

A Typology of Transgressive Thought in Iran

Arash Ghajarjazi *

Abstract

This paper presentation sketches an intellectual history of transgressive thought in Iran in the short period between 1920 and 1950. To that end, two types of transgressive thinking are distinguished. First, with regard to intellectuals such as Amir Khān Amir A'lam and Ahmad Kasravi, I develop the concept of liminal transgression. Second, in relation to personas such as Šādeq Hedāyat and Donyā magazine, I work on the concept of irreversible transgression. I elaborate these concepts in relation to the educational reforms in the second half of the nineteenth century, during which natural sciences and empirical knowledge began to be systemically dissociated from Islamic knowledge (ma' refat-e/shenākht-e eslāmī). Drawing on George Bataille and Michel Foucault, liminal transgression is defined as an oscillatory movement around the limit of a religious system. In contrast, borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I use the concept of irreversible transgression as a movement that radically stand outside of a given system. This latter type is transgressive to the extent that it fundamentally evades and avoids any knowing venture informed by Islamic or Islamicate ideas, narratives, and practices. I argue that in the better part of the nineteenth century, new sciences ('olum-e jadid) were kept at a safe distance from Islamic knowledge without dismantling or disrespecting it. Since circa 1920, however, some secular Iranian scientists and literati increasingly dispelled Islamic knowledge – from lesser-known figures such as 'Ali Rādpur, who wrote frequently in scientific magazines in the 1920s to more distinguished writers such as Hedāyat, who openly criticised Islamic doctrines and practices in his (non-)fictions. These textual personas are re-contextualised as integral to the seventy-odd years of the separation between empirical knowledge and theological knowledge.

This paper is the result of my involvement in the research project Beyond Sharia, convened at Utrecht University by Prof. Asghar Seyed Gohrab.

Keywords

Transgression, intellectual history, Kasravi, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Bataille

*Arash Ghajarjazi is Postdoc. researcher at Utrecht University and holds a Ph.D. In Philosophy and Religious Studies. He is the author of the forthcoming book called: *Irrationalities in Islam and Media in 19th-century Iran*, (2022).

A Typology of Transgressive Thought in Iran¹

§ 1

Humankind has reached a stage in the evolution of civilisation that it wants to conduct its society according to materialist and logical principles. *Donyā* magazine manifests the permeation of this thought in the Persian-speaking sphere.²

§ 2

Centuries ago, [The Prophet's] far-sighted vision saw what can be [empirically] observed today. The true religion of Islam, which has included the laws of hygiene (*hefẓ al-seh̄ha*) in its principles, improved this branch of medicine to such a degree that thousands of great scholars in Europe are still struggling and suffering to attain that level.³

Above are two excerpts that reflect on the relationship between Islam and

science. The first is taken from the leading article of the sixth issue of *Donyā* magazine, managed by the scientist and intellectual Taqī Erāni (d. 1940) and published in Iran from 1933 to 1935. The author implicitly excludes Islamic knowledge (*ma'rifat-e eslāmī*) from the collective conduct of modern Iranian civilisation. In contrast with *Donyā's* dismissive attitude to Islamic knowledge, the second quote takes a reconciliatory stance. It was written by the physician Amir Khān Amir A'lam (d. 1961), a high-ranking practitioner and medical trainer in the late Qājār and the Pahlavi era, who received his medical diploma in France. The excerpt is taken from the Persian version of Amir A'lam's doctoral thesis on the topic of Islamic hygiene (*hefẓ al-seh̄ha*). He had partly translated it from French to remind young Iranian medical students of their own religio-scientific tradition. Unlike *Donyā*, A'lam thinks that modern science, at least its medical branch, has not yet advanced as much as Islamic Prophetic medicine. For him, science would eventually arrive at everything Islam already knew.

Many scholars often describe such personas in terms of the concept of the secular.⁴ To crudely summarise their

1 For the transliteration style of the Persian and Arabic words, see my forthcoming book, Ghajarjazi, *Irrationalities in Islam and Media in Nineteenth-Century Iran*.

2 Anon., "Six Months of *Donyā* Magazine and Its Reception (Shesh Māh Majalle-ye *Donyā* va En'ekās-e Ān)," 165.

3 Amir A'lam, *Name-Ye Ahmadi: Hefẓ al-Seh̄ha-Ye Eslāmī (Islamic Hygiene)*, 6.

4 Any list of examples would be inexhaustibly long. Among them I can mention Hamid Dabashi's views on secularisation, which is a strictly a colonial project applied to a society from the outside. Dabashi, *Being a Muslim in the World*, 20–40. Many scholars use the term unproblematically to broadly describe modern intellectuals and scientists. See, for instance, Schayegh, *Who Is Knowledgeable, Is Strong*, 14. It is not within the scope of this short article to review secularity studies in the field. I should therefore state that there are

views, both *Donyā* and A‘lam are considered secular in view of their presupposed separation between Islam and science. However, A‘lam’s and *Donyā*’s viewpoints stand on opposite extremes: if for the latter that separation *dismises* Islam to the advantage of science, for the former the same separation *embraces* an Islam that is imagined so perfect that science could only ideally attain. To be clear, the broadly complicated concept of the secular has positively contributed to our understanding of Iranian modern history. Complementary to their work, I find it necessary to re-examine this history by developing new concepts so as to distinguish more sharply between these “secular” figures. As ‘Ayn al-Qoḍāt al-Hamadāī (d. 1131) suggested in his book *Tambidāt*, perhaps for the first time in the history of Islamic thought, in as early as the twelfth century, “unbelief (*koḥrḥā*) is of different kinds, though people confuse them all as one (*bedān ke koḥrḥā bar aqsām ast va khalq hame koḥrḥā yeki daneste and*)”.¹ How far and how detailed do we know about *koḥr* in modern Iran? In this short and sketchy paper, I think with the concept of *transgression* to that end. To do so, I keep an eye on a few theoretical sources on one hand and closely examine selected primary sources on the other hand. The theories work as toolboxes by which I elaborate the concept of

transgression while my close inspection of the primary sources ensures that the concept is made to work integrally to a concrete historical context, namely early twentieth-century Iran.

In *Donyā* magazine, science gains an epistemological ascendancy to religion. The article asserts that every knowing effort should be left to the scientists and in so doing it steps outside the cultural hegemony of Islam in Iran. Parallel to this, the secular Amir A‘lam reverses this transgressive act. If *Donyā* pushes beyond the clerical limit, A‘lam pulls against it. The difference is self-explanatory. This relationship, however, appears more ambiguous when other contemporaneous intellectuals and scientists are considered. For instance, in his book *On The Matter of Islam (Pirāmun-e Eslām)*, Ahmad Kasravi (d. 1946) imagines two Islams:

One is the Islam that the holy Arab man established thousand three hundred and fifty years ago and would continue for centuries. And the other is the Islam that exists today ... These two are called Islam but are not the same and are completely separate from one another.²

This trick enables Kasravi to be both transgressive *and* affirmative with respect to Islam, though this latter aspect did not prevent the fierce backlash against him by

works that do take what I would like to call *graded secularity* seriously. As one example in the Persian language, see the brilliant concept of *aqānajaḥīzodā’i* proffered by Nikfar. Nikfar, “Putting Forward a Native Theory of Secularisation,” 11. In the English language, there is a recent edited volume that discusses different kinds of secularisation and secularisms in non-Western cultures. See Künkler, Madeley, and Shankar, *A Secular Age beyond the West*.

1 ‘Ayn al-Qoḍāt Hamadānī, *Tambidāt*, 208.

2 Kasravi, *Pirāmun-e Eslām (On the Matter of Islam)*, 1.

the Shia clerics, which ultimately led to his brutal assassination.

Similarly, another physician in the same period, Abbas Naficy (d. 1972) criticises the Muslim clergy for their hindering the progress of medical science in Iran in his PhD dissertation on the foundation of Persian medicine. Although he goes against the religion of Islam, as practised, and propagated by the clerical society, he nostalgically idealises the pre-Islamic Persian religion. Another example would be Mahmud Mahmud (d. 1965), who held similar ambiguous views.¹

Such ambiguous commentaries on Islam and science can be found abundantly in the Persian-speaking print media in the first half of the twentieth century. Many examples can be found in the magazines of *Dānesh*, *Mebr*, and *Irānshahr*, among many others.² In these ambiguous loci, the relationships between science and Islam are not as clear as the ones in *Donyā* and *A‘lam*. This ambiguity reflected a wider social indecisiveness in talking about Islam and science. Put simply, from the point of view of the Iranian public at the time, what was perceived as Islam and science could not have been a straightforward understanding. It is in this undecided and blurry mental environment that many writers, poets, and scientists mused about their complicated modernity. How can the concept of transgression intervene in this

field? How can it explain the differences and nuances in this complication?

The Liminal Transgression of Kasravi and A‘lam

In his book *L’Erotisme*, translated in English as *Death and Sensuality*, George Bataille offers a provocative understanding of transgression. “The taboo”, he writes, “is there to be violated”.³ A transgressive act in a religious domain, according to Bataille, does not subvert and destroy. It is performed against the limit of a system not to destroy it, but rather to the contrary, to ensure the system lives on. The key relation between “limit” and “transgression” is what I would like to hold on to in my thinking about the case of Iran.

Michelle Foucault adapts the same key concepts in his “Preface to Transgression”, published in French in 1963, and later in English in 1977. In this short essay, Foucault elaborates further on the relation between limit and transgression. As he explains,

the play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is

1 See Mahmud’s article in the magazine of *taqaddom* signed by his pseudonym: Nakshabi, “Ta‘lim va Tarbiyat-e Tude-Ye Mellat (The Education of the Nation’s People).”

2 See for instance Anon., “Jang Bā Fasād-e Akhlāq (War on the Corruption of Morality).” Cyrus Schayegh refers to this article many times in his book. See for instance Schayegh, *Who Is Knowledgeable, Is Strong*, 78–80.

3 Bataille, *Death and Sexuality*, 64.

made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable.¹

At its core, Foucault maintains that a transgressive act must always oscillate back and forth through the limit in order to subsist as such. To transgress, one needs to constantly abandon and embrace the limit of whatever is being transgressed. Otherwise, according to Foucault and Bataille, the whole system would collapse and transgression per se would become meaningless. Inversely, the limit has to afford and enable transgression. It must keep it as a realisable possibility: “a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows”².

Both Bataille and Foucault understand transgression in the context of Western history of sexuality. For Foucault, this was particularly pertinent to the revolutionary zeal of the 1960s in Europe and the US – the events of May 68 being its culmination. It was in such a context that Foucault wrote about the affirmative and non-destructive sense of transgression. Despite Foucault’s and Bataille’s different intellectual contexts, their philosophies can be tweaked to respond to the Iranian context. In a word, it is possible today to do what Foucault failed to do in his own time, namely, to think about the complex

intellectual history of Iran considering the concept of transgression.³

I use the term *liminal transgression* to observe A‘lam’s and Kasravi’s secular standpoints, as well as many of their contemporaries. Liminal should capture the sense of being on both sides of a limit point. Even an Orwellian *doublethink* may come to mind. Both Kasravi’s splitting strategy – whereby Islam is schizophrenically imagined as two – and A‘lam’s conciliatory strategy – whereby Islam is stretched to the extent that it becomes an ideal science – are liminal. None of the two figures approaches Islam in a subversive manner, though they both move in the vicinity of a limit. In Kasravi’s case, this limit affords him to step over what is considered Islam in his time only to step back toward a pristine understanding of Islam. Borrowing from Foucault to describe this liminality geometrically, this transgression “takes the form of a spiral”⁴ in the sense that one is paradoxically moving away from the centre and pulled towards it at the same time. To muse a bit further with this cryptic theory, on the edges of a whirlwind, one is at once pulled into the centre and thrown away from it. The fate of the spiralled depends on an accidental, though necessary momentum, which results in either ex-communication or assimilation, e.g. Kasravi or A‘lam. If Kasravi ended up being thrown out of the

1 Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 34.

2 Ibid.

3 For an extensive study of how Foucault misperceived the Iranian Revolution see Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*.

4 Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” 35.

spiral in his transgression – he was declared a *molhad* and violently assassinated— A‘lam gravitated towards the centre – where he would be declared a pious scientist. These two figures move in opposite directions but move in *one* transgressive geometry. They both operate on and around the limit but do not dismantle the system whose limit they explore.

Liminal transgression captures only one aspect of modern Iranian intellectuals’ relationship to Islam. There remains another type, a more clandestine transgression, the one I trace in *Donya’s* leading article quoted earlier. Liminal transgression is unable to account for this type, in which Islam is not even mentioned explicitly, but is implicitly dismissed. What type of transgression is at work in this case?

The Irreversible Transgression of *Donyā*

In early twentieth-century Iran, many scientists and literati came to the realisation that absolutely nothing in the Islamic epistemic traditions could be considered truthful, and hence could not be admitted as a measure of knowledge. Nothing from the scripture, the Prophetic literature, and centuries of theological hermeneutics could be considered scientific knowledge, nor even compatible with it. The genealogy of this radical transgression may be drawn from the likes of Fath‘alī Ākhundzāde (d. 1878) to Šādeq Hedāyat (d. 1951). They were neither divided subjects to imagine an ideal version of Islam, nor hyper-pious scientists like A‘lam to embrace a timeless and idealistically rational Islam. It seems that these other secular personas,

best exemplified in *Donya’s* leading article, radically crossed the limit, and did not wish to step back into the religious system. There is no negotiation between the centre and the periphery, no reconciliation, and no splitting strategy. One cannot deconstruct their duality as easily as with Kasravi and A‘lam. There is a completely different domain that operates independently from the perceived Islam, and yet is not necessarily antagonistic towards it.

The concept of liminal transgression does not respond to this kind of transgressive operation. It falls short of recognising such a subtle radicalism. To explain this type, I borrow from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s philosophy of the limit. This is given in their most celebrated book *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which they distinguish between “limit” and “threshold” – the former is taken in more or less the same sense as Foucault’s, and the latter, as they put it, a stage beyond the limit “marking an inevitable change”. In their views, it so happens that sometimes one steps beyond the limit too far, crossing a threshold beyond which nothing could be the same anymore. Their famous analogy is the “last glass” complex:

what does an alcoholic call the last glass? The alcoholic makes a subjective evaluation of how much he or she can tolerate. What can be tolerated is precisely the limit at which, as the alcoholic sees it, he or she will be able to start over again (after a rest, a pause ...). But beyond that limit there lies a threshold that would cause the alcoholic to change assemblage: it would change either the nature of the drinks or the customary places and

hours of the drinking. Or worse yet, the alcoholic would enter a suicidal assemblage, or a medical, hospital assemblage, etc.¹

To think with Deleuze and Guattari, those ambiguous seculars like Naficy and Mahmud always knew their limits, that is, their last glass, beyond which they would cease to be Muslims. Kasravi too had his last glass on the horizon of his transgression, namely the pristine Islam of “the holy Arab man”, though he might have tragically miscalculated the dosage.

Closing Remarks

The concept of transgression can be rendered in Persian/Arabic in different ways. Terms such as *‘dul*, *takbatti*, *‘osyān*, *tajavūz* are among a few possible candidates. Each of these words can capture a sense of the Latin-based term transgression, which etymologically means to step across. In Islamic traditions, different words have been used by different communities of Muslims that can be thought of in relation to transgression in the sense I have crudely developed in this paper. From the very early decades of Islam, there were unbelievers, e.g., *kāfars*, *khavārej*. Later, certain Shia sects were considered a sort of transgression by the Seljuks and the Mamluks. One can also think of the terms *gholov*, from which *gholāt* was derived, or

zandaqa, *elḥād*, *fesq*, *fetna*, and *ertedād*.² Sometimes, one could return from these categories of unbelief, if they repented, but mostly, stepping into those external domains would be considered unforgivable and irreversible. In *ertedād* and *keofr*, for instance, there is a sense of passing across a threshold beyond which the assemblage changes.

To bring a sip of this theoretical reflection in the Persian language, I am tempted to use the word *rad kardān* when thinking about this second type of transgression. It comes from the Persian vernacular and is often used when younger urban Iranians wish to describe a person’s aberrant behaviour, or more directly a person who is so high on drugs that they cannot ever return to their normal condition. There is a sense of irreversibility in *rad kardān*, which may be missed in the word *ertedād*.

These two types of transgressive thought have survived well into the new century. The second type, irreversible transgression, has become the norm among both the Iranian diaspora as well as the Iranian denizens in Iran.³ A quick glance at the politically agitated avatars on social media clearly reveals this collective radical transgression/*rad kardān*. This transgressive attitude to Islam is not reducible to resentment, as Dariush Ashoori would like to think.⁴ Rather, it is

1 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 438.

2 For two seminal studies on these terms see Lewis, “Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in the History of Islam”; Knysh, “‘Orthodoxy’ and ‘Heresy’ in Medieval Islam.”

3 For a statistical perspective on this see Arab and Maliki, “Iran’s Secular Shift.”

4 For a brief explanation of the concept of resentment, see Khatibi, “Mafhum-e Kintuzi va Bohran-e Roshanfekri-ye Irāni [The Concept of Resentment and the Crisis of Iranian Intellectuality].”

more likely that for such personas – from Hedāyat in the 1920s to exiled scientists in the 2020s – this transgression is “the minimal necessary condition of intellectual integrity in the rigorous search for knowledge and truth”, to quote the Syrian philosopher Ṣādeq Jalal al-‘Aẓm (d. 2006).¹ This absolute rejection of Islamic knowledge may be oftentimes emotionally charged, but the rejection per se is not a necessary consequence of emotions.

On the other hand, it may be observed that the first type, liminal transgression, was conveniently assimilated by the Islamic Revolutionary discourse from 1979 onwards. During this period, a modern rationalised interpretation of Islam gained dominance, whereby sciences were pragmatically assimilated into the Islamic praxis and contradictions were masked or justified by resorting to mystical and mythical components. The Islamic Republic has so far succeeded in sustaining this trend in the twenty-first century and provided enough intellectual resources for Muslim scientists to thrive without experiencing fundamental crises of thought.

¹ ‘Aẓm, *Critique of Religious Thought*, 29. The book was originally written in Arabic and published in 1969 in Lebanon, after which he was put on trial in Beirut for offence against Islam and Christianity.

Bibliography

- Afary, Janet, and Kevin Anderson. *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Amir A'lam, Amir Khān. *Name-Ye Ahmadi: Heḡz al-Seḡḡa-Ye Eslāmi (Islamic Hygiene)*. Tehran: Institute of Medical History, 1953.
- Anon. "Jang Bā Fasād-e Akhlāq (War on the Corruption of Morality)" 1, no. 5 (1922): 93–97.
- . "Six Months of *Donyā* Magazine and Its Reception (Shesh Māh Majalle-Ye *Donyā* va En'ekās-e Ān)." *Donyā* 1, no. 6 (1934): 165–69.
- Arab, Pooyan Tamimi, and Ammar Maliki. "Iran's Secular Shift: New Survey Reveals Huge Changes in Religious Beliefs." *The Conversation*, September 10 (2020).
- 'Ayn al-Qoḡāt Hamadānī. *Tambidāt*. Edited by 'Afif 'Oḡḡayrān. Tehran: n.p., 1991.
- 'Az̄m, ḡādiq Jalāl. *Critique of Religious Thought: English Translation of Naqd al-Fikr Ad-Dini*. Translated by George Stergios and Mansour Ajami. Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015.
- Bataille, Georges. *Death and Sexuality: The Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*. Translated by Mary Dalwood. New York: Walker and Company, 1962.
- Dabashi, Hamid. *Being a Muslim in the World*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Athlone Press, 1988.
- Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 29–52. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Ghajarjazi, Arash. *Irrationalities in Islam and Media in Nineteenth-Century Iran*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2022.
- Kasravi, Ahmad. *Pirāmun-e Eslām (On the Matter of Islam)*. n.p., 1944.
- Khatibi, Firouzeh. "Maḡm-e Kintuzi va Boḡran-e Roshanfekri-Ye Irāni (The Concept of Resentment and the Crisis of Iranian Intellectuality)," 2012. https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2012/06/120603_144_ashuri_darush_iranian_intellectual. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.
- Knysh, Alexander. "'Orthodoxy' and 'Heresy' in Medieval Islam: An Essay in Reassessment." *The Muslim World* 83, no. 1 (1993): 48–67.
- Künkler, Mirjam, John Madeley, and Shylashri Shankar, eds. *A Secular Age beyond the West: Religion, Law and the State in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa*. Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Lewis, Bernard. "Some Observations on the Significance of Heresy in the History of Islam." *Studia Islamica*, no. 1 (1953): 43–63.
- Nakshabi, Rasul. "Ta'lim va Tarbiyat-e Tude-Ye Mellat (The Education of the Nation's People)." *Taqaddom* 1, no. 10 (1928): 561–70.

Nikfar, Mohammad Reza. “Tarḥ-e Yek Nazariye-Ye Bumi Darbarye Sekularizasiyun (Putting Forward a Native Theory of Secularisation).” *Aftāb*, no. 27 (2003).

Schayegh, Cyrus. *Who Is Knowledgeable, Is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society, 1900-1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.