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Chapter Five

From Religious Sectarianism to Modern Nationalism

Introduction

The ideological imaginary that inspired the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and has continued to play a constitutive role during the institutionalisation of this revolution, was developed during a historical process of interaction between the utopia of freedom and justice and the discourses of domination and repression. The Muslim ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s made an impressive contribution to the development of a revolutionary ideology out of the doctrines of Shi'i political philosophy. But the process of the construction of this ideology began long before these ideologues entered the political scene.

It is in the gradual development of Shi'i political philosophy in the context of competition between the truth claims of at least four discourses of power that one can situate the genesis of the Islamic ideology of revolution. The Shi'i scholastic discourse, the political discourse of the State, the poetic discourse of Iranian-Islamic mysticism and the philosophical discourse of modernity were the main competing truth claims that came into interaction with each other in Iran in a long historical span. And it was in the context of the constant debate, dispute and contest between these discourses of power that the Shi'i imaginary of protest took shape as the ideological formulation of the utopia of freedom and justice.

The discourse of State in the history of Shi'ism is as old as the Islamic faith itself. The discourse of State in Islam was originated in Arabia by the Prophet Muhammad himself, who was both the spiritual and political leader of the Muslim community. It was a discourse of unity, which was concerned, primarily, with the unity of the Muslim community under one system of political authority. Its immediate audience were three main groups of converts, Mohajerin (Immigrants), Ansar (Friends) and the Quraysh (Mecca's powerful aristocracy). Mojahedin were the Muslim proselytes in Mecca who later migrated under Muhammad's leadership to Medina to flee persecution by the Meccan aristocracy. Ansar were the residents of Medina, the second group of converts, who gave Muhammad and the Meccan Muslims protection against the Meccan aristocracy, and who accepted Muhammad as their political and spiritual leader. And the Quraysh were the last group of proselytes whose conversion to Islam was practically forced after military defeat at the hands of the Prophet.

For Shi'ism, the Prophetic State and the short-lived rule of Ali, Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, were the golden age of Islamic politics. But in the Shi'i imaginary, this golden age was “subverted” by the Umayyad clan of Quraysh who deposed Ali and established a powerful but “unjust” and “corrupt” dynastic rule. Thus, in its genesis, the Shi'i political imaginary developed in the form of a discourse of justice and liberation. In this discourse, the State and its discourse of power appeared alien, illegitimate and repressive, and the restoration of the authority of the Ahl-al-Beyt (Prophet's Household) became a just and legitimate goal to be achieved sometime in the future. In time, Shi'ism appropriated the messianic concept of the Mahdi, and developed the notion of entezar (waiting for the return of the concealed Mahdi). The ideological development of the Shi'i imaginary in modern times was heavily loaded with the idea that the return of the Mahdi was imminent, and an Islamic revolution was needed to prepare the condition for the revolution of the
Mahdi. But this modern development could not happen outside the immediate Shi'i tradition in Iran, which was a mainly quietist and scholastic tradition based on political abstention and religious scholarship. The practice of *taqiyya* (dissimulation of belief), which had developed under political repression, was the basis for the diversion of Shi'ism from a primarily political cause to a religious practice based on *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *kalam* (theology).

The discourse of scholastic Shi'ism was a long-term consequence of the political dispute that began after the demise of the Prophet over the issue of succession. A movement that began as a political dispute grew in time into a theological and juridical discourse, which offered itself as a distinct religious belief with its own social, political and moral philosophy, which was derived from novel interpretations of the sacred texts and traditions. This discourse, nonetheless, remained in principle a discourse of dissent with respect to the discourse of the State, which was mainly to maintain the legitimacy of the Umayyad and then Abbasid caliphates. Scholastic Shi'ism gained political significance in Iran since the early sixteenth century with the rise of the Safavid dynasty and the adoption of Shi'ism as the State religion.

The discourse of mysticism in Iran may be best understood as an internal division within the scholastic discourse. Although Persian mysticism had its roots in the pre-Islamic pantheism, its development in the form of *irfan* was significantly influenced by the Islamic and particularly Shi'i scholarship. The mystical tradition in Iran may thus be understood as a collection of heterodox poetic-philosophical discourses, which deviated from the orthodox Shi'i scholasticism offering esoteric interpretations of the sacred traditions. It was manifested in the formation of several Sufi orders, a new speculative philosophy, the mystical poetry of *irfan*, and the scattered millenarian movements throughout Iran.

The process of competition and dispute between contesting truth claims became the main vehicle for the development of an Islamic revolutionary ideology. But this religious ideology could not have come of age as the mobilising force of a modern revolution had it not been for its encounter with the West and its discourse of modernity. The process of the formation of the ideology of Islamic Revolution can therefore become comprehensible in the context not only of the internal conflict between the traditional discourses of power in Iran, but also in the confrontation between Iran and modernity.

No doubt, the transformation of the political philosophy of Shi'ism in the modern time had a lot to do with the emergent social, economic, political and cultural problems that Shi'ism as State religion, with much social and institutional influence, had to deal with. At the social level, there were problems created by new forms of social stratification. In the economic sphere, there were problems caused by the rise of world capitalist system and its expansion to domestic markets of Iran, still a traditional society. Political problems included those produced by the colonial expansion of the West and the tendency to draw a new geopolitical map of the world. And Iran’s cultural problems were caused by the real and perceived threat of the Western culture to the indigenous culture.

The Shi'i imaginary of protest thus asserted itself in a discursive field of political, philosophical and spiritual competition between the imaginaries of justice and freedom on the one hand, and the imaginaries of domination and repression on the other. The analyses of imaginary constructs, such as ideologies and utopias, therefore, can give fruit only in this discursive historical perspective. Given this context, I shall build on my previous arguments to review the historical background of...
the interaction between what I call the ideologies of resistance and oppression in Iran. In this chapter, I shall trace various phases of the development of Shi’i political philosophy from the beginning to the modern time. In the following chapters, I shall use this historical analysis in a detailed discussion of the development of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution in recent times.

The Shi’i ulama, as the main element of the continuity of the Shi’i political tradition, have been part and parcel of the history of development of political philosophy in Shi’ism. Therefore, a large part of my review of the development of the Islamic revolutionary ideology will have to do with the intellectual developments within the ulama ranks in the context of their historical interaction with the State and society. For this historical overview, I shall rely mainly on a critical reading of the existing texts that I consider credible and have been more readily available. No doubt, my interpretation of these developments can only be one of many possible interpretations; and as such, it is open to critique, questioning and correction.

The Significance of Islamic Political Philosophy in Iran

Shi’i political philosophy was instrumental in the formation of an Islamic collective imaginary in Iran, an imaginary that penetrated the political culture of Shi’i believers via new interpretations of the collective memories of Islamic history and mythology. The motivational energies that this imaginary released in the Iranian psyche created a strong momentum toward the formation of an ideology of revolution (Islamic Revolution) and a utopia of State (Islamic Government). The motives behind this development arose from various sentiments or perceptions of reality.

These sentiments or perceptions were based on varied motifs like hatred, humiliation, despair, envy, oppression, injustice, and of course desire and hope. The source of some of these sentiments was in the past, particularly in the unfulfilled political aspirations of the Shi’i Imams. There was a deep-rooted resentment on the part of Shi’i believers with the subversion by the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphas of the legitimate and divine right of the Household of the Prophet to lead the Muslim community spiritually as well as politically. Therefore, there was naturally a collective sense of hatred of the incumbent rulers who were perceived to be occupying the positions of political authority illegitimately. This perception was basically a result of the success of radical Shi’i activists to identify the incumbents with the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs.

Many other sentiments had their roots in modern times. For example, a strong sense of humiliation was felt by the general public as a result of the inferiority of the Iranian State with respect to modern Western powers. Despair was another strong sentiment affecting the public opinion in modern times as a result of the collective fear of cultural extinction by the West. Envy was a feature of the resentment of the lower classes toward the widening gap between the poor and the ever-affluent upper classes. In the modern cities and in the rural areas, the poor and the powerless perceived the rich and the powerful as “world-devouring” and “blood-suckers”.

The perception of being oppressed by the State also had modern roots. Here secular political agitators had done a tremendous job since the end of the nineteenth century. This feeling was enforced by the enhancement of the State military power in modern times. The public perception of injustice was another modern sentiment, which was closely connected with State’s imposition of new cultural, social and economic pressures on the population. But there was nonetheless a strong collective desire for assertion of a new dignified identity worthy of recognition by others, and
the hope that this collective identity would defend the people, their cultural values and their beliefs, against a world, which was perceived to be sinful and dominated by non-believers. This hope was therefore a hope for a kind of collective salvation in a situation that was seemingly desperate. This desire for salvation was, however, a worldly desire, because it was perceived in terms of a force that would bring Iran as a modern nation into a prestigious state of existence in the modern world.

As Jean Baechler has suggested, sentiments can animate people and drive them into a state of rebellion against the existing social and political order. Baechler has rightly criticised the neglect of the autonomous role of such important factors as dignity and prestige in motivating the quest for power. Such neglect has been a feature of the modern politico-economic discourses, and particularly the Marxist discourse. After all, the Marxian notion that all conflicts have economic origin has resulted in a serious neglect in the literature of revolution of the motivational force of popular sentiments in driving revolutionary politics.

One cannot attribute the quest for power and prestige either to purely natural-instinctual drives of human beings, or simply to man’s culture as against his nature. Although such sentiments as hatred, envy, power and prestige may have originated from human aggressive instincts, there is little doubt that politics as the social expression and organisation of these sentiments is anything but a product of the sublimating force of human culture, which is manifested in concrete cultural imaginaries. In modern Iran, culture and language - in the form of sacred texts, narratives and rituals - provided a symbolic environment where human instinctive desire for power was sublimated into the imaginaries of the future, which were perceived to make a better and more dignified life possible.

A main factor contributing to the formation of the Shi'i revolutionary ideology was arguably the breakdown of the legitimacy of political authority, which had left the collective desire for power, prestige and a better material life unfulfilled and frustrated. Psychoanalytically speaking, the repression of these desires had displaced them into the unconscious layers of the collective psyche. The unfulfilled desires were thus manifested in cultural fantasies, millenarian expectations, hatred of the government, refusing to obey the laws, protesting against the outmoded relations of power, and occasionally acts of aggression.

The breakdown of the legitimacy of the State in modern Iran was, in short, manifested in the form of a state of crisis in the relationship between the people, the religion and the State. No doubt this breakdown was a result of a long-term historical development involving internal rebellions and revolutions, wars with other civilisations, cultures and nations, the growth of the State and the peril of the loss of religion and culture. It came to a head when the Shi'i political philosophy - through creative interpretations of the religious tradition - grew into a modern political ideology. This ideology, by virtue of its cultural roots, sublimated the unfulfilled and repressed collective desires into an imaginary of revolution, convincingly portraying itself as Good and the incumbent political order and its international allies as Evil.

Even more importantly, this political ideology could identify itself with liberty and equality, and the ruling authorities with bondage and injustice. It heralded “a return to origins” and an “absolute salvation”, which would celebrate a “golden age of innocence”, and would defy the corruption of the cultural, political and economic dependence on foreign powers. It successfully identified the State as responsible for internal oppression, external disastrous wars and the endemic economic crisis. It was

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1 Baechler, J., Revolution, Basil Blackwell, New York, 1975, p. 93
2 Ibid, p. 131
also successful in attributing certain politically neutral events, such as natural disasters, to the corrupt nature of the existing political regime. As such, it successfully posed itself as the recipe for reversal of the fortunes of the poor, the weak and the humble. And finally, it created a charismatic leadership with religious sanctity that was perceived to possess extraordinary virtues, and able to make the wishes of the believers come true.

Of course, the development of Shi'ism, as a political ideology fit to tackle modern problems did not mean the transformation of the nature of Shi'ism in the modern secular sense. In other words, and despite the claims of some of the critics of the Islamic Revolution, in becoming an ideology, the political philosophy of Shi'ism did not shift the primary theological and jurisprudential concerns of the Shi'i faith. Such mistaken assumptions as referring to the politicisation of Shi'ism as a shift from its purely religious doctrinal positions, have to do with the assumption of universality of the Western political developments, developments that have led to what we call secularism.

To be sure, the development of modern politics in many Western societies involved the rise of liberal and socialist political ideologies via modern revolutions. These ideologies sought power for the people to resist the absolute and corrupt power of political and religious establishments. However, in Shi'i Iran, colonialist expansion of the West ensured that no modern credible ideology inspired political movements with real political, social and economic benefits for the population. There, the popular and institutional influence and functions of religious authorities remained largely intact. Consequently for the majority of Iranians, the religious culture, as the core of a valid collective identity and national integrity, became the only value worth to fight and even die for. As such, in Iran, politics became primarily an instrument for the defence of Shi'ism as the representation of cultural integrity and national identity of the population.

The Shi'i Political Philosophy in Transition

The historical significance of Islam in determining the outcome of political struggles in Iran has been largely attributed to the fact that Iranians adopted Shi'ism as an ideology of resistance. Shi'ism's reputation for militancy derives from the original resistance of its followers to the Prophet Muhammad's official successors who conquered Iran. Subsequently, Shi'ism underwent drastic changes as a result of doctrinal innovations. One important doctrinal change was the formation of Twelver (Ithna'ashari) or Imami Shi'ism. This process had significant political ramifications, especially in providing for the doctrinal justification for the contemporary politico-cultural influence for the Shi'i ulama in Iran. The ulama were gradually recognised by the population as the main interpreters of the rulings of the Shi'i sect of Islam. In no other Islamic sect did the clerics acquire such a monopoly of religious authority.

In Iran, where the overwhelming majority of the Shi'i population live today, the ulama domination of religious leadership did not form as an immediate result of the ascendance of Imami Shi'ism in the seventh century among the Iranians. In fact, until the sixteenth century, the Shi'i believers were in minority in Iran. It was with the rise of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century, the enforcement of Shi'ism as the State religion and the marginalisation of other Shi'i schools, that the ulama gained a

1 It may also be argued that even in the West the domination of the liberal and socialist schools of thought in the process of secularism should not be allowed to conceal the fact that secularism in West is deeply rooted in various variations of the Christian faith.
strong, social, political and cultural influence. Nonetheless, the theoretical and doctrinal foundations of the political significance of Shi'ism go back long before the Safavids to the time of the rise of Islam.

Nikki Keddie has attributed the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the need for “State formation” in Arabia. According to her, Mecca and Medina at that time, “as relatively advanced trading and agricultural cities outside the direct sphere of Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, were at the stage of State formation, and needed an ideology to unify the urban populace and the nomadic tribes around them into a State.”¹ Thus, from its inception, the Islamic movement under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad had a political character, its immediate task being to form a strong State. The intertwining of religion and politics, therefore, as many experts on Islam have noted, began with the Prophet Muhammad himself. He led his community politically as well as religiously. The first Islamic State was set up in Medina after the opponents of the Islamic movement were crushed in several battles (ghazavat) by the Islamic army under the command of the Prophet Muhammad himself.

From very early on, the political philosophy of Islam attended to the major areas of social life including the role of the State in the economy, legal system, and norms of social morality. Therefore, the question as to who should rule the Muslim community after the Prophet was of crucial importance to the existence of Islam as a faith. In fact, it was around this burning issue, that the branch of Islam, which later was called Shi’i, was formed. Immediately after the death of the Prophet in 632, a fierce struggle for succession began among the claimants of leadership. Two major groups emerged initially: those who advocated the election of a successor for the Prophet by the communal elite on the basis of the seniority of the candidate, and those who felt succession belonged to the male blood descendants of the Prophet.

The candidate of the former group, Abu Bakr, succeeded the Prophet apparently with a majority support (his opponents conceded his leadership), and founded the tradition of the caliphate, which became the official form of Islamic government for centuries thereafter. This group later came to be called Sunni (followers of the Prophet’s traditions) with the advent of Sunni fiqh (law). The latter group, or as they were later called Shi’is, supported Ali Ibn Abitalib, Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, and advocated his leadership. This should have been a minority viewpoint at the time of Prophet’s death. The Shi’is, however, did not give up their claim to power. “Their originally political claim to power within a few generations took on a religious content.”² As such, Shi’ism incorporated new elements, which were not found in an explicit form in the Qur’an and the Sunnat (the tradition of the Prophet).

The early phases of the formation of the Shi’i political philosophy, based on the Shi’i traditions as perceived by Shi’i believers in Iran, began with Imam Ali’s unsuccessful bid for political power, which, according to the Shi’is, was the expressed will of the Prophet Muhammad himself. On his return from his last pilgrimage to Mecca, in a place called Qadir-e Khom, the Prophet is believed to have designated Ali as the leader of the Muslim community after himself. Actually, Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman, three of the most prominent of Prophet’s disciples and warriors, ascended to the leadership of the Muslim community as grand caliphs (kholaflay-e rashedin) in what was considered by Ali’s followers as a clear act of usurpation of power.

Ali’s apparent consent to the political authority of Abu Bakr, Omar and Othman is believed by the Shi’is to have been out of his concern for preserving the political unity of the Muslim community after the demise of the Prophet. His action

² Ibid. p. 5
was thus seen both as a pragmatic strategy conceived by an astute political thinker, and as a courageous act of selflessness and generosity by a mystical figure free from worldly attachments. This phase of the formation of political philosophy of Shi‘ism led to Ali’s ascendance to political power as the fourth grand caliph.

The five-year period of Ali’s actual rule after the third Caliph Othman could be considered as a new twist in the early development of the Shi‘i political philosophy. In this period, the concept of just government was shaped in the minds of the Shi‘i believers. Nahj-ul-Balaqa, the collection of Ali’s spiritual contemplations, his sermons and edicts, and his advises and decrees issued to his appointed governors, has mapped the rules and procedures of a political leadership concerned with principles of social justice over and above any other consideration.

But the short-lived rule of Ali as caliph was problematic and strewn with conflicts from the beginning. The main conflict arose when Mo‘aviyya of the Umayyad clan, who was connected with Arabia’s aristocracy and had a strong political influence, challenged Ali’s authority in the name of Islam. It was in the context of this drawn-out conflict that a third political group called Kharijite (renegades) emerged, which rejected both the continuation of the caliphate under Ali or the transfer of the political power to the Umayyad dynasty. The Kharijites advocated a more popular, non-elitist political leadership. The Kharijite political attitudes could be considered in today’s political terminology as close to some form of republicanism.

Following the battle of Saffain and the ensuing conspiracies, Ali was ousted from office by Mo‘aviyya, and later was assassinated by the Kharijite Ibn-e Moljan. The Kharijite were also suppressed. But the rise of the Umayyad Caliphate did not end the claim of the Shi‘is to political power. Since the rise to power of the Umayyads was seen as a result of the conspiracy rather than legitimacy, the Shi‘is remained powerful contenders of power. According to Martin Kramer: “what began as a dissident position on the matter of succession in the seventh century blossomed in time into a full religious tradition, distinguished from Sunni Islam by its own reading of theology and sacred history.”

With the death of Ali and the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate (661-749) the Shi‘is lost much of their hope in gaining leadership. Nonetheless, a last bid for power was made by the Shi‘is in 680 when Imam Hussein, the second son of Imam Ali, challenged the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. It is reported that Hussein and his small number of followers, despite being heavily outnumbered by the Umayyad armed forces, engaged in a heroic battle in Karbala (now a city in Iraq) and were brutally massacred. Hussein’s death, or as Shi‘is put it shahadat (martyrdom), occurred on Ashura (the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim year), and until this day is passionately commemorated by the Shi‘i believers. One of Hussein’s sons who survived the massacre was able to carry on the line of Shi‘i leaders (Imams).

The uprising of Imam Hussein against the Umayyad Caliphate to restore the Shi‘i political leadership, and his tragic defeat, may be considered as a turning point in the making of the Shi‘i political attitude into a religious doctrine. This period began with the experience of injustice and the attempt to restore justice by returning to power a legitimate politico-religious authority in the person of a members of the House of the Prophet (Ahl-ul-Beyt). It ended with the tragic realisation that such attempts involved great risks, and that they were unlikely to succeed at least in the near future. But in this process, a strong collective belief came of age: the belief that only the members of the House of the Prophet were legitimately qualified for the

leadership of the community of believers. In time, Ali and his male descendants came to be regarded by their followers as infallible Imams. They were considered infallible (ma'soum) because they were believed to be immune to committing sins. This religious conviction carried within it a concrete political expression in the consideration of the infallible Imams as politico-religious leaders, and in the belief that the Imams had a hereditary right to political power.

The increasing suppression of the Shi'i believers after the death of Hussein left little, if any, possibility of active political opposition to the Caliphs. The militancy which dominated Shi'i struggle for political power since the death of the Prophet Muhammad, therefore, gradually subsided and an era of apparent political quietism began. Messianic ideas entered into Shi'i belief and were expressed by the notion of occultation of the twelfth Imam. “The de facto depoliticisation of the Shi'i sect of Islam occurred as early as the mid-eight century when the sixth Imam Jafar al-Sadiq reportedly renounced, albeit temporarily, political rule, and the political functions of the Imam were indefinitely postponed.” At the same time, he did not grant legitimacy to the Caliphs who were increasingly seen as the usurpers of the rights of the Imams. “The growing unpopularity of the Umayyads, who were closely tied to an early Arab aristocratic group and did not meet the needs of either the middle or the popular classes, led to an underground anti-Umayyad (Shi'i) movement.”

The formation of the Twelver or Ithna'ashari Shi'ism, which offered the twelfth Imam as the final infallible Imam may be considered as another major turn in the early development of the Shi'i political theory. Although there were other variations of Shi'ism, which believed in the authority of five and seven Imams (Zaidism and Isma'ilism), the Twelver Shi'ism was politically significant because of its politicisation of the concept of the Mahdi (the divinely guided one). This concept took shape around the belief that the twelfth or the last Imam was destined to go into concealment because the world was not yet ready for a divine government. However, it was believed that the twelfth Imam would return at an appropriate time in the future as the Mahdi to restore the rightful authority of the House of the Prophet and establish the divine government of God on earth.

The messianic character of Twelver Shi'ism appealed particularly to the members of the lower classes. This was the case because the poor had long cherished the promises of the Qur'an about social justice. Thus, it stands to reason that Imami Shi'ism should have taken shape as a consequence rather than the cause of social and political dissent. In the words of M. Bayat: “Various movements of revolt, organised under the Shi'i banner against the nascent Sunni State, were essentially politically oriented.” Gradually though, as Bayat suggests, aspirations for social justice, transformed political opposition into a religious sectarian movement with serious doctrinal implications.

The Early Stages of Imami Shi'ism

A major point of departure of Shi'i from Sunni Islam was clearly the notion of Imamate, “the institution of a succession of charismatic figures who dispense guidance in comprehending the esoteric sense of the Prophetic Revelation.” Concepts of the Imamate have varied with regard to the number of Imams and the extent of their authority, hence the creation of different schools, such as Zaidism (believers in five Imams),

3 Bayat, M. “The Iranian Revolution …”, 1983, p. 34
4 Algar, A. Religion and State in Iran (1785-1906), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969, p. 2
Isma'ilism (believers in seven Imams), and Twelver or Imami Shi'ism (believers in Twelve Imams).  

According to W. Montgomery Watt, it was only between 874 and about 920 that Imami Shi'ism took definite shape. This period was designated as the period of the Lesser Occultation (Gheybat-e Soghra). It commenced with the proclamation of the disappearance of the twelfth Imam, spanning the period that the Imam was believed to be in direct contact with certain deputies of his will, and ending with the proclamation that direct contact with the Imam had ceased.  

The era following the Lesser Occultation, which is believed by the Shi'is to have continued to this day, is referred to as the era of the Greater Occultation (Geybat-e Kobra). As M. Momen has suggested: “no aspect of the history of Shi’i Islam is as confused as the stories relating to the disappearance of the twelfth Imam and the ensuing events.” Montgomery Watt has noted: “Twelver Shi’ism could reasonably take shape only after the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam.” Jassim M. Hussein, although admitting that Watt’s suggestion stands to reason, adds that “there is ample proof that traditions claiming that the twelfth Imam would go to occultation existed before 874.” Miraculous stories aside, Imamism was shaped on the basis of four important elements, which had developed since the death of the Prophet Muhammad around the question of succession.  

First, there was the idea of charisma attached to the descendants of the Prophet through family ties. A corollary to this was the belief that the leadership of the community should be entrusted to these charismatic figures. Ali was seen as the significant embodiment of this charismatic leadership. The cult of the charismatic leadership of Ali made ground for the second major element of the early Shi'ism, namely the idea of “the transmission of authority by designation”. An idea, which has led Montgomery Watt and others to the conclusion that according to the Shi'i political philosophy “the ideal form of the rule is autocratic.”  

Third, there was the messianic idea of the Mahdi, which in turn can be perceived as a consequence of the fact that the Shi'i charismatic leadership suffered defeat but retained its legitimate claim to political authority. The Mahdi, it was believed, would reappear some day to institute the realm of perfection and justice. The attraction of this conception of the Mahdi was that it gave a measure of hope to Shi'i believers in opposition to the Sunni Caliphate. At the same time, it projected an apparently quietist and, at times, apolitical feature for the faith. This seems to be at the root of assumptions about the strong link between belief in the Mahdi and political quietism.  

Fourth, there was the idiosyncrasy of adl (justice), which was not embraced by the Sunni Islam. Accordingly, God was perceived as “infinite justice”, implying that He has left the people free to choose between good and evil deeds, and that He did not predestine all human action. This rationalistic interpretation, which later became a principle of Imami Shi'ism, was first put forward by one of the early Islamic philosophical schools, the Mu'tazilite. The Mu'tazilite held that “good and evil could be

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1 For differences between Twelver Shi'ism, Isma'ilism and Zaidism see Allama Tabataba'ie, M. H. Shi'ite Islam, London, Allen and Unwin 1975, p. 82  
2 Momen, M. An Introduction to Shi'i Islam, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985, p. 161  
4 Ibid. p. 22  
5 Ibid. pp. 21-33
apprehended by reason, and that, since God as infinite justice, could not be responsible for the civil acts of man, man must be the creator of his own act.  

An important implication of this way of reasoning was quintessentially political and doctrinal. Referring to God’s adl, Shi‘is could argue that the Sunni caliphate was not necessarily God-given - a premise, which became a basis for the claim that the Umayyad and later Abbasid caliphs usurped political power, which rightfully belonged to the Imams. A wrong had been done, and therefore it must be corrected. Obviously this allegory had the potential of being used in different political and doctrinal contexts. As a leverage for political opposition, it could be used by the Shi‘is activists against the State. And in philosophical and jurisprudential disputes about the nature of God and His intervention in the world, it could be evoked by the Shi‘is philosophers and jurists against their Sunni counterparts.

The belief in God’s infinite justice, the charismatic leadership of the Imams and the transmission of authority, along with the attribution of divine powers to the Imams and claims of their infallibility, demarcated the Shi‘i political, philosophical and legal understanding from that of the Sunnis. But this conflict was intense particularly in the political sphere and over the issue of succession of the Prophet. As Michael Fischer has suggested: “To Sunnis, Abu Bakr, Omar and Mo‘aviyya were good caliphs, men without whom the survival of Islam would have been in question. For Shi‘is, they are three of the key men who perverted Islam so that from then till the present, Islam has been unable to fulfil its promise as a just social system.”

Early Shi‘ism gathered support in Iran most probably because its understanding of the Umayyad caliphate as illegitimate appealed to the ethnic sentiments of Iranians under the Arab rule. This outlook, Keddie notes, provided for much of the support by means of which the Abbasid caliphate was able to replace the Umayyads in 749. The Abbasids had expressed concern about the tragic encounter of Ali’s descendants with the Umayyads before they assumed power. This might have aroused the sympathy of the Iranian Shi‘is, who were still in minority. However, this trend was reversed as the repression of the Iranian Shi‘is continued under the Abbasid caliphate.

Edward Browne was impressed by the persistence of the pantheistic notions of pre-Islamic Persian religions and the traces of Hellenic speculative philosophy in the “heretic” Islamic sects that flourished in Iran after the “imposition” of Islam by the Arabs. He thus pre-maturely described Iranian Shi‘ism as a “heterodox sect that like Sufism, Isma‘ilism and mysticism was born on Persian soil ... (in order) to vindicate the claim of Aryan thought to be free, and to transform the religion forced on the nation by Arab steel into something which, though still wearing a semblance of Islam, had a significance widely different from that which one may fairly suppose was intended by the Arabian Prophet.” This interpretation may have come from Browne’s encounter with a rich and fairly sophisticated system of speculative philosophy, which had been developed by Iranian Shi‘i scholars in contrast with the mainly jurisprudential Shi‘ism.

As for their political stance, Iranian Shi‘is gave up whatever hope they had invested in the Abbasid caliphate following their treacherous treatment of the Iranian warriors, like Abu-Muslim, who had helped them to overthrow the Umayyad Caliphate. By expressing an intense devotion toward Imam Ali and his descendants, Iranian Shi‘is continued to identify themselves, politically as well as spiritually, with their oppressed Arab co-believers rather than with the Abbasid caliphate, a process

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3 Brown, E. G. A Year Among the Persians, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1883, p. 123
that elevated the standing of Shi‘ism in the then predominantly Sunni Iran. This disposition gave rise to much tension during the Abbasid rule between the Iranian Shi‘is and the Caliphate. This tension intensified under Caliph Mutawakkil who rose to power in 847. He made Sunnism the official religion of the caliphate.1

According to Montgomery Watt, the establishment of Sunnism as State religion was a major factor contributing to organisation and further theorisation of Imami Shi‘ism.”2 Naturally, any meaningful theorisation of Twelver Shi‘ism could logically have taken place only after the death of Hasan al-Askari, the eleventh Imam, and the obscure disappearance of his son, Muhammad (known as the Mahdi), around 874. According to Twelver Shi‘ism, the disappearance of the Imam was a voluntary concealment and in this state the twelfth Imam was not subject to mortality. Watt has acknowledged that such a theory “was clearly a deliberate political act”, particularly when the followers of the Imam also claimed that “he was represented on earth by a vakil (deputy) who was presumed to be in contact with the Imam.”3

As Amir Arjomand has pointed out: “This chiliastic form of authority when successfully activated by a claimant to Mahdihood (would) institute a charismatic structure of domination in which religious and political authority were fused.”4 The vakils who claimed to be in contact with the Hidden Imam (Emam-e Ghayeb) were prominent theologians: among them Kulaini, the author of Usul-al-Kafi - a major canonical Shi‘i text. The deputies of the Hidden Imam constituted the core of a growing group of theologians who further developed the Shi‘i fiqh.

There was in fact a succession of four deputies, the last dying in 940. After this date the period of the Lesser Occultation ended and the era of the Greater Occultation began, which still continues. The passage from the Lesser to the Greater Occultation, which put an end to the office of the vakil, can be seen as another deliberate political act in a situation where open action by claimants to this office was no longer possible. A claimant to the office of vakil, for instance, was put in prison in 945.5

The Evolution of the Imami Jurisprudence

A new twist in the early political development of Shi‘ism occurred in the period from the disappearance of the twelfth Imam until the rise of the Safavid dynasty. This period was marked by the total loss of hope for the return of political authority to its true owners in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, the doctrine that the true political authority belonged to the Shi‘i Imams was never lost to the Shi‘i believers and would re-emerge every now and again in the form of millenarian movements under the leadership of claimants to Mahdihood. This period also saw the recognition of the role of the Shi‘i jurists under the titles of ulama, mujtahids and foqaha as the interpreters of religious law in the absence of the Imam.

It is widely believed that Shi‘i jurisprudence was initiated in the eighth century by the fifth and the sixth Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq as distinct from the jurisprudence of the Sunni Schools. But, the important developments in the Shi‘i law took place after the disappearance of the twelfth Imam. There are two oral reports (hadith) from Imam Jafar al-Sadiq in the tenth century collection of such reports by Kulaini in his Usul al-Kafi that urge Shi‘i not to seek legal judgments from the non-Shi‘i State functionaries. One of these gives authority to make such

2 Ibid, p. 27
3 Ibid, p. 27
judicial rulings to the relaters of the Imam's oral reports, who were competent in mastering religious knowledge. In *Usul al-Kafi*, “iman (faith), aql (reason) and ilm (knowledge) emerged as linked with salvation.”

The rise of the Buyid dynasty (932-1055) had a significant impact on the spread of *Shi'ism* in Iran due to its Iranian origin and its adherence to *Shi'ism*. Sir Percy Sykes has noted that “this family sprang from a Persian tribe in Daylam, which claimed descent from Bahram-e Gure (a legendary pre-Islamic Persian king), and professed *Shi'i* doctrines.” The rise of the *Shi'i* and Iranian Buyid dynasty in central Iran in the tenth century and their conquest of Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, initially encouraged the expansion of *Imami Shi'ism*. As Arjomand suggests, the rise of the Buyids facilitated “the proselytizing activity of the *Imami* sect, … (and) produced a corpus of polemical, theological and legal literature … (which) laid the foundation of the *Imami* rational theology (*kalam*).”

It should be noted, however, that at this stage *Imami* theology was still an essentially Arab phenomenon and was being developed under the aegis of the *Shi'i* Arab scholars many of whom had migrated from Arab lands to central Iran away from the caliphate heartland. Naturally, in this context, ethnic and cultural discord as well as disagreement on the question of legitimate political authority turned into a source of political and doctrinal tension and disputation, which marred the cordial relationships of the *Imami* theologians and the Buyids. The situation became particularly tense when the Buyids, largely because of political considerations, chose to keep an Abbasid figure-head as caliph in Baghdad and rule in Iran under the Abbasid auspices.

With the downfall of the Buyid dynasty a number of Sunni Turk dynasties conquered and ruled Iran, notably the Ghaznavid and Saljuqid, which gained prominence in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In this period the status of *Shi'ism* further declined mainly as a result of ethnic and sectarian prejudice exercised by the rulers. Ironically though, religious and ethnic discrimination was instrumental in stirring patriotic sentiments blended with religious ardour. Nowhere was the fusion of Persian patriotism and *Shi'i* devotionalism better accentuated than in the greatest Persian work of epic, Abol-Ghasem Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, which was composed around a thousand years ago during the reign of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi and brought the author much hardship. That *Shahnameh* epitomised the superiority of Persians over Arabs and Turks, and that *Shi'i* Ferdowsi glorified Imam Ali and his descendants in his book, was reason enough to outrage the Turk and *Sunni* Sultan Mahmud; a situation that entailed the persecution of Ferdowsi.

Meanwhile, as a result of the consolidation of *Imami* scholarship “a body of men grew up who knew the oral traditions of the prophet Muhammad and the Imams, and were familiar with the legal reasoning employed by Jafar al-Sadiq and his successors. The study of the oral traditions of the Prophet and the Imams became a central preoccupation of this group who came to be known as the *ulama* or *mujtahids*.

The thirteenth century saw the invasion of Iran by the Mongols. Paradoxically, despite the devastation brought about by the Mongol invasion, the later Mongol rulers encouraged artistic and religious development. According to J. R. Cole, in the Mongol period the “*Shi'i* jurisprudence became a well-developed speciality and major works were composed in this discipline.” Scholars like Sheikh Saduq and Allama al-Hilli were

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1 Arjomand, S. A. 1984, pp. 27-28
3 Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 28
5 Ibid, p. 37
leading figures of this trend who added to the number of the Shi‘i canonical texts. The result of the work of these men was a system of law, which gave Imamism a coherent and a distinct status. As Cole has pointed out, this legal system addressed most of the matters covered by law in the West: personal status (marriage, inheritance, etc.), criminal acts and commercial transactions. It also contributed to a system of philosophical theology.

According to M. Murtazavi, the period of the rule of Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty over a vast empire witnessed a kind of religious pluralism, which created a fertile ground for the flowering of religious variance. This situation, although it encouraged the development of a well-disciplined jurisprudential Shi‘ism, was also favourable to the spread of other religious viewpoints as well. A major boost was given, for example, to mysticism and Sufism, which had started in the Saljuq period and, as Arjomand has noted, did not fall in the sphere of the ulama authority, which governed the rationalised Shi‘i jurisprudence. The Sufi orders subserviently followed a charismatic personality to whom they attributed miraculous powers (karamat). Whereas, the custodians of Shi‘i scholasticism were predominantly the Shi‘i ulama who were experts in Imami theology and jurisprudence. Some of these men like Khadja Nasir-ad-Din Tusi were prominent politicians, giving counsel to the Ilkhanid rulers. Others like Allama Hilli were towering intellectual figures. As such, they have been suitably termed by Arjomand “clerical aristocracy”.

The spread of Sufism, however, occurred mainly at the popular level, as its association with miracles and magic appealed to the masses. According to Arjomand, the persistence of Sunnism and the growth of Sufism were the main barriers to the rapid spread of Imami Shi‘ism in this period. Even the rise to power of professed Shi‘i Ilkhan ruler Ghazan Khan (1295-1304) did not reduce the strength of Sunnism and the spread of Sufism. However, there appeared a piecemeal fusion of Shi‘i tenets into Sufism, which resulted in extreme devotion of some Sufi orders to Imam Ali and his descendants. Nevertheless, solemn theology made headway at administrative level notably in the legal system. This process was more evident in the wake of the decline of Ilkhanid Empire and the rise of local dynasties.

The Mongol Muzaffarid dynasty, which ruled in Fars in the fourteenth century, had certain notoriety in enforcement of the Islamic punishments (hodud). The poems of the great mystical poet Khadja Shams-ad-Din Hafiz, who lived in Shiraz under the Muzaffarid Shah Shuja, is marked by metaphoric criticism of the overemphasis of the State and the official religious establishment on public piety. At the popular level, a number of millenarian movements were organised by certain Shi‘itised Sufi orders, notably the Sarbidar and the Hurufiyya movements, which were inspired by the extremist interpretations of the messianic notion of the Mahdi. These movements sometimes led to the formation of short-lived small States.

The late fourteenth century also witnessed the conquest of a large part of Iran by Tamerlane (Timur-i-Lang). The Timurid period, which extended well into the fifteenth century, was marked by the continuation of the spread of intense Shi‘i devotionalism. This was evident “in the manuals of the guilds and, more spectacularly, in the building of the Gawharshad mosque on the site of the tomb of the eighth Imam in Mashhad by the Timurid Queen (Gawharshad).”¹ The decline of the Timurid dynasty also gave rise to a number of small States run by the tribal warlords until the rise of the strong State of the Safavid dynasty.

¹ Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 30
The *Imami* Legal practice

The early evolution of *Imami* Shi‘i thinking on jurisprudence in its Arabic context can be traced back to Islamic law and practice as it developed in the early Islam.¹ The *Qur‘an* was accepted by all Muslims as a source of law. The next most important source of law to gain wide acceptance among Muslims was *ijma*’ (the consensus of the community). As Fazlur Rahman has noted, this was the living tradition of Muslims who were still close to the Prophet Muhammad in time.²

*Qiyas* or analogy was another important source of the Islamic legal system. For example, by using legal analogy of the prohibition of the use of date wine in the *Qur‘an*, the Islamic legal experts established that grape wine was also to be prohibited. “This practice of analogical reasoning to derive legal judgements not explicitly found in the *Qur‘an*, or in the community’s collective memory of the Prophet’s practice, was called *ijtihad*, or individual endeavour. One who practised *ijtihad* was a *muftahid.*”³ Momen has defined *ijtihad* as “the process of arriving at judgement on points of religious law using reason and the principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh)*.” Finally, oral reports (*hadith*), attributed to the Prophet and transmitted by one or two persons in each generation, were put forward as a source of law. These four sources of law were more or less accepted by the *Sunni* as well as the *Shi‘i* Schools although with different interpretations.

As Momen suggests: “When Twelver Shi‘i Islam first emerged as a distinct entity separate from other Shi‘i groups at the turn of the second-third Islamic centuries (eighth-ninth centuries AD), it was principally the *ulama* who took the lead in defining its doctrines and evolving its polemics.”⁴ Obviously, as Twelver Shi‘ism was chronologically behind Sunni Islam, in most of its legal and juristic forms and practices, it tended “to follow the latter very closely.” However, there were clear lines of demarcation between the two schools in terms of their attempt to answer the socio-legal questions, which were not directly addressed in the *Qur‘an*.

Frustration of the political aspirations of the early Shi‘is, which had evinced itself in the Imami religious orientations also marked the Imami legal system. In contrast with the incumbent Sunnis, who attributed a reformist role to the Islamic law and viewed it as a modifying element superimposed on the existing practice, the Shi‘i legal philosophy proposed a legal interpretation of the *Qur‘an*, which would lay the foundation of an entirely new system of law.

As N. J. Coulston has noted in his *A History of Islamic Law*, juridically as well as politically, the Shi‘i understanding of Islamic law proposed a novel version of the nature of Islam. According to this version, in contrast with the Sunni version, Islam was seen as “providing an outright break with the past practice.”⁵ In practice, however, there were only a few sources of reference available to the Shi‘i jurists in order to develop a legal system entirely different to that of the Sunnis. Hence, their innovations were limited to laws regulating certain social transactions like marriage, divorce and inheritance. In the area of religious rituals minor differences could also be found.

Nonetheless, Shi‘i jurisprudence was able to draw on an additional source of knowledge: the traditions of the Imams. This source, although it provided a more varied base for legal reasoning, in a practical sense, created hindrances as well.

² Fazlur Rahman, ISLAM, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 70
³ Cole, J. R. in Keddie, N. R. ed. 1983, p. 34
⁴ Momen, 1985, M. p. xx
⁵ Ibid, p. 184
⁶ Ibid, p. 184
Momen notes that the *Shi’i* ulama initially used an uncritical method to derive the law from a collection of oral reports concerning the tradition and knowledge of the Imams. “It was Allama Hilli who established (in the fourteenth century) the methodology and terminology of the critical study of the *hadith* literature.” Hilli, following the Sunni models, rationalised *Shi’i* jurisprudence by introducing analytical and deductive reasoning into the theological and legal practice and literature. However, this reasoning took place almost entirely within the context of the tradition and knowledge of the Imams.

The aim of the practice of *ijtihad* seemed to be confined to interpreting, through rationalising the *hadith*, what Imams would have decided in any particular case. Historically, this limitation has curbed much of the innovative capacity of the process of *ijtihad*. The *Imami* jurisprudence therefore acquired a scholastic theological component, which transferred the authority of interpretation of the religion to the experts in the *Shi’i* theology and jurisprudence. The major pedagogical centre for this enterprise was the *madrasa*.

In his study of the *madrasa* system, Fischer has analysed the structure of the Islamic scriptural school and “its contribution to the formation of social consciousness through its product, a body of literate, scholarly-thinking men with their knowledge of the scripture, the written word.” Referring to Derrida (1967), Fischer emphasises the “determining effect” of scriptural tradition as a major cultural medium on the “way people think”. Portraying the evolution of scholarship in the *madrasa* system, he writes: “The form of pedagogy and the scholarly apparatus of the Islamic *madrasa* needed first to establish a textual canon and then to develop methods for deriving laws from the canon. Methods for dealing with inconsistencies in the texts and among commentaries on the texts, pedagogy for introducing elementary students to ritual duties and ideological justifications. Other pedagogies for initiating advanced students into both the canon and the legal techniques; rules of disputation that could serve either to stimulate exploration of a subject or to set boundaries on what was permissible to query and degrees for competence.”

In time, the legal and interpretative power of the ulama enhanced their social position and their judgement on socio-legal issues came to be taken as the judgement of the infallible Imams. This tendency was challenged by the *Akhbari* school of thought that attempted to reassert the primacy of the infallible guidance of the Imams and attacked the increasing power of the ulama. According to Arjomand: “the *Akhbari* conception of *Imamate*, which was dominant in the eleventh century, ... was hostile to all extensions of the authority of the Imams after the concealment of the Twelfth Imam ... and conceded de facto religious authority only to the compilers of their traditions (*akhbar*). Indirectly, however, it enhanced the stratification of the *Shi’i* community into ordinary believers and the *Seyyeds*, descendants of the prophet, who could claim to partake of the charisma of the Imams through descent.”

### The Political Attitude of the *Shi’i* Jurists

Although the significance of the *ulama* at this stage was mainly attributed to legal jurisprudence, they were also well placed to present themselves as the bearers of the political tradition of the *Shi’i* Imams whose legitimate claim to political power had been inhibited by temporal authorities. As such, they also obtained a de facto political significance. In principle, the *Imami* juridical norms, developed by the *mujtahids* in the eleventh century, accommodated the idea of the concurrent and independent

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1 Momen, M. 1985, p. 185
2 Fischer, M. M. 1980, p. 36
3 Ibid, p. 36
4 Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 13
existence of juridical and political authorities. Algar has noted that both activist and quietist attitudes to prevailing political authority could be “deduced from Imami belief, but it is clear that the latter came gradually to dominate the mainstream of Shi’ism.”

This, in effect, meant that even the ulama would have difficulty in claiming political authority. The implication of this attitude was the deferment of the advocacy of a total overthrow of the existing order in the name of a legitimate alternative. With the emergence of the notion of taqiyya (concealment of one’s belief) as an article of the faith, Abbas Klaidar notes, “the later Imams and the ulama refrained from directly challenging the established order.”

The practice of taqiyya and the inhibition of open political activity deeply affected further development of Shi’ism, particularly in the urban centres. The tradition of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq himself in refraining from open political activity was complemented with the belief that this concealment had made it essential to train and preserve a hard core of believers for the continuation of the faith and for possible future political action. Owing to the fact that Shi’i believers never had withdrawn their claim to political power, and that open political activity at the time of the Sixth Imam meant political naivete, such a practice seemed reasonable.

In its scholastic form, Imami Shi’ism thus became an elitist doctrine – the religion of a special few – which demanded a high degree of individual knowledge, belief and will power. As such, it acquired characteristics similar to Christian monasticism stressing devotion to otherworldly salvation and acceptance of a minority status in this world. This mode of thinking was instrumental in allowing the devoted believers to express their inner selves in the form of philosophical speculation and mystical contemplation. However, this individualistic inner isolation found ways to affect the society and politics at large. It conveyed the solemnity of the lifestyle of the strict believers to the population through a dogmatic doctrine. According to this doctrine, Islam had been diverted from its true path at a spiritual level, and it was the duty of the believers to revive the truth by fulfilling God’s commandments as they were originally meant.

The impact of the emerging forms of the practice of taqiyya was particularly evident in the socio-political attitude of irfan, which has much in common with the Western concept of gnosticism. In this tradition, which was a logical extension of a long-term abstention from political activity, many great Shi’i thinkers devoted themselves to the study of theology and philosophy. The result was an era of mysticism and the development of an esoteric interpretation of religious texts and knowledge, which led to the creation of a number of great works in poem and prose. The denigration of serious involvement in worldly activities - a characteristic of this view - was supported by the concept of occultation and belief in the illegitimacy of any political involvement in the absence of the Hidden Imam. Furthermore, there was a spread of Sufi orders mainly among the tribes, which inspired an undisciplined popular religion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Ironically, this trend gave rise to “a number of millenarian movements, all of which formally professed Shi’ism”, and demanded political power.

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1 Algar, H. 1969, p. 2
2 Ibid, p. 2
4 Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 30
The Safavid dynasty rose to power as a result of one of these millenarian movements. The rise of the Safavid State radically altered abstentionist political practices and created a new setting for the development of Shi'ism. Bayat argues that until the early sixteenth century, the Imami Shi'i sect “existed primarily as an important progressive school of Islamic theology without transferring its allegiance to a political cause.” However, with the establishment of Imami Shi'ism as the State religion by the Safavid kings in 1501, political involvement was superimposed upon the faith; nevertheless, the doctrinal base of its abstention from direct involvement in politics remained strong. In time, Shi'ism was transformed into an essentially political faith with contemplative, isolationist and quietist characteristics.

In its contemplative dimension, one could find similarities in the Imami faith to what Weber observed as the religious feeling of the seventeenth century Lutheran believers, inherited from the German mystics. This religious feeling is described by Weber as “a feeling of actual absorption in the deity, that of the real entrance of the divine into the soul of the believer, ... characterised by a passive search for the fulfilment of the yearning to rest in God.”

Safavid Shi'ism: The State Religion

Although Imami Shi'ism had found advocates in Iran very early on, its adherents there were in a minority, as elsewhere in the Muslim lands, up until the rise of the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722). With the advent of the Safavid Empire and the announcement of Shi'ism as the State religion, a fierce conversion campaign began in order to establish Shi'ism as the majority religion in Iran. The rise to power of the Safavid State and the recognition of Shi'ism as the State religion could be considered as the historical link between the earlier and later phases of developments in Shi'i politico-religious discourse.

The Safavid period was of utmost importance as it saw two main developments in Iran. One was the establishment of the first centralised State in Iranian history since the fall of the Persian Empire. This was, in part, a result of the mainly indirect influences of the European Renaissance and the rise modernity in the West. The more immediate backdrop of the formation of a strong centralised State in Iran was the religious and political rivalry with the Ottoman Empire, which was in a more direct contact with Europe. Iran’s main concern was that the Ottoman Sultan had now taken the place of the Abbasid Caliph, and claimed to be the principle political force representing Islam. The growing Shi'i population in Iran though regarded the Ottoman Sultan not any more legitimate than the Caliphs. He was also seen as the usurper of the legitimate superiority of the Shi'i faith and a defender of Sunnism.

The second major development in the Safavid period was the expansion and ultimately predominance of the authority of the Shi'i ulama as the custodians of the faith. Even this phenomenon should be seen in the context of the rivalry with the Ottomans and the increasing influence of the Western modernity. The new State in Iran desperately needed the support of the Shi'i ulama. The ulama would give the State a divine discourse of legitimation, which not only would enable it to attract domestic support and establish a unifying discourse of power, but also would make it appear in the global scene as a distinct identity.

1 Bayat, M. Mysticism and Dissent. Syracuse University Press, USA, 1982, p. xiv
2 Weber, M. Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. by T. Parsons, New York, 1958, p.112
The efforts of the Safavid monarchs to gain religious legitimacy for their State led to the infusion of religious and political establishments similar to the infusion of Sunni establishment with the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates. However, As Arjomand has shown in his book, The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam (1984), the Shi‘i religious establishment in conferring legitimacy to the State gained important political, legal and social positions, which gave them functions far beyond mere ceremonious legitimation of the State. Offices of the sadr and the qasi were two conspicuous examples of the elaboration of the institutional functions of the ulama in the Safavid period.

In this period, and especially under the leadership of the prominent faqih, Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, the Shi‘i ulama defeated their doctrinal rivals, who had denied the essentiality of the ulama as the custodians and interpreters of religion. As already noted, Shi‘ism although it was a minority religion in Iran prior to the Safavid period, nevertheless, had fervent followers there. For all its undesirability for the Sunni population, the imposition of Safavid Shi‘ism on Iranians resulted in the formation of the principal elements of a centralised State, emanating from a common collective identity based on a common religious faith.

Another important aspect of the development of the Shi‘i religious discourse in the Safavid period was the predominance of the Persian language as the language of the transmission of the faith. Persian of course was the main spoken language in Iran. It had also been the dominant bureaucratic and literary language for centuries. But it was only the language of the native Persian population of Iran, which many other ethnic and religious groups had called home. The Turkic tribes who had settled in Iran had in fact ruled in various parts of Iran for centuries. Some like Seljuqs and Ghaznavids had even created powerful dynasties. There were also the Kurd, Beluchi, and Arab minorities, not to mention the religious minorities like Jews, and Christian Assyrians and Armenians. But the language of the transmission of the Islamic faith to present generations was predominantly Arabic.

Safavid Shi‘ism did not question the principle of the predominance of Arabic as the language of the faith; but by encouraging the proliferation of Shi‘i narratives, poetry, tropes, idioms and rituals in Persian, it basically altered the language of the transmission of the faith. State-sponsored events, particularly large-scale annual rituals of commemorating the tragedy of Karbala, and the encouragement of the tradition of fictionalisation of the events surrounding the killing of Imam Hussein and his family and disciples, played an important part in the creation of a vivid collective memory for the ordinary Shi‘i believers who had now comprised the majority of the population. Shi‘ism as State religion and as the majority faith, and the Persian language as an instrument of cultural continuity thus became the cornerstone of the later development of the sense of nationality in Iran.¹

Moreover, the lack of a serious resistance to the official conversion to Shi‘ism, explains the tacit affinity of even Sunni Iranians with Shi‘ism. With the heating of the market of Shi‘ism, the Safavid period also saw the formation of a coherent body of the ulama. Just as the Christian clergymen wielded a lot of influence through their ministries and disciples on the formation of national sentiments in Europe, the Shi‘i ulama in conjunction with the Safavid State generated religious forces which formed the framework of what would later emerge as Iranian-Shi‘i nationalism.

As I noted earlier, the Safavid State adopted Shi‘ism as the State religion most probably because of political considerations in its rivalry with the Ottoman Sunni

¹ Some historians have already noted Shi‘ism, as a common and unique religion, as the source of nationalism in Iran. See, for example, Cottam, R. W. Nationalism in Iran, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964, p.9.
State. It sought to adopt Shi’ism as the basis of the legitimacy of an alternative Islamic State that would challenge the Ottoman State, which had reconstructed, solidified and expanded the disintegrating Islamic Empire of the Caliphate. Shi’ism thus emerged after a long waiting period as an alternative basis for political legitimacy distinct from that of the Sunni Caliphate. This was a chance to save Islam from those, who had distorted it, and to rebuild it on proper foundations. Consequently, in the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth centuries, a “structural relationship” developed between religious and political institutions in Iran, a relationship, which was as elaborate as the pattern of State-religion relationship in the Sunni World.¹ This relationship was founded on the religiously ordained power of the king.

Thus, the Shi’i ulama, as the most learned men in the realm of religious knowledge, came to be vitally needed by the State. The ulama influence derived largely from the authority of religious learning as the source of literacy and the knowledge of both physical and spiritual worlds.² The Safavids attracted many of the Shi’i ulama from the Arab lands to strengthen the scarce Shi’i knowledge in Iran. The spiritual functions of the ulama in legitimising the State, as Arjomand and others have noted, were carried out mainly in the form of the ritual of official praying (du’a-gu’i) and holding mourning ceremonies for the martyrs of Karbala. Hand in hand with this, emerged certain bureaucratic functions. As Arjomand has pointed out, the mosques and the educational system were integrated into the religious endowments and came under the administration of “the highest clerical functionary, the sadr”. Furthermore, the qasi, appointed by the ruler, presided over the judiciary branch of the Safavid State. As Corbin indicated: “One significant consequence of the establishment of Shi’ism, as the State religion by the Safavids, was that it gave birth to something like an official clergy, exclusively concerned with legality and jurisprudence.”³

Moreover, the transition of Shi’ism from a sectarian faith to a majority belief created doctrinal tensions. The essence of Shi’ism demanded a minority status for its adherents whose opposition to the existing political order involved an often quietist but unyielding political attitude. Theoretically, the real triumph of Shi’ism was possible only through the return and manifestation of the Mahdi. The establishment of a Shi’i State by Safavids violated this pattern and partially obscured it. Justifications for the ulama association with the State did not change the doctrine of Occultation, but it certainly transcended its implications. The claim of the founders of the Safavid dynasty to descent from the seventh Imam, and their Sufi origin, expedited this process.

Some Shi’i ulama “hailed the creation of the first Shi’i empire in history as the forerunner of the kingdom of the Hidden Imam. Many considered obedience to the new Shi’i State as incumbent.”⁴ The personal piety and charisma of the Safavid kings were also of great importance in maintaining their legitimacy. “Isma’il the founder of the Safavid dynasty was known as the perfect guide (murshid-e kamil).”⁵ Isma’il can be conceived as a representative of militant Sufism, who could find a stronghold among the tribes wandering in the area between the Ottoman territory and Iran toward the end of the fifteenth century. Qizilbash, a more powerful one of these tribes, had initiated serious rebellions against the Ottoman rule.

The grand leader and founder of the Safavid Sufi order was Sheikh Safi-ad-Din Ardebili, who is not considered to have advocated extremist political activities. Even

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¹ Arjomand, S. A. ed. Authority and Political Culture in Shi’ism, Sunny Press, Albany, 1988, p. 80
² In Islam, like in Christianity, both science and philosophy were generated within the religious discourse.
³ Cited in Algar, H. 1969. p. 5
⁴ Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 179
⁵ Ibid, p. 110
today among some Sufi orders, Sheikh Safi is remembered worshipfully. It is likely that a militant and millenarian version of Sufism had identified with messianic tenets of Shi'ism very closely; so much so that under Isma'il it merged with scholastic Shi'ism. In fact, the activation of aspiration for the advent of the Mahdi among the Safavid tribal constituency accounted for much of the worshipful support that Isma'il enjoyed during his conquests in Iran, and his battles with the Ottomans. Nevertheless, with the establishment of the Safavid State, with the growth of urbanisation, and with the enrichment of tribal Sufism by Shi'i scholasticism, the millenarian extremism of the Safavids was transformed into a powerful “Caesar-o-papist” State.

The long reign of Shah Abbas, the Great, the most glorified Safavid monarch (1587-1629), saw prosperity and stability in Iran despite the repressive nature of the polity. At the same time, lines of division appeared between the State and religious authorities, which was a natural consequence of the confrontation between political mobility and dogmatic rigidity. Under strong rulers like Shah Abbas practical necessities minimised dogmatic restrictions and pushed the ulama into acquiescence; but at the same time, the State provided the ulama with important governmental positions and a dignified social status, ensuring at least their tacit support.

By contrast, “Shah Tahmasp’s orthodox beliefs led him to confer the title of Nayeb al-Emam (Vicegerent of the Imam) upon the Sheikh al-Karaki... By deferring to the mujtahids in matters of religion and sacred law, he renounced all pretensions to religious authority, whose exercise was invested in the learned doctors of the Shi‘i dogma and the sacred law.” The relationship between the State authority of the monarch and the religious authority of the Shi‘i ulama was thus a contradictory one, and remained unresolved because of the overwhelming power of the monarch. The source of the contradiction on the side of the monarch was his claims to divinity through pretensions to lineage from the twelve Imams, claims that were in apparent contradiction to the doctrine of Occultation, so central to the Twelver Shi‘ism.

The contradiction on the part of the Shi‘i ulama arose from their structural dependence on the Safavid State, which had turned the sectarian tenets of Shi‘ism into those of a State religion that represented the faith of the overwhelming majority of the population. This in turn necessitated the legitimisation of the temporal authority, which was indeed a clear defiance of the belief in illegitimacy of all temporal rulers in the absence of the Mahdi. However contradictory in its theoretical foundation, the success of the Safavids in establishing a new uniform religion and incorporating the religious authority in the body politic, can be perceived as an important element in their success in creating a centralised State. The Safavid State thus rationalised the form of political domination into an enduring and stable institutional structure suitable for the administration of a prosperous centralised empire, which lasted more than two centuries.

**The Doctrinal Victory of Dogmatic Shi‘ism**

As I mentioned earlier, the Safavid period saw the doctrinal ascendancy of the Shi‘i jurists in the domain of intellectual thought in Iran. Naturally, doctrinal disputes were a feature of the process of the doctrinal ascendancy of the jurists. According to Arjomand, lines of division developed among the body of ulama that had become so indispensable not only to the legitimacy of the Safavid State, but also to its burgeoning bureaucratic apparatuses. A rift developed particularly between the ulama of Iranian background and those who had come to Iran from the Arab lands.

1 Ibid. p. 179
Generally speaking, the Iranian ulama, who were mostly Sunnis prior to the conquest of Iran by the Safavids, formally professed Shi'ism and entered the service of the Safavids as judges and clerical administrators. However, the Shi'i ulama who came to Iran from Arab lands were a group of religious professionals consisting of mainly of Shi'i jurists. The former group, as bearers of Iranian philosophical traditions, favoured mysticism and a philosophical interpretation of the faith. Its prominent figure Mir-e Damad founded the school of gnostic philosophy (irfan), known as the school of Isfahan. The latter group with a “narrowly dogmatic and juristic outlook” of Shi'ism gained prominence as mujtahids (those with authority to practice ijtihad) notably under the leadership of Mulla Muhammad Baqir Majlisi. As Etan Kohlberg has noted, Majlisi was “the most powerful religious figure in Persia under Shah Sultan Hussein.” According to Algar, Majlisi was “the first of a series of important and influential mujtahids who came to dominate not merely the intellectual and religious history of the country, but its political fortunes.”

As the juridical branch of the ulama grew in power in the seventeenth century, the Iranian proponents of philosophical tradition mounted an intellectual opposition against it. According to Arjomand, the Iranian clerics countered the Shi'i mujtahids with a radically different interpretation of Shi'ism. “In reviving Akhbari traditionalism, they discarded the legalistic exoteric rationalism of the mujtahids in favour of a gnostic rationalism that advocated inner-worldly salvation through the hermeneutic comprehension of the sacred texts.” Naturally, the philosophical and speculative interpretation of the Qur'an, and belief in a progressive understanding of religion, created a tense doctrinal struggle within the Shi'i school. Bayat notes that the tension arose as a result of the incompatibility of some speculative views with the principles of the faith.

Subsequently, the juridical mujtahids ruthlessly waged war against what they saw as religious heterodoxy, and achieved a fundamental doctrinal victory. “More inclined towards a legalistic approach to religion, and seeking to dominate the intellectual scene in Iran, the mujtahids imposed strict adherence to religious law, of which they declared themselves the sole guardians.” As the philosophical theology and mysticism drew on neo-platonic philosophy, the juridical party ruthlessly undermined it as the innovation of the Greek infidels. Arjomand dates the decisive triumph of the jurists over the speculative ulama at 1694. Hand in hand with the victory of the dogmatic party over the proponents of mystical and philosophical Shi'ism, went the institutional consolidation of the Shi'i jurists. What is known as orthodox jurisprudential Shi'ism (fiqh), guided by the foqaha (jurists) or mujtahids, has its roots in the institutionalisation of the juridical Shi'ism in the late Safavid period.

The doctrinal victory of the dogmatic Shi'ism and the enhancement of its practical functions in the running of the State bureaucracy became possible largely because the mujtahids succeeded in a relative rationalisation of the principles of the faith in order to make them workable on the social level. The scholastic and legalistic framework of the Shi'ifiqh (jurisprudence), which repudiated the inward emotional and ecstatic piety of the mystics, was best positioned to cast off its rejectionist attitude toward the State to which it could make important contributions. The mujtahids also repudiated the relaxation of social morality, caused as a result of mystical and philosophical speculations. And by advocating strong measures under the supervision

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1 Kohlberg, E. “Western Studies of Shi'a Islam”, in M. Kramer. M. ed. 1987, p.37
3 Arjomand, S.A. 1984, p. 145
4 Bayat, M. 1982, p. xiii
5 Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 154
of a new orthodoxy, they enforced their prescription for public piety through a revival of the collective Shi‘i rituals of eulogising the twelve Imams.

In addition, the mujtahids strode toward rationalising the idea of the expectant waiting for the return of the Mahdi, the Hidden Imam, by interpreting it as a silent waiting. This was of significant political consequences, as it tended to legitimise the State-ulama political authority in the absence of the Hidden Imam by easing the impulsive and irrational passion and enthusiasm of the ordinary believers for an imminent return of the Mahdi. However, the mujtahids remained aware of the potential surge of chiliastic enthusiasm and hysterical emotions of the public, which could be aroused by the activation of messianic notions by the claimants to Mahdihood. As such, they tried to direct these sentiments in support of their own political influence on the royal court. The ascendance of weak personalities to the throne in the late Safavid period facilitated the increase in the political power of the mujtahids to the extent that they could directly influence the monarch’s decisions.

Therefore, towards the end of the Safavid period, the increase of the mujtahids power was facilitated by both the creation of an official Shi‘i jurisprudential institution within the polity and the weakening of power of the king. The early Safavid period was marked by the domination of the monarch over the clerical establishment, which resulted in State-ulama mutual co-operation. However, in the later Safavid time, when faint-hearted personalities such as Shah Sultan Hussein ascended the throne, “a power struggle, launched by influential members of the religious institution, ended with the emergence of two distinct centres of power, religious and temporal.”⁴ This division of power had serious socio-political ramifications, which extended beyond the Safavid period and were reasserted in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Qajar period.

The power of the mujtahid was derived basically from his spiritual and practical functions, which were of considerable importance to the community. These functions were manifested in doctrinal and legal forms. From the doctrinal point of view the mujtahids following Kulaini established that at the time of the Greater Occultation, the believer’s primary loyalty must lie with the Hidden Imam. And that in this period the responsibility of the mujtahid was to provide immediate guidance in matters of practice.² The status of the mujtahid was further enhanced by the provision that every believer must seek guidance from a mujtahid through taqlid (emulation).³ “The institution of the mujtahid had the practical merit of ensuring a continuous leadership of the community and of providing a source of immediate authority that was neither too great to offend the claims of velayat (authority of the Imams), nor too restricted to be without practical effect.”⁴ Other practical functions of the mujtahids, which had legal base, included “the guardianship of the estates of the minors and orphans”, the administration of endowments, shrines and mosques, and “various grants of an individual and voluntary nature”.⁵ They also had the authority of the certification of documents. More importantly, the senior and more learned ulama were the recipients of Islamic taxes

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1 Bayat, M. 1982, p. 19
2 See Mahmud ibn Yaqiub Kulaini, Usul Al-Kafi, translated from Arabic to Persian by J. Mustafavi, Tehran, (nd.)
3 Borujerdi, Hussein Tabataba'i, Tawzih al-Masail, Illmiyya, Qom, (nd.) pp. 2-3. Interestingly, the obligation of emulation in Shi‘ism is matched by a liberal counter-provision that any male believer could potentially become qualified for self-guidance if he should become a mujtahid. In fact, no formal mandate exists in Shi‘ism to assign religious knowledge to the turbaned clerics alone. Any layman could become a mujtahid should he endeavour to master Shi‘i scholarship. Moreover, there has been no imposition of the choice of the marja-e taqlid (source of emulation) in Shi‘ism.
4 Algar, H. 1969, p. 8
5 Ibid, p. 8-9
(Zakat and Khums). All these made for a rather large source of income for the mujtahids. In addition to all this, the mujtahids obtained specific judicial functions under the Safavids and thus shared with the State the administration of justice.

**Decline and Fall of the Safavid State**

The fall of the Safavids revealed that over two hundred years the centralised government had not changed the tribal fabric of Iranian society. In fact, the Safavid dynasty itself was overthrown in 1722 by the rebellious Afghan tribes. Some scholars have suggested that the main cause for the decline and fall of the Safavid dynasty was “the deterioration in the character of the monarchs”\(^1\) This widely accepted account has historical merits. But weakness of personality alone might not have necessarily led to the disintegration of the Safavid State. Rather, the decline in the power of the Safavid State may be attributed to the defects that appeared in the incorporation of Shi‘ism by the State.

One major problem was that, with official incorporation of religion into the State, the means for serious criticism of State policies through the religious authority were restricted. The incorporation of religion into the State, which was instrumental for the construction of the Safavid centralised State, became a problem because it gradually desensitised the religious authority to public sentiments. And thus, the function of the ulama in bridging the distance between the State and society lost its vigour. There are a lot of fictions about the ventures of Shah Abbas, the great, to go among the ordinary people in disguise in order to learn about the grievances of the public about the government. These stories were perhaps generated in response to the gradual disconnection between the State and society in the Safavid period. In time, the State appeared increasingly as a force of coercion and tax collection insensitive to social and economic plight of the people. As such, the Safavid State, by over-emphasis on Shi‘ism as the instrument of its legitimacy, began to lose its popularity, and its very legitimacy began to tumble. This can arguably be conceived as contributing to the disintegration of the centralised State that the Safavids had created.

In effect, the process of rationalisation of religion in the Safavid period gradually degenerated into political intrigue, which at the end produced destructive consequences. By becoming an official part of the State apparatus, religion all but lost its status, as a structure of resistance to the State power, and as a voice for the expression of the grievances of the community of believers. By placing too much emphasis on upholding the codes of public piety, and spread of intolerance toward ethnic minorities and the believers of other faiths and sects, the Safavid Shi‘i establishment contributed to the resurgence of ethnic and sectarian unrest. This situation was also conducive to an atmosphere of intellectual stagnation.

Believers of the Sunni Islam, in particular, came under strong coercive pressure. This pressure ranged from social discrimination through political persecution and religious denigration. Annual ceremonies were organised, for example, for cursing Caliph Omar, respected by the Sunnis, but known by the Shi‘is to be Imam Ali’s political rival, and the one who led the Islamic conquest of Iran. Sectarian and ethnic repression was perhaps a major cause in the rebellion of the Sunni Afghans against the Safavid State. Toward the end of the Safavid period, the undue influence of certain Shi‘i ulama on the monarchs led to serious political

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\(^1\) Lockhart, L. *Nadir Shah*, Luzac, London, 1938, p.1
mistakes. The permissiveness of the ulama with close court connections also contributed to the corruption of the royal court and the neglect of the military.

From a politico-economic perspective, the stability and cohesiveness that the Safavid Empire enjoyed in its earlier period were based on a new social stratification. This new social stratification was based on the military and bureaucratic power of the central State and the means of the appropriation of economic surplus. The State was basically composed of the royal court, the bureaucracy and the religious establishment. Economically speaking, it relied mainly on the long-distance trade of the merchants and the largely coerced labour of the peasant subjects of the empire who produced the basic foodstuff. The integrity of this empire was based on the success of the State to “collect the tribute and redistribute the surplus” effectively, to use Wallerstein terminology.¹

Of utmost importance to the Safavid Empire was to keep the urbanised middle-class in a vulnerable political position in order to deny them the possibility to provide for the leadership of spontaneous rebellions by the primary producers. This end was achieved not only by the effective maintenance of the military and redistribution of the surplus, but also by the influence of the religious establishment to disallow such movements on the ground that they violated the religious legitimacy of the State. The failure of the later Safavid monarchs to maintain the military and a semblance of justice, and the deterioration of the status of the religious establishment, reduced the ability of the State in pre-empting tribal and peasant revolts of which it finally became a victim.

The Decline and Rise of the Ulama Influence

A new phase began in the political development of Shi’ism with the rise of Nadir Shah Afshar to power and the decline of the authority of the Shi‘i ulama. Surprisingly, under Nadir Shah, the founder of Afshar dynasty (1736-1747), the Shi‘i ulama came under severe State persecution. As Azar Tabari has noted: under Nadir Shah, “Shi‘ism was demoted to the status of a fifth orthodox school alongside the four Sunni schools. Prominent Shi‘is were persecuted and many of the ulama, under both the Afghans and Nadir Shah, fled to Najaf and other sanctuaries in Iraq.”²

Ironically, the persecution of the ulama forced many of them into migration. They immigrated typically to the Shrine cities of the Ottoman Iraq, such as Najaf and Karbala, away from the pressures of the Nadir’s rule. Nadir’s religious sectarian adherence is not known clearly. But it is known that, contrary to the Safavid policy, he did not rely on Shi‘ism as the basis for the legitimacy of his rule. Rather, he made a more general reference to Islam to gain a more universal religious legitimacy for his conquests in Muslim lands beyond Iran, typically in the Indian sub-continent. Under Nadir Shah, the religious policy of the State was determined by the goal of consolidating a “pan-Islamic empire”. Nadir’s “extensive military campaigns” were certainly one reason for “his firm and high-handed religious policy.”³ At any rate, the developments under Nadir, as Algar suggests, “accelerated the process of divorce between the religious institution and the monarchy.”⁴

In suppressing the Afghans, Nadir, a member of the Afshar tribe, sought to restore stability through appropriation of power and wealth via military conquest.

² Tabari, A. “Shi‘i Clergy in Iranian Politics” in Keddie, N. R. ed. 1983, p. 48
³ Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 215
⁴ Algar, H. 1980, p. 5
Nader's strategy for military expansion, based on an authoritarian one-man rule, reminds one of Alexander of Macedonia. He was definitely a strong personality as far as his capacity for war and conquest was concerned. He realised the need for religious legitimacy, but relied on it only pragmatically. As such, he made use of the legacy of the Safavid prestige to ascend the throne. Initially, he supported Prince Tahmasp Safavi in his quest for the restoration of the Safavid dynasty and soon became "Tahmasp's principal commander and adviser."1 And thus, he added to his own military power and prestige. This opening provided him with much of the means, which enabled him to ascend the throne.

As for the Shi'i ulama, the move to the areas under Ottoman rule, although it brought them a short-term disadvantage, in the long-term served them in curious ways. The important consequence of the immigration of the ulama to cities in Iraq was the promotion of their growing independence from the Iranian State. In the Ottoman Iraq, Keddie indicates, "the leading Shi'i ulama were not subject to economic or political pressure from the Iranian government."2 Although, the ulama suffered a heavy financial loss as a result of the confiscation of vaqf (endowment) properties under Nadir, they nonetheless learnt to "subsist on their own resources, totally independent of the State."3 Relying on the religious taxes paid to them directly by the community of believers, the ulama preserved the fundamentals of their social influence in Iran. Thus, they even developed a potential advantage for launching a political challenge to the Iranian State in case of its deviance from the Shi'i religious traditions. Moreover, while in the Ottoman territory, the ulama criticisms of the Iranian State would be unhindered by the local authorities due to the deep-seated rivalry and animosity between the Ottoman and the Iranian States.

As such, Nadir's period was of crucial importance in the further development of the political attitude of the Shi'i ulama. Nadir Shah attempted to break the State away from its reliance on legitimation by the Shi'i ulama but without much success. The Safavid Caesar-o-papist system of rule received severe blows under Nadir, but was not eradicated. After Nadir's death, the Safavid legacy of reliance on religious legitimacy remained the most viable form of political legitimacy.

New Modes of Religious Rationalisation

The next important phase in the development of the Shi'i political philosophy owed much to the relatively short period of rule by Zand dynasty (1750-1779). Karim Khan Zand, the founder of this dynasty, sought a compromise solution to the problem of legitimacy by maintaining an incarcerated Safavid figurehead as Shah Isma'il III while calling himself vakil al-ro'aya (deputy of the subjects).4 "The puppet Ismail was kept in captivity at Abadeh."5 Out of his thirty-year reign Karim Khan ruled undisputedly for over twenty years. According to Sir Percy Sykes: Karim Khan gave the exhausted Iran two decades of sorely needed rest.6

The late eighteenth century also witnessed the brief resurgence of the Akhhari school of thought, which rejected the functions of the mujtahid as incompatible with the authority of the Imams. The Akhbaris believed that "each Shi'i could rely on, and

1 Lockhart, L. 1938, p. 25
2 Keddie, N. R. 1982, p. 21
3 Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 217
5 Sykes, P. 1951, p. 279
6 Ibid, p. 280
interpret, the traditions of the Prophet and Imams, and hence the ulama were not needed to officially interpret the doctrine. Another Shi'i school of the late eighteenth century was Sheikhhism, which also denounced the growing powers of the mujtahid. The height of the Sheikhhism was also brief. But, it indirectly contributed to the intellectual development of another strong anti-mujtahid movement, Babism, which erupted in the nineteenth century.

Most probably as a response to growing anti-mujtahid agitation, Aqa Muhammad Baqir Behbahani (1705 - 1803), "launched and sustained a vigorous religious movement, known as the Usuli movement." Behbahani, a relative of Majlisi, said that the mujtahid was needed to interpret the fundamentals (usul) of the faith. The Usulis finally defeated their doctrinal opponents. This was in fact a revival of the doctrinal ascendancy of the Shi'i mujtahids in new terms. Although this doctrinal victory did not yet carry any strong political connotations; nonetheless, it contributed intellectually to the further development of the Shi'i political philosophy.

According to Algar, a reason for the victory of the Usulis was that "the institution of the mujtahid", which they supported, had the "merit of ensuring a continuous leadership of the community and of providing a source of immediate authority." Neither the Akhbaris, who rejected the necessity of a living authority to interpret the religious dogma, nor the Sheikhis, who believed in an authority which claimed direct contact with the Hidden Imam, enjoyed the rationale of the institution of the mujtahid. The Usuli movement "revived jurisprudential rationalism" and became the dominant intellectual trend in the nineteenth century Shi'ism. "The need to follow the rulings of a mujtahid, who was less fallible than any temporal ruler, created a doctrinal basis" for appeals to the mujtahids over the head of the ruler. These powers were increasingly used by the mujtahids in the nineteenth century.

This new mode of rationalisation of religion by the Usuli movement was in large part owed to its tendency to make the religious life and moral conduct accessible to the ordinary man. It did this mainly by giving the Shi'i faith a systematic and practical character. It avoided the idealist notions that valued the faith of the ordinary believers only if they could demonstrate through extreme ascetic spirituality that they were "the vessel of the divine light" and totally absorbed in God. Instead, it gave the average believer the opportunity to feel himself/herself as worthy of the faith by following worldly ascetic conduct, such as certain routine practices, which did not require an extreme spiritual transcendence.

The ordinary believer was thus required to pray regularly, obey certain regulations of personal and public piety, pay his religious taxes, visit the holy sites, and when circumstances arose contribute to the jihad, either by going to war, or by financially supporting the defence of the Muslim community. The believer was also required to emulate a qualified mujtahid of his choice in emergent duties that was not clearly defined in the routine practice, and leave the effort at extreme asceticism and acquisition of high religious knowledge to the mujtahids.

Weber's observation of the Methodist doctrine is to a certain extent valid in the case of the Usuli doctrine. Just as Methodism, the Usuli faith rejected the necessity of monastic asceticism and mystical contemplation as an essential part of the duties of the ordinary believers. And by subjecting the believers to certain

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1 Keddie, N. R. 1982, p. 21
2 Arjomand, S. A. 1984, p. 217
3 Algar, H. 1969, p. 8
4 Keddie, N. R. 1982, p. 22
personal and social moral obligations, the Usuli doctrine, like Methodism, "prevented
a premature collapse into a purely utilitarian doctrine of good works in this world."¹

The Ulama and the Qajar Dynasty

The Shi‘i political philosophy encountered modernity face to face for the first
time under the long reign of the Qajar dynasty from the late eighteenth to the early
twentieth century (1795-1925). Under the Qajar kings, the Shi‘i ulama were
couraged to return to Iran and play the same legitimising role that they played under
the Safavid dynasty. But this time, the ulama were much more independent from the
government, and their economic independence along with their social functions and
political influence provided them direct authority over the people. As such, the ulama
began to establish a de facto political authority, which was expressed in their role as
the defenders of the community against the atrocities of the State, and the conveyors
of the grievances of the public to the government.

Under the Qajar dynasty, the predominantly juridical Shi‘i ulama, empowered
by the victory of the Usuli movement, established a relatively coherent social group
with specific functions instrumental in the cultural and spiritual affairs of the
population. They had already been detached from the State during the domination of the
Sunni Afghans and the rule of Nadir Shah, and had maintained their prestigious
social status independent of the State. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, they
had also developed a relatively coherent political theory concerning the State power.
As we have seen, the position of the jurists as de facto regents of the Hidden Imam
had been established doctrinally after the defeat of the A khbari movement and the
universal recognition for the institution of the mujtahid.

From this standpoint, the believers were bound to consider the institution of
monarchy as ultimately illegitimate but tolerable as long as it accommodated the
religious law. The contradiction, of course, was seldom stated explicitly because of the
jurists’ lack of power of coercion vis-à-vis the State. Nonetheless, this inherent
contradiction was the source of most of the friction between the secular and religious
powers throughout the nineteenth century. Theoretically, “the ruler, like every other
believer who had not attained the rank of i j t h a d, was obliged to be muqallid (emulator) to a
certain mujtahid and to execute his rulings and pronouncements.”² But, the mujtahids
could not yet demand this obligation of the ruler authoritatively. The most they could do
was to hope that the king would follow their rulings in religious matters. And
religious rulings ( fatva ) were traditionally limited mainly to matters of jurisprudence,
and did not extend to issues that had a direct bearing on government policies.

Indeed, the mujtahids were not in a position to insist on the division of society
to muqallid-mujtahid on a political level, which would mean forcing the absolute
monarch to abdicate his power. Moreover, the theoretical basis for such a demand was
insufficient. There was no solid formulation in the Shi‘i fiqh to legitimise any State in
the absence of the Hidden Imam, even the ulama State. This needed a doctrinal
innovation to authorise the ulama to rule directly; and given the practical dominance
of the State over the ulama since the Safavid period, such innovative attempts were
inhibited.

To be sure, in the nineteenth century, Mulla Ahmad Naraqi issued certain
juridical rulings, which were primarily concerned with the re-establishment of the
legal authority of the Shi‘i jurists through political power. In his Awa‘id al-Ayyam, he

¹ Weber, M. 1958, pp. 125-126. Ayatollah Muhammad Khatami, the President of the Islamic Republic, referred to
the affinity between Shi‘ism and Methodism in an interview with CNN in January 1998.
² Algar, H.  1969, p. 23
asserted that according to the hadith, just as the kings would have authority over the people, the ulama would have authority over the kings. Yet, he did not go as far as claiming a direct political authority for the ulama. Overall, there appeared a symbiotic relationship between the ulama and the State during the early Qajar period, providing for the growing religious influence on the society and increasingly on the polity.

The founder of the Qajar dynasty Aqa Muhammad Khan, was the chief of the Qajar tribe, and as such repeated the pattern of a tribesman ascending the throne. Having proved more powerful than other tribal contenders to power, he subdued his rivals and formed a tribal confederacy around the end of the eighteenth century. Aqa Muhammad Khan’s constant engagement in military activity and his conquests in Iran resulted in the establishment of an absolutist monarchy comparable, in terms of its military and bureaucratic features, to the Safavid State. The rise of the Qajar polity coincided with the Usuli ascendancy in religious domain. The proclaimed adherence of Aqa Muhammad Khan to the Shi'i faith and his personal piety bore resemblance to the religious character of the founder of the Safavid dynasty, although there could be found marked differences as well. What should be emphasised here is that under Aqa Muhammad Khan the pattern of association of the State with the ulama was revived, but this time under the domination of the Usuli ulama.

Fath-Ali Shah, the second Qajar monarch, adopted a policy of token deference to the ulama. If Fath-Ali Shah’s apparent piety and his strong belief in Shi‘ism was one reason for this policy, the other reason could be the Shah’s perception that the State could not relate to the nation if it alienated the ulama completely. However, a policy of token submission of the State to religion could have only temporary success because it did not solve the fundamental conflict between the ulama and the State. The policies of Fath-Ali Shah’s successors tended to give up the conciliatory mood and under the pressure of events the contradiction passed into open conflict by the end of the nineteenth century.

In this conflict, there were certain factors, which placed the ulama on the side of the nation and at the same time alienated them from the State. The Usuli concept of representation of the Mahdi had made the social position of the ulama one of continuity. They were the guardians of religion and conductors of the spiritual life of the community. Their power was based on a messianic concept of authority: that of the Mahdi. "The continuity of the power of the ulama made for a close link with the community, to whom the State by contrast, appeared as alien and external, descending intermittently to exert taxes and to conscript soldiers."  

The ulama critical stance against the government intensified toward the end of the nineteenth century with the increasing influence of the Western governments, particularly Russia and Britain on Iran’s cultural, political and economic life. The politicisation of the ulama in this period was increasingly linked with the intensification of the grievances of the Iranian merchants against the government’s political and economic concession to foreign governments and businesses.

The ulama were also in a better position to address the existential confusion of the ordinary people in the face of historical developments of the nineteenth century by providing a religious explanation of the meaning and purpose of life. The obedience of the believers to the ulama was therefore a voluntary act arising from the obligation they felt they had to God. By contrast, the State demanded subjugation of the people purely through coercion. The alienation of the people from the State and their inclination to side with the ulama was reflected clearly in the unofficial but sacred

1 Ibid, p. 24
institutions of the bast (sanctuary): “Refuge from the illegitimate tyranny of the State was sought with the representatives of the only legitimate authority.”

Thus, in the Qajar period, the common alienation of the ulama and the people from the State served to bring them more closely together. The ulama came out to act more or less as national rather than communal leaders. This was primarily due to the fact that the sense of national identity in Iran since the Safavid period was closely associated with Shi‘i Islam. It should be noted that the political and economic developments under the Qajar dynasty, which contained new elements unprecedented in the earlier periods, played a decisive role in providing for modern forms of political activity, a phenomenon, which created new orientations in the socio-political and socio-religious attitudes of the ulama.

This phase of Shi‘i political development culminated in the participation of the ulama in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 under a reformed understanding of religion, which brought them into co-operation with the secular ideologues of the revolution. Some of the ulama even participated in the mainly secular ensuing Constitutional Government. Pro-Constitution ulama played an important role in putting pressure on the Qajar dynasty to accept the institution of a parliament and drafting of a constitution. This period saw the beginning of the development of Shi‘ism as a political ideology; politics, henceforth, grew from the position of an implicit and secondary aspect of the ulama concern to one of explicit and primary importance.

New Socio-economic Developments

The Qajar ascendance to power in Iran coincided with a period of intense rearrangement of the world order. The capitalist world economy, which had emerged in Europe since the sixteenth century had reached in Wallerstein words: “an equilibrium point in its relations with other world-systems: the Ottoman and Russian world-empires.”

Iran’s position as an empire had declined drastically following the collapse of the Safavid State, the invasion of the Afghans and the largely inconsequential wars of Nadir Shah. The relatively smooth period of Karim Khan’s reign was limited territorially and temporally, and vulnerable to tribal insurgency. What is more, the structural balance established under the Safavids between the State and religion had been lost due to the persecution of the ulama during the invasion of the Afghans and the reign of Nadir Shah. The Qajar State was finding that it had to seek alternative means to consolidate its power both internally and in relation to foreign powers. The impact of the early expansion of the capitalist world-economy on Iran was made through military, technological and commercial superiority of the West. Soon the Qajar State found itself compelled to adopt the ways of the modern world by bureaucratising, raising a standing army, homogenising the culture and diversifying the economy.

Three significant elements entered Iran’s social context under the Qajar dynasty. First there was the attempt by the State to modernise the polity, largely because it sought alternative ways to consolidate its power. This move had the implication of lessening the dependence of the State on religious authority as the source of its legitimacy. Second there was a sharp growth in trade with Europe, which gave an unprecedented impetus to commercial activities and urbanisation. One important repercussion of the growth in trade with the West was the import of modern

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1 Ibid. p. 24
2 Wallerstein, I. 1979, p. 26
Western ideas. Third, there was the increasing interference of colonial powers in Iran’s policy making, with its impact on the course of development there. These changes could not go without impact on the traditional institutions, notably the ulama.

Aqa Muhammad Khan’s constant engagement in military activity and his conquests in Iran and Caucasus once again resulted in the establishment of a system of absolutist monarchy, comparable in its administration to the centralised Safavid State. “The relative security achieved by the early Qajars, combined with a revival of urban life, commerce and administration, provided the necessary setting for the activities of the ulama.”

The replenished economy marked the advent of the Qajars with a kind of economic revival, which was unprecedented since the fall of the Safavid dynasty. The ulama relished the general stability and the relinquished hostility of the State, both of which gave them an open hand in pursuing their socio-religious functions.

But, the stability that Aqa Muhammad Khan achieved was mainly based on his power of coercion rather than any sustainable reforms in the socio-economic structure. His early childhood castration - reportedly ordered by Karim Khan - is cited as a motive for his vindictive nature after he ascended the throne. And his assassination by his own men, which is believed to be a reaction to his unbridled cruelty, put an abrupt end to the reign of this infamous warlord.

The process of the colonial expansion of Europe reached new heights in the nineteenth century during the reign of Aqa Muhammad Khan’s successors. Aqa Muhammad Khan’s conquests in the Caucasus were perhaps the last brave attempt to preserve Iran as a military contender in the world and prevent her decline to a “peripheral” status in the emerging world economy. But these conquests were reversed under his successors, and by the end of Qajar period, Iran as a crumbling hope for a new imperial power on the world scene reached its end. The decline of Iran as a world power, in similarity to the decline of the Ottoman Empire, conforms to Wallerstein’s assertion that: “the geographic expansion of the European world-economy meant the elimination of other world-systems.”

Iran lost much of its military power in the two wars with Russia in the nineteenth century under Fath-Ali Shah - the son and successor of Aqa Muhammad Khan - and had to give up the territorial conquests of Aqa Muhammad Khan in the Caucasus. Nor did it have access to modern military technology and discipline to rebuild its army. The State machinery was also weak and there was virtually no industry. Iran’s attempt to secure the honour of its imperial thus failed particularly after the unsuccessful military confrontations of Fath Ali Shah with the Russian Tsarist State.

Iran’s interaction with the modern world meant transition from pre-capitalist economic structures to a capitalist division of labour without being able to adopt modern cultural structures. Traditional cultural structures remained strong or were affected only marginally. Even traditional economic forms, such as sharecropping, agricultural tenancy and coerced labour remained intact. Nonetheless, the increased volume of foreign trade produced a measure of growth in the economy.

The long reign of Fath-Ali Shah (1797-1834), and that of Naser ad-Din Shah (1848-1896), provided for a measure of political stability and the relative growth of the agrarian economy after the conclusion of the wars with Russia. But the defeat in the wars had led inevitably to the increasing influence of Russia on the Iranian polity and economy. This era also witnessed the beginnings of Iran’s serious encounter with Britain at the height of the colonial period. The creation of a relatively peaceful

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1 Tabari, A. in Keddie, N. R. ed. 1983, p. 50
2 Wallerstein, I. 1979, p. 27
environment led to a period of sustained cultural activity as well. After a period of neglect men of letters and art found patrons among the nobles and notables.

The economic growth, however, was slow, which was partly caused by the low rate of population growth in the course of the nineteenth century. Charles Issawi has put this rate at a little over 0.5 percent, which he attributed to the bad hygiene conditions. With repeated outbreaks of cholera and plague, the population of Iran grew slowly from "perhaps 5 to 6 million in 1800 to about 10 million in 1914." There were also variations in demographic movements across the nation. Issawi has noted the expansion of several towns and the decline in the proportion of nomads. According to Ann Lambton, the demographic change was due to famine and epidemics as well as commercial movements, internal migration, and "a marked growth in the size of many towns". 

Economically, land was the main source of livelihood for the predominantly peasant population whose agricultural production laid the basis of the State revenue. Tax, levied on land, was exacted from the peasants predominantly via the land tenure known as *tuyul*, which was granted to the notables by the Shah. There was, in fact, various types of land - crown land (*khalisa*), private land (*melk*), endowments (*vaqf*), land without owner (*mavat*), and land fallen out of cultivation (*bayer*) - with different modes of ownership and exploitation. Tax farming was also widespread.

As for the social structure, Iran of the early *Qajar* period, which consisted of "the traditional classes of landlords, ulama, military officials, merchants, craftsmen and peasants, became a more complex society and developed a small industrial, commercial and financial bourgeoisie and an industrial working class by the early twentieth century." The general living standard under the *Qajar* rule was low and many foreign observers described it as miserable. One reason for this situation lay in the subsistence nature of the economy, which inhibited the increase in production. This was exacerbated by the high share of landowners in the crop, which gave them no incentive to invest in agricultural development. To cite another reason for the misery of the peasants, one may refer to the lack of appreciation of agricultural problems by the landowners simply because they did not live on the land. As Lambton has pointed out: "Landowners tended to be concentrated in the town and not, as in Western Europe, in castles and manorial estates." The condition of the middle-class merchants also deteriorated despite the growth of the volume of trade. It was so because the native merchants had to suffer under the pressure of competition from the foreign merchants from the more powerful countries who enjoyed an unfair advantage in the market.

### The Military Reform

Well into the *Qajar* period, there were attempts by the State to modernise the bureaucracy and the army. One of these moves was the attempt at centralising the administration by Fath Ali Shah. He pursued the goal of establishing a central authority through a military polity. This attempt primarily aimed at diminishing reliance of the government on tribal military contingents by creating a standing army. For understandable reasons, this policy created a lot of conflicts.

The conflict with the *ulama* arose when the government tried to allocate a big part of its revenue to the task of military reform. The process military reform in Iran

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was in this respect largely similar to the same process in modern Egypt and Turkey. The
tension intensified as Abbas Mirza, Fath-Ali Shah’s Crown Prince, turned to Europeans
to organise the new army. Furthermore, the extension of the army outside the clerical
supervision tended to create a modern source of power independent of the influence of
the ulama.

There is evidence indicating the ulama agitation to provoke the second Perso-
Russian War in 1827, which resulted in Iran’s defeat and the devastation of the standing
army of 12000, which Abbas Mirza had organised in the first decade of the nineteenth
century. Algar has noted: “In 1826 when Muslims inhabiting territories that had been
captured from Iran in the first Russo-Iranian war were subject to religious persecution at the
hands of the Russians, … the ulama then delivered a judgement to the effect that it was the duty
of Iran to go to war against Russia.” Keddie accounts for the ulama resentment at Abbas
Mirza’s military modernisation as part of the opposition of vested interests: “Some
ulama saw the Western instructors, drill and especially uniforms of modern armies as infidel
encroachments that might lead to greater Western incursions.”

Another attempt of Abbas Mirza in modernising the State in the early nineteenth
century concerned centralisation of judiciary. This move was also bound to encounter
the objection of the ulama, as it would reduce the power of the religious courts, which
were under their administration. Abbas Mirza’s reformist efforts were aborted by his
premature death.

The Educational Reform

Another serious reformer, Mirza Taqi Khan, better known as Amir Kabir (the
great commander), Naser ad-Din Shah’s Chancellor (1848-1851), also sought effective
bureaucratic and social reforms, but he tackled the issue via strengthening of the central
authority through rationalisation and technicisation of the government. “Creation of
telegraph lines under him put provincial governors within instant reach of the central
government and greatly enhanced its authority.”

One major intrusion of Amir Kabir in the sphere of ulama interests was his
attempt to modernise education by establishing a modern school on the Western model.
At the time, the traditional system of education, consisting of the maktabs (religious
elementary schools) and madrasas (religious colleges), was under the administration of
the religious authority. Traditionally, the ulama, as the most intellectually advanced
social group, had dominated the realm of education, which was funded by large
charitable endowments.

Amir Kabir also attempted to extend the government’s administration to cover
public works and social services, a project which absorbed a good part of the
government’s revenues, and hence meant cutbacks on the expenses of the royal
household, the class of officials and notables. The court officials and the members of
the royal family, therefore, resented Amir Kabir’s reforms even more than the ulama.
And hence, Amir Kabir fell victim to the court intrigue, which convinced the Shah to
order his assassination.

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1 Algar H, 1980, p. 6. Also see, Hasan Fasai’s History of Persia under Qajar, H. Busse ed. and trans. Columbia
University Press, New York, 1972, p.127
2 Keddie, N. R. 1982, p. 44
3 Arjamond, S. A. The Turban for the Crown, Oxford University Press. New York, 1988, p. 31
The Unpopularity of the Reforms

After the death of Amir Kabir, the attempts to modernise the polity did not stop. On the contrary, with the emergence of the world-economy, the reforms had to intensify. The modernising trends and the Western orientations entailed reconsideration of the government policies regarding the old elite and the notables including the religious dignitaries, endangering their social standing.

On balance, the modernising policies of the Qajar monarchs gained little, if any, popular support as they took place mainly at the bureaucratic level. The extortionist tax policies and the neglect of the public works left an alienated and impoverished mass of population. Thus, the scene was set for closer association between the ulama and the masses. The ulama involvement in the enhancement of public works with the use of the charitable funds was vital in facilitating this trend.

The modernising policies of the Qajar monarchs were not able even to satisfy the new social groups, such as the modern professionals, bureaucrats, technocrats, intellectuals, and wage labourers. Wallerstein’s analysis of the situation of the English monarchs in the conflictual atmosphere of the rise of capitalism there is valid to a certain extent in the case of the Qajar monarchs. They were “the focal point” of two conflicting forces: the “new productive forces”, which were making economic development possible, and the hierarchies from the past, which were the “pillar of the monarch’s strength”.1

The Encounter with the West

An important factor that facilitated the alienation of the masses from the State in Iran in the second half of the nineteenth century was the increasing association of the State with the colonial powers and the promotion of foreign as against national interests towards the end of the nineteenth century. “Western penetration” in Iran during the nineteenth century was a catalyst for the breakdown of the traditional social fabric of the society. As M. E. Yapp suggests, this “penetration manifested itself directly through the political and economic pressures applied directly by Britain and Russia, and indirectly through the striking example of the success of European economic, social and political ideas and techniques.”2

The British and Russian rivalry in the nineteenth century arose primarily from the fact that the efforts of Britain as the core State of the modern “world-economy” was faced with the resistance of Russia to avoid plunging into a peripheral status. Thus, Russia, relying on its relatively strong military power, confronted the British effort over the control of the areas close to its borders.

True, Iran was not officially colonised by the West in the period of colonialism, whereas much of Asia and Africa were. But this was mainly because it happened to fall in a “geographical belt at which the dynamics of Russian and British expansion met.”3 Iran was considered by the two powers as a buffer zone; therefore, they agreed to consider it as a certain kind of neutral ground divided to two spheres of influence. Nevertheless, Iran’s subjugation to these colonial powers was unequivocal during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was thus subjected to the intervention of Russia and Britain through war, subversion and diplomatic intrigue.

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1 Wallerstein, I. 1979, p. 47
2 Yapp, M. E. "The Last Years of the Qajar Dynasty" in Amirsadeghi, H. ed. Twentieth Century Iran, Heinemann, London, 1977, p. 2
3 Cottam, R. 1964, p. 158
The genesis of Iran’s subjugation to the West, as noted earlier, was its “humiliating defeat in the wars of 1803-1814 and 1828 against Russia, which forced the Qajars to cede to Russia two fertile provinces and to levy low tariffs on Russian goods.” The two wars with Russia drained Iran’s economy and its military might. The sense of honour created in the nation by Aqa Muhammad Khan’s victories in the Caucasus was lost and with that went the sense of national confidence and loyalty to the government. Sensing the crisis, Fath Ali Shah expressed interest in Napoleon’s anti-Russian overtures, which was demonstrated in a new openness to French enterprises in Iran. But, the Russian victory over Napoleon left Iran virtually defenceless before Russia and then Britain.

True, the Russian advancement in Iran was counterbalanced by the British interference, but the British confrontation with Russia in Iran had hardly anything to do with the interests of Iran. In fact, the British colonial policy gave priority to economic and strategic interests of Britain over all other interests. For instance in 1884, the Iranian modernist Malkam Khan, acting as Naser ad-Din Shah’s envoy, turned to Britain for some support for Iranian integrity threatened by Russian encroachments. However, Grenville, the British Foreign Minister of the time, made the British support subject to commercial and strategic benefits for Britain.

During the nineteenth century, as Mohsen Milani notes: “England and Russia, having divided Iran into their respective spheres of influence, obtained a multitude of favourable concessions from the ineffectual Qajar rulers. ...Concessions to foreign merchants and nations, and invasion of foreign goods gradually integrated Iran’s local and regional markets into the world market.” The growing involvement in international developments had a significant impact on Iran’s socio-economic structure. The impact of this process on social stratification and class formation was evident in "the rise of wealthy entrepreneurial merchants and less significantly, a small working class consisting overwhelmingly of migrant workers employed in the neighbouring regions of Russia." However, for all the prospects of lucrative economic activities that the contact with the West created for the Iranian merchants, it stripped them from the beginning from the most important means they required to realise their desire for a fair competition.

The Russians imposed on Iran a system of capitulation after they triumphed in the wars, which gave to their merchants a free hand in conducting their business in Iran. In effect, the Iranian government accepted, among other things, to exempt Russian businessmen from the taxes and duties that their Iranian counterparts were obliged to pay, and from many other restrictions under which Iranian merchants had to suffer.

In 1841, Britain too concluded a treaty with Iran, which gave British merchants privileges similar to those enjoyed by their Russian counterparts. Abbas Amanat has noted that the increasing influence of foreign merchants in the Iranian economy forced many Iranian merchants out of the leading positions in various business fields and made them subordinate to foreign capital. A British governmental correspondence of 1851 stated: "Great discontent prevails in the bazaars of Tabriz in consequence of the duties on goods imported by Persians having been increased; the mode of levying them is also greatly and very justly complained of.”

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2 Cottam, R. 1964, p. 158
4 Milani, M. 1988, p. 45. Also Banani, A. The Modernization of Iran. Stanford, 1961, p. 8
5 Arjomand, S. A. 1988, p. 34
7 Issawi, C. ed. 1971, p. 80

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The Genesis of Iranian Nationalism

The Iranian merchants, although they became wealthier as a result of the increase in the volume of foreign trade, felt the pressure of foreign capital and also noticed the governmental policies, which favoured the foreigners. The Qajar failure to address the rising nationalist sentiments of the native merchants further alienated them from the government and increased their hostility towards the ruling system. In this manner, the modern sense of nationality turned the Iranian merchants into a political force in opposition to the State despite the prospect of economic gains from the increase in the volume of international trade. The condition was thus ripe for the merchants to seek allies among the beleaguered ulama.

As we have seen, Western penetration in many ways adversely affected the fortunes of the ulama. Nevertheless, it increased their political clout.\(^1\) Some of the ulama became opponents of Western imperialism and a component of rising Iranian nationalism. These ulama increasingly expressed concern about the Western influence on the Qajar kings and the dominance of the foreigners in the economic sphere. Reforms in the State apparatus had already destabilised the relationship between the State and the religious institutions, turning the ulama into a potential political ally for the merchants. Also, the traditional association of the general public with the ulama became more meaningful as the ulama became increasingly dissociated from the government. John Malcolm indicated in his *The History of Persia* that people looked to the ulama increasingly as their protectors against the ruling system. The ulama, despite the weakening of their official position in the State, exercised social and political influence through traditional religious institutions. As Malcolm observed at the end of the nineteenth century, the ulama “(filled) no office, (received) no appointments, (had) no specific duties, but (were) called, from their superior learning, piety and virtue by the silent but unanimous suffrage of their countrymen, to be their guides in religion, and their protectors against their rulers.”\(^2\)

The ulama dreaded the “Western penetration”, the expansion of modern education and the rise of “alien” laws and culture, which also meant further decline in their own power and status. In opposition to foreign colonial powers and the Qajar kings, they drew on the belligerent merchants of the bazaar and the traditional population who perceived the roots of their misfortunes lay in the intrusion of the foreign “infidels”. The ulama and the merchants found a common political and ideological platform based on a blend of nationalism and religion.

Nationalism, as many observers have suggested, developed in modern Europe as an essentially secular force, and at least in some societies where religion had lost its capacity to bond the people and the State, it gradually appeared as a new faith displacing and weakening traditional religious beliefs.\(^3\) But, as Benedict Anderson has argued in his *Imagined Communities* (1983), modern nationalism had its roots in the imaginative fictionalisation of religious, cultural and other communal traditions of the past. The identification of church with the absolutist regime, particularly in France, had a lot to do with the decline of religious influence on the emerging nation-States in some European societies. But in other European societies, notably in England and Germany, the ties between modern nationalism and religious traditions remained strong.

In Iran, the rise of modern nationalism presented a mixed tendency. On the one hand, the influence of Western humanist philosophers, and particularly that of the myth

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\(^1\) Milani, M. 1988, p. 48


\(^3\) Cottam, R. 1964, p. 135
of the French Revolution, on the first generation of Iranian secular nationalists created anti-religious intellectual tendencies, which favoured the divorce of religion and nationalism in Iran. On the other hand, Shi‘i religion, due to its doctrinal incompatibility with the State, formed a real uniting base that, at least toward the end of the Qajar rule, complied with and enhanced a kind of religious nationalist ideology. The strong showing of the ulama in the 1905 Constitutional Revolution further strengthened the religiously based nationalist sentiments. It should be noted, however, that at the early stages of the Constitutional Revolution, the ulama opposition to the State concerned specific acts of the government, which were considered to be detrimental to national interests, and did not question the legitimacy of kingship as a whole.

The interaction of religious nationalism with the nationalist imaginary on the model of Western secular ideologies gave the Constitutional Revolution a peculiar dynamism. In particular, the assertion of liberalism and socialism as two secular implications of modern Western nationalism created a state of jitters in the political alliances of this period. A case in point was the alliance of the ulama, the bazaar and the modern intelligentsia against the State in demand of a constitution.

**Ulama-Merchant Alliance: The Usuli Rationalisation**

As we have seen, the ulama-State relationship in the Qajar period was affected deeply by the momentous changes, which resulted from global developments. Iran’s reaction to these developments, in terms of religion-State relationship, was twofold; one emanating from internal interactions within the religious establishment, and the other resulting from new social stratification caused by transition to a capitalist mode of economy. The impact of internal developments on the Shi‘i religious institution primarily had to do with the question of religious legitimacy of the State. This was not a new issue, and as we have seen, had been operative in Iran’s polity ever since the institutionalisation of Shi‘ism in the Safavid period and the allocation of important social functions and State-related activities to the Shi‘i ulama.

The collapse of the ulama-State structural relationship during the post-Safavid period brought hardship to the ulama, but did not destroy their cultural, institutional and psychological influence. The ulama influence emanated from their scholastic knowledge (which was institutionalised in various educational establishments in the main urban centres), their bureaucratic functions, and their role as norm-givers and supervisors of the spiritual life of the populace. The adherence of the first Qajar monarch, Aqa Muhammad Khan, to Shi‘ism provided new opportunities for the reassertion of the ulama influence at the political level, but the course of events since his death rendered the revival of a Safavid-style polity impossible. A major development was the attempt of the Usuli movement, which escalated the process of the rationalisation of religion at doctrinal and political levels by reaffirming the position of the ulama as the representatives of the legitimate authority of the Absent Imam. It thus emphasised the temporal character of the monarchical States in the absence of the true government of God, which would be established by the returning Mahdi in the future.

This doctrinal interpretation, which had created a sacred social position for the ulama, was combined with their role as the source of literacy and knowledge, which was achieved through long years of scholastic studies. Meanwhile, their role in performing various social functions at the local level, such as giving sermons and speeches to the crowds in religious occasions, performing marriages, setting moral standards for economic transactions, etc. brought them closer to the public. In addition, their efforts to divorce the religious courts from the State, gradually gave
rise to a kind of legal authority in de facto competition with, and at times opposition to, the State during the nineteenth century.

The eventual failure of the Qajar State to absorb the Usuli movement in to the service of the State was at least partly due to the impact of the capitalist world-economy on Iran. This impact, which was felt initially in terms of Western technological, military, and trade advancements, had urged the State to adopt the ways of the foreigners, loosen its ties with traditions and search for new sources of legitimacy. The process of the divorce of the State and the traditional sources of State legitimacy was detrimental not only to the ulama, but also to the local commercial bourgeoisie. Thus, the interests of the commercial bourgeoisie and the ulama, on the one hand, and those of the State including the royal court, the officials and the aristocrat landowners, on the other, were destined to clash.

Like the ulama, the traditional middle-class merchants, who formed the backbone of the Iranian commercial bourgeoisie, had economic as well as moral concerns. The moral concerns of the traditional merchants with the loss of religion in the face of the cultural influence of the West might have even outstripped their purely economic concerns. The religious worldview of the merchants was very close to that of the Usuli ulama who considered worldly activities as part of religious duties. By making the moral element of conscience into a determining factor in the worldly conduct of the believers, the Usuli ulama in effect tried to rationalise the Shi‘i faith in the face of modern socio-economic and socio-political developments. The economic activities of the middle-class merchants thus came to be basically governed by religious ethics.

This situation presented similarities to the process of rationalisation of religion in Europe. Weber, for example, noted that the Baptists’ refusal to accept office in the service of the State - which had originated from “the repudiation of everything worldly” - forced their “intensified interest in economic occupations”. Along similar lines, the separation of the Usuli Shi‘ism from the State encouraged economic activity on the part of the believers. And just as the Baptists’ emphasis on the conscience of the believer as the revelation of God to the individual gave their worldly conduct a religious focus, the element of conscience in the Usuli Shi‘ism asserted that every worldly activity was witnessed by God and evaluated as a religious duty. Parallels can also be found between the Puritan attitude toward business and the attitude of the religiously minded merchants of the Iranian bazaar. Weber has noted the Puritan repudiation of “all connections with the large-scale capitalistic courtiers and projectors as an ethically suspicious class”, while taking “pride in their own superior middle-class business morality.” Iranian middle-class merchants too - while taking pride in their own business morality - which was close to the ethical views of the Usuli religious establishment - took a suspicious view of the State and the large-scale landowners, who were tied with the State. Moreover, the Usuli ulama in time developed a kind of anti-authoritarian ascetic character comparable to that of the Puritans, which was resented by the court officials due to its criticism of the indulgence of the courtiers in pleasure seeking activities. The lifestyle of the royal court was increasingly seen in clear conflict with the rising middle-class morality.

All this could have reasonably contributed to the development of a “spirit of capitalism” in Iran as it did in Europe. But, it was not to be. Using a Weberian model, one possible explanation for this lack of success for a Western-style capitalism in Iran may be that the unique historical elements that made the rise of capitalism possible in
the West were not present in Iran in a form to produce the same effect. These elements were the revival of a worldly ascetic doctrine through Protestantism, the peculiar political framework of Europe in the seventeenth century and the degree of technological advancement that Europe had reached at that time. But there was an extra element in operation in Iran of the nineteenth century, which made the situation even more difficult for the development of an indigenous capitalism; namely that Iran had missed on the initial process of transformation of feudalism into capitalism. As such, capitalist development in Iran was affected by forces, which were not present in the period of the rise of capitalism in Europe, notably the already established capitalist States and their push for global expansion.

Thus, Iran’s initiation into modernity was less a result of the development of the indigenous factors than the impact of the global expansion of the Western capitalism. As such, the efforts of the Iranian State in modernising the polity and society, was more a response to the exigencies of capitalist development in the West than to the needs of the local commercial bourgeoisie and the religious establishment. It thus took the form of certain regulations for mercantile activities, which were imposed by the State. This process created a backlash: the rationality of the Usuli movement and the economic conduct of the indigenous bourgeoisie, which could have created a strong impetus to economic development if assisted by a strong State, was repressed and effectively pushed back.

As the path to a meaningful economic advancement for the merchants was blocked, there was good reasons to bring the merchants closer to the ulama, who were also concerned about the loss of cultural and national dignity of Iran. Therefore, the abstention from politics by the traditional classes could not last as the path to meaningful cultural, social and economic activities were closed, and hence the thwarted energies of the ulama and the merchants were channelled back into political activity. However, since the embryonic state of “the spirit of capitalism” in Iran did not grow to produce the necessary condition for the commercial bourgeoisie to share in political power, the native Iranian merchants were forced into political opposition in alliance with the ulama.

Thus, the modernisation efforts of the Qajar State, which were mainly in the form of a series of scattered and unsystematic merchantalistic acts implemented through despotic measures, led to the repression of the spirit of capitalism in Iran. As Weber wrote: “The merchantalistic regulations of the State might develop industries, but not, or certainly not alone, the spirit of capitalism. Where they assumed a despotic, authoritarian character, they to a large extent directly hindered it.”

The disconnection between cultural and religious developments on the one hand, and economic development on the other, may be conceived as an important factor, which hindered the development of “the spirit of capitalism” in Iran. This condition instigated new political trends within the Shi’i establishment, which would enable the ulama to act as political leaders and agitators representing among other groups the bazaar merchants. To clarify how the disjunction between religious and economic developments in Iran was related to bazaar’s political alliance with the ulama, it would be useful to briefly discuss the historical background of this alliance.

The Roots of the Religious Worldview of the Bazaar

In addition to its significant economic role, the Iranian bazaar had historically played an important part in shaping the moral order of the urban economy, and during

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1 Weber, M. 1958, p. 152
the years had become the hot bed of anti-regime political activity. No other economic group in Iran had been able to play such culturally constitutive role as that of the bazaar in connecting moral commitment, economic activity and political agility. The Iranian bazaar was not only the backbone of the marketplace in the Iranian economy, but also an arena for the construction of moral order and social reality. As such, I argue that the bazaar should be reduced to narrow economic terms. It was an integral part of the society’s basic values and assumptions about reality.¹

The Iranian bazaar, as a traditional marketplace, was “fraught with moral connotations”. But more than instituting the ethics of business, it provided an arena for public participation in social life. Robert Wuthnow’s reference to the role of marketplace in England in the eighteenth century could also apply in the case of the Iranian bazaar.² Here too, the marketplace served as a legitimate structure of moral virtues that shielded economic transactions against the dangers of “avarice, lust, fanaticism and caprice”. Relying on the available religious precepts, it permitted the pursuit of economic self-interest within the constraints of rationally and socially accepted norms, and prohibited the pursuit of individual self-interest at any cost. The political implication of the moral strength of the bazaar was its acceptance by the people as a source of protection against the State tyranny.

The origins of the Iranian bazaar can be traced back to the medieval time when scattered activities of long-distance Persian merchants found some cohesion. In the Safavid period, Persia was on the route of merchantist activities, and merchants as the middle stratum of the Persian Empire played an important role in providing the ruling upper stratum with taxes or tribute. This was paid essentially to secure the support of the king and military strong men who controlled the State machinery.

The payment of tribute had placed merchants in a politically subservient position with respect to the State, like that of the lower classes. Yet, the social position of the merchants differed significantly from the lower classes like the peasants. They had access to economic wealth, connections in high places, and consequently a better lifestyle. But such privileges were only available while the merchants could attract protection form the royal court and particularly the military elite. Because of this precarious political position, the properties of the merchants were always under the threat of arbitrary confiscation by the State. This would be the case as soon as the ruler or the strong men of the military establishment felt that the merchant’s wealth could unduly increase their social or political influence.

Connection of the merchants with the religious establishment may be attributed to their need for some sort of moral certainty and social standing. With the increasing strength of the official religion in the composition of the Safavid State, the merchants sought closer ties with the religious establishment. With the expansion of urban centres in the Safavid period, merchantist activities and the market place found a degree of cohesion, which was evident in the formation of the centralised bazaar network in major urban centres like the capital Isfahan. The relationship that developed ever since between the merchants and the religious establishment was crucial in providing the bazaar with religious worldviews.

The systematisation of the bazaar religious understanding of the world received a strong boost during the Qajar period with the rise of the Usuli Shi’ism. Interestingly, this boost was caused mainly by political motivations. The major political motivation that facilitated the strengthening of the religious institution in the

¹ In my understanding the Iranian bazaar in Iran, I have been inspired by Robert Wuthnow’s understanding of the role of the market place, as a force of moral order. See Wuthnow, R. Meaning and Moral Order, 1987, p. 79.
² Ibid, p. 82
economic life of the bazaar was inspired by the common problems that the ulama and the merchants had with the State. These problems, as I have explained before, was the growing dependence of the Iranian State on the Europe powers. This had caused a decline in political and economic position of these groups, and consequently increased their cultural and moral insecurities in the face of the hegemonic alien ideas and cultures. The major outcome of this ulama-merchant affinity was the formation of a traditionalist platform against Westernisation of the polity, culture and economy.

The ulama-merchant alliance soon expressed itself in terms of political, economic and cultural demands. It opposed further dependence of the State on foreign powers, criticised the moral laxity of the court and demanded State protection for the native merchants as against the foreign merchants. This alliance was inspired by the idea of a religiously based national State, which would support the development of an indigenous economy governed by a worldly ascetic conduct, and which would protect the moral life of the community based on the principles of the Shi‘i faith. This alliance became more solidified as the Qajar dynasty took a course, which ran counter to almost all the demands of the merchants and the ulama. The State put up a religious face by encouraging public piety and religious ceremonies and rituals, but it did little about the growing influence of the Western powers in the economy, polity and society. This trend in turn resulted in the further weakness of the Iranian State with respect to the Western States, the undermining of the national bourgeoisie by the foreign capital, and the increase of corruption in the royal court.

To be sure, the State still kept its religious façade by buying off a number of handpicked clerics to promote otherworldly salvation as the only concern of the faith. This was clearly a move in defiance of the calls of the politically-minded religious leaders and the restive merchants for a more serious role of religion in organising social life in this world. The increasing influence and power of a small class of large capitalist landowners with close links with the royal court and the foreign capital, who had little if any concern with social morality and economic wellbeing of the country, undermined even the religious façade of the State. People wished to see in religion a sense of social justice and moral excellence, whereas the religion of the State appeared as corrupt and ignorant of the moral and social wellbeing of the believers. In effect, the subservient position of the State with respect to the European States, particularly Russia and Britain, and the growing power of the landed aristocracy, which was increasingly linked directly with the colonial powers and expressed no interest in developing local agriculture and industry, made the government intervention in favour of the local middle-class merchants and industrialists virtually impossible. This in turn deepened the technological, military and industrial weakness of Iran, and strengthened the alliance of the reform-minded ulama and the nationalist bazaar merchants.

In contrast with certain European nations like England, where the affinity of the State, reformed religion, and local farmers and industrialists, was conducive to economic growth, in Iran, the reform-minded religious leaders and the local merchants and industrialists formed an alliance against the State. This alliance developed naturally due to the fact that the economic aspirations of the merchants were inspired largely by their religious worldviews, and that foreign capital, ignorant of the local cultural values, thwarted the meaningful development of economy even where it produced wealth for some merchants. The need for an indigenous moral code for economic development meant that the polity had to secure moral authority for its economic policies. The political opposition of the ulama and the traditional merchants to the State was largely motivated by the failure of the State to secure this balance.
The political aspirations of the ulama-merchant alliance were not only a matter of economic expediency for the commercial bourgeoisie. Rather, political motivations were formed side-by-side the entrenchment of a peculiar form of religious understanding of the world, which had permeated the conduct of economic activity of the bazaar through sacred texts and symbolic structures, and shaped the spiritual understanding of trade, labour, business and property ownership.

The ulama-merchant platform of the Qajar period, which was initially loosely formed on the basis of the commonality of religious worldviews, was gradually consolidated in the course of events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, enhancing the political clout of the ulama. The Tobacco Movement of 1890-92 and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 were conspicuous examples of the convergence of the mercantile dissent, religious agitation and popular protest.

The Tobacco Movement

The Tobacco Movement took place following Naser ad-Din Shah’s grant to a British company in 1890 of the production, distribution, sale and export of Iranian tobacco. According to Fereydoon Adamiyat, an early twentieth century Iranian historian, the tobacco industry at the time, employed more than 200,000 people and about 2.5 million people consumed tobacco. The native merchants and those involved in the tobacco industry opposed the concession in a violent protest movement, which was supported by the ulama. The movement culminated when a religious leader and marja‘e taqlid (source of emulation), Ayatollah Mirza Hassan Shirazi, ruled that on religious grounds the use of tobacco was forbidden.

The issue of this religious verdict (fatva) provoked a positive popular response as the majority of the smokers embraced the Ayatollah’s call. Even some members of the aristocratic elite publicly obliged to the fatva. It is believed that the fatva was issued as a result of agitation by Seyyed Jamal ad-Din Assadabadi, a radical cleric. Seyyed Jamal was a middle-ranking cleric, and did not have the authority to issue a fatva in his own right. According to Adamiyat’s account, the senior ulama did not initiate the movement, but supported it after it took momentum. This was understandable, because the ulama had not previously engaged in any explicit political activity. Engagement in politics could be construed a breach of the doctrine of Occultation. This was ulama’s first serious venture in modern politics; and interestingly, it immediately implicated a foreign power. Until then, the ulama opposition to the Qajars was concerned with moral issues, anxiety about the loss of religion and naturally the decline of the ulama social position. Besides, the ulama were not closely involved in the tobacco industry and therefore were not among the hardest hit from the economic point of view.

Clerics like Seyyed Jamal were among the first reform-mined religious leaders belonging to the ranks of the junior ulama. Seyyed Jamal’s activism should be attributed as much to his religious convictions as to his advocacy for the reform of religion in order to promote politico-religious ideals, rather than mere religious orthodoxy. As noted earlier, Seyyed Jamal was not considered a mujtahid and did not rank high as far as his religious learning was concerned. The most high ranking religious authority of the time was Ayatollah Shirazi and his fatva carried only a slightly disturbing political message, and hardly any explicit economic demand. The text read

1 Adamiyat, F. Shuresh Aleyh-e Emtilaz-e Rigi (Rebellion Against the Rigi Concession), Payam, Tehran, 1979, p.11
simply: “In the name of God, the merciful, the forgiving, today the use of tobacco in any form is reckoned as war against the Imam of the Age (may God hasten his glad advent).”

There is yet another important aspect to the claim that the religious institution gradually joined the Tobacco Movement. Protest movements such as the Tobacco Movement were recent phenomena arising from modern social stratification due to the rise of the capitalist “world-economy”. It appears that modern social developments affected traditional institutions, such as the Shi'i ulama, convincing them to consider involvement in unprecedented social and political functions in the face of the imminent threat of the modernising policies of the Qajars and the increasing Western influence. This new trend in the ulama attitude was expressed in their gradual direct involvement in politics. This may be considered as the genesis of an important reform tendency that arose within the ranks of the orthodox religion and increasingly asserted itself as a distinct social, cultural and political force.

At any rate, the religious colour of the tobacco movement and its popular support forced the monarch into unilateral cancellation of the concession. However, the monarch’s submission to the ruling of the ulama was not conceded in explicit political terms. Rather, it called for fresh thinking on the part of the radical ulama and nationalist merchants about the potential political power of their alliance. Although Iran had to pay compensation for its unilateral cancellation of the treaty - which affected the ailing Iranian economy adversely - the victory of the uprising was a significant psychological boost for the people. As Milani has suggested: “it proved that the Shah’s decision could be reversed, an encouraging development for those who wished to limit his arbitrary power.” As such, the Tobacco Movement may be perceived as a dress rehearsal for the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911).

Indeed, the rate of the ulama political involvement intensified and took new forms in the twentieth century. If the reform-minded ulama did not have a well-defined and updated economic and political rhetoric, they gradually found one. The bourgeois economic demands of the merchants, and the political demands for democracy and parliamentarism put forward by the intelligentsia, were astutely incorporated by some reform-minded ulama into the religious discourse. This process involved at times a concerted effort of a group of ulama. At other times, the contributions of the ulama were scattered, unorganised and even unintended.

Nonetheless, the modern politicisation of the Shi'i religious discourse nourished a powerful political practice, which ran through the twentieth century. Against a xenophobic background, which had taken shape as a result of the insensitivity of the colonial powers to the religious sentiments, political grievances and economic plight of Iranians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the reform-minded ulama gradually built up a fairly sophisticated anti-Western and anti-government agenda. The politicisation of Shi'ism at the early twentieth century came at end of a historical cycle, a cycle that had begun with the transformation of Shi'ism from a political cause into a religious dogma.

1 Keddie, N. R. Religion and Rebellion in Iran, Franc cass, London, 1966, p. 95. Also in a telegram to the Shah, Ayatollah Shirazi regarded his act as an intervention to secure justice for Iran's peasants and to prevent the spread of kafir (infidel) influence in the Muslim community. (For the translation of the telegram, see Keddie, N. R. 1966, p. 89). There are also claims that the fatwa was initially forged by some lower ranking militant ulama, and that Ayatollah Shirazi approved of it only after it proved successful. In any case, the fatwa served more as a catalyst for the movement than as its originator.

2 Milani, M. 1988, p. 49

3 The desecration of the Holy Shrine of Mashhad by the Russian commander Gribydov in 1820 is only one example of the impetus to xenophobia among Iranians in the 19th and early 20th centuries.
The Ulama and The Modern Intelligentsia

The closing decade of the nineteenth century saw a rapid spread of modern secular political ideas among Iranians who had come in contact with the West mainly through educational or business trips and by means of access to European publications. Given that at the time only a tiny percentage of the population had enough resources for such endeavours, it was only natural that the scope of political awareness was sharply limited. Nevertheless, out of this background emerged a small but vocal intelligentsia that had a great impact on the events of the early twentieth century. The Iranian secular intellectuals of the early twentieth century advocated a new political arrangement, which would give them a chance to participate in the polity. Some of these intellectuals were fascinated by the idea of parliamentary democracy and praised it in their publications. Others were influenced by socialist ideas, particularly the ideas of the Russian socialist revolutionaries of the early twentieth century.

Gabriel Almond once wrote: "the democratic State gives the ordinary man the opportunity to take part in the political decision-making process as an influential citizen." Many members of the first generation of Iranian secular intellectuals had a similar liberal understanding of the democratic State. Modern intellectuals like Mirza Malkam Khan were highly influenced by Western liberal ideology. Others like Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh and Aqa Khan kermani, despite their religious background, became critical of religious traditions. But liberalism was not the only ideological inspiration for the secular intellectuals. The spread of Marxism in the neighbouring Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century spilled over the border and reached Iran. Marxist agitation was particularly active in the northern provinces of Azerbaijan and Gilan around 1905. With the defeat of the 1905 Russian Revolution at the hand of the Tsarist regime, many active Russian Marxists relocated their political activities to Iran. Abrahamian maintains that "the diverse social background of the intelligentsia at the turn of the century included clerical, bureaucratic, land-owning and mercantile elements." The early secular intellectuals were highly productive. They created various political parties and put out a large number of publications spreading the ideals of liberalism, nationalism and socialism. Modern secular ideas presented a serious ideological challenge to the orthodox Shi'ism, one which it had never experienced before. However, the secular intelligentsia did more than just competing with the orthodox ulama intellectually. Paradoxically, at times, they also acted as allies for the reform-minded ulama.

The challenge to religious orthodoxy arose from the emergence of modern political thought and its relevance to the socio-economic developments in Iran at the turn of the century. Until the turn of the century, political opposition to Iranian governments was not explicitly expressed, rather it was implicitly articulated in religious rhetoric. It goes without saying that the religious domain was almost entirely controlled by the Shi'i ulama. The dominance of the ulama over the religious realm, as we have seen, came about after the decisive victory of the Usuli school over the Akhbari and Sheikhi schools. The unsuccessful Babi movement of the 1840's also put forward a serious challenge to the State authority, contrary to the ulama passive objection to the State. However, the political content of the Babi movement was again expressed in purely religious terms.

1 Almond, G. Civic Culture, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1963. p. 4
2 The intellectual legacy of the early twentieth century secular intellectuals influenced prominent authors and activists in the following decades, such as the historian Ahmad Kasravi, the author and politician Ali Dashti, the Marxist intellectual and activist Taqi Erani, the writer and social critic Sadeq Hedayat, etc.
3 Abrahamian, E. Iran Between Two Revolutions, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1982, p. 78
It was only with the rise of modern intelligentsia and their usage of Western secular thought and rhetoric that explicit political demands penetrated the dominant intellectual discourse of dissent. Bayat has suggested that the secularisation of social thought and institutions in the early twentieth century took place as a result of the failure on the part of the conservative religious leaders to respond to lay intellectuals' and religious dissidents' call for reform. But suppression of politics in doctrinal disputes could not survive modern social developments. Thus, since the turn of the century, socio-economic forces - capitalist growth and the world economy - and new ideas “shifted the emphasis in religious disputes from doctrinal considerations to politics.”

The tremendous social and economic changes that were occurring in Iran forced the spiritual leaders of the Muslim community to tackle immediate socio-economic concerns of the population. Thus, the conservative approach of orthodox jurisprudential Shi'ism to burning issues concerning demands for change in the old structure of the polity, was challenged by reform tendencies. The reform-minded ulama saw the conservatives as blocking the path of social and economic progress. The forthcoming Constitutional Revolution exposed new trends within the religious establishment tending to break away from orthodoxy. During the upheavals of the Constitutional Revolution (1905 - 1911), the secular intelligentsia found converts to their political cause within the ranks of the reform-minded ulama. And through these political allies, they gained the valuable support of some high-ranking members of the religious establishment like Ayatollah Seyyed Muhammad Tabataba'i and Ayatollah Seyyed Abdullah Behbahani.

The reform-minded ulama felt that the orthodox religion should be reformed so that concrete social issues could be addressed. This was one of the main concerns of the early-twentieth-century religious reform movement in Iran. Some historians have even argued that modernist Muslim groups “while remaining part of the Muslim community, and still invoking authentic Islam as their authority, tried variously to divest the seats of authority and power of their sacred quality.” This might be too extreme. But there were certainly many modernist Muslim intellectuals, both clerical and lay, who were prepared to accept deep levels of reform in outmoded religious thoughts and practices in order to save the sanctity of religion by divesting it of obscurantism, and making it relevant to the modern world.

Another concern of the early Iranian reformers, regardless of their religious or secular tendencies, was to deal with the technologically superior West and its cultural and military onslaught. In this, the reform-minded ulama and the secular intellectuals acted now as allies, now as competitors, and now as enemies. One major weakness of the secular tendencies with respect to religious reformers stemmed from their uncritical acceptance of Western social and political ideals. Another shortcoming on the part of the modern intellectuals was their increasing imperviousness to the new political potentials of religion. They still kept their political ties with the reform-minded ulama, but tended to despise religious reformism for being ultimately constrained by religious obscurantism.

Meanwhile, the Shi'i belief system was giving a powerful impetus to a new form of politico-cultural resistance. This mode of resistance developed in an ideological language. It was expressed mainly in the language of opposition to the State disregard

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1 Bayat, M. 1983, pp. 30-42
2 Rosen, B. M. ed. Iran since the Revolution, New York, 1985, pp. 21-31
3 Ibid, p. 24
for national interests, popular culture and the economic misery of the community of believers. The increasing manipulation of the Court and State officials by the Western powers gave religious agitators ample supply for political propaganda. Shi‘ism was thus transformed by a generation of religious intellectuals into a modern political ideology, which was to become the voice of the oppressed population in opposition to the State and manifestations of the Western dominance. The new image of the West that emerged as a result of religious critique bore no resemblance to the emancipatory image that liberals were offering. It could be demonstrated that the West was now affiliated with the most regressive and reactionary forces in the dominated society, the ruling tyrants.

In the European context, the inception of capitalism was characterised by the emancipation of new forces of progress defying tyranny, whereas the capitalist West entered the Oriental societies as an imperialist power allying itself with the domestic rulers where possible, and seeking to subjugate the dominated nation. British snobbish attitude towards Iranians and their self-seeking activities in Iran made a permanent damage to the cause of liberalism there. “Independent aristocrats”, “courageous non-conformists”, and “self-confident merchants”, as Almond put it, “were the forces that transformed the tradition of feudal estates to the parliamentary tradition and enabled Britain to pass through the era of absolutism.”¹ In Iran, however, these forces helped the absolutist regime to survive the attempts of democratic forces at liberalisation of the polity and economy.

Seyyed Jamal-ad-din Asadabadi could be considered a credible representative of the reform-minded ulama who began to give the religious rhetoric an ideological voice. He initially combined a radical religious rhetoric with pan-Islamic sentiments. His activities in Iran coincided with the rule of Naser-ad-Din Shah. I have already noted his involvement in the Tobacco movement. He is believed to have been involved in clandestine plans for assassination of the State officials. It is believed that the assassination of Naser-ad-Din Shah by Mirza Reza Kirmani was carried out under his agitation. Seyyed Jamal’s concern with the underdevelopment of the Muslim world was the likely inspiration for his pan-Islamic views. Impressed by European improvements, Seyyed Jamal argued that Muslims could catch up with Europe through a reformed Islamic world power. He saw the then powerful Ottoman Empire as capable of achieving this goal.

The religious continuum provided a massive means of communication for the propagation of the ideas of the modern religious intellectuals. The pulpit, the congregation prayers, the Ta‘ziyeh (Passion play) and the Muharram processions were part of the traditional means of communication.² The need on the part of the religious and secular reformers and revolutionaries to have larger audiences, and the tendency among the reformist ulama to tackle the issues of modern times, set the scene for peculiar alliances between these forces since the turn of the century. These alliances, as I have already noted, were particularly strong between the reformist-nationalist religious leadership and the liberal or radical elements of the intelligentsia.

The Dilemma of the Intelligentsia

Modernisation in Iran, therefore, carried an inherent dilemma from the very beginning. Unlike the advanced European societies, where the pre-capitalist forces of tribal ethnicity and rural religion were marginalised, and pre-capitalist modes of production were given an insignificant position, in Iran pre-capitalist economic and

¹ Almond, G. 1963, p. 7
² For further reading see Chelokowski, P. ed. Ta‘ziyeh, Rituals and Drama in Iran, New York, 1979
non-economic features remained powerful and decisively affected the course of development there. As C. Benard and Z. Khalilzad have suggested: "In the West anachronistic sources of identity, and conflict such as ethnicity, sectarianism, and political religion were gradually displaced and became depoliticised, making way for the new structures and conflicts of the modern nation-State.... (In Iran,) traditional lines of cleavage persisted as identity structures and interest groups. The influx of new influences (acted) on existing structures in a way that in some cases did make them anachronistic but in other cases revived them."

The early twentieth century secular intellectuals, although they felt less coerced by traditional social restraints and experienced a measure of individual freedom, were still under religious influence. As such, although they became increasingly critical of social and political potentials of religion, they did not confront orthodox religion in order to reform it. Therefore, many did not explore the alternatives to orthodox religious worldviews at a philosophical level, as did their Western counterparts much earlier. "Metaphysics and philosophy in general were neglected and thus remained, almost by default, the domain of the turbaned ulama." \(^2\) Modern literary genres were of more attraction to the secular intellectuals than the critical study of religious texts. In their relationship with the State too, the early Iranian secular intellectuals formed a socially conscious force in resistance to the State power much later than their counterparts did in Europe. And even when they developed a common political personality opposing the ruling powers, they were unable to emerge as a voice distinct from the Islamic discourse to convey their political and economic message.

The perseverance of religious images, as portrayed by the religious discourse, played an historical part in preserving the religious mentality of the people. The cult of the Mahdi remained intact at the popular level, despite the penetration of modernity. Ashura, the ritual of commemoration of the Imam Hussein’s martyrdom, was celebrated annually across the nation. The secular intellectuals were inevitably deeply influenced at a sub-conscious level by these images and sentiments. “Even among some of the so-called Westernised intellectuals and artists, religious symbols and rites were providing traditional roots for new modes of literary self-expression and artistic creativity.” \(^3\) However, the secular intellectuals often denied the seriousness of this religious influence at the political level; nevertheless, they relied on religion from time to time for pragmatic political purposes.

As such, the politicisation of the early secular intellectuals involved a complex process of bypassing the religion and adopting nationalist, socialist and liberal viewpoints whereby they denied religion any meaningful position in the modern world, but resorted to it due to its sentimental value for the public. Quite naturally, the secular intellectuals realised that they would need wide influence if their ideas were to be of any social utility. So, they often tried to put their writings and speeches in Islamic terms. Like many other Third World intellectuals, they had realised that they could not adopt a genre of writing that was deliberately targeted at a small audience. Rather, they were concerned with a form of writing, which might prompt the ulama and the still orthodox and traditional middle classes. However, this should not imply that the adoption of religious discourse by the secular intellectuals was due only to conscious designs and pragmatic reasons. Rather, the traditional middle-class origins of most of the intellectuals meant that their identity was deeply rooted in the religious

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2. Rosen, B. M. ed. 1985, pp. 21-31
3. Ibid, p. 24
culture, and thus religion constituted an important part of their character at a subconscious level, whether they liked it or not.

However, the formation of the religious-liberal alliance during the Constitutional Revolution, despite its immediate success, left a somewhat dubious legacy. Although the reform-minded ulama were in conflict with the orthodox clerics, they did not tend to split with the established religion entirely in order to side with the secularists. They were concerned with the future of Shi'i clerical establishment as a whole, and some believed that reformation would secure a dignified position for the ulama in the society and polity in modern Iran.

Therefore, the impact of the reformist ulama on the people was not to meet the ends that the secular intellectuals and revolutionaries had in mind. Here, the clergy could easily bend the alliance and label the secularists as enemies of Islam as soon as their own ends were met. In fact, the reformist clerics, like the secular intellectuals had a utilitarian view of the religious-liberal alliance. They saw in their alliance with the secular revolutionaries the potential to preserve their prerogatives, which were endangered by the growing dependence of the Iranian government on the Western powers. At any rate, the intellectual developments in Iran, at the turn of the century were a prelude to the Constitutional Revolution.

The Constitutional Revolution

In the opening years of the twentieth century, amid destabilising intellectual and socio-economic developments in Iran, and under the politically lenient Mozaffar al-Din Shah, three social elements, distinct from the State, were playing active roles in determining the subsequent events: the reform-minded ulama, the bazaar merchants, and the secular intelligentsia. The growing disillusionment of these social groups with the State had already given rise to their joint oppositional activities against the State policies.

These groups had one common concern, the growing cultural, political, and economic influence of the European powers in Iran. Broadly speaking, the concern of the ulama was predominantly cultural, arising from the loss of the religious authority in the face of Western cultural onslaught. The intelligentsia basically demanded democratic reforms in the State, as they were worried about the loss of Iran’s political sovereignty. But only the merchants had explicit economic concerns about the growing power of the foreign capital. Other discontented social groups, such as the urban retailers, peddlers, craftsmen, artisans and peasants, did not present independent political concerns, but began to take part in protest movements which were organised by the leading social groups.

Mob mobilisation was not a modern phenomenon in Iran, but since the turn of the century mass movements acquired new aspects. Ervand Abrahamian, in his study of the role of the crowd in Iranian politics, has noted this differentiation, which was manifest in the Constitutional Revolution: “One major aspect of the crowd, mobilised by the leading social groups in the early twentieth century, was its meaningful composition. For example the assembly that took sanctuary in a mosque in Tehran during December 1905 was formed of wealthy traders protesting against bastinadoing of two prominent sugar merchants. They were supported by the bazaar, which went on a general strike, and by a group of religious leaders, who took sanctuary in the Shrine of Abdul Azim with their families and theology students. Then came the active participation of all the crafts and trading guilds.”

The extent of control over the masses, therefore, began to determine the degree of influence and importance of opposition parties. In this respect, the ulama were leading forces. Their influence over the urban and rural masses derived from the traditional and religious sentiments embedded in the collective psyche of the majority of the people. It has been noted before that the ulama were the main social group who shaped the consciousness of the traditional masses through the religious-governed education system in the cities and through the lower ranking mullas in the villages.

The traditional merchants too gained a degree of influence over the masses through social and economic ties notably employment, credit and money lending. The modern social groups, such as the secular intelligentsia and the small working class, were distinguished because of their emergence out of modern social developments and their disjunction from the traditional social consciousness. Increasingly alienated from the State repressive and extortionist policies, these groups too had to seek alliance with the powerful traditional forces.

The destabilising social conditions in early twentieth century Iran, largely caused by the modernisation of the State and society, laid the foundation of a massive social movement, comparable in its scope to the 1905 Russian revolution. But social instabilities like this could have been operational in any society without giving rise to a mass revolution. The peculiarities of the Iranian case, it can be argued, originated from the success of the oppositional forces in meaningful mass mobilisation. They mastered the art of making a revolution through their intelligence and their effective political networks.

Nikki Keddie has given the following account of the Constitutional Revolution, which portrays it as a classic modern revolution: "In the early twentieth century Persian Revolution, there could be found most of the features of a classic great revolution - a political, social, and economic crisis crippling the old regime's ability to rule, a growing agitation against the government, mass demonstrations of such scope that the government had to give in to their demands; counter revolutionary attempts by the government, which succeeded in the Shah's 1908 coup d'etat; defeat of the government by the common people in arms, and the differentiation of an originally united movement into conservative and radical parties. The revolutionary struggle also continued for a number of years rather than being decided by one or two brief crises."

The Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 has been discussed from different standpoints. From the standpoint of political economy it has been seen as: "a popular response to the devastating political and economic conditions in Iran at the turn of the century." The growth of the domestic bourgeoisie and the subsequent conflict of their interests with those of the Western capital were the basis of demands for economic independence. Concerns with economic independence correlated with a sense of nationalism, which was skilfully used by the modernising groups, which attempted to initiate an intellectual break with the past and to reconstruct Iran on the basis of modern socio-political concepts derived from the West.

Arjomand maintains that: "The Constitutional Revolution was a nationalist, democratic and bourgeois revolution. It was an expression of the political awakening of a growing civil society, which was represented by democratic and nationalist demands of the intelligentsia, and at the same time a revolution to unleash the growing mercantile bourgeoisie, which was harnessed by the landlords, military and officials."

Habl al-matin, a weekly published by Iranian modernists in Calcutta since the late nineteenth century, played a significant role in voicing the bourgeois-democratic

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2 Ibid, p. 162
3 Arjomand, S. A. 1988, p. 35
concerns of the Constitutional Revolution. In its issue of 18 May 1906, it urged the Iranian merchants "to give up the inauspicious course of flattery and to adopt vigilance and unity". It also criticised the government policies: "Why is it that the government, which is the axis of commerce, plays a different game every moment, fluctuates, and impoverishes the nation?"

From the standpoint of political economy therefore, the Constitutional Revolution was the revolution of the new social classes, such as the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie. However, given the weakness and small size of the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie, it is difficult to portray the Constitutional Revolution as a strictly bourgeois revolution. According to political economists, this difficulty must be overcome in terms of the alliance of the new socio-political forces with the Shi'i ulama and the forces within the existing political structure, forces which had reacted positively to their revolution, and with which they had to compromise. This interpretation tends to attribute little independent inclination on the part of the ulama to political action against the ruling system, and as such may inadvertently view the Shi'i ulama as a redundant social force whose massive power for social mobilisation was used by the burgeoning reformist and revolutionary intelligentsia.

In fact, the political concerns of the ulama accounted for much of the momentum of the Constitutional Revolution. To develop a more than rudimentary understanding of the complex development of the Constitutional Revolution, I shall briefly deal with the combination of political, economic and religious factors operative during the events of the Constitutional Revolution.

The Intertwining of Political and Religious Discourses

A commonly held view is that parliamentary democracy constituted the most important element of the Constitutional Revolution. Indeed the political associations with specific demands for political democracy and economic independence, which were organised by secular activists prior to the revolution, point to the high degree of political organisation around democratic demands. These associations were first formed in the late nineteenth century under Naser-al-Din Shah's despotic rule, and mostly adopted underground activities. Some of these associations got also involved in violent political action, particularly the assassination of political figures. One of the most radical of these groups, Markaz-e Gheybi (Secret Centre) became very active during the events of the Constitutional Revolution. More of these groups were formed during the first years of the twentieth century under Mozaffar-al-Din Shah when the exercise of repressive policies was less severe. The capital Tehran and other major urban centres like Tabriz were the principle ground for the formation of these associations. From 1903 to 1905 three secret societies were formed in Tabriz and Tehran. "The programmes of the two Tehran societies variously emphasised the evils of tyranny and the benefits of the rule of law, the desirability of the form of government found in the progressive nations and the necessity of the reform of the State, taxation, the army, and the judiciary systems." One of the most radical of these groups, Markaz-e Gheybi (Secret Centre) became very active during the events of the Constitutional Revolution. More of these groups were formed during the first years of the twentieth century under Mozaffar-al-Din Shah when the exercise of repressive policies was less severe. The capital Tehran and other major urban centres like Tabriz were the principle ground for the formation of these associations. From 1903 to 1905 three secret societies were formed in Tabriz and Tehran. "The programmes of the two Tehran societies variously emphasised the evils of tyranny and the benefits of the rule of law, the desirability of the form of government found in the progressive nations and the necessity of the reform of the State, taxation, the army, and the judiciary systems." One of the most radical of these groups, Markaz-e Gheybi (Secret Centre) became very active during the events of the Constitutional Revolution. More of these groups were formed during the first years of the twentieth century under Mozaffar-al-Din Shah when the exercise of repressive policies was less severe. The capital Tehran and other major urban centres like Tabriz were the principle ground for the formation of these associations. From 1903 to 1905 three secret societies were formed in Tabriz and Tehran. "The programmes of the two Tehran societies variously emphasised the evils of tyranny and the benefits of the rule of law, the desirability of the form of government found in the progressive nations and the necessity of the reform of the State, taxation, the army, and the judiciary systems."

These groups, as Lambton has suggested: "had little resemblance to the political parties of the West; their affinity was rather with the secret society characteristics of the extreme religious sects of Medieval Islam." But there were also secret organisations, which were

1 Issawi, C. ed. 1971, p. 68
2 Arjomand, S. A. 1988, p. 35
3 Mirza Reza Kermani, the man who assassinated Naser-al-Din Shah, is believed to have been a member of one of these associations masterminded by Seyyed Jamal.
4 Ibid. p. 36
5 Lambton, A. K. S. 1987, p. 307
inspired by Western secret societies. One of these secret societies was the Iranian Freemasonry. This society was founded by some of the influential members of the intelligentsia and attracted a number of prominent officials, and there are claims that it was also joined by a number of the ulama. In time, the Iranian Freemasonry was accused of secret connections with Britain, and as the notorious secret instrument for the promotion of British interests at highest political and religious levels. Understandably therefore, the politically conscious secular and religious figures have vehemently denied any connection with Freemasonry. But strong perceptions about the connection of early secular intellectuals with Freemasonry have persistently marred their political reputation in the public mind.

By 1905, these associations presented three major elements in their composition - nationalism, religion, and liberalism. These elements were rarely manifested purely. In fact, what actually made up the modernist trend of the Constitutional Revolution was the temporary emergence of an ideological syncretism incorporating all these elements in a coalition of liberal intellectuals, nationalist merchants, and reform-minded ulama. The liberal intellectuals embraced the nationalism of radical merchants, and were convinced that the essence of Shi'i Islam did not contravene civil liberties. The merchants demanded the stopping of concessions to foreign powers, and the introduction of economic reforms that would allow the productive and unrestrained activity of the domestic capital. They predominantly held a religious worldview, but were convinced that a democratic system of government would work in their interest. The reform-minded ulama registered Iran's political and economic decline under the inefficient Qajar kings, and with it the isolation and degeneration of Shi'i Islam. They were worried about the growing non-Muslim preponderance in Iran, and about the weakening of religious institutions. They were prepared to ally themselves with the merchants and intellectuals as they believed the return to Islam as a model of society would soothe the political and economic grievances.

"The opening phase of the Constitutional Revolution was marked by the march of the religious leaders to take bast (sanctuary) in Qom." The growing influence of foreigners in Iran's bureaucratic, financial and military affairs was certainly a major source of discontent on the part of the ulama and merchants. For instance, the selective favouritism of Naus, the Belgian controller of Iran's Custom for the European merchants had antagonised the already squeezed native merchants. Also, Edward Browne, in his The Persian Revolution, referred to tyrannical acts of the government and chronic food shortages as two sources of discontent at this time. But the strong emotions that drove the mass movement against the regime arose from the blatant insensitivity of the colonial functionaries to the popular religious sentiments. For example, the contemptuous action of Naus in taking pleasure at being photographed in clerical guise created a major disturbance among the ulama and the community of believers when this photograph was printed in one of the newspapers.

Against this background and agitation by the ulama, a conflict developed between the merchants and the government on the question of distribution of sugar, which resulted in the arrest and whipping of two native merchants. In protest against the government action, a group of the merchants and some of the ulama took sanctuary in

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1 It is believed that the Iranian Freemasonry was founded by Mirza Malkam Khan, one of the more famous and influential of the early Iranian secular intellectuals, following his travels to Europe and his association with the Masonic societies there.
3 Cottam, R. 1964, p. 162
the Shrine of Abdul Azim, south of Tehran in April 1905. Soon after a three week protest was organised in the grounds of the British legation in Tehran which, according to Kasravi, gathered fourteen thousand ulama, merchants, and many other urban occupants. Gradually requests for justice and the rule of law developed to demands for a constitution and a parliament. Eventually in August 1906, Mozaffar-ad-Din Shah accepted the demand for a Constitution and soon after the first Iranian Parliament (Majlis) was convened.

The death of the relatively lenient Mozaffar-ad-Din Shah in early 1907 and the rise of the autocrat and Russian-supported Muhammad Ali Shah to power put the new Parliament in a precarious position. The Majlis eventually suffered a military coup, carried out by the new monarch in April 1909 and backed by the Russian troops, which resulted in the temporary restoration of autocracy. However, the popular uprising of July 1909 in support of the Constitution deposed Muhammad Ali Shah and restored the power of the Majlis.

The Majlis "as the organ of national sovereignty, represented the realisation of the democratic goal of the Constitutional Revolution." It also represented the economic demands of the bourgeoisie. The contribution of the ulama to the movement was also recognised in one of the articles of the new Fundamental Law (Ghamun-e Assassi), which guaranteed a committee of the ulama the right to veto the rulings of the Majlis if they were found in contradiction with the Shari'at (sacred law).

The Fundamental Law was in effect a combination of Western liberal notions derived mainly from European Constitutions - particularly French and Belgian Constitutions - and certain provisions to ensure the religious law was not contravened. Muhammad Taqi Bahar indicated in his A Short History of Political Parties in Iran that the Iranian Constitution of 1910 was in the most part a translation of the Belgian Constitution of 1830. Amin Banani has pointed to the contradictory nature of the 1910 Constitution. "It tried to accept all the tenets of Western liberal democracy, based upon the seventeenth and eighteenth century concepts of natural law and the natural rights of man, but subject to a strict conformity with the Shari'at and approval of the ulama. It set out to establish a Western liberal democracy with secular institutions but without the basic prerequisite of such a system: the separation of Church and State." Provisions for economic reforms were also reflected in several articles of the Fundamental Law.

The Failures of the Constitutional Movement

If the Majlis was successful in propagating democratic ideas of national sovereignty, its attempts to build a centralised State - strong enough to implement these ideas - ended in failure. A number of reasons have been presented for the failure of the Constitutional movement when conceived as a bourgeois-democratic revolution. These reasons included the fiscal problem of the constitutional government, the absence of a strong military force at the disposal of the government, and the lack of a land reform for the benefit of the peasants.

The perennial problem of tax collection is often cited as the main stumbling block in the way of a financial reform desired by the Majlis. This problem was
aggravated by the fact that the Majlis had to confront the Shah's unproductive expenditures. Other difficulties with the financial reform are attributed to the objections emanated from the imperialist powers, and the "grandees" of the old regime who had apparently accepted the Constitution.

As for the military weakness of the constitutional government, it has been noted that this government could only organise a militia of less than a thousand men. As Browne has reported, the main source of the constitutionalists' military power during their confrontations with Muhammad Ali Shah had come from the tribal gunmen. The weak point of the Constitutional Revolution thus was that its military power was derived from an old power structure, which inherently contradicted the modernising trends of the revolution.

The land reform, in which the Majlis abolished the tuyul (commissioned land), but sanctioned private land ownership, is also cited as an important factor in the failure of the constitutional movement, as it gave rise to a class of landowners with unlimited powers. Naturally, large landowners formed an important obstacle in the way of any reform, which would have benefited the peasants at their expense.

Evidently, in these evaluations of the weaknesses of the Constitutional Revolution, there is little appreciation of the ulama dismay as an important factor in the failure of this revolution. The ulama dismay heightened with the opening of the ideological conflict inherent in the forged blend of the Shi'i Islam with the Western originated ideas of liberalism and nationalism. This was the case, because the ideas of national sovereignty, liberalism and democracy that had emerged from the Constitutional Revolution were naturally conceived to have inevitable secular implications.

Two basic contradictions arose soon after the convention of the first Majlis. Firstly, democracy as the rule of people could be conceived as the denial of the supremacy of God. Although the legislators of the first Majlis tried to resolve this conflict by granting to a committee of the mujtahids the right to veto the legislation of the Majlis, in practice the resulting problems left the Majlis undecided and inefficient, and the conservative ulama discontent. Secondly, a secular national government had to represent the nation of Iran and be somewhat independent of the dominant religious sect, and liberalism demanded equality of religions before the law, a proposition which demanded predominance of nation over religion, and was by nature unacceptable to many of the ulama.

The Ulama and the Constitutional Revolution

Interpreted as a bourgeois-democratic revolution, the constitutional movement was a modernising movement concerned with economic and political changes resulting from the integration of Iran into the burgeoning world economy. In this sense, the Constitutional Revolution has been viewed as a modern nationalist movement, intending to modernise Iran following the model of Western development, and at the same time, endeavouring to resist foreign domination in order to achieve political sovereignty. In this perspective, as I have already noted, the main driving forces of the revolution have been identified as the secular intelligentsia with their demand for

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1 The extravagant royal visits to Europe, financed by the Iran-based British and Russian Banks, had left Iran heavily in debt. For more information on the extravagant royal expenditures see Shuster, W. M. The Strangling of Persia, New York, 1912, p. 290
2 Arjomand, S. A. 1988, p. 42
3 Browne, E. G. 1966 (1910), p. 300
To complete this model, the political-economists, particularly of the left, have evaluated the ulama position on the basis of their response to the revolution. As such, the ulama shared with the intelligentsia and the merchants the oppositional stance to the State, and their support for the revolution was indispensable because of their power of mass mobilisation. But according to these political-economists, the ulama were also part of the structure of the "ancien régime", and as such were basically reactionary. Therefore, the revolutionaries, in need of the ulama support, had to make compromises to their reactionary demands. I have already cited one such compromise: the provision in the Supplementary Fundamental Law, which provided a committee of five mujtahids the power to veto the legislation passed by the Majlis if found in breach of the Sacred Law.

It has also been claimed that the ulama were pressured into joining the movement from the fear of losing their popular backing as a result of the competition of the constitutionalist pamphleteers and publicists. Indeed, secular reformism had dominated the intellectual environment of the constitutional era by making use of print media - newspapers and secret pamphlets (shabnameh) - and by organising political networks through secret societies. Although the ulama still enjoyed the means of mosque, pulpit and the congregational prayers, they were taken by surprise by the vigour of the political activities of the secular reformers. An important basis for the regressive character of the ulama, secularist intellectuals commonly believe, lay in their dissatisfaction with the Constitution.

To comprehend the discontent of the ulama with the Constitution more profoundly, the immediate political implications of the victory of the revolution have to be studied. Given the predominance of liberal-nationalist ideology in the articles of the Fundamental Law - drafted on the basis of European Constitutions - it was only natural that the religious component of the leadership of the revolution not to be satisfied with the outcome of the revolution. The religious constitutionalists rightly realised that their gain from the victory was not proportional to the part they played in the revolution. The apprehension of the constitutionalist ulama was intensified with the growth of the radical secularist element in the camp of liberal-nationalist revolutionaries. High ranking constitutionalist ulama like Ayatollahs Behbahani and Tabataba'i came under pressure by the more traditional ulama who had expressed concern from the beginning about the essential incompatibility of religion and the secular implications of the revolution, particularly the separation of religion and State. With the open espousal of secularism by liberal activists in the wake of the formation of the Parliament, the dissident ulama began an active campaign to express their discontent. Their dissatisfaction was embodied in the activities of Sheikh Fazllolah Nuri, a prominent mujtahid of Tehran.

Kasravi has given evidence of Nuri’s activities, which began with the objection to a bill in the Majlis, which would give equal rights to religious minorities, and was enhanced with the formation of the anjoman, a political association of the anticonstitutional ulama.1 Regarding the constitutionalist ulama as theologically incompetent and susceptible to Western influence, Nuri “insisted that the Constitution by its very existence contravened the Shari'at, which did not recognise the validity of man-made law.”2 He initiated a doctrinal struggle against the Constitution that in the political scene was expressed in terms of the fight of religion and tradition against modernity and democracy and humanism, and the merchants with their effort to maintain a national economy.

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1 Kasravi, A. 1355/1976, 370-375
2 Cottam, R. 1964. p. 142
infidelity. In response to the constitutionalist clerical and lay activists, who stressed that Western political concepts were conforming to the laws of the Shari'at, Nuri insisted on the non-Islamic origins of the Constitution and its irreligious nature.

Nuri's propaganda, which became more articulate and far reaching through his newly published journal *Ruz-nameh*, gave the voice of opponents of parliamentary government an ideological expression. It put under pressure the clerics, who had converted to constitutionalism and had sided with the parliamentary government. This led to a split within the ulama. A few prominent mujtahids firmly supported the constitutionalists. Others either sided with Nuri in outright rejection of constitutionalism or supported it only conditionally, "insisting on the supervisory veto power of the religious authority, the restriction of freedom of the press, and the disavowal of any reform entailing the secularisation of the judiciary and educational system."  

Although Nuri's anti-constitutionalism brought him in temporary alliance with the autocrat and Russo-phile Muhammad Ali Shah, one should distinguish between their intentions. The deep-rooted hostilities between the ulama and the monarchs did not vanish; but they gave way to political considerations. Each party tried to use the capacities of the other in a concerted political action against the constitutionalists. However, Nuri's obsession with rejection of the Constitution, which sided him with the "impious royal court", cost him his religious and popular prestige. Nuri's hard-line attitude towards constitutionalism even after the capitulation of the Shah to the Constitution marked his religious extremism. His insistence on the cause of Islam during his captivity and trial until he was hanged in July 1909 highlighted the prominence of his religious-political concerns. However, as Arjomand has suggested: "Though the uncompromising anti-parliamentarianism of Nuri ... was doomed, an earlier variation of his position, the advocacy of Islamic constitutionalism (mashruteh mashru'eh), was in effect accepted by the vast majority of the constitutionalist ulama." This viewpoint is still popular among the ulama.

Nuri's turning against the constitutional movement also highlighted another important feature of this revolution, namely the emergence of flaws in the alliance of the mosque and the bazaar, which had formed in common opposition to the State in 1905. Many merchants and some reform-minded ulama favoured the economic legislation of the Majlis, whereas the conservative ulama rejected it. The objection of the conservative ulama was informed by the thrust of the economic policies of the Majlis, which favoured modernisation.

It is therefore in the context of the intellectual developments within the ranks of the ulama during the Constitutional Revolution that one could grasp a more profound understanding of the roots of the failure of this revolution as a modern movement with demands for parliamentarism and market economy. The Constitutional Revolution had to compromise ideologically on the issues of democracy, civil liberty and political freedom. In conjunction with Nuri's fundamentalist or reactionary stance against the Constitution Revolution, new ways of thinking and new imaginaries of revolution began to take shape both within the reformist and conservative ulama. A particular strand of these imaginaries continued the tradition of expressing politics in strictly religious terms. More radical and less liberal than the constitutionalist ulama, and more moderate and creative than the conservative Nuri and his disciples, the followers of this new political trend began the construction of the modern Islamic ideology of revolution. They thus formed a wish, the desire of making their own revolution, which would be

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1 Arjomand, S. A. 1988, p. 52
2 Ibid, p. 57
3 It had also to compromise militarily as the failure of the Constitutionalists to set up a strong standing army made them dependent on the old structure of tribal military power.
revolutionary enough to challenge the despotic State and the colonial aggression, and independent enough not to fall under any ideology, which would not oblige to the Islamic ideology. This trend initiated the final phase in the development of the political philosophy of Shi'ism, which came to fruition in the 1960s and the 1970s. I shall discuss this phase in more detail in the following chapters.

The Political Discourse of the Constitutional Revolution

The transformation of Shi'ism into a political ideology did not mean that it lost its religious essence. It remained primarily a religious cause, the cause of empowering religious faith and institutions via political praxis. Nonetheless, as I have noted earlier, countervailing social sentiments and political tendencies ever since the Constitutional Revolution pushed for the development of an expressly secular politics in Iran in the fashion of European Enlightenment. Interestingly, groups and individuals of both religious and non-religious persuasions shared such sentiments; and reform movements both within and outside the State adopted such tendencies. As a result, concepts such as parliamentary democracy and political pluralism entered Iranian political discourse in the form of political parties, and independent legislative and legal institutions.

However, a non-religious politics never enjoyed public credibility and legitimacy in Iran. Neither the liberal attitudes of secular intellectuals, nor the egalitarian attitudes of the Marxist intellectuals, nor even the State-sponsored idealisation of the ancient Persian imperial and religious traditions, were able to find a legitimacy radically separated from religion. At any rate, they did not gather a strong and popularly supported base in Iran as a political culture.

By contrast, the final phase of the formation of the Shi'i political ideology, which began during the Constitutional Revolution and peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, played a significant role in constituting the political consciousness of Iranians. This phase, which has continued unabated even after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, owes as much to the original political doctrines of Shi'ism as it does to the theoretical and practical interactions of the ulama with the modern political and intellectual developments. In their inception during the struggles over the 1905 Constitution, these interactions gave rise to various political platforms vis-à-vis the secular reformers.

According to Kasravi, the ulama took essentially three positions towards the secular intellectuals during the Constitutional Revolution. “Some - led by Mulla Mohammad-Kazem Khorasani, Hajj Shaykh Abdollah Mazandarani, and Hajj Mirza Hussein Tehrani - argued that since the Imam al-Zaman (Lord of the Age), the twelfth Imam, was not taking an active role in the world, a constitutional government of the wise should replace the rule of the cruel. Others - led by Seyyed Muhammad Tabataba’i and Seyyed Abdollah Behbahani - agreed with this ideal but argued that it could prove to be difficult to implement, and that it was at least important to establish constitutional checks upon the cruelty of the rulers... Yet others - led by Shaykh Fazlollah Nuri -insisted on the establishment of a constitutional government, but constitutional in the literal sense of the word mashruṭa, ... which comes from the Arabic root shart (condition): that is, conditioned by the Qur’an and the sunna (practices of the Prophet).”

The Constitution of 1905 reflected, to various degrees, all these positions and thus became a document, not dissimilar to most other political documents every where else, containing apparent contradictions, and hence, in need of interpretation. In the text of the Constitution, there were articles proclaiming notions of citizenry, freedom,

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1 Fischer, M. From Religious Dispute to Revolution, 1980, p. 149
taxation, justice and checks on the government, modelled on the traditions of European democracy, as well as articles that imposed religious limitations and qualifications upon these notions.¹

The influence of the constitutional movement on the theory of Islamic government (velayat-e faqih), which was developed by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1970s, is undeniable. To be sure, this influence is so strong that it may be considered as the cornerstone of the latest version of Shi'i politics in Iran. But one should not assume that this influence meant an unprocessed replication of the position of the ulama in the constitutional period by the Islamic ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s. Driven by such assumptions, some analysts have given an undue weight to the influence of Nuri on Ayatollah Khomeini’s understanding of the Islamic government.

Nuri is considered to be essentially an anti-constitutionalist joining the constitutional movement out of political expediency. Attributing too much weight to the influence of Nuri on Khomeini’s thought thus implies that Khomeini was also essentially anti-constitutionalist. The perception that Ayatollah Khomeini essentially advocated an anti-constitutional position is due to the fact that he has referred to Nuri more frequently than other religious leaders of the Constitutional Revolution. However, the actual development of politics since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, reflected in the process of institution building, indicates clearly that all the three positions of the ulama of the period of Constitutional Revolution have influenced Khomeini’s political theory. Khomeini’s Islamic revolutionary discourse thus came of age as a distinct theory of revolution and a distinct theory of State appropriating interpreting, incorporating but not merely replicating the ideas of the constitutional ulama. Nor did it limit itself to these mainly religious ideas; interestingly, it also appropriated, interpreted and incorporated other available discourses relevant to his cause, such as those of the secular revolutionaries. (See Chapter 7 for more detail.)

The Genesis of the Islamic Ideology of Revolution

Most of the existing analyses of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 are based on narrow assumptions about Iran’s economic and social structure in the early twentieth century. A large part of this, as I noted earlier, has been class analysis based on a political-economic understanding of events. In most of these analyses, the revolution has been portrayed as a bourgeoisie revolution; and the ambivalence of the ulama in the revolution is construed as treacherous behaviour. However, as I have argued, the ulama role in the Constitutional Revolution could be better understood in light of a discursive field of various discourses of power where the ulama competed and interacted with alternative truth claims offered by the State, the speculative philosophers, the mystics and the modern intelligentsia. Political economy, although it has value as an analytical tool, appears unable to clarify all aspects of the ulama involvement in the Constitutional Revolution. One reason for this is that politico-economic views have been too obsessed with understanding this revolution on the model of the Western bourgeois or bourgeois-democratic revolutions.

A major weakness of the strictly politico-economic views is that by connecting the ulama to the State and privileged social classes, they fail to adequately account for the fact that the revolutionary events, which led to the grant of the Constitution, were in many cases led by the ulama. The ulama were also the primary social group to be

¹ One such limitation was the passage of an amendment proposed by Nuri, which pronounced that all laws passed by the Majlis should be subject to the veto of a committee of the ulama, if they were found to be in breach of the Shari'at (Islamic Law).
directly subjected to the tyrannical measures of the government, which had added to the feelings of religious hostility against the State. The events leading up to the confrontation of the ulama with the government also involved persecution and in some cases execution of the constitutionalist ulama and their followers.

In the event of the death of any of the ulama or tullab (seminarians), the mourning ceremony would be easily turned into a political rally attended by a vexed crowd. Such rallies were apt to be utilised by the constitutionalist ulama to vent their political concerns. According to Nazem al-Eslam Kermani, the ulama usually found historical analogies to compare the tyranny of the Qajar kings with that of the “unjust rule” of the Umayyad caliphs.1 Invoking the doctrine of Occultation, they questioned the legitimacy of the temporal power of the king and rendered the government unlawful and civil disobedience incumbent.

The constitutional movement, therefore, was expressed, at least in its popular phase, by religious zeal. The religious nature of the agitation ensured that the ulama should play a leading role in the movement. The ulama interest to take part in the revolution and obtain its leadership is obscured by their objections against the “revolutionary ethos” in the second phase of the revolution. According to Algar, the controversial role of the ulama could be related to “the existence of the secret societies” some of whose secularist members, like Malkam Khan, had “realised that only the ulama had the power to set the masses in motion and bring about change.”2

The question, therefore, arises whether the ulama, despite their seeming prominence, were in reality serving consciously or unconsciously as the tools of secular groups with purposes different from their own. Moreover, while in light of the Qajar history and Shi'i doctrine, it was natural for the ulama to lead a politico-religious movement against the State, why did they support the demands for a Constitution in the first place? Due to many parallels that can be drawn between the content and the form of the Constitutional Revolution and those of the recent Islamic Revolution in Iran answers to these questions are of great significance for the students of modern Iranian history.

Theoretically, doctrinal prerequisites of the ulama existence make their social and political activities subject to the maintenance of the Twelver Shi'i doctrine about relationship between religion and State. Basic to this doctrine is illegitimacy of the State. During the quietist period of the Imami Shi'ism negation of the State took a passive form but the possibility was left open for active resistance in the future. According to Algar, the prevalent duality of the Shari'at (religious law) and the 'urf (civil law) in Iranian society under the Qajar rule had kept the religious law in abeyance and the civil law inefficient.

The government’s leaning toward a Western style administration was in conflict with the laws of the Shari'at, which were governed by the ulama. It is, therefore, possible to assume that the ulama involvement and agitation in the constitutional movement pursued the ultimate goal of applying the Shari'at in its entirety. The wording of the Article 2 of the Fundamental Law clearly illustrates the extent of the attempt made by the ulama to pursue their institutional interests by imposing their views upon the mainly liberal Constitution of 1910, and thus subject it to a religio-legal binding. It also stresses the millenarian aspirations of the Constitutional Revolution. The legitimacy of the Constitution was made contingent upon the blessing of the Imam-e Asr (leader of the age), the Mahdi:

1 For the instances of the use of religious symbolism during the Constitutional Revolution see Nazim ul-Eslam Kermani, Tarikh-e Bidari-ye Iran (The History of the Awakening of Iranians), Tehran, 1970/1349
2 Algar, H. 1969, p. xiv
"The Majlis, which has been formed by the blessing of the Imam-e Asr (may God speed his appearance) and by the grace of his Majesty the Shah, and by the vigilance of the Islamic ulama (may God increase their example) and by the Iranian nation, may at no time legislate laws that are contradictory to the sacred laws of Islam. It is self-evident that it is the responsibility of the ulama to determine and judge such contradictions...Therefore it is officially decided that in each legislative session a board of no less than five men, comprised of mujahids and devout fuqaha, who are also aware of the needs and exigencies of the time, ... be nominated by the ulama. This Majlis shall accept this board as full members. It is their duty to study all the legislative proposals, and if they find any that contradicts the sacred laws of Islam, they shall reject it. The decision of this board in this respect is binding and final. This provision of the Constitution is unalterable until the coming of the Imam-e Asr, may God speed his appearance."

Owing to the fact that the agitation leading to the granting of the Constitution was largely inspired and directed by the ulama, "they might legitimately have expected from its realisation a systematic application of the Islamic law, and hence an expansion or at least perpetuation of their functions." However, the constitutional government tended increasingly to take the semblance of a Western style political structure leading to social and political decline in the role of religion, in general, and that of the ulama, in particular. This can be seen as a significant factor contributing to the ulama turning against the constitutional government.

One may even argue against the stress on the strictly political role of the ulama in confronting the State. Referring to the de facto depoliticisation of Imami Shi'ism, Bayat, for example, has viewed the ulama activity basically as the effort of one of the Shi'i schools to establish “its sole guardianship of the religion”, and to dominate the intellectual scene in Iran. In reference to the tradition of mystical heterodoxy and religious dissent, she argues that the mujahids have endeavoured “to restrict speculative thought and impose strict adherence to religious law,” and that in this course they have had to face intellectual dissent opposing Shi'i orthodoxy. Bayat contends that the Constitutional Revolution marked the ascendancy of these dissidents whose call for religious reform was transformed into “demands of secularisation of important social institutions controlled by the ulama.” According to this interpretation, the foremost concern of the ulama heightened political activism since the turn of the century has been opposition to the modernist dissent within orthodoxy.

One can identify two intertwining politico-religious trends, which took shape among the Shi'i ulama in Iran in the early twentieth century around two distinct sets of agenda, giving rise to two discrete, but intersecting movements. One was a radical religious movement (which is inaccurately identified as fundamentalist) concerned with and opposed to the modern orientations in the State, which would come at the price of Western domination. This movement naturally opposed the manifestations of the Western political, cultural and economic preponderance, which was perceived to be diminishing the power of religious institutions. And the other was a religious modernist movement with liberal tendencies, which criticised the lack of courage and commitment of the government to allow for the development of effective modern institutions under the supervision of a reformed religion.

In the extraordinary atmosphere leading up to the Constitutional Revolution, these two movements, tended to reinforce each other in the narrow but highly crucial

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1 Banani, A. The Modernisation of Iran, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1961, pp. 17-18
2 Algar, H. 1969, p. 255
3 Bayat, M. 1982, p. xiv
4 The Sheikhi school of theology and the Babi religious revolt can be cited as two important expressions of religious dissent within Shi'i orthodoxy
5 Bayat, M. p. xvi
agenda of opposition to certain government policies. The short-term success of this political merger and the social mobilisation, caused by the resultant emotions of unity, blurred the deep-seated conflicts that divided these two movements. This was perhaps the reason why they were often mistaken for a single movement.

Controversy still prevails in the domain of debate concerning the ulama activities during the Constitutional Revolution. One thing, however, has to be agreed on; the Constitutional Revolution revealed that the potential social power of the ulama could be put into practice in the modern era for explicit political purposes. Indeed, it effectively altered the dynamics of Iran’s political life in the twentieth century.

Like all great revolutions, the Constitutional Revolution contained a manifold of interest groups with conflicting expectations from the revolution. The religious-modernist desire to present governmental and religious reforms as sanctioned and even enjoined by Islam had supporters both in the ranks of the ulama and among the secular intellectuals. As Algar has suggested, the reform-minded ulama believed that the law of Islam complied with science and civilisation, and reasonably expected that the sacred law be implemented after the attainment of the Constitution. In practice, the ensuing Western orientation in the constitutional government disappointed these ulama.

However, an important group among the ulama remained loyal to the constitutional cause. The persistence of these ulama in support of a constitution government is an important indication that “the ulama participation in the movement had not been the result simply of circumstantial pressure and confusion induced by secularist stratagems.”¹ These clerical ideologues concluded that a constitutional government was capable of co-existing with the Shi'i faith. In retrospect, this view “established itself as the dominant one among the Iranian ulama and continued to inform their political attitudes after the Constitutional Revolution.”² As such, the inception of new political interpretations of Shi'i Islam in the modern age by modernist Muslim activists and ideologues may be considered as the genesis of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution.

The Impact of Religious Rationalisation on Political Developments

The emergence of new views among the ulama, which was not originally found in the history of Shi'ism, was an outcome of the process of rationalisation of the Usuli Shi'ism, which enable it to address the exigencies of time. It was ironic that this dogmatic school became one of the few Shi'i sects that were flexible enough to keep their social and political relevance intact until present day. This became possible not by permissiveness and the weakening of the faith, rather by rationalising the position of the religious dogma toward this-worldly questions, which concerned the society.

Political and economic problems were the burning issues of the time; and therefore, it seemed quite natural to some of the ulama that reform was needed to reinvigorate the principles of the faith. For the reform-minded ulama, the principle of the faith would become corrupt, outmoded and eventually powerless and disintegrated, if they remained out of touch with modern developments. The notion of ijtihad (updating the religious rules to address emergent issues and problems) made such innovations plausible. To this extent, we may be able to draw parallels between the reform trend, which appeared in the Usuli Shi’ism during the late nineteenth century

² Ibid, p. 238
and early twentieth century in Iran, on the one hand, and the reformation of the 
Christian faith in the seventeenth century Europe, on the other.

As Weber noted, the tendency of Reformation, in general, and that of certain 
Protestant sects, in particular, to encourage and inspire a social organisation of faith had 
two significant consequences. First, it resulted in the emergence of a positive attitude 
toward this-worldly activities. These activities were increasingly interpreted as religious 
duties. In this context, the Reformation also created a shift in the philosophical 
orientations of religion and made it accessible to ordinary believers. This orientation 
encouraged worldly activities on a par with otherworldly salvation. Sometimes, it even 
elevated the religious value of being pure in this world to a level higher than salvation 
in the other world. It thus entailed a greater emphasis on individual endeavour to 
restrain from corruption of the body and soul. Nevertheless, new trends in religious 
understanding of the world opened the way for religious innovations leading in the 
long-term to the emergence of the anti-thesis of the religious dogma, namely the 
Enlightenment and the modern secular ideologies in the eighteenth and nineteenth 
centuries.

The second consequence of the Reformation was mainly economically oriented 
and entailed a religious model for organisation of business and labour. In effect, it 
motivated the modern capitalist enterprise by its praise of work and creation of wealth 
as religious activities, so long as they were not used as a means of indulgence in 
worldly pleasures. The essence of production of wealth as religious duty motivated the 
religiously-oriented small capitalists of the seventeenth century Europe to engage in 
harder work and more investment not for immediate profit or pleasure, but as a social 
duty set by God. This trend had undoubtedly encouraged the accumulation of capital. 
Obviously where there was an immediate return, it would be considered as a bonus, 
which would make worldly life of the believer that much more comfortable. More often 
though pleasure and fulfilment was deferred or sought within the legitimate domain of 
the private family.

Traces of these two trends can be identified also in the manifestations of the 
participation of the Usuli ulama in the Constitutional Revolution. To these ulama I have 
referred to as reform-minded in terms of their attitude toward the role of religion in 
modern times and in terms of their perception of the role of the State in policy making. 
The reform-minded ulama did not propose less restriction on the moral conduct of the 
public; quite the contrary, they were very much concerned with the restoration of the 
social status of the religious dogma through the enforcement of a stronger measure of 
public piety than existed. Their idea of reform entailed the provision of new methods 
for social organisation of religion so that it could deal with worldly problems of the 
modern time. They, therefore, questioned the traditional attitude of political abstention. 
They believed that traditional ways of reviving religion, which was limited to 
jurisprudential and theological scholarship, were susceptible to decline if they did not 
tackle the political issues of the time head on.

As for the economic worldview, the reform-minded ulama came very close to 
advocating the same kind of spirit, which inspired the capitalist enterprise in the West. 
They emphasised the sanctity of private property, advocated the diversification of trade, 
and encouraged the creation of wealth through honest profit making, which they 
believed would be in obedience of “God’s commandments”. They also stressed the 
sanctity of honest labour by referring to it as the means of livelihood of the Prophets

\[\text{Weber, M. 1958, p. 108}\]
and the Imams. Also, similar to many Protestant sects, they recognised the unequal distribution of the wealth as “a special dispensation of the Divine Providence”.

The siding of the reform-minded ulama with the bazaar merchants was in effect an alliance with the local bourgeoisie, which largely shared the religious, economic and political views of these ulama. However, the reformist ulama and the merchants were limited in their efforts by three strong constraints. One, as already mentioned, was the repressive nature of the State power. Another was the “ecclesiastical regimentation”, advocated by the traditionalist or orthodox ulama, who emphasised the external conformity to the letter of the religious law and abhorred the diversification of the activities of religion in the world. The third constraint came from the challenge of the philosophical and ideological discourse of modernity, which competed and at times threatened the modern Shi‘i discourse.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I traced the various phases of the development of Shi‘i political philosophy. In doing this, I emphasised the interdependence of socio-economic and socio-religious developments since the rise of Shi‘i Islam. I also tried to demonstrate how a religio-political dispute over the succession of the Prophet led to the formation of Islamic sects, notably the Imami Shi‘ism; and how the internal transformations of the Imami doctrine affected political developments in Iran, and in turn was affected by them. I argued that socio-political and socio-economic developments in Iran since the rise of the Safavid Shi‘ism, which transformed Shi‘ism from a sectarian religion to the level of the State and majority religion, were instrumental in making the return of this faith to politics possible. Since the Safavid period, the Shi‘i ulama developed a relatively coherent body politic with concrete social and institutional functions as well as spiritual and intellectual influence. Thus, the modern politicisation of Shi‘ism became possible when in the course of competition with contesting truth claims, it acquired the capacity of social and political organisation in its own right.

The developments, which caused the collapse of the Safavid State, resulted in the weakening of the strong State-religion ties and the resurgence of competing intellectual movements within Shi‘ism. This period also saw the beginning of the end of the Persian Empire, despite the attempts of the Nadir Shah and Aqa Muhammad Khan to restore it. The religious outcome of these upheavals was the emergence of the Usuli Shi‘ism as the dominant intellectual school in the religious establishment. This school achieved a high degree of internal doctrinal and juridical coherence, restored its institutional functions, particularly in the legal field, and acquired the ability to survive independent of, and even in opposition to, the State through its direct links with the population.

The process of the development of the Usuli Shi‘ism exhibits similarities to the revival of religious asceticism in Christian Europe after Reformation. In doctrinal terms, the Usuli Shi‘ism rejected mystical traditions, monastic seclusion and the mere pursuit of otherworldly salvation. By contrast, it emphasised strict personal and public piety as a worldly ascetic conduct and a religious duty, which would govern all social activities. It rationalised the messianic notions concerning the waiting for the Mahdi by giving the Usuli clerics the power to represent the Imam in his absence by supervising the worldly conduct of the believers. In this sense, it also contained the surges of religious emotionalism of the ordinary believers by bringing the sacraments and rituals under the control of the ulama establishment.

1 Ibid, p. 177
In political terms, the *Usuli Shi‘ism* entered a conflictual relationship with the State especially in the *Qajar* period. Just as the Methodists in England in the eighteenth century confronted the established power of the monarch, the elite and the official clergy, the *Usuli ulama* criticised the royal court and the corrupt clergy in the nineteenth century Iran. They were particularly critical of the pleasure-seeking attitude of the courtiers and the decline of the religious values. Moreover, the political attitude of the *Usuli ulama* provided gradually for new interpretations of religious texts, rituals and other symbolic structures. The abstention from politics, which was the dominant feature of the *ulama* political attitude, became increasingly vulnerable. Instead, the notion of illegitimacy of temporal States in the absence of the Absent Imam was emphasised.

In economic terms, the *Usuli* movement tended to influence the mainly middle-class merchants and industrialists, who were in an inferior position economically and politically, with respect to the upper-class landowners, court officials and military strong men. The merchants generally shared the religious views of the *Usuli ulama* and pursued an ascetic moral conduct in their personal, social and business life, which was governed by religious treatises. Another feature of Iran’s traditional commercial bourgeoisie was its tendency to conduct its business independent of the State, similar to the practice of the Methodist businessmen in England in the eighteenth century. However, the worldly asceticism, that Weber identified as a significant social and psychological impetus in prompting the rise of modern capitalism in Europe, did not lead to a similar outcome in Iran.

In many European societies, particularly in England, capitalist economic growth became possible by the farmers, industrialists and merchants who were inspired by a new religious motivation, and found support in strong national States. In Iran, however, the local merchants and the reformist *ulama* had to confront the alliance of the State, landed aristocracy whose interest were better served by the foreign capital. And as such, they achieved little economic success while becoming more vocal in political opposition to the State.

With the expansion of the capitalist world economy, social developments in Iran were increasingly affected by the relegation of Iran to a peripheral position. The transition of Iran to a peripheral status was a part of the global expansion of the Western capitalism. This expansion was an important factor in thwarting the development of an indigenous capitalism in Iran, which could be inspired by the local cultural and religious values. The hegemonic position of foreign powers, which was achieved through military, industrial and trade superiority of the West, stripped the Iranian cultural structures form opportunities that could motivate meaningful economic activities. Thus, the reformist *ulama* and merchants became firmer in their political opposition to the State by resorting to *Shi‘ism* as a national political ideology.

From this point on, the conflictual relationship between the State and religion, which was largely hidden due to their functional co-operation at earlier times, began to be openly articulated until it led to a clear political confrontation in the Constitutional Revolution. In this process, political and doctrinal complications, and lack of opportunity to pursue meaningful economic activity and production of wealth, meant that political motivations dominated the reformed religion.

There still remained an orthodox core of scholastic *Shi‘ism*, which did not approve of this political orientations. But in time, the new political orientations in *Shi‘ism* left the conservative *ulama*, with all their higher religious ranking, out in the cold. *Shi‘ism* was thence increasingly expressed in terms of an Islamic ideology of revolution. The analysis of this trend, which began in the 1940s and 1950s, and climaxed in the 1960s and 1970s, is the subject of the next chapter.