

CIVIC PIETY:
VISIONS OF SECULARITY IN CONSTITUTIONAL IRAN

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In just regimes like constitutional and republican regimes, legitimacy is based on piety—not religious piety, but civic piety (*taqva-ye madani*).¹

Introduction

The Iranian historical experience reveals the co-existence of complex discursive *mélanges* regarding religion and secularity.² In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the division between the discourse of the Enlightenment and the discourse of Islam and the separation of the realm of the state from the realm of religion was proposed alternately by dissident intellectuals, reforming bureaucrats, and the autocratic state, as a condition of modernity. Clashes between these discourses occurred intermittently, especially during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911, but also in reaction to the reforms from above known as the White Revolution of 1963 and during the popular revolution of 1979, which overthrew the monarchy and resulted in an Islamic Republic.

However, except for a few historical instances, the lines between secularity and religion have remained blurred. For example, in the 1960s, both secular and religious intellectuals (such as Ali Shariati, Jalal Al-Ahmad), who were concerned with the formulation of a mobilizing ideology against the process of autocratic modernization without democratization, used an Islamic discourse towards the construction of an anti-materialist, anti-imperialist authenticity. Even Marxists such as Khosrow Golsorkhi used the martyrdom of Hussein, the third Shi'a Imam and the Karbala

¹ Cf. Dekhoda's scrapbook.

² I would like to thank Ervand Abrahamian, Mangol Bayat, Lucian Hölscher, Sylvie Le Grand, Mohamad Tavakoli Targhi, Arash Naraghi, Fahimeh Gooran, Mahshad Mohit, and Sara Khalili whose ideas and discussions helped me formulate these preliminary thoughts on the history of secularity in Iran.

paradigm³ to arouse the indignation and protest of people towards the injustices of the secular dictatorship.⁴

The blurring of the lines between the secular and the religious and the use of the religious discourse to address social inequities has continued to the present day. This is demonstrated by the fact that even in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is no consensus on one Persian word for 'secularity', 'secularism' or 'the secular'.⁵ The words *fara-dini* (beyond religion), *orfi* (based on custom as opposed to religion) *donyavi* (of this world), *qeir-e maz-habi* (other-than-religious), and derogatory or insulting terms such as *la maz-hab* or *bi-deen* (both meaning without religion and denoting immorality) are all used. In fact, today, when discussions about secularity and the separation of state and religion occupy an important place in the discourse of dissent in Iran, the words that are most often used in journals and at conferences are *sekular* or *sekularism* from the English, and *laique* and *laicite* from the French.

The clash between the discourse of the Enlightenment and the discourse of Islam first occurred among the reformists of the nineteenth century, but most openly and publicly in the discussions between the social democrat intellectuals and activists writing in the constitutionalist press and the anti-constitutionalist Muslim clerics (*ulama*). In this paper, I would like to focus on this particular clash, primarily because it was the first public discussion of the issue in the public space provided by the newly established newspapers; and secondly, because the discussion involved indigenous and European concepts, as they were understood at the time, with a focus on the use of words and their contextual meanings. The constitutional period (1906–11) is very important in Iranian history because it marks the beginning of a struggle for cultural modernism that has lasted to the present time; many of the issues that were raised then, including the boundaries between the secular and the religious, remain unresolved today.

³ In the year 680, Imam Hussein fought against the forces of the Ummayyid Caliph Yazid and was killed along with members of his family and supporters. For Shi'a Muslims, this tragic battle has come to represent principle and courage in the stand against violence and injustice.

⁴ See his defense in court before his execution for armed resistance in 1974. See on youtube: "Khosro Golsorkhi" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buTIBLGdUfo> (accessed November, 2010).

⁵ See Talal Asad's distinctions between these words in Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity*.

Historical Contexts

The Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) was characterized by a precarious alliance between secular liberal reformers from the aristocracy and state bureaucracy, middle-class secular intellectuals, and mostly religious merchants, clerics, and guildsmen from the traditional middle class.⁶ These groups who supported a constitutional monarchy and an elected parliament united against the absolutist courtiers, aristocrats, landowners, Russian advisors and conservative *ulama* (Muslim clerics). With the death of Mozaffareddin Shah, who had given in to public demands and signed the royal proclamation to establish a constitution in 1906, his absolutist son Mohammad Ali Shah came to power in 1907 and led the anti-constitutionalist camp.

Within the alliance of constitutionalists, the presence of secular social democrats and religious dissidents was remarkable due to the radical nature of their influence within the *Majlis* (parliament) and their sizable/presence in the cultural realm through newspapers and public orators.⁷ These “secular activists” were mainly from the middle class and had been exposed to both traditional and modern education and knowledge of Europe in some way. Others were clerics; all espoused a program of radical reform informed by the European Enlightenment and Russian Social Democracy. They knowingly solicited the aid of some clerical leaders who wished to set limits on the abuse of power, strengthen Muslim Iran against foreign intervention and, in particular, to protect Iranian merchants against foreign advantages. The complex combination of forces and motivations was further complicated by personal intrigues and rivalries within the ruling Qajar family as well as by the intricacies of the imperialist rivalry of Britain and Russia in Iran.

This general picture is more or less accepted by most historians of the constitutional period in Iran. What is addressed less frequently is the question: what precisely do we mean by ‘secular’ when we refer to the secular activists? Accepting Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi’s premise of the creation—since the late nineteenth century—of a “discursive *mélange*”, an “inter-textualization of pre-Islamic, Islamic, and contemporary European histories and ideals”⁸ to provide alternative social and political scenarios for

⁶ By ‘secular’ I mean those who desired the constitutional separation of religion and state.

⁷ See Nabavi, “Readership, the Press, and the Public Sphere.”

⁸ Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 1–4.

change, I shall attempt to answer this question through a close reading of certain texts from the constitutional press. This is part of a larger study on the essays of Ali Akbar Dehkhoda that appeared in the press between 1907 and 1911 in an effort to map and explore the precise trajectory of ideas—their “creative relocation”—from different sources into a discursive *mélange* of the particular historical context of constitutional Iran.

Who Was Dehkhoda?

Born in 1879 in Tehran, Ali Akbar Dehkhoda was descended from a family of minor landowners. He received his early education in the traditional religious system which meant that he learned Arabic and the “formal sciences”—grammar, the interpretation of religious texts, ethics, and philosophy under the tutelage of a cleric. Dehkhoda continued his education at the School of Political Science in Tehran, where he studied the ‘modern’ sciences of world history, geography, international law, political science, and French language. After completing his studies, Dehkhoda was employed by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and sent to the Balkans as a junior diplomat serving Ambassador Mo’aven Dowleh Ghaffari. Based in Bucharest and Vienna, he continued to study the European sciences and the French language.

When he returned to Iran in 1905, he was briefly employed by a modernist merchant, Haji Hossein Aqa Amin Zarb to act as translator to the Belgian engineer who was charged with building the Khorasan roadway. By this time, the constitutional movement was well under way. Dehkhoda thus found access to the network of dissident intellectuals who had organized secret societies and were actively recruiting supporters and organizing protests. He was invited to join the Revolutionary Committee as a young recruit. Shortly after the success of the revolution in 1906, Dehkhoda joined Mirza Jahangir Khan, a social democrat and a prominent constitutionalist, and Mirza Qasem Khan, a constitutionalist merchant from Tabriz, to publish *Sur Esrafil*, one of the most vocal, radical, and popular newspapers of the constitutional period. Each issue of *Sur Esrafil* carried an article on a current political or social issue written by Dehkhoda, several articles on current news and analysis written by Mirza Jahangir Khan and others, and finally, the popular satirical column written by Dehkhoda entitled “*Charand Parand*” (gibberish, poppycock).

In the first constitutional period—from May 1907 when the first issue of *Sur Esrafil* came out—to the absolutist coup on June 23, 1908, Dehkhoda

focused on explaining the social democratic project to the people—to the educated by writing political and philosophical essays, and to the less educated population through the satirical “*Charand Parand*” column. The main brunt of his attacks at this time, the main objects of his critique were the absolutists and the conservative clerics or ulama—a group he referred to as “*kohneh-parastan*” (reactionaries).⁹

As editor and one of the main writers of the influential paper *Sur Esrafil* and later *Soroush* published in Istanbul, Dehkhoda set out to contribute to what he considered a primary task of the educated intellectual of the time, namely, the elaboration of the meaning of constitutionalism (*takmil-e ma’ni-ye mashrutiyat*). Aware that constitutionalism and other political concepts such as liberty, freedom, and the social contract were Western concepts not grounded in the historical experience of Iran, Dehkhoda and his colleagues believed that their precise meaning had to be constructed through discussion and dialogue, and had to be adapted to Iranian conditions and contexts. As such, he combined the unfamiliar new constructs with the more familiar ways of thinking in order to communicate with large audiences.

In his political essays, he was a fiery and passionate advocate of parliamentary democracy, socio-economic justice, and the modernization/rationalization of culture that coalesced into a movement in Iran after the constitutional revolution. To promote parliamentary democracy, he focused on crafting the definition of constitutionalism in its Iranian context and on defending the newly founded parliament (*Majlis*) against its religious and secular foes. To promote economic and social justice, he proposed a program of land and tax reform, and the reorganization of all institutions according to rational principles.¹⁰

The modernization of culture (secularization, rationalization, democratization) was the most complex and difficult agenda, and in retrospect, the one in which Dehkhoda made the most important and lasting contribution to Persian culture, particularly through his compilation of the voluminous “*Loghatnameh* or Lexicon of the Persian Language” later in his

⁹ The Persian words used throughout the article are Dehkhoda’s own; the translations are mine.

¹⁰ The discussion in this paper is focused more on the relationship between French Enlightenment thought and Dehkhoda’s political ideas. The elements of Russian social democratic thought that inspired Dehkhoda most can be seen in his programs for economic and agricultural change. See forthcoming Mozaffari, *Crafting Constitutionalism*.

life.¹¹ To define and promote this task, he launched a critique of religion as it was interpreted and practiced, advocated a modern secular education and justice system, and called for the direct participation of the people, particularly the disadvantaged, in determining the agenda and setting the priorities of state and society. His particular utilization of language to expose the ills of society, and to give a voice to the people, was one of his greatest achievements.

It is important to note that during this period, Dehkhoda was a revolutionary whose aim was not only to educate, but also to mobilize. This made him acutely aware of the different groups which made up his audience in *Sur Esrafil*. Street poetry, anecdote, satire, and complex essay genres and forms were all used to appeal to different audiences.

*What the Secular Meant to Dehkhoda:
The Discourse of the Enlightenment*

The clue to understanding the meaning of ‘secular’ is the binary that he set up to differentiate reactionary backwardness from what he and other like-minded intellectuals framed as an Iranian modernity. Dehkhoda’s critique addressed the different elements of “a culture of servility” (*farhang-e ta’abod*), which he considered to be the greatest obstacle to the establishment of “a modern culture” (*farhang-e jadid*). The culture of servility was sustained and nurtured by the alliance of reactionaries or *kohneh-parastan*—an ignorant self-serving despot, a corrupt court, oppressive governors and leaders in collusion with the reactionary *ulama* (*ulama-ye sou’*), promoting a backward-looking religion. Let us focus for a moment on Dehkhoda’s critique of religion in the context of his epidemiology of culture.

Dehkhoda’s understanding of religion and its role in Iranian society was extremely complex and seemingly contradictory. At times, he attacked and ridiculed it relentlessly; in other instances, he quoted the Quran and *hadiths* (traditions) at length, used the logic of religious arguments to legitimate his own positions, and pleaded for the support of the clerics or *ulama* against the monarchy. On occasion, we witness an uncomfortable dance

¹¹ After the failure of the Constitutional Revolution and the outbreak of the First World War when he was disillusioned with politics, Dehkhoda conceived the *Loghat-Nameh* (Lexicon/Encyclopedia) Project. He devoted the rest of this life to the compilation of this extraordinary encyclopedia of Persian words and foreign words used in Persian.

between secular content and religious form—secular projects framed in religious terms.¹² In many of his essays Dehkhoda appears to use religion to make new ideas either comprehensible or acceptable. However, careful consideration of his position indicates that he was most assuredly a secular thinker.¹³ His vision of society, its problems and solutions, was a humanist one. He had the ‘modern’ penchant to relegate to religion a useful function in the rational organization of society—that of providing a moral and spiritual bond among its members.

In a series of essays on monotheism and superstition which he wrote as a response to the religious anti-constitutionalist discourse, Dehkhoda disclosed his definition of religion:

Religion (*deen*) is the guardian of laws and the fulfilment of the morals of all the nations in the world. All the past prophets and great men of wisdom and intelligent men of religion know the benefit of religious belief to be this...¹⁴

Thus, religion became internalized as our conscience or “internal secret police”, as Dehkhoda called it, and it assured our good behaviour and good deeds. Holy texts, such as the Quran, were to be regarded as constitutions for morality, just as constitutions for states proscribe and describe the powers of government and protection for the people.

Of course, this sociological view of religion has a great deal in common with Montesquieu’s views on religion in *The Spirit of the Laws*. Though Montesquieu paid lip service to the “Christian religion as the first good”¹⁵ he went to great lengths to establish that differences in “climate, laws, mores and manners” gave rise to different kinds of religions; that therefore, each religion was compatible with the physical and cultural characteristics of the areas in which it originated or was practiced.¹⁶ Montesquieu also differentiated between the aims and functions of human laws and those of religion, and on this Dehkhoda definitely agreed. His view of the ideal society was one in which the affairs of men and women were governed by rational laws and their conscience by religious law.

¹² See for example, the references to *mozare’e* and *mozare-be* in his economic discussions in *Sur Esrafil*, issue 17–19.

¹³ Secular is defined in this context as those who desired the constitutional separation of religion and state.

¹⁴ *Sur Esrafil* editorial entitled “Moslemeen va sherk,” issue 16, 1.

¹⁵ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 459.

¹⁶ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 476, 493.

A rational Muslim is asked, “what is the divine purpose behind the sending of prophets and holy books, or, what benefit or harm does the Almighty derive from the faith or denial of people?” His answer of that rational Muslim was: “Only *our* need for the existence of an inner conscience within our hearts has led the Source of all Wisdom to send books and prophets such that we would come to recognize His Unique Essence.¹⁷”

In this rational world where elected representatives would govern political and economic affairs through rational laws, and religion would be relegated to the role of the guardian of morality, Dehkhoda’s predilection for the word *adam-parasti* or “humanism” becomes clearer. Linguistically, in Persian, *adam-parasti* (human-worship) was a word that was created as the translation of “humanism” (from the French); but it was modelled after the word *khoda-parasti* (God worship), which distinguished monotheism from *bot-parasti*, or idol worship. In effect and meaning, *adam-parasti* is an apparently deliberate creation of a contradistinction to *khoda-parasti*, putting the human being, as it does, at the center of concern.

The first openly and systematically critical article about the contemporary practice of religion to appear in *Sur Esrafil* was the editorial entitled “*Zohur-e Jadid*”, which was published in *Sur Esrafil* dated 20 June 1907. This essay touched such a sensitive chord in the religious establishment that it led to Dehkhoda’s denunciation by the Society of Religious Students as ‘an unbeliever’ and the closing of *Sur Esrafil*. With characteristic wit, Dehkhoda wrote:

If you say to an Iranian Muslim, “O Man of Faith, clean your nose, O Holy One, clean your ears, O Enemy of Muawwiya, pull your socks up, such simple tasks prove to be too burdensome and difficult for the poor bloke. But if you say, O Seyyed, Become a Prophet! O Sheikh, Make claims to be an Imam! O Hojjat-ul Eslam, Be the Shadow of the Imam on Earth, in a flash, our noble man fixes his stunned eyes on a distant object and assumes a forlorn countenance. He begins to mumble softly. He sticks out his chest as a shield of protection against the nefarious arrow of hidden enemies, hypocrites and violators. In other words, every atom in the man’s being becomes ready to receive revelation and inspiration. At first, he just hears noises—the movement of ants or the buzz of bees—but after a few days, in his mind’s eye, he sees the angel Gabriel at the height of his majesty. . . .

These false prophets, fake *imams* and phony leaders have ignored the rest of the world, and have descended their holy selves right in this small piece of land which is the centre of the true religion of Islam. None of these useless good-for-nothings appear in any of the mountains of Farangistan

¹⁷ *Sur Esrafil*, issue 16, 1. The emphasis is mine.

(Europe) or any of the villages in America, because of the rule of law and widespread education. And [there] even if Gabriel tries to anoint [someone] to prophethood and issue a direct command a thousand times, they will not hear of it. But *mashallah*, the bountiful soil of Iran produces a fresh prophet, a new Imam, even, Allah help us, a new God every hour. And stranger still is that their efforts take root and their movements spread. What is the reason for this? . . .

Whatever the stimuli for the imagination of the pretenders, the reasons for the acceptance of the people and receptivity of the Iranian populace are no more than two: One is ignorance, and the other, the habit of servility (*'adat be ta'abod*).

Dehkhoda blamed the *ulama* for not knowing and not imparting the "truth" of Islam. The body of religious knowledge which they studied and taught was convoluted and mixed with superstition, and they were more interested in power than truth and morality. As a consequence, the community of believers was in its entirety ignorant and susceptible to fear and superstition. The power of the *ulama* could only be maintained and perpetuated through the habit of servility that they encouraged amongst the believers. This was a general critique against the institution of organized religion and its members.

In Dehkhoda's writing, other elements of the culture of servility included illiteracy, ignorance, the lack of enlightened education leading to poverty and superstition, and the oppression of women and minorities. The people, *mellat*, were often portrayed as ignorant and unmotivated (symbolized by the image of the opium addict, the *tariyaki*). The stark division between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless, led to the perpetuation of injustice. The culture of servility could not tolerate the freedom of expression or criticism; therefore, intellectuals could not freely function in it.¹⁸ In contradistinction, modern culture was characterized by the rule of law, where the interests of the *mellat* (people) were fairly represented in an elected parliament; where modern education produced bright, energetic, honest and competent men and women. The gap between rich and poor became narrower. The pursuit of modern culture meant the recognition of women as productive members of society and the improvement of minority rights; it would, in time, lead Iran out of economic, social and political backwardness. Modern, enlightened society would make Iran more confident and tolerant of freedom of expression; intellectuals could use their pens freely as the instruments of justice

¹⁸ For a discussion of these issues see Nahid Mozaffari, *Crafting Constitutionalism*.

and right—as the collective conscience of the community.¹⁹ A modern, enlightened Iran would be less susceptible to the manipulations of the imperial powers.

Educating the people about the culture of servility and fighting against it, was an important goal not only for Dekhoda and *Sur Esrafil*, but for many other newspapers such as *Tarbiyat*, *Majils*, *Mossavat*, and *Habl-ul Matin*. The secular intellectuals saw themselves as the facilitators of this process of transformation from a culture of servility (*farhang-e ta'abod*) to modern civilization (*tamadon-e jadid*). In order to accomplish this, they understood that they had to capitalize on the sentiments and the associations that had been mobilized during the constitutional revolution. They needed the active participation of the people (*mellat*) for this project to succeed. They utilized the power and influence of the constitutionalist ulama, though they knew that the *ulama* failed to grasp many of the contradictions between democratic institutions and the power of the clerical establishment. Their most formidable cultural rival was conservative, anti-constitutionalist religion. All the sustained argument and writing by Dekhoda and others about the conservative *ulama* and the backwardness of their ideas was underscored by an implicit unspoken fear of the power that they wielded over the people or *mellat*.

The Clash of Meanings: The Discourse of Islam

Let us now consider for a moment what the conservative *ulama* or clerics understood of the constitutionalist project. The most vocal anti-constitutionalist cleric, Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri, agreed only with the setting of certain limitations on the power of the Shah and his ministers. He cautioned that changes should not be implemented too rapidly lest things get beyond control. But he fiercely objected to the desirability of 'freedom' and 'liberty' in society. Using the word *kufr* (heresy) to describe these concepts, Nouri called "unlimited freedom and absolute liberty" in society wrong and against Islam. In response to the laws envisaged by the constitutionalists, he stated:

First, our law was written over one thousand three hundred years ago *Agha* (sir) and given to us. Even if they want to write a law today, it has to be in accord with the Quran, and the law of Mohammad and the *shari'a*. If you

¹⁹ *Sur Esrafil*, issue 1, 4–5.

want my advice, remove the term 'freedom' because ultimately it is going to lead us into disaster. Also, you said that limits would be set on the *shari'a* as well. Know this: there are no limitations on the *shari'a*.²⁰

As these discussions indicate, Nouri and his followers wanted certain limitations on the absolute power of the king and court, and more power for the *ulama* through the enhanced importance of the *shari'a* under the new order. Tabatabai, the constitutionalist cleric, was willing to pursue a version of constitutional government that was a codified and more just version of the status quo, with constraints on the power of the king, court and ministers. The position of Muslim law, or the *shari'a*, and the power of the *ulama* would basically be unchanged in his understanding, but in effect, the *ulama* would gain from the improvements in society through the prevalence of law and justice. The position of the constitutionalist *ulama* was well summarized by Ayatollah Molla Akhund Abdollah Mazandarani, whose letter from Najaf was published in the eleventh issue of *Sur Esrafil*. After acknowledging that the people had risen up against the excessive oppression and injustices of the rulers, he echoed Tabatabai's definition of constitutionalism or *mashrute* as the setting of limitations on and increasing the accountability of the rulers. He then stated that:

... it is evident that this matter [constitutionalism] has nothing to do with religion or faith. They have not suggested that constitutionalism or absolutism should apply to the religion or faith of the people... but due to the provocations of the absolutists and oppressors... some have attributed the respected Majlis, the establishment of which is meant to remove injustice and oppression, with heresy (*kufir*), the pretense of faith (*zandaqeh*) and the denial of God (*elhad*)...²¹

In short, the anti-constitutionalist clerics like Nouri *only* agreed to setting limits on the power of the absolute monarchy. Any new laws would have to conform to his interpretation of religious law. There was to be no separation of state from religion. The constitutionalist clerics like Tabatabai and Mazandarani saw the establishment of a parliament and the promulgation of new laws as *only* setting limits on the excesses of the absolute monarchy. This, in their opinion, would perpetuate justice and

²⁰ Nouri, *Kitab-e Tazakorat-ul ghafil wa Ershad ul-Jahel*, 56–57. Except for the Nouri quote, these are summaries of the comments of the two clerics as related by the witness Hashem Mohit-Mafi, *Moqadamat-e Mashrutiyat*, 107–108. According to the author Mohit-Mafi, this conversation took place very early in the constitutional struggle when Mozafareddin Shah had sent Azod-ul Molk to negotiate with the *ulama* in Qom.

²¹ *Sur Esrafil*, issue 11, 1–2 (Letters from Abdollah Mazandarani from Najaf).

strengthen religion, as the poor and oppressed depended on the clerics as their interlocutors against the injustices of the temporal rulers. There was to be a nominal separation in the affairs of state from the affairs of religion in this construct because the parliament and non-religious laws would act to limit the power of the temporal rulers. However, from their perspective, the moral power and influence of the clerics and religion on state and society would be strengthened.

The secular intellectuals seized upon this line of reasoning and articulated their preference for the complete separation of state and religion in terms of the differentiation between the affairs of this life from the next. Commenting on these letters, the *Sur Esrafil* suggested "it is obvious [from these two letters] that the purpose of the Majlis is the reduction of oppression and injustice; it redresses the affairs of *this life* (*omur-e mo'ashi*) and it has nothing to do with the affairs of the *next life* (*omur-e mo'ad*)."²²

Having established and argued that this division between the realm of politics and the realm of religion was plausible, Dehkhoda and the secular intellectuals remained wary of the role that the *shari'a* and the *ulama* would play in a constitutional system. They were influenced by the anti-clerical trends of the European Enlightenment thinkers, and by the philosophy that put man not God at the center of attempts to reorganize society. They were furthermore wary of the influence—which they often considered detrimental—of the *ulama* on the masses. Therefore, they employed rational argument, polemic and satire to reach as many of the 'people' as they could in order to expose and undermine this influence.

Sheikh Fazlullah Nouri, the anti-constitutionalist cleric, understood the secular implications of the establishment of parliament and the rule of law better than the constitutionalist clerics. He knew that the separation of religion and politics would lead to a diminished role for religion in society. He wrote:

It is obvious that our divine law is not intended for worship only; rather, it (also) contains the most complete and comprehensive commands for politics. Therefore, we have no need to devise laws, particularly since, based on our Islamic belief, we have to organize our worldly affairs (*nazm-e mo'ash*) in a manner that does not conflict with our dedication to the next world (*amr-e mo'ad*), and this is only possible with divine law because that is the only law that can combine these two directions. . . . If we consider *ourselves* capable of devising such a law, then we will have no rational justification for prophesy, *for if someone believes that the exigencies of the age can change*

²² *Sur Esrafil*, issue 11, 2.

some elements of that divine law or can complete it, that person is outside the realm of Muslim belief, because our prophet (Peace be upon him) is the final prophet, and his law is the final law. Consequently, these beliefs contradict the belief in *khatamiyat*²³ and the perfection of the Prophet's religion. The denial of *khatamiyat* is heresy according to divine law. . . . Therefore, the fabrication of law whether in whole or in part is in contradiction with Islam. . . .²⁴ If the benefit of constitutionalism was to protect the commands of Islam, why did they lay its foundations on equality (*mossavat*) and freedom (*horriyat*)? Each of these two devious principles destroys the steady foundation of divine law, because Islam is based on submission, not on freedom, and the structure of its commands is based on the calculation of differences, not on equality. . . .²⁵

In response, in the twelfth issue of *Sur Esrafil*, Dehkhoda wrote his essay on the limitless potential for human progress, which he insisted should not be hampered by any leader, spiritual or worldly. He provocatively defined freedom (*azadi*) thus:

The new word 'freedom'—which has been sought, directly or indirectly, by all prophets, men of wisdom, and men of knowledge all over the world; the word that we have just recently begun to utter with a thousand stutters on our tongues and doubt (on our minds), means precisely this— those who claim to be leaders of this graveyard which is Iran should not limit (the quest for) human perfection to their definitions alone, but grant permission for human beings to use their own innate powers to determine their path to progress and perfection, and to pursue it without fear.²⁶

Dehkhoda went on to maintain that the only limitation on the pursuit and practice of this freedom was respect for the freedom of others.

Since there was no limit to human progress, then the sending of prophets in each age corresponded to the need for the renewal and adjustment of revealed laws to the changing demands of each period. But with Islam, and Mohammad, humanity achieved salvation, because of the perfection of this clear religion, humanity was able to do without the emergence of a new prophet and itself took hold of its eternal mission and the requirements of its will.²⁷

²³ The principle of *khatamiyat* is the belief that Mohammad was the Seal of the Prophets, and that the validity of Islamic laws would remain until further notice from God (until the coming of the Mahdi or the Muslim version of the messiah).

²⁴ Nouri, *Kitab-e Tazakorat-ul ghafil and Ershad ul-Jahel*, 56 f.

²⁵ Nouri, *Kitab-e Tazakorat-ul ghafil and Ershad ul-Jahel*, 59.

²⁶ *Sur Esrafil*, issue 12, 2.

²⁷ *Sur Esrafil*, issue 13, 2. This is the only instance that I have used the translation of Soroudi, "Sur Esrafil, 1907–8," 238.

Implicit in this argument was that Islamic law was not eternally applicable; that human reason, will, and the knowledge afforded by modern science could in fact replace an all-encompassing divine law. The demands of modern times dictated the confinement of religious law to certain aspects of life.²⁸ This subordination of religious law to human reason is all the more clear in light of Dehkhoda's adherence to the philosophy of humanism or *adamparasti*.

One of Sheikh Fazlollah's recurring accusations against the constitutionalists was that they were "deniers of the *shari'a* and believers in nature"²⁹ What did this mean? Nouri had apparently become aware of and particularly sensitive to the problem that the embrace of constitutionalism meant a complete cultural transformation. He explained it thus in the proclamation which attempted to explain his change of heart about constitutionalism. "In the last year, a discourse (*sokhan*) from the land of the Franks [Europe] has spread amongst us... which has amounted to the adaptation of all laws to the needs of the times." To explain what this adaptation entailed, Nouri gave the following examples: "...such as the legitimization of intoxicants, the propagation of whorehouses, the founding of schools for the education of women and girls' primary schools, the use of income from prayer and pilgrimage to holy sites to build factories and roads..."

The worst of the effects of this constitutionalist worldview was yet to come for Nouri: "...that all the nations of the world should be equal in their rights, that the blood of dhimmi (non-Muslim) and Muslim could mix, that they could give wives and take wives from each other."

It is little wonder that the cleric remarked that the whole country was in turmoil from Azarbaijan to Kermanshah to Fars—because the rules and boundaries had broken down... and that this turmoil was visible in the private realm as well as in the political realm.

It is very significant that "impure" and "sinful" acts (in Islam) such as the promotion of intoxicants and the establishment of houses of prostitution were mentioned in the same breath as the establishment of schools and the education of women; for they presented the same calibre of challenge and threat to the predominance and hegemony of the reactionary (*kohne-parast*) outlook. In fact, both the question of women and the

²⁸ *Sur Esrafil*, issue 13, 1–3 and issue 14, 1–5.

²⁹ "*monker-e shari'at va mo'taqed be tabi'at*" see in *Khandaniha-ye Qarn*. Reprint of one of the proclamations of Sheikh Fazlullah during his refuge in the shrine of Shabdolazim in 1907, 90.

question of minorities were important elements in the “culture war” of the constitutionalist period, precisely because any proposed changes in the way these issues were traditionally dealt with, indicated the presence and the challenge of a different worldview and a different distribution of power. Nouri accurately observed that the advent of constitutionalism had come to mean a disruption in the hegemony of the *ulama* in the realm of culture.

He was also correct in noting that in the pages of *Sur Esrafil* and other constitutionalist newspapers, the features of the “other” worldview were promoted actively. The “discourse from the land of the Franks” clearly included the call to pursue modern knowledge and the endorsement of secular schools. Almost every issue of the *Sur Esrafil* weekly announced the opening of new schools and the publication of books.³⁰ As noted elsewhere in the discussions on politics and economics, Dehkhoda and his colleagues considered the study of the Western sciences and the propagation of such rational knowledge to be an essential pre-requisite to solving Iran’s major problems, and to building a new, just society. Whereas ‘modern’ schools teaching the Western sciences, along with history, literature and military sciences had been set up since the previous century, they had not been considered such a threat to the conservative *ulama*, because they had only catered to the elite.

In the constitutional period, the question of modern education had been articulated as a “right” and a necessity, not only for the elite, but for the entire population. Articles arguing in favour of modern education abounded in newspapers. Furthermore, this right was advocated not only for the male half of the population, but also for women. Dehkhoda devoted many hours and pages in *Sur Esrafil* to lamenting the fact that the common people were ignorant, superstitious, and therefore susceptible to the control of the “malignant” *ulama*. As discussed above, he had spent much energy arguing with the *ulama* that the pursuit of knowledge was not contrary to the *shari’a* or any other aspect of “the pure religion of Islam.” For him, modern education was the only practical solution to ignorance and backwardness.³¹

³⁰ See, for example, *Sur Esrafil*, issues 5, 16, 17, 18, 23, 25. In *Sur Esrafil* issues 17, 23 there were announcements regarding the activities of the Tarbiyat bookstore and educational center in Tehran. In issue 25, the readers were informed of the opening of the *Anjoman-e Farhang-e Olum-e Jadid* (Society of the Academy of Modern Sciences) offering free classes.

³¹ This remained his most steady commitment throughout his life.

Another prominent example of Dehkhoda's secularizing discourse framed in Islamic language can be found in his economic discussions regarding land reform and the moral justifications for peasant land ownership. He superimposed the legal Islamic concepts of *mozare'e* (a good and just contract) and *mozarebeh* (a bad and exploitative contract) to address the current economic discussions spearheaded by the social democrats in parliament. According to the scholar Janet Afary, the "theoretical confusion that the humanistic attributes of Islam could be given a socialist interpretation by merging them with European socialist ideas" was a common tendency among Muslim socialists in the early twentieth century.³²

I do not know if Dehkhoda was a Muslim believer in his heart, but his economic discussions demonstrate his belief that a version of Islam, as envisioned by educated, enlightened people, was a just and moral system, and that its tenets could help reformers towards their goal of a just redistribution of wealth in society. This belief may have been tempered by an awareness of the exigencies of the times: *that an ideology of reform could not reject religion altogether, considering the legal and cultural power of the ulama and the piety of the majority of the people*. Nevertheless, Dehkhoda made it abundantly clear that, above all, the economic, financial and organizational sciences had to be learned from the West and implemented in a manner that would increase productivity, distribute wealth more equitably, and benefit the majority of the population.

Conclusions

Informed by the work of Talal Asad and many contributions in this volume,³³ one can conclude that 'the secular', as opposed to 'secularism' as a political doctrine, comprises a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities that have come together and changed over time. Articulations of 'the secular' in constitutional Iran as exemplified by the writing of Ali Akbar Dehkhoda confirm Talal Asad's view that it is useful to look at the secular as an epistemic category. Dehkhoda's arguments in favor of the secular regarded it *not* as a colonial imposition or worldview that gives

³² Afary, *The Iranian Constitutionalist Revolution*, 129. This is a long and involved discussion, which will hopefully appear in *Crafting Constitutionalism* in 2014.

³³ *Reconfigurations of the Religious Field: Secularization, Re-Sacrilization and Related Processes in Historical and Intercultural Perspective*. Dynamics in the History of Religions, Ruhr University Bochum: December 1–3, 2009.

precedence to the material over the spiritual and promotes alienation and consumerism—these views came later in twentieth century Iran with Al-Ahmad and Shariati. The secular, during its earliest articulations in Iran, was presented as a rational, humanist principle that would not deny the right to religious belief, but restrain “religious passion as a source of intolerance and delusion.”³⁴

Dehkhoda saw “the secular” as the relegation of religion to its role as the guide for personal conscience, as the guardian of morality in society. He focused his critique of religion not on religion per se, but on the agency of the conservative clerics in maintaining the power of the despot through the propagation of public ignorance. He systematically focused on the deconstruction of the culture of servility to raise awareness among the people in order to break the political alliance between despotism and the entrenched clerical establishment.

The shifting and relational meanings of ‘religion’ and ‘the secular’ can be observed through Dehkhoda’s conscious use of religious language and symbols, at times as a concession to the constitutional clerics and at times to speak to a population well versed in religious belief, symbols and language. (Only five per cent of the population was literate in that period.) Thus, references to religious texts, such as the Quran and the hadiths, and religious terms such as *shirk*, *khatamiyat*, *mozare’e-e* and *mozarebeh* were imbued with different, more contemporary meanings to explain unfamiliar concepts to various audiences.

Dehkhoda’s writing in the early constitutional period meant to communicate his “secular” social democratic vision to the public and to create shared critiques, shared symbols and shared solutions. The visibility of the small group of radical and secular intellectuals, of which Dehkhoda was a part during the constitutional period, and their presence on the political scene, did not accurately reflect their power base or their actual level of political organization. The failure of the constitutional revolution attested to that fact. However, throughout the rest of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Iranian intellectuals have continued to grapple with the different versions and interpretations of the secular as championed by Dehkhoda and his colleagues.³⁵

³⁴ Assad, *Formations of the Secular*, 21.

³⁵ Parts of this paper were presented at the Centenary Conference on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911, organized by the Iranian Heritage Foundation at the University of Oxford, 30 July–2 August 2006. A different version of this paper was published in Chehabi, *Iran’s Constitutional Revolution*.



Fig. 1: The image on the first page of *Sur Esrafil*.

The image on the first page of *Sur Esrafil* (literally meaning the trumpet of Esrafil) depicts the angel Esrafil blowing his horn to awaken the dead on the Day of Judgment. In the case of the newspaper *Sur Esrafil*, the image symbolized the awakening of the people to assume their rights as represented by the words on Esrafil's scroll—*horriyat* (freedom), *mossavat* (equality), *okhovvat* (fraternity). This image exemplifies the discursive *mélange* between the European Enlightenment and indigenous concepts and meanings, including the discourse of Islam.

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