

Decolonizing The Mind and the relevance of the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH)

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Introduction

I am deeply honored by the invitation from Astan Qods Razavi, the University of Tehran and Sharif University of Technology to address this congress that is attended by so many esteemed scholars. I am humbled by this opportunity to share my ideas about the relevance of the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH) for solving the problems of our modern world.

I want to express my gratitude for the support, discussion and feedback that I got from professor Saied Reza Ameli about the relationship between Islam, Imam Reza (PBUH) and the theoretical framework of Decolonizing The Mind, which I will deal with in this speech. Dr. Zohreh Kharazmi has been so kind to collect all the English books and documents on Imam Reza (PBUH). I thank her for her work. I want to thank brother Massoud Shadjareh and sister Arzu Merali from the Islamic Human Rights Commission in London, with whom I have worked for the past twelve years in the struggle to decolonize the world. I would not be here, if it were not for their support and our joint work. This address is based on my book Decolonizing The Mind, which has been translated in Farsi by Ebrahim Mohseni Ahooei. I want to thank him for the translation and his feedback on the text of this speech.

How to assess the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH)

The focus of this congress is: *The Civilizational Thought of Imam Reza (PBUH): Justice for Everyone, Injustice for No One*. I will take up this theme by answering the following question: What is the relevance of the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH) for solving the current problems of modern times?

I will argue that the life and thought of Imam Reza (PBUH) fit very well in the narrative of how to move beyond the current colonial system towards a new world civilization. In order to understand this argument you need a theoretical framework that enables you to analyze the colonial world civilization. If you use the theoretical frameworks that Western science has produced, you will not be able to understand the relevance of the life and thought of Imam Reza (PBUH). I will show this by looking at the Western civilization. I define a civilization as a collection of societies with economic, political, social and cultural institutions that have a common cultural base. The common cultural base is a combination of a variety of elements: language, religion, cosmology, and most important: knowledge production.

Western civilization is intrinsically linked to colonialism. Colonialism is a collection of global systems of economic, political, social and cultural institutions that the Global North has created in order to rule the world in a colonial world civilization since 1492. From 1492-1650, the cultural base was Christian theology, but after 1650 the European Enlightenment became the foundation for the colonial world civilization. Compared to other civilizations that lasted for thousands of years, Western civilization is very young (500 years) and the European Enlightenment even younger (350 years). The Islamic civilization is 1,400 years old and the Chinese civilization is 2,500 years old.

Western civilization has come to dominate the whole world through colonialism; that is why I speak of a colonial world civilization when I refer to the current civilization that we live in. It is a global civilization, in contrast to other civilizations that were regional, although the region could be quite large. Western civilization has permeated every corner of the world. Its knowledge base, its scientific base, is being taught at almost every university in the world. Whether you are in Tokyo or New York, you use the same textbooks on economics, sociology or astronomy.

The European Enlightenment has produced two major schools of thought: Liberalism and Marxism. If you use these frameworks to assess the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH), then you won't get far. Both schools use the concept of modernity. In this concept world history has moved from a low level of backwardness where knowledge is based on superstition to a high level of development, where knowledge is based on science. Rationalism (thinking with your head and not with emotions) and progress are the keywords of modernity. And progress is in contrast with backwardness.

In Liberalism, world history ends with capitalism. German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831), an intellectual giant in the European Enlightenment, argued that Europe is the pinnacle of human history, the end of history, or as Hegel puts it: "*the last stage in History, our world, our own time.*"¹ History has come to an end with the rise of European modernity. Hegel wrote this in 1830. Conservative American scholar Francis Fukuyama repeated this claim 150 years later with his book "The End of History".²

Karl Marx (1818-1883), another intellectual giant of the European Enlightenment, also used the concept of the end of history, but then capitalism is not the end of history. It is communism.

If you use these frameworks to assess the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH), then the only conclusion is that his thought is irrelevant and belongs to a backward history. The only valid way of thinking is based on modernity.

If you use decolonial theory, you are in a better position to understand the importance of the lessons from the life and thought of Imam Reza for solving the problems of the world today. Decolonial theory is a critique of the European Enlightenment and its concept of modernity.

The critique of modernity: decolonial theory

In the past few decades scholars from the Global South began to challenge the notion of modernity with the concept of decolonization. There is another side to modernity, they argue. Modernity is seen by the European Enlightenment as something good, because it represents (European) progress and rationalism. The other side of modernity is the brutal colonial oppression and exploitation of the colonized world. Colonialism began with the most horrific genocide in human history: the enslavement and extinction of the indigenous people of Abya Yala, the term for the Americas, that the indigenous people use. The population of Abya Yala around 1492 is estimated to have been between 75 and 145 million. Within a few generations following their first encounters with Europeans, the vast majority of the indigenous population had been exterminated. On average, for every twenty people alive at the moment of European contact, only one stood in their place when the bloodbath was over.¹

The Abya Yala Holocaust was followed by another unimaginable crime against humanity: the European trans-Atlantic enslavement of Africans. The foundations of the current world economy (production, transportation, finance, consumption) was based on this crime. The systematic kidnapping of Africans over several centuries and enslaving them to work under brutal circumstances in Abya Yala took a huge toll on human lives. It led to a disaster in Africa. Africa lost a massive part of her young and industrious population as the result of massive kidnapping. Hundreds of millions of lives were destroyed by this system (slavery is destruction of life). Africa has suffered from other crimes of European

¹ Hegel, G. (2001), p. 462.

² Fukuyama, F. (1992).

colonial powers, notably the Holocaust in the Congo where the Belgians killed 10 million Africans and forced others to work as slaves on the rubber plantations.

The list goes on and the conclusion is: there is another side of modernity that is not progress, but a decline of humanity into barbarism. It is fundamentally a system of injustice. The other side of modernity is intimately connected with knowledge production and science, that justified this injustice.

Decolonial theorists argue that decolonization is not only linked to political and economic independence of former colonies. There is another dimension that has been overlooked, but plays a crucial role today: the cultural dimension of colonialism. They offer a critique of Eurocentric scientific knowledge. They take issue with the notion that Eurocentric knowledge is universal knowledge.

Within decolonial theory there is a specific theoretical framework, which I adhere to. It is the school of Decolonizing The Mind (DTM). I developed this framework in my book titled *Decolonizing The Mind*.

There are three dimensions in DTM:

1. The critique of Eurocentric knowledge production. I offer a fundamental critique of individual disciplines, including mathematics and natural sciences.
2. The development of an alternative comprehensive, coherent and integral knowledge production. DTM goes deep into the knowledge that was produced in civilizations from the Global South (Chinese philosophy, Hinduism, Islam, Indigenous philosophies, etc.) and looks for useful concepts that can be integrated in a trajectory to decolonize the disciplines and reconstruct new knowledge per discipline.
3. The translation of this new knowledge into viable policies to build a new pluriversal world civilization. DTM tackles the problem of power. For example: how to reconstruct a new economic order? What are the practical implications of this reconstruction? What kind of economic institutions are needed and how will they be built? How do we organize to transcend from the colonial world civilization to a new world civilization?

With DTM we now have a tool to assess the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH). We ask ourselves the questions:

1. What kind of critique does the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH) offer to Eurocentrism?
2. What are his alternatives for this critique?
3. How does his alternative translate into practical policies in the world of today?

In order to answer these questions, we need an additional tool from DTM: epistemology - the theory of knowledge. If we look at the life and works of Imam Reza (PBUH) from a factual point of view, we get a narrative about historical events. We cannot properly evaluate these events, because we just have the facts about what he did and said 1,200 years ago. For an evaluation, we need a theoretical point of view. We take his actions and ideas and then pose the question: what concept is behind the action or thought that is still relevant today?

DTM epistemology differs from Eurocentric epistemology. The Eurocentric view (both the Liberal and Marxist one) is that the purpose of knowledge production is the search for truth about the natural and social world. It tries to understand and explain the natural and social world. In DTM epistemology, it is not only about seeking the truth, but it is also about producing lies. In DTM, the notion of lies is inherent to Eurocentric epistemology. Colonialism has introduced mental slavery, the colonization of the mind, in its civilization.

DTM epistemology has a specific method in detecting lies. The method is conceptual thinking. A concept is an idea that describes and explains certain aspects of the social and natural world. Knowledge is contained in concepts. The concept is the basic unit of knowledge. A concept consists of five elements: terminology (a term is a linguistic expression of a concept), observation (a collection of facts about the object of knowledge production), analysis (a framing and a storyline with a certain logic that makes us understand reality), theory (a collection of interrelated concepts that provides a bigger picture of the natural and social reality) and ethics (knowledge is not only about true or false, but also about right and wrong). DTM analyses the colonization of the mind on the

level of epistemology by showing how these five elements are used to manipulate our view of reality.

I will elucidate this with the following example: how to view the voyage of Christopher Columbus. There are two views: the Eurocentric view and the decolonial view. The Eurocentric view uses the term "discovery of the Americas". The decolonial view uses the term "the brutal occupation of Abya Yala". The Eurocentric view limits the observations to facts about Columbus trying to discover a new route to Asia. The decolonial view includes the facts about the genocide that he initiated in Abya Yala. The Eurocentric view has an analysis of how a new world was discovered by Columbus. The decolonial view has an analysis of how an old world was destroyed by genocide. The Eurocentric view uses the theory of the rise of modernity, to position the voyage of Columbus. The decolonial view uses the theory of the decline of humanity because of colonialism to position the voyage of Columbus. The ethics of the Eurocentric view has led to the erection of 600 statues to celebrate the life and works of Columbus. The ethics of the decolonial view leads to the denunciation of Columbus and the destruction of those statues.

With these five elements of a concept we can see how lies are constructed and knowledge has been colonized.

With the three dimensions of DTM and DTM epistemology we can now properly assess the relevance of the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH). This makes our work easier if we understand the context of how to look at Islam in modern times. Ayatollah Khomeini (PBUH) proclaims that *"Islam is a religion of those who struggle for truth and justice, of those who clamour for liberty and independence. It is the school of those who fight against colonialism."*² There is an Islam that addresses the problems of the world today from a decolonial point of view.

I will focus on the following topics from the life and works of Imam Reza (PBUH):

1. The relationship between religion and science.
2. The concept of racism.
3. The concept of social and economic justice.
4. The political theory of Imam Reza (PBUH).

I will conclude with an assessment of the relevance of Imam Reza (PBUH) for the transition towards a new world civilization.

1. The relationship between religion and science

The Eurocentric view

In Islam there is no conflict between science and religion. So for Imam Reza (PBUH) science is not separate from religion. But in Europe the Enlightenment came in conflict with Christian theology. That conflict had a big impact on the knowledge production in Europe and the world. The Enlightenment extended that conflict to other theological traditions, including Islam.

Colonialism changed the world in a dramatic way. The occupation of Abya Yala, the growth of the mining industry (gold, silver) and the rise of the plantation economy led to the rise of a world economic system. After the genocide of the indigenous people of Abya Yala, Europeans set up a massive system of kidnapping Africans and enslavement from West Africa to be transported to Abya Yala. There millions of black people were forced to work for free for white plantation owners. The produce of their labor (sugar, coffee, cacao) went to Europe where European capitalists set up factories to process these products. This required a global infrastructure of railways, roads and harbors and a global financial infrastructure of banks and insurance companies. This is all based on the rise of new branches of industry and the rise of technology and science.

Christian theologians did not know how to handle the rise of science independent on the Bible. The Bible was seen as the only valid source of knowledge. A typical example is the work of the Irish archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656). On the basis of the biographies of the different individuals mentioned in the Bible he constructed a genealogy from Adam and Eve to the birth of Christ. In the Bible individuals could live for several hundred

years. Ussher concluded that God created the universe (including life) on Sunday October 23, 4004 BCE at 6 PM. Thus the Bible became part of astronomy. The Bible holds that the sun orbits around planet earth. For astronomers this was unacceptable, because it goes against all empirical observations. Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) formulated a model of the universe that placed the Sun rather than Earth at its center. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), a Dominican friar, adhered to the astronomical model of Copernicus. He was declared a heretic by the church and was burned alive. Later, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), declared his support for the Copernican model. But he recanted his position and escaped execution. Instead, he was sentenced to life in prison.

In order for science to survive, it had to take on Christianity on different levels. On the political level the Enlightenment argued for a separation of state from church. On the level of epistemology it argued for the separation of ethics from knowledge. In many civilizations knowledge was both about true and false and about right and wrong. The question: is the moon round or a square is about true or false. The question "Can you maximize the profit of your enterprise?" is presented in Western economic theory as a question about true or false, but in reality it is about right or wrong. In his book *Our Economics* Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr (1935-1980)³ from Iraq says that what Eurocentric economists call "maximum profit", Muslims call "greed". Greed is an ethical category. The separation of ethics from knowledge in the European Enlightenment occurred in six steps.⁴

French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) starts with the proposition that the mind can create valid knowledge independent of the Bible. There is another source of knowledge besides the Bible: reasoning. Descartes says that we observe reality with our senses. Our senses can deceive us. We can mistake a snake for a rope. How do we know that our senses are giving us correct information and that we are not living in a dream all the time? He starts with doubting everything. Everything that was taken for granted, is now uncertain, even his own existence. He concludes this process of doubting as follows: *"While I was trying to think of all things being false in this way, it was necessarily the case that I, who was thinking them, had to be something; and observing this truth: I am thinking therefore I exist."* Now he had established that valid knowledge can be derived by reasoning. He didn't have to rely on the Bible. That was the first step.

English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) came with the second step. Apart from reasoning, there is observation as a source of knowledge. Knowledge is derived from experience and not from religious texts.

The third step is made by German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He says that something more is needed than observation and reasoning to produce new knowledge: analysis and theory. If I turn an open bottle with water upside down, I observe that the water falls down. If I do it for the tenth time and the water keeps falling down, then with reasoning I can argue that the water will fall down on the eleventh time. When I observe the eleventh time, that the water indeed falls down, then I can conclude that my reasoning was correct. But according to Kant, you still have incomplete knowledge, because you cannot explain why the water falls down. For an explanation, you need a theory, in this case the theory of gravity, that explains why water falls down because of the force of gravity.

Another German philosopher, Georg Hegel (1770-1831), came with the fourth step. His famous quote "All that is rational is real, and all that is real is rational" should be understood as follows. If a theory (the rational) provides a correct explanation of reality (the real), then reality can be predicted by the theory. If the theory of gravity is correct, then it can predict that in a situation of weightlessness water might not fall down but go up.

French sociologist August Comte (1798-1857) came with the fifth step: the notion of scientific knowledge as the highest stage in the development of the human intellect. Comte distinguishes between three stages in the development of human knowledge. In the theological state, the human mind explains natural and social phenomena by the immediate action of supernatural beings (God, spirits). In the metaphysical state, which is only a modification of the first, the mind explains natural and social phenomena with abstract concepts, such as Karma in Hinduism. It is not a deity. It is an abstract concept

to explain events that have happened. The third and highest stage of knowledge is scientific knowledge based on observation, reasoning, theory and validation. This is the positivist stage that produces objective knowledge. In order to be truly objective, science should remove every link with religion. Religion is subjective. Objective science, that is disconnected with religion in every way, became secular. As science became secular, ethics was removed from science. Science is only about true or false and not about right or wrong.

The sixth step is codified in many textbooks on scientific methods. It is the application of positivism to both the natural and the social world. The same methods of the natural sciences (observation, reasoning, theory and validation) are used in both branches of science. So ethics has been removed also from social sciences.

The intellectual climate in which Imam Reza (PBUH) lived

In the time of Imam Reza (PBUH) it was possible to develop mathematics and the hard sciences in concordance with theology. The connection between ethics and science promoted science, while in the West science had to develop in opposition to theology and thus it was necessary to separate ethics from science.

In his study of the Life of Imam Reza (PBUH), Sharif al-Qurashi describes the intellectual environment in which Imam Reza (PBUH) lived. *"The time of Imam al-Ridha', peace be on him, was called the Golden Time,"* he writes. *"It was the most brilliant and wonderful of all the times in Islamic history. That is because building prospered; agriculture developed; the Islamic state dominated most regions of the world as well as Baghdad became the capital of Islamic world; rather the capital of the world, for it was the greatest city to which scholars and diplomats from everywhere in the world came in order to obtain an office in the state or to present the needs of their countries in the fields of administration, economy, and science."*⁵

Science flourished, not in opposition to theology, but in concordance with it. The Abba'sid government established institutes and libraries in Baghdad, where Islamic and non-Islamic sciences were studied. It is important to stress al-Qurashi mentions that non-Islamic sciences were also studied. This means that in that Islamic intellectual environment there was a great tolerance regarding intellectual studies and discussions. The promotion of research and study was institutionalized. There was a deliberate policy by successive rulers to collect books from all over the world. al-Qurashi writes: *"Ha'ru'n al-Rashid brought to it his personal library and added to it the books which were collected by his father al-Mahdi and his grandfather al-Mansu'r. Then al-Ma'mu'n asked the Emir of Siqliya for some philosophical and scientific books. He added these books to the Depository of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma) after he had received them as well as he brought to it many books from Khurasa'n. Wherever he heard of a book, he brought the book to it... When al-Ma'mu'n made peace with the leader of the Island, he asked him to send him the books which were collected by the Greeks in a house and which none came to know except them. So the leader of the Island gathered his retainues and men of opinion and counseled with them about carrying the books to al-Ma'mu'n."*⁶

An important part of the scientific culture was the policy of translating books from foreign languages into Arabic. There were books on hard sciences such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, architecture and civil engineering. There were also books on social sciences that included grammar, philosophical and political sciences. So it was not limited to Islamic theology.

Baghdad was only one of the many cities of knowledge in the Abba'sid empire. Other centers were Yathrib (Medina), Ku'fa, and Basra.

The view of Imam Reza (PBUH) on knowledge

In contrast to Europe, science in an Islamic society develop in concordance with theology, not in competition with it. Seeking knowledge is obligatory for every male and female Muslim. The first word in the Quran is "Iqra"("Read"). Studying and acquiring knowledge is an obligation for Muslims.

Imam Reza (PBUH) explains the importance of reason in acquiring knowledge. Reason, he argues, is the best favor which Allah has given to man and through which He

distinguished him from grazing animals. He says: *"Everyone's friend is his reason; his enemy is his ignorance."*⁷

He goes on: *"Reason is a free gift from Allah, and politeness is acquisition. He who undertakes politeness has power over it. He who undertakes reason increases (himself) through that."*⁸

Mohammad Hakimi, who published the selected sayings by Imam Reza (PBUH), explains the quotes: *"According to the above-cited hadith from Imām Rezā (a.s.), the dearest part and the most significant essence in human beings is wisdom and reason. Although every aspect of the creation of man is great and wonderful, God honors the wisdom He has bestowed upon man, and considers it the most valuable gem He has granted mankind. To take advantage of this unique jewel, one must apply reason before he takes any action or starts an individual or social movement... Instincts will drive man to an animal life while wisdom supervises and controls man's instincts and tendencies, preventing the passions from turning into transgression and becoming destructive. It is human wisdom that guarantees the proper and balanced usage of instincts and desires. The uncontrolled desires and animal instincts lead to the material and spiritual degradation and corruption of mankind, but wisdom makes everything in man work in a proper way. Hence, wisdom is one's true friend."*

In another saying about knowledge, Imam Reza (PBUH) states: *"Knowledge unites its men more than family relations do."*⁹ Hakimi explains how to interpret this saying: *"Human relations in a small society, like the family, and big societies, like cities and countries, must be accompanied by the recognition of people and their human values and dignity as well as their rights and responsibilities... The conscious unity of people and the harmonizing and perfectionist movements in society depend on knowledge and awareness. It is knowledge and insight that can gather people correctly together and lead them to their objectives."*¹⁰

Knowledge is power. That proposition is corroborated by the following saying of Imam Reza (PBUH): *"Kings are commanders of people and knowledge is commander of the kings."*¹¹

Imam Reza (PBUH) reiterates the importance of knowledge in this quote: *"(A believer) does not get tired of acquiring knowledge throughout his life."* Seeking knowledge is a lifelong process. It does not stop with the formal education in schools and universities. According to Imam Reza (PBUH) society can be divided into three groups: a) the learned, b) the students and knowledge-seekers, and c) the ignorant, who don't make any attempt to acquire knowledge and cognition, who have no relation with scholars and who do not study at all. He says: *"Be either an educated person or a student, and don't be a third type because you will be ruined."*¹²

Imam Reza (PBUH) takes the discussion on the relationship between theology and knowledge to another level when he says: *"Wisdom is the believer's lost belonging. So, seek it even if it is with the polytheist; because you are more deserving and competent for it."*¹³ There is also wisdom outside of Islamic theology. In the era of colonialism Christian theology had difficulties in acknowledging that there is also wisdom outside of Christian theology. But Imam Reza (PBUH) had no problem in acknowledging that even polytheists can have wisdom that is worthwhile for seeking it.

The relevance of Imam Reza (PBUH) view on knowledge

In order to understand the relevance of the view of Imam Reza (PBUH) on knowledge for our times, it is important to understand the implications of the separation of ethics from knowledge, that the European Enlightenment has tried to achieve. The central proposition of Eurocentrism is that scientific knowledge is only about true and false, not about right and wrong. If you adhere to this proposition, where do you leave ethics? The answer is simple: you deny its relevance, hide it away or turn it upside down. For example, in economic theory you hide the ethical value of greed and present greed as an objective category: profit maximization. Once you do this, it opens the door to hiding injustice and presenting injustice as a fait accompli, a fact that you have to accept as something natural.

We live in a world full of injustice. That injustice is justified by Eurocentric knowledge production. By stressing the need to combine knowledge with ethics, Imam Reza offers an alternative to a Eurocentric knowledge system that continuously justifies oppression, exploitation and dehumanization.

2. The concept of racism

DTM theory of racism

In DTM I define racism as a global system of economic, political, social and cultural institutions that organize the relationship between human beings on the basis of superiority and inferiority. The defining characteristic is not biological race and not even ethnic groups, but the organization of relationships between human beings on the basis of superiority and inferiority. The principle of this organization can be race or ethnic group, but colonialism started with religion as the organizing principle. Although the term racism contains "race" as the core concept, the system should not be limited to race. It is about superiority/inferiority that can be linked to race, but is not limited to race.

Racism has not always existed in the history of mankind, nor will it remain forever. Before Western colonialism, people were oppressed, exploited and dehumanized in brutal ways. Their oppressors and rulers have regarded and treated them as inferior people. The differences between these forms of racism and the racism that has been established by Western colonialism are in economic, political, social and cultural institutions that perpetrates racism and an elaborate system of knowledge production that justifies it.

With colonialism, racism became a worldwide phenomenon and was institutionalized in economics, political structures, social relations and cultural institutions on a global scale. While other systems of oppression, exploitation and dehumanization were regional or local, Western colonialism brought this to a global scale. This means that even in countries where there are no or hardly any people of color - like Japan - ideas about inferiority of people of colour can still exist because of the global impact of colonialism.

Another difference is the fact that racism became an integral part of knowledge production. The concept of superiority/inferiority was and is used to justify the colonial world system. It also created and institutionalized the mechanisms of the colonization of the mind. Three concepts of racism have been developed in colonialism.

The first concept is theological racism. Superiority and inferiority are argued from theology. The prominent example of theological racism is the debate in 1550 in the Spanish university city of Valladolid between two Christian theologians: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494-1573) and Bartholomé de Las Casas (1484-1566). The king of Spain asked their advice on the following question: *"Is it lawful for the King of Spain to wage war on the Indians, before preaching the faith to them, in order to subject them to his rule, so that afterward they may be more easily instructed in the faith?"* The debate invoke arguments about the superiority of Christians and the inferiority of the people of Abya Yala. Colonialism and exploitation was argued from Christian theology. This is reflected in the work of Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1492–1584), who participated as a soldier in the invasion of Mexico under Hernán Cortés and wrote an account of the events. He said: *"We came here to serve God and the king, and also to get rich"*.¹⁴

The second concept is biological racism. Superiority and inferiority are argued from philosophy and the natural sciences. This coincides with the rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The most prominent philosophers and scientists from the European Enlightenment were hardcore racist. I give a few quotes about their views on black Africans.¹⁵ Even Hitler would be ashamed if he would have read them.

Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755): *"Those concerned are black from head to toe, and they have such flat noses that it is almost impossible to feel sorry for them."*

Voltaire (1694-1778): *"Their round eyes, their flattened nose, their lips which are always large, their differently shaped ears, the wool of their head, that very measure of their intelligence, place prodigious differences between them and the other species of men."*

David Hume (1711-1776): *"I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites."*

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): *"The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous."*

Georg Hegel (1770-1831): *"The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state."*

Charles Darwin (1809-1882): *"At some future period the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla."*

The third concept is cultural racism. Superiority and inferiority are argued from the social sciences. All human beings may be equal biologically, but not all cultures are equal. Everything develops from a lower and simple phase to a higher and more complex phase, like Darwin's concept of lower and higher life forms. Western society represents the higher and most complex phase of human civilization and culture.

Racism was embedded in the different disciplines of knowledge production of the European Enlightenment.

The view of Imam Reza (PBUH) on racism

The concept of superiority/inferiority is absent in the life and works of Imam Reza (PBUH). He stresses the equality and dignity of all human beings, Muslims and non-Muslims. This is illustrated in the following story by Zakariya Bin Adam, one of the pupils of the Imām. He recounts: *"I asked Imām Rezā (a.s.): 'A non-Muslim living in the Islamic community who had been stricken by hunger and poverty, brought his son to me and said, 'This is yours; feed him and he will be your slave.'"' Imām Rezā (a.s.) said: 'A free man cannot be traded. You are not expected to do so, nor are the non-Muslims.'"*¹⁶

In the stories about Imam Reza (PBUH) there is a tale about Imam Ali (PBUH) who reflects the same value that Imam Reza (PBUH) employs. The story goes as follows: *"A blind old man passed begging.*

Imam Ali (a.s.) asked: 'Who is he?'

They said: 'O Commander of the Faithful, he is a Christian.'

The Imam said: 'You exploited him until he got old and now you give him nothing.

*Support him from the Islamic treasury.'"*¹⁷

These statements show the value of human life for Imam Reza (PBUH) irrespective of religion, race or culture. That is in sharp contrast with the European civilization where racism is still rampant today.

Although Imam Reza (PBUH) regards Islam as the right way to move forward for humanity, he never regarded non-Muslims as inferior and always wanted them to be treated with dignity and respect. Here are some other examples to illustrate this.

Yaser, a servant of the Imam's recounts: *"A letter was sent from Neyshaboor to Al-Ma'mūn, informing him that a Zoroastrian had willed before his death a great wealth to poor people. The judge of Neyshaboor distributed that money among the poor Muslims.*

Ma'mun asked the Imam, 'My master, what do you say about this?' The Imam said:

*'Surely non-Muslims might not donate to poor Muslims. Write to the judge and order him to take the same amount from the Islamic treasury and donate it to poor Zoroastrians.'"*¹⁸

Rayyan Ibn Shabib tells the following story: *"I asked Imām Rezā (a.s.), 'My sister willed something to the Christians and I want to give it to some of our Muslim friends.' The Imām said: 'Perform the will the way it is, for God the Almighty says 'Its sin is on those who change the will.'"*¹⁹

The respect for non-Muslims goes very far in the thought of Imam Reza (PBUH). At all times respect for one's parent should not be subjected to religious consideration, even if your parents are non-Muslims.

Moammare Ibn Khallad recounts: *"I asked Imām Rezā (a.s.) 'Should I pray for my parents even if they do not know the truth (God or the right path)?' The Imām said, 'Pray*

*for them and give alms on their behalf, and if they are alive while they don't know the truth, treat them kindly. The holy prophet (s.a.) has said, 'God has chosen me as prophet of mercy, not of torment and cruelty... 'It is obligatory to do good to one's parents even if they are polytheists, but they should not be obeyed in committing sins.'"*²⁰

Imam Reza (PBUH) was comfortable with what today might be called interfaith dialogue. This is illustrated by the story about al-Ma'mu'n ordering all his governors in Islamic world to summon the great religious scholars from different faiths and scholars who were experienced in different kinds of science, to go to Khurasan in order to question the Imam about the most difficult scientific and religious matters. Imam Reza (PBUH) wholeheartedly engaged in these conversations.

The relevance of this way of thinking is huge for today. We live in a colonial world civilization in which Eurocentrism treats differences in culture in terms of superiority and inferiority. Imam Reza (PBUH) shows that you can strongly believe in your own convictions and the idea that your religion shows the best way for humanity to move forward, yet you can still do this in a respectful way towards others who hold different beliefs. This attitude and conviction of respectful and dignified conversation between people from different ideological backgrounds will be a foundation for a trajectory to build a new world civilization that transcends the old colonial world civilization.

3. The concept of social and economic justice

The views of the European Enlightenment

Colonialism is a system that is inherently unjust. It is based on theft and occupation of land that belonged to other people. It committed genocides. It enslaved hundreds of millions of people. It is based on exploitation, oppression and the violation of basic human rights. The Liberal school of the European Enlightenment justified injustice with so called objective theories about social development.

The Marxist school developed a critique of injustice, not from a moral perspective, but from an "objective scientific" perspective. A central concept is the labor theory of value, which states that the value of a commodity is based on the average number of labor hours required to produce it. Surplus value is the difference between the value that the ruling class gets from the commodity and the value that the laborer receives. Surplus value is the basis for class societies. Capitalism is the latest stage in the history of humankind. In this mode of production surplus value is appropriated from wage labor through the market mechanism and private ownership of the means of production. Capitalism will be brought down by a socialist revolution. Markets and private ownership of the means of production will be replaced by nationalization of the means of production and the institution of a planned economy. Parliamentary democracy is replaced by a system of representation by workers and peasants. The social system moves to a classless society. Culture is based on rationalism and scientific knowledge. Although the fall of the Soviet Union has discredited Marxism as a theory of liberation, it still has an important influence in social movements in the Global South.

The view of Imam Reza (PBUH) on social and economic injustice

In Islamic economic theory the problem is not markets or private ownership of the means of production, like in Marxism, nor is the problem an efficient way of organizing scarce resources for production and distribution of goods and services. The problem in Islam is ethics. The purpose of any economic system is to support people in achieving a state of welfare and security through moral means.

Imam Reza (PBUH) says: *"Poverty is the key to misery and misfortune... Whenever the world (i.e. wealth and fortune) smiles on someone, it gives him the virtues of others. And whenever it turns its back to him (i.e. he becomes poor), it will rob him of his own virtues."*²¹ Poverty is the root of social problems. Poverty is the cause of mental stress, diseases, the loss of dignity and humanity. The main purpose of an economic system is to provide a decent standard of living for its population. That is the central core of the economic theory of Imam Reza (PBUH).

According to Mohammad Hakimi, The Holy Prophet (PBUHAHF) considers poverty "*worse than murder*". Imām Ali (PBUH) calls it "*the grave death*".²²

These views on economics and poverty are very relevant today. Fighting poverty is not only about increasing the income of the people. It is about creating conditions for a dignified life. We can see this on how the life of people in China was transformed when people are uplifted from poverty.

The establishment of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949 led to immediate gains for the people: dramatic increases in literacy and life expectancy. But disastrous Marxist economic policies during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) led to the death of 16.5 million people. Another disastrous policy was undertaken during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) which caused the death of 20 million people.

And then came Deng Xiaoping as the leader of the Communist Party of China (CPC). He tackled the theoretical question of Marxism. He used a Marxist category ("production forces") to argue that these forces (technology, natural resources) can be developed with private capitalists under the leadership of the Communist Party. Thus, you get an important segment of the population (creative entrepreneurs) involved in building the economy. He was pragmatic. He did not care about what this meant for the Marxist labor theory of value. He cared about what this meant for fighting poverty.

I will elaborate on what it means when a society is lifted out of poverty, as should be the aim of any society as Imam Reza (PBUH) argues. The case of China gives a vivid illustration of what this means.

In 2022, the World Bank acknowledged that China had lifted 800 million people out of extreme poverty. No country in the history of humanity has ever recorded such an achievement. These statistics reveal a completely new world for the average Chinese citizen. Poverty comes with hunger and diseases. Poverty alleviation means that their living environment has changed dramatically. The difference between urban and rural areas is decreasing. Housing programs enable people to build and rent or own homes. People in the rural areas, who once lived in dilapidated mud-and-straw cottages, now live in decent houses. They have decent clothes. They have access to safe drinking water, garbage disposal, and sewage treatment. Water infrastructure enables irrigation in rural areas. Soil and water conservation are part of a strategy of eco-environmental conservation. They have access to medical services (medicines, doctors and hospitals), elderly care and social assistance. There is a system of social security that enables people, who are in dire need, to get help. Old people now receive a pension. Public services have been improved significantly. All school age, rural children receive kindergarten and elementary education within their own villages. Electricity makes it possible to have light, refrigerators, and other consumer goods (television, internet access, mobile phones and computers). Villages with electricity can develop their economic base. This base is enforced with the building of new roads (including highways) and railways. People can now move to find work or establish enterprises and earn money with various economic activities and opportunities. Government credits for startups have a greater tolerance for non-performing loans in severely impoverished areas. The Chinese program of poverty alleviation has strengthened the traditional cultures of different ethnic groups. New cultural centers are established that protect and promote traditional culture, folk culture and fine craftsmanship which opens up tourism. Another cultural effect is that the mindset changes when people are climbing out of poverty. They are more confident and self-assured. They strive for excellence and hard work. They value material progress; they don't take it for granted. They are more involved in decision making processes in their own communities. The Chinese programs have targeted specific groups for additional assistance: women, children, the elderly, and the disabled.

The Chinese do not refer to Imam Reza (PBUH) when they talk about fighting poverty. They have their own views. But their experience shows the relevance of the view of Imam Reza (PBUH) on the purpose of an economic system, namely fighting poverty. It shows what fighting poverty can mean for the daily lives of the people: it is fighting injustice.

In addition to his view on the economic system as a system of justice by lifting out of poverty, Imam Reza (PBUH) also point out how injustice works. He says: *"I did not circulate the wealth among the rich."*²³ An economic system that only benefits the wealthy people is an unjust economic system. Today we live in a world where many countries have set up economic systems that only benefit the richest segment of society. This is incompatible with Islamic economic theory that is based on a fair distribution of wealth. The concept of fairness in economics goes back to Imam Ali (PBUH), who introduced the concept of a fair price. In a letter to Mālek al-Ashtar he emphasizes the principle of limiting the profit in economic transactions: *"The transaction must be easy and comfortable and must be based on justice. The price must be in such a way that neither the buyer nor the seller is extorted."*²⁴

Imam Reza (PBUH) uses this concept when he says about a trader: *"He can charge as much as he needs for his daily bread; or when he buys something to sell, he can charge a small benefit."*²⁵

Another element of a just economic system is the need for an efficient and effective use of scarce resources. It is not an aim in itself, like in Liberalism, but it is a way to ensure that society benefits from such a policy. Imam Reza (PBUH) says: *"Surely, God hates [people's] wasting property."*²⁶ Excessive consumption is a form of unjust distribution of resources. If resources are used in a wasteful manner, this means that they are not available for improving the welfare of the people.

Imam Reza (PBUH) also held views on a just labour market. The labour market is just, when it puts the interest of the worker to the fore. The following story by Suleiman Ja'fari, illustrates his views: *"I went to the presence of Imam Ridā (A.S.) for a task and with His Holiness we set off until we entered a house. The servants were busy doing their work. Among them was a black-faced man who was not a servant of the Imam (A.S.).*

The Imam (A.S.) asked: 'Who is this man?'

The others answered: He helps us and at the end, we will pay him.'

The Imam (A.S.) said: 'Have you determined his wage?'

They said: 'No, but whatever we give him, he is satisfied.'

The Imam (A.S.) became agitated and stated: 'Did not I warn you not to employ anybody without determining his wage?'

*Then His Holiness turned to me and said: 'If someone employed a person before assigning his wage and then three times of his wage is given to him, he would become distrustful and assumed his right has not been duly given. However, if his wage is determined and is paid that amount, he would thank you. And if you pay higher than the determined amount, he would get happy.'*²⁷

4. The political theory of Imam Reza (PBUH).

The Enlightenment on the separation of church and state

The struggle between Christian theology and the European Enlightenment was extended to political theory. In philosophy the Enlightenment brought a separation of ethics from knowledge. In political theory they brought a separation of church and state.

John Locke (1632-1704), a philosopher of the English Enlightenment, laid the foundation for the concept of the separation of church and state. He used the argument of tolerance of the state versus religious fanaticism: *"And the zealots hardly have patience to refrain from violence and rapine, so long till the cause be heard, and the poor man be, according to form, condemned to the loss of liberty, goods or life. Oh that our ecclesiastical orators, of every sect, would apply themselves, with all the strength of argument that they are able, to the confounding of men's errors! But let them spare their persons. Let them not supply their want of reasons with the instruments of force, which belong to another jurisdiction, and do ill become a churchman's hands. Let them not call in the magistrate's authority to the aid of their eloquence, or learning; lest perhaps, whilst they pretend only love for the truth, this their intemperate zeal, breathing nothing but fire and sword, betray their ambition, and show that what they desire is temporal dominion."*

In order to prevent religious fanatics from using the state apparatus to enforce their views on others (see the cases of Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei), there must be a separation of church and state.

The views of Imam Reza (PBUH) on politics

What is the purpose of a political system? Imam Reza (PBUH) had a clear idea as the following conversation between him and Al-Ma'mun shows. One day Al-Ma'mun shows the Imam a letter about the conquest of several villages of Kabūl by the Muslim army. The following conversation ensued:

"The Imām said: 'Has it made you happy that you have conquered some villages?'

Al-Ma'mūn asked, 'Isn't it something to be happy for?'

The Imām addressed him saying: 'Fear God about Muhammadan community (Islamic society) and the rule you have over them, as you are spoiling the affairs of Muslims and have granted the responsibility to those who rule not according to God's decree. You have stayed in this city leaving the house of migration (Medina) and revelation (Mecca). In your absence, people are being oppressed and no one cares about a believer's oath and promise. The oppressed are having a hard time, not having anything to live on, nor finding anyone to complain to. ... Don't you know that the ruler of Muslims should be like the axis of a tent within the reach of anyone who needs him?'"²⁸

According to Imam Reza (PBUH) the purpose of a political system is not just to have a state administration. The purpose is to provide the people justice, welfare, happiness and freedom. These are ethical categories. If a Muslim state oppresses people, it does not rule according to God's decree.

A lot has been written about the most captivating episode of the life of Imam Reza (PBUH): the proposal by Al-Ma'mun to hand over the caliphate to the Imam. Al-Ma'mun (786-833) came to power in 813, after defeating his brother in a civil war. In 817 he offered the caliphate to Imam Reza (PBUH). The Imam refused. Only after threatening to kill him, the Imam accepted the offer under the following conditions:

- A. He would not command; nor would he prohibit.
- B. He would not remove any person from his office.
- C. He would not appoint any person in any of the state offices.

Al-Ma'mun hoped to corrupt the Imam. When this failed, he killed him by poisoning in 818.

Others have gone in more detail into the motives of Al-Ma'mun to make this offer.²⁹ I will deal with the concept behind the initial refusal and later the limited acceptance of the offer by Imam Reza (PBUH) and what it means for political theory.

As I explained above, the policy of the Imam was based on the concept that every state should have an ethical basis. That is in contrast to the European Enlightenment that sees a secular state without a specific ethical foundation as the best state. The state administration of Al-Ma'mun was a corrupt state. Sharif al-Qurashi describes the corruption.

When he married lady Boura'n, Al-Ma'mun gave his wife one million dinars as a dowry. The value of a dinar was equal to a camel. Al-Hasan b. Sahl, the father of lady Boura'n, stipulated that al-Ma'mu'n should marry his daughter in his village situated at Fam al-Sulh. Al-Ma'mun traveled to the village and spent one million dinars on the soldiers who were with him. He took with him thirty thousand young boys and seven hundred slave-girls. As for the soldiers who were with him, they were four hundred thousand horsemen and three hundred thousand infantry soldiers. As for al-Hasan b. Sahl, he slaughtered thirty thousand sheep, a similar number of chicken, four hundred cows, and four hundred camels. The expenditures of al-Ma'mu'n on this marriage were thirty-eight million dinars. The father of the bride got ten millions dirhams from the land taxes of Fars and the lands of al-Sulh.³⁰

Taking responsibility for a state administration that is so corrupt, would have led to the corruption of the Imam himself. A corrupt state loses its legitimacy.

The ascetic lifestyle of the Imam was very different from that of Al-Ma'mun. The Imam refused to reside in the palace, avoided luxury, shared meals with the lowly people, and kept company with the poor. He rejected all the seductions of government and authority.

A leader of a community should behave in a humble and modest way. A telling example is the story of the Imam and the bath house. Sharif al-Qurashi recounts: "*Imam 'Ali b. Musa' al-Ridha' would go to the bath-house, but the owner of the bath-house did not recognize him. It happened that there was a soldier in the bathhouse and the soldier asked the Imam to rub and clean him. The Imam responded to his request. When the soldier came to know of the Imam, he became fearful and terrified. However, the Imam calmed his fear and made him know that he rendered him a human service.*"³¹

The clash between Al-Ma'mun and the Imam was not only on the level of ideas (what is the function of the state in relation to the people), but also on the level of lifestyle. Imam Reza (PBUH) ordered al-Ma'mu'n to establish justice and fairness among the people and prevented him from wasting the properties of the state. This was a big source of tensions between them.

The concept of the ethical foundation of a state is a key concept in the political theory of Imam Reza (PBUH). That concept remains still relevant today. Many states in the world operate on the basis of injustice by serving the interest of the rich. In the United States the Military Industrial Complex rules the state. Their interests determine the policy of the successive government.

Imam Reza (PBUH) and a new pluriversal world civilization

We live in a crucial phase in world history. The colonial world civilization is at the end of its course with the decline of the West and the rise of the rest. New international institutions that are outside of Western control emerge on the global political scene, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization dealing with security issues and the BRICS dealing with economic issues.

The economic power of the West has decreased dramatically. In 2021 China had surpassed the United States as the biggest economy in the world. Its GDP by Purchasing Power Parity was US\$ 27 trillion, while that of the US was US\$ 23 trillion. China has become the leading economic and technological power in the world.

The political influence of the West has significantly waned as well. For 500 years they have been able to occupy land in the Global South and dictate how the societies in the Global South should be governed. That has changed dramatically in the past decades. Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa have become global or regional power centers that challenge Western political hegemony. They are key players in shaping a new world order.

In September 2006 Brazil, Russia, India, and China started a series of high-level meetings at the margins of the General Debate of the UN Assembly. Three years later, in 2009 the inaugural BRIC summit took place in Yekaterinburg in Russia. The summit was attended by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil), Dmitry Medvedev (Russia), Manmohan Singh (India), and Hu Jintao (China). In 2010 South Africa joined BRIC, and BRIC turned into BRICS. In 2015 BRICS established the New Development Bank with an initial authorized capital of US\$ 100 billion.

We are now almost 20 years later since the first discussions on a new world order began. With the economic boycott by the West of governments they don't like and with the wars in Ukraine and Palestine BRICS has gained a new significance. It is becoming the alternative center of power of the Global South in shaping a new world order.

This order is often articulated in terms of the transition of a unipolar world to a multipolar world. In my view we need to add another element to the discussion about a changing world order: the question of civilization. We are moving from a universal civilization to a pluriversal civilization. When we talk about a multipolar world, we are talking about shifts in the economic and political power structures. When we talk about a new world civilization, we talk about contributions from different civilizations of the Global South that we combine with creativity and imagination to create a new knowledge base for a new world civilization.

This is not a task for politicians, but for intellectuals: academics, activists, spiritual leaders, and artists. Governments and politicians can facilitate their work by providing

the infrastructure for intellectual discourse, but at the end of the day the burden of building the knowledge base for a new world civilization falls on the intellectuals. In January 2024 Iran became a member of BRICS. This offers a unique opportunity to use lessons from the life and thought of Imam Reza (PBUH) to build a new world civilization.

Iran can take the lead in BRICS to add the civilizational dimension to the discussion about a new world order. The key institute in this process would be the institutes for higher education: the universities. Until recently, universities like Harvard in the USA or Oxford in the UK were regarded as high quality institutions. With *Decolonizing The Mind* we question the quality of these institutions. They produce colonized knowledge. They produce lies and present them as universal truths. That is not high quality. We need a new type of university. The quality of the old university is already in the name. Uni = one and versity = truth. So they produce one truth. With *Decolonizing The Mind* we need to move to a pluriversity, an academic institution that acknowledge a diversity of theoretical frameworks to solve the current problems of the world. I call it the BRICS university. Take the fundamental question of epistemology. Imam Reza (PBUH) teaches us that there is no separation between ethics and sciences. In fact, ethics should be embedded in science. The curriculum of the BRICS university will be based on this principle that Imam Reza (PBUH) had laid down.

Take economic theory. The European Enlightenment presented only two alternatives: free market economy propagated by Liberalism or central planned economy propagated by Marxism. Imam Reza (PBUH) presents a third alternative: an economy based on social justice.

Take social theory. The concept of superiority and inferiority is rooted in many social theories of the West. Imam Reza (PBUH) shows how people from different ideological backgrounds can interact in a dignified and respectful manner.

With *Decolonizing The Mind* the BRICS university reconstructs the disciplines of science, including mathematical and the natural and life sciences. In this way, they lay the foundation, the knowledgebase, of a new world civilization. With the life and thought of Imam Reza (PBUH) Iran can take the lead and promote the building of BRICS universities in the Global South.

Thank you.

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Notes

- ¹ Hira, S. (2023), p.279.
- ² Khomeini, A. (2011), p. 1.
- ³ Baqir as-Sadr, M. (1994a-d).
- ⁴ See Hira, S. (2023), paragraph 5.2.2: How ethics was removed from science in the European Enlightenment.
- ⁵ Sharif al-Qurashi, B. (1991), chapter 13: The Time of The Imam
- ⁶ Idem, p. 502-503.
- ⁷ Idem, p. 383-384. Hakimi, M. (2011), p. 21-23.
- ⁸ Sharif al-Qurashi, B. (1991), p. 383-384.
- ⁹ Hakimi, M. (2011), p. 25-26.
- ¹⁰ Idem.
- ¹¹ Rayshahri, M. (2016), p. 85-86.
- ¹² Hakimi, M. (2011),, p. 85-86.
- ¹³ Rayshahri, M. (2016), p. 85.
- ¹⁴ Quoted in Hira, S. (2023), p. 168.
- ¹⁵ See Hira, S. (2023) paragraph 6.3 (Biological racism) for these quotes.
- ¹⁶ Hakimi, M. (2011), p. 41-42.
- ¹⁷ Idem.
- ¹⁸ Idem, p. 43.
- ¹⁹ Idem, p. 43-44.
- ²⁰ Idem, p. 74.
- ²¹ Idem, p. 34-35.
- ²² Idem.
- ²³ Idem, p. 56-57.
- ²⁴ Idem, p. 63.
- ²⁵ Idem, p. 62.
- ²⁶ Idem, p. 33.
- ²⁷ Salmani Rahimi, A., Enferadi, M. and Nemati, B. (2017), p. 38-39.
- ²⁸ Hakimi, M. (2011), p. 49-50.
- ²⁹ See Khamenei, A. (2015), p. 19-23, Sharif al-Qurashi, B. (1991), p. 596-598, and Rayshahri, M. (2016), p. 46-47.
- ³⁰ Sharif al-Qurashi, B. (1991), p. 509-510.
- ³¹ Idem, p. 6.