

# CONVERTING PERSIA

Religion and  
Power in the  
Safavid Empire

**Rula Abisaab**

I.B. TAURIS

## Converting Persia

*To my parents, Huda 'Attallah and Anis al-Jurdi,  
with love and gratitude  
and  
To the memory of Husayn Muroeh*

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LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2004 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
www.ibtauris.com

In the United States of America and in Canada distributed by  
Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St Martin's Press  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

Published in association with the **Iran Heritage Foundation**

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International Library of Iranian Studies 1

ISBN 1 86064 970 X

EAN: 978 1 86064 970 7

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Typeset in Palatino Linotype by Steve Tribe, Andover  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin

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# Acknowledgments

MY INTEREST IN DRAWING historical links between Arab and Persian Shi'ite societies originated at Yale University in the seminars of Abbas Amanat, my dissertation advisor. Amanat offered me distinct intellectual motivation, encouragement and friendship, which helped me find the voice of the historian. I am indebted to Said Amir Arjomand and Hossein Modarressi, who commented on and reoriented facets of this work in its dissertation form. My discussions with Rifa'at Abou el-Hajj helped shape the theoretical framework of this study. Willem Floor offered critical insights and suggestions on some aspects of this work. Rudi Matthee also made valuable comments on the work and raised important questions. Any shortcomings in this work are solely my responsibility.

Thanks to the Iranian Heritage Foundation, which supported my scholarship and the preparation of this monograph for publication. The current work, though based on the dissertation, underwent thorough revisions and critical alterations resulting in the elimination of one chapter and the addition of a new one and five central sections. In the process, I have departed from some of the assumptions made in the dissertation in the light of new research and in connection to the debates and theoretical underpinnings of the current historiography on Safavid Persia. I am grateful to several Iranian and Lebanese scholars who assisted me in obtaining copies of the manuscripts I needed and bringing new sources to my attention. These scholars are Sayyid Hasan al-Amin, Sayyid Jawad Shahrestani in Qum, Sayyid 'Ali Shahrestani in Mashhad, Sayyid Ahmad al-Husayni at the Mar'ashi library in Qum, and Dr. Kamran Fani and his assistant Fahimeh Khallaqi at Da'irat al-Ma'arif Tashayyu' in Tehran. I am also thankful to Aqa Hasan Ansari, Nezam Mafi, Sadeq Sajjadi, Sayyid Muhammad 'Ali Rawdati in Isfahan, and Rasul Ja'fariyan in Qum who, despite his

illness, met with me and advised me on a number of 'Amili works. I would also like to thank 'Ali Naqi Munzavi, 'Ali Rafi'i, 'A. Ha'iri at Majlis Library, and Vali Nasr. I am especially thankful to Jane Joyce who edited sections of this work and offered important suggestions as to its organization and style.

Parvaneh Khallaqi, Menouchehr Khoshnood and Fereshteh Kashani who hosted me in Tehran made my intellectual and personal experiences of Iran exceptional and deeply rewarding. I am thankful to my sisters Adelle, Hiba and Jinan for their unrelenting support and love. Malek, my partner, took a semester off his graduate studies to accompany me to Iran. Without him neither the trip experiences nor life to that matter would be the same.

## **MAP ONE**

## **MAP TWO**

# Introduction

IN THE LAST THREE decades, Islam with its varied Sunnite and Shi'ite colorings has figured as an international socio-political phenomenon with significant legal and doctrinal dimensions. A plethora of studies probing resurgent facets of Islam and its culturally distinct manifestations have searched relentlessly into the past for the 'origins' of this turbulent phenomenon. Since the unfolding of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979–80, the Shi'ite world, clergy and lay society, have been transformed forever. A striking feature of this transformation was the unprecedented political power wrested by the Shi'ite *'ulama* and their hegemony over a vital medium of legal ideas, as they proceeded to reinterpret a *shari'a*-based society and redefine the foundations of its modern Islamic state and political outlook.

Safavid history became a focal point of investigation for modern scholars exploring questions of empire, nation, religious community and conversion, clerical leadership and relations among Muslims, Christians and Jews. In modern narratives on clerical and revolutionary Islam and their relevance to Persian society, Iranian and Arab nationalists and Islamists alike have given the Safavid period (1501–1736CE) a central place.<sup>1</sup> These narratives are largely rooted in culturalist interpretations, which glorify Arab agency in converting Iran to 'mainstream' Shi'ism or treat legalistic Islam as a cultural intrusion, an imposition of an Arab normative basis of worship by émigré clerics on Persian society.<sup>2</sup> They purport that legalistic Islam, unlike gnosticism and philosophy, was alien to Persian culture and its forms of intellectual inquiry. My work challenges such interpretations of religious transformation in Persia. My study also comes to life when juxtaposed against the political zeal invested by Muslim activists today in the renewal of Islamic law and the unprecedented power that clerics have assumed in recent decades. The debates among both Shi'ite and Sunnite

reformists and militants over the nature of political authority in Islam, find some of their formative elements in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Iran.

Few if any studies have attempted to delineate the dynamic processes of exchange between Arab and Persian scholars and the contribution of their respective social matrices to the development of Islamic political theory and juridical concepts before the age of European expansion and colonialism. Moreover, most scholars of Islamic law continue to treat ideas, particularly legal ideas, as developing outside the realm of social relations and severed from the loci of power.<sup>3</sup> Religious thought is seen as reproducing itself from within the clerical establishment where an insulated community of legal experts seems to function outside the medium of history. My study, in contrast, probes into the internal social and political transformations that shaped the juridical concepts of the Syrian *'ulama* of Jabal 'Amil and the utility of their scholarship to the young Shi'ite state envisaged by the Safavid monarchs in the early sixteenth century. I delineate the changes the Syrian clerics made in the Islamic theory of government, their varied reinterpretations of law and 'reinvention' of religious legitimacy for state and society. Doctrinal and legal works on heterodoxy, Sunnite-Shi'ite polemic, Sufi practices, the convening of Friday prayer, religious seclusion, the meat slaughtered by Christians and Jews, alongside philosophical works on the nature of the world and God's relationship to it are all brought to bear on larger questions of social and political history. The theoretical framework of this work had drawn much inspiration from the epistemic foundation of Husayn Muroeh's *Al-Naza'at al-Madiyya fi al-Falsafa al-'Arabiyya al-Islamiyya*, which shifts the focus from culture to social process, investigating the transmission of knowledge from one civilization/culture to another, in this case from the Arab to the Persian, in the light of the internal structural and historical forces within the hosting society (Persia). Muroeh rejected attempts to understand the emergence of new philosophical, scientific and legal concepts in their own terms, as ruled by personal differences among scholars or institutional changes exerted from above. Instead, he focused attention on the incremental material-social developments, particularly class arrangements and conflicts, which shaped the production of ideas during different historical periods. I use 'class' in the pre-modern period to denote a human grouping whose members are engaged in similar economic-occupational activities, have a comparable position vis-à-vis the means of production, but who nonetheless draw upon a variety of social experiences and factional, religious, ethnic or regional identities that can and do undermine class. I also benefited from Rifa'at Abou El-Haj's treatment of the nature of the transfer of scholarship from one locale to another 'less as one of importation and more as one that meets local needs, thereby becoming for some... historians a creative, but projected, means for understanding their society and by extension themselves, that is in defining their identity'.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I have found the treatment of 'tradition' in the works of Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger illuminating. By understanding the dynamic and multilayered notions of 'tradition', as changing rather than static, I cautioned myself against self-descriptions of 'tradition-based' juridical concepts and rulings advanced by Safavid

theologians. Customarily, theologians invoked past rulings and framed their argument in terms of conformity to clerical 'tradition' or the texts of foundational Shi'ite '*ulama*, even while advancing new legal opinions and juridical concepts. Their opinions and concepts, however, assumed new meanings derived from novel historical experiences and ideological positions.

The Safavid period (1501–1736CE) is of great significance to historians of Islam in that it captures the imperial adoption and institutionalization of Shi'ism in Persia. This study examines the historical circumstances which made Safavid Persia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the home of leading Arab '*ulama* who hoped to suppress folk and heterodox notions of Shi'ism and define 'orthodoxy' on the basis of Ja'fari legal parameters and clerical consensus. I focus attention on nine Safavid theologians of an 'Amili background who led glamorous careers and/or produced works of great import and relevance to Persian society in particular and the Shi'ite world at large. The scholars were 'Ali b. 'Abd al-'Ali al-Karaki (d. 940AH/1533CE), Husayn b. 'Abd al-Samad (d. 984AH/1576CE), Husayn al-Mujtahid (d. 1001AH/1592CE), Baha' al-Din al-'Amili (d. 1030AH/1621CE), Mir Damad (d. 1041AH/1631–2CE), Ahmad b. Zayn al-'Abidin (d. 1054AH/1644CE), Lutfullah al-Maysi (d. 1032AH/1622–3CE), 'Ali b. Muhammad b. al-Hasan b. Zayn al-Din al-'Amili (d. 1103–4AH/1691CE) and Muhammad al-Hurr al-'Amili (d. 1111AH/1699CE). Except for 'Ali b. Muhammad b. al-Hasan b. Zayn al-Din, all of the above theologians enjoyed close ties with the Safavid court, occupied the highest religious offices in Persia and created the principal tools for the routinization of Safavid rule irrespective of whether they inherently accepted its legitimacy or contrived to challenge it in time. Based on legal and doctrinal works, biographical précis, personal history, Safavid chronicles, travel accounts and Ottoman Arab literature, I highlight the social order in which the clerics lived, the rivalries they experienced, and the alliances they forged with the Persian notables and the military elite, known as the Qizilbash.<sup>5</sup> The clerics' efforts at establishing a distinct system of Shi'ite ideas and legal practices found justification not in the Arab cultural background of the 'Amilis but rather in the Persian social ambit that nurtured and reworked those ideas. Their scholarship and careers spoke directly to Safavid legitimacy, imperial sovereignty, state structure, religious policy, popular dissent and the social struggles among the administrative-military elites.

Beyond the scholastic-social ties that bound the founders of the *madrasas* of Jabal 'Amil and their disciples together, there was a marked network of kinship relations, both consanguinal and marital, that reinforced the solidarity and elitism of this community. Access to *shari'a* knowledge tended to concentrate in tightly knit family groups and became the esteemed possession of their immediate descendants. By the early sixteenth century, Jabal 'Amil became the foremost center for Shi'ite learning, and an accrediting institution, producing and influencing hundreds of theologians who lived or settled in Syria, Mecca, Iraq, Persia and India.

The 'Amili '*ulama's* migration to Persia became one expression of the dramatic changes in Jabal 'Amil's political stability, the meager recruitment of 'Amili jurists

in the Ottoman teaching system, the clerics' frustrated hopes of implementing the Ja'fari rulings (*ahkam*) and legal punishments (*hudud*) in their locales, and their ambitions in recasting their social role in Shi'ite society.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Qatifi and Iraqi Shi'ite scholars at the time, the 'Amilis were prepared to transform Shi'ism from a religion of the community to that of the state, proposing significant modifications in political theory and becoming highly equipped to circumvent Ottoman and Uzbek propaganda and ideological expansion. They espoused, to differing degrees, a close affinity with secular sovereignty. This is best illustrated in their distinct approaches toward Friday prayer (*salat al-Jum'a*). Whereas Friday prayer and the sermon succeeding it were systematically convened among Sunnite Muslims from early Islamic times, Shi'ites have for most of their history made a half-hearted commitment to its performance during the absence of the Imam. The early Safavid Shahs understood the extent to which the convening of Friday prayer was fundamentally tied to the legitimacy and sovereignty of the ruler and attempted, for the first time in Shi'ite history, to institute it. The enactment of Friday prayer, which required the presence of a jurist further aimed at restoring the Shi'ite community to political normalcy concomitant with state formation. Whether as rationalists (*usulis*), who favored the use of rational inference in deriving legal rulings, or as traditionalists (*akhbaris*), who relied solely on traditions for religious guidance, leading 'Amili scholars participated effectively in governmental offices and strengthened the foundation of Safavid rule without abandoning their aspiration for a total recovery of Imamate authority. By the mid seventeenth century, conventional 'Amili jurists faced a strong competition from new intellectual hybrids, namely, the Sufi bent and philosophically bent scholars who joined in the heated struggles over the legal status of Friday prayer.

The terms 'Shi'ism' and 'Sunnism' underwent significant shifts from the early Safavid period until the mid sixteenth century, as well as in the late seventeenth century. I have tried to delineate some of these shifts and to account for several competing versions of 'Shi'ism' under the early Safavids. Yet, we need more in-depth studies on this question. Willem Floor accurately noted that, 'apart from the fact that there are neither precise data on the entire population nor of its ethnic or religious distribution, one also does not exactly know what the term Moslim meant in those days'.<sup>7</sup> Large sectors of non-sedentary populations including the Turkoman Qizilbash expressed shamanistic beliefs and ritual cannibalism at odds with urban clerical Shi'ism. As for Sunnism, it continued to appeal to important social groups in early Safavid society and to find use among political elites. Several traditions of Sunnism and Shi'ism overlapped, including the *ahl al-bayt* devotionism. Yet, mostly due to the Safavid-Ottoman political rivalry, Safavid religious servicemen encouraged and popularized the vilification of Sunnite symbols and drew stronger ritualistic and doctrinal boundaries between *shari'a*-based Shi'ism and *shari'a*-based Sunnism.

Far from remaining self-absorbed legal experts, the 'Amili jurists mediated their views effectively through a network of students and followers who translated their juridical rulings into Persian and state officials who turned them into decrees. The

'*ulama*'s doctrinal, legal and philosophical works reflected alterations in the monarchs' sources of legitimacy, measure of control over the Qizilbash, centralization efforts, economic stability, depopulation and forced migration aimed at thwarting Ottoman invasions in frontier areas heavily inhabited by Christians. The clerics' writings also reflected internal class conflicts, expressed in distinct ideological terms. At the time of Shah Tahmasb, but mainly under Shah 'Abbas, the translation and abridgment of major Shi'ite texts of doctrine and positive law from Arabic into Persian carried the legal-political debates from the exclusive circles of theologians to a vast community of low-ranking scholars, political figures, merchants and artisans.

Safavid jurists solicited, in addition to the clientship of a learned Persian elite, a following among the lower strata of Safavid society. Like other state-appointed officials, the 'Amilis saw themselves collectively as the custodians of a defined orthodoxy, encouraging not merely an explicit knowledge of doctrine but a systematic enactment of ritual. They built new bridges and supplied pertinent justifications for how an exegetic use of the past in Twelver Shi'ite history is relevant to the present. Concomitant with the dissemination of Shi'ite creed was a process of Persianization on class and state levels; that is the consolidation of an idiosyncratic Iranian Shi'ism. Perhaps the most indicative feature of Persianization was the almost complete eclipse of 'Amilism' as a scholastic-ethnic phenomenon at the Safavid court in the mid seventeenth century and the emergence of an eclectic body of Iranian '*ulama*' who carried the legal discourses to wider circles of scholars and politically charged domains.

As the 'Amili theologians ascended the highest ranks of the Safavid religious establishment, they had to define their approaches to both popular and 'high' Sufism, to the folk religious beliefs and rituals that thrived in guild sectors.<sup>8</sup> In a dialectic of opposition and co-optation, state-backed jurists were able to score important victories against heterodoxy and popular Sufism, both of which were presented as a moral discordance to Shi'ite legalism. By the end of Safavid rule, much of the archetypal austerity, miraculous (*karamat*) powers and spiritual excellence known to the Sufis became the claimed grace of the guardians of the *shari'a* and its officially uncontested interpreters. Here I draw upon the studies of Abdol Hosein Zarrinkoob, particularly in *Dunbala-yi Justuju-yi Tasavvuf dar Iran*, but further explore Sufi adoptions of the legal discourse and highlight diversity within clerical and Sufi circles in changing historical contexts. In the meantime, influential religious leaders had wrested new sources of power through the Shahs' patronage, the consolidation of religious endowments (*waqf*), and the acquisition of economic grants and immunities from taxation. They never, however, acted independently or determined the Safavids' policies as such. Rather, they accommodated the sovereigns' agendas while simultaneously manipulating the judicial domain and reworking vital social alliances to achieve some autonomy and political power.



# 1

## Sufi Regalia and Legal Banners

### The Safavids and the Emigré Arab Jurists

I want a jurisconsult (*mujtahid*) from Jabal 'Amil  
– *Shah Tahmasb*

IN 907AH/1501CE, A SUFI order in Ardabil, known as the Safavid, claimed sovereignty in Persia and founded an empire that rivaled the Ottomans in the West. The empire's assumption of a distinct religious identity, namely Shi'ite Islam, was concomitant with profound social and political changes in Persia and regional Arab Shi'ite societies during the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

The terms 'Shi'ite' and 'Shi'ism' require explanation. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 11AH/632CE, one religious faction, known as the partisans (Shi'a) of 'Ali (d. 41AH/661CE), the cousin of the Prophet, promoted 'Ali as the rightful successor and caliph. The aspirations of this faction, however, remained unfulfilled for 30 years, during which three of the Prophet's Companions in turn became caliphs, namely Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman. These caliphs came to represent 'mainstream' or Sunnite Islam. Their followers argued that they constituted the 'Sunna' (the right path) supported by the majority of the Muslim community. 'Ali and his followers rejected this position, and protested that 'Umar and 'Uthman promulgated Islam in ways contrary to the Qur'an and Muhammad's statements. Shi'ism asserts that its authority originates in 'Ali, the first Imam (an infallible religious guide), and is transmitted to 'Ali's descendants from Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-'Askari, the twelfth and last Shi'ite Imam, had no progeny. He disappeared or went into hiding in 260AH/873CE. Shi'ites consider the twelfth Imam to be the Mahdi (Messiah) and await his return to establish the legitimate Shi'ite government.