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The Scum of Tabriz: Ahmad Kasravi and the Impulse to Reform Islam

CHAD KIA*

ABSTRACT *Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), one of the most influential Iranian thinkers of the twentieth century, delivers a stinging criticism of Shi'ism and Islam in two works which have been almost completely ignored by secular scholars, despite their immense influence on the thought and writings of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution as well as Ali Shariati and Jalal Ale Ahmad, its ideological forebears. The article considers the paradoxical reception of Kasravi's Shi'ism (Shi'igari) and On Islam (Dar Piramun-i Islam): both their extraordinary impact on Islamic revivalists and their neglect by specialists in Iranian affairs and Islamic studies. The occlusion of Kasravi's impulse to reform, the reduction of his ambiguous position in the Iranian intellectual tradition, has functioned to all but foreclose discussions of Islamic reform among secular scholars, deforming the contemporary intellectual history of Iran and Shi'ism more broadly.*

Ahmad Kasravi has had a phantasmagoric presence in the discourse of Shi'ism in Iran. He has been widely acknowledged as one of the most influential Iranian thinkers of the twentieth century, as well as 'the most controversial of all modern Iranian intellectuals'.¹ Despite this stature, Kasravi or his works are seldom studied or discussed, and what must be considered his most powerful work, *Shi'igari (Shi'ism)* has been almost completely ignored by academics and specialists on Iran and Islam for some 70 years. This neglect belies the significant influence of this work on such religious figures as Ayatollah Khomeini and such partisans of Shi'ism and Islam as Ali Shariati and Jalal Ale Ahmad, the two ideological forebears of the Islamic revolution in Iran, which in 1979 established Shi'i theocracy with Khomeini as its supreme leader.² The influence of Kasravi's work on such leading proponents of Shi'ism stands out because it is in *Shi'igari* that he delivers his most blistering criticism of Shi'ism

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¹ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), p. 104; Ervand Abrahamian 'Kasravi: The Integrative Nationalist of Iran', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 9(3) (Oct. 1973), p. 273.

² See (i) Lloyd Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator: Ahmad Kasravi and the Iranian Mystical Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 3; (ii) Mohammad Tavakoli Targhi, 'Tajadud-i ikhtirā'i, tamadun-i 'āriyatī wa inqilāb-i ruwhānī' [Inventing Modernity, Borrowing Modernity], *Iran Nameh* 20(2–3) (Spring/Summer 2002), <http://fis-iran.org/fa/irannameh/volxx/kasravi-modernity> (in Persian, with English synopsis); (iii) Ali Ansari, *Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 189; (iv) Aaron Vahid Sealy, "'In Their Place': Marking and Unmarking Shi'ism in Pahlavi Iran' (Doctoral thesis, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2011), p. 101.

and its clergy. Indeed, what is most striking about the almost complete neglect of *Shi'igari* is how it is characteristic of precisely secular and/or non-Muslim scholars and specialists. It is also significant that, despite his attacks on Shi'ism and Islam, Kasravi was no 'Europhile', let alone a 'westoxicated' intellectual seeking a rapid westernization of his country like many other early- or mid-twentieth-century figures from the region.³ In fact, Kasravi was perhaps the first Iranian to overtly reject the perceived superiority of contemporary Europe or the 'West', and to view the very notion 'as a deceptive device for the promotion of colonialism and capitalism'.⁴ In the early 1930s, Kasravi was already publicly countering the dyadic east/west perception of the world by offering a counter-European project for peoples of the 'East' that helped shape the discourse which came to dominate the field of postcolonial studies and discussions of 'alternative modernities'.⁵ By challenging the prevalent Eurocentric view of Iranian intellectuals, which at the time was also promoted by the government, and by rejecting any essentialized difference between East and West, Kasravi was a progenitor of the discourse that came to repudiate European 'orientalism' some 45 years before the publication of Edward Said's book.⁶ The near complete neglect of Kasravi's *Shi'igari* and his other polemic *Dar Piramun-i Islam (On Islam)* by scholars who specialize in Iranian affairs or in the field of Islamic studies is extraordinary: these texts remain dangerous 70 years after the murder of their author.⁷

Published eight months apart in 1943–1944, the two works have continued to haunt the imagination of statesmen and intellectuals alike—whether secular or clerical. Certainly, Kasravi's *Shi'igari* continued to haunt Shi'i ideologues and nativists for decades after his death, to the extent that many issues he had raised in his polemics were seized on to advance a fundamental transformation of Shi'i Islam. On the other hand, secular scholars' meticulous avoidance of the two influential books cannot be mere happenstance. If Kasravi is cited in scholarly works at all, it is as a historian or a 'modernist reformer'.⁸ Kasravi's attacks on and claims about Islam and Shi'ism are at the most mentioned only in passing and nearly always accompanied by apologetic

³ For example, see, Ansari, 'Politics of Nationalism', pp. 46–7.

⁴ Kasravi's *Ayiin* 'was the first critical study in Iran of Westernization/modernization/industrialization, written at a time when Westernization was extremely popular in the country'. See M. A. Jazayeri's introductory piece, 'Kasravi, Iconoclastic Thinker', in Ahmad Kasravi, *On Islam and Shi'ism*, trans. M. R. Ghanoonparvar (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1990), p. 5. Also, see the English synopsis of Tavakoli Targhi, 'Inventing Modernity'. Regarding reformers in the Arab world see Ibrahim Abu Lughod, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

⁵ See the English synopsis to Tavakoli Targhi, 'Inventing Modernity'.

⁶ Privately and perhaps less self-consciously other figures such as Hossain Kazemzadeh Iranshahr (1884–1962) or Mohammad Qazvini (1877–1945) had 'effectively corroborated' Edward Said's theoretical observations, according to Hamid Dabashi. See his *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), pp. 77–78, 73, respectively. For Kasravi's unequivocal statement denying essential 'badness' of Europeans see, his *Ayiin (Ethos)*, p. 36, <http://ketabnak.com/comment.php?dlid=35686> and his *Varjavand Bunyad* [Worthy Foundations], pp. 39–40, <http://www.kasravi.info/ketabs/varjavand-boniad.pdf> (in Persian).

⁷ The two works, *On Islam and Shi'ism* have been translated into English by M. R. Ghanoonparvar. See footnote 4.

⁸ Hamid Dabashi, refers to Kasravi as a 'historian and modernist reformer' in his *Shi'ism: a Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 266; Leonard Lewisohn characterizes Kasravi as 'the radical Iranian modernist' in his *Hafez and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry* (Lodnon: I. B. Tauris, 2010), p. 20; as recently as 2012, Kasravi has been cited as an exemplar of 'modernists' or 'modernist thinkers' by Alireza Doostdar, *Fantasies of Reason: Science, Superstition, and the Supernatural in Iran* (Doctoral thesis, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2012), p. 57, footnote 29, and p. 60, footnote 31.

rationalization.⁹ Thus whether studiously avoided or pursued, the story of Kasravi's reception—and murder—is nothing less than the story of the intellectual history of twentieth-century Iran. When Kasravi is discussed and his work subjected to analysis, it is its repositioning that stands out: Kasravi's language of reform—religious reform—is framed within the discourse of westernization/modernization or, more recently, of alternative modernities. This framework, which subordinates any discussion of reform to the binary of traditional/modern or the paradigm of colonial modernity has made it impossible to talk of Kasravi as an Islamic reformer or, by extension, of even broaching the subject of reforming Islam. Robert Irwin once stated that Edward Said's *Orientalism* 'discourages any kind of critical approach to Islam in Middle Eastern studies'. But in fact, it may have been Kasravi, an earlier 'postcolonial' thinker, with his two books, *Shi'igari* and *Dar Piramun-i Islam*, who produced a silence in the field from which scholars have yet to emerge.¹⁰

Those familiar with Kasravi's writings have judged him to be a religious 'bigot' or a pioneer 'secularist',¹¹ a 'dangerous iconoclast',¹² or the person who 'single-handedly brought the age of reason to Iran', a 'xenophobe' or a broad-minded internationalist, an 'apologist for military dictatorship',¹³ or a 'staunch supporter of freedom in Iran',¹⁴ an ideologue for the propertied classes, or a 'petit bourgeois idealist'.¹⁵ As the historian Ervand Abrahamian points out, most of these descriptions contain at least some element of truth, and yet nearly 70 years after his death Ahmad Kasravi in some ways still cannot be spoken about.¹⁶ More broadly, Kasravi may be emblematic of the inadequacy of postcolonial language to articulate a critical consciousness, but then so is the resistance to him, which has taken the form of silence. Today, although most of Kasravi's books and pamphlets on language, literature, gender, history, and religion are available electronically and/or in English, only his authoritative history of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution remains readily available in his native Iran.¹⁷ Internationally, the

⁹ Abrahamian, p. 283. Vanessa Martin refers to Kasravi as 'the rationalist political thinker and historian', Vanessa Martin, 'Religion and State in Khumaini's "Kashf al-asrār"', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 54(1) (1993), p. 34. On-line, *BBC.co.uk, Persian*, in a series of articles marking the 66th anniversary of Kasravi's death, Khosro Naghed, 'Iranian lexicographer, writer and translator', writes, 'Bigotry of Kasravi and his irascible complaints and his acrimonious and unstructured criticisms of faith and belief of others, as well as his antagonism and hostility towards long-established poetry and classical literature led this indefatigable and inimitable researcher toward extremism and cavil', Khosro Naghed, 'Farjām-i kār-i kasravi' ['conclusion of Kasravi's work'], *BBC.co.uk, Persian*, March 20, 2012, (accessed August 17, 2013), http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/03/120319_144_kasravi_end_naghed.shtml. See also Masud Azizpour's article at the same site.

¹⁰ Robert Irwin, 'Edward Said's Shadowy Legacy', *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 7, 2008. Ridgeon also notes that Kasravi foreshadows Said, Ridgeon, p. 133.

¹¹ Erfan Sabeti, 'Bahā'igari, justāri dar dīgarsitizi', and Mohammad-Reza Nikfar, 'Kasravi wa mas' alih-yi huwiyat-i sikūlār', *BBC.co.uk, Persian*, (accessed August 17, 2013), http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/03/120313_144_kasravi_bahai.shtml.

¹² Farzin Vahdat, 'Bunbast-i tajadud dar andīshi-yi ahmad kasravi' [The Concept of Modernity in Ahmad Kasravi's Writings], *Iran Nameh* 20(2–3) (Spring/Summer 2002), <http://fis-iran.org/fa/irannameh/volxx/kasravi-modernity-writings> (in Persian, with English synopsis).

¹³ Abrahamian, pp. 273–274.

¹⁴ Farhang Rajaei, *Islamism and Modernism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 50.

¹⁵ Abrahamian, p. 274. Also see Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 85.

¹⁶ *On Islam* and *Shi'ism* are the two 'ideological' writings that still continue to receive 'next to no attention' by scholars of Iranian affairs and Islam. See Jazayeri, 'Iconoclastic', p. 47.

¹⁷ Ahmad Kasravi, *Tarikh-i mashrutihi-yi iran* [History of the Iranian Constitution] (Tehran: Amir Kabir Press, 1984); see also, the website devoted to Kasravi, www.kasravi.info. For a more recent critical assessment of this work see Abbas Amanat, 'Memory and Amnesia in the Historiography of the Constitutional Revolution', in

controversial Iranian presidential elections in 2009 managed to provoke enough anticlerical sentiment to trigger new interest in Kasravi and scrutiny of this polemical works, but the probe has been limited to the internet and by journalists and nonacademics.¹⁸ However, even there the considerations of *Dar Piramun-i Islam* and *Shi'igari* remain muted or circumspect, highlighting Kasravi's respect for the Prophet or oneness of God.¹⁹

Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), who became a fierce Iranian nationalist, was a native Azeri. Having lived in Tabriz through the upheavals of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was also an ardent defender of constitutionalism. He came from a clerical family and attended various Quran schools until he completed his religious training in Tabriz at the rank of 'mullah'.²⁰ Averse to clerical life and unpopular for interrupting the sermons of others (when he found historical inaccuracies or superstitious elements), he gave up his clerical position to teach Arabic at the American Memorial School of Tabriz in exchange for learning English.²¹ Kasravi never studied abroad nor attended any of the more recently established European-style schools in Iran.²² Therefore, unique among influential intellectuals and religious reformers, Kasravi lacked any formal training beyond theology. He never received 'higher education' either in secular colleges or at Shi'i seminaries in places like Qom or Najaf. Kasravi's study of the modern sciences and all other profane subjects was accomplished on his own and in isolation from any formal setting.²³ Being an 'outsider', without colleagues or allies, perhaps spurred the radicalization of his ideas and his reputation as iconoclast, which in turn, must have also made it easier for those within the establishment to disregard or dismiss his claims and arguments.²⁴ For those familiar with him, Kasravi is more than anything infamous for his book-burning rituals and his attacks on Sufism and Persian classical literary icons like Khayyam and Rumi.²⁵ In 1946, Kasravi was being prosecuted by the secular justice ministry for his attacks on Islam and Shi'ism when he was assassinated in the courtroom by Islamic extremists.²⁶

Curiously, Kasravi's criticism of Shi'ism receives its most direct scholarly exposition in English in a brief passage in Ali Rahnama's biography of Shariati,

Footnote 17 continued

Touraj Atabaki (ed.) *Iran in the 20th Century: Historiography and Political Culture* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), esp. pp. 49–50.

¹⁸ An example is Muhammad Amini's new annotated Persian edition of Kasravi's *Shi'igari* (Los Angeles: Ketab Crop., 2011).

¹⁹ See *BBC.co.uk*, Persian website marking the 66th anniversary of Kasravi's death, April 2, 2012, especially the piece by Mohammad Amini, 'Kasravi, shar'at wa rifurmāsūn-i dīnī', (accessed March 15, 2012), http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/indepth/cluster_kasravi_66th_anniversary.shtml.

²⁰ Ahmad Kasravi, *Zindigani-yi man* [my life], 1323/1945, p. 32, <http://www.kasravi.info/ketabs/zendegani%20man/zendegani-man.pdf>. For a brief account in English see Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 98–105. Also see Mohammad Doustdar Haghghi, *The Religious Thought of Ahmad Kasravi Tabrizi* (Masters thesis, Montreal: McGill University, 1998), pp. 20–23, http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/webclient/StreamGate?folder_id=0&dvs=1383333628294~182.

²¹ Kasravi, *Zendegani*, pp. 42–43, 49–51; Mottahedeh, p. 103.

²² Both Qazvini and Iranshahr had studied in Europe, see footnote 6.

²³ For example, of those Kasravi influenced the most, Ale Ahmad attended secular Dar al-Fonun in Tehran, and Shariati attended University of Paris (Sorbonne).

²⁴ See Kasravi's account of his friendships in Tabriz while in religious school in Kasravi, *Zendegani*, pp. 24–25, 40–42.

²⁵ Jazayeri, pp. 27–28; Abrahamian, p. 287; Ridgeon, p. 28.

²⁶ Naser Pakdaman, *Qatl-i kasravi* (Afsaneh Publications, Sweden, 1377/1998), pp. 27–29, <http://ketabnak.com/comment.php?dlid=37221>.

where a bit more than a full page is devoted to the discussion of *Shi'igari*.²⁷ In this surprisingly informative summary, Kasravi's refutation of Shi'i beliefs is stated to be based on the Quran and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali. Rahnema also adds—as authors more deferential to Kasravi often dutifully acknowledge when broaching the subject—that Kasravi 'remains highly respectful and reverential' towards all three, as well as towards Ali's son, Imam Hossain and all their original followers. Further, Kasravi 'was very careful not to question or negate any of the three fundamental bases of Islam, namely monotheism, prophethood and resurrection.'²⁸ The summary then enumerates Kasravi's objections to the sixth Imam of the Shi'is, Jafar-Sadiq, to the Shi'i practice of dissimulation, to the insulting of the Sunni 'rightly guided' Caliphs, to the institutionalization of weeping and mourning sessions and to going on pilgrimages or otherwise petitioning the imams for various needs. Finally, Rahnema states what few others have ventured to repeat with such directness:

From the Shi'i community's point of view, Kasravi crossed the Rubicon when he attacked the authenticity of certain essential pillars of Twelver Shi'i thought and insulted certain highly revered Shi'i infallibles. He rejected the commonly held Shi'i belief that the first three caliphs had usurped the position of Imam Ali. He challenged the concept of imamate [...] rejected the infallibility of the Twelve Imams, ridiculed the existence of the Twelfth Imam and consequently the central Shi'i notion of his occultation and his promised return on earth.²⁹

Certainly, Kasravi does assail the pillars of Shi'ism and dismisses the entire sect as a whole, rejecting the claims that Shi'i Imams ever ought to have been thought of as the religious and temporal leaders of the Islamic community. He refuses the idea that the Imams are infallible and wholly repudiates the rituals, content, and the objectives of the Shi'i faith—including the belief in the Twelfth Imam together with the fundamental Shi'i idea of his disappearance as a child and his promised return as the Mahdi. Still, it is not exactly clear from the passages in Kasravi's *Shi'igari* where his descriptive criticism amounts to insults or 'ridiculing' of the Twelfth Imam, as Rahnema claims. According to Moojan Momen, 'no aspect of the history of Shi'i Islam is as confused as stories relating to the Twelfth Imam'. Momen also grants that 'the facts' are too 'contradictory' to follow, not only for the 'un-believer' but even for the 'committed believer'.³⁰ Despite the oft repeated characterization of Kasravi as angry, his observations, though wholly critical of Shi'i beliefs, remain earnest, steadfastly matter-of-fact and devoid of gratuitous disparagements. Indeed, the accounts of the Twelfth Imam in standard textbooks on Shi'ism yield little information that either contradicts or proves more complimentary than what is written by Kasravi:³¹

The story was that the eleventh imam had no known offspring. For this reason, after his death, a schism arose among his followers. One group said: 'the imamate has ended'. [...] another group said: 'The late imam is survived by a five-year-old son who is hidden in a

²⁷ Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A political biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p. 10.

²⁸ Rahnema, p. 9.

²⁹ Rahnema, p. 9.

³⁰ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 44–45, 59–60, 161–62.

³¹ On early Shi'i history see, Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam: Abu Jafar ibn Qiba al-Razi and His Contribution to Imamite Shi'ite Thought*, (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993).

cellar and who is the living imam' The leader of this group [...] called himself the 'Bab' (or the gate to the imam). He said: 'The imam has appointed me as the medium between him and the people. Whatever you have to say, tell me and whatever money you want to donate, give to me [...] let us repeat [...] the child that they spoke of was not seen by anyone [...] one cannot accept that someone would have an offspring without anyone knowing of it. And then, why would the imam hide himself? Why would he not come out of the cellar? If an imam is the leader, he must be among the people to guide them.'³²

No other passage in Kasravi's book, perhaps in any book, is more direct and devastating a challenge to the core principle of Twelver Shi'ism. The silence with which it has been met, even on occasions when other aspects of Kasravi's work and life are fastidiously critiqued or criticized, testifies to its incendiary power. A little more than a year before he was killed, Kasravi, already facing attacks from religious leaders as well as government officials and members of the Parliament, further explains his criticism of and opposition to Shi'ism in an open letter to the Iranian prime minister. Published as *The Government Must Answer Us*, the open letter elaborates Kasravi's objections:

Now we get to the religion of Shi'ism [...] Most of our grievances and complaints are about that [...] This religion is incompatible with reason, it is incompatible with the sciences, it is incompatible with history, it is incompatible with Islam itself; it is incompatible with life. Beyond all these, it is incompatible with representative government (with democratic life) which we achieved with bloodshed and sacrifice. We have a hundred complaints about this religion but the main problem is that last: its incompatibility with representative government.³³

As Jazayery, who was an active member of Kasravi's political party, explains, Kasravi's preoccupation with religion in general stemmed ultimately from his belief that 'from the beginning of Iran's history to the time of the Constitutional Revolution, no more important event occurred than the Constitutional Revolution', which introduced a representative (parliamentary) government to a preindustrial, impoverished, majority Shi'i sultanate that until then was nominally ruled by patriarchal despots whose arbitrary writ could rarely extend beyond the walls of the capital.³⁴ That the revolution had failed, or was left incomplete, Kasravi blamed on European interventions and the fact that Iranians were not prepared for it: 'he considered it a disgrace that forty years after the Revolution, not one out of a thousand in Iran knew the meaning of democracy'.³⁵ For Kasravi the greatest obstacle to democracy was Shi'ism itself. 'Our task is not just to put religion in order. But until we put that in order, we cannot do anything else'.³⁶ His 'unrelenting mission [...] to transform Iran into an integrated modern state' was predicated on that.³⁷

The reaction of the Shi'i clergy to all this is not surprising and, regardless of Kasravi's motives, it is hardly remarkable that rather than provide reasoned explanations or counter arguments, Kasravi's rationalist questions about, for

³² Kasravi, *Shi'ism*, p. 127. Compare this characterisation with with Abu Muammad al-Hasan b. Mosa al-Nawbakhti, *Kitab-i firaq al-Shi'a* (Istanbul: Mattba'at al-Dawla, 1931), pp. 25–26.

³³ Ahmad Kasravi, 'Dawlat bi mā pāsukh dahad', p. 8, <http://www.kasravi.info/ketabs/dowlat.pdf>; see also, Jazayery, p. 30.

³⁴ Jazayery, p. 34. See also, Ali M. Ansari, 'L'état, c'est moi: the paradox of Sultanism and the question of "regime change" in modern Iran', *International Affairs* 89(2) (2013), p. 286.

³⁵ Jazayery, p. 34.

³⁶ Jazayery, p. 42.

³⁷ Abrahamian, p. 278; see the discussion below, regarding Kasravi's characterisation as a 'modernist'.

instance, the Twelfth Imam, are taken as insults.³⁸ What *is* surprising is the silence of modern scholars with a broadly secular outlook. Of course, if we consider Kasravi's own fate, then prudence, or even dissimulation on the part of any skeptical and non-devout Iranian regarding all matters concerning Shi'ism and Islam would have been only sensible. But what would cause scholars and specialists even outside of Iran to entirely avoid Kasravi's criticisms of Shi'ism for some 70 years?³⁹

Hamid Dabashi in his seven-hundred-page book on the ideological foundations of the Islamic Revolution dismisses Kasravi in two short paragraphs as a self-styled historian with a 'crude and rather artificial understanding of Shi'i doctrinal principles'.⁴⁰ Hamid Algar does the same with his assessment that Kasravi was 'competent as a historian but mediocre as a thinker'.⁴¹ Lloyd Ridgeon, who admits to being 'more unforgiving' of Kasravi's attacks on Sufi Islam, is perhaps the only specialist who has addressed one of Kasravi's polemics—against Islamic mysticism—at length. Early in his book *Sufi Castigator*, Ridgeon states that 'Kasravi should be lauded for [...] his steadfast rejection of superstitious beliefs'.⁴² However, later in his analysis of Kasravi's criticisms Ridgeon at times equivocates, even dismisses outright some of the objections raised by Kasravi against Sufi superstitious practices. For instance, when Kasravi condemns fantastic tales of miracles performed by various saints, Ridgeon responds with passages from the Quran and seems ultimately to reject Kasravi's objections as those of a 'rationalist' who has jettisoned 'both miracles and God from the world'.⁴³

But as Ridgeon also observes, it was indeed Kasravi's attacks that 'galvanized the clerical forces' and 'ironically' proved instrumental to the reassertion of clerical participation in politics which culminated in Khomeini's induction as the 'Supreme Leader' in an Islamic Republic.⁴⁴ Unwittingly, Kasravi also helped set in place the anti-Western ideological foundations of the Iranian revolution of 1979 through his influence on Ale Ahmad. The remarkable similarity between Kasravi's disparagement of the European ways in his book *Ethos* (1932) to that of Ale Ahmad's influential *Occidentosis* (1962) disguises the latter's appropriation of Kasravi's ideas to advocate not a break with but rather a return *to* a supposed Islam. Still, when in his *Occidentosis* Ale Ahmad blames the Shi'i clergy for transforming Iranians from 'travelers in the universal caravan of Islam' into

³⁸ See text of Khomeini's letter 'Bikhānand wa bi kār bibandand' *BBC.co.uk, Persian*, March 11, 2012, (accessed August 17, 2013), http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/03/120311_144_kasravi_khomeini_letter.shtml. See also Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 191 and below, the text related to footnote 55.

³⁹ After the Islamic Revolution secular nationalism was condemned as 'a bourgeois ideology created by imperialism to sow dissension in the Muslim world and divide the people from the clergy'. Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 124.

⁴⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 45–46.

⁴¹ Hamid Algar, *Imam Khomeini: A Short Biography*, Section 2 'The Years of Spiritual and Intellectual Formation in Qum, 1923 to 1962' (The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works) <http://www.al-islam.org/imambio/section2>.

⁴² Ridgeon, p. 9.

⁴³ Ridgeon, pp. 54–55. See also footnote 2, above.

⁴⁴ Ridgeon, p. 3; Ghanoonparvar, among others, has noted Kasravi as the source of many characteristics of the current theocratic system in Iran. See his 'Pākdīnī dar ārā'i kasravi: nigārišī 'aqlānī bih dīn' [Kasravi's Rationalist Approach to Religion], *Iran Nameh* 20(2–3) (Spring/Summer 2002), <http://fis-iran.org/fa/irannameh/volxx/kasravi-rationalist-religion> (in Persian, with English synopsis).

'guardians of tombs and beggars picking crumbs from the tables of departed martyrs', he is restating what Kasravi had scorned years earlier.⁴⁵ Shari'ati, who was the other source of the ideology that helped launch and sustain the Islamic revolution was intimately familiar with Kasravi's works and assimilated many of the latter's criticisms of Shi'i clergy—their 'backwardness', their worshipping of the saints, their passive complacency—into his own works.⁴⁶ Even after the establishment of Shi'i theocracy, when Abdolkarim Soroush, the most influential representative of the secularizing strain of Islamic discourse in Iran, stated that for today's Muslim 'hoping to return to pre-modern times is to hope for the impossible', he was repeating Kasravi's criticism of those who sought to return to Islam as it had been during the seventh century.⁴⁷

Of course, there were, both before Kasravi and after him, clerics or lay religious individuals who sought to reform Islam. But unlike most critics of Shi'ism and its clergy that came after him, for Kasravi the attempts at 'restoring' or revitalizing Shi'ism intrinsically were fatuous.⁴⁸ In the case of Shi'ism in Iran, reformers argued for change or at least for the abandonment of Shi'ism's exacting codes of conduct and reform of its medieval absolutism, even if it were only to confront the evils of 'the West'.⁴⁹ Indeed, Kasravi, who by the 1940s finds that Muslims 'everywhere and of every sect have sunk into a state of misguided ignorance'⁵⁰ is expressing a nearly hackneyed self-critical view from half a century earlier, when the nineteenth-century reformers like Afghani had advocated sidelining the historical accumulation of traditions of jurisprudence in favour of exercising reason in a free intellectual pursuit to re-interpret the original divine and prophetic sources (*ijtihad*).⁵¹ As Said Amir Arjomand remarks, the fact that the initiators of the very first modern revolution in Asia—namely, the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905–11)—were calling upon the Shi'i clerical class to exercise their independent religious authority and assume the leadership of the nation was itself a jolt to the Shi'i clergy to abandon their traditional pacifism.⁵² But Arjomand also notes that Asadallah Mamaqani's scathing 1918 attack on the foundations of clerical authority in Shi'ism was followed by a 'completely apolitical' Sangalaji who nevertheless advocated reform and attacked Shi'i clericalism. Revealingly, Mamaqani's ideas for political reform were not to be

⁴⁵ Jalal al-i Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), p. 45. Ale Ahmad had himself written of his familiarity with speech and words of Kasravi. Also see (i) Mottahedeh, *Mantle of the Prophet*, p. 288; (ii) Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, pp. 45–46; (iii) Tavakoli Targhi, 'Inventing Modernity', and (iv) Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 64.

⁴⁶ Ali Rahnama has noted the anecdote about Shariati's underscored request for Kasravi's books to be sent to him in Paris while he was a student there. Rahnama, pp. 8–10. Sohrab Behdad writes, 'more than thirty years later, Ali Shariati, another Muslim reformist, presented Islam in a way similar to that of Kasravi and succeeded in mobilizing Muslim intellectuals in a social movement that led to the 1979 revolution'. See his 'Utopia of Assassins: Navvab Safavi and the Fada'ian-e Eslam in the Prerevolutionary Iran', in Ramin Jahanbegloo (ed.) *Iran Between Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), p. 73. Also see Abrahamian, 'Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution', in *Middle East Report and Information Project 102: Islam and Politics* (Jan. 1982), pp. 24–28.

⁴⁷ For Soroush see Ali Asghar Seyyedabadi, 'The Muddled Dream of Returning to Tradition: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush', (Nov. 2006), <http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-The%20Muddled%20Dream%20of%20Returning%20to%20Tradition.html>; for Kasravi see Shi'ism, pp. 83–85.

⁴⁸ Ahmad Kasravi, *Ma chi mikhvahim?* [*What Do We Want?*], p. 98; see also, Jazayeri, p. 26.

⁴⁹ Dabashi's, *Post-Orientalism*, p. 259; and *Shi'ism*, p. 266.

⁵⁰ Kasravi, *On Islam*, p. 64.

⁵¹ Sami Zubaida, 'Islam and Secularization', *American Journal of Social Science*, 33(3) (2005), p. 444.

⁵² Said Amir Arjomand, 'Ideological Revolution in Shi'ism' in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 178.

matched until 1982—after Khomeini was the ‘Supreme Leader’—by the recently deposed former president of the Islamic Republic.⁵³

In the 1960s, a younger generation of both clerics and lay-religious intellectuals were partisans of reform of religious leadership, which unlike Kasravi’s advocacy sought to restore or revitalize the Shi’i tradition.⁵⁴ But in Arjomand’s words, even these attempts at reform came to a halt once Khomeini demonstrated the power and effectiveness of an older form of leadership by denouncing the Pahlavi regime in 1962–1963 and setting in motion ‘a vigorous movement of traditionalist clericalism’.⁵⁵ However, Khomeini’s very first published criticism of the Pahlavi regime had appeared nearly 20 years earlier. In an open letter to the ulama in 1944, the as yet unknown Khomeini asks the clerics to unite against the immorality of public life, and especially to react against a certain ‘scum from Tabriz who has insulted your creed entirely and, at the very center of Shi’ism, has managed to heap insults on Imam Sadeq and the Hidden Imam (may my soul be sacrificed to Him) and not a word has been issued [in protest] from any of you’.⁵⁶

The fervor of Khomeini’s letter was matched in his book-length response, which he published anonymously around the same time. They suggest Khomeini’s recognition that unchecked, Kasravi’s challenge could be potentially devastating, posing an existential threat to Shi’ism in Iran, or at least to its clergy. Although Khomeini did not begin to develop his own political theory until the 1960s, it was Kasravi who first caused him to defend publicly the authority and prerogatives of the religious elite.⁵⁷ Indeed, Khomeini’s initial foray into politics may well have been due to Kasravi’s rhetorical challenge: apparently certain of the clergy’s incompetence, Kasravi calls on them at the conclusion of his *Shi’igari* to take over governing the nation. After he condemns the clergy as parasites who refuse to pay taxes (because they believe the only legitimate government is that of the Hidden Imam) and who contribute nothing to society but the perpetuation of superstition and docility, Kasravi addresses them directly as a class:

Suppose government belongs to you and you are capable of running it, then why do you not want to take it over? Why do you not want to ‘implement religious laws’? What is to prevent you? [. . .] When did you even show a desire to do so [. . .] when did you ever rise up? Then why, rather than planting doubt in people and abandoning them, do you not rise up to the task?⁵⁸

The Unveiling of Secrets (Kashf-i asrar) is manifestly Khomeini’s response to the questions posed by a Kasravi ‘disciple’, Ali Akbar Hakamizadeh, in a 36-page piece entitled *Secrets of a Thousand Years*, which was published by Kasravi’s bi-monthly *Parcham*.⁵⁹ The criticisms stated by Hakamizadeh, who like Kasravi was

⁵³ Regarding the development of Shi’ism in the twentieth century and the ideological revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, Arjomand writes, ‘neither Mamaqani nor Shari’at Sangalaji had any appreciable impact. Rather, it was [Shaykh Fadl Allah] Nuri’s Islamic traditionalism that contained the seeds of future developments. Arjomand, ‘Ideological Revolution’, p. 184.

⁵⁴ Clerics such as Mahmud Taleqani, Murteza Mutahhari and Muhammad Beheshti, and lay-religious intellectuals like Mehdi Bazargan and Ali Shariati.

⁵⁵ See Arjomand, ‘Ideological Revolution’, p. 190.

⁵⁶ The epithet ‘*bī sar wa pā*’ (literally, ‘without head or foot’), used by Khomeini to describe Kasravi, has been translated as ‘adventurer’ in Keddie’s *Modern Iran*, p. 191.

⁵⁷ Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 19; ‘It was Kasravi who brought up the subject [of *vilāyat-i faqih*, or ‘Guardianship of the Jurisconsult’] openly for the first time’, see Zajaryery, p. 21.

⁵⁸ Kasravi, *On Islam and Shi’ism*, p. 197.

⁵⁹ Keddie, p. 191.

a former cleric, were not unprecedented, nor did he present them in a particularly forceful or sophisticated manner.⁶⁰ Among other things he accuses the clergy of encouraging superstitious practices amid their following. But Khomeini's compulsion to respond to Hakamizadeh in more than three hundred pages had likely taken root earlier, prompted by Kasravi's perhaps more stinging and viable criticisms of the *Shi'i* creed that had already been published.⁶¹

Kasravi's [*Shi'ism*] aroused the anger of the devout Shi'is. It was on the account of these protests that Kasravi changed the title of his book [from *Shi'ism*] and called upon everyone to judge [reissuing the same piece under the title]: *Let Them Read and Pass Judgment*. In the year 1943 this book was going from hand to hand. Doubtless it had been centuries since the bastions of Islam had to face such explicit and decisive criticism. It is in this atmosphere that *The Secrets of a Thousand Years* came out.⁶²

What makes Khomeini's *Unveiling of Secrets* most relevant here is the way in which this response has been seen as a 'vindication' of Shi'i practices and rituals, or a 'line-by-line refutation' of Hakamizadeh's criticisms and explicitly, or by extension, a confutation of both Kasravi and Sangalaji.⁶³ Such uncritical ratification of Khomeini's *Unveiling of Secrets* is a testimony to the power of Kasravi to continue to haunt the imagination of later readers no less than he did the cleric who wrote a book that was 'ten times as many pages' as the piece to which he apparently is responding.⁶⁴ Khomeini's response is indeed striking in its 'staunch traditionalism' and vigorous defence of the Shi'i hierocracy and its practices.⁶⁵ However, Khomeini's counter arguments against all the criticism levelled against Shi'i clergy, beliefs, and practices often take the form of reduction to absurdity, which leave the question at hand displaced and unresolved.⁶⁶ At times Khomeini's position seems pragmatic, even modern; such as when he defends the Shi'i custom of visiting tombs of the martyrs and appealing to the saints for cures or fulfilment of other needs. Here, Khomeini defends the practice as a useful psychological aid that helps the faithful avoid the feeling of helplessness. However, such an endorsement makes him seem more inclined towards a pragmatic social psychology, even manipulation, rather than a vindication of Shi'ism intrinsically. Khomeini remains equivocal on the ultimate effectiveness of the practice and its ramification for a society in a twentieth-century world, which was a prime concern of Kasravi's.

At other times Khomeini seems decidedly esoteric and premodern. For instance, he confirms and defends the validity of miracles, prescience (*ghaybgū*) and the occult⁶⁷ by citing not only people like the twelfth-century philosopher Suhrawardi, but also the advances made in France on the science of 'magnetic sleep' (*nuwm mighnāṭīsī* or hypnotism):

⁶⁰ For earlier examples, see Tavakoli-Targhi, endnotes pp. 59–65.

⁶¹ Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, p. 18.

⁶² Muhammad Taqi Haj Boushehri, *Cheshmandaz*, 6 (Summer 1368/1989), p. 23.

⁶³ According to Algar, Khomeini vindicated 'such aspects of Shi'i practice as the mourning ceremonies of Muharram, pilgrimage (*zīyārat*) to the tombs of the Imams, and the recitation of the supplicatory prayers composed by the Imams'. Algar, *Imam Khomeini*, <http://www.al-islam.org/imabiography/>; also see, Brumberg, p. 58.

⁶⁴ Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Arjomand, *After Khomeini*, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran from Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 132.

⁶⁷ Khomeini, *Kashf-i asrar*, p. 50, http://azadieiran2.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/kashfolasrar-khomeyni_www-azadieiran2-wordpress-com.pdf.

[The science of] magnetic sleep has shaken the world . . . the great strides made in science today revealing the hidden secrets of the world and supernatural miracles, blessings, prophecy, and knowledge of the occult, which the materialists used to dismiss as fairytales, have become close to definitive and in a near future science is certain to make them axiomatic.⁶⁸

The basic problem for Khomeini seems to be the impossibility of addressing the issues raised directly, without sarcasm, ad hominem arguments or other rhetorical devices, since to do so would assume equality in the right to interpret between himself, Hakamizadeh, Kasravi and Sangalaji all of whom at various points he has in mind. Beyond what he sees as insults to the sacrosanct and the encroaching threats to the clerical authority, what Khomeini is countering in his *Unveiling of Secrets* is an attack—likely unawares, at least on the part of Hakamizadeh—on his essentialist, hierarchical worldview, deeply rooted in Aristotelian cosmology. In a system where a clergyman (*shakhs-i ruwhānī*) immanently inhabits a higher plain of existence than the non-clergy, it must have seemed nearly intolerable for Khomeini to be taken to task by a ‘bunch of scum’.⁶⁹ Khomeini variously but repeatedly calls on ‘our pure brothers, our zealous youth, our honorable countrymen [who] must destroy the seed of these dishonorable pollutants with an iron fist’.⁷⁰

In retrospect, the murder of Kasravi two years later, the killers’ avoidance of punishment, and the manner in which the entire episode was handled by the fledgling justice ministry may well have added to the impression that the real culprit had already been put to death. Accounts of Kasravi’s death and its aftermath leave the impression that the prevailing viewpoint about the whole episode was that Kasravi was responsible for his own murder.⁷¹ Nor do such entrenched attitudes seem to have substantially abated with the passage of time even among secular scholars. Rahnema, for example, sees the murder as quid pro quo: ‘having had a traditional clerical education, Kasravi must have anticipated the traditional response of the clerical community to this discourse’.⁷²

With Kasravi safely out of the way, the mining of his ideological writings as spoils of victory was made all the more acceptable. Indeed, the threat Kasravi posed to the clerical establishment seems to have prompted close readings of his works and absorption of many of his criticisms and insights not by secularists or advocates of modernization but by those invested in the maintenance of Shi’i hegemony.⁷³ However, not all content pillaged from Kasravi’s writings by partisans of Shi’ism needed to be ‘reverse engineered’ for use in future battles. As Abbas Amanat has pointed out, Kasravi’s polemical treatise against the Baha’is came to determine the negative attitude of many generations of Iranians towards

⁶⁸ Khomeini, pp. 52–53.

⁶⁹ ‘*chand nafar bī sar wa pā*’ Khomeini, p. 212.

⁷⁰ Khomeini, p. 74. Houchang Chehabi believes that Kasravi’s assassins ‘interpreted Khomeini’s pronouncement to mean that Kasravi’s life was free for a Muslim to take’. See *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: the Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), p. 117.

⁷¹ For example, see (i) Pakdaman, *Qatl-i Kasravi* pp. 185–191; (ii) Behdad, pp. 71–92; (iii) Abrahamian writes that to some, Kasravi was ‘justly murdered for trying to destroy the foundations of traditional authority’. Abrahamian, ‘Integrative Nationalist’, p. 273; (iv) Vahid Sealy writes that the murderers were ‘cleared [...] in part, because none of the witnesses were willing to risk testifying against the Fedai’yan’, Sealy, p. 71.

⁷² Rahnema, p. 9.

⁷³ Sealy observes this with regards to Kasravi’s ‘secular-nationalist objection to Baha’is’. But the ‘close readings’, in case of Kasravi’s works on Shi’ism, were by no means always ‘hostile’, Sealy, p. 101.

this persecuted group.⁷⁴ The hostility towards the Tudeh Party by clerics and the state, which outlawed it in 1949, might have made criticism of the Shi'i establishment more palatable for leftist intellectuals in any case. But even after being forced underground or into exile, any semblance of sympathy towards Kasravi's views on Shi'ism remained concealed. Indeed, the dissimulation of the secularist intelligentsia regarding religious matters persisted during the remaining Cold-War decades as both leftists and the Pahlavi regime continued to instrumentalise Islam, vying for popular legitimacy.⁷⁵

More insidious than turning a blind eye to Kasravi is the scholarly displacement of him into the discourse of 'modernist' reform, a distortion of what it was that he actually represented. This [mis]characterization of Kasravi has helped to foreclose discussion of Islamic reform. Far outlasting the deterrence caused by his murder, this embedding of Kasravi's language of reform into the discourse of nationalism or modernization has deformed discussion of the contemporary intellectual history of Iran and Shi'ism more broadly, further constraining his potential influence. Although Kasravi was certainly a reformer, his identification as a 'modernist' ought to be a more contentious characterization, if for no other reason than the fact that the term activates vexed postcolonial debates on the question of modernity.⁷⁶

The discourse on 'alternative modernities' and the efforts made in surmounting Eurocentric scholarship and its obstructing binaries or the inhibiting hierarchy inherent in designating nation-states as 'modern' and 'traditional' or 'developed' and 'developing' has tended to contort substantive analysis almost as much as the prejudices that such discourse purports to displace. Kasravi's earliest polemic, *Ethos* or *Ayin*, synthesizes a number of earlier works from the 1920s in which various Iranian writers had weighed in on the benefits and harms of modernity (*tajadud*), tradition, and change.⁷⁷ What is evident in these writings is that at least until the mid-twentieth century no distinction between the idea of 'westernization' and 'modernization' had yet formed. In fact, the disentanglement of the two concepts was to be realized in the dissemination of just the sort of polemics and writings in which Kasravi and others were engaged in order to work out the effects of all the change that in one way or other seemed to them to originate in Europe.⁷⁸

Kasravi was certainly a public intellectual who advocated certain social reforms and lived, wrote, and published in a span of time that in European history is designated as the 'modern' period. Kasravi was not immune to the global tendencies of his time, dominated as they were by the interests and designs of European colonial powers. He was also a nationalist who sought to strengthen

⁷⁴ Amanat, p. 50. With Kasravi gone, the main 'threat' to the Shi'i tradition, fought by what Arjomand calls the 'clerical publicists' in the 1940s and 1950s, 'was no longer the vague but ubiquitous secularism and materialism, but their concrete embodiment in the Baha'i sect and the [communist] Tudeh Party'. Amanat, p. 188; and Rasul Jafarian, *Jaryanha va sazmanha-yi mazhabi-siyasi-yi Iran, 1941-1979* (Tehran: private printing, 2006), p. 368.

⁷⁵ Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 112.

⁷⁶ See (i) Juan Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: the Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 1-15; (ii) Michael Saler, 'Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review', *American Historical Review* (June 2006), pp. 962-716; (iii) Andrea Huyssen and David Bathrick, 'Modernism and the Experience of Modernity' in *Modernity and the Text* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 2-16; (iv) Timothy Mitchell, 'The Stage of Modernity', in *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 1-34.

⁷⁷ Also translated as creed or ideology. See Jazayery, p. 15, and Tavakoli Targhi.

⁷⁸ See discussion of *Gharbzadegi* in Ali Miersepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 107. In his later writings Kasravi seems to ground his tacit theoretical assumption about the nature of reality on what Miersepassi refers to as a materialist epistemology. This likely had not yet coalesced in his first polemic. Miersepassi, p. 6.

what in his view was to form the Iranian nation. He sought the establishment of representative government and hankered after the liberation of Iranians from royal despotism, believing representative government to be the ‘ultimate product of thought of the human race’.⁷⁹ Although he believed personal ethics and collective ideology superior to the imposition of man-made laws, Kasravi was also a fierce and often exemplary advocate of the rule of law.⁸⁰

The fact that Kasravi was mostly supportive of Reza Shah’s ‘modernizing’ campaign might seem to justify his characterization as a modernist reformer but the label distorts one’s view of the contemporary environment in which Kasravi’s ideas were formed and propagated.⁸¹ Whatever was meant by the early to mid-twentieth-century Iranian intellectuals’ view of Iran as ‘backward’,⁸² for Kasravi and his generation the issue appears less ideological than visceral: in one account from 1920, Kasravi had to walk more than a hundred miles on foot along the swampy remnants of a supposed ‘road’ that had been built by the Safavids in the seventeenth century in order to reach his government appointed job in Mazandaran province on the Caspian Sea.⁸³ This is of wider relevance in terms of what is at stake in conceptualizing change in the region during the early twentieth century: the differences between Mustafa Kemal’s campaign for ‘modernization’ in Turkey and the top-down undertakings by Reza Shah to make Iran ‘look like’ Europe warrant further reflection.⁸⁴ There are indeed fundamental limitations to ubiquitous comparisons between Ataturk’s plans for a crumbled Mediterranean empire that had been one of the great colonial powers of the world and the drive by a semi-illiterate former ‘stable boy’ who had risen through the ranks of a brigade established by the imperialist Russians in a sultanate where, as recently as the famine of 1918–1919, millions of people had perished.⁸⁵ It is a measure of Reza Shah’s success in transforming Iran that the very standards by which he is judged at the end of his 16 years of autocratic rule would have been unthinkable in the Iran of 1920. And although his takeover of Iran certainly helped ‘clear the way for the demolition of the parliamentary structures’, the barely two-decade old institution, dominated as it was by Qajar princes and tribal chiefs, had hardly exemplified an

⁷⁹ As quoted by Jazayeri, p. 33.

⁸⁰ See (i) Kasravi, *Ayiin*, p. 60.; (ii) Abrahamian, ‘Integrative Nationalist’, pp. 277–278; (iii) Kasravi, *Dah sal dar ‘adliyah* [Ten Years in the Judiciary], p. 28, <http://www.kasravi.info/ketabs/10sal.pdf>.

⁸¹ Kasravi was certainly not supportive of what Homa Katouzian refers to as Reza Shah’s ‘pseudo-modernism’. See Homa Katouzian, ‘Nationalist Trends in Iran, 1921-1926’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10 (1978), pp. 533–551.

⁸² See Stephanie Cronin, ‘The Army, Civil Society and the State in Iran: 1921-26’ in Touraj Atabaki and Erik J. Zürcher (eds.), *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization Under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), p. 131. For a concise account of Kasravi’s view on Iran’s ‘backwardness’ see Abrahamian, ‘Integrative Nationalist’, p. 281.

⁸³ Kasravi *Dah sal*, pp. 15–17, <http://www.kasravi.info/ketabs/10sal.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Mokhber al-Saltaneh, a former prime minister recalls Reza Shah as saying in a private audience, regarding the Shah’s compulsory order to Iranian men to wear the bowler hat. Quoted in Atabaki and Zürcher, pp. 33–34. Abrahamian admits that it is more apt to compare Reza Shah to the early Bourbons or sixteenth-century Habsburgs than to Ataturk; although his own standards for assessment of Reza Shah’s reign are at times on a par with late twentieth-century liberal democracies of Western Europe. See Abrahamian, *Modern Iran*, p. 65. Even such observations as Behnam’s, that ‘Iran rejected the Turkish Kemalism, based on the acceptance of Western civilisation and on the separation of politics and religion’ remain predicated on the assumption of contemporary correspondence between the two countries. See Jamshid Behnam, ‘Iranian Society, Modernity, and Globalization’, trans. Alireza Rahbar Shamskar, in Jahanbegloo, p. 5.

⁸⁵ For this description of Reza Shah, see Abrahamian, *Modern Iran*, p. 63. Also see (i) Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 14–15; (ii) Mohammad Gholi Majd, *The Great Famine & Genocide in Iran: 1917-1919* (University Press of America, 2003), p. 1; (iii) ‘Chronology of Famines’, *World Ecology Report: Critical Issues in Health and Environment*, 20(4) (Winter 2008), p. 5.

anti-monarchical, democratizing force.⁸⁶ In the long run, the fact that Reza Shah was prevented by Shi'i clerics from establishing a republic may have been more consequential than his inevitable autocracy.⁸⁷ As Kasravi saw it, when the masses had been able to elect their own representatives they had constantly voted for divisive politicians, 'thus paving the way for Reza Shah's rise to power'. Reza Shah had not, Kasravi wrote, 'suddenly appeared from the "primitive jungles of Africa" but had risen up from the indigenous population'.⁸⁸

Still, even though Kasravi believed in rewarding individuals based on merit, his support for individualism and self-interested pursuits was quite constrained and his treatment of contemporary challenges facing the dominant patriarchy, of which he certainly was a part, was anything but progressive.⁸⁹ Kasravi, who had married his third wife while still with his second (he was married four times), also believed in the inferiority of women and the need for them to remain at home, subordinate to men.⁹⁰ He certainly shares this anxiety about the emasculating affect that the European 'Other' would have on the deeply entrenched patriarchal order with subsequent generations of nativist intellectuals and 'reactionary modernists'.⁹¹ In fact, with a qualified exception of his views on religion, it would be difficult to characterize many, or even most of Kasravi's reformist demands as liberal. There are also aspects of Kasravi that could be decisively described as antimodern.

Kasravi appears most stereotypically 'antimodern' by reviling the 'machine', calling it 'the infernal tool', stained with 'the blood of millions'.⁹² His *Ethos* shows an author who years after his conversion into a 'true anticleric' (by the spectacle of Halley's comet in 1910), remains nonetheless enamoured of Islamic traditions.⁹³ In it, Kasravi praises not only the centuries-old Islamic legal system favourably against modern European laws but also lauds Islamic Sufism which, according to him, taught people for centuries always to choose contentment of others over their own and to 'struggle for the benefit of others at one's own expense'.⁹⁴ Here, it is not the 'traditional' ways of life or Islam that he attacks but 'Europeanism'. However, he does already exhibit signs of the break with the normative Shi'i tradition that was to come. *Ethos* conspicuously lacks any reference to Shi'ism and despite his repeated praise for the prophets of the 'East' there is no mention of Islam or its prophet. Kasravi saw religion (*dīn*) as 'a code of behavior' based on 'rationality' (*khirad*), and he saw rationality as God's most precious gift to man.⁹⁵ Accordingly, he believed religion must play a pivotal role as the 'foundation for a compassionate, rational and ethical life' which he saw as an alternative path of progress and development.⁹⁶

⁸⁶ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 103–104.

⁸⁷ Nikki Keddi, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796–1925* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1999), p. 86.

⁸⁸ Abrahamian, 'Integrative Nationalist', pp. 281–282.

⁸⁹ For example, see Ahmad Kasravi, *Varjavand Bunyad* [Worthy Foundations], pp. 103–104, 130–132, <http://www.kasravi.info/ketabs/varjavand-boniad.pdf>.

⁹⁰ see Ghanoonparvar, 'Pākdīnī', endnote 13. Kasravi's marital history was provided to Lloyd Ridgeon by Kasravi's grandson. See Ridgeon, p. 196, endnote 42.

⁹¹ Mirsepassi mentions Jeffrey Herf's study of 'reactionary modernism' in Germany in his discussion of Ale Ahmad, see Mirsepassi, p. 105.

⁹² *Ayiin*, p. 15. Although he appears to have a much modified view about it in his later writings, see Abrahamian, 'Integrative Nationalist', p. 293, endnote 41.

⁹³ Mottahedeh, pp. 103–104.

⁹⁴ *Ayiin*, p. 67. On his admiration of Islamic legal system, p. 77.

⁹⁵ Kasravi's *Sufism*. See translation in Ridgeon, p. 82.

⁹⁶ See Tavakoli Targhi. For a brief description of Kasravi's views on religion see Ridgeon, pp. 46–48.

Despite his attacks on Shi'ism and Islam, Kasravi continued to adhere to many aspects shared by Abrahamic religions as manifest in his repeated profession of belief in a single creator and ruler of the universe or resurrection after death.⁹⁷ In his first polemical piece, Kasravi plainly states, 'we are well aware of the heinous acts committed in the name of religion in the past and despite it all consider religion a must for the world and abstain from irreligion'.⁹⁸ He elaborates further on his idea of what the basis of religion ought and ought not to be:

We despise a religion that separates humans from one another and designates supremacy of one group over another. We despise a religion that causes strife and bloodshed. We are speaking of that religion [in] which humans are all equals and brothers and no one would seek supremacy over another.⁹⁹

As Jazayeri states, Kasravi's writings on religion both in volume and in the amount of detail absorbed more of his time and energy than those on any other subject.¹⁰⁰ In fact, Kasravi was rather consumed by propagation of his own ideology, which despite his catalogue of objections still seems to be mostly predicated on an 'original' Islam adjusted to critical reason—or what was in Kasravi's view within its bounds. Over all, it is as though Kasravi would prefer a return to a pre-industrial world, albeit one that is—in light of his views articulated in later writings—post-Enlightenment:

The world, until two or three centuries before this was in a tranquil state, and even if there were certain deficiencies, many of them have been eliminated in the course of these centuries... Why not return to that previous state?¹⁰¹

Clearly Kasravi is lamenting the loss of the old organic, local, hierarchical community (*Gemeinschaft*) and its replacement with the new atomized, individualistic society (*Gesellschaft*), which Europe represents and which 'Europeanism' promises.

Significantly, Kasravi's rejection of Europeanism in *Ethos* is based on a goal that he believes is shared by all humans everywhere: 'the singular wish of all [people is]... for peace of mind'.¹⁰² Kasravi, ever vigilant against superstition, emphasizes that he is specifically using the term 'peace of mind' (*āsāyish*) with its connotations of contentment and happiness, instead of the generic Persian word regularly used to convey 'happiness in life'.¹⁰³ 'Promoters of Europe', he adds elsewhere, always claim that in Europe, unlike the 'East', time is 'prized'. To him this itself is one of the main causes for the hardships of today's life: 'another occasion when time is also prized is the battlefield... where a moment's neglect may result in obliteration', he adds, implicitly condemning European capitalism.¹⁰⁴ Kasravi does believe that time is valuable, but only when at the service of a mind that is at peace.

⁹⁷ Kasravi blames the exasperation of people in Europe with religion on the 'black deeds of priests' who for centuries, he claims, 'used religion to prevail upon them and did not hesitate in any inhumane behavior', Kasravi, *Ayiin*, pp. 48–49.

⁹⁸ *Ayiin*, p. 10.

⁹⁹ *Ayiin*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁰ According to him poetry was second. Jazayeri, p. 42.

¹⁰¹ Jazayeri, p. 13.

¹⁰² *Ayiin*, p. 5.

¹⁰³ The phrase commonly used is *khushbakhti*, literally: good fortune, fortunate, or serendipity; also translated as felicity.

¹⁰⁴ Kasravi, *Ayiin*, p. 21.

Kasravi also takes explicit issue with European superiority, or as he sees it, the appearance of it, vis-à-vis ‘us’, or the people of the east. He believes that the European feeling of superiority is entirely based on what he admits are extraordinary advances made in science and technology over the previous two or three centuries. To explain why such advancement is contemptible Kasravi—perhaps influenced by Rousseau—offers a second a priori assumption about human nature: that each human being faces two struggles (*nabard*) in life: one against nature and the other against fellow humans. According to Kasravi, all technological advances made by Europeans are useful solely for the purpose of the human struggle against nature; they are detrimental to human-to-human relations and are useless in lessening the chances of struggle amongst humans themselves. Writing in the early 1930s, Kasravi argues that, in fact, European technological inventions have had catastrophic effects on relations *between* people and promise even more disasters and destruction to come.¹⁰⁵ But unlike Ale Ahmad, who was clearly influenced by Kasravi, the latter does not pathologize Europe or its advocates.¹⁰⁶ His aim is not, as he puts it, to find fault with Europe gratuitously but rather to track down the causes for Europe’s contemporary deleterious condition ‘in order to awaken the Easterners’, and that ‘perhaps Europe also could benefit from these well-meant (*dilsūzānih*) quibbles’.¹⁰⁷

Despite any of this, if Kasravi is cited in scholarly works at all, he is mostly identified as a ‘modernist reformer’ or a ‘modernist thinker’.¹⁰⁸ Lloyd Ridgeon, whose substantial study of Kasravi concentrates on his criticisms of Sufi Islam, argues Kasravi’s attitude towards Sufism represents the ‘reaction of an Iranian modernist to Iran’s mystical heritage’.¹⁰⁹ Farzin Vahdat, who has analysed Kasravi’s thought as relating to discourses on modernity, claims that Kasravi’s ideas can be considered an attempt at adaptation to modernity in the Iranian socio-political discourses of the earlier part of the twentieth century. Vahdat draws on German critical thought that sees the ideas of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘universality’ as two ‘pillars’ of the modern world and argues that Kasravi’s lopsided emphasis on disembodied subjectivity (what others might call his chauvinistic nationalism) allowed little space for the creation of intersubjectivity which is necessary for the emergence of the rights of citizenship for Iranians in a civil society. But Kasravi, ‘the most controversial of all modern Iranian intellectuals’, was shot and stabbed in a courtroom in Tehran in 1946 not because of his criticisms of Sufism, nor because his ideas would eventually disallow intersubjectivity. Kasravi was killed because of his *sine qua non* criticism of Islam and Shi’ism.¹¹⁰ However one might define ‘modernity’ and Kasravi’s relationship to it, he did indeed pose a

¹⁰⁵ *Ayiin*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰⁶ Regarding Ahmad Fardid see Ali Mirsepassi, *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment: Philosophies of Hope and Despair* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ *Ayiin*, p. 14. Neither does Ale Ahmad condemn modern technology and the machine indiscriminately but rather loathes the nihilistic nature of the machine, which he sees as an imposition of the West: ‘Ale Ahmad argues that Iran must Islamicize the machine by rooting it in Iranian culture’. Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 8, above.

¹⁰⁹ Ridgeon, p. 9, 51.

¹¹⁰ The questions raised by Mahmoud Delfani’s article ‘Ahmad kasravi: az dīn sitīzī tā dīn āvari’, posted on the 66th anniversary of Kasravi’s death, regarding possible other ‘reasons’ (*dalā’il*) for Kasravi’s murder put in further relief the need for grappling with the actual content of Kasravi’s writings and his criticisms of Shi’ism and Islam, on which promulgation of Pakdini (his new creed) was predicated—not vice-versa—as Delfani suggests. *BBC.co.uk, Persian*, March 27, 2012, (accessed August 17, 2013), http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/03/120313_144_kasravi_religion_delfani.shtml.

‘rationalist threat from within the faith’, which makes it difficult not to see him as something that is hardly ever even conceded: Kasravi was an *Islamic* reformer.¹¹¹

Secular intellectuals’ mechanical condemnation of Kasravi’s book burning rituals is symptomatic of the same inability or unwillingness to accurately acknowledge—let alone substantively engage with—his calls for reform.¹¹² Kasravi’s symbolic burning of books was not inquisitorial but an affected gesture of protest and propelled by what he saw as the accretion of an ossified ‘high culture’, wholly beholden to superstition and mysticism, which was, in turn, nurtured and perpetuated by the institutions of Shi’ism.¹¹³ The absence of discussions about Kasravi as an ‘Islamic’ reformer or even raising the subject suggests that doing so, not least for apparently secular modern scholars, would be tantamount to what Amanat has described as ‘betraying the Shi’i-based national solidarity’, or to compromising the tacitly accepted essential truth of Shi’ism and Islam.¹¹⁴

At least since Kasravi, Shi’i reformists in Iran, whether Shariati, Soroush, or the philosopher Mohsen Kadivar, go no further in their attempt at reforming of Shi’ism than to offer compelling new readings of the sources or the tradition; readings that are deemed more compatible with the contemporary world, or indeed potentially responsive to any period. Kasravi’s own claim that his *khirad*- or reason-based ideology (*pāk dīnī* or pure religion), which he was actively propagating, was a ‘continuation of Islam’ is perhaps unique in transcending a recast hermeneutics: reform for Kasravi seemed to require more than mere ‘rereading’ of the sources, which especially in the case of Shi’ism he saw as grossly inadequate.¹¹⁵ Considering Kasravi’s background and education, not to see him as a Shi’i reformist would be to define reform strictly in accordance with the criteria of Shi’i orthodoxy—a measure according to which any number of other reformers (e.g. Shariat-Sangalaji, or Soroush) have ultimately had as much success as Kasravi.¹¹⁶

Kasravi’s tumultuous life and fate, in Rahnema’s words, are indicative of ‘the extent and limitations of an open attack on certain rituals and practices, the clergy and ultimately certain fundamentals of the faith’.¹¹⁷ However, it is also arguable that the extent of success of other, more agile, circumspect, and respectful approaches have not been much greater. Since his murder, aside from occasional veiled praise for his

¹¹¹ Rahnema, p. 6. Only Behdad seems to have matter-of-factly characterised Kasravi’s endeavour as a ‘call for an Islamic reformation’. Behdad, p. 71.

¹¹² For example in Ghanoonparvar’s ‘Pāk dīnī’.

¹¹³ Kasravi objected to and held as suspect the moral teachings of medieval didactic literature, a corollary of Islamic mysticism, see Kasravi, ‘*Duwlāt bi mā*’, esp. pp. 2–6. For Kasravi’s objections to mysticism (Sufism) see Ridgeon, pp. 51–57. Kasravi’s criticism of Persian poetry was continuous with his disdain for Islamic mysticism, reflecting, indeed, the intimate links that existed between them. Regarding the affinities between the latter and Shi’ism, Babayan writes, ‘our knowledge of the relationship between sufism and Alid loyalty . . . continues to be vague and ahistorical’. See (i) preface to Kathryn Babayan’s, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2003), p. 11; (ii) Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: the Inner Path of Islam* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), pp. 22–27; (iii) Maria Massi Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi’ite Identity in Early Islam* (SUNY Press, Albany, NY 2007), pp. 25–31.

¹¹⁴ Amanat, p. 54.

¹¹⁵ After fleeing to exile, former Islamic Republic president, Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr writes of the generalisation of the Imamate as the participation of each man and woman in government of the monistic (*tawhīdī*) society. See Arjomand ‘Ideological Revolution’, pp. 178, 204, endnote 29.

¹¹⁶ For example, see Shariat-Sangalaji, *Kilid-i fahm-i qur’an: bi inzimam-i barahin-i qur’an*, pp. 9–21, http://www.4shared.com/office/dWRJdxR-_____-_____-__1323_.html.

¹¹⁷ Rahnema, p. 10.

'courage', or regrets about his stubbornness, anger, and other mistakes, modern scholars with a secular outlook have avoided engaging challenges posed by Kasravi's polemics against Islam. Iranian socialists and leftist intellectuals had already made a conscious decision, even in the period before Reza Shah's abdication in 1941, not to antagonize the devout with anti-religious propaganda.¹¹⁸ This dissimulation regarding issues associated with Islam continued into the 1980s with disastrous results for the left.¹¹⁹ Many Iranian specialists living outside Iran in the decades since the Islamic Revolution have avoided highlighting issues that in their view might be conducive to a more aggressive foreign policy towards Iran or to a more adverse treatment of minority Muslim communities in their host countries.¹²⁰

Leaving aside the question of the effectiveness of such tropism in the 35 years since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the reticence of secular academics about Shi'ism or Islam could only rest on a dyadic world view that resists development. Since the 1980s, along with the debates on the role of ideology in conditioning cultural values and priorities in post-Foucauldian academic discourse, specialists on Islam and Iran have been more conscious of the means of knowledge production with respect to the non-European 'other'. But resistance to hegemony through manipulation of the modes of knowledge formation seems to have been predicated on just the sort of studied silence that has greeted Kasravi's *Shi'igari*.¹²¹ It would be difficult to imagine Anglo-American leftist intellectuals reacting similarly, for instance, towards the writings of the historian E.P. Thompson and his condemnation of the 'barbaric and evil superstitions' of the Christian church.¹²² As Mehrzad Boroujerdi points out, Iranian intellectuals' sustained ambivalence towards the West has continued to retain some element of nostalgia that has resisted any complete break with the past or embrace of modernity.¹²³ Even those who praise Kasravi as a historian, or commend his contributions to the Persian language, or his fight against superstition have stayed clear of his *Shi'igari* and *Dar Pīramun-i Islam*. As though in justification for this avoidance, when Kasravi is mentioned almost invariably something of his failures and shortcomings follows, even if only in passing: be it his unsuccessful attempt at unifying Iran's diverse sects or tribes,¹²⁴ his 'naive attitude toward the shaping of the religio-political dissent',¹²⁵ his distortion of 'the facts' in his writing of history,¹²⁶ his 'failure' in literary criticism and

¹¹⁸ Abrahamian, *Modern Iran*, p. 108.

¹¹⁹ For the devastating effect Iranian lefts' various strategies see Chapter 5, 'The tragedy of the Iranian Left' in Ali Miersepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 159–179.

¹²⁰ Analogous to issues discussed in (i) essays in Shireen T. Hunter and Huma Malike (eds.), *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam* (Westport: Praeger, 2005); (ii) Sean Yom's review of the same book in *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, Winter/Spring (2006), p. 167.

¹²¹ See Julian Go (ed.) *Postcolonial Sociology (Political Power and Social Theory)* (Bingley: Emerald Group, 2013), pp. 231–262.

¹²² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 98.

¹²³ If so, then the ambivalence must have in turn helped enhance what Dabashi refers to as Iran's 'anticolonial modernity', Dabashi, *Shi'ism*, p. 209. Also, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 'The Ambivalent Modernity of Iranian Intellectuals', in *Intellectual Trends*, in *Twentieth-Century Iran: A Critical Survey*, ed. Negin Nabavi (2003), pp. 11–23.

¹²⁴ Abrahamian, 'Integrative Nationalist', pp. 279, 290.

¹²⁵ Amanat, p. 51.

¹²⁶ Evan Siegel, 'Distortions in Kasravi's History of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution', (accessed August 17, 2013), <http://iran.qlineorientalist.com/Articles/KasraviDistortions/KasraviDistortions.html>.

attempts at purifying the Persian language,¹²⁷ and of course, his book-burning rituals.

Where are the seeds of the modern state with a majority-Muslim population? In Kasravi, paradoxically, we find articulated the temptation of an Islamic rationalization of the state. This should not surprise us if we observe how traces of Kasravi find their afterlife in the clerical and anti-western intellectuals of the Pahlavi era, among those who would condemn him for his anti-Islamic vitriol. But Kasravi's larger project is repressed, suppressed, forgotten, not least by later generations of postcolonial scholars. The apparent absence of viable paradigms for channeling the critical energies unleashed by contemporary events in the Middle East and North Africa have brought into sharper focus recent scholarship in fields related to these regions and to Islam: their adequacy, or indeed their relevance. In stark contrast to the mid-twentieth-century discourse of Iranian clerics and lay-religious intellectuals, no synthesis of Kasravi's writings on Islam within the wider secular intellectual discourse has been possible. The vacuum created by the absence of such scholarship has contributed to what can be seen as a fortification of Shi'ism and Shi'i positions against any approach to reform from within or without the faith. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences, largely stymied by their preoccupation with a critical stance towards colonial modernity, could consider emulating the Islamic scholars and partisans of Shi'ism and engage the incendiary, inverted, and hidden impulse of Kasravi's *Shi'igari*.

¹²⁷ Iraj Parsinejad, *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran, 1866-1951* (Bethesda: Ibex, 2003), pp. 187–195.