



Challenges Facing the Critical Approach to Theological Systems¹

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Abstract

Theological systems encompass religious texts, believers' interpretations of these texts, and the religiosity of the faithful. Among the significant challenges to adopting a critical approach to theological systems are: the failure to distinguish between religious texts, religious knowledge, and religiosity; the dominance of exclusivist views of religion; extreme sanctimoniousness; the spread of religious populism; the prioritization of rituals and ceremonies over religious beliefs; personality-centric religiosity and neglect of the main message of religion; emotionalism and excitement-driven attitudes; the prevalence of imitative over investigative perspectives; and the professionalization of religion. Examining these challenges, identified inductively, helps us gradually transition from a dogmatic and non-critical view of theological systems to a critical and dialogue-oriented approach. Such a shift marks the beginning of accepting the reality of critique in the realm of religion and theological systems, leading to significant advancements.

Keywords: Theological Systems, Religion, Religious Knowledge, Religiosity, Exclusivism, Sanctimoniousness, Dialogue.

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1. Introduction

Every theological system consists of a network of religious knowledge, including religious texts, believers' interpretations and understandings of these texts, and the religious conduct and behavior of believers. The first aspect can be termed the religious text, the second as religious knowledge, and the third as religiosity or religious conduct. The quality and quantity of each aspect depend on the nature of the religion itself, the dispositions of the believers, and the role of various cognitive and non-cognitive factors. In other words, religion, primarily referring to divine religions here, is one entity, while religious knowledge, arising from believers' interpretations of religious texts, is another, and religiosity or the religious conduct of believers is yet another reality. By distinguishing between religion, religious knowledge, and religiosity, assuming the validity and authenticity of religion, for example, the texts of divine religions like Islam and Christianity, it becomes clear that religious knowledge and the religiosity of believers are not uniform or consistent. Instead, they are influenced by cognitive variables such as reason, experience, intuition, and induction, and non-cognitive variables such as place, time, class, livelihood, professional interests, race, economy, and culture. This diversity can be observed in the historical development of various religious knowledge and religious conduct among followers of different religions. The emergence of various religious sects, such as Shia and Sunni in Islamic tradition, or Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox in Christian tradition, illustrates the significant role of these cognitive and non-cognitive factors in shaping the qualitative and quantitative aspects of religious knowledge and conduct. Hence, adopting a critical approach is an essential and inseparable requirement of theological systems in all religious traditions, especially divine religions. The aforementioned cognitive and non-cognitive variables have led to the formation of diverse religious knowledge and conduct, each with varying degrees of proximity to the essence of religion. These variables act as lenses and filters through which believers' religiosity and interpretations of religion pass, inevitably absorbing the characteristics of these variables to varying extents. It can be argued that due to the influence of these variables, there is no pure and unadulterated religious knowledge or religiosity. Instead, all are, to varying degrees, influenced by these significant cognitive and non-cognitive factors. This undeniable reality underscores the necessity of a critical perspective towards the theological systems of believers in all circumstances. Only through a critical perspective can we reduce the

negative impact of these variables, especially the non-cognitive ones with detrimental effects, and achieve a higher and more accurate level of religious knowledge and conduct. However, the primary issue lies in the obstructive role of these cognitive and non-cognitive factors. They not only color the formation of believers' religious knowledge and conduct but also serve as significant barriers to critiquing the theological systems. We refer to this as the challenges facing the critical approach to theological systems.

Based on inductive reasoning, several cognitive and non-cognitive factors play a significant role in obstructing the adoption of a critical approach to theological systems. The main factors and challenges are: 1. Failure to differentiate between religious texts, religious knowledge, and religiosity, 2. Exclusivist views towards religion, 3. Religious populism, emotionalism, and excitement-driven attitudes, 4. Prioritizing rituals and ceremonies over religious beliefs, 5. Personality-centric religiosity and neglect of the main message of religion, 6. The dominance of imitative perspectives over investigative ones, 7. The professionalization of religion.

2. Failure to Differentiate Between Religious Texts, Religious Knowledge, and Religiosity

One of the primary issues in critiquing the domain of religion and theological systems is the inherent ambiguity in the meanings of religion itself, religiosity, and religious knowledge. This ambiguity raises the problem of determining which aspect of religion, what part of it, which religious knowledge, and which religious conduct can be criticized. The diversity of theistic and non-theistic religions, divine and non-divine, monotheistic and polytheistic, and similar distinctions make defining religion very challenging. Moreover, when discussing religion, it is crucial to specify whether it refers to religious texts and scriptures, religious experiences and inspirations, religious teachings and propositions, or religious rituals and ceremonies. Additionally, there must be clarity on which of these aspects holds priority and precedence in reference to the core of religion. Even assuming the primacy of religious texts and scriptures as the primary reference for understanding religion, we face the issue that some significant religions, both divine and non-divine, lack well-defined religious texts universally accepted by their adherents. Furthermore, the religious texts of these religions have often undergone significant changes and transformations throughout their history. If the criterion for referencing religion is merely the foundational and primary teachings and propositions, it becomes evident that

even within a single religion, there is no consensus on the specific number of its core teachings, nor a relatively uniform understanding of them. For instance, among Christians, there is no general agreement on the authority of the New Testament as the primary source of Christian theology, which includes the four Gospels, the Apostles' letters, and other related texts. Some consider Christian tradition an integral part of the Christian religion as well (McGrath, 1996, p181-187). Similarly, in the Islamic world, even with a consensus among Muslims on the authority of the Quran, there is no unanimous agreement on the Sunnah, especially the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad and Shia Imams. Additionally, in defining the essence of Islam, some emphasize its doctrinal aspects, others its jurisprudential aspects, and yet others its ethical or mystical aspects (Tabataba'i, 2012, p 32). In summary, the lack of a clear conceptual and even practical definition of religion itself, along with the numerous disagreements in this area, makes a critical perspective towards religion and its theological system challenging. Another issue is the failure to distinguish between religion, religious knowledge, and religiosity. If we assume that religion refers to religious texts or fundamental doctrinal propositions, then religious knowledge can be understood as believers' interpretations and understandings of these religious texts and doctrinal propositions. Religiosity or religious conduct, then, refers to the behaviors, actions, rituals, and practices that believers perform or are committed to base on their religious knowledge (Qorbani, 2019, p 111).

Given the aforementioned assumption, that religious texts and fundamental doctrinal propositions constitute the essence of religion, along with the provided definitions of religious knowledge and religiosity, the first logical conclusion is that accepting the general unity of religion does not necessarily result in the uniformity of religious knowledge and believers' religiosity. This is because the interpretation of religious texts and the understanding of doctrinal propositions by believers heavily depend on significant cognitive and non-cognitive factors. Therefore, even assuming the unity of the essence of religion, we naturally encounter a plurality of religious knowledge and a diversity of religiosity styles. Acknowledging this reality facilitates a critical engagement with religious knowledge and conduct. However, the fundamental issue is that many believers, and even some religious scholars, do not adequately recognize this difference and distinction. Sometimes they view it solely from a theological, jurisprudential, or ethical perspective, neglecting other aspects. They often consider their understanding as identical

to the religion itself, viewing other interpretations or differing religiosity styles as outside the bounds of religion. This is precisely where significant religious sects within each religion emerge, each claiming to have the correct understanding aligned with the religion and deeming opposing views as contrary to it. By distinguishing religion from religious knowledge and religiosity, at least the crucial point is acknowledged that believers may have different interpretations and consequently diverse styles of religiosity. Although these religious understandings and religious conducts are not entirely congruent, they are not necessarily in opposition either. Instead, they are different perceptions of a single truth, and to the extent that they reflect a correct understanding of the essence of religion and faithful adherence to it, they are considered closer to the divine and rewarded by God. This problem is exacerbated when the diversity of religiosity methods is taken into account. Various levels of religiosity, such as philosophical, jurisprudential, ethical, ritualistic, and emulative of prominent religious figures, can be identified (Movahedian, 2018, p23). The issue arises when it is not clear which of these, and to what extent, aligns with the essence of religion, leading individuals to regard their own style of religiosity as the only one that conforms to the essence of religion.

In summary, the inherent ambiguities in the meanings of religion, religious knowledge, and religiosity, their diverse instances, and the lack of clear conceptual and practical distinctions among them, make a critical approach towards them challenging. This often results in a certain conflation in critiquing theological systems.

3. Exclusivist Attitudes Toward Religion

Exclusivist attitudes toward one's religion and religious tradition are primary obstacles to adopting a critical approach to religion and theological systems. This issue is deeply rooted in the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. Religious exclusivism refers to the belief that divine truth and salvation are restricted to one religion or religious tradition, while other religions or sects are, wholly or partially, deprived of such grace (Peterson & Others, 1997, p 221-222; Stenmark, 2006, p102). This attitude is often directly or indirectly based on religious texts, the way believers interpret these texts, or the specific history of the religion. For instance, Christians may view the resurrection, ascension, and crucifixion of Jesus as unique to Christianity, thus elevating it above other religions (Richards, 2005, p 40-41). Similarly, some Muslims argue that due to the finality of Prophet Muhammad and the alleged alterations in earlier divine scriptures, Islam is the only true religion,

considering other religions less valid or devoid of significant salvation (Javadi Amoli, 2008a, p196). This exclusivist view also exists within religious traditions themselves. For centuries, the three main Christian denominations, namely Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, have regarded each other as heretical and damned. In the Islamic world, even today, some Sunni and Shia scholars and laypeople accuse each other of heresy, considering their own sect as the only path to eternal salvation (Ash'ari, 1981, p 322; Salim Ibn Qeys, 1996, p 250-252).

Regardless of how close these exclusivist claims are to the truth, they create numerous obstacles to the possibility of critically engaging with these religions and religious traditions, as well as questioning the religious knowledge and conduct of believers within these traditions. Since welcoming criticism from others about one's religion and religious tradition requires a special spiritual, psychological, cognitive, and ethical readiness, exclusivist attitudes deprive believers of this opportunity or limit it significantly. In this case, key characteristics of religious exclusivism include: disdain for learning from others, extreme sanctimoniousness, personality-centric religiosity, ignoring other religions' and religious traditions' values, relying on own identity and defining the religious other through our negative virtues.

This attitude suggests that everything essential about the truth has already been granted by God, who has chosen us as His worthy children. Therefore, there is no need to pay attention to "the religious others" or listen to their voices (Swidler, 2014, p 24). Since God has provided the best and only path to salvation for us, there is no need to seek salvation in other religious traditions (Moyaert, 2011, p 51). Thus, theoretical and practical self-sufficiency and reliance on unique God-given gifts of truth and salvation prevent any form of dialogue, criticism, and religious understanding with others. Others are seen as misguided infidels, deprived of divine truth and destined for hellfire, making it unnecessary to listen to them. The only exceptions for an exclusivist to engage in religious dialogue or a critical approach are to invite the other to their own saving religion, prove the invalidity of the other's belief system, or, at a minimum, find ways for peaceful coexistence. Such a perspective hinders the recognition of common beliefs among followers of different religions and religious traditions. Core beliefs such as faith in God and the divine truth, and the idea that we are all God's creatures, are among the most important common tenets of believers, fostering dialogue, criticism, and religious understanding. However, these

vital points are neglected due to the exclusivist view centered on the Prophet, or the Imam in Shia tradition. This exclusivist attitude confines us to an island with no means of establishing communication with inhabitants of other islands. The excessive emphasis on personality-centric teachings prevents believers from focusing on shared teachings and achieving the necessary empathy and common language, thereby eliminating any inclination to listen to others' voices.

This approach finally involves placing excessive emphasis on the Prophet or leader of a religious tradition and defining most or all religious teachings around them, which leads to neglecting the main, common message of religions, especially divine ones. Although the centrality of a person or leader in religious traditions has its importance, this should not cause believers to overlook the core message that the Prophet was merely a messenger and deliverer of God's primary purpose in sending the Prophet, is to convey this message, i.e., monotheism. Hence, while the Prophet holds significant importance in religious traditions, they should be secondary to God's intrinsic aim of delivering the divine message. Unfortunately, this crucial distinction is often overlooked by believers and religious scholars, who tend to define the entirety of their theological system around the person of the Prophet.

Religious exclusivism naturally leads to extreme sanctimoniousness regarding most, if not all, aspects of one's religious belief system. Consequently, even the smallest details of one's religion are considered highly important and sacred. This perspective overlooks the sacred and sublime values of other religions and religious traditions (Moyaert, 2011, p 21). For example, the fact that followers of other religions also worship the one God, are His servants, adhere to moral values, and believe in the afterlife is of little significance to the exclusivist because these beliefs do not belong to their own religious tradition. Thus, religious exclusivism naturally leads to disregarding the cognitive, ethical, and spiritual values of other religions and religious traditions, while elevating the sanctity of one's own religious tradition. This prevents any openness to the words and values of the religious other, as the other is perceived to have nothing new or true to offer.

Another characteristic of religious exclusivism is the affirmation of one's positive identity while defining the other based on their negative traits. In other words, we see ourselves as the rightful servants of God, worthy of all virtues, while the religious other lacks these virtues and possesses most, if not all, religious and moral vices. This dominant negative view of the other

is a key feature of exclusivism, blinding us to the merits and goodness of others. This excessive emphasis on self-importance leads to a kind of conflict and opposition, creating an identity struggle where the other is defined by what we lack and do not seek (Moyaert, 2011, p 53; Baumann, 2004, p 18). Therefore, there is no similarity between our identity and that of the other to facilitate sitting together and listening to each other. As a result, people are divided not based on their shared humanity but on their adherence or non-adherence to one's own religious tradition. This division is akin to categorizing the world into Christians and non-Christians, or Muslims and non-Muslims, where the latter are seen as infidels and non-believers who must either be guided or fought in a holy struggle. If they are not guided, hell is their ultimate destination. A dangerous corollary of this viewpoint is the use of any means to invite the other to one's own religion, leading to religious and sectarian violence and bloody wars. The long history of Muslims' military campaigns to non-Islamic lands and Christians' attacks on Jerusalem to save the holy land from the so-called infidel Muslims are unfortunate examples of the ideology of converting infidels to one's own faith, which blocks any possibility of mutual understanding and criticism. Unfortunately, this overarching view neglects the truth of humanity and forgets the common truths of religions and universal ethical principles, closing the door to rational and realistic mutual critique and dialogue, leading to war instead of peace.

These mentioned aspects make it impossible for an exclusivist to listen to the voice of the other, as they feel no need to hear the truth from the other. They have no will to engage in dialogue with the other or to see themselves from the other's perspective. Moreover, they define the other based on what they lack, deeming them unworthy of dialogue. Therefore, exclusivism shuts the door to any conversation. In contrast, dialogue, based on inclusivism or pluralism, is the gateway to critical and wise evaluation of religious belief systems and is open to all religious perspectives, even critical ones.

4. Centrality of Religious Laws and Rituals in Relation to Beliefs

One of the significant characteristics of religions is the different roles that religious laws and rituals play alongside religious beliefs and convictions. Consequently, some thinkers consider beliefs and laws as the fundamental elements of religion (Javadi Amoli, 2008b, p 20). However, when it comes to critiquing a theological system, we often encounter the issue of altering the position and relationship of laws and rituals relative to beliefs and convictions, resulting in the centrality of laws and rituals. In other words,

while it appears that in the worldview of divine religions such as Islam and Christianity, beliefs and convictions, like monotheism and the afterlife, hold a more foundational and essential position compared to laws and rituals such as prayer and pilgrimage, this distinction is frequently disregarded, and their relationship is reversed. In this regard, some religious followers mistakenly refer to certain traditions emphasizing the importance of ritual practices; for instance, traditions like "prayer is the pillar of religion" (Kulayni, 2009, vol. 3, p 9); "Islam is built on five pillars: prayer, almsgiving, fasting, pilgrimage, and guardianship" (Kulayni, 2009, vol. 2, p 21). Although these traditions hold particular value, they do not indicate the foundational role of laws and rituals relative to religious beliefs. In reality, the core of any religion, such as Islam and Christianity, is its belief system, primarily expressed through faith in monotheism and the afterlife. Only a theoretical commitment to monotheism paves the way for adherence to righteous deeds and leads to salvation. Thus, the foundation of any divine religion, like Islam or Christianity, lies in its beliefs and doctrinal propositions, which give meaning and direction to ritual practices and religious ceremonies.

The fundamental issue here is the shift in the position of laws and rituals relative to religious beliefs and convictions, complicating the critique of a theological system. This shift is likely why, for example in Islamic society, jurisprudence, as the science of ritual laws and religious ceremonies, holds a more central and significant role compared to theology, mysticism, and Islamic philosophy, which deal with the belief system of Muslims. This change has led religious scholars, especially jurists, to gradually overlook the role of beliefs and focus all their efforts on explaining the details of ritual laws and religious ceremonies. This phenomenon can be described as the "expansion of jurisprudence" relative to other Islamic doctrinal sciences, which undoubtedly have a more foundational role than prevalent jurisprudence (Soroush, 1996a, p 148).

5. Religious Popularization

A significant obstacle or challenge to critiquing theological systems is religious popularization. According to Will Durant, the masses desire a religion rich in miracles, mysteries, and myths (Durant, 1968, p 101). The rational aspect of religion is difficult for the masses to digest and not particularly attractive; instead, they are enamored with the mythological, superstitious, and mysterious aspects of religion. Religious popularization means the centrality of the masses in understanding and practicing religion, whereas the common people possess a very low level of religious

understanding compared to scholars and thinkers. As Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, an Iranian contemporary thinker, states, "usually, the masses are believers and faithful, but ignorant, degraded, and unaware, and consequently oppose reforms" (Motahhari, 1983, p 298). However, for various reasons, perhaps due to the prominent role of religious laws and jurisprudence in the lives of common people and the sustenance some religious scholars derive from them, the masses play a significant role in religious life. According to Motahhari's view, "The nature of the masses is that they always cling to the past and what they have become accustomed to, unable to distinguish between right and wrong. The masses consider every novelty a heresy or a whim, ignorant of the norms of creation and the demands of nature. Therefore, they oppose anything new and always support the status quo" (Motahhari, 1983, p 299). Indeed, the general public, referred to here as the masses, vastly outnumber the scholars and elites. Unlike the elites and scholars, the masses are primarily concerned with properly observing religious laws and rituals rather than understanding and rationally interpreting the core teachings of the faith. Consequently, given the extensive role of the masses, one can seriously speak of two levels of religiosity: popular and elite. In elite religiosity, reason plays a central role in understanding and affirming the faith. In popular religiosity, however, broad acceptance of religious teachings or fragmented traditions occurs alongside a simplistic and subjective perception, lacking scholarly contemplation and rational reflection (Esmaeili & Ashena, 2011, p 63). Popular religiosity is a clear manifestation of cultural or indigenous religiosity, where religious rituals and customs gradually change and redefine according to local, ethnic, cultural, and even economic characteristics. According to Geertz, popular cultural religiosity is a form of collective consciousness as a cultural system, where religion must be sought at the social level. This type of religiosity has five major characteristics:

1. Simplicity: This consciousness portrays essences as simple existences, explaining them straightforwardly.
 2. Practicality: It tells us what is needed for progress.
 3. Superficiality: It asserts that what appears correct is indeed correct.
 4. Lack of Methodology: Such ideas are not theoretical, precise, or based on thought.
 5. Accessibility: Anyone can and should acquire it (Eller, 2007, p 50).
- Importantly, popular religiosity attempts to simplify realities. Simplicity in the cognitive dimension focuses on simplifying religious understanding and

beliefs. Popular religiosity is practical, providing tools and solutions for solving problems, but it may rely solely on predefined tools from this collective consciousness, avoiding the root causes of issues. It does not seek to investigate and scrutinize facts and truths but validates what appears correct (superficiality). Since collective belief is superficial, it lacks exceptional theoretical precision (lack of methodology). The final characteristic of popular religiosity is ease of acquisition (accessibility); anyone can easily adopt such beliefs with minimal intellectual effort (Esmaeili & Ashena, 2011, p 65-66).

The most significant feature of popular religiosity is its resistance to reformative and critical perspectives and actions. This outlook on religion rarely accepts criticism and reforms. On the contrary, it strives to dismiss critical views by labeling them as heresy, unbelief, and similar terms. Moreover, since the masses think about religion based on their emotions and excitements, and because religious matters are intertwined with their daily livelihoods, their view of religion is primarily emotional and sensational, preventing any rational examination and assessment. As a result, critiquing religion and the theological system arising from it, entangled with emotional populism, becomes more challenging; they can easily reject any critical discourse conflicting with their emotions.

Therefore, the inclination towards populist thinking among religious scholars and intellectual elites, and even the isolation of committed intellectuals, is one of the harms that ultimately leads to the obstruction of a critical approach to religion. In this regard, the words of Ayatollah Shahrestani, an Iraqi contemporary scholar, are thought-provoking. He states, "Scholars and jurists, due to fear of the people, speak contrary to their beliefs. They speak to the general public in one way and express different views in their practical treatises. The jurist, out of fear of stirring up people's emotions against himself, aligns his judgments (fatwas) with them. Such stances harm religion and sect, leading to the backwardness of the religious community. Since ignorant people always incline towards superstitions and innovations, when scholars remain silent in front of them, innovations overpower religious truths, and religion turns into a kind of savage idolatry, inviting the ridicule of other nations" (Shahrestani, 1930, p 266).

In summary, populism is one of the main obstacles to a critical approach to religion. The masses not only reduce religion to their livelihood and superstitious, emotional, mythical daily life, but by focusing on religious laws and neglecting doctrinal teachings, clinging to their marginal and

subjective beliefs, they prevent scholars and intellectuals from enhancing religious knowledge and practice. The dominance of emotions and excitements in popular religiosity is also a major obstacle and challenge to a rational and critical approach to religion.

6. Dominance of Religious Personality Cult and Neglect of the Main Message of Religion

Another significant problem related to the possibility of critiquing religion and the theological system based on it is the reliance of the entirety of that religion or theological system on the person of the religious leader or messenger. In this scenario, all the core teachings of that religion or theological tradition and system are defined based on the nature and characteristics of the relevant person. It seems that the existence of such a person gives rise to such a religion or theological system. Consequently, the theology and religious beliefs formed also carry the color of the religious leader and Prophet; whereas, the main message of religions, especially divine religions, is the call to monotheism and salvation, not the call to the Prophet himself. Furthermore, the Prophet himself is a herald of monotheism and salvation. However, the aspect of Prophets, Imams, and great religious figures serving as role models gradually causes believers, especially the common people, to somewhat overlook the main message of religion and, by adhering to and modeling their religious conduct on the personal, ethical, and individual character of the Prophet, Imam, or religious leader, plan their religious journey. While this approach has many benefits, it is not without flaws. The primary flaw is the gradual sidelining or abandoning of the main message of religion and the elevation of the person in question, resulting in a rigid and exclusivist view of that person and their religious tradition. This problem is particularly evident in person-centered religions like Christianity or Islam, and Judaism, which, revolves around the centrality of Jesus Christ, Muhammad or Moses, for example, leading to an exclusive, uncritical view of Jesus Christ, Muhammad or Moses and the entirety of Christian, Jewish or Islamic beliefs. In the Islamic tradition, the excessive emphasis by some Shia on the role of the Imams in its extreme form, granting them divinity in radical Shia sects and among Alawites, and the extreme preoccupation of some Twelver Shia with the obligation of visiting the shrines of Imams and their descendants, somewhat exemplifies this approach. While honoring great religious figures and modeling religious conduct on them is desirable, the problem lies in the excess, which leads to neglecting other valuable aspects of religion. In this context, extreme person-centered religiosity is also

not highly desirable. This is because emulating great religious figures involves attributing a kind of sanctity to them, whereas not all their personalities, actions, and behaviors are sacred, nor are they necessarily infallible. The association of sanctity and infallibility with person-centered religiosity prevents any realistic perspective on those figures and their place in religion, the religious tradition, and the belief system. This perspective hinders even the correct hearing of these figures' earthly remarks by believers, as all our efforts are directed towards sanctifying, deifying, considering them heavenly, and perceiving them as otherworldly.

7. Predominance of Imitative Religiosity over Investigative Religiosity

Another crucial point, supported by extensive historical evidence, is the overwhelming prevalence of imitative religiosity over investigative religiosity throughout the history of religious traditions, which significantly hinders the critique of religion. Specifically, the long historical reality of the lives of followers of various religious traditions, such as Shia and Sunni in Islamic tradition, or Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox in Christian tradition, shows that the faith and religious understanding of the majority, about 95%, are imitative and indoctrinated rather than investigative and scholarly. In reality, the religion and sect we belong to are not primarily within our control; rather, three influential factors, including parents, geography, and time, play a significant role in determining our religion and sect. This means our religion depends on which parents (e.g., Shia or Sunni, Catholic or Protestant), in which land (e.g., Iran or Saudi Arabia, or Germany), and at what time (now or five centuries or fourteen centuries ago) we were born. For instance, a child born to Shia parents naturally adopts Shia Islam. Similarly, a child born in Saudi Arabia is more likely to be Sunni or Wahhabi, and child born in Iran about five centuries ago was likely Sunni, but being born now increases the likelihood of being Shia. Thus, our religion and sect result from the interplay and combination of race, geography, and time (Hick 1985, p 47-48). For this reason, all or most people, even assuming their innate inclination towards seeking God, initially have an imitative or indoctrinated religion and sect. Only after many years of life, if some individuals become knowledgeable scholars or researchers in search of religious truth, there is a possibility of migrating from one religion to another or from one sect to another. However, it is crucial to note that due to the indoctrination and influences from parents, environment, society, media, global advertisements, and similar factors, the majority of followers of religious traditions, even throughout their lives, do not consider the

possibility that their religion or sect might be wrong and that another religion or sect might be right. They are brought up to believe that their sect and religion are entirely correct, feeling no need to study and understand other religious traditions and theological sects. More importantly, many believers in a religious tradition, unfortunately, have very little knowledge even about the teachings of their own religion and sect. They are primarily preoccupied with jurisprudence, rituals, and ceremonies, accepting beliefs mostly according to the imitative tradition of their parents without investigating and digesting them. What expectations can we have from such individuals, who constitute about 95% of believers in most religious traditions? When they lack necessary awareness and insight regarding their own religious and sectarian beliefs, how can we expect them to strive for understanding the true religion and adopting a critical perspective? The problem with imitative religiosity is that it generally cannot tolerate any critique or examination of its belief system and religiosity, as it has been learned imitatively that what they believe and their religious conduct align with the text of the religion and God's will. Consequently, no doubt or questioning is permissible in such a context. Thus, in such an environment, rational thinking is suspended, imitative modeling thrives, misuse of religion becomes possible, and commercialized religiosity is also feasible. In this religious conduct, imitating the methods of ancestors and the authority of certain religious figures replaces any rational and critical perspective, and excessive insistence by critics on their views may sometimes cost them their lives.

8. Professionalization of Religion

One of the main obstacles to critiquing theological systems is the professionalization of religion. This may be considered the most significant barrier among those mentioned factors previously. Professionalization of religion refers to the dependency of the entirety or a substantial part of religious matters on a specific class, group, or profession within society. This also means that the understandings, interests, and concerns of that group or profession gradually become intertwined with or dependent on the entirety of religion. Essentially, a mutual dependency is established between a particular group and class in society and religious matters or the religious institution, leading that group to understand, explain, and defend the entirety of religion, directly connected to their status, interests, and class considerations. This professionalization of religion is most apparent in religious scholars in general and in the clerical class or clergy in particular. Thus, professionalization of religion implies the dependency of religion and

religious matters on the clerical class and the dependence of this class's interests on the religious institution and religious matters. The most crucial aspects of this dependency include the interpretation, explanation, and defense of religious teachings. Conversely, the primary dependencies of this class involve sustenance, gaining social status, and exerting authority through religion. The efforts of the clerical class usually lead to exclusivity and the official interpretation of religion, meaning that this class considers itself the only worthy group for properly understanding, explaining, and defending religion, denying such rights to others. This process results in granting the clerical class an exclusive and sacred status for interpreting religion. In turn, the exclusive right to interpret religion serves both as their means of sustenance and its justification. Such reciprocal relationships lead to class considerations that protect their status and position and prevent any weakening or challenges.

Therefore, professionalization of religion is a gradual religious phenomenon resulting from the control of the religious institution and matters by a specific group within the religious community. Its primary consequences include:

1. Monopolization of religious interpretation: Interpretation of religion is controlled by members of this class.
2. Expansion of official religious interpretation: The official interpretation is expanded, and alternative interpretations are devalued.
3. Misinterpretation of alternative views: Interpretations by others are deemed incorrect or even deviant.
4. Segregation within the religious community: Society is divided into clerical and non-clerical groups, with clerics possessing the exclusive right to correct religious interpretation.
5. Class division: Society is stratified into clerics and non-clerics, conferring social status and specific sanctity upon clerics.
6. Gradual sanctification of clerical understanding: The clerical interpretation of religion becomes increasingly sanctified, hindering critical perspectives.
7. Interweaving of clerical interests with religious interpretation: Clerical interests become intertwined with their understanding, interpretation, and defense of religion.
8. Predominance of class interests over truth-seeking: Clerical interests gradually overshadow the pursuit of religious truth and freedom.

9. Clerical independence from lay knowledge: The clerical class becomes independent of non-clerical knowledge, perceiving others as needing clerical guidance.

10. Exemption from lay oversight: Clerics are not subject to oversight by the public or non-clerical intellectuals, deemed unqualified to supervise clerical activities.

11. Internal supervision only: Oversight within the clerical class is ineffective due to class relationships.

12. Growth of disciple-mentor relationships: Such relationships hinder the culture of critique, placing individuals' status above critique and even above religious teachings.

The results above have a direct connection with a crucial consequence considered in this research, which is the prevention of criticizing the clergy and challenging their understanding of religion and the theological system derived from it. The professionalization of religion, with all its negative outcomes, leads to an even more undesirable result: the production of religious intolerance and exclusivity within the clergy. This exclusivity causes them to reject or dismiss all critical perceptions of their religious thoughts and behaviors. The mere process of religion becoming a profession is not inherently negative, as the history of divine religions naturally witnesses the emergence of a class claiming knowledge of religious science, known as religious scholars. Many of them, especially as individuals, have made significant and beneficial contributions throughout the history of religions, even sacrificing their lives in the process of reforming and reviving religion. However, simultaneously, the history of religions also shows the gradual growth of the clergy class, whose formation and the intertwining of their professional interests with religious activities have inflicted severe damage on religious life.

The clergy's effort to exclusively understand, interpret, and defend religion, their reliance on religious endeavors for their livelihood, and their specific assumptions have gradually sanctified this class. Some clergy have equated the entirety of the clergy or their understanding with religion itself, elevating this class above all others in society (Motahhari, 1993, p 314). Such interactions have led the clergy to restrict the understanding, interpretation, and defense of religion solely to their class, preventing non-clerical scholars from entering this field. This has sanctified the clergy, granting them exclusive rights to officially interpret religion and rejecting most interpretations by non-clerical intellectuals (Soroush, 1997, p 25-26).

Consequently, the clergy, with these considerations, typically do not listen to other voices or open up to non-clerical approaches. From their perspective, any differing opinion either opposes their understanding of religion and thus the religion itself, or it contradicts their professional interests. Therefore, the clergy often show a cold reception to critiques of their theological system, especially when these critiques come from non-clerical scholars or ordinary people. The main tool used by some clergy against such critical approaches is to instill the notion that their opponents' views are either insignificant due to their lack of religious expertise, or expressed out of ignorance by ordinary people. Most clergy believe that only they have the right to understand, interpret, and defend religion, naturally closing the door to critical approaches toward their religious understanding. Furthermore, the increasing prominence of jurisprudential aspects in religious societies and the emphasis on imitative religiosity over doctrinal beliefs have both reinforced the professional interests and the status of the clergy.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

The aforementioned barriers create a formidable obstacle to critiquing theological systems in religious traditions and societies. Thus, as long as these barriers exist and effectively function, there is little hope for the effective application of critical approaches to religion and theological systems unless a significant number of these barriers are removed or lose their efficacy. Consequently, the following theoretical and practical strategies are proposed to address or alter these barriers, thereby offering a clearer outlook for the future.

1. To resolve the issue of conflating religion with religiosity and religious knowledge, it is essential to expand religious discourse literature and enhance the religious awareness of believers regarding the entirety of religious teachings and beliefs. This will increase their insight and religious knowledge, enabling relatively common perceptions of religion, religious knowledge, and religious conduct. Additionally, it is necessary to further explain the hierarchical and gradational levels of doctrinal propositions and even levels of religiosity so that believers understand the importance of the hierarchical and gradational system of religious beliefs. Achieving the necessary success and creating sufficient transparency regarding religion, religious knowledge, and religiosity would be better initiated within a single religious tradition, such as the Shia, Sunnah, Catholic or Orthodox and Protestant tradition, before comparing it with other religious traditions. Moreover, it should be repeatedly conveyed to believers that, assuming the

stability of religion (i.e., considering religious texts as religion), religious knowledge and consequently religiosity are never fixed or absolute. Instead, they are continually influenced by cognitive and non-cognitive variables, leading to constant flow, change, and evolution. Accepting this reality will prevent unnecessary surprise among believers about their religious understanding and conduct, fostering openness to new perspectives on these matters.

2. The best approach to address an exclusive attitude towards religion is to acknowledge that such an attitude leads to intellectual stagnation, dead-end conversations, the cessation of critical thinking, and religious isolation. Given God's boundless mercy and widespread guidance, it is illogical to think that He has bestowed all the blessings of truth and salvation solely upon us, leaving others deprived. Instead, it is reasonable to believe that the compassionate God has granted His blessings of truth and salvation to all His servants according to their capacities and strengths, or at least made these available to them. Abandoning religious exclusivism brings about the positive outcome of openness to the truths that other religions may hold, fostering the willingness to rectify our own potential shortcomings, keeping the path of dialogue with others open, and being ready to accept any critical remarks that enhance our understanding. Recognizing the inherent limitations of our human and earthly existence leaves no room for religious exclusivity or pride but logically leads to adopting humility in religious, ethical, epistemological, and existential terms, thereby perfecting all our human virtues. Furthermore, considering one religion superior does not necessarily imply exclusivism because a religion can be deemed superior due to the absence of certain defects found in other religions and the presence of sublime teachings unique to it. Meanwhile, this religion and others, particularly divine and theistic religions, share fundamental teachings like monotheism and belief in the afterlife, linking them sequentially, longitudinally, and gradationally. Moreover, the superiority of a religion does not necessarily entail the superiority of its followers, as the development of religious knowledge and pious conduct among believers is influenced by various epistemic and non-epistemic variables, leading to diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations and the emergence of different religious sects. Thus, the logical solution is to abandon exclusivism and adopt more appropriate approaches such as inclusivism or pluralism.

3. The most suitable approach is to encourage scholars and the public to reconsider their theological framework, recognizing the foundational and

prioritized status of beliefs and ethics over religious precepts and rituals. It is essential to repeatedly reexamine the role of theology as the discipline responsible for religious beliefs and the position of ethical teachings, ensuring that people understand that adherence to religious precepts and rituals is valuable and impactful only when their belief and ethical systems are logically structured and influential. Focusing on religious texts such as the Christian Bible and the Holy Quran highlights the foundational and impactful role of doctrinal and ethical teachings over jurisprudential rules. This principle underscores the logical precedence of beliefs and ethics over jurisprudence.

4. The solution for escaping populism and transitioning from imitative to investigative religion is to promote religious study and awareness among the public. It must be repeatedly and emphatically reminded that recognizing and accepting a religion is purely an investigative and rational matter, leaving no room for blind imitation or ritualism, as the ultimate responsibility for religious salvation or misguidance lies with the individual, and no one else will bear this burden, as the Quran says: "No bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another" (the Quran, 53: 38). Additionally, rational studies of religion should be expanded, and the religious dynamics of society should be managed by both scholars and intellectuals, who should also supervise each other's performance to prevent the rise of populism. The gradual expansion of a rational approach to religion leads to a rational understanding of one's religious belief system, yielding several positive outcomes: firstly, the various aspects of the belief system and their interconnections are recognized; secondly, the extent of blind and imitative acceptance is reduced, and rational acceptance is increased; thirdly, its strengths and weaknesses are revealed; fourthly, it becomes possible to compare it with other belief systems; fifthly, the necessary will to address its shortcomings and deficiencies is generated; and sixthly, any form of fanaticism and intellectual rigidity is eradicated from the belief system, and any critical approach towards it, whether from within or from another religion, is openly welcomed and assessed.

5. Overcoming religious person-centeredness and emphasizing the core message of religions, an effective strategy to combat religious Person-centered and refocus on the core message of religions is to concentrate on the central teachings of faiths and recognize Prophets as intermediaries and messengers. The primary message of theistic religions emphasizes monotheism, belief in the afterlife, and shared ethical principles, which can

logically connect these faiths. Advocating a shift from Person-centeredness to God-centeredness and truth-centeredness fosters the formation of an ethical community of believers who can engage in peaceful dialogue and coexistence. Through empathetic and critical interfaith discussions, they can collaboratively improve and complete each other's religious belief systems. Focusing on common religious beliefs helps avoid sectarianism and exclusive religious perspectives, welcoming new intellectual horizons and critical approaches from other faiths.

6. Addressing the professionalization of religion, both theoretical and practical measures are essential. Firstly, it is natural and expected that there exists a class of scholars or clergy. However, professionalization should not lead to an exclusive understanding, interpretation, and defense of religion. Clerics must acknowledge that they are neither the sole group capable of comprehending, interpreting, and defending religion nor necessarily the best at it. They need to accept that the notion of an infallible and inherently truthful interpretation is an unattainable ideal. Continuous self-assessment is necessary to distinguish between productive assumptions and those that confine their thinking and vision (See: Forati, 2009, p 58). Moreover, understanding, interpretation, and defense of religion are not exclusive to clerics; all people, especially scholars and intellectuals, whether clerical or non-clerical, possess this capability. Secondly, recognizing that all believers' religious understandings, both clerical and non-clerical, are historically situated and hermeneutical, evolving over time (Forati, 2009, p. 55), encourages clerics to relinquish their insistence on an exclusive right to interpret religion. This acceptance grants others the same interpretative rights. Thirdly, the clergy and religious scholars require public oversight, particularly from intellectuals and thinkers, in addition to internal peer review among the clergy. Such oversight promotes direct and sincere critiques, enhancing the clergy's receptivity to criticism and contributing to their gradual improvement (Soroush 1997, p 31-32, 42). Fourthly, the professionalization of clergy and religious scholars should not entail social class separation or confer special religious status and sanctity upon them. Treating them as a distinguished and sacred class is a detrimental and identity-destroying poison. Clergy and religious scholars must recognize that they are not fundamentally different from others; hence, others also possess epistemic and ethical virtues and are equally subject to scrutiny by the public and intellectuals. Lastly, although clergy's dependence on the public and the government is a severe pitfall, financial dependence on the public and

political dependence on the government, the primary effort of the clergy should be toward individual, organizational, and professional independence from both forms of dependency. Such dependencies compromise their intellectual freedom, making those agents of the masses or political power (Soroush, 1997, p 29, 48).

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