The Capacity of Imām Riḍā's (PBUH) Teachings in Encountering Secular Theories of Justice*

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Abstract

Due to the long-standing nature of the discourse surrounding it, the definition of justice has evolved within a wide range of theories that attempt to define it. Each theory in the intellectual history of humankind that has sought to define justice has done so based on its foundational commitments. Consequently, the definition of justice is intrinsically linked to the theoretical framework from which it emerges. This article seeks to review several liberal theories of justice—particularly those of Hume, Kant, and Adam Smith—and to demonstrate that, despite their internal variations, these theories are characterized by a secular orientation. The central question this article addresses is whether Imām Riḍā's (PBUH) teachings offer any response to the secular foundations underpinning these theories. In the findings section, drawing on the dialogue between ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabāʾī and Henry Corbin, the paper argues that secularism, by emphasizing anthropomorphic theology (*tashbīh*) and rejecting transcendent theology (*tanzīh*) along with the metaphysical dimension of divinity, has enabled the secular and worldly interpretation of various dimensions of human life—including justice. In the final section and conclusion, the focus turns to the link between Imamate and justice, highlighting the potential of the Razavi hadiths to critique secular theories of justice.

Keywords: theory of justice, universal justice, divine justice, hadiths of Imām Riḍā, secularism, Imamate, sainthood (*walāya*)

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Introduction

If approached through purely general and abstract meanings, perhaps the most fitting definition of justice is either "things placed in their proper position" (Sayyid Raḍī 2005, 1:382, Hikma 437) or "giving each right-holder their due" (Sabzivārī 2015, 54). However, when examining the various definitions of justice formulated throughout history, it becomes clear that the historical limitations of human understanding have shaped these formulations. Corresponding to ontological or epistemological shifts across different eras of human life, the conception of justice has been structured within divergent theoretical frameworks. Thus, any definition of justice is inevitably linked to the underlying theory of justice in question.

Put differently, while all theories of justice strive to define things according to their proper place, the ontological or epistemological presuppositions each theory rests upon result in distinct conceptions of what constitutes that "proper place." For instance, in the Aristotelian theory of justice, the determination of positions—whether ontological or anthropological—is contingent on the overarching structure of Aristotle's philosophical system. Hence, the true position of things is defined according to his ontological premises, and once those premises shift, the theory of justice inevitably transforms as well. As Thomas Kuhn argues, paradigms shift with revolutions in scientific or even political structures (Kuhn 1970, 17), and with such paradigm shifts, the definitions and theories of justice are also susceptible to radical transformation.

From this vantage point, throughout the history of human development, we have encountered multiple theories of justice, each attempting to define justice, understood as one of the most fundamental elements of political life, based on the prevailing ontological, epistemological, and anthropological assumptions of its time. One such historical epoch is the modern era, during which several theories of justice emerged. Through the translation of foundational texts and the establishment of corresponding political systems, these modern theories have now become critical questions within the contemporary world.

With the global proliferation of modern humanities—including across the Islamic world—and their accompanying political and economic systems, modern theories of justice have likewise become widespread. This proliferation makes critical engagement with such theories within the Islamic world important and necessary.

Through a brief yet adequate overview, this article examines several of the most influential liberal theories of justice in the modern era. It aims to demonstrate that one of the essential presuppositions underlying these liberal theories is their secular

character. Following this, by revisiting the philosophical dialogues between the late ʿAllāmah Ṭabāṭabāʾī and the renowned French philosopher Henry Corbin, the paper critiques the foundations of modern secularism. Finally, drawing from the teachings of ʿAlī ibn Mūsā Riḍā, it explores the potential of these teachings in mounting a critical response to modern secularism and its attendant theories of secular justice.

Research Questions

In light of the aforementioned introduction, this article seeks to address the central question: What capacities do Razavi teachings hold in responding to the secular foundations of modern theories of justice? In answering this primary question, the following secondary inquiries will also be explored:

1. How the modern secular theories define justice in contrast to classical Greek interpretations?
2. What strategies does Shīʿī thought—particularly the teachings found in Razavi hadiths—offer in response to the secular foundations of modern theories of justice?

Literature Review

This study's specific and focused topic lacks direct antecedents in prior research. However, several works merit mention in thematic parallels. Ahmad Vaʿizi (2009), in *A Critical Study of Theories of Justice*, offers a comprehensive treatment of both modern and non-modern justice theories and clearly distinguishes their foundational differences. However, his work does not offer a response to these theories grounded in Razavi teachings. Rahmatullah Karimzada (2018), in the article "The Foundation of Justice in the Teachings of Imām Riḍā," meticulously analyzes the justice theory articulated by Imām Riḍā, though without comparing it to modern theories.

1. A Brief Overview of Theories of Justice in the Modern World

1-1. Theories of Justice in the Greek World

As will be elaborated below, modern theories of justice differ from earlier theories in two respects. First, they reject the essentialist framework that characterizes Greek conceptions of justice. Second, they propose a secular and worldly understanding of justice from the theories of justice in the dominant Christian medieval period.

Therefore, in order to understand this transformation, it is essential to first consider the Greek theories of justice.

Plato presents justice as one of the four cardinal virtues—alongside courage, wisdom, and temperance—applicable both at the individual and the collective levels. He ties the definition of justice closely to the question of social order: "Justice is that each person performs their own task and does not meddle in the work of others" (Plato 1988, 2:1018 [433]). On the individual level, justice concerns maintaining order among the soul's distinct faculties. Injustice arises when the soul's three parts are in conflict, refusing to restrict themselves to their own proper functions, just as social injustice arises when individuals abandon their societal roles.

> The just man is one who does not allow one part of the soul to interfere with the task of another part, nor any part to intrude upon the function of the rest. Rather, he always ensures that each part fulfills its own true duty. (Plato 1988, 1034 [443])

The result of this view in the punitive justice is that punishment serves to purify the soul, and by extension, society. "Socrates: 'He who is punished is rid of the evil and defect of his soul?' Polus: 'Yes'" (Plato 1988, 1:304 [477]).

Plato's conception of justice stems directly from his philosophical system. His theory of Ideas posits a realm of intelligible realities—true and immutable—distinct from the sensory-material world, which is subject to flux and impermanence. The Idea of the Good is the ultimate source of all true knowledge, and genuine knowledge arises only when the philosopher apprehends this Idea. "You have often heard me say that the Idea of the Good is the highest object of knowledge, and that it is due to its presence that justice and the other human virtues are good and beneficial" (Plato 1988, 2:1117 [505]).

According to Copleston's account of Aristotle's criticisms of Plato, while Aristotle criticizes Plato's dualism between the world of Ideas (Muthul) and the world of sensibles, he nonetheless acknowledges the universality as belonging to rational knowledge. However, "Aristotle identifies this universal element with the inner essential form of the sensible object itself, which, combined with its matter, constitutes the object—and thus, the rational principle resides within the object itself," not in the separate realm of Ideas (Copleston 1994, 428). In fact, Aristotle bridges the gap between the world of Ideas and the world of sensibles by the union of matter with diverse forms.

This foundational difference led Aristotle to ultimately define the virtue of justice in the mean path of morality. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia*—human happiness—is equivalent to Plato's highest good. Justice, in turn, stands at the apex of virtues, for it

makes the attainment of eudaimonia possible. As Aristotle states, "Justice includes all virtues, and in a special sense, it is the perfect virtue. This is because the exercise of justice involves the application of all the virtues. Justice is also a perfect virtue in the sense that it is realized not only in relation to oneself, but also in relation to others" (Aristotle 1999, 28–31 [1097b]).

Aristotle understands moral virtues as a mean between two vices—one of excess, the other of deficiency. Justice, accordingly, is the mean between committing injustice and enduring injustice. However, because justice is the most perfect virtue, it plays a determining role in calibrating the proper mean of the other virtues as well.

1-2. Modern Theories of Justice

A defining feature of justice in the Greek philosophical tradition—as also echoed in later classical systems, such as in the works of al-Farabi—is its conception as an intrinsic or objective virtue, determined in itself and not merely by convention.

> In classical political thought, philosophers consistently attempted to connect their understanding of the good, happiness, and right with the realities of human conditions, grounding human rights, the ideal political order, and the principles and values governing political relations in their conception of human nature and society. (Vaʿizi 2009, 141)

In a fundamental philosophical shift, however, David Hume, through what became known as "Hume's fork," in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, marked a pivotal moment by asserting a rupture between normative claims ("ought") and metaphysics *is statements* (propositions about rational reality). The derivation of *oughts* from *is statements* does not take place within metaphysics. Hume, laying the groundwork later expanded by thinkers such as Kant, redefined justice not as an intrinsic or independent virtue, but as a function of human desires and emotions.

Morality provokes internal emotions and obstructs action, a role reason alone cannot fulfill. Thus, moral principles cannot originate from reason. As long as reason remains ineffective in shaping or guiding our desires and actions, claiming morality arises from rational deduction is pointless (Hume 1888, 457).

This instrumental conception of reason—as a faculty serving inner passions and desires—leads to a reconceptualization of justice as an ethical construct whose primary function is to establish balance or, more precisely, sympathy among human feelings and desires in interpersonal interactions. Under the influence of their emotions and desires, individuals acquire properties, and to regulate these properties, laws must be established. Justice, therefore, pertains to the observance of such laws.

Without property laws, concepts like justice and injustice would be meaningless (Hume 1888, 501).

What renders Hume's definition of justice a product of a fundamental revolution in political philosophy is that, although for Hume justice still means giving each their due, this due no longer derives from eternal truths such as those in the realm of Ideas. Rather, it is governed by laws designed to regulate properties, desires, and emotions. "Justice and rights emerge only after the formulation of human laws. Hence, no right exists independently of laws—let alone one that precedes justice" (Va'izi 2009, 152).

This shift redefines justice as dependent entirely on the conditions necessary for just action and legislation, rather than as a standard by which actions or laws are to be deemed just or unjust. Justice is no longer an intrinsic virtue, but a constructed one, grounded in contextual circumstances.

> The emergence of justice is rooted in human conventions. These conventions are designed to remedy certain conflicts arising from the coincidence between specific characteristics of human nature and the position of external objects … . For this reason, with a proportional increase in human benevolence or in nature's generosity, and the substitution of nobler virtues and greater abundance, justice becomes redundant and useless. (Hume 1888, 494–495)

After Hume, the definition of justice as a contextual and conditional construct—designed to regulate human emotions and dispositions—was further developed and systematized in philosophy by Immanuel Kant and in economics by Adam Smith.

As we know, Kant's central question in the *Critique of Pure Reason* concerns the conditions under which empirical knowledge or Newtonian science becomes possible (Capelston 2001, 278). In contrast to Platonic or Aristotelian views, Kant does not regard knowledge as intrinsic, which is discoverable by philosophy through the realm of Ideas. Rather, his inquiry centers on the conditions that make knowledge possible.

In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant uses synthetic a priori propositions to explain moral propositions, including those related to justice, just as he does for propositions related to knowledge, with one key difference: the object of practical reason, which exists in a pure form, is the free good will. For Kant, as a liberal philosopher, the good will is the only intrinsic good in the entire world; everything else derives its moral worth from its relation to this good will. So fundamental is this notion that, in Kant's view—unlike in metaphysical philosophies or in the theologies of the Abrahamic religions—God, as a Being external to the human world, is not inherently or absolutely good. Rather, God is good only because He possesses a good will (Kant 1969, 43).

Following from this conception of good will, Kantian ethics departs significantly from Aristotelian virtue ethics. It is fundamentally deontological, or duty-based. A moral action is realized only when the good will, through the integrity of duty, reaches its intended end; the moral value—whether positive or negative—of the action depends solely and exclusively on the proper fulfillment of duty and the realization of the good will. "If my free will chooses an action to fulfill a duty, that action is moral and just. Kant refers to this absolute, universal, and exceptionless moral law as the categorical imperative (Va'izi 2009, 196).

As we shall further explore, Kant completely departs from the general principles of Platonic or Aristotelian moral philosophy and does not ground the universality of moral matters in ideal or abstract rational realities. Instead, he considers morality to be defined by its universalizability. Accordingly, when Kant speaks of justice, he introduces the general law of justice, which is, in fact, the broadest articulation of the moral law known as the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1969, 63, 273).

The categorical imperative delineates the conditions for realizing the freest form of the good will and, for this reason, represents the most just and moral principle. Justice, therefore, is the condition for realizing the most universal form of freedom. If the categorical imperative—which is the most comprehensive condition for the realization of good will—is fulfilled, we attain the ideal of justice as the Idea of the Good. In this vein, Kant defines justice in general terms as follows: "Justice is the restriction of individual freedom in such a way that it can coexist with the freedom of everyone else to the extent permitted by a universal law" (Reiss 2001, 71).

Four distinct examples of justice may be classified. Justice manifests when the conditions for maximizing freedom within the realms of law, politics, and related domains are met. The first is democracy, wherein individuals make decisions for themselves, which is a manifestation of justice.

> The possibility of injustice is entirely ruled out when the person decides for himself; therefore, legislation must only proceed through a unified will imbued with collective consent—namely, the united general will of the people, by which each person makes for all the same decision that all have made for him. (Rosen 1993, 46)

The second instance of justice is realized in a system of political representation. The general principle of justice demands that "we must ensure that our external actions are compatible with the external freedom of all other rational individuals" (Rosen

1993, 51–57), a demand that becomes practically achievable through representative institutions.

The third instance pertains to just legislation, grounded in a specific formulation of the categorical imperative that Kant terms the principle of autonomy: "Act always as if you were through your maxims a legislating member in a universal kingdom of ends" (Kant 1969, 58–59).

The fourth and most comprehensive instance—fully reflective of Kant's humanistic and liberal conception of justice—is derived from a formulation of the categorical imperative under the principle of humanity: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means" (Kant 1969, 58).

Kant's theory of justice effectively extracts Hume's emphasis on the dependency of justice on conditions—rather than treating it as an inherent virtue—from its empirical roots, reconstituting it as a rational and necessary principle. It is crucial to recognize that Kant's emphasis on the autonomy of the principles of justice is grounded in his anthropological theory, wherein the good will is considered the source of all moral value. In Kant's ethical framework, we encounter a human being who wills purely toward the good. Here, "good" does not signify Plato's Idea of the Good, but rather the deontological realization of duty in its most universal sense.

Consequently, within Kant's moral theory, the moral quality of actions—whether good or bad—is not intrinsic. The distinction between the life of a saint and a villain depends solely on which one the society considers to be contrary to the freedom of others. Suppose both act according to duty and thereby realize the most general principles governing their own freedom. In that case, it is the society that, based on its own judgment, regards one as evil and the other as good (Vaʿizi 2009, 235).

Moreover, by prioritizing good will over any form of spiritual or moral virtue, spiritual matters effectively become subordinate to human will. Acts such as sacrifice and selflessness—rooted in total submission to sacred entities such as God—lose their meaning within this framework. In other words, the God of Abrahamic religions, who is characterized by the attribute of justice, is here rendered subordinate to our will and the degree to which the categorical imperative is realized. He is not the Omnipotent Being who fully encompasses us and to whom we must submit unconditionally. This interpretation of God—or a being with complete authority over us—within Kant's framework is subject to the principle of the unintended consequences of the good will, a notion echoed in a different manner by Adam Smith.

Although Kant credited Hume with awakening him from his "dogmatic slumber" rooted in Wolffian rationalist philosophy, and acknowledged Hume's attention to empirical, a posteriori matters, Adam Smith enjoyed a lifelong friendship with Hume and absorbed his influence more profoundly.

Smith aligned with Hume on the primacy of desires and emotions, but emphasized the emotions' interpersonal dimension more. Focusing on this collective and relational aspect of emotions, Smith directed the evaluation of the legitimacy of human desires and feelings toward the judgment of others regarding the individual.

> We cannot form any preference or aversion toward our own feelings, motives, or actions unless we place ourselves in another person's position and view our behavior as if from outside. I say that I divide myself into two persons […]. The first is the spectator […] the second is the agent, the person properly so called, who attempts to form a judgment about his own conduct in the character of the spectator. (Smith 1759, 193)

In this duality of self and other, Adam Smith introduces the pivotal concept of the impartial spectator as a criterion for moral judgment. "The natural misrepresentation of self-love can only be corrected through the eyes of this impartial spectator" (Smith 1759, 231). This spectator is, in fact, an internalized human presence, akin to an impartial conscience, positioned between the self and an imagined other, capable of discerning the source of moral action. "The disorder and injustice of our selfish passions are sometimes enough to compel the inner human to deliver a judgment vastly different from what our actual states would permit" (Smith 1759, 273).

In Smith's view, this conscience or impartial spectator assumes the role of God or moral legislator, though it is also susceptible to error. "The general rules of almost all virtues… are extremely loose and inaccurate; they admit of many exceptions, and require such modifications that it is impossible to regulate our conduct entirely by them" (Smith 1759, 299). Among these general rules, justice is included, though it is regarded as the most precise of them all (Smith 1759, 301).

From Adam Smith's perspective, moral virtues—including justice—are not inherent qualities but constructs aimed at maintaining balance. While Hume's moral philosophy holds that property arises from sentiments and desires, Smith develops the theory of balance among sentiments via the invisible hand metaphor, first proposed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, even before it appears in *The Wealth of Nations*.

> The rich only select from the mass what is most valuable and pleasing. They consume a little more than the poor, and despite their selfishness and natural rapacity—

> though their sole intent is their own comfort, and the only end they aim at by employing the labor of thousands is their own satisfaction—in satisfying their vain and insatiable desires, they divide all their advancements with the poor. They are led by an invisible hand. (Smith 1759, 184–185)

The market, governed by the rule of the invisible hand, thus becomes the concrete manifestation of the impartial spectator—a mechanism that establishes justice between the desires and wishes of two human individuals with utmost precision. It suggests that general moral rules, including justice, are neither intrinsic nor pre-established, but, as with Kant's categorical imperative, are products of and responses to human actions in relation to others. Though shaped by human conduct, these rules remain perpetually conditional and emerge as unintended consequences of those actions.

2. The Transformation of Christian Theodicy and the Secular Meaning of Modern Theories of Justice

Some thinkers argue that the transformation of justice theories in the modern world—where justice is no longer regarded as a divine and intrinsic virtue but has become a mechanism for regulating human actions and desires—is rooted in broader transformations in theology and religion. In *The Theological Roots of Liberalism*, Ismail Kurun contends that with the marginalization of the Catholic Church and the emergence of the Reformation—coinciding with the rise of Cartesian doubt—a new conception of religion and individual conscience emerged. This conception, detached from the institutional authority of the Church, granted the individual complete autonomy to define the rules of life independently and freely (Kurun 2016, 12).

According to Kurun, "The Enlightenment viewed Luther as a hero of liberty in all spheres of life and a champion of emancipation from the authority of the Catholic Church" (Kurun 2016, 13). He also references the famous sociological analysis by Max Weber regarding the role of Protestant ethics in the rise of economic liberalism and capitalism. In Weber's view,

> The Catholic is more tranquil and has less acquisitive motivation. He prefers a life with maximum security—even with lower income—over a risky and adventurous life, even if such a life could bring honor and wealth. A humorous proverb illustrates this: 'Either eat well or sleep well.' In this analysis, the Protestant prefers to eat well, while the Catholic prefers to sleep without disturbance. (Weber 2005, 8)

Kurun argues that the theological transition from Catholicism to Protestantism transformed the divine covenant between humans and God, and its civil institution—the Church, formerly a socio-political authority—into a modern social contract (Kurun 2016, 35). This aligns with the previously discussed ideas of Hume and Smith, who rejected justice as an intrinsic virtue and instead construed it as adherence to contractual rules.

Kurun further cites economist Robert Nozick's analysis of liberal foundations, observing that liberalism must dispense with the notion of natural or divine rights and instead ground itself in Kant's principle of humanity, one of the categorical imperative's central formulations (Kurun 2016, 135).

John Milbank similarly observes that with the rise of natural theology in the eighteenth century, God's transcendent and apophatic dimension was eclipsed, reducing the Divine to an immanent presence within society.

> God is no longer the ultimate autonomous power behind human autonomy, but rather a deity directly embedded within human society, maintaining its coherence like Newton's God among celestial bodies in Newtonian space. Yet this condition does not restore the traditional providence of Catholic theology. This modern form of providence is precisely specifiable and can be referenced at the level of finite causality. (Milbank 2017, 95)

In other words, in the modern secular world, the transcendent nature of God has been set aside, replaced by an immanent conception.

In his reading of Smith's theory of justice, Milbank notes that "For Smith, justice in general is merely the accidental sum of particular instances of justice [and not an independent truth], with the latter rooted in the sympathetic indignation of the individual towards any unpunished crime" (Milbank 2017, 97). Smith further asserts that the nature of hatred and repulsion, functioning purely as a contingent phenomenon at the level of emotion and passion—not reason—prevents us from intensifying our resentment at unpunished injustice. Therefore, benevolence need not be sustained or enforced through fear of due punishment (Smith 1759, 125). Even without benevolence, society may preserve justice through material exchange of favor and kindness, agreed upon by value (Milbank 2017, 98).

According to Milbank, this conception of justice finds expression in the institution of the market, whose function is to restrain human appetites and desires.

> Although it is true that institutions of justice, once established, encourage virtue and sympathy, their origin lies neither in an initial contract nor in public virtue, but in the

> gradual historical limitation of the individual self through the negation of another self. (Milbank 2017, 99)

Milbank articulates his analysis even more clearly, asserting that political economy and its corresponding market theory embody Smith's theory of artificial justice. "This realm—justice as artificial virtue and not as virtue in the general sense—is the domain Smith outlines as the field to which political economy is confined" (Milbank 2017, 99).

This ethical theory, developed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is directly connected to *The Wealth of Nations*, with no need for mediation. "There is no difficulty in aligning the Theory of Moral Sentiments with the Wealth of Nations, for Smith makes it explicit that political economy is specifically built upon that domain of ethics concerned with self-interest" (Milbank 2017, 98). Smith acknowledges that pure benevolence belongs only to a being free from dependency—namely, God. Human beings, by contrast, must account for more self-interested virtues of merit and desert, which give rise to habits of thrift, industry, and prudence, and the rational use of personal resources and assets (Milbank 2017, 98–99).

Justice grounded in such notions of merit and desert is clearly neither the distributive justice of classical political theory nor one primarily oriented toward the common good (Milbank 2017, 100). Put differently, in Adam Smith's theory, economics becomes the endless balancing of human sentiments in accordance with the laws of supply and demand (Milbank 2017, 105). Given that the Christian notion of justice has traditionally been expressed through the doctrine of divine Justice (theodicy), Milbank argues that Adam Smith's market theory represents a secular and worldly reformulation of the Catholic Christian doctrine of divine Justice.

3. The Shiʿi Perspective: Between Secularism and Transcending It

Thus far, we have sought to demonstrate how, within the process of modern secularism, justice—once regarded as an intrinsic and transcendent virtue—was redefined as a worldly phenomenon, contingent upon human desires and actions. However, from the Shiʿi perspective, particularly as interpreted by ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabāʾī, secularism arises from the negation of God's transcendent aspect and a reduction of the divine to its immanent, worldly dimension (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 2003, 198). In this view, secularism denies the transcendence and apophasis of God.

Henry Corbin, the eminent French thinker, in dialogue with ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabāʾī, characterizes secularism in modern philosophies and thought systems as the rejection of God's transcendence and the exclusive focus on His worldly and immanent aspect.

This secular denial entails the rejection of metaphysics. Given that divinity constitutes the core of religion and serves as the origin of all theological, faith-related, and practical concerns, the secularist perspective weakens every religious matter grounded in spirituality and eschatology, reinterpreting all spiritual issues from a materialistic standpoint (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 2003, 200).

According to this analysis, secularism took shape in the Christian and modern world and occurred within Islamic history. In Christianity,

> The Church did not limit itself to divine incarnation in Christ. It went further, reapplying this incarnation to itself, regarding itself as Christ's substitute, and thereby as the absolute source of command, to be obeyed unconditionally. Moreover, through rituals like the Eucharist, the Church distributed the blood and flesh of Christ (the realized divinity) to all. (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 2003, 201)

Subsequently, it was Christianity and the Church that paved the way for natural theology and naturalism: The Church forfeited its vast authority, leaving in the minds of Westerners merely the memory that religion was initially a natural tradition emerging in a phase of human history, which, after fulfilling its role, was supplanted by the more advanced and complete natural tradition (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 2003, 202). A similar trajectory can be observed in Islamic history. Ṭabāṭabāʾī notes that,

> Although the belief in divine incarnation—promoted by the Church in relation to Christ—was not expressed by early Islamic figures with respect to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) … a situation emerged that resembled the Church's post-Christ claim to divine incarnation, which implied absolute governance and unconditional authority, enabling the Church to dominate its followers' spiritual and worldly affairs. In the Islamic world, a comparable pattern arose in the immediate aftermath of the Prophet's passing away, initially through the caliphate (instead of the imamate) and later within the collective body of the companions" (ṣaḥāba) (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 2003, 211).

In explaining this historical development, Ṭabāṭabāʾī points to an epistemological perspective that aligns precisely with the transformation seen in the Western world: namely, the rejection of intrinsic and metaphysical truths and virtues, and their replacement with purely human and social conditions. This shift includes, for instance, the transformation of justice from a religious and metaphysical concept to a secular one.

In the Islamic world, this development commenced with a straightforward and apparently rational claim: at the outset of the caliphate (successor to the prophet), its leaders openly declared that although the Prophet (PBUH) had been guided by divine

revelation in his decisions and governance, with his death and the end of heavenly revelation, it became necessary to depend on *ijtihād* and rational judgment merely for decision-making (Ṭabāṭabā' 2003, 211).

According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, this shift is explicitly equivalent to what occurred in Christian and modern Western history: Islam's spiritual existence declined from its elevated rank and authentic station into the social domain, becoming restricted within the limits of material existence. As Corbin notes, divinity was embodied within Islamic society—or specifically within the caliphate and its surroundings. As a result, the luminous spiritual presence of Islam, once visible during the Prophet's lifetime, was relegated to history (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 2003, 218).

In Ṭabāṭabā'ī's view, this paradigm shift had significant implications for *sharīʿa* (divine Law) rulings, particularly through the substitution of *qiyās* (analogical reasoning) and *istiḥsān* (juristic discretion) in place of explicit scriptural texts (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 2003, 228). Moreover, it led to the elevation of *ijmāʿ* (consensus) in both jurisprudence and theology (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 2003, 232). He criticizes this development: At best, this consensus provides no more than a speculative proof (*ḥujja ẓannī*). The entire framework established to grant consensus epistemic superiority began with citing a hadith from the Prophet (PBUH): 'My *umma* shall not unite upon error.' On this basis, the consensus of the *umma* was deemed authoritative. Subsequently, the elect, the juristic elite, or the scholars of the *umma* were regarded as its representatives. Eventually, scholars from a single sect—such as the Ashʿarites or Muʿtazilites—came to stand in for the wider scholarly community of the *umma*. Over time, even theologians within one of these sects supplanted the broader scholarly circle of that sect (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 2003, 232).

According to this analysis, the only effective path to overcoming the process of secularism—whether that of early Islamic history or modern Christian secularism—is found in the teachings of the Shiʿite Imāms.

> The spiritual influence and diffusion of Ahl al-Bayt (PBUT), spearheaded by the intellectual discourse and practical moral training of the first Shiʿite leader, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (PBUH), accompanied by the natural disposition of the masses—who were, by their general afflictions, inclined toward such a spiritual orientation—as well as the discreet presence of men of God who were trained in this school and lived in concealment and *taqīyya*[2] while occasionally revealing aspects of truth and righteousness, all contributed to a transformation. A number of individuals from the

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[2] *Taqīyya* in Shiʿism is permissible only when there is a risk of death or total loss of property in a way that such loss would weaken one's religion. Therefore, it is distinct from lying (Momen 1985, 183).

majority community in the second century Hijri were drawn to inner struggle and self-purification, embarking upon the spiritual path, and others among the general populace developed devotion toward them. After two or three centuries, this orientation took deep root across the Islamic world and gave rise to massive, awe-inspiring communities. (Ṭabāṭabāʾī 2003, 243)

4. The Teachings of Imām Riḍā (PBUH) in Critiquing Secular Views and Immanentist Conceptions of Divinity

As outlined in the joint analysis by Ṭabāṭabāʾī and Henry Corbin, one of the principal causes of secularism in modern thought is its entanglement in cataphatic theology and its denial of the transcendent aspect of God. In this framework, as previously mentioned, the doctrine of Shiʿite Imamate plays a pivotal role in transcending the idea of secularism.

> When the relationship is envisaged between *lāhūt* (divinity) and *nāsūt* (humanity) in the person of the Imāms, there is never a question of anything resembling a hypostatic union of two natures. The Imāms are divine epiphanies, theophanies. The technical vocabulary (*ẓuhūr*, *maẓhar*) always has reference to the comparison with the phenomenon of a mirror: the image appearing in the mirror is not incarnate in (or immanent in) the substance of the mirror. Understood in this way, as being neither less nor more than divine epiphanies, the Imāms are the Names of God, and as such they preserve us from the twofold dangers of *tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) and *taʿtīl* (agnosticism). (Corbin 2001, 48)

In light of this interpretation, the subsequent discussion will explore two categories of Razavi teachings to critique modern secular theories of justice.

1) Criticism of Confining God to Worldly and Immanentist Conceptions: Imām Riḍā (PBUH), due to his theological engagement with various religions—including Christianity—explicitly and repeatedly criticized the reductionist view that denies God's transcendence and confines Him to an immanent, cataphatic conception. Among the most well-known instances is his renowned debate with the Christian, Jāthlīq, high priest, in the court of Maʿmūn al-ʿAbbāsī.

Jāthlīq, in line with prevailing Christian doctrine, claimed that Jesus (PBUH) shared the same substance (*jawhar*) as God. In response, Imām Riḍā emphasized Jesus's acts of worship—his prayers and fasting—and posed a pointed theological question: "If Jesus (PUBH) was truly one with God, then to whom was he praying and for whose nearness was he fasting?" (Ibn Bābawayh 1994, 1:322). This argument illustrates that

Jesus cannot simultaneously be divine and human; otherwise, the logic behind his worship becomes nonsensical.

Jāthlīq also argued that Jesus was worthy of worship because he revived the dead. Imām Riḍā refuted this by referencing multiple figures—Yasaʿ (Elisha), Ḥizqīl (Ezekiel), and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)—who, both before and after Jesus, brought the dead back to life by God's permission. However, none of them were ever considered god in the Torah, the Gospel, or the Quran (Ibn Bābawayh 1994, 323). Through this exchange, Imām Riḍā clarified the ontological distinction between God and created beings and established that miraculous acts do not warrant divinization.

Beyond these debates, Imām Riḍā also explained, in other hadiths, the relationship between God and the created world. He stated: "God created space without occupying space Himself, and created form and modality without possessing modality Himself. Thus, He cannot be comprehended through such categories" (Kulaynī 2014, 1:78). Similarly, in the eleventh chapter of *ʿUyūn Akhbār al-Riḍā (a)*, it is reported: "Whoever likens God to His creation is a polytheist, and whoever attributes to God what He has forbidden is a disbeliever" (Ibn Bābawayh 1994, 1:229).

These teachings collectively dismantle any attempt to anthropomorphize the Divine or to confine His nature within the bounds of worldly, human-like attributes, thereby offering a robust theological criticism of secular-immanentist interpretations of divinity.

 2) The Connection Between the Principle of Imamate and Justice: Building upon the aforementioned analysis of the role and status of the infallible Imām in Shiʿite thought—particularly in the relationship between God and humanity, wherein the Imām is conceived as the perfect human—it is now possible to explore the intrinsic connection between imamate and justice in the hadiths of Imām Riḍā. In one such narration, justice is explicitly named as a necessary condition of the Imām, alongside infallibility (*ʿismah*): "The conditions for Imamate are: piety, purification from all defilements, freedom from all defects, and being just" (Ibn Bābawayh 1994, 1:451).

Furthermore, Imām Riḍā has said, "Indeed, what is demanded from an Imām and the guide of society is fairness and justice, that he speaks truthfully, judges justly, and fulfills his promises" (Majlisī 1983, 10:351).

In a well-known hadith regarding the nature of Imamate, found in Chapter 20 of *ʿUyūn Akhbār al-Riḍā (a)*, Imām Riḍā interprets the verse "And [remember] when his Lord tried Abraham with [certain] words, and he fulfilled them. He said, 'I am making you an imām for mankind.' He said, 'And of my progeny?' He said, 'My covenant does

not include the wrongdoers'" (Quran 2:124, Nasr et al 2015 translation). This hadith points to the high status of Imamate, which was granted to Ibrahim *after* his prophethood. He asserts that this verse "invalidates the Imamate of every unjust individual until the Day of Resurrection" (Ibn Bābawayh 1994, 1:447). Further in this hadith, Imām Riḍā underscores that the designation of Imamate—with a deep-rooted connection with justice—is far beyond the reach of the general public. He states: "Imamate is too lofty in status, too great in dignity, too elevated in rank, too inaccessible in depth to be grasped by people's intellects, understood through their opinions, or attained by their own choice" (Ibn Bābawayh 1999, 1:446–47).

From this portion of the hadith, one may infer that the Shiʻite conception of justice, especially in relation to the institution of Imamate, stands in stark contrast to modern secular theories of justice. It is not contingent upon human contracts or societal consensus, but is rather an inherent virtue inseparably linked to infallibility. Because the position of Imamate is restricted to a specific group of divinely-designated individuals (the Fourteen Infallibles), it cannot be subject to fluctuating historical or social conditions. Consequently, the theory of justice associated with Imamate transcends purely this-worldly contractual models.

Nevertheless, although the infallible Imām is endowed with a supra-historical aspect, he simultaneously possesses a human, worldly identity akin to that of other people. This dual nature enables the realization of a socially grounded theory of justice within worldly contexts.

Finally, it should be noted that many of Imām Riḍā's hadiths elaborate on specific manifestations and meanings of justice. However, given this article's foundational orientation—which seeks to critique the theoretical underpinnings of modern secular justice theories—consulting those narrations falls outside the article's scope.

Conclusion

This article first sought to demonstrate that one of the defining features of modern theories of justice is the negation of justice as an intrinsic virtue, revealing their fundamentally secular and this-worldly character. A critical examination of representative thinkers—David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith—showed that justice in these frameworks is severed from essential virtues and reconstituted as a purely contractual and human construct. Even in Kant's theory, where justice is framed as a rational principle, it ultimately remains subject to human convention.

Following this, drawing on the analyses of scholars such as Ismail Kurun and John Milbank, this paper argued that the anthropocentric turn in these theories stems from

a theological shift: the denial of God's transcendence and the confinement of divinity to a wholly immanent and worldly dimension. Thus, the secular nature of these theories is defined by their complete reliance on human constructs and their detachment from divine attributes.

The theological underpinning of secularism in the Western world—especially post-Renaissance—necessitates reflection on the metaphysical relationship between God and creation (between the Necessary Existence and contingent beings). Secularism, in this view, manifests as a cataphatic theology, where divine and human attributes are similar. In contrast, according to the seminal discussions between Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Henry Corbin during 1950s in Iran, Shi'i theology conceptualizes the relationship between God and the Perfect Human not through incarnation or a purely immanent lens, but through the metaphors of theophany (*ẓuhūr*) and manifestation (*tajallī*)—most notably, the analogy of the mirror. The doctrine of Imamate encapsulates this metaphysical theophany manifestation of the Divine.

In conclusion, by referring to the hadiths of Imām Riḍā, this paper first presented critiques of perspectives that deny the transcendent aspect of God. Secondly, considering the intrinsic connection between the principles of Imamate and justice in these hadiths, the paper concluded that within the corpus of Imām Riḍā's narrations, neither Imamate nor justice can be interpreted in secular terms. In this light, the Shi'i conception of justice, as embedded in the doctrine of Imamate, offers an alternative to modern secular paradigms. This connection provides a framework that, unlike modern theories, can simultaneously engage the demands of social justice while avoiding the reductive secularization of justice itself.

Based on the findings of this paper, future research can expand this perspective into various domains of justice—including social, economic, and political justice—and explore its practical implications in theoretical and applied contexts.

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