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Continuity and Change during the Saddle Period: The Case of ʿirfān in Modern Persian Literature

Geçiş Döneminde Devamlılık ve Değişim: Modern İran Edebiyatında İrfan Örneği

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The concept of *Sattlezeit* was coined by Koselleck to identify a period of change and transformation in Europe beginning from the middle of eighteenth century in which the meaning of old concepts was changing to fit the conditions of a modern world and to account for the new relationship humans were developing with nature, history, and time.[1] Koselleck focuses his analysis on concepts used in political discourse, specifically what he calls "basic concepts" without which communication in the realm of politics is not possible. Because they index newly emerged complex social and political realities, these concepts are highly complex, ambiguous, and contested.[2]

I personally do not find Koselleck's theoretical framework helpful in my work, which pri-

1 See Reinhart Koselleck, "Introduction and Prefaces to the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: (Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany)", *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, trans. Michaela Richter, 1(2011): 9, https://doi.org/10.3167/choc.2011.060102.

2 There have been some more recent attempts to analyze the process of modernization through this lens in other (non-European) social contexts. Scholars like Khuri-Makdisi and Zemmin, for example, have explored the applicability and helpfulness of this framework in the Arab Middle East. Florian Zemmin, *Modernity in Islamic Tradition: The Concept of 'Society' in the Journal al-Manar* (Cairo, 1898-1940) (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2018) and Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, "He Conceptualization of the Social in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Arabic Thought and Language," in *A Global Conceptual History of Asia, 1860-1940*, ed. Hagen Schulz-Forberg (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).

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marily focuses on religious (and not political) concepts in Persian discourse. I especially take issue with how Koselleck's analysis tends to emphasize change and disruption over continuity and persistence when it comes to the history of the so-called "basic concepts". As Motzkin reminds us, a historian's conceptualization of a transitional or threshold period is dependent upon a perceived *continuity* as well as *discontinuity*.[3] In the case of Koselleck, *Settelzeit* is conceptualized primarily as discontinuous with what comes before it and continues with what comes after. Hence Koselleck's emphasis on basic concepts as ones that "facing backwards … pointed to social and political realities no longer intelligible to us without critical commentary."[4] The saddle period, therefore, functions as a means by which "modernity itself asserts its own peculiarity as a radically new era, directed toward the future and breaking with tradition."[5] Even if we accepted that disruption and radical transformation are the appropriate concepts through which one is to analyze the emergence of the modern practice of politics as a matter of secular public debate and its basic concepts, we cannot automatically assume that other realms of discourse went through a similar pattern of transformation. In fact, if the major political revolutions of the era are any indication (think the Young Turk Revolution or the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, for example), the realm of politics seems to have been particularly susceptible to disruption and radical change, something that is not true about other realms of human thought and action to this extent. In the realm of religion, for example, although certain individuals and small groups of elite intellectuals might have privately held radically new ideas, they often found the public much less receptive to radical change in this area. Therefore, and precisely because the disruption of the status quo politics was the primary goal for many modernizing intellectuals and activists of the time, they intentionally shied away from pushing for radical religious reform.[6] Whatever radical ideas about religion and its future they entertained in private settings, strong voices of modernization in Persia such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1987) and Mīrzā Malkum Khān (d. 1908) spoke of religious reform in more modest and cautious terms in public.[7] Therefore, a theoretical framework in the history of concepts that puts a premium on change and disruption at the expense of continuity would be ill suited for the study of religion and religious concepts.

Having said so, I do believe that there can be benefits to using the category of Saddle Period as a heuristic tool. There is no question that significant changes were happening across Middle Eastern societies during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries due to their encounter with various aspect

3 See Gabriel Motzkin, "On the Notion of Historical (DIS) Continuity: Reinhart Koselleck's Construction of the Sattelzeit," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1, 2 (2005): 145–58.

4 Koselleck, "Introduction and Prefaces," 9.

5 Zemmin, *Modernity in Islamic Tradition, 40.*

6 The Bābī movement in Iran is a perfect example. Had it succeeded in spreading in Iran and becoming the dominant religion of its citizen, we were then talking about a major socio-cultural disruption that equaled the political upheavals of the time. Such a major change in the religious landscape of Iran would have been certainly traceable in key religious concepts of the time.

7 For example, al-Afghānī's evaluation of religion and its role in human civilization are much more negative in his correspondence with his European counterparts compared to his publicly accessible writings and lectures for Muslim audience. As for Malkum Khān, we know he was personally of an Armenian background and, most likely, did not have endearing views of Islam but he eschewed such negative views in favor of his political reform project. For more on al-Afghānī see Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Dīn "al-Afghānī": A Political Biography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). On Malkum Khān see Hamid Algar, Mīrzā Malkum Khān; a Study in the History of Iranian Modernism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).*

of European modernity. Since language is inherently social, tracing the changes in how concepts and categories gradually change, fall out of favor, or emerge anew is an effective lens though which scholars can analyze such change. Given the state of research in the context of Iran, which is well behind studies done in the context of Europe as well as the Ottoman Empire, utilizing this concept can be helpful in two ways. First, it serves as a reminder for us to be vigilant about the fluid nature of language, especially when it comes to foundational concepts, during this period and look for how the semantic field changes in response to societal developments (or vice versa). Second, it can be helpful in organizing and connecting otherwise disparate research efforts concentrated on various geographical contexts. In the case of Iran, I would argue that its encounter with European modernity begins to show its discursive and conceptual effects a few decades later than its neighbors to the east (the Mughals) and the west (the Ottomans) mainly due to its buffered geographical situation vis-à-vis Europe (with the notable exception of Russia).[8] We know, for example, that many Iranian intellectuals and political activists of the late nineteenth century frequented Istanbul, the cosmopolis of the Middle East and the meeting place of the "West" and the "East." They were keenly aware of the intense debates among their Arab and Turkish counterparts regarding reform and modernization.[9] I would hypothesize, therefore, that the semantic shifts that we observe in key concepts in Persian during this period were influenced or inspired in important ways by similar but earlier shifts in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. The Saddle Period, as a heuristic organizing framework, can facilitate a conversation between historians of Iranian modernity and their Ottomanist counterparts to test such a hypothesis and much more. It can help us understand the extent to which debates about modernity and progress in Iran were inflected through earlier similar discourses in Istanbul and Cairo.

In what follows, then, I will focus on the concept of *ʿirfān* and its semantic transformation during this period. To do so, I will heavily rely on the framework I developed in my recent monograph, *'Mysticism' in Iran*. There, I discuss how the concept of *ʿirfān*, despite its humble and marginal pre-modern Islamic and Persian roots, gained a new meaning in the late Safavid period as an alternative to the traditional concept of *taṣavvuf*. I analyze this semantic shift in detail as a result of larger tectonic shifts in the religious and political landscape of Safavid Iran, most importantly the emergence of a new class of political and religious elite and the gradual conversion of the population to Twelver Shiʿism.[10] The last chapter of *'Mysticism' in Iran* touches upon another seismic semantic shift in the meaning of *ʿirfān* during the first half of the twentieth century in the wake of the Iranian encounter with Western modernity. In this

8 Therefore, I find myself in general agreement with Zemmin's suggestion that the historical span of the Middle Eastern Saddle Period needs to be adjusted to 1860—1940, I believe the beginning in the case of Iran might even have to be pushed to 1880. See Florian Zemmin, "The Janus Face of Kātib Çelebi: Reflecting on the Ottoman Saddle Period," *Turcica* 50 (2019): 331–32, https://doi.org/10.2143/TURC.50.0.3286579.

9 For example, see Thierry Zarcone and F. Zarinebaf, *Les iraniens d'Istanbul, Varia Turcica 24 (Paris: Institut français de recherches en Iran, 1993).*

10 See Ata Anzali, *"Mysticism" in Iran The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 24–156. For more on the emergence of the new clerical class see Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For more on the conversion of Persia to Twelver Shiʿism see Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

essay, I would like to expand my discussion of the latter transformation and offer some preliminary analysis that can hopefully serve as a demonstration of how useful tracing the history of concepts can be for illuminating the impact of the Great Western Transmutation in creating a modern epistemic regime in Iran.[11] While scholars of modern Iran have produced many valuable studies in recent decades that deal with intellectual, social, and political history of this region, there are relatively few studies that offer insight about the historical development of key Persian concepts as a register for analyzing broader historical change.[12]

Since an awareness of the semantic field of *ʿirfān* before the Saddle Period is indispensable for a full understanding the changes that occurred during the Saddle Period, I will first offer a summary of how the concept of *ʿirfān* was invented during the late Safavid era in Persian discourse. The readers who are already familiar with my previous work will find most of the material in this (pre- Saddle Period) section familiar. A significant exception is the results of my recent research on the Persian lexicographical tradition, which highlights the previously unrecognized but important role Persianate elite cultures of South Asia played in making the concept of *ʿirfān* more visible.

I. *ʿIrfān* Before the Saddle Period

It is not an exaggeration to say that the most important single geopolitical concern that shaped the Safavid polity throughout the sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries was the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry. From the very beginning, religion was deeply entangled in this rivalry as the Safavids chose to legitimize their rule by portraying themselves as defenders of a fledgling Twelver polity, the first and the only of its kind, against the Sunni (Ottoman and Uzbek) threat. The oppositional nature of the Safavid political discourse had deep and lasting impacts, forcing a deeper epistemic reckoning. With the support of the Safavid Court, there emerged a new class of Shiʿi ʿulama who, having gained access to an unprecedented amount of resources, began a concerted effort not only to promote Twelver Shiʿism among the populace but also to "emancipate" it from the hegemony of Sunni discourse.[13] As such, they began lay-

11 The term "The Great Western Transmutation" is borrowed from Marshall Hodgson. See Marshall G. S Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, I-II-III, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).*

12 Some notable exceptions can be found in the works of Mohammad Tavakkoli-Targhi and ʿAbd al-Hādī Ḥā'irī's wherein important concepts such as *millat, mashrūtah, and istibdād and their changing meaning during the crucial period of the Constitutional Revolution is examined. See Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, The Formation of Two Revolutionary Discourses in Modern Iran: The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909 and the Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1988 and Idem, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography, (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Also see ʿAbd al-Hādī Ḥā'irī, "Sukhanī pīrāmūn-i vāzhah-yi istibdād* dar adabiyyāt-i inqilāb-i mashrūṭiyyat-i īrān", *Irān va jahān-i islām: Pazhūhish-hā-yi tārīkhī pīrāmūn-i chihrah-ha, andīshah-ha, wa junbish-ha* (Mashhad: Intishārāt-i āstān-i quds-i raḍavī, 1368/1988), 223–31 and Idem, "Sukhanī pīrāmūn-i vāzhah-yi m*ashrūtah*", in *Irān va jahān-i islām*, 212–22. Note that these studies, while valuable and insightful, focus exclusively on key political concepts and, at the same time, their authors seem to be completely unaware or uninterested in doing conceptual history as framed by Koselleck.

13 There is a disagreement among scholars about the extent to which the "importation" of Twelver ʿulama from Lebanon to Safavid Iran was instrumental in establishing the clerical class. See Devin J. Stewart, "Notes on the Migration of ʿĀmilī Scholars to Safavid Iran", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies 55, 2 (1996): 81–103; Andrew J. Newman, "The Myth of the Clerical Migration to Safawid Iran: Arab Shiite Opposition to ʿAlī al-Karakī and Safawid Shiism", Die Welt Des Islams, New Series, 33, 1 (1993): 66–112; Mahdi Farhani Monfared, Muhājarat-i ʿulamā-yi shīʿa az jabal ʿāmil bih īrān dar ʿaṣr-i ṣafavī (Tehran: Amīr kabīr, 1377/1998). Nevertheless, there is no question that, in scale and scope, the Twelver clerical class in Safavid Iran has no predecessors in Shiʿi history. For more on the internal dynamics of this class see*

ing the foundation of a new epistemic regime that set the limits and conditions of producing authentic religious knowledge. By the end of the seventeenth century, when the majority of Iranians of the Safavid heartland had converted to the new state religion, Twelver Shiʿism was transformed from a minority sect deeply dependent on largely non-supportive networks of power to an imperial religion with ample resources to shape social reality on its own terms.

It is in this context that one needs to understand the intense campaign orchestrated against Sufism (and philosophy) by some of the influential ʿulama during the second half of the seventeenth century. As a result of their efforts and the tacit support of the Safavid court the term "Sufi", which was worn as a badge of honor in the early seventeenth century especially as a sign of proximity to the royal family, had turned into a highly stigmatized term as a symbol of connection to Sunni "infidels". Simultaneously, many Sufi networks, like the Naqshbandīs and the Qādirīs, either had to cease their operations in Safavid territories or move their centers to the margins of the realm or outside it. Others, such as the various Kubravī branches chose to adopt the framework of Safavid Shiʿism, which meant less emphasis on visible signifiers of traditional Sufi piety and more emphasis on the Shiʿi nature of their worldview. Yet, there were many among the ʿulama themselves who did not want to throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. While they distanced themselves from Sufism as a social institution, they did not see the Sufi worldview as inextricably entangled with Sunnism. In fact, as followers of the Twelve Imams they found themselves deeply sympathetic toward important aspects of the Sufi worldview. Thus, they engaged in a major effort to domesticate central Sufi ideas and ideals in terms of what they considered to constitute an authentic Shiʿi discourse, that is, one that was based on the sayings and teachings of the Imams.

It is only apt that the term *ʿirfān*, from the Arabic root *ʿa-r-f* meaning 'to know', became the semantic signifier of this effort. The debate about prominent and controversial Sufi figures such as Ḥallāj and Bāyazīd and ideas like *vaḥdat-i vujūd* was essentially a disagreement about what constituted a valid source of religious knowledge. The Sufi-minded ʿulama had a more expansive view in which rational/philosophical discourse and individual mystical intuitions qualified as valid sources of knowledge as long as, in their interpretation, they did not contradict the teachings of the Imams. In contrast, the anti-Sufi ones insisted on much narrower standards, considering a more literal understanding of the sayings of the Imams in a more limited number of texts they considered canonical as the only legitimate sources of knowledge.

The term *ʿirfān*, often in the form of its active participle *ʿārif*, was already in use in Sufi discourse to refer to a mystic who has achieved some of the highest ranks of gnosis.[14] The Safavid epistemic shift, however, meant that *ʿārif* and *ʿirfān* were not understood as semantically subsumed under Sufism but as an alternative. The original engineers of this semantic change were a few Sufi-minded Shiʿa scholars who hailed from the Fars region in Iran such as Shāh Muḥammad Dārābī (d. 1718) and Sayyid Quṭb al-Dīn Nayrīzī (d. 1760). The former, a well-respected madrasa teacher in Shiraz who was known for his poetry in Persianate literary circles of India

Said Amir Arjomand, "The Clerical Estate and the Emergence of a Shiʿite Hierocracy in Safavid Iran: A Study in Historical Sociology", Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 28, 2 (1985): 169–219.

14 See Anzali, *"Mysticism" in Iran, 10–16.*

(penname *ʿārif*), often coupled the terms *ʿirfān* and *taṣavvuf* together in his works as if they were semantically interchangeable.[15] The latter, who was the master of the Dhahabī Sufi network *and* a prominent madrasa teacher, went a step further and –without any sense of irony– vehemently rejected any association with Sufism, calling the people who equate his mode of piety with Sufism foolish, stupid, and ignorant! He blamed the collapse of Safavid dynasty on such misguided attacks on real *ʿurafā* and ahl *al-faqr*, portraying himself a "servant of Shiʿa *ʿārif*s."[16] For both Dārābī and Nayrīzī as well as many other Sufi-minded scholars, ʿirfān provided the semantic cover to continue their exploration of the spiritual world without being accused of sympathy for the infidel Sunnis and the degenerate and/or heretical dervishes and Sufis.

Even though the Safavid dynasty came to an end in 1722, the religious order that it established proved resilient for the most part. During the next century, therefore, *ʿirfān* in this new meaning –defined in contrast to *taṣavvuf*– gained further footing in elite Shiʿi circles who were sympathetic to esoteric readings. By the end the eighteenth century, the study of *ʿirfān* gradually had become institutionalized within a small circle of mystically minded Shiʿi scholars (who often had poetic sensibilities as well) as they began to speak of *ʿirfān* as a "discipline of knowledge". A curriculum was developed, in which the bulk of attention went to the writings of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and his followers. The mystical poetic tradition represented by Rūmī (d. 1273) and Hāfez (d. 1390), while not consistently part of the curriculum, was also a center of attention. For example, the pre-eminent Twelver religious scholar and polymath Mullā Mahdī Narāqī (d. 1795) classified *ʿirfān* among the four "rational and esoteric" disciplines of knowledge alongside *ḥikma, ishrāq,* and *kalām*.[17] His son, Mullā Aḥmad (d. 1829), who inherited many of his father's traits, used the phrase *ahl-i ʿirfān* to refer to past Sufi figures as well as the mystically minded Shiʿi scholars as a collective.[18] He also wrote the immensely popular work of poetry *Mathnavī Tāqdīs*, deliberately mimicking the structure and style of Rūmī's *Mathnavī*, which was subsequently published numerous times across the Persian speaking world of Indo-Persia.[19]

A survey of lexicographical literature from seventeenth century to nineteenth century confirms this semantic transformation. While

15 See, for example: Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Dārābī, "Miʾrāj al-Kamāl" (n.d.), fols. 113–125, Kitābkhānah-yi āstān-i quds raḍavī. and Idem., *Laṭīfah-yi ghaybī (Shiraz: Kitābkhānah-yi aḥmadī, 1978), 108–9.*

16 See, for example Abū al-Qāsim Amīn al-Sharīʿa Khuyī and Sayyīd Quṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad Nayrīzī, *Mīzān al-ṣavāb dar sharḥ-i faṣl al-khitāb, ed. Muḥammad Khvājavī, (Tehran: Maulā, 2004), III: 1198 and 1318. For a detailed analysis see Anzali, "Mysticism" in Iran, 143–56. Similarly, almost a century later Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1826), the founder of shaykhī school reminds his reader that the difference between a Sufi and an ʿārif is that the later, in contrast to the former, makes sure that there is no contradiction whatsoever between his beliefs and practices and the example of the Infallible Imams. mīlak-la ʿimāvaJ ,īʾāsḥA nīdibĀʿ-la nyaZ .b damḥA .523 :IIIV ,(9002/0341 rīdahG-la :arṣaB-la) ,XI-I -per sgnihcaet sih ecnis elbaton si noitisop sʿīʾāsḥA ni ygoloeht iʿihS ni tnempoleved tnacifingis a tneser saw sihT .ygolometsipe ifuS gnitacitsemod fo smret noitisiuqca tcerid ro ,fhsak no sisahpme sih ot eud citnehtua tsom eht sa ,smamI eht morf egdelwonk fo -hcaet sih ,eromrehtruF .egdelwonk suoigiler fo mrof eht fo ecnegreme eht rof noitadnuof eht emoceb sgni .noigiler īʾāhaB eht dna tnemevom cinaissem ībāB era setangoc sti dna "ifuS" mret eht ,sesac htob nI dna ,ʾāfaruʿ ,ʾāyīlua ekil smret ,daetsnI .desu ylerar .yteip fo sepyt laedi sa desu era ʾāmakuḥ*

17 See Anzali, *"Mysticism" in Iran, 176.*

18 Ibid., 181.

19 For more on this see ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Zarrīnkūb, *Dunbālah-yi justijū dar taṣavvuf-i īrān, (Tehran: Amīr kabīr, 1362/1983), 314. For a detailed comparison with Rūmī's Mathnavī see Riḍā Bābāʾī, "Maulā-yi narāq va mathnavī tāqdīs," Aiynah-yi pazhūhish, 73 (1381/2002): 73–97.*

we don't know of any Persian dictionaries that were composed during this time in Iran, there are a few Arabic-Persian lexicons that are mentioned in bibliographical sources.[20] The latest among them is *Tarjumān al-luqha*, an Arabic-Persian dictionary composed by Muḥammad-Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad-Shafīʿ Qazvīnī in 1705 as a translation of *Qāmūs al-muḥiṭ* under the patronage of Shāh Sulṭan Ḥusayn. The root *ʿa-r-f* is extensively covered in this dictionary and, while it mentions *ʿirfān* as a verbal noun from this root, it does not give us any insights about its meaning.[21]

The situation was dramatically different in India, where the rich and welcoming courts and a cultured Muslim elite attracted both native and immigrant scholars. Many Arabic-Persian and Persian dictionaries were compiled during this time in India, therefore. A survey of these dictionaries reveals that, in general, the mystical meaning of terms like *ʿārif* and *ʿirfān* was much more noticed in the cultural context of India compared to Arab, Turkish, and Persian contexts. To begin with, *Muʾayyid al-fuḍalāʾ* (comp. 925/1519) by Muḥammad Lād Dihlavī does not have a separate entry for *ʿirfān* but defines *ʿārif as* "a discerning and God-knowing man."[22] A century later, *Muntakhab al-lughāt-i shāh jahānī* compiled in 1636-37 defines *ʿārif* simply as "knower and patient" *(shanāsandah va shakībā*) and *ʿirfān* as "knowing" (*shanākhtan*).[23] As we move to dictionaries complied later during the nineteenth century, it is clear that *ʿirfān* as a mystical term has gained more prominence within South Asian Persianate literary circles. For example, *Ghīyath al-lughāt*, first printed in 1826, separates two major meanings for *ʿirfān* under its entry on *maʿrifa*. First, ʿirfān as "knowledge" and "discernment" in general; second, *ʿirfān* as "knowledge of God."[24] Similarly, the *Ānandrāj* dictionary, complied in 1888-89, dedicates a separate entry for *ʿirfān* in which the author differentiates between the general meaning of the term as "knowledge" and "discernment" and its more specialized use as "knowledge of God." More importantly, he adds that the term is often used in the latter sense.[25] Additionally, two major Persian-English dictionaries composed during the nineteenth century include the term *ahl-i ʿirfān* or "folks of ʿirfān" under their entries on *ʿirfān*, a clear literary recognition of an "imagined community" of scholars who coalesced around this term.[26]

20 John Perry, "Arabic-Persian Dictionaries," in *Encyclopædia Iranica, accessed May 24, 2021, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/dictionaries#pt2.*

21 Muḥammad-Yaḥyā Qazvīnī, "ʿarafa", in *Tarjumān al-luqha, 1117/1705, Kitāb-khānah, mūzih, va markaz-i asnād-i majlis-i shūrā-yi islāmī, https://dlib.ical.ir/faces/search/bibliographic/biblioFullView.jspx?_afPfm=-xxi1akedw. The same is true of another translation produced in India at 1736-37 by Maulavī Muḥammad Ḥabīb-Allāh Iṣfahānī (Qābūs*) for the Mughal King Muḥammad Shāh (d. 1748).

22 Muḥammad Lād Dihlavī, "ʿārif", in *Muʾayyid al-fuḍalāʾ (Kānpūr: Navalkishor, 1899), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101076015658. This dictionary was written under the heavy influence of Sharaf-nāmah-yi ibrāhīmī (comp. 878/1473). See Ibrāhīm Qavām Fārūqī, "'ārif", in Sharaf-nāmah-yi manyarī yā farhang-i ibrāhīmī, ed. Ḥakīmah Dabīrān (Tehran: Pazhūhishgāh-i ʿulūm-i insānī va muṭāliʿāt-i farhangī, 1385/2006).*

23 At the same time, neither the influential *Burhān-i qāṭiʿ (composed 1651) nor the comprehensive Haft qulzum (composed 1813-14) include an entry for ʿirfān or ʿārif.*

24 See Ghīyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad Rāmpūrī, "Maʿrifa", in *Ghīyāth al-lughāt, ed. Manṣūr Sarvat (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1984).*

25 Muḥammad Pādœāh b. Ḡulām Muḥyī al-Dīn, "'ārif," in *Farhang-i ānandrāj (Lakhnow: Navalkishor, 1893), https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.522311/2015.522311.Farhang-Anand-1/page/n7/mode/2up and Ibid., "'irfān."*

26 See Francis Joseph Steingass et al., "ʿirfān," in *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary: Including the Arabic Words and Phrases to Be Met with in Persian Literature (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & co., ltd., 1930). The same is true of the earlier dictionary composed by Francis Johnson, which was a major source for Steingass. See Francis Johnson, "'irfān," in A Dictionary Persian, Arabic and En-*

To conclude this section, as a domesticated version of *taṣavvuf*, the newly established paradigm of *ʿirfān* had several notable features. First, we see less rhetorical hostility towards human reason and rationality. In this regard, it is interesting to take into consideration the fact that, as mentioned above, Narāqī classifies rational and esoteric disciplines together (in contrast to exoteric disciplines such as *fiqh* and *ʿuṣūl al-fiqh*) is significant. This, I argue, speaks to the fact that the lines that partially separated the two were increasingly blurred. The development of *ʿirfān*'s curriculum during Qajar times, which included highly theoretical works in metaphysics by Ibn ʿArabī, Mullā Fanārī (d. 1431) and Ibn Turkah (d. 1432) reflects the same reality. As a result of this process, the ideal types of *ḥakīm* and *ʿārif* become more closely entangled and the two appear to be used increasingly as complementary pairs in nineteenth century literature.[27] The dichotomy of reason (*ʿaql*) versus intuition (*kashf*), which is a well-known theme of classical Sufi literature, does not seem to be as prominent and relevant among proponents of *ʿirfān* therefore. In fact, many prominent ʿulama invested in the tradition of *ʿirfān* are trained quite extensively in Islamic philosophy and logic.[28]

Second, in comparison to *taṣavvuf* the concept of *ʿirfān* lend itself more freely to a more individualistic pursuit of mystical knowledge. The fact that it was dislodged from the intricate social network that was central to the Sufi quest allowed the seekers of *ʿirfān* more freedom to define the terms of their spiritual quest. Rather than submission to a specific master and his will as Sufis were supposed to do, the students of *ʿirfān* were encouraged to take the Infallible Imams as their true *pīr*.[29] Even when they were explicitly asked, the teachers of *ʿirfān* in Shiʿi madrasas balked from playing the role of spiritual master.[30] This left the seekers unsettled and somewhat disappointed, but it also gave them an expansive hermeneutical grounds in the field of Shiʿi literature to construct their own path.

Third, the domestication of Sufism as Shiʿi *ʿirfān* also meant a radical depoliticization of the latter. While it was not unusual for Sufi masters to claim spiritual as well as material sovereignty, the teachers of *ʿirfān* who lived and taught at the margins of Shiʿi madrasas cultivated a primarily otherworldly notion of spiritual quest. It was not until the innovative and radical re-interpretation of the concept of *valāya* by Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) that *ʿirfān* was explicitly re-politicized.[31]

glish, (Imprimpériale Paris, 1853), http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5806274s. While it is impossible to establish a causal relationship one way or the other, I believe it is not a co-incidence that ʿirfān's increasing semantic visibility in Persian dictionaries compiled in the context of South Asia comes at the heels of the literary activity of Persian scholars, Sufis, and poets like Dārābī who spent many years of his life in various Indian courts. As another example, at the end of his Latifah-yi ghaybī, which is the first extensive commentary on Hafez's poetry, Dārābī includes an appendix titled Iṣṭilāḥāt-i ahl-i ʿirfān. For more see Anzali, 'Mysticism' in İran, 138-140.

27 For a good analysis of the curriculum of *ʿirfān and ḥikma in Qajar period see Sajjad H. Rizvi, "Hikma Mutaʿaliya in Qajar Iran: Locating the Life and Work of Mulla Hadi Sabzawari (d. 1289/1873)," Iranian Studies 44, 4 (2011): 473–96.*

28 For more examples on this trend see Manūchihr Ṣadūqī Suhā, *Tārīkh-i ḥukamāʾ va 'urafāʾ-yi mutåakhkhir (Tehran: Ḥikmat, 2002).*

29 See my discussion of ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Damāvandī (d. after 1747), for example, in Anzali, *'Mysticism' in Iran, 163-168.*

30 See my analysis of the correspondence between Āghā Muḥammad Bīdābādī and Ṣadr al-dīn Kāshif Dizfūlī (d. 1842) in Ibid., *172-3.*

31 For more see Alexander Knysh, "'Irfan' Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy", *Middle East Journal 46, 4 (1992): 631–53. To claim that the concept of ʿirfān before Khomeini was relatively depoliticized, of course, is not to say that the post-Safavid concept of ʿirfān was devoid of authoritative and hegemonic systems that controlled its function. Rather, I use the term politics in its con-*

In the next section we will see how, during the Saddle Period, such characteristics made the concept of *ʿirfān* an appealing one candidate for modern-minded intellectuals to play with as part of their overall notion of what constituted "good religion", i.e. something aloof from the superstitious beliefs of the masses, compatible with rationality and individual agency, and separated from politics.

II. *ʿIrfan* during the Saddle Period

It is against both the backdrop of the above-mentioned paradigm of *ʿirfān* that emerged during the late Safavid period, *and* the tectonic changes that the social, cultural, and religious landscape of Qajar Iran in her encounter with European modernity that we need to understand its transformation during the Saddle Period. Not surprisingly, the calls for a modern understanding of *ʿirfān* did not come from traditional centers of scholarship (the Shiʿi madrasas). In general, the most vocal and radical proponents of reform in religion during this time were often not the traditional ʿulama but a new class of elite intellectuals deeply influenced by modern Europe. Although often educated in traditional settings, their commitment to a modernist socio-cultural vision translated into strong criticism of the very same traditional structure in which they were educated.[32]

The encounter with modernity forced these intellectuals, politicians, and journalists to substantially re-think the role of religion in the society. Ideas of religious reform ranged from radical calls to emancipate the populace from the yoke of religion all together to more pragmatic calls to modernize traditional institutions while preserving the "good" aspects of religion.[33] What was considered good, of course, was often informed by Enlightenment values such as universalism, pluralism, rationalism, egalitarianism, and individualism. In a stark contrast, guardians of traditional religious institutions, such as the *madrasa* and the *khānaqāh*, were often criticized for fueling the fires of dogmatism, perpetuating factionalism, doubling down on particularism, maintaining a corrupt hierarchy that served only themselves, and promoting irrational and/or superstitious beliefs and practices.

While an in-depth analysis of this broader epistemic transformation is beyond the scope of an article, in what follows I often include –alongside my analysis of the concept of *ʿirfān*– a corollary analysis of the chosen author's conception of what constitutes a "good religion".[34] This is an attempt to illu-

ventional sense of the activities associated with the governance of an area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve such power.

32 Terms like "modernist" and "modernity" are ambiguous concepts and there is no scholarly consensus about their definition. I do find it useful, however, to offer a working definition for the purpose of clarity in this article. Following Eisenstadt, I understand "modernity" to involve both cultural and political programs that developed first in Western and Central Europe. I am specifically interested in the cultural program which, according to Eisenstadt, "entailed some very distinct shifts in the conceptions of human agency, and of its place in the flow of time. (S. N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities: A Collection of Essays, I-II. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), I: 537.") More specifically, following Weber, I understand the emergence of modernity to be marked by an increasing and widespread questioning of the legitimacy of a divinely preordained social order and an intense reflexivity that "came to question the very givenness of" such order and, therefore, "gave rise to an awareness of the possibility of multiple visions that could, in fact, be contested." (Ibid., 538) Along this awareness came the awareness "of a great variety of roles existing beyond narrow, fixed, local, and familial ones … [and] the possibility of belonging to wider trans local, possibly changing, communities." (Ibid.) I use the term "modernist" to describe people whose worldview was deeply informed by modernity, thus heavily favoring values such as individual agency, universalism, pluralism, rationalism, democracy, and so on and so forth.*

33 Akhūndzādah's writings exemplify the former approach while reformists like Malkum Khan and al-Afghānī often advocated the latter one.

34 For an insightful historical narrative about how a si-

minate the broader discursive context within which the concept of *ʿirfān* and its transformation need to be understood. In other words, I find it impossible to offer a proper analysis of the concept of *ʿirfān* independent of the underlying (and changing) notions of what constitutes proper religiosity – notions that are, implicitly or explicitly, at work in our authors' mind. The authors I have chosen to focus below are by no means taken to be representatives of their age or the community to which they belonged. Rather, my aim is to offer a preliminary analysis based that could be used as a springboard for future, more comprehensive studies.

Mīrzā ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Āghā Khān Kirmānī (d. 1896)

I begin my analysis with the case of Mīrzā Āghā Khān Kirmānī, an important modernist intellectual and political activist of the late nineteenth century Qajar Iran, because he is historically earlier than other figures and his literary activity belongs to an era that could be marked as the beginning of the Saddle Period in Iran. Kirmānī was an eclectic figure who was deeply influenced in his intellectual outlook by both Mīrzā Malkum Khān and Mīrzā Fatḥʿalī Ākhūndzādah (d. 1878).[35] His significance has already been recognized in scholarly literature as an early figure that, alongside Ākhūndzādah, formed an early Persian proto-nationalist narrative that developed into a fully-fledged national myth later in the twentieth century, adopted and operated by the Pahlavi regime.[36] It is not his views on nationalism that are of interest to us here but his attitude towards religion. It has been noted that Kirmānī is anything but consistent in his views about religion across his writings: Based on which one of his writings one focuses on, he can come across as a Godless Darwinist, a Muslim modernist, or a Bābī reformist![37] Kirmānī, of course, was not unique in the fluid nature of his religious identity. Whether it was due to concerns about the backlash they might receive for revealing their real metaphysical/religious commitments or a symptom of an ongoing existential experimentation in pursuit of spiritual satisfaction, the religious identity of many reformist personalities of the time is shrouded in mystery. For the purpose of this analysis, I would like to focus on a small treatise written by Kirmāni titled *Haftād va du millat*. With this choice, I am not making the claim that this treatise somehow reflects the "true" religious identity of the author. Rather, I find the treatise particularly interesting because of the light it sheds on an emerging modernist notion of what constitutes "good religion"

milar concept of "good religion" has been influential in Western academia see Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton, N.J., Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2006), 177–200. The modern concept of religion has been subject to extensive analysis, especially in the context of Western Europe. See, for example, Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Brent Nongbri, Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). Scholars have examined the emergence of this concept in non-European contexts as well. For a fascinating study in the context of Japan see Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, The Invention of Religion in Japan (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). For a useful study in the Islamic (mostly Arab) context see Abdulkader Tayob, Religion in Modern Islamic Discourse (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).*

35 For a good overview of Kirmānī's worldview see Firiydūn Ādamiyyat, *Andīshah-hā-yi mīrzā āqā khān kirmānī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i payām, 1357/1978).*

36 Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

37 For more on the dynamic and fluid nature of his views on religion see Mangol Bayat Philipp, "The Concepts of Religion and Government in the Thought of Mîrzâ Âqâ Khân Kirmânî, a Ninteenth-Century Persian Revolutionary", *International Journal of Middle East Studies 5, 4 (1974): 381–400, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800025502.*

and Kirmānī's remarks on the *ʿurafāʾ and ḥukamāʾ* towards its conclusion.

Haftād va du millat is a free adaptation of the short story *Le Café de Surate* written originally by the French author Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (d. 1814). The title of the work, which can be translated as or "Seventy-two Religious Communities"[38] invokes the content of a widely known hadith report in which Muhammad laments the future factionalism among Muslims, prophesizing that they will divide up to seventy-three different sects only one of which beholds his true path.[39] The hadith was later taken up by Hāfez in one of his most cited ghazals where he says:

Let's forgive the seventy-two sects for their
wars
theyfollowedmythssincetheydidn'tseethe
truth[40]

Hāfez's take on the hadith is different from how classical theologians understood it in the past. For the latter, the hadith was often used as a confirmation of the validity of their own position at the expense of all other schools of thoughts or sects. Hāfez, however, does not seem to be interested in asserting the validity of one theological school over all others. Rather, he interprets the hadith to mean that sectarian and ideological conflicts are all petty and unnecessary ones, a symptom of being veiled from the Truth, which transcends all narrow conceptions of it. Inspired by Hāfez, Kirmānī uses the title as an apt commentary on the sectarian fights that consumed his contemporaries. Continuing his effort to indigenize the story, Kirmānī replaces the protagonist of the original story with a more relatable figure for his Iranian audience. In the original French, the protagonist is a Chinese man, a follower of Confucianism, who happens to be sitting in a Café in Surat, India, and listening silently to representatives of different religions and sects such as Hinduism, Protestantism, Sunnism, Catholicism, and Judaism engaging in a heated debate over whose God and religion is the Truth. After everyone is tired of a prolonged and futile debate, they turn to him and ask him if he has anything to say. The Chinese man mocks the shortsightedness of all by telling them a story. The morale of the story is for all to become aware of their own positionality and embrace a pluralistic view. In terms of his own religious views,

38 I have translated the term *millat according to its traditional meaning of "religious community" here although I am aware of the transformation of its meaning later during the Saddle Period to "nation". For more, see Markus Dreßler's contribution to this volume.*

39 The hadith comes in many different versions. See, for example, ʿAbd al-Qāhir b. Tāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-farq bayn al-firaq, trans. and ed. Kate Chambers Seelye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1920), 21–22.*

40 Khvājah Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ, *Dīvān-i ḥāfiẓ khvājah shams al-dīn muḥammad, Chāp-i 2, ed. Parvīz Nātil Khānlarī. (Tehran: Khvārazmī, 1362/1983), 374.*

the Chinese man can best be described as a Deist and an advocate of natural religion, both products of European Enlightenment. In Kirmānī's adaptation, however, the most important part of the story begins when the Chinese man is done speaking. The ultimate protagonist who has everyone's ear is not him but a certain Mīrzā Javād from Iran. He is Kirmānī's perfect fictional character that embodies all the values that the author envisioned for a modern citizen of Iran to possess, especially in terms of their religious worldview. Although from Iran, Mīrzā Javād "was so concerned with the fate of humanity that nobody could tell where he was from." In other words, he rose above the pettiness of local politics and factionalism, adopting instead a global and cosmopolitan perspective. He also "had exceeding admiration for all the prophets and sages; so much so that it was unclear what religious community he belonged to."[41] That is to say, Mīrzā Javād was a pluralist, someone who did not think that any group or individual is in exclusive possession of truth.[42] Furthermore, he is described as someone who "instead of inviting people to be his disciples, he was an honest devotee of all the claimants of guidance and mission though none of them considered him their disciple."[43] That is to say, he consciously avoided the trap of undemocratic and often corrupt hierarchical religious structures.

As mentioned, Kirmānī's reading of the abovementioned prophetic hadith is unmistakably inspired by Hāfez's subversive discourse in which the significance of sectarian identity is deeply questioned. While for Hafez it is mystical realization that led one to such questioning, for Kirmānī, this role is given to human reason. Given the already established semantic field around the notion of *ʿirfān* as well as *ḥikma*, it is not surprising to see Kirmānī suggest that, among all religious types, Mīrzā Javād was ultimately "more on friendly terms with the *ḥukamāʾ* and *ʿurafāʾ* and [like them] considered comprehension (*fahmīdan*) the spirit and the truth of religiosity."[44] Yet, at the same time he criticizes indigenous traditions of *ḥikma and ʿirfān* in Iran for falling short of Mīrzā Javād's ideals who did not think that "logic and philosophy or Sufism and *ʿirfān*" can ultimately unite people or bring them peace." Otherwise, he asked, "why did philosophers and mystics (*ʿurafāʾ*) argued within their ranks all the time?"

Kirmānī's ideal religious man, thus, Mīrzā Javād's piety bears all the hallmarks of a modern citizen, one who believes in pluralism, has a cosmopolitan and rational perspective, and privileges the well-being of man over the nitty-gritty of a certain God's commands. Yet, neither the *ḥukamāʾ* nor the *ʿurafāʾ* of the time, according to Kirmānī, measured up to this standard. *Haftād va du millat* remained unpublished until decades after its author's death. It was left to intellectuals of the early twentieth century to imagine, once again, what constitutes "good religion" (and *ʿirfān*) as a pluralistic, cosmopolitan, and rational construct.

The Niʿmatullāhī Authors

Any discussion of *ʿirfān* in modern Iran is incomplete without considering the Niʿmatullahi contributions. After their early 19th century revival, they were the only major active Sufi network in Iran with substantial social influence and strong ties to the political

41 Mīrzā ʿAbd al-Ḥusayn Āghā Khān Kirmānī, *Haftād va du millat (Berlin: Iranshahr, 1924), 93.*

42 Ibid., *119.*

43 Ibid., *95.*

44 Ibid., *96. Kirmānī's own family background, in which ḥikma and ʿirfān had a heavy presence, might account for his affinity to these traditional modes of piety. See Kirmānī, Sih maktūb, ed. Bahram Choubine (Essen: Nima Verlag, 2000), 8.*

elite.[45] The traditional Niʿmatullāhīs were the only group who defended the term Sufi in unambiguous terms and stuck with it in their works throughout the nineteenth century in Iran. They pushed back against the marginalization and stigmatization of the term Sufi, wearing that badge with honor. That did not mean, however, that they were not influenced by the powerful currents of modernist thought that were sweeping through the country –although different branches had varying responses. A major Sufi figure whose home was a social hub for many modern-minded Iranian elite interested in mysticism and reform towards the end of 19th century was Mirzā Ḥasan Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh (d. 1899) who was known among his peers to have been more open-minded, ecumenical, and innovative. Similar to Kirmānī, he was deeply frustrated about factionalism and in fighting (especially among Niʿmatullāhī Sufis) and tried to stay away from such dramas. He strongly advocated for the idea of *Ṣulḥ-i kull* or "universal peace" and, throughout his life, actively tried to promote this idea among his disciples. His ecumenical outlook, most likely inspired by his familiarity with the Indian context, drew criticism and suspicion of outsiders: he was accused of having connections with the Bahāʾī, Ismāʿīlī, Ahl-i ḥaqq, and Freemasons in Iran and Yogis and Brahmans in India.46 His home attracted many like-minded and high-profile modernist intellectuals, politicians, and businessman. It is not surprising, therefore, that while his disciples were unable to honor his dying wish to avoid disunity, "[a]ll of the new subbranches became preoccupied, through their leaders, with far-reaching organizational and ideational changes" that were aimed at modernizing Sufism.[47]

In his own work, Ṣafī acknowledges the fact that many of his contemporary elite avoid using the term Sufi opting to use terms like *ʿārif* instead.[48] He argues that part of the reason for this is the hopelessly fragmented religious landscape of Iran in which several factions with competing esoteric claims— such as the Shaykhīs, the Bābīs, the Bahāʾīs, as well as different branches of the Niʿmatullāhī network are vying for followers. In response, he claims that what he represents is "pure Sufism [that] has nothing to do with the beliefs of any particular sect or the customs of any particular community…rather, all sects and communities, to the extent of their ability, have adopted its praiseworthy principles."[49] This ecumenical approach to Sufism is significant because it is not only one of the hallmarks of modernist conceptions of "good religion" but also a central component for the modern concept of *ʿirfān*. While the concept of *ʿirfān* is more prominent in his writings compared to his contemporaries,[50] at the end of the day Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh was deeply invested in long held Sufi traditions and the extent of reforms he would advocate (either in the realm of semantics or practice) were quite limited. For example, he heavily criticizes a tendency in his era among educated people who —although in general inclined to mysticism— reject the necessity of submitting

45 For a study of the early developments of the Niʿmatullāhī revival in Iran see Leonard Lewisohn, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I: The Niʿmatullāhī Order: Persecution, Revival and Schism," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* University of London 61, 3 (1998): 437–64. For a study of later developments of different branches of the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi network late Qajar period see Matthijs van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in Iran, from the Late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

46 Ibid., 91–92.

47 Ibid.

48 Mīrzā Ḥasan Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh. *Asrār al-maʿārif va mīzān al-maʿrifa (Tehran: Iqbāl, 1340/1961), 52.*

49 Ibid.*, 36–37.*

50 This might have had to do with the extensive interactions he had with South Asian religious and cultural elite, especially during his stay in India.

to the authority of an individual murshid. Instead, he contemptuously remarks that "their *ʿirfān* is only about the study of Hāfez and [Rūmī's] *Mathnavī*, or, if they are highly educated the study of theoretical works of *ʿurafāʾ*."[51] Ṣafī's statement is significant in two ways. First, it confirms that the notion of *ʿirfān* he was familiar with was, in terms of its content, heavily influenced by (1) the Persian poetic tradition of Hāfez and Rūmī (pace Dārābī) and (2) the theoretical works of Sufism (pace Narāqī). Second, it is clear from his retort that *ʿirfān* was commonly conceived as being somewhat in contrast to the traditional notion of *taṣavvuf* with the most defining aspect of the latter being obedience to the master. Here, he puts his finger on one of the most important tensions between traditional and modern modes of piety, which is the desire to emphasize one's own individual rational agency in contrast to the cultivation of virtues such as obedience and complete surrender. Ironically, majority of his followers – who formed the Freemasonry style *Anjuman-i ukhuvvat* or "Society of Brotherhood" immediately after his death under the leadership of Ẓahīr al-Dawla (d. 1924) –proceeded to dissolve the institution of *qutb* or the "Pole" a couple of decades later replacing it with a *hay'at-i mushāvarah* or "Consultancy Council" the leader of which was "no more than first among equals".[52]

A similar tension between traditional and modern understandings of Sufism is at display in another Niʿmatullahī classical text that was written at the turn of the 20th century, *Ṭarāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq*. *Ṭarāʾiq* is a widely used Sufi hagiography authored by Maʿṣūm-ʿAlī Shāh Shīrāzī (d. 1926), a Niʿmatullāhī Sufi and a respected man of letters. Given the abovementioned Niʿmatullahī insistence on using the term Sufi, it is not surprising to find that the term *ʿirfān* does not occupy a significant place within the text beyond its traditional meaning in classical Sufi literature. What is fascinating, however, is the strong emphasis on *ʿirfān* in the preface to the work, which was written by one of the most prominent modernist figures of Qajar Iran, Muḥammad-Ḥusayn Furūqī (d. 1907) who also happened to be a good friend of Maʿṣūm-ʿAlī Shāh. Unlike the author, who was deeply immersed in the Sufi tradition, Furūqī was a poet, journalist, translator, and author from a merchant family who went through a traditional education in his childhood but became increasingly interested in Western thought as he grew up. He matured as a progressive intellectual familiar with the literary, scientific, and political trends in Europe. He was the editor of Iran's first nongovernmental newspaper, Tarbīyat, which began publication in 1894. He was also a teacher of literature and later the chair of the College of Political Science (*Madrasah-yi ʿulūm-i siyāsī*), the first such institution ever established in Iran. There are two remarkable features of this preface that I want to highlight. First, in a stark contrast to the author himself Furūqī deliberately avoids giving the term *taṣavvuf* the center stage in spite of the prominence of that category for the book itself. Instead, he repeatedly uses terms like *ʿārif* and *ʿirfān*, treating these concepts as if they were the principal concepts for the book. While, like the lexicographical tradition we discussed above, he only offers a rather generic and literal definition of *ʿirfān* as "knowledge of God," he warns that this "discipline", if not accompanied by "reasoning and trustworthy evidence, has no place among the learned and critical generation of 'the age of discovery'."[53]

51 Ibid., 14, 17, and 53.

52 Bos, *Mystic Regimes, 106*.

53 Muḥammad Maʿṣūm-ʿAlī Shīrāzī, *Ṭarāʾiq al-ḥaqāʾiq, ed. Muḥammad-Jaʿfar Maḥjūb, I-II, (Tehran: Kitābkhānah-yi bārānī, 1339/1960), I: 8.*

Here, we clearly see how the concept of ʿ*irfān* has turned into a polemical tool in the service of modernist intellectuals and their push to reform religion. We can also clearly see a great deal of expectation around the concept of ʿ*irfān* as a term suited for 'the age of discovery'. The semantic dissonance between Maʿṣūm-ʿAlī Shāh and Furūqī, I believe, is the clearest indication of a transitional period. It demonstrates the unsettled nature of the semantic field of ʿ*irfān* and the forward looking (i.e. progressive), anticipatory nature of the discourse in which it was used. It represents a break from the established discourse of the past and, at the same time, it is literally juxtaposed to it. Perhaps more importantly, Furūqī's commentary reveal much about his modernist political project of creating a "good religion" by "liberating" traditional modes of piety from the hegemony of "superstition" and "irrationality". It was not just the mystical aspect of religion that needed to be transformed but religion itself.

While the abovementioned Niʿmatullāhī Sufis were certainly impactful in the emergence of the modern concept of ʿirfān in Persian discourse, the figure who arguably offered its first systematic definition was an ex-Niʿmatullāhī and a popular preacher and author, Kayvān Qazvīnī.[54] He had spent many decades of his life as a Sufi initiate, first associating with Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh and his circle and then as a notable missionary of the Sultān ʿAlī Shāhī branch of the Niʿmatullāhī network.[55] But it was his growing frustration with traditional Sufism, especially his critique of the master/disciple relationship, that led him to advocate an alternative framework developed around the notion of ʿ*irfān*.

Kayvān described his project as one that was focused on salvaging what he called "genuine Sufism" or "true religion" from the complicated web of backward traditions that has been spun on it for centuries by the ʿulama and other religious experts. In line with the direction of reform, Kirmānī, Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shāh, and Furūqī had suggested Kayvān defined ʿ*irfān* as "genuine Sufism," i.e. a universal concept unbound by specific religious creeds or institutions. He also emphasizes its necessary compatibility with science and reason. A third feature of 'ʿ*irfān* that he adds is its lacks hierarchical structures, having neither orders nor master/disciple relationships. In fact, in a telling instance when he uses *taṣavvuf* and ʿ*irfān* in conjunction with each other he adds the word "subservience" or *sar-sipurdaghī* in parenthesis in front of the former concept to indicate that it is in fact the traditional emphasis on master/disciple relationship that separate Sufism from ʿ*irfān*.[56] Finally, he says, it has no place for secretive or inaccessible language and teachings, a truly egalitarian concept.[57] In his own words:

> [ʿ*Irfān*] is neither an official field of knowledge… nor is it a religion or a branch of a specific religion that is biased or defensive against other religions and denominations or that sets its goal on the same level as other religions' goal, making every attempt to promote [that goal] and to falsify the other [religions]. On the contrary, it is an all-encompassing way of knowledge that can turn to any science, religion, or philosophy, benefiting from them as they benefit from it, so that eventually it be-

54 Van der Bos is the first scholar to note the importance of Kayvān and offer a short analysis of his life. See Bos, *Mystic Regimes, 83–85. I offer a more extensive analysis in my own monograph. See Anzali, "Mysticism" in Iran, 199–216.*

55 On Kayvān's association with Ṣafī see ʿAbbās Kayvān Qazvīnī, *Rāzgushā, ed. Maḥmūd ʿAbbāsī (n.p.: 1376/1997). 145-46.*

56 Ibid., 124

57 ʿAbbās Kayvān Qazvīnī, *Irfān-nāmah (Tehran: Āfarīnish, 1388/2009), 35 and Idem. Rāzgushā, 326–27.*

> comes intimately entwined with them… Therefore, ʿirfan is not only the basis of science and religion, but also their ornament and perfection, and it is the means by which they resolve their differences and reconcile their hostilities…[58]

This definition of *ʿirfān* is admittedly very abstract and vague. It defines an aspirational goal, one that is attractive for his modern-minded audience as an ideal with no corresponding reality on the ground. Therefore, when faced with the question of who might be considered a genuine Sufi, or a disciple of *ʿirfān*, Kayvān is unable to give an example of an indigenous person or a group that exemplifies its ideals. Instead, in a fascinating comment, he points to the Theosophical Society as an example of a group that espouses "universal *ʿirfān*, not bound to any specific religion."[59] The only way he could have learned about Theosophy given his lack of familiarity with foreign languages was through Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr.

Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr[60]

Iranshahr was a prominent member of the so-called "Berlin Circle" that was formed in Germany during WWI by Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh (d. 1970).[61] Some of the most influential literary and political figures of the early twentieth century Iran who lived temporarily outside Iran, mostly due to political persecution in Iran, were members of this circle. Among them, Iranshahr was the only one who had a strong penchant towards mysticism and esotericism. Iranshahr's interest in esotericism flowered in the immediate years after the First World War in Weimar Germany during a significant cultural moment dubbed as "The Occult Revival".[62] While there were hundreds of esoteric movements that were active in Europe at the time, the one that influenced his views the most was Theosophy.[63]

Inspired by the philosophy of Helena Blavatsky, Iranshahr adopted a Perennialist view from early one –that is, the belief that all religions originated from and reflected the same source of truth, which was best preserved in their esoteric traditions. The core of any religion, therefore, was its mystical tradition. So, while he did engage in discussions with his colleagues about how Islamic legal framework need reformed, the most important and indispensable part of religion for him was the esoteric aspect. Iranshahr believed that "progress"' and "civilization" could not in fact be realized *without* religion. For him, though, the main problem was that most people had the wrong idea of what religion was all about. Citing the example of Europe, Iranshahr emphasizes that a cornerstone of "good religion" was its deeply personal nature (individual religion), lack of superstitious beliefs and practices (rational religion), and amenability to change and

58 Kayvān Qazvīnī, *ʿIrfān-nāmah, 28.*

59 Kayvān Qazvīnī, *Rāzgushā, 124.*

60 I have tried to respect how modern authors spelled their names in Latin alphabet when I was able to find it and, thus, refrained to use diacritical marks for their names .

61 For more on this circle see Jamshid Behnam, *Birlīnīhā: andīshmandān-i īrānī dar birlīn, 1915-1930 (Tehran: Farzān-i rūz, 2000).*

62 For more on this see Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). For a broad introduction see Kocku von Stuckrad, Western Esoterisicm: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge (London ; Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub, 2005) and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed, Guides for the Perplexed (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).*

63 For a detailed analysis of Iranshahr's esoteric influences see my forthcoming article Ata Anzali, "From Ethnic Nationalism to Cosmopolitan Mysticism: The Life and Works of Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr (1884–1962)," *Iranian Studies, (2021): 1–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2020.1869533.*

reform (flexible/progressive religion).[64] More importantly, a "good religion" was a universal religion. That is to say, a religion that captured "universal truth" with the minimum amount of sectarianism and "superstition"; a religion that addressed the deepest needs of human race and helped them aspire towards global unity and brotherhood; a religion that was most compatible with the universal laws of science and morality. Like Kirmānī's fictional character Mīrzā Javād (whom he helped publicize), Iranshahr acknowledged that none of the dominant religious traditions of his time came close to such lofty ideals. The ideal form of religion, thus, was filled with expectation for him, an ideal that was to become a reality in the future and unite all humanity. In fact, he talked about Theosophy with much enthusiasm as "the religion of the future".[65] As for *ʿirfān*, while it is true that Iranshahr did not make substantial use of the concept in his writings during the 1920s, he was arguably the first author to use it as an equivalent to the concept of "mysticism".[66] This semantic equation might not amount to much when considered in isolation but it represents the completion of a long process of epistemic transformation in which *ʿirfān* became the semantic locus of modernist expectations on matters of spirituality.

Circling back to Kayvān, his attempts at popularizing the modern concept of *ʿirfān* was successful if later Persian literature is any indication. The definition was well received among the literati, quickly making its way into the most comprehensive Persian lexicon of the time, *Lughat-nāma-yi dihkhudā.* Toward the end of a lengthy entry on *ʿirfān* we read:

> Sufism is just one manifestation of *ʿirfān*… it is only a specific sect, a particular spiritual path that stems from the fountain of *ʿirfān*. The latter is a universal and comprehensive term that includes Sufism… it is possible, then, for an *ʿārif* not to be a Sufi but not vice versa. [67]

Conclusions

The efforts of modern-minded Iranian intellectuals, pundits, and authors to introduce the concept of *ʿirfān* as a signifier for a more individualist, universalist, rational, science-friendly, and egalitarian mode of piety is an interesting case to ponder the transition from the pre-modern to the modern. What is significant about the emergence of this concept is that it was not simply a wholesale importation of a Western idea or ideal. Rather, the process exemplifies creative efforts to tap into a poignant symbol that was invented during the Safavid period. Recent studies by Jantzen,[68] King,[69] and others have demonstrated how Western modernity has been instrumental in shaping our understanding of important concepts such as 'mysticism' as an individualistic, anti-institutional, other-worldly, depoliticized one. What I find interesting in my attempt to offer a conceptual history of *ʿirfān* is that this concept carried some similar semantic connotations even at its early stage of development during the Safavid period. *ʿIrfān* and its semantic cognates came to

64 Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr, "Dīn va milliyyat," *Irānshahr 3, 1–2 (1924): 4-31.*

65 See, Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr, "Tiʾusufī (1)." *Irānshahr 4, 11 (1927): 643-44.*

66 Anzali, *'Mysticism' in Iran, 213.*

67 ʿAlī Akbar Dihkhudā, "ʿirfān," in *Lughat-nāmah-yi dihkhudā, ed. Muḥammad Muʿīn and Jaʿfar Shahīdī (Tehran: Muʾassasah-yi intishārāt va chāp-i dānishgāh-i tihrān, 1993).*

68 Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).*

69 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East" (London: Routledge, 1999).*

the attention of figures such as Kirmānī and Furūqī because of their conceptual affinity and perceived compatibility with modernist ideals outlined above. By the early eighteenth century the concept was untethered, both semantically and socially, from the domain of *taṣavvuf*. The intimate and highly hierarchical personal relationship between master and disciple was transformed into a symbolic and highly abstract form of relationship between the adept and the Shiʿi Imams. Both these developments, I argue, gave the adept a relatively greater degree of individual freedom in defining the contours of his/her spiritual quest. *ʿirfān* was also highly rationalized during the Safavid period with the infusion of Ibn ʿArabī and Mullā Ṣadrā's speculative mysticism.[70] For modernist intellectuals and spirituals, this provided a much-needed cover against the charges of superstition and backwardness.

In conclusion, while there is no doubt that certain aspects of this contemporary concept, such as the idea that it could be detached from a particular religious context, the emphasis on its compatibility with empirical science and technology, and the heavily individual centered quest model, developed in response to and were influenced by the process of modernization in Iran, other elements have been in the making since the seventeenth century as part of the internal dynamics of Persian-Shiʿi culture as briefly discussed above. In repurposing *ʿirfān* as an alternative to Sufism, modern Iranian intellectuals appropriated an already well-developed notion that they found to be an apt expression of their aspirations. There was transformation and rupture, but there was also continuity.

70 Of course, this form of rationalism was very different from the instrumental rationalism that became paramount in modern era. Yet, the rediscovery of the usefulness of the tradition of Islamic philosophy during the late nineteenth century (largely by al-Afghānī) for modernizing reform efforts made it possible for advocates of modernity (and *ʿirfān) to conflate the two notions.*

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