a defining characteristic of the Iranian community across generations. However, contemporary evidence suggests a significant transformation in the landscape of religiosity within Iran. While various generations have engaged with religious life at different levels—from traditional, Sharia-based practices to more secularized beliefs—the younger generation demonstrates a diminished commitment to formal worship rituals. For many, religion is increasingly reinterpreted through the lenses of morality and spirituality, rather than strict adherence to religious law. This shift indicates that the formal and ritualistic aspects of traditional Islam, which once satisfied the spiritual curiosity of Iranians in pre-modern times, no longer fully resonate with the contemporary spirit (Faraji & Kazemi, 2009). This evolving dynamic highlights a crucial period of change in how religiosity is perceived and practiced in Iranian society.

This observed transformation in religiosity has led some native intellectuals to propose the concept of "secular

spirituality" within the framework of modernism, emphasizing the distinct characteristics of the modern individual. As a prominent feature of "New spiritual movements", secular spirituality denotes the pursuit of meaning and interpretive frameworks that are independent of traditional religious dogma (Furseth & Repstad, 2023). Contemporary philosophers of religion often label this phenomenon as "modernistic spirituality" and situate it within the broader project of "rationality and spirituality" (Clark, 2006, p. 8). This theoretical construct rests upon two fundamental presumptions: first, the assertion that "all of us are more or less modern", whether "modernity" is understood as a descriptor of individuals or a characteristic of societies; and second, the premise that "we are all more or less religious", acknowledging religiosity as a graded concept encompassing varying degrees of intensity.

An atheistic perspective defines spirituality through feelings of wonder, joy, and peace, asserting that it is inherently secular and entirely separate from religious or supernatural doctrines. This view challenges common misconceptions, positing that spirituality is a purely immanent human experience. However, critics contend that "secular

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spirituality" fundamentally deviates from the essence of what constitutes spirituality. They argue that without any reference to theism, the supernatural, or an otherworldly framework, this secular interpretation is indistinguishable from humanism (Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2014). For these opponents, the absence of non-conventional or transcendent elements strips spirituality of its core meaning, reducing it to a mere synonym for humanistic ideals.

A clear diagnosis of the research problem is crucial for a successful solution. The concept of "secular spirituality", despite its seemingly straightforward nature, presents considerable ambiguity. This study aims to address this complexity by answering several critical questions:

What defines spirituality in modern and secular terms? Is there a consensus on the meaning of spirituality? What is the context and purpose behind the emergence of secular spirituality? Why is "spirituality" being presented alongside or as an alternative to the traditional understanding of religion today? What factors motivate thinkers to offer secular spirituality as a new path for modern individuals, and what lends it a logical defense? Finally, what are the defining characteristics and components of secular spirituality?

This study will critically examine the components of secular spirituality, drawing on the views of Professor Mostafa Malekian, a contemporary Iranian philosopher of ethics. Our research findings will demonstrate that this form of spirituality, due to its secular components, disregards metaphysics and the immaterial identity of human beings. Consequently, based on these fundamental deficiencies, the secular interpretation of spirituality ultimately cannot satisfy the meaning-seeking soul of modern individuals.

2. Definition of Spirituality

The term "spirituality" is generally understood as a connection to the transcendent, genuine, and absolute, standing in contrast to what is material, apparent, and superficial (Dehkoda, 1998, p. 763). Some contemporary thinkers view spirituality as the "inner core of religion", representing the essential, absolute, and central substance of faith, effectively summarizing all religions (Malekian, 2006, p. 277).

However, defining spirituality proves challenging. Seyyed Hossein Nasr considers it one of the most obscure terms of our time (Nasr, 2007, p. 23), even more difficult to define than science, attributing this difficulty to its ambiguous usage over recent decades (Nasr, 2006; Nasr, 2010). This perspective often portrays spirituality as the inner dimension or "sacred quality" found across diverse traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Mortaza Motahari, a prominent contemporary Muslim thinker, defines spirituality as "The Transcendent", characterized by several key features:

- 1) It transcends animality (Motahari, 2004, p. 48) and serves as a fundamental distinction between humans and animals (1992, p. 231).
- 2) It is among the high human values (1984, p. 244).
- 3) It represents a sacred and transcendent tendency (1996, p. 490).
- 4) It signifies a pull towards universal, general, transcendental, and supernatural truths (2004, p. 24).

These varied interpretations highlight the complexity and multifaceted nature of spirituality, underscoring the ongoing debate surrounding its precise meaning and scope.

To encapsulate, traditional (revelation-oriented) spirituality refers to the inner dimension of both individual and

collective human experience. It's through this lens that humans, either consciously or unconsciously, forge a unique connection with the origin of existence. This perspective posits spirituality as an innate human quality, inherent in everyone—modern or traditional—even if individuals remain unaware of it at certain junctures in their lives.

Conversely, some contemporary Iranian theologians define spirituality as a description of the modern individual's disposition. In this view, a spiritual person is one who leads a fulfilling and authentic life. More specifically, this involves three key aspects: first, the embodiment of positive moral virtues such as honesty, humility, justice, compassion, love, and mercy; second, the experience of desirable psychological states, including self-esteem, peace, happiness, hope, and a deep sense of inner contentment; and third, a belief in an inherent meaning and value in one's own life (Malekian, 2010, p. 277).

Beyond traditional or theological definitions, spirituality is also conceptualized through the lens of rationality, a cornerstone of modernity. In this vein, some define it as "rationalized religion" (Malekian, 2005, p. 273).

Alternatively, a functional definition posits spirituality as "a process whose product is the least possible suffering." This process, it is argued, incorporates cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, and insightful elements (Malekian, 2005, p. 372). However, this latter definition risks reductionism by narrowing the multifaceted meaning of spirituality primarily to its psychological components.

Moreover, spirituality is deeply intertwined with the religious and cultural characteristics of communities, and it is significantly shaped by individuals' cultural values and their perceptions of the world and humanity. Given these diverse and often interdependent factors, crafting a truly comprehensive and coherent definition of spirituality remains a considerable challenge. To clarify the concept of modern spirituality, particularly from Professor Malekian's perspective, it's helpful to delineate what it is not. This approach highlights the core distinctions of modern spirituality through a series of negative statements.

2.1. Spirituality is Not Religion and Religiosity

Malekian emphasizes that modern spirituality is distinct from religion, a concept he analyzes in several ways:

Divine Origin of Teachings: Religion can refer to a body of divinely revealed or mystically derived teachings, such as Islam or Buddhism, that are not products of the human mind. This encompasses major world religions like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Daoism, Shinto, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism (Malekian, 2001, p. 280).

Interpretations of Islam: Malekian further dissects "Islam" into three categories: Islam (1) as sacred texts, Islam (2) as scholarly commentaries, and Islam (3) as historical practices of Muslims.

Religious Law (Sharia): Sometimes, religion denotes religious law, comprising commandments and rituals dictating individual and social duties.

A crucial characteristic of religion in this framework is "absoluteness": the belief that one's own religion embodies absolute truth, while others are false (Malekian, 2001). Malekian notes that many religious scholars, implicitly or explicitly, uphold this view. However, he rejects all but the first interpretation of religion as a definition for spirituality. Conversely, he contends that spirituality inherently lacks absolute meaning. No spiritualist claims their path is the sole or complete

truth. Furthermore, spirituality is dissociated from religious Sharia, as spiritual practitioners, according to modern spiritualists, engage in diverse and individualized rituals.

2.2. Spirituality is Not Rationalism and Reasoning

While Malekian has defined spirituality as "rationalized religion" (Malekian, 2005, p. 273), it's important to understand the specific interpretation of rationality within modern spirituality. Modern Iranian spiritualists define rationality as a complete commitment to logical reasoning. However, this does not imply a tautological relationship where rationality and spirituality are interchangeable. As Malekian states, "It is self-evident that these two concepts do not imply a single truth" (Malekian, 2005, p. 247).

2.3. Spirituality is Not Text-Oriented Instruction

A key reason spiritual individuals often don't adhere to a particular religion or harbor prejudice against any specific faith—and consequently don't magnify differences—is that their spirituality isn't confined by a specific religious text. This allows for a more open and inclusive approach to spiritual seeking.

2.4 Spirituality is Not Mysticism and Morality

Although Malekian has occasionally characterized spirituality as a "mystical experience", we cannot definitively conclude that modern spirituality, in his view, is synonymous with mysticism. Mysticism, like spirituality, is a concept lacking clear and distinct criteria, as evidenced by Malekian's own presentation of multiple meanings for mysticism (Malekian, 2001, p. 334). Similarly, while morality is undoubtedly intertwined with many spiritual paths, it does not fully encompass the broader scope of spirituality itself.

3. Historical Roots and Contexts of Secular Spirituality

Understanding the historical backdrop and genesis of "secular spirituality" is pivotal for addressing the associated research problems. A critical inquiry into its emergence necessitates exploring the rationale behind its proposition: Why is secular spirituality being promoted? Why is it presented alongside, or as an alternative to, traditional religious understanding? What motivates scholars to offer this new path to modern individuals?

Theorists of secular spirituality identify two primary drivers for its emergence:

3-1. The Incapacity of Traditional Religion to Alleviate Human Suffering

Humanity, throughout history and individual experience, has consistently grappled with pain and suffering. These sufferings often form a hierarchical system where earlier pains precipitate later ones. Traditionally, humans have looked to religion for solace and solutions to these existential burdens, and religion has historically demonstrated the capacity to address such needs. However, representatives of secular spirituality argue that while religion may have fulfilled this expectation in the past due to its offer of a metaphysics that was rationally acceptable to pre-modern individuals, this is no longer the case. Over time, components of this complex religious metaphysics have become increasingly questionable and, for modern rational thought, often untenable (Malekian, 2005, p. 314). This rational incongruence renders traditional religious understanding insufficient in providing relief for contemporary

suffering. This raises a crucial question: given the needs of modern humans, is a fundamentally different form of spirituality the only solution, or can a consistent spirituality be presented with new methodologies, much like divine prophets adapted a singular spiritual message for diverse audiences? Malekian himself acknowledges that "The founders of religions and sects - both in the Abrahamic religions and in the Eastern religions - have all sought spirituality from religion, so spirituality is the essence of religions" (Malekian, 2001, p. 263).

3-2. The Destructive Potential of Modern Technology and Human Power

The second compelling factor necessitating the development of spirituality for modern humans is the immense capacity of modern man to disrupt social order. This can be viewed as a negative byproduct of secular science. When scientific and technological advancements are decoupled from moral and spiritual considerations, they can endanger human life, leading to pain, suffering, and misery instead of happiness, pleasure, and peace. Unrestrained by ethics or commitment, science provides tools of immense destructive power. Human dominance over technology, devoid of spirituality, can lead to human detriment in the long run. Instead of fostering progress, development, and peace, it can precipitate societal decadence, decline, and the proliferation of violence. As human access to tools and technology increases, so too does their capacity for action, making a moral deterrent increasingly vital. Malekian posits, "There must be a deterrent to tell the modern human: You can do many things, but - morally and spiritually - you are not allowed to do them" (Malekian, 2001, p. 315). "Secular spirituality" is proposed as this very deterrent, complementing traditional religious understanding. According to Malekian, spirituality is both necessary and desirable in the contemporary era. The fundamental distinction lies in its possibility: unlike traditional religious understanding, which may have been necessary and desirable in the past but is often deemed impossible today, "spirituality is both necessary/desirable and possible" (Malekian, 2001, p. 315).

4. Critical Analysis of the Components of Secular Spirituality

The components of secular spirituality in Iran arise from fundamental conflicts between the characteristics of "modernity" and the "traditional understanding of religion." Given that rationality is a prominent feature of modernity, and spirituality is considered "rationalized religion" (Malekian 2005, p. 273), the elements of secular spirituality naturally align with modern characteristics.

4-1. Adherence to Rationality and Reasoning

The most significant and inherent component of modern secular spirituality is its emphasis on rationality and adherence to reasoning. This stands in direct contrast to the devotional nature of traditional religion. The modern individual, with their argumentative disposition, isn't inclined towards unquestioning religious devotion. Therefore, a crucial step in realizing spirituality is to largely remove the element of worship from religion. This shift moves from heteronomy (governance by external rules, as in devotion/obedience) to autonomy (self-governance, as in adherence to rationality and reasoning) (Malekian 2005, p. 275).

Within secular spirituality, rationality, much like spirituality itself, describes the human condition: a person is either rational or irrational. Consequently, rationality is not only compatible with spirituality but is essentially understood as "comprehensive and

deep rationality." Malekian argues, "Contrary to many people's beliefs throughout history, human beings should not be either rational and abandon spirituality or be spiritual and uproot rationality" (Malekian, 2010, p. 278). This comprehensive and profound rationality, which purportedly leads to spirituality, is characterized by several aspects:

- 1) It doesn't reduce humans to mere "thinking machines" but acknowledges their emotional and volitional dimensions.
- 2) It doesn't dismiss a fact simply due to an inability to explain it.
- 3) It relies on common sense.
- 4) As an idea, it aligns with most, if not all, other human beliefs.
- 5) As a belief, it has been corroborated by adequate research (Malekian, 2010, p. 278).

Despite these various interpretations, Malekian broadly defines rationality as "complete adherence to reasoning" (Malekian, 2001, p. 265). A key aspect of the secular spirituality approach is the belief in the relativity of rationality.¹ This relativity stems from a distinction between a proposition's "logical truth" and its "rationality" (Malekian, 2001, p. 274). This means an idea can be logically sound, yet one individual might perceive it as rational while another deems it irrational.

4-2. Healing Human Pain and Suffering

Representatives of secular spirituality contend that contemporary individuals often grapple with profound feelings of loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression, emptiness, and meaninglessness. The fundamental aim of spirituality, in this view, is to alleviate these pervasive human sufferings. This form of spirituality is understood as being cultivated through historical experience. Throughout history, individuals who have reported less suffering have often shared specific spiritual beliefs, behaviors, feelings, and emotions. These historically observed spiritual experiences are now recommended as a path for those seeking relief. This advice is "self-referent", meaning it requires personal engagement and experimentation. Central to this approach is "having a genuine life", which is defined as being committed to oneself and acting in accordance with one's own understanding and perception. Malekian (2005, p. 371) asserts that "having a genuine life has a very decisive effect on reducing the suffering of spiritual people."

Modern spirituality, particularly in this functional aspect, appears to be influenced by Buddhist mysticism. Buddhist wisdom, centered on the impermanence of all things (*Anitya*), suffering (*Dukkha*), and non-self (*Anatman*) (Hawkins, 2003, pp. 34-35), resonates strongly here. The ultimate goal in Buddhist traditions is to escape the cycle of suffering (*Dharma*) and attain Nirvana, achieved through an eight-fold path: right attitude, right intention, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right effort, right attention, and right concentration (Aria, 2000, p. 71).

The influence of Buddhist mysticism on Iranian secular spirituality is further supported by statements from its representatives: "It seems that the end of human suffering is an escape from suffering. Most psychological research—both philosophical and empirical psychology—as well as self-analysis confirms that the ultimate goal of man is to escape suffering. He is always trying to get rid of pain and suffering. Of course, the one who clarified this point was the Buddha" (Malekian, 2005, p. 363).

Consequently, within secular spirituality, the pursuit of spiritual practices is fundamentally driven by a desire to reduce one's own suffering. This perspective extends even to altruistic acts, suggesting that alleviating the suffering of others ultimately serves to mitigate one's own distress. Malekian argues that all social institutions—family, economy, politics, education, and even religion—may ultimately be established with this inherent purpose: to reduce human pain and suffering (Malekian, 2005, p. 363).

This claim culminates in the assertion that even the very origin of religion, specifically divine revelation, is presented as a route for escaping suffering. "In the case of the founders of religion, religious experience is the result of escaping pain and suffering, but in the case of believers, the source of faith is escaping from suffering and its reduction" (Malekian, 2005, p. 365). This interpretation frames all spiritual and even religious pursuits as ultimately oriented towards the alleviation of human suffering.

A critical analysis of this view reveals that, like other social institutions, religion can, at times, exacerbate or even inflict human suffering. The historical example of medieval Christianity illustrates this point: its dogmatism and violence, far from alleviating suffering, actively generated considerable individual and societal distress.

Furthermore, the primary motivation of prophets and religious founders hasn't solely been the alleviation of their own suffering or that of their followers. The multi-millennial history of religions consistently shows that embracing a new faith often entailed enduring a litany of hardships, pain, and suffering for both founders and adherents. From a superficial perspective, embracing a phenomenon that appears to increase suffering might seem incompatible with human self-preservation, even prompting modern spiritualists to label such behavior as a "general madness" (Malekian, 2005, p. 364).

However, from a profound revelatory perspective, where the core concepts are duty and servitude to God, the metrics of pleasure, pain, comfort, and suffering aren't limited to temporary worldly life. Instead, the focus shifts to the afterlife and eternal happiness. With such a spiritual outlook, followers of religions might willingly and even eagerly embrace mortal, temporary worldly pain and suffering, seeking their mental actualization and spiritual development within this challenging path. Therefore, criticisms that attribute "madness" to patient and steadfast followers on the path of truth are not well-

¹ The concept of the self-annulment of the relativity of rationality is a complex philosophical discussion, the full elaboration of which falls outside the immediate scope of this article. However, a pertinent illustration can be found in the work of the renowned philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Frequently challenged on whether his conception of tradition invariably leads to the relativity of rationality, he endeavors to distance himself from this self-annulling implication through two key arguments. He first contends that the mere

recognition of diverse rationalities does not inherently invalidate the justification of rationality itself, nor does it undermine the consequences of a particular form of rationality. Second, he explicitly acknowledges that the relativity of rationality poses no inherent threat to the concept or theory of truth. For a more detailed exploration of MacIntyre's argument on this matter, readers are directed to Pyle, A. (2002). Key philosophers in conversation. Routledge, p. 8.

justified.

It becomes clear that if human existence is confined solely to this earthly life, many arduous endeavors accompanied by painful suffering might indeed appear as a form of madness. However, the human attempt to escape suffering takes on a profoundly different meaning when one considers the continuation of life after death.

4-3 Being Secular (Worldliness)

Modern individuals are often characterized by sentimentalism, where the primary criteria for evaluating experiences are pleasure and pain. They constantly seek to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering. Life, in this view, is a series of theoretical problems and practical obstacles that individuals strive to overcome, with success leading to feelings of pleasure and peace. Consequently, modern individuals expect every claim, including religious teachings, to offer solutions that bring about worldly peace and pleasure. This perspective demands that any claim be testable and its results immediately observable in this world. This allows modern individuals to confirm or deny the practical outcomes of religious tenets. However, according to representatives of secular spirituality, this expectation contrasts sharply with traditional, hereafter-oriented religion. From the viewpoint of institutional and historical religions, human duty primarily involves adherence to religious commands, with the effects of deeds anticipated in the afterlife. This traditional perspective is rooted in a specific metaphysics, leading religious adherents to hope for rewards in the hereafter, valuing eternal life and divine recompense over immediate worldly happiness, hope, or peace derived from worship. While it's not suggested that traditional religious individuals only consider the afterlife, their primary focus remains there. Nevertheless, research indicates that traditional believers often exhibit greater peace and hope than others, with lower rates of suicide and similar phenomena serving as evidence for this claim.

This inherent characteristic of modern individuals—their demand for immediate, tangible results—doesn't necessarily imply a denial of an afterlife. Instead, it reflects a belief that all claims, including religious ones, must be demonstrable and yield observable theoretical and practical outcomes in this world. In essence, modern individuals prefer a "cash" transaction over "credit", rendering the existence or non-existence of an afterlife largely irrelevant to their present-day verification (Malekian, 2005, p. 278).

Given that modern spirituality, as a novel interpretation of religion, is designed to be compatible with the defining traits of contemporary humanity, "secularism" or "worldliness" emerges as a foundational component. Since secularism itself denotes cosmopolitanism, worldliness, and "paying attention to the present" (Soroush, 2005, p. 73), it's plausible to assert that the spirituality proposed by modernists is fundamentally secular. The architects of this theory concur, acknowledging that "being here-present is one of the meanings of secularism and it means that we should be able to test every solution that is offered to us, in this world... The meaning of being here-present is that if someone offers a way to solve a problem, the effects and results of that solution must be discovered in this world. This does not mean that modern man necessarily denies life after death and the hereafter. Modern man can also believe in the hereafter and life after death. What is important for him is that his lab is situated in this world. He considers just this world as a laboratory. One of the meanings of secularism is

that every word you say must be tested here, and I should be able to test it" (Malekian, 2005, p. 278).

Thus, modern spirituality embodies a form of secularism, predominantly concerned with the "here and now." What defines a spiritual person in this context is their present-focused nature. Through spirituality, they seek immediate, worldly gains: "He now seeks inner peace; Now he wants inner happiness; Now he seeks hope; Now he seeks inner satisfaction; And now he seeks to find meaning in life" (Malekian, 2005, pp. 316-317).

A critical examination of modern spirituality's secular and worldly orientation reveals a significant flaw: it stems from an incomplete understanding of humanity within modernity. When human existence and its aspirations are confined solely to the material realm, it risks reducing human dignity to that of a mere object. The profound suffering experienced by modern individuals isn't simply physical; it's an internal anguish. How can we genuinely address inner satisfaction, spiritual hope, and peace when the human soul and psyche are fundamentally non-worldly and non-material?

Furthermore, divine religions and sacred scriptures have never exclusively presented their mission as merely spiritualizing individuals or alleviating immediate human suffering. Even if such a narrow focus were conceivable, they certainly wouldn't limit its realization to the "here and now." Divine prophets and genuine purveyors of spirituality have consistently declared the primary goal of their mission to be human happiness and guidance leading to the comfort of the afterlife, not merely transient peace in this mortal world.

It's also crucial to acknowledge that the very unrest and depression prevalent in contemporary society are arguably a direct consequence of the dualistic and secularist thinking that emerged after the Renaissance. The rigid separation of this world from the hereafter, matter from meaning, body from soul, and the objectification of humanity are all products of this fragmented worldview. Therefore, the emphasis on secular spirituality and the exclusive pursuit of religious effects and benefits within this earthly life is simply another manifestation of this dualistic thought—a framework that itself faces substantial critiques today. Given that this "dead-end thinking" is a contributing factor to human distress and unrest, how can it genuinely offer peace and hope to individuals?

4-4. Distrust in History

A defining characteristic of modern spirituality is its distrust of historical certainty. This skepticism stems from the modernist view that history is a probable, rather than definite, science, making it impossible to form absolute conclusions about past events. This stands in direct contrast to traditional religions, which often predicate belief on the acceptance of specific historical occurrences. For instance, in Christianity, adherence hinges on accepting events like the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus. However, modern spirituality argues that definitive knowledge of events occurring two millennia ago is unattainable (Malekian, 2005, p. 276).

It's important to clarify two nuances regarding this "distrust in history":

Firstly, it does not imply a lack of historical perspective from modern individuals; rather, having a historical view is characteristic of modern thought.

Secondly, it doesn't mean a refusal to learn from history. Instead, as noted, this distrust signifies a belief, particularly

since the age of skepticism personified by David Hume, that absolute certainty about any historical period is unattainable and that this uncertainty applies universally to all historical accounts (Malekian, 2005, p. 276).

This inherent uncertainty in history, a hallmark of modernity, appears fundamentally incompatible with traditional religious frameworks. Consequently, representatives of modern spirituality advocate for minimizing religion's reliance on historical events. In this view, spirituality is a form of religion that places the least emphasis on historical occurrences, where such events are not considered foundational pillars of religious thought or conduct (Malekian, 2005, p. 278).

4-5- *De-sanctification of Individuals*

Egalitarianism is a core tenet of modernity, and consequently, a significant feature of modern spirituality. Modernity asserts epistemological equality among all human beings. This means the validity of any claim or statement rests solely on the strength of its own argument, entirely independent of the person presenting it. In other words, no one is exempt from providing reasoned arguments for their assertions, regardless of any perceived sacred status. Within this framework, only logically sound claims are accepted; claims do not derive value from their representatives.

This stands in stark contrast to the traditional understanding of religion, which often places immense value on the sanctity of individuals. In such intellectual and practical systems, certain individuals are deemed exceptional and are accorded a distinct status. In traditional religions, individuals can even attain the status of holy persons, and in some instances, reach a perceived level of divinity. Interestingly, Malekian (2005, p. 283) notes that while the founders of religions themselves may not have claimed sanctity, their followers frequently attribute such a status to them.

4-6. *The Infirmary of Mythical Metaphysics*

According to modern spiritualists, most institutionalized and historical religions are built upon extensive and rigid metaphysical systems. Adherents achieve a "perfection of faith" by assenting to a vast array of doctrinal propositions, often presented as comprehensive philosophical frameworks. Even in traditions with minimal metaphysics, such as Buddhism, adherence to concepts like reincarnation, karma, and samsara is deemed essential for righteous practice (Malekian, 2005, p. 283).

These classical metaphysical systems, though not always products of revelation and varying in their reliance across historical religions, generally exhibit two key features: comprehensiveness and extensiveness. They are vast and all-encompassing, with claims spanning the entirety of human existence. For example, philosophical systems by thinkers like Ibn Sina, Hegel, Spinoza, and Whitehead interpret and imbue meaning into everything, including time, space, life before and after death, inanimate objects, and plants.

Mythological and Intuitive Nature: They are not solely rational or argumentative but often incorporate mythological elements and rely on intuitive reason.

However, the modern world is characterized by specialization, where individuals are experts within narrow fields, and their lack of commentary on subjects outside their domain is not indicative of illiteracy. Furthermore, in the modern intellectual landscape, myths and intuitive reason are

often deemed indefensible. Consequently, the elaborate metaphysics of traditional religions are largely unacceptable to modern individuals, leading to a prevalent distrust of these classical metaphysical systems. From this perspective, spirituality is presented as a form of religion whose metaphysical burden has been reduced to a minimum (Malekian, 2005, pp. 280-283).

It is crucial to note that the perceived inability of modern humans to comprehend or justify such metaphysics, or their lack of appeal, does not inherently invalidate their truth or falsity. A fundamental question, however, arises regarding the empirical basis for asserting modern humanity's opposition to metaphysics. What evidence suggests this incapacity, and at what specific point in history was humanity more adept at understanding metaphysics, and for which specific segment of the population? The purported separation of physics from metaphysics, much like the divorcing of the world from the hereafter or the body from the soul, is largely a product of secularist thinking. Moreover, the claim that the modern world is exclusively specialized, with individuals confined to narrow fields, has been increasingly challenged in recent decades. The rise of interdisciplinary studies and novel problem-solving approaches that transcend singular specialties suggests a move away from extreme specialization. Extreme specialization historically led to the compartmentalization of sciences, the separation of physics from metaphysics, and a disconnection between the earthly and the transcendent. Furthermore, the sustained interest of prominent thinkers in metaphysics post-Renaissance indicates that its relevance and intellectual engagement have not diminished compared to earlier periods.

5- Discussion: General Critique of the Theory

While modern individuals struggle to embrace traditional religious understandings, it's equally apparent that they face challenges in comprehending and practicing modern spirituality on a comparable scale. It seems that even the representatives of modern spirituality find it difficult to generalize and actualize their claims in practice. Modernity appears to have fundamentally reshaped human desires, leading to a constant pursuit of worldly peace, comfort, and immediate material gratification. Consequently, modern individuals often find themselves unable to grasp or accept any form of spirituality, whether religious or secular. If a project is to be designed to align with the "metamorphosed self" of modern humanity—a self primarily driven by immediate, material desires—perhaps it should be called something else entirely, as it seems to lack a common meaning with established notions of spirituality. Until the fundamental nature of such a person's desires shifts back towards natural moderation, neither universal justice nor a lost sense of spirituality can truly return.

Another critical point is that while secular spirituality is sometimes presented as the "essence of religions", its relationship to the core truths of divine religions requires a more precise definition. A key issue here is the absence of absolute thinking within secular spirituality. In contrast to monotheistic religions and traditional spiritualities—where claims of absolute legitimacy are central—secular spirituality, despite profound differences among its various proponents (e.g., Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton), never asserts or seeks to prove its own absolute legitimacy or the invalidity of other paths. The arguments some spiritualists offer to challenge the absolute legitimacy of a particular religion often include: (1)

internal disagreements among scholars of that religion; (2) the presence of many precepts and teachings found in one religion also existing in numerous others; and (3) the undeniable moral and spiritual greatness of individuals who have emerged from diverse religions and sects (Malekian, 2001, p. 280). Given these points, spiritualists cannot, by their own logic, claim absolute legitimacy for their particular path.

In criticizing this claim, it is imperative to assert that religious spirituality, grounded in profound knowledge, reasoned beliefs, logical principles, and original ethics, and aligned with scientific and intellectual standards, undoubtedly maintains its validity and distinct position. Such spirituality stands in stark contrast to the secular spiritualities often presented by movements like certain interpretations of Buddhism, paganism, or even more fringe practices (e.g., penis worshipers, demon worshipers), which frequently rely on free personal and psychological experiences, often lacking a robust theoretical basis and rational support.

Given this understanding, what then impedes representatives of secular spiritualities from articulating their legitimacy in a reasoned manner, adhering to established rational criteria and standards? Why do they not subject their claims to rigorous challenge and examination to discern their veracity according to agreed-upon rational criteria, thereby determining their degree of truth? Concomitantly, such a process would expose the invalidity and illegitimacy of personal, concise, and dubious spiritualities that derive little or no benefit from epistemological and rational principles, rendering them theoretically indefensible to genuine seekers of truth and spirituality.

Furthermore, in a broader critique of the theory of spirituality, it must be noted that this theory also posits a separation of "faith" from "belief." This represents a fideistic notion, emerging from the disjunction of religion from reason and the denial of religion's inherent rationality. Thinkers like Alan Watts, in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, arguably based their ideas on this separation, contending that faith and belief are contradictory and entirely antithetical. They claim that beliefs are cumbersome, but if faith and spirituality are stripped of theoretical and ideological content, they become unburdened and liberating. This is because belief typically contains a propositional truth referring to reality and claims to discover something. Conversely, faith is presented as a personal tendency or spiritual experience, purely subjective and psychological, devoid of cognitive content, and therefore "non-cognitive." In this non-cognitive state, it supposedly creates no obligation or conflict with other faiths. Thus, in considering modern spirituality, it is often recommended that faith or spirituality be defined as a purely personal and existential approach, a subjective experience that, unlike ideological faith, lacks an epistemological basis and carries no legal, individual, social, or dogmatic behavioral requirements.

The concluding question, however, remains: Why do existing religions—even Islam—not command maximal acceptance today? Why does modern humanity not perceive a need for them, or find its needs unmet by them? Undoubtedly, the core essence of Islam has not been adequately presented to contemporary humanity; the new generation remains unfamiliar and alienated from this living and dynamic truth. Modern individuals encounter a "religion" that often appears neither vibrant nor dynamic. It seems this profound truth is currently constrained, unable to fully perform its intended role. It is earnestly hoped that proponents of religion will exert

greater effort and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning in Islamic law) to better elucidate this truth and strive more diligently to present it to humanity in its authentic form.

6. Conclusion

This study has established that the advent of modernity, with its inherent mechanization of human life, significantly contributed to the marginalization of spirituality, leading to considerable psychological distress in secular societies. Given that modern individuals, due to their distinct characteristics, are no longer able to fully engage with traditional, institutional, and historical religious frameworks, the concept of "secular spirituality" has emerged as a theoretical response within the modernist paradigm, designed to align with contemporary human needs.

Modern spirituality, alternately defined as "rationalized religion"—a prominent component of modernity—or functionally as "the process by which the least suffering is possible", exhibits several key characteristics. Firstly, it is not primarily based on traditional religious beliefs or monotheistic teachings; indeed, it is often structured and interpreted in opposition to religious and Islamic doctrines. Secondly, it largely disregards the practical injunctions of Islam (obligatory acts, prohibitions, etc.) and is sometimes formulated in direct contrast to Islamic law and precepts. Thirdly, this form of spirituality, which counters traditional religious teachings and upholds secularism by negating the religious system of "right-duty", fundamentally diverges from traditional Islamic spirituality. Traditional Islamic spirituality, by contrast, is not antithetical to religious teachings and rules; it cannot harmonize with polytheistic or non-Islamic beliefs, nor with secular laws and behaviors.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals that modern spirituality, with its core components (such as an emphasis on rationality and rejection of devotion, a focus on alleviating suffering, a "here and now" orientation, the de-sanctification of individuals, distrust of history, and a denial of metaphysics), eschews truth claims and absolute thinking. In contrast to religious and traditional spirituality, where claims of legitimacy are central, secular spiritualists, despite their inherent differences, neither assert absolute legitimacy for their own views nor claim the absolute falsehood of others. In fact, some have actively sought to provide justifications for undermining the absolute legitimacy of specific religions.

This research posits that modernity has fundamentally altered human desire, leading to an intensified pursuit of worldly peace, comfort, and immediate material gratification. Consequently, until the fundamental orientation of human desire shifts back towards its natural moderation, the profound spirituality that has been seemingly lost will not return.

In conclusion, it is argued that presenting the concept of modern spirituality to the general populace or younger generations, without providing an understandable framework, risks causing astonishment, confusion, and a rupture from their familiar traditional ways, rather than leading to "liberation." However, despite these concerns, if the intended audience for this theory comprises scholars, intellectuals, and researchers, then modern spirituality could indeed be considered a valuable contribution for this thoughtful segment. Notwithstanding its shortcomings and the critiques presented, this theory stands as a commendable and honest intellectual and scientific endeavor to address the spiritual concerns of contemporary humanity. This article's aim has been solely to analyze the components

and theoretical underpinnings of this concept through a scientific and impartial critique, without any intention of undermining or demeaning it. It is hoped that such theorizing will stimulate further reflection and thought among scholars, thereby proving beneficial to intellectual and scientific communities.

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