

Persianate Islam and the Secularity of Kingship

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In line with the conceptual framework of the “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities” project,¹ secularity here is defined as the differentiation between the religious and the non-religious through the drawing of symbolic boundaries. The scope of secularity changes as a result of divergent developmental paths of different cultural logics pertaining to different normatively autonomous spheres or domains of life within each society/civilisation, and as a result of inter-civilisational encounters, notably the non-Western world’s encounter with Western modernity and its conception of secularity.

Max Weber’s concept of a world region as a civilisational zone (*Kulturkreis*) applies to the Persianate world in the Islamic era, which was called Irānshahr² (the land of Iran) already in the late 10th century.³ According to Abu Mansur Tusi, who wrote the earliest known *Epic of Kings* in New Persian in the 10th century, Irānshahr “extends from the Oxus river to the Nile”. Weber also linked this notion of a world region to his seminal idea of the world religions of salvation being the core around which civilisations grow. Marshall Hodgson (1974) followed Weber’s paradigm with reference to Islam, but without adopting his term. In Hodgson’s conception, Islamicate civilisation creates a world *region*, which he called Islamdom, in analogy to Christendom. And, whether or not he knew it, Hodgson followed Abu Mansur in also defining the Islamicate civilisation as extending from the Nile to the Oxus. Hodgson termed

Weber: World religions as core of civilisations

Hodgson: Islamicate civilisation as a world region

- 1 Christoph Kleine, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Research Programme of the HCAS ‘Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities,’” Working Paper Series of the HCAS “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities” 1 (Leipzig, 2016).
- 2 Within this text, the transliteration system of the *Journal of Persianate Studies* is used for Persian and Arab terms.
- 3 Etymologically, this means the “empire of the Aryans”.

the cultural traditions that developed on the basis of the Persian language “Persianate”, and further contrasted the continued vitality of the ‘Persianate zone’ with the early flourishing of the ‘Arabic zone’ of the Islamicate civilisation, going so far as to divide the Arabic zone itself historically “into an earlier ‘caliphal’ and later ‘Persianate’ phase.”⁴

New Persian as *lingua franca*

The New Persian was first written in the Arabic script towards the end of the 9th century. It quickly became the *lingua franca* of several monarchies and empires, as well as the complementary *lingua franca* of Islam during its expansion in the Eastern Muslim land.⁵ The rise of local monarchies in the Iranian zone of the caliphal body politic, most notably the Samanids, switched their official language from Arabic to Persian. The culture of the Persianate zone of the Islamicate civilisation was made distinctive by two major components that in turn make their study distinctive: Persianate Islam and Persian kingship.

The most significant works in nascent Persian prose on Islam under the Samanids were the Persian creed by the leading Hanafi theologian, Abu Mansur Mâturidi (d. 944), and the *Great Commentary* (*Tafsir-e bozorg*) on the Qur’an, which was wrongly attributed to Mohammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923). These texts were published at the same time as the Persian translation of Tabari’s monumental *History of Prophets and Kings* by the Samanid vizier, Abu ‘Ali Bal’ami (d. 974 or after 992),⁶ which, alongside a slightly earlier prose translation, paved the way for the later versifications of the *Epic of Kings*

4 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*, vol. 2. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 293–94; Saïd Amir Arjomand, “HODGSON, MARSHALL GOODWIN SIMMS,” Encyclopædia Iranica, online edition, originally published September 24, 2015, accessed June 19, 2019, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hodgson-marshall>.

5 Bert G. Fragner, *Die “Persophonie”: Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens (Persophonia—regionalism, identity, and language contacts in the history of Asia)* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1999).

6 These were both completed in the third quarter of the tenth century under Mansur b. Nuh (961–76). Thus, from the very beginning, the Persianate variant of the Islamicate civilisation combined the Persianisation of Islam with the revival of Persian kingship.

(*Shāhnāma*).⁷ Sufism did not take long to become the dominant feature of Persianate Islam, however.⁸

With the exposition of mystical concepts in the elegant Persian prose of Khwāja ‘Abdallāh Ansāri (d. 1089) in Herat in the mid-11th century, and the treatise on Sufism by his contemporary, Hojviri of Ghazna in 1077,⁹ Persian replaced Arabic as the primary medium for the expression of Sufism, the movement that had been gathering momentum for a century or two in Khorasan. Ansāri’s followers, Rashid al-Din Maybodi (d. after 1126), Ahmad Ghazāli (d. 1126), and ‘Abd al-Karim Sam‘āni (d. 1167) continued to write in Persian in the 12th century,¹⁰ as did ‘Ayn al-Qozāt Hamadāni (d. 1131) and Hakim Sanā’i of Ghazna (d. 1131). Sufism was thus incorporated into Persianate Islam, and in fact became its new distinctive feature. Sufi literary works in Persian presented a non-legalistic mystical variant of Islam. What is fascinating is that the Sufi-tinged Persianate Islam travelled to India and was received as the central, universalistic tradition of Islam, and not as a form of “local knowledge”. New Persian was forged from the beginning as the complementary *lingua franca* of Islam, and became, as Hodgson emphasised, the main vehicle for the spread of Islam as a world religion and of the Islamicate civilisation in the “eastern lands of the Caliphate”.

Sufism Persianate
Islam’s distinctive
feature

The Rise of Samanid Kingship

Meanwhile a new type of Islamicate political regime was created in 10th-century Khorasan and Transoxania by the Samanids, who traced their descent from Bahram Chubin, the Parthian rebel against the Sasanian Khosrow II in the 6th century. The new regime combined the idea of Iranian monarchy with an entirely novel form of political organisation, consisting of patrimonial government with a Mamluk army of royal slaves. Military slavery in the form of soldiers and

New regime combined
Iranian kingship with
patrimonial government

7 Saïd Amir Arjomand, “Persianate Islam and its Regional Spread,” in *Religions, Nations and Transnationalism in Multiple Modernities*, ed. Patrick Michel, Adam Possamai, and Bryan S. Turner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

8 The Google Scholar entries I have mentioned in fact show big clusters on Persianate Islam and its near equivalent, Persianate Sufism.

9 He is known as Hazrat-e Dātā Ganjibakhsh, and his shrine is Lahore’s foremost sacred site of pilgrimage.

10 William C. Chittick, *Divine Love. Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

generals who were owned (*mamluk*) by the patrimonial rulers who soon claimed imperial kingship as King of Kings (*shāhanshāh*) emerged and developed in the Samanid kingdom, the prototypical “Persianate polity” credited with the revival of the Persian language at the beginning of what the Indologist Sheldon Pollock called the Vernacular Millennium.¹¹ Its administrative structure fitted Weber’s ideal type of patrimonialism. Weber also noted the propensity of patrimonial regimes for mercenary and slave armies but did not built it into his model and definition.

For the reception of monarchy in the Islamicate civilisation, however, we can go much further back in history to what Hodgson called the caliphal phase of Islam when the ancient Persian idea of kingship, as Zakeri demonstrates in great detail, constituted the core of Persian wisdom presented in Arabic garb.¹² The reception of the Persian idea of monarchy in the 8th and 9th centuries resulted in the distinction of the religious/spiritual and the political/temporal domains with the spread of what I have provocatively called the theory of the two powers. According to this theory, which prevailed into the 20th century throughout the Muslim world, prophecy and kingship were the two powers ordained by God. Kings were considered necessary for the maintenance of order in the world so that humankind could benefit from the divine guidance sent down by the prophets and thereby attain salvation in the other world.¹³

Persian kingship:
distinction of
religious/spiritual and
political/temporal
domains

Prophecy and kingship
ordained by God

The spread of Persian kingship

The Persianate polity as shaped in the Samanid kingdom was not adopted by the Saljuq nomadic empire in the 11th century, despite the recommendation of the great vizier Nezām al-Molk, who in fact created his own personal Mamluk retinue. However, it was adopted by the Ghurid rulers of present-day Afghanistan, who belonged to the Iranian House of Shansab, in the latter part of the 12th century. At the beginning of the 13th century, the Persianate polity then

11 Saïd Amir Arjomand, “Evolution of the Persianate Polity and its Transmission to India,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009).

12 Ali b. ‘Ubayda al-Rayhani and Mohsen Zakeri, *Persian Wisdom in Arabic Garb* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

13 Saïd Amir Arjomand, “Legitimacy and Political Organisation: Caliphs, Kings and Regimes,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 4, ed. Robert Irwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

travelled to India via the institution of royal military slavery. The childless Ghurid Sultan, Mo‘izz al-Din, who conquered India at the end of the 12th century, expressed the notion of the military slaves as sons of the king, and left his conquered subcontinent to his slave-generals who perfected their distinctive political regime, the Delhi Sultanate. In this period, which was marked by the Mongol invasion of Iran, just as Sufism was formed as a distinctly Persianate variant of Islam and spread westward to Anatolia, Persianate kingship travelled along with it. Najm al-Din Rāzi (d. 1256), fleeing the Mongol invasion under Chinggis Khan in the 1220s, wrote the first major treatise on kingship from the Sufi perspective, *Mersād al-‘Ebād*, which included a mirror on the wayfaring (*soluk*) of kings. He was introduced by the great master of his Kobravi Sufi order, Shehāb al-Din ‘Omar Sohravardi (d. 1234), to the Seljuq Sultan of Rum, ‘Alā’ al-Din Kayqobād (r. 1219–37), to whom he dedicated the treatise. Like his predecessor and his successors, who commissioned *Shāhnāmas* and *Seljuqnāmas* modeled on Firdawsī’s *Shāhnāma*, ‘Alā’ al-Din Kayqobād bore the name of the ancient kings of Iran. Sufism and kingship as the two major ingredients of Persianate culture thus travelled together.

Main characteristics of Persianate culture: Sufism and kingship

While the Mamluk army was the structural feature of the Persianate body politic, its soul or core normative idea was ancient Persian kingship. In keeping with this Persianate heritage, the Persian bureaucrats of the Il-Khanid Mongolian Empire in Iran had, by the end of the 13th century, revived the Persian idea of kingship for the benefit of their Mongolian masters as attested by the oldest illustrated manuscripts of the *Shāhnāma* from this period.¹⁴ The ancient Persian kings’ divine charisma (*farrah*) was made transitive and spread to the realm of Iran, making it prosperous and luminous. Thus the good news of the ascension of Ghāzān, the first Il-Khanid ruler to convert to Islam, came from the heavens to earth: “That to the land of Iran (*irān zamin*) a king/shall be sent by God”, as the 14th-century bureaucrat

Divine charisma of ancient Persian kings

14 The later Il-Khans, as is well known to art historians, promoted it by producing lavishly illustrated manuscripts of *Shāhnāma*, and commissioned Hamdollah Mostawfi to write their own supplementary epic of kings, *Zafarnāma*, which devoted a larger number of verses to the kingship of Chinggis Khan and his descendants than to that of either the Arabs or the Persians. In the eleven-volume edition of *Zafarnāma* published in Tehran, this occupies volumes 7–11 (2009/1388 onward). Mostawfi gives the theory of kingship a further Persianate twist to link it inseparably to the land of Iran.

Hamdallah Mostawfi put it. Similarly, through the justice of the last Il-Khan, Abu Sa‘id, “all the realm of Iran (*molġ-e irān zamin*) turned to paradise”.¹⁵ This, incidentally, is the rebirth of the idea of Iran first invented in the Sasanian revolution.

I have identified Persianate kingship and Sufi Persianate Islam as the main sources of the enormous sub-global growth and spread of Persianate culture and society. Symbolic, literary and material forms once generated by culture became autonomous and assumed lives of their own. Although Persianate monarchy is extinct and Sufism severely debilitated, the Persianate conception of kingship at the apex of the secular, temporal domain has been decisive in the contemporary understanding of a secular sphere of life and the delimitation of its boundaries with the sacred, Iran’s current uniquely theocratic regime notwithstanding.

Persianate kingship
crucial for contemporary
conceptions of secularity

Intellectual debates on secularity in the Islamic Republic of Iran

The decline and persecution of Sufism as a component of Islam under the Islamic Republic of Iran has in no way diminished its cultural importance as it permeates classical Persian poetry that now occupies a prominent space in the secular cultural sphere. No one quoting Sa‘di, Mawlana (Rumi) or Hafez can in any way be considered to be acting within the religious domain which has been strictly defined by the theocratic regime. The speech of the most prominent and popular champion of the separation of religion and politics, Abdol-Karim Soroush is full of the poetry of Mawlana in particular, and Mawlana’s poetry also adds colour to the writings of the former reformist President of the IRI, Sayyed Mohammad Khatami.

The demise of monarchy did not diminish the conceptual secularity of the political sphere it once dominated either. In fact, it was the Islamic intellectuals in the Islamic Republic of Iran who led the break with political Islam in the early 1990s themselves. In 1992, the lay Islamic intellectual, Soroush, made a radical break with his predecessor ‘Ali Shari‘ati’s revolutionary characterisation of Islam as an ideology in a critique of the Islamic revolutionary ideology, arguing that Islam as a world religion is “richer than (*farbatar*) ideology”.

15 For the citations, see Saïd Amir Arjomand, “State Formation in Early Modern Muslim Empires: Common Origin and Divergent Paths,” *Social Imaginaries* 2, no. 2 (2016).

An ideological society, he argued, stifles free enquiry and intellectual development, whereas Islam as a world religion allows for a variety of different interpretations that open the road to intellectual creativity. Soroush proceeded to advocate his idea of ‘Islamic secularism’ which bore a striking resemblance to what Nurcholish Madjid had done in Indonesia some two decades earlier.¹⁶ At about the same time, the cleric Mohammad Mojtabeh-Shabestari, replacing the now defunct kingship with the modern idea of democracy, rejected the fundamental premises of the regimes’ ‘political jurisprudence’ by arguing that since the time of the Prophet, the *fiqh* was never constitutive of political order and was always pragmatic and designed to answer practical questions that arose within the framework of existing political regimes. The choice between political regimes was to be based on reason and not religion. This appears to be an argument for the secularity of the political domain as independent of religion and subject to normative regulation by human reason and deliberation. More generally, he proposed a hermeneutic approach to Islamic law and religion. This led to the popularisation of the idea that different ‘readings’ (singular, *Qerā’āt*) of Islam were legitimate, a truly radical conclusion for a Shi‘ite cleric who had been elected to the first revolutionary parliament in 1980.

An equally radical break with 20th-century apologetic Islamic modernism was made by Soroush in his advocacy of religious pluralism toward the end of the 1990s. Soroush said that there was not one (as suggested by the common reading of the opening chapter of the Qur’an) but many “straight paths” to salvation.¹⁷ Soroush backed his project of de-ideologisation of Islam by upholding the traditional separation of religion and politics, replacing the now defunct kingship with its modern substitute, namely democracy. To enhance the separation of religion and politics, he also put forward a hasty

Soroush: Idea of “Islamic Secularism”

Mojtabeh-Shabestari: *fiqh* designed to answer practical political

Different legitimate readings of Islam

Soroush’s de-ideologisation of Islam: replacing kingship with religious democracy

16 Nurcholish Madjid had denounced the idea of the Islamic state (*negara Islam*) as the sacralising of what is actually profane in Islam as early as 1970–71, but it was not until the 1990s that his call for secularism and rejection of the ‘mythology’ of the Islamic state was taken up by the younger generation of Islamic intellectuals and thus became a major force in the movement for democratisation after the fall of Suharto. For the comparison, and for the references in this section, see Saïd Amir Ajjomand, “Islamic Resurgence and Its Aftermaths,” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 6, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

17 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Serāthā-ye mostaqim (Straight Paths)* (Tehran: Serāt, 1998).

argument to justify secularism as the scientification and rationalisation of social and political thinking and maintained that Islam as a religion was inherently secular. In its original formulation, Soroush's assertion that Islam is inherently secular was highly ambiguous, if not confused. However, he returned to the topic in the following decade, attacking secularism as a new modern anti-religious religion, and criticising "secularist reason ('*aql*)" in a similar fashion to his earlier attack on ideology in a number of articles. He drew on Mawlana's poetry, as he often does, to show the inadequacy of secular reason.¹⁸ Soroush's revised position on secularism in contrast to secularity appeared in a volume he edited with Mojtabeh-Shabestari on *Tradition and Secularism (Sonnat o sekularizm)* which was conceived as a part of the major intellectual debate in Iran around the turn of the century on the subject of tradition and modernity.¹⁹ In this reversal, he defended the distinction and autonomy of religion against the intrusion of instrumental reason.

The advocacy of Islamic reform by Soroush and Mojtabeh-Shabestari paved the way for the movement for political reform led by President Khâtami (1997–2005), who gave currency to Mojtabeh-Shabestari's principle of the acceptability of different 'readings' of Islam and endorsed Soroush's idea of 'religious democracy', presuming it to be compatible with the constitutionally entrenched doctrine of the Mandate of the Jurist (*vilâyat-e faqih*). Khâtami argued that in Iran, where the majority of the population are assumed to be religious, rule by the people would naturally be 'religious democracy' (*mardom-sâlâri-ye dini*). To support his argument, Khâtami was fond of referring to Tocqueville's description of America in the first half of the 19th century as a model for religious democracy. Khâtami's own contribution to the debate on tradition and modernity, however, consisted of a book surveying Perso-Islamicate political thought critically to establish its justification of arbitrary despotism and domination (as opposed to democracy).²⁰

Khâtami: rule by the people as 'religious democracy'

18 Abdolkarim Soroush, "Din o donya-ye jaded" and "Sekularizm," in *Sonnat o sekularizm*, ed. Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtabeh-Shabestari, Mostafa Malekiân and Mohsen Kadivar (Tehran: Serât, 2002/1981).

19 Saïd Amir Arjomand, "The Reform Movement and the Debate on Modernity and Tradition in Contemporary Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 4 (2002).

20 M. Khâtami, *Âin va andisha dar dam-e khudkamâgi. Sayri dar andisha-ye siyâsi-*

He covered the Platonising adaptation of Greek political thinkers by Perso-Islamicate medieval thinkers, followed by mirrors for princes. He stressed the “decline” of Islamicate political thought and the literature on advice to the rulers almost from their inception! President Khâtami was deeply influenced by his former colleague at the ‘Allāma Tabātābā’i Center for the Study of Politics, Javad Tabātābā’i, in his choice of the topic of political thought and his highly critical approach to it.

Javad Tabātābā’i was a political philosopher and a staunch modernist and secularist. He considered self-criticism to be the first step toward secular modernity and deplored its absence and the lack of critical thinking among Iranian intellectuals, and Islamists in particular, regarding their cultural heritage. His remedy was to analyse traditional Persian political culture critically in order to understand the decline it had undergone as a part of the Islamic civilisation. In a series of books published from the late 1980s onward, he wrote about the irreversible decline (*zavāl, enhetāt*) of political thought in pre-modern Islamic Iran, arguing that epistemically it was incommensurate with modernity.²¹ His project was to recover pre-Islamic Iranian political thought, which he called the “thought of Irānshar” or “Iranianate thought (*fekr-e Irānshahri*),” and to examine it critically in order to restore and modernise it, while excluding Islam. His monograph on Nezām al-Molk (d. 1088) is particularly interesting because it can be taken as a case study of the secularity of kingship and the separation of traditional political thought from religion. In it, Tabātābā’i maintains that the great Nezām al-Molk – the vizier of the two most important rulers of the Greater Seljuq Empire and arguably their best theorist on the thought of Irānshahr – recognised the irrelevance of the Caliphate and, by implication, religion to Sultanate or monarchy and by extension to the (secular) political domain.²² Given

Tabātābā’i: pre-modern Islamic Iranian political thought to be recovered

ye musalmanān dar faraz va furudei tamaddon-e eslāmi (*Creed and Thought in the Trap of Arbitrariness. An Exploration of the Political Thought of the Muslims through the Rise and Decline of Islamic Civilisation*) (Tehran: Tarh-e Naw, 1999).

21 Notably, J. Tabātābā’i, *Darāmadi Falsafi bar Tārikh-e Andishah-ye Siyāsi dar Irān* (*A Philosophical Introduction to the History of Political Thought in Iran*) (Tehran: Kavir, 1993/1372); idem, *Zavāl-e Andishah-ye Siyāsi dar Irān* (*Decline of Political Thought in Iran*) (Tehran: Kavir, 1994/1373).

22 J. Tabātābā’i, *Kh’āja Nezām al-Molk* (Tehran: Nashr-e Naw, 1997/1375). Compare also Neguin Yavari, *The Future of Iran’s Past: Nizam Al-Mulk Remembered* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Tabataba'i's understanding of the causes of the decline of the Islamic civilisation, he was dismayed by the creation of a theocratic republic in Iran. Thus, the condition of decline was exacerbated by the intrusion of Islam into the political domain as a result of the Islamic revolution of 1979. It was therefore imperative to maintain the tradition of monarchy in the aftermath of the Islamic revolution. As he put it in an interview, "Ayatollah Khomeini has forced the religious tradition into a situation where it does not belong."²³

In short, in sharp contrast to the Islamist intellectuals, and less sharp contrast to Islamic reformists like Sorush, Tabataba'i sought to base the alternative modernity appropriate for Iran not on Islam but on Iranianate thought. This clearly amounts to the greatest defiance of the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran and its grandiose de-differentiation of the political and the religious sphere by the obliteration of temporal monarchy. This defiance also implies an insistence on the sharpest distinction of the religious and the political domains of life and thus on the secularity of the political order.

23 Ali Mirsepassi, "Democracy and Religion in the Thought of John Dewey," chap. 5 in *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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This text is part of the *Companion to the Study of Secularity*. The intent of the *Companion* is to give scholars interested in the concept of Multiple Secularities, who are not themselves specialists in particular (historical) regions, an insight into different regions in which formations of secularity can be observed, as well as into the key concepts and notions with respect to the study of secularity.

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