

“The Onslaught of Colonialism”

An appendix to “The End of Islamic Ideology” by Hamid Dabashi

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It is with this paradoxical disposition, at once insurrectionary and tyrannical, de jure and de facto, that Shi'ism enters its colonially mitigated history in Modernity. The history of Shi'ism in Modernity is the chronicle of its gradual revival as a religion of protest. During the Safavid period (1501-1722), Shi'ism experiences one of the sharpest episodes of its active complacency with an active reconstitution of Persian monarchy, being in effect turned into the state religion and as such instrumental in the brutal execution of power. It can no longer speak the truth to power because it *is* the power. In the material success of the Safavids as a Shi'i dynasty, the moral legitimacy of the faith is critically compromised. Between the decline of the Safavids in 1722 and the rise of the Qajars in 1789, which also coincided with the onslaught of colonialism in Iran, the Shi'i clerical establishment is gradually depoliticized and rendered rather irrelevant beyond its scholastic domains, which is in effect the best thing that could have happened for the insurrectionary disposition of the faith to recollect and resuscitate itself.

With the rise of the Qajars and the commencement of the project of colonialism, Shi'ism begins to resume its revolutionary posture. It is impossible to read the history of modern Shi'ism and its gradual re-modulation into “Islamic Ideology,” except as a *response* to the encroachment of the colonial onslaught and the joint projects of the Enlightenment and Modernity that it precipitated not just for the Shi'i Iranians but for Muslims in general. Even events and developments internal and integral to the history of Shi'ism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries were agitated by a direct catalytic effect from the colonial encounter. From the active consolidation of the position of supreme religious leader to the victory of one school of jurisprudence over another, to the aggressive involvement of religious authorities in the political fate of the society at large all took place in the immediate context of a critical encounter with Modernity and the Enlightenment through the intermediary of the colonial project. Shi'ism was re-invented in Modernity under colonial duress.

The mutation of Shi'ism into an Islamic Ideology as a site of resistance to colonialism, however, initially began exactly in the opposite direction and by the leading clerical authorities being aggressively incorporated into the Qajar political apparatus. Shi'ism thus began its history in response to colonially mitigated Modernity in its complacent, self-negating, mode, and not in its revolutionary posturing. It was during the reign of the Qajar potentate Fath Ali Shah (1797-1834) that he actively recruited the blessings of the Shi'i clerical establishment in legitimizing his political authority. The Qajars were instrumental in the gradual ideologization of Shi'ism by trying, once again and on the model of the Safavids, to turn it into a state ideology. From the collapse of the Safavids in 1722 to the rise of the Qajars in 1789, the Shi'i clerical establishment had gradually

emerged as an independent entity, far more independent of the ruling monarchy than they had been during the heydays of the Safavids . This relative autonomy, sustained by an independent source of income from religious taxes, resulted in the autonomous authority of such prominent clerical figures as Seyyed Mohammad Baqer Shafiqi, the Sheikh al-Islam of Isfahan, who was extraordinarily powerful.¹ The onslaught of colonialism initially facilitated the incorporation of the Shi'i clerics into the state apparatus, and this was by and large mitigated by the internal rivalries among the competing juridical factions among the Ulama. A critical case in point is already evident during the reign of Fath Ali Shah when Mirza Mohammad Nishapuri, a staunch Akhbari jurist (who were engaged in a life-long battle against the Usulis, a principally juridical disputation with marked theological and even political implications, promised the Qajar warlord the head of Tsitsianov, the Russian general who was poised to take over Baku, if the Akhbari school of jurisprudence were to be made the state creed. Fath Ali Shah made that promise and Mirza Mohammad did in fact produce Tsitsianov's head. But the monarch reneged on his side of the bargain.²

Shi'ism gradually assumes a more aggressively combative posture in the Qajar period, although still remains subservient to the state apparatus. In the course of Qajar wars in the Caucasus with the Russians, Abbas Mirza, the Crown Prince, solicited and received the support of the Shi'i clerics in his territorial battles. The increasingly aggressive Russian colonialism was desperately trying to be a rival with the more potent European forces like the British and the French. Even the Ottomans were now something of a local menace for the Qajars. In the course of 1804-1814 wars with Russia, which resulted in the humiliating Treaty of Golestan in 1813, Abbas Mirza wrote to such prominent Shi'i clerics as Sheykh Ja'far Kashef al-Ghita and Mulla Ahmad Naraqhi and asked them to declare his wars against the Russian as Holy War, and they did.³ The barbarity of the Russian army under such savage generals as Yermelov in abusing the Muslim population of the Caucasus of course gave ample reason to the Shi'i authorities to become implicated in the frontier wars between the Qajars and the Russians. Abbas Mirza may in fact have used the Shi'i authorities to compel his reluctant father, Fath Ali Shah, into war.⁴ Whatever the case, the Shi'i establishment was manipulated by the Qajars to serve their dynastic purposes. As for the clerical establishment itself, they lacked leadership, vision, or even legitimate universal authority to be an effective and autonomous political force. Their effective complacency in the humiliating defeat of the Qajars implicated them in that dynastic disgrace. But the thunderous elevation of popular discontent, caught between the Russian aggression, Qajar incompetence, and clerical complacency, was gradually awakening the insurrectionary spirit of the Shi'i *conscience collective* .

The Qajars are squarely defeated by the Russians and lose much territory in the Caucasus and this gives the Shi'i clerics a new momentum to reclaim political power. Much against Fath Ali Shah's resistance, such prominent clerics as Mulla Ahmad Naraqhi and Aqa Seyyed Muhammad Tabataba'i forced him to go to war again and in fact participated in the battles against the Russians. But still the relationship between the clerical establishment and the Qajar potentates is predicated on power-politics and not on the Shi'i Ulama's awareness of and trust in their popular basis. As a result, the loud rhetorics

of the Shi'i clergy while joining force with the Qajar aristocracy did not match their dismal performance on the battle-field. Soon after the start of the campaign, Aqa Seyyed Mohammad, the chief protagonist of war against the Russians, abandoned Abbas Mirza's advancing army, retreated to Tehran and died. Add to that dismal performance the treachery of the entire clerical class of Tabriz under the leadership of Mir Fattah the son of Mirza Yusef, one of the most prominent members of the Tabrizi Ulama, who betrayed their nation and handed over Tabriz to the invading Russian army.⁵ The result is a continued upsurge of Shi'i moral indignation to which the dismal capabilities of the clerical class is yet to reach.

Although the agitation of the clerical class resulted in yet another disastrous Treaty, Turkmanchai of 1828, and even more losses of territory to the Russians, the ennobling anger constitutional to Shi'ism in moments of revolutionary crisis was now in full political throttle, ready to recast the ancestral faith into a site of ideological resistance to colonialism. The terms *fatwa* (religious edict) and *jihad* (holy war) now resumed their militant currency. In the judicious words of one historian of modern Shi'ism: "the importance of the second Russo-Iranian War from the point of view of the ulama . . . was their emergence as a force capable of shaping national policy. This was, indeed, the first of a chain of episodes where the ulama were to have a marked influence on the course of Iranian history."⁶ This still is giving too much credit to a class whose atrophied body was running out of breath trying to catch up with the revolutionary crescendo of their constituency. Even an unabashedly pro-clerical historian like Algar concedes that in the course of these defeats at the hand of the Russians, "the ulama had been used initially as instruments for the arousing of religious emotions; but their success in arousing these emotions revealed their potential strength as leaders of the nation."⁷ What both these historians confuse is the arrested growth of the clerical class, best evident during the Qajar frontier battles with the Russians, and the far more revolutionary expectations of their constituency.

After these wars, the defeat of the Qajars to defend their Muslim subjects, and the active presence of the Shi'i clerics in resistance to colonialism, much begins to change. Shi'ism in effect enters the colonially mitigated Modernity on the battle-fields of Turkmanchai and Golestan. The active politicization of Shi'ism in response to colonialism, and the colonially mitigated politics of expectation among the Shi'is, was immediately translated into the institutional consolidation of the supreme position of religious authority. When today we look back at the charismatic figure of a prominent Shi'i cleric like Bahr al-Ulum (d. 1797), it is hard to believe that the attribution of miraculous deeds to him by his contemporaries were not the earliest indications of the emergence of the position of supreme religious leader (*Marja'-e Taqlid*) as a figure of political authority responsible to his constituency at the threshold of the colonial advancements in the region. By the middle of the Nineteenth century, and in the two prominent figures of Hujjat al-Islam Shafiqi (d. 1844) and Hajji Muhammad Kalbasi (d. 1845), the position of *Marja'-e Taqlid* had been thoroughly consolidated and spread over a multi-national (Iran, India, Iraq) domain. Already we hear of such titles as *Ra'is al-Ulama* and *Na'ib al-Imam* attributed to these figures.⁸ The active attribution of such superlative political titles was in effect the institutional expression of the emerging expectation of the Shi'i community at large.

Foreign aggression coupled with domestic corruption had made the time pregnant with great expectations, and the clerical class would sink or swim in the rising tides. By investing these titles in their religious leaders, the colonially ravaged nation was setting them up against the monarchs and thus mandating for them an agenda of political action.

While from the Golestan Treaty of 1813 to the Turkmanchai Treaty of 1828 we see the active politicization of Shi'ism in complacency with the Qajar dynasty and yet in resistance to the Russian colonial advancements, in the clerical opposition to the reforms of Mirza Hossein Khan Sepahsalar, which came to a critical point in 1873, we witness a midway transition to full revolutionary posture because this episode represents the clerical establishment's own vested interest preventing the full revolutionary potentials of Shi'ism to explode onto the political scene. As a reformed-minded minister, Mirza Hasan Khan Sepahsalar (d. 1880), was instrumental in initiating some crucial administrative changes that rubbed the clerical establishment the wrong way. In 1872, for example, he tried to systematize and incorporate into a central administrative apparatus the appointment of high-ranking clerics which deeply angered the Shi'i establishment.⁹ Even his attempt to establish a cabinet in Naser al-Din Shah's court was distasteful to the clergy because it disturbed the feudal political culture of the court. But most objectionable to the Shi'i clergy was Sepahsalar's attempt to modernize the Iranian judicial system which would have resulted in the clerical establishment losing its power. In the words of one historian: "Unconditional submission to the primacy of European models would have made their religious learning irrelevant to the affairs of society and destroyed their whole *raison d'être*."¹⁰ The vested economic interest of the Shi'i clerics cannot be under-estimated either. During the famine of 1871, Hajji Mulla Ali Kani, the chief nemesis of Sepahsalar, made millions, as did many other high-ranking Shi'i Ulama. The opposition of Kani and other like-minded clerics to Sepahsalar taking Naser al-Din Shah to Europe in 1873 in order to encourage the monarch towards modernizing reforms is equally informed by their fear that such reforms would put their economic and political power in danger. The situation finally culminated in the clergy's aggressive assault against Sepahsalar while he accompanied the monarch in Europe. The concession that the Qajar court had made to Baron Julius Reuter in 1872 for the exploitation of minerals and forests as well as the construction of railroad was the principal occasion that coagulated the opposition of the Shi'i Ulama. The opposition was strong enough that Naser al-Din Shah, having no will or vision of his own, summarily dismissed Sepahsalar in 1873.

The fact that such corrupt Shi'i clerics as Mulla Ali Kani opposed colonial concession of the Qajars to the British out of their own vested economic and social interests does not make the resistance an entirely misguided social event. Through these concessions, the nascent Iranian national economy was being aggressively incorporated into a colonial configuration within the global economy of the British empire and its rivals. At a time when the emerging Iranian national interest needed to be predicated on a sovereign economic policy, the British colonialists were aggressively after incorporating it into their global interests, while the Qajar aristocracy and their liberal reformist courtiers like Sepahsalar were complacent in the design. The secular modernization track that Sepahsalar represented was so utterly enamored by the achievements of "The West" that

had not an iota of critical stand against it. Thus the aggressive “modernization” of Iran had very little distance from its equally aggressive colonization. Despite such corrupt figures as Mulla Ali Kani and many other Shi’i clerics like him, they at least had a more critical stand vis-à-vis colonialism. That critical stand was principally out of a corrupt concern with their own pathetic interests. But the critical *conscience collective* that now Shi’ism embodied defied that pathological barrier.

Though not officially colonized, Iran was in effect being treated like a colonial outpost by the British precisely through the mechanism of such economic concessions as that given to Reuter. Despite the potentially positive aspects of Sepahsalar’s reforms, there was no critical element in his assimilation into the European project of Modernity and with that forfeiting the Iranian national interests to colonial concerns.¹¹ The fact that Kani abused the occasion for his and his clerical cohorts’ vested interest should not prevent us from seeing that there was an element of national interest in this anti-colonial resistance and that his standing up to Sepahsalar and Naser al-Din Shah helped in giving Shi’ism a renewed self-confidence that could potentially speak the truth to power. There is thus a direct link between the letter that Kani wrote to the monarch claiming political relevance for the clergy and Mulla Ahmad Naraqi’s equally adamant insistence on such rights earlier in the century.¹² The incident with Sepahsalar and the Reuter Concession thus marks a critical re-emergence of Shi’ism in its revolutionary posture but this time in the full confrontation with the colonially mitigated project of Modernity. The crucial aspect of the Sepahsalar episode is that while the clerical establishment itself is as corrupt as the Qajar aristocracy, the revolutionary disposition of Shi’ism emerges and assumes proportions almost despite the clergy. As the *conscience collective* of a people, Shi’ism has always had a reality sui generis, almost entirely independent of the Shi’i clerical class. At their best, the clerical class has caught up with the critical collectivity of that consciousness, at its worst it has worked against it.

The Tobacco revolt of 1891-1892 gave a far more precise definition to the emergence of Shi’ism as an insurrectionary movement against colonialism.¹³ Naser al-Din Shah’s giving the Imperial Tobacco Corporation the exclusive right to the sale and distribution of tobacco in 1891 resulted in such massive popular abhorrence that the revolutionary force of Shi’ism was in effect exorcised out of a complacent clerical establishment. The initial outburst of popular resentment against the Tobacco concession was in the provincial city of Shiraz, and soon spread to other cities such as Tabriz and Isfahan, and reveals a clear coalition between local merchants like Hajji Abbas Urduabadi and lower ranking clerics like Hajj Seyyed Ali Akbar Falasiri.¹⁴ The active presence of the merchant class in the Tobacco revolt is the clear indication that the nascent Iranian national bourgeoisie was being directly threatened by the encroachment of the colonial interests and had implicated the Shi’i establishment in providing it with an ideological battle-cry. Economically, the revolt represented the resistance of the Iranian national bourgeoisie to becoming subordinate to the overriding logic of colonialism. Socially, the clerical establishment was resisting its privileges being compromised. But in the middle of these particular class and colonial interests, Shi’ism, as the iconic constellation of an insurrectionary disposition, was re-emerging with full revolutionary power, over which no particular group, not even the clergy itself, had full control. Rising from the depth of

the Shi'i *conscience collective* is its moral protestation against injustice. No particular class, least of all the clerical establishment itself, was in full control of this subterranean defiance of tyranny constitutional to the very moral texture of Shi'ism.

The emergence of Mirza Hasan Shirazi as the prominent clerical figure leading the uprising against the Tobacco Concession in 1891 marks a critical point in the active re-politicization of the faith. The presence of such figures as Seyyed Ali Akbar Falasiri from Shiraz and Aqa Munir al-Din from Isfahan in Samarra, where Mirza Hasan resided, points to the aggressive pressure that the merchant class was exerting on the Shi'i authorities to raise the ideological banner against the British colonial interests. The pressure was effective. Between July and September 1891, Mirza Hasan Shirazi wrote two letters to the Qajar monarch and publicly declared his opposition to the Tobacco Concession. While Naser al-Din Shah was contemplating his response, Mirza Hasan wrote to a reputable cleric in Iran, Mirza Hasan Ashtiani, in November and charged him with leading the protest on his behalf. What happens next is a brilliant indication as to what exactly is in charge of the Shi'i revolutionary resurrection. Shirazi's communication with Ashtiani in November is the last factual evidence that we have of his intervention. Early in December a religious edict (*fatwa*) appears in Tehran that bans the use of tobacco and it is signed by Mirza Hasan Shirazi. Earlier versions of the self-same *fatwa* appear in Isfahan in November. Suddenly there is a collective conviction that Shirazi has actually issued this *fatwa*. The fact of the matter, however, is that there is no evidence that Shirazi actually issued this *fatwa*. It is as if the collective wish of the popular demand willed it. And it was issued. It was issued and signed far more by the collective will of the Shi'i insurrectionary disposition than by Mirza Hasan Shirazi.¹⁵

This is not to under-estimate the power and influence of the merchant class in fabricating this *fatwa* in order to protect their own economic interest against colonial intrusions. But at this stage, the formation of a national bourgeoisie is constitutional to the economic interest of the nation at large. The constitution of that national economy is threatened by both the infiltration of the colonial interest and the active collaboration of the corrupt Qajar court (which of course included a healthy dose of such prominent Shi'i clerics as Seyyed Abdollah Behbahani who squarely sided with the Qajar monarchy and their colonial cohorts and defied the *fatwa* against use of tobacco) as well as the malleable liberalism of Reformists like Sepahsalar. The prominence of such high-ranking Shi'i clerics as Mirza Hasan Shirazi in Iraq and Mirza Hasan Ashtiani in Iran derived its legitimacy not by representing the economic interest of the Iranian merchant class but by being the spokesmen of a more universal claim on the well-being of a nation. The Shi'i Ulama in effect become the personification of the collective will of the Shi'i nation. The people at large was in effect transferring legitimate sovereignty from the court to the mosque, from the king to the clerics. But at all times *they* were in charge of bestowing of sovereignty and legitimacy, and it was in *them* that the insurrectionary will of Shi'ism was once again being born onto history. Sympathetic historians of the clerical class¹⁶ are quick to attribute the success of the Tobacco Revolt to the leadership of the clergy. But the fact is that the best and most revolutionary among the clerical class *followed*, not *led*, the movement. When Naser al-Din Shah wrote his threatening letter to Mirza Hasan Shirazi admonishing him for not allowing the use of tobacco, the leading Shi'i clergy of

Iran packed his bag and was about to leave the country on 4 January 1892. It was the gathering of a massive crowd at his residence, protecting him and demanding that he stay that *turned* him into a leader. He did not *lead* the protest. He *followed* it. The revolutionary disposition of the *conscience collective* of a people, agitated at the moment of historical crisis, has a far more fertile ground to give birth to a militant memory than the vested interest of any given class can either stop or control it. The whole tobacco episode came to an end when Naser al-Din Shah repeal the concession and Mirza Hasan Shirazi lifted the boycott in 6 January, 1892, which was followed by Mirza Hasan Ashtiani restoring calm to the capital on 26 January of the same year. By then the Shi'i insurrectionary disposition had come to full revolutionary recognition.

¹ For a biographical sketch of Hajji Seyyed Mohammad Baqer Shafti see my translation, "Lives of Prominent Nineteenth-Century 'Ulama' from Tunikabuni's *Qisas al-'Ulama'*," in Said Amir Arjomand (ed), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, 305-318.

² See Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985: 135 for more details. By this time the victory of the Usulis over the Akhbaris was so emphatic that in fact Fath Ali Shah could not have possibly delivered on his promise. Mirza Mohammad was subsequently brutally murdered by the Usulis.

³ For more on Mulla Ahmad Naraqi and his historical significance see Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969: 57, 63, 79, 89, and 101.

⁴ As suggested by Algar in Algar 1969: 87.

⁵ See Algar 1969: 92-93.

⁶ Momen 1985: 138.

⁷ Algar 1969: 93. Identifying the nobility of a people's collective anger against colonial aggression as "arousing [their] religious emotions," as if one is speaking of an infantile nation, is extraordinarily condescending had it not been such a supreme sign of theoretical illiteracy about Shi'ism.

⁸ On the early evolution of the office of clerical authority see Said Amir Arjomand's "The Mujtahid of the Age and the Mulla-bashi: An Intermediate Stage in the institutionalization of Religious Authority in Shi'ite Iran," in Arjomand 1988: 80-97.

⁹ See Algar 1969: 170.

¹⁰ Algar 1969: 172.

¹¹ For a thoroughly celebratory reading of Sepahsalar and treating him as a champion of modernizing reform see Adamyat [1351] 1972, for a more critical reading of Sepahsalar combined with an apologetic account of the Shi'i Ulama see Algar 1969: 169-183.

¹² See my essay on Naraqi in Nasr, Dabashi, Nasr 1989: 102-146. These historical cases of demanding authority for the clerical establishment is to be distinguished from the bogus claim that such demands are constitutional to the Shi'i theory of authority as argued by Abdulaziz Abdulhusein Sachedina in *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence* . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

¹³ For an account of the revolutionary significance of the Tobacco Revolt see Ann K. S. Lambton, "The Tobacco Régie: a prelude to revolution," in her *Qajar Iran* . London: I. B. Tauris, 1987: 223-276.

¹⁴ See Algar 1969: 207.

¹⁵ Hamid Algar does a fairly conscientious job in intimating the uncertainty as to whether or not Shirazi actually wrote this edict or not. See Algar 1969: 211-212.

¹⁶ Like Hamid Algar in Algar 1969: 214-215.