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Behrooz Moazami, *State, Religion, and Revolution in Iran, 1796 to the Present*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, xiii + 208 pp., \$36.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9781137325884.

Curiously, Behrooz Moazami's text begins with the year 1796. The title of his book immediately situates Iranian political genealogy within a different timeline than the one commonly presented to readers of contemporary Middle Eastern and Islamic history. Typically, commentaries on the Islamic Republic begin with the authoritative figure of Khomeini, and the intellectual work of Ali Shariati. In this sense, Moazami assumes a unique starting point. He de-centers 1979 by focusing on the formation of the Qajar State in 1796 and provides a systematic empirical study of Iranian political history. By dividing the text into three sections, Moazami traces the political genealogy of Iranian state formation in relation to Islam, and examines constitutionality and frictions within the theocratic regime.

Powers of Bureaucracy, Orthodoxy, and Islamization

The first section provides the reader with a political history focused on the transition from fragmented tribal rule towards the formation of a centralized political system and state bureaucracy between 1796-1963. Moazami begins with the condensation of political power leading to the emergence of the Qajar dynasty. In the second part of this section, he focuses on the formation of the Pahlavi ascension to power between 1921-1963. Here he elaborates on how colonial history influenced and affected the unification of the Iranian Army and financial system. In this section, Moazami systematically analyzes Reza Khan's rise to power, his use and expansion of the military State, the "arbitrary taxation" system, foreign policy with Britain with regards to oil revenue, modernization of techniques of imprisonment, torture, and surveillance of political opponents. Moazami elaborates upon Reza Khan's fascination with German fascism and race theories of supremacy, and how Hitler's ascension to power in 1933 improved trade relations between Iran—a name that originates from the word *Aryan* and officially adopted in 1935—and Germany. Moazami notes how this "Germanophilia" was also one of the reasons for Reza Khan's fall from power in 1941 due to British and Soviet pressure. Furthermore, Moazami's characterization of 1941-1946 as a time of "embattled state," and 1947-1953 as a fuller "militarized state" demonstrates his interest in providing nuanced historical details within careful periodizations. Through these demarcations, he elaborates on the political transformation of Iranian bureaucracy and constitutionalism.

The second section studies the processual history of networks and institutionalizations of the Shi'i *ulama* between 1796-1963. In Chapters 4-6 Moazami breaks down this period into three distinct phases: 1. 1796-1892, in which Shi'a revivalism assumes an orthodoxizing character; 2. 1892-1921, when the *ulama*—through their active participation in the struggle against the Régie of Tobacco (1891-92) and their role in the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911)—become a more stabilized and uniform element within the nation-making project; and 3. 1921-1963, in which the *ulama* organized itself and developed the necessary political power to provide a moral ideology to help facilitate the formation of the Iranian state. In Chapter 4, there is an intriguing discussion of the relation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, revivalism and messianic concepts in Shi'ism. Moazami explains the systematizing structure of orthodoxy and its relation to authority, which legitimates a specific discourse as the dominant discourse. He suggests that orthodoxy and heterodoxy are interdependent, and that the radicalization of heterodoxy can create new relations of power, in which new authoritative discourses or a “new orthodoxy” (56) emerges. The chapter also details how the *usuli ulama* worked closely with the Qajar state to suppress the Babi movement. The author is careful in stating that while the *usuli ulama* became more stabilized, authoritative, financially autonomous, and organizationally powerful, messianic and mystical elements remained a significant part of Shi'ite epistemic history from the nineteenth century through the present. The author is sympathetic to the Babi movement, which departed from Islam to present a new form of religious mysticism, and was subsequently disciplined by the state with the assistance of the *ulama*. In his description of the Babi movement's suppression, he also suggests that this “widespread urban movement could be considered the Shi'i version of the Protestant reformation, at least in its militant Calvinistic form” (61). While thought-provoking, this suggestion reveals Moazami's Eurocentric assumptions, insofar as he maps the modernist reformation of Islam along the same lines as that of Judeo-Christian secularity. Because of this Eurocentrism, he is unable to trace the actual workings of discursive power within the dynamic of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Instead, he partakes in a non-immanent, external critique of the *ulama*, too motivated by a particular political line and therefore, too interested in identifying intentions, political gamesmanship, and pragmatism. Such an endeavor simplifies the complex relation between Shi'ite orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and frames it as an ideological battle between “conservatism” and “radicalism”—both defined through a Eurocentric understanding of political spectrum.

Chapters 5 and 6 illustrate the politicization of the *ulama* in Iran, their role in the making of the constitution, and the creation of a particular religious ethos central in formulating a national moral space. Moazami writes:

The *ulama*'s participation in the political and social conflicts of the period occurred on a battleground that had no precedent in the history of Shi'ism. The *ulama* leadership had to defend its own power and beliefs, and act as the guardian of Shi'ism in a social and political environment that had changed radically. (80)

Moazami continues to discuss how modern institutions like “nonreligious schools, printing houses, Masonic lodges, secret societies, and (later) parliamentary factions and parties” (80) become part of Islamist discourse in Iran, and how the *ulama* adapted to a constitutional language. He specifically mentions the influential works of important Shi'ite *ulama* and *mujtabeds* like Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai and Mirza Mohammad Hossein Gharavi Naini. All of this takes place in the context of the transitions and disintegrations of various world

powers in the earlier part of the 1900s, including the demise of: the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire (1917), the Caliphate system (1923), and the Qajar state (1925). Moazami observes that these disintegrations resulted in different kinds of dynamic relations between secularism and religiosity in Turkey, Russia, and Iran. In Iran, however, he claims that a statist politics organized the institutionalization of the *ulama*, but due to regional and international shifts “the defense of Shi’ism was subordinated to the defense of Islam, and the defense of Islam was subordinated to the defense of the political status quo” (90). Moazami’s observation here is twofold: first, a maximization of political determinism and, second, a minimization of Islam’s internal system of reasoning. In other words, for Moazami, Islam(ism) in general and Shi’ism in particular are mainly determinations of secular state politics, history, and power.

Moazami’s shortcomings in grasping Islamism’s discursive autonomy lends itself to the third section of the text in which he uses statist and nationalist political logics to describe the period between 1963-1979, a specifically intense time that led up to the Islamic revolution. The author attempts to describe the tensions between and within the *ulama* and state power, Khomeini’s political strategies and manipulations to Islamize the revolution, and the emergence of a theocratic state. The author suggests that Khomeini was not the product of institutional religion, and that his interpretations and application of Shi’ism were outside of orthodoxy, esoteric and “closer to the Sheikhism and Babism of the nineteenth century” (118). While the suggestion that Khomeini’s early engagement with religion is esoteric in nature has merit, Moazami’s comparison of Khomeini’s mysticism to Sheikhism and Babism is politically suspect. He provides no real, empirical, or concrete evidence to show an actual connection between Khomeini’s practice and those traditions that are marginal to dominant Shi’a discourse. By situating early Khomeini within a parochial discourse, Moazami destabilizes the foundations of his authority and attempts to de-authenticate and regulate the Islamic Republic’s ultimate authorizing powers.

The author locates the debates around the election bill of October 8, 1962 as an important starting point for Khomeini’s political radicalization within the *ulama*. He explains that the unclear use of “this celestial book” instead of the Qur’an created anti-government sentiments within the *ulama*. Moazami writes,

After a 54-day campaign, Khomeini and other *ulama* and their students forced the regime to retreat from the bill. The *ulama*, for the first time during this shah’s reign, had had an opportunity to test their strength in a nationwide political and religious encounter (119).

In his analysis, Moazami stages this political radicalization of the *ulama* under Khomeini as the ground upon which the fight against the Shah’s White Revolution takes place. He explains how the political agitation of the *ulama* resulted in Khomeini and two other scholars’ imprisonment, the June 5 uprising, and the exile of Khomeini in 1964. After the absence of Sayyed Hossein Burujerdi and Sayyed Abolqasem Kashani created a vacuum in politico-religious leadership, it was Khomeini’s nuanced engagement with both political and religious discourse that ushered in a new critical social phenomenon for religious masses, radical Islamists, and significant members of the secular opposition.

Moazami articulates the relationship between Khomeini and the religious establishment’s orthodoxy in an interesting way: he shows that Khomeini was “an unconventional religious scholar” (120), who was able to synthesize the esoteric with the legal. Khomeini’s concept of *velayat faqih* was groundbreaking in Shi’a thought, but scholars have tried to show how this

interest in making mysticism compatible with *sharia* goes all the way back to the Andalusia thinker and mystic Ibn Arabi. However, Moazami still insists that there is an essential incompatibility between mysticism and *sharia*. He writes,

But it is not difficult to show that sharia and mysticism are organizationally incompatible. The former is by nature rigidly institutional, while the latter is based on charisma and has an ephemeral character. (121)

The author suggests that because of historical circumstances Khomeini, who according to him was an unorthodox mystic, was able to blend two different worlds that needed to be blended, but that “under different circumstances” (123) Khomeini’s ideas would be considered “mediocre metaphysical speculations of an isolated mullah” (123). Moazami never provides us with examples of what these “different circumstances” could be, or how Khomeini’s radically innovative notion of *velayat faqih* (that in the end foundationally changed the history of Islam in Iran) could be considered mediocre. In his discussion of the “Islamization of the revolution” he writes that Khomeini hid his theocratic interests and acted like “any other politician” (133), leading the massive suppression of all potential opposition to his concept of *velayat faqih*. It is important to note here that for Moazami, the revolution is always already secular, or the secular is the largest sphere of political intervention, and it is through clever, strategic, wily maneuvers and tremendous suppression that the mullahs in general and Khomeini in particular were able to Islamize the revolution. The ground of the secular is a major assumption in Moazami’s political epistemology. In his reading, the history of the transformation of Khomeini’s religious and political life seems external to the emergence of the revolution. It is as if Islam was added later into the equation; in other words, as if Islamization was a form of hijacking of the more authentic and representative secular revolution. This assumption is clear in the following quotation: “The Iranian Revolution—a dominantly secular modern mass rebellion led by a messianic theologian on the margin of the religious establishment—eventually produced a modern militant, theocratic, and messianic Republic, as the balance of power shifted” (136).

Even though Moazami is highly suspicious of Khomeini and the radicalized *ulama*’s intentions, he provides details about the formulation of the religious legal discourse. He explains that the “Shi’i jurists adopted the Sunni concept of *maslahat* (public interest), which they had historically rejected” (142), which in my view (contrary to the author’s) demonstrates the global reach of Islamization, and the ethico-political interweaving of Shi’a and Sunni concepts of governance and the law. For Moazami, processes of Islamization are cunning ploys from the outside and are framed as interventions on the secular, and the crises of the state and its possible disintegration are blamed on an imbalanced relation between Islam and the state.

Concluding Remarks

Moazami’s *State, Religion, and Revolution in Iran, 1796 to the Present* begins with an honest political claim. The author describes his work as an outcome of rigorous “discussions and debates” with his “political friends in Tehran after the revolution” (xi), and situates his main arguments within a particular history of an “existential need” (xi) to understand the political defeat of the secular Left to the followers of Imam Khomeini. Even though Moazami aims to trace Iranian political history by examining the commencement of the Qajar dynasty in 1796, it appears from his opening statements that the driving force of his text is a particular

secular anxiety over Islamism, signified by the figure of Khomeini. In this sense, the text finds refuge in social science and political theory for the purposes of adjusting to the traumatizing defeat of the Left to clerical political formations that culminated in the 1979 revolution and the achievement of State power.

Such scholarly endeavors—in which the centering of Islamism is negated through a political ideology present a priori—tend to assume a similar form. First, a so-called defeat by Islamists is accepted with humility. Second, this defeat is relativized within a larger social history so as to not be grasped as a final loss. Finally, when one can demonstrate this relativism of defeat through a technical use of social scientific methods and tracing of institutional genealogy, then it becomes possible to arrive at a new political balance. Moazami writes, “This book attempts to rethink Iranian history from the perspective of a generation that fought honorably and failed, but is proud of its deeds and its history” (xi). With this newfound political balance Moazami is able to think about the 1979 revolution as unfinished, and predict the Islamic regime’s disintegration. He writes, “As the endemic crises of the theocratic regime confirms, the moment of the Islamization of the state, the climax of this fusion, also had the seeds of its disintegration”(3).

One wonders why Moazami is interested in thinking about the contemporary political situation through the metaphor of revolution. Why is this phrasing necessary in thinking about new political formations? Why is it necessary to suggest that the Islamic revolution of 1979 is incomplete? In this text, it is unclear if the term “revolution” adequately describes political possibilities in Iran, especially, after the rumors and scandals of the 2009 election year. I think the author, who articulated a very intriguing and important political history, runs the risk of making critical readers suspicious of his political motive by calling the revolution unfinished. Is the author suggesting that Islamists cannot conduct a proper revolution? Is he assuming that Islamists have to mature into good secularists to create a society of good governance? While much of the text is focused on actual empirical history, though at times a bit too linear for it to be properly genealogical, assumptions about the necessity of incompleteness of revolution seem to have a prescriptive political interest.

While Moazami states that “[t]he contemporary return of religion to the world political scene is not the return of a ghost of a seemingly distant past or the defeat of secular projects” (2), his analysis of the relation between state formation and religious institutionalization relies upon functionalist assumptions.¹ For him, religious homogenization is functionally necessary for the formation of a state, religious morality performs an ideological task for the State apparatuses, and the State assists religion in developing an orthodox authority. The book suffers because such functionalism fails to address the historical contingency of the modern state’s paradigmatic basis in the secular. Because the state’s secularism is not historicized, the book ends up naturalizing the history of the state. Revolution in general and Islamic revolution in particular become minor moments and temporary disturbances within the metanarrative of the secular state.

¹ Salman Sayyid describes the “hauntology” related to Muslims in relation to Eurocentrism. He explains the presence of Islam as ghost in modernity not to suggest that “religion” is a remainder from the past. To the contrary, Sayyid suggests that Islamic revival is an active history of the contemporary world. Islam as ghost haunts Europe, and produces anxiety for the secular because of a particular historical unconscious. Moazami fails to understand this. He also seems to take political religion (Islam) and secularization as equally relative categories, without taking into consideration the historical contingency and one-directional flow of secular power. See Bobby S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 1997); see also Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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