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Book presentation
J.G.J. TER HAAR

Johan G.J. Ter Haar

Chair of Persian Language and Literature and the Cultural History of Iran at Leiden University

On 15 May 1998, Dr J.G.J. Ter Haar (1941) delivered his inaugural speech as Professor of Persian Language and Literature and the Cultural History of Iran. The speech was entitled: *In De Stilte Van De Sharī'a, Een debat over de islam in het moderne Iran* (In the Silence of the Sharī'a; a debate on Islam in Modern Iran). The following is part of his conclusion. The entire speech has been published by the Research School CNWS, Leiden.

'Sorūsh and his fellows belong to that group of intellectuals which is called rowshanfekrān-e dīnī in present day Persian. They are – literally translated – the religious intellectuals, the religious intelligentsia, intellectuals who do not only designate a central role in their thinking to their religious convictions, but who also give Islam a not unimportant social and political role, even though they vary amongst themselves in their interpretation of this role. However, not all Iranian intellectuals belong to this category. There are also intellectuals in Iran who as a matter of principle do not see any role for Islam in public life, who hold the opinion that religion is at most something for the private sphere and who advocate a completely secularized society. But, different from the religious intellectuals, who can disseminate their views in *Kiyān* and other magazines, they are not – or virtually not – capable of having their voices heard, at least, not in public. However difficult it is to estimate the size and influence of this movement, it would be a mistake to think that secularism does not exist in Iran. Personally, I am inclined to say that the views of the religious intellectuals in Iranian society are more widely accepted than those taking a purely secularist stance.

On the other hand (...) we should not overestimate the importance and the influence of the debate. Not only since the importance of any intellectual debate should not be overestimated, but also because in Iran many other things are going on in many other fields than

the debate on Islam. (...) This does not mean that the debate (...) is for debate's sake only. This is so because in the debate there is a central question that is of great importance for the development of Islam within, as well as outside, Iran. What that question entails has, in my opinion, never been put more poignantly than in the title of the article by Sorūsh in *Kiyān* (April/May 1998), 'Serāthā-ye Mostaqīm', which means 'the proper ways'. Every Muslim who sees this title will immediately think of the first sura of the Quran, where this is also mentioned, in singular, in the prayer 'lead us to the right path'. The question Sorūsh and his fellows ask is whether there is only one right path in Islam, or whether perhaps more ways lead to Mekkah. ◆

Prof. Ter Haar is the author of, among others, Volgelingen en erfgenaam van de profeet: de denkwereld van shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, 1564-1624 (Leiden 1989) (Follower and Heir of the Prophet: the Thinking of shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi) and Volgelingen van de imam: een kennismaking met desjī'tische islam (Amsterdam) 1995 (Followers of the Imam: an Introduction to Shi'ite Islam).

