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The critique of religion as political critique: Mīrzā Faṭḥ ‘Alī Ākhūndzāda’s pre-Islamic xenology

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Although he was one of the most cosmopolitan writers of the nineteenth-century Persianate world, the writings of the Azeri intellectual Mīrzā Faṭḥ ‘Alī Ākhūndzāda (1812–1878) do not present the author, on a first reading, as a paragon of tolerance. Born in Nukha, a provincial town that was incorporated into the Russian empire when he was 16 but which at the time of his birth belonged to Qajar Iran, Ākhūndzāda, who was to become “the most significant representative of the Iranian Enlightenment,” as well as “the most intriguing and important personality to participate in the nineteenth-century Iranian revival” dedicated much of his life to attacking the dominant institutions of his time.¹ Ākhūndzāda fleshed out his critique of religion in general and Islam specifically in his most ambitious work, the *Letters from Prince Kamāl al-Dawla to the Prince Jalāl al-Dawla* (1865), often referred to simply as the *Maktūbāt* (*Letters*).² These fictional letters purport to record an exchange between a Mughal prince based in Iran and a Qajar prince based in Egypt. The overriding theme of these letters is a vociferous critique of the foundations of Islamic learning as well as of the Arab contribution to Islamic civilization. *Maktūbāt* consists of three letters from the fictional Kamāl al-Dawla, one of the last scions of the Mughal dynasty, to the Qajar Prince Jalāl al-Dawla, who answers his friend’s polemics at the end of the text. The text concludes with an appendix, also comprised of three letters, from “a friend of the writer Kamāl al-Dawla, to one of the writer’s followers” (*Maktūbāt*, 202–228). Although Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (1721) is often proposed as a model for this epistolary text, Ākhūndzāda moves in a more eclectic direction. He is not content to simply apply European Enlightenment thought to nineteenth-century Persia.

Maktūbāt focuses on the critique of Islam as a religion and a social practice. At the time of their composition, the letters of Kamāl al-Dawla included some of the most pointed critiques of Islamic thought – and of theistic belief generally – ever to have been composed in Persian. While the European influences on *Maktūbāt* have attracted significant scholarly attention, its eclectic non-European genealogies remain relatively obscure.³ And yet *Maktūbāt* engages with multiple pre-European traditions of religious critique. The first of these, which Ākhūndzāda made the least explicit, is the Islamic endeavor to document religious diversity that dates back to al-Bīrūnī’s *Kitāb al-Hind* (*Book of India*) and al-Sharastānī’s *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal* (*Book of sects and creeds*). A second influence, which he accentuated more forthrightly, is early modern Neo-Zoroastrianism, as well as the revival of pre-Islamic Iranian learning by itinerant Parsis (Indian Zoroastrians) during the nineteenth century. The Mughal tradition of religious debate set the stage for this second body of work, which attained florescence at the court of the

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Mughal ruler Akbar (1556–1605), although its legacy persisted long after the reign of Akbar and into the reign of Shāh Jahān (1628–1657). Ākhūndzāda's most important source, the *Dabistān-i madhāhib* (*School of Religions*), was composed during the latter's reign.⁴

Ākhūndzāda's endeavors to revitalize a pre-Islamic Iranian past drew heavily on the work of Indian Zoroastrians, most notably Manekji Limji Hataria (1813–1890), whose Gujarati-language *Essay on a Description of a Journey to Iran* (1864) coincided in time with Ākhūndzāda's *Maktūbāt*. Both works promoted a vision of Iran as “the original birthplace of the ancestors of the Parsi community and of their empire.”⁵ As a spiritual ambassador of the Zoroastrians (or, as he preferred to call them, Parsis), Manekji spent 40 years in Iran working to improve conditions for his fellow Zoroastrians. During his time in Iran, Manekji also spearheaded a literary movement among the Iranian literati that aimed at the revival of pre-Islamic Iranian culture. This movement included such luminaries as Jalāl al-Dīn Mirzā, whose three-volume *Book of Kings* (*Nāmāh-yi khusravān*, 1868–1871) harkened back to a time when the rulers of Iran were “heroes defending Iran against the unremitting assaults of foreign armies and tyrants.”⁶ In a letter to Manekji, Ākhūndzāda proudly declared that both his own *Maktūbāt* and Jalāl al-Dīn's *Nāmāh-yi khusravān* would awaken Iranians from the “sleep of neglect [*khwab-i ghaflat*]” in which he considered them to have become immersed.⁷ For Ākhūndzāda, corresponding with Manekji was a means of linking his own work with that of his enigmatic contemporary.⁸

Following the completion of his *Maktūbāt*, Ākhūndzāda corresponded with Manekji on matters pertaining to their shared interest in ancient Persian culture.⁹ Like the fictional Kamāl al-Dawla, Manekji hoped to revive pre-Islamic Iranian culture within Qajar society, and to displace the legacy of Arab and Islamic rule in Iranian history. Also like Kamāl al-Dawla and notwithstanding his ardent Iranian nationalism, Manekji was not a native-born Iranian. Like Ākhūndzāda, who only visited Qajar Iran twice and passed most of his life within territory that had recently been incorporated into the Russian empire, the Indian-born Manekji identified as Persian, and saw himself as the rightful heir to the lost legacies of ancient Iran.

European learning clearly influenced Ākhūndzāda's efforts to reform the modern Iranian world. Yet, in the light of the preponderance of studies on Ākhūndzāda as a reformer alongside a scarcity of attention to anything else, this essay shifts the focus. I examine Ākhūndzāda's non-European precedents as well as his subsequent impact on Iranian intellectual history. Recent scholarship has shown how Ākhūndzāda's Persian lineages were mired in proto-nationalism, and awash in anti-Arab sentiment, and other prejudices.¹⁰ While critical engagement with Ākhūndzāda must interrogate his biases, it is also worth tracing how he advocates for gender and social equality from within socially retrograde idioms. Following on the second imperative, this article documents how the early modern intellectual genealogies that Ākhūndzāda incorporates into his utopian vision nuance our understanding of early modern rationalism within Islamic intellectual history.¹¹ I also explore how these connections contribute to an emergent global intellectual history which is increasingly taking hold within the academy.¹²

Before proceeding, it is important to note the intimate relation Ākhūndzāda perceived between religious tolerance and the critique of religion. In the dictionary of key terms that prefaces his *Maktūbāt*, Ākhūndzāda defined the “liberal” as “an absolute free-thinker [who] is not subject to religious terror, and does not believe in what is beyond reason and outside nature's law [*qānūn-i tabī'at*].”¹³ Elsewhere, Ākhūndzāda insists on the impossibility of being liberal while maintaining religious beliefs (*i'tiqād*) (*Maktūbāt*, 56). In his view, liberalism and religious faith exclude each other. Given Ākhūndzāda's rejection of faith, it is worth pondering how a text that is shaped by a long history of Islamic reasoning, and yet opposed to religion as such, should be situated within Islamic intellectual history. Is the critique of Islam internal to the history of Islamic reason? Can a normative canon, that derives its weight and salience from the authority of its sources, and an adamantly secular criticism, such as that propounded by Ākhūndzāda,

that seeks to destroy this authoritative foundation, be productively engaged together? These questions centrally inform my engagement with Ākhūndzāda, as I explore how the Azeri Persian writer combined European and non-European sources to transform an early modern discourse of religious pluralism into an Enlightenment-inspired critique of Qajar despotism.

However it is read, Ākhūndzāda's *Maktūbāt* is clearly and provocatively situated at the intersection of Islamic thinking about cultural, religious, and racial difference. The Mughal protagonist Kamāl al-Dawla considers atheism superior to any creed, and eagerly awaits the replacement of science by faith as the force driving intellectual inquiry. And yet at the same time, *ḥadīth*, didactic texts such as Sa'dī's *Gulistān* and *Bustān*, and a rich corpus of Persian poetry from Ferdowsi to Hafez all lie at the basis of Kamāl al-Dawla's critique. In light of the diversity of influences that enter into its composition, the tradition of treating the *Maktūbāt* purely as an unsuccessful imitation of European values risks eliding the shaping force of Persian and Arabic intellectual history on this text, while silencing the rich dialogue that Ākhūndzāda stages among these various traditions.

Ākhūndzāda explicitly rejects Islam, along with all other theisms. Yet, his text is suffused with the erudition that might be expected of an author who attained to the highest level of Islamic education available in nineteenth-century Nukha. Literally rendered, Ākhūndzāda means "son of an *ākhūnd* [local religious leader]," and, as this name suggests, the author's father was a well-known Islamic scholar.¹⁴ Notwithstanding his disavowal of Iran's Islamic past, Ākhūndzāda was profoundly indebted to prior Muslim thinkers for many of his key insights. Contemporary scholarship stands to gain much by reading *Maktūbāt* in light of its use of Islamic categories for thinking about political power. First, *Maktūbāt* is a text that illuminates early modern endeavors to rethink the foundations of religious knowledge within the Islamic world. Second, *Maktūbāt* read in this way establishes what early modern scholarship did for the nineteenth-century critique of despotic rule. Finally, the text suggests an alternative genealogy for the concept of the critique within the intellectual history of the modern Middle East that is not wholly parasitic on European knowledge. This genealogy is attentive to the intellectual vibrancy of precolonial Islamic engagements with religion.

European influences

Before exploring Ākhūndzāda's lesser known premodern sources, it is worth reviewing his better known European intertexts. Ākhūndzāda's choice of genre for his manifesto is not incidental to its content, for the form he adopted enabled him to articulate a critique of religious belief that exceeded in force and clarity anything that had been written up to that point in Persian. Scholars have attended closely to Voltaire's impact on Ākhūndzāda's conception of critique and specifically his rejection of religion.¹⁵ Ākhūndzāda engages extensively with Voltaire's oeuvre, which, like most of his Iranian contemporaries, he accessed in Russian translation.¹⁶ Equally in evidence among Ākhūndzāda's influences are John Stuart Mill and David Hume, in whose name Ākhūndzāda drafted a letter to the "scholars [*ulamā*] in India and Bombay."¹⁷ Although evidence of direct influence is lacking, the precedent Montesquieu set for Ākhūndzāda with his *Lettres Persanes* is too substantial, particularly in formal terms, to be ignored.

Both Ākhūndzāda and Montesquieu use the epistolary genre to stage wide-ranging critiques of their respective cultures, and in ways that are formally innovative within their respective literary worlds. Both texts appropriate the foreign gaze as a means of generating new perspectives on long-familiar norms. Montesquieu's improbably named Safavid visitors to France, Usbek, and Rica explicate the peculiarities of French culture in terms suited to a fictitious Persian worldview. Ākhūndzāda's Mughal visitor to Iran, Kamāl al-Dawla, does much the same through his comments on Qajar society. At the same time, the spectrum of cultures that engage Kamāl al-Dawla is vaster

and more varied than the relatively constricted east–west binary that constricts the conceptual horizons of Montesquieu’s characters. Whereas Usbek and Rica move between Enlightenment France and Safavid Persia, Ākhūndzāda’s Mughal prince engages a much wider set of comparisons.

Alongside comparing cultures, Kamāl al-Dawla engages in cross-temporal comparison. Like many Iranian reformers of his age, Kamāl al-Dawla is preoccupied with Iran’s pre-Islamic past, in particular its lost glory under the Sasanians. These comparisons lead to wide-ranging critiques of Islamic norms and Arab legacies, and to calls for the reform of Islamic society. They also critically engage with many basic sources within the Islamic tradition, such as Ibn Khaldūn and al-Sharastānī. Here Ākhūndzāda puts his deep learning in Persian, Arabic, and Turkish literature, and in Islamic history, to good use. Other texts of the time that were inspired by *Lettres Persanes* operated wholly within the Enlightenment framework, but Ākhūndzāda’s engagement with the *longue durée* of Islamic history notably surpassed that of Montesquieu.¹⁸

As with his concept of secular liberalism, Ākhūndzāda’s concept of critique was inflected by European norms. This influence is evident in his definition of *qeritika* – a term Ākhūndzāda coined as a calque to the French *critique* and an alternative to the more prevalent Arabic term, *naqd*, that remains the primary term for literary criticism is discussed in Iran.¹⁹ According to Ākhūndzāda, *qeritika* is

normal in Europe and numerous benefits are inherent in it ... when someone writes a book, another person writes objections to his work – conditionally upon his not including hurtful or impolite words referring to the author – all that is said is put into a jocular vein.²⁰

And yet while the form of Ākhūndzāda’s *Maktūbāt* owes more to the European concept of critique than to classical Persian or Arabic literary forms, its content and learning, and even, paradoxically, its argument, are deeply rooted in the history of Islamic thought.

In view of Ākhūndzāda’s sophisticated epistolary framework, it would be a gross simplification to read the polemic against Islamic and Arab civilization²¹ that permeates Kamāl al-Dawla’s letters as a straightforward reflection of the author’s worldview. Ākhūndzāda was, among his many roles, a poet. He was keenly attuned to the capacity of literary discourse to undermine political creeds through formal and poetic means. Ākhūndzāda’s fictional letters metafictionally deploy poetic masks, irony, footnotes (unusual at that time in Persian), and other forms of parenthetical citation to cast new light on the original utterance. Cyrus Masroori has appreciated the tension in Ākhūndzāda’s text between content and form. “In developing Jalāl al-Dawla’s defense,” writes Masroori, “Ākhūndzāda tried hard to provide the strongest arguments, although he opposed Jalāl al-Dawla’s position.”²² Such dialogic devices confer on this epistolary text the polyphonic style of a novel, in the Bakhtinian sense, and reveal its similarities with such contemporaneous modernist polemics as Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864).²³ These metafictional devices also complicate the exposition of Kamāl al-Dawla’s critique. Inasmuch as, for Ākhūndzāda, the formal and the analytical dimensions of the text are inseparable from each other, grasping the form of his *Maktūbāt* necessarily entails engaging its incendiary content.

The most striking aspect of Ākhūndzāda’s oeuvre, when compared to the writings of other reformers with whom he shared a desire to modernize his society, is his vigorous rejection of Islamic traditions, including the Arabic alphabet, Islamic law, and Islamic forms of governance. These rejections are crystallized more forcefully in the *Maktūbāt* than anywhere else in Ākhūndzāda work. Central to Kamāl al-Dawla’s plea for tolerance is a rejection of institutionalized religion. In his first letter, he states: “I am indifferent to all religions and hope for salvation. I prefer that religion through which man can achieve happiness and freedom in this world” (32). Elsewhere, the Mughal prince links the capacity to think autonomously to the political agency entailed in collective action. Addressing his fellow Iranians *en masse*, he declares:

You are larger in number and capacity than the despot. All you need is to unite in heart and goal; if this union were achieved you would then think autonomously and would free yourself from the bonds of empty ideas and despotism's injustice. (55)

Notably, the terms Ākhūndzāda uses to index his utopian political vision are all European in origin: *civilization*, *despot*, *fanaticism*, and *revolution* are retained in transliterated form in his Persian text. In contrast to his contemporaries Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838–1897) and Mīrṣā Malkhom Khān (1833–1908), Ākhūndzāda makes no attempt to Islamicize his European concepts. Far from pursuing this ecumenical path, Ākhūndzāda treats Islam, and indeed, religion in general, as alien to his enlightenment ideals. Expressed in stringently polemical rhetoric, Ākhūndzāda's call for tolerance appears suffused with intolerance, particularly towards Arabs, a people whom he presents in strikingly racialized terms. And yet, even as he derides Arab and Islamic civilization, Ākhūndzāda draws important lessons from discarded traditions that circulated within the Islamic ecumene.

While Ākhūndzāda's utopian efforts to appropriate pre-Islamic Persian civilization are compromised by his hostility to the groups that he perceives to have brought about this civilization's demise, I focus here on the aspects of Ākhūndzāda's critique of Islam as well as of Qajar Iran, that continue to be relevant, even in an era when proliferating prejudice against Islam calls for continuous contestation. Among the most important of Ākhūndzāda's acts of reclamation is his engagement with the early modern Neo-Zoroastrian sources that centrally informed Manekji's thought. Stimulated by a Mughal environment that tolerated and indeed cultivated dissent from dominant religious norms, Neo-Zoroastrian texts offered their readers new ways of managing religious difference. Even as he rejected Arabo-Islamic civilization as a source through which Persianate modernity could be fashioned, Ākhūndzāda managed religious difference from within these same Islamic traditions.

An Indian xenology

For Kamāl al-Dawla, pre-Islamic Persian civilization is a storehouse possessing a wealth of ancient values that he believes can be compellingly grafted onto the present. The Mughal prince cites frequently from a corpus of Persian texts that circulated throughout early modern India, which aimed to infuse Islamic ideals of kingship with pre-Islamic Zoroastrian values. Just as Kamāl al-Dawla endeavored to engage the diversity of beliefs that were housed within Qajar Iran, Neo-Zoroastrian literature aimed to recognize the diversity of religious beliefs that were housed within the Mughal empire.

As Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have documented, Mughal xenology extended well beyond Mughal domains.²⁴ Much of this xenological literature was tied to the Mughal court, and some of it was commissioned by early Mughal rulers, including most notably Akbar, who remains a classic symbol of Mughal ecumenism. In addition to collections of sayings by Mughal rulers and Sufi shaykhs, Mughal xenology sought to reflect the diversity of belief systems across the globe through encyclopedias, translations, and other synthesizing genres.²⁵ While many early modern Indian rulers promoted tolerance of non-Muslims, and worked to accommodate difference within Islam, the body of work they commissioned and supported also played a crucial role within the Mughal ecumene in disseminating knowledge concerning pre-Islamic forms of governance and political life to a global Persianate readership.

Arguably the most important contribution to Mughal xenology is *Dabistān-i madhāhib*, a text composed in the mid-seventeenth century, and subsequently attributed to many different authors. Manekji gave a copy of the Bombay edition of this work, published in 1875, to Ākhūndzāda.²⁶ All that is known concerning the author is that he adopted the penname (*takhalluṣ*) Mūbad Shāh in

his poetry.²⁷ Inasmuch as a *mobad* is a Zoroastrian priest, the *takhalluṣ* Mūbad Shāh clearly suggests the author's Zoroastrian ties. Scholars have therefore inconclusively identified the author of *Dabistān* as a Parsi from Gujarat. Nothing is known concerning the author's historical identity, and the attribution of the text to Zū'lfīqār al-Ḥusainī that is given in one manuscript is disputed in the most recent critical edition.²⁸ Circumstantial evidence within the text suggests that, whomever he was, the author was closely associated with the Neo-Zoroastrian group that was named for its leader, Ādhar Kaywān, and which was active in India during the time when the text was composed.

In contrast to earlier works of Islamic xenology, including the works of al-Bīrūnī and al-Sharastānī, *Dabistān-i madhāhib* is heavily informed by eyewitness accounts, first-person interviews, and other materials that suggest a first-hand encounter with the religious practices the author describes. Given its range, inclusive of Parsis, Hindus, Tibetans, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sadiqis, monotheists, Rawshaniyyas, monotheists, rationalists, and Sufis, *Dabistān* reads like an early attempt at a comparative anthropology of human difference, along religious lines. Unlike al-Bīrūnī's and al-Sharastānī's treatises, *Dabistān* is a xenology of the author's present, and not only of the past. In pursuit of first-hand information, the author of *Dabistān* interviewed members of religious movements tied to the Mughal court, including the Nuṭṭawīs, a religious group that, although declared heretical by the Safāvids, attained widespread popularity throughout the early modern Persian-speaking world. Many Nuṭṭawīs were part of the inner circle of the Indian prince Dārā Shīkūh (1615–1659), to whose significance for Ākhūndzāda I now turn.²⁹

Dārā Shīkūh was assassinated by the same Awrangzeb (r. 1658–1707), a historical figure whom the fictional Qajar Prince Jalāl al-Dawla names as Kamāl al-Dawla's father in the *Maktūbāt*. Although he was the son of a ruler known for his conservative tendencies, Kamāl al-Dawla was, in terms of this historical paradigm, the brother of a prince famed for his heterodoxy.³⁰ Ākhūndzāda promotes this identification even to the extent of stretching historical plausibility, for Kamāl al-Dawla's letters are dated 1863, and Awrangzeb died in 1707. In affirming the *Dabistān*, Ākhūndzāda's protagonist rejects his father's orthodoxy in favor of the more ecumenical forms of governance that preceded Awrangzeb's reign. In voicing his critique of Islamic orthodoxy through the persona of a late Mughal prince, Ākhūndzāda was therefore engaged in a sophisticated, as well as highly strategic, revision to the historical record.

Kamāl al-Dawla frequently refers to *Dabistān* as an authoritative source on pre-Islamic Persia. Given his time and place, Kamāl al-Dawla would have had easy access to such works of Mughal xenology in India prior to his sojourn in Iran. Furthermore, the views that structure Kamāl al-Dawla's account of pre-Islamic Persian ethics and cosmology specifically parallel the worldview on evidence in *Dabistān*, including its Nuṭṭawī and neo-Zoroastrian views. In the following section, I explore two of the most significant among these parallels. The first pertains to the structure of being, as conceived by Nuṭṭawī cosmology. The second pertains to Persian memories of Arab conquests.

Unities of being

Materialist in their cosmology and pantheist in their ontology, the Nuṭṭawīs derived their name from the Arabic/Persian *nuṭṭa*, meaning "particle" and "point."³¹ In Nuṭṭawī cosmology, "historical time was divided into four cycles of sixteen thousand years" with each cycle spanning "eight thousand years of Arab rule and eight thousand years of Persian rule, with the final cycle belonging to the Persians."³² The Nuṭṭawīs of the Safavid and Mughal empires eagerly awaited the year when the era of Arab rule was expected to come to an end, which they had predicted would be 1582 (990 A.H.), 10 years prior to the millennium of the *hijra* (migration of

Muhammad to Medina and the beginning of the Islamic calendar). On that year, the Nuṭṭawī believed, “the era of Islam was coming to an end, opening the way for the dominance of the Persians and their religion under the guidance of a messiah.”³³

Nuṭṭawī millennial expectations were further exacerbated when the court astrologer of Shah ʿAbbās I (1587–1629) persuaded the shah to temporarily abdicate the throne and allow a Nuṭṭawī leader, Yūsuf Tarkishduz, to serve as the nominal ruler of Iran for a few days in order to avoid the ominous influence of a comet.³⁴ Yūsuf was executed a few days later, when the shah decided to reclaim the throne. The incident precipitated a Safavid massacre of the Nuṭṭawīs, an event that Ākhūndzāda later made the subject of one of his most important plays, *Betrayed Stars, or the Story of Yūsuf Shāh the Saddler* (1857).³⁵ This play attests to Ākhūndzāda’s awareness of and interest in Nuṭṭawī thought, as well as to his sympathy with the plight of persecuted believers whose views relegated them to the borders of Islamdom. Surely Ākhūndzāda must have discerned in Nuṭṭawī heterodoxy a precursor of his own critical approach to the study of Islam.

There is also a striking congruence between Kamāl al-Dawla’s views on the trajectory of Arab-led Islamic history in the *Maktūbāt* and the Nuṭṭawī cosmological belief in the rotation between Arab and Persian cycles in human history. In his first letter, Kamāl al-Dawla digresses from the topic at hand to address Iranians in general. “One thousand two hundred and eighty years have passed since that time when, like naked hungry beasts, the barbarian Arabs brought you to the depths of misery” he states (6). Kamāl al-Dawla expatiates on this theme, mixing terminology derived from the French Enlightenment with his modernizing reformist agenda, underwritten by a Nuṭṭawī narrative:

Your earth, once blessed, now presents a façade of emptiness, as though it were a place tossed away [and forgotten]. Your people are considered the most ignorant on earth, and are deemed unable to comprehend the blessings of civilization and of freedom. And your ruler is a despot. In truth, your sons are now squeezed in on all sides. On the one side they are faced with the oppression [*zulm*] of despotism. On the other side they are held back by force of the clergy’s fanaticism. (6)

In this quote, *ivilization*, *despotizm*, and *fanaticizm* are all given in Persian transliteration. They are also listed as entries in the dictionary of foreign terms that prefaces some manuscripts of the *Maktūbāt*. Thus, while Ākhūndzāda looked first to the luminaries of the French and Russian Enlightenments in formulating his program for reforming the Islamic world, he inflected this quest with a Persian orientation that could not dispense with pre-European intellectual legacies. Kamāl al-Dawla’s engagement with Nuṭṭawī, Zoroastrian, and other pre-Islamic belief systems uniquely merges these two traditions, the first pertaining to the critique of religion, and the second branching out into the critique of despotic rule. The net result of this merger is to bring the two strands of critique together, and thereby to connect the critique of religious fanaticism with political opposition to tyranny.

According to the *Dabistān*, the creed of the followers of the neo-Zoroastrian group with which the author is believed to have been affiliated is crystallized in the belief that “God can be reached through every religion” (*Dabistān*, 42). The text stresses the egalitarianism of believers who maintain that, if someone has a reason to be in contact with them, “whether for salvation or for this world, they [must] do all they can to be with him and assist him.” Most crucially, believers must “abstain from intolerance, malice, jealousy, hatred, and preference of one community [*millat*] over another, and of one religion [*kesh*] over another” (*Dabistān*, 42). These believers, who reject the faith in the superiority of one creed over another that undergirds traditional monotheism, consider “the learned, the mystics, the upright ones and God-worshippers of every religion to be their friends, and do not call ordinary people bad, nor do they denounce the worldly ones” (*Dabistān*, 42). The insistence in *Dabistān* on the radical equality of all belief systems –

including systems of non-belief – anticipates Ākhūndzāda’s conception of religion tolerance, notwithstanding the more polemical idiom in which he cast his views.

It is significant that Ākhūndzāda selected an Indian Mughal Prince as the mouthpiece for his reformist agenda. Even more striking from a literary and historical point of view is the fact that Ākhūndzāda made this prince a son (at least nominally) of Awrangzeb, the Mughal ruler who tried to suppress his predecessors’ ecumenical management of religious difference. Kamāl al-Dawla entered the Mughal world long after Akbar’s famous attempt to bridge cross-confessional difference through the idiom of *sulḥ-i kull* (university civility) had faded into historical memory.³⁶ As one of the last Mughal princes, he inhabited a world for which Akbar’s ecumenical legacy was a distant memory, while living in the expectation of the new leveling of categories that was ushered in by the encounter with European modernity.

In many respects, Kamāl al-Dawla’s – and Ākhūndzāda’s – state of expectation parallels the Nuṭṭawī anticipation of the new age that would be ushered in when the Arab cycle of Islamic history was replaced by a Persian cycle that would bring about the end of Islam. This continuity is reflected in Kamāl al-Dawla’s second letter to Jalāl al-Dawla, which elaborates a metaphysical vision that closely echoes the Nuṭṭawī cosmology of the *Dabistān*. Kamāl al-Dawla additionally incorporates elements from Buddhist and European metaphysics, alongside to him the more familiar Sufi unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), most famously associated with the Andalusian mystic Ibn al-ʿArabī. One oft-cited passage from the *Maktūbāt* reveals the depth of Kamāl al-Dawla’s interest in Sufi cosmology as well as the range of Ākhūndzāda’s learning:

The universe exists ... for itself, with its own laws, [and] stands in need of no other, auxiliary [...] existence. So, like the Buddha, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, Shabistārī, Petrarch, and Voltaire, we concur with [...] pantheism [...]. Until you have been informed about astronomy ... you will not know that the whole universe is one perfect unity of energy ... and all objects are just fragments and pieces compared to the unity of being [*waḥdat al-wujūd*] and all of those fragments are whole and that wholeness is the unity of being [*waḥdat al-wujūd*]. And it is this unity of being which is itself creator and itself creation. (102)³⁷

These words, taken from Kamāl al-Dawla’s second letter to Jalāl al-Dawla, closely mirror the *Dabistān*’s cosmology, while adding to it several values from more modern intellectual history, including the emphasis on scientific knowledge and allusions to two major figures in European thought, Petrarch and Voltaire, both of whom are referenced in the dictionary of foreign terms that is found in certain manuscripts of this work. Kamāl al-Dawla’s comments also echo a bilingual Persian-Azeri essay that Ākhūndzāda composed on the Persian poet Rūmī, in which he promoted the poet as the prime exponent of the teaching regarding unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) that transformed Sufism as well as Persian literature.³⁸ Finally, certain strands of the *Maktūbāt*’s paean to pantheism have been shown to closely paraphrase parts of David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1776).³⁹ Among the many influences on the *Maktūbāt*, neo-Zoroastrianism is arguably the most palpable, even though it is not identified as such. Ākhūndzāda may have concealed the influence of Nuṭṭawī thought on his work because he knew how little he had to gain from advertising his fondness for a school of thought that had been anathema to the Iranian state since the Safavid period.

Critique as tolerance, tolerance as critique

The critique of religion in early modern Europe shaped the intellectual constellation that Jonathan Israel has influentially called the Radical Enlightenment, a movement that he shows to have centrally inflected modernity as a philosophical concept.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the forms of intellectual dissent that extended from Safavid to Mughal domains during the early modern

period did not crystallize into a movement of comparable force. Partly in response to Israel's idea of the Radical Enlightenment, scholars of early modern Islam have discerned a nascent tendency towards rationalist critique within early modern Islamic millenarianism. "Despite a strong Šūfī tradition conducive to a doctrinal break from the sharī'a, agnostic thought [in the Islamic world] never seriously opted for a rational methodology," historian Amanat writes.⁴¹ In Amanat's view, "counter-rationalism" in the early modern Islamic world, which included both the Nuṭawīs and the neo-Zoroastrians, "rejected dabbling in the speculative philosophy of earlier centuries." This rejection in turn contributed to the "rapid decline of antinomian thought once Mughal patronage ceased to exist."

Maktūbāt combines the best features of Nuṭawī anti-rationalism, Persian mysticism, and critique in the European sense. Ākhūndzāda draws on Persian mysticism's relentless critique of orthodoxy, while supplementing its antinomian tendencies with an Enlightenment-inspired critique of despotism. Ākhūndzāda's reputation as an opponent of Islam has been overdetermined by his principled opposition to the religious currents in nineteenth-century Iran, where *Maktūbāt* is banned. As a result of this prohibition, *Maktūbāt* has been published in Baku Frankfurt and Düsseldorf (both in second half of the twentieth century) but never within Iran. The letters are most accessible to outsiders, and circulate most widely among readers in the Iranian diaspora, dissident Iranian writers living abroad, and foreign scholars. This complex genealogy of influence has prevented scholars from recognizing Ākhūndzāda's reliance on the Islamic sources against which he polemicized.

Even more than Ākhūndzāda's debt to Voltaire and Montesquieu, his engagement with early modern Nuṭawī and neo-Zoroastrian sources such as *Dabistān* makes Ākhūndzāda's critique of Islam an important example of religious dissidence and freethinking from within the Islamic world. Contrary to Ākhūndzāda's assertion, and to the views of many of his Iranian contemporaries, Arabic writers were deeply invested in freethinking and radical critique.⁴² Scholars have emphasized the impact of Mill, Voltaire, and Montesquieu on Ākhūndzāda, in part because these influences are explicitly announced by their author and are relatively new in the history of Persian literature. By contrast, the influence of texts such as the *Dabistān-i madhāhib* on radical reformists and atheists from the Islamic world poses a greater challenge to current master narratives. The branding of Ākhūndzāda as an Islamophobic atheist has of course been facilitated by Ākhūndzāda's own provocative critiques and incendiary rhetoric, as well as by the history of Soviet scholarship, which has heavily shaped the way in which he is read in Soviet Azerbaijan.⁴³ However, this highly various and contradictory oeuvre is more complex and more multifaceted than are its creator's isolated and often one-sided provocations. It follows that our engagement with Ākhūndzāda today should not be constrained by subsequent ideological appropriations of his work.

In the foregoing, I have tried to complicate the picture, partly projected by the author himself and partly the product of his reception, of Ākhūndzāda as an archenemy of Islam. Much of the stimulus for Ākhūndzāda's critique of Islam came from Europe, as did the form taken by that critique. But the categories through which Ākhūndzāda passed judgment on his milieu were profoundly eclectic and deeply rooted in Islamic (as well as pre-Islamic) pasts. They were Persian, they were Zoroastrian, they were heretical, and Sufi. Notwithstanding their dissident status, these variegated traditions deployed Islamic categories of reasoning and mobilized Arabic and Persian sources in their arguments. In short, I have argued that the similarities between Ākhūndzāda and the targets of his critique reveal as much concerning the nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions of Islamic intellectual history, as do their divergences.

Alongside its critical contribution to the study of Islamic thought, Ākhūndzāda's harsh and sometimes shrill critiques have much to offer intellectual history generally. Like his opponents, Ākhūndzāda was profoundly attuned to the primacy of language in effecting political change.

One manifestation of this awareness is his engagement with alphabet reform, and his attacks on the Arabic script, which led him to author a text that was, in the words of Afshin Marashi, “one of the earliest tracts to acknowledge the importance of language in the project of reforming culture and society in the Middle East.”⁴⁴ Like his opponents, Ākhūndzāda prioritized justice over abstract conceptions of metaphysical truth. The early modern critique of religions led Ākhūndzāda directly to a critique of despotic rule. While eclecticism is intrinsic to his method, so too is his methodological suspicion of the sources on which his critique was based.

By bringing sources from early modern South Asia into conversation with the Enlightenment critique of tyranny, Ākhūndzāda extended multiple intellectual genealogies. He linked the recognition of religious difference to a conception of political freedom that was relatively new to Persian literature. This new political philosophy has been foundational to the thinking of many Iranian intellectuals who followed in Ākhūndzāda’s wake, including his friend Mīrzā Āqā Khān Kirmānī (1854–1896), whose *One Hundred Sermons* deploys the same fictional personas found in Ākhūndzāda’s *Maktūbāt*.⁴⁵ In addition to *One Hundred Sermons*, Mīrzā Āqā Khān composed an untitled treatise that, similarly to the *Maktūbāt*, deploys the frame narrative of an epistolary correspondence between a Qajar and Mughal prince.⁴⁶

With respect to literary production in subsequent decades, the controversial life of the Prophet, *Twenty-Three Years*, by the litterateur and Pahlavi-era senator ‘Alī Dashtī (1894–1982) exists in a direct genealogical relation with Ākhūndzāda’s *Maktūbāt*.⁴⁷ Finally, Aḥmad Kasravī (1890–1946), arguably Iran’s “most original thinker during the 1930s and 1940s,” produced critiques of Islam and of Sufism that continued the line of critique pioneered by Ākhūndzāda.⁴⁸ Iraj Parsinejad, who has authored what are arguably the most important contemporary studies of Iranian criticism in this specifically dissident sense, perceived the link between the critique of religion and broader social criticism when he noted that Kasravī’s crusade, inspired by Ākhūndzāda, to “‘purify’ the Persian language must be understood as an attempt to dispel the ‘illusions’ generated by centuries of religiosity.”⁴⁹ This dissident lineage has more recently taken the form of a “westoxification” discourse, whereby Iranian intellectuals have been taken to task for their infatuation with Europe, in the writings of Jalāl Āl-i Aḥmad (1923–1969).⁵⁰

That the same Baha’i scholar Bahrām Chūbīnah has edited the key works of all four writers mentioned here – Ākhūndzāda, Mīrzā Āqā Khān, Kasravī, and Dashtī – speaks to the strength of the Persian dissident tradition that begins with Ākhūndzāda’s *Maktūbāt* and culminates in Dashtī’s polemical life of Muhammad.⁵¹ Although most of the books that fall within this genealogy are currently banned in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the influence they exert on contemporary Iranian thought is attested by the proliferation of editions of these works across the global Iranian diaspora, from Düsseldorf to Los Angeles. Taken together, the polemics of Ākhūndzāda, Mīrzā Āqā Khān, Kasravī, and Dashtī constitute a distinctively Iranian contribution to the critique of religious despotism. Although these authors did not have envision themselves as reformers of a tradition they regarded as hopelessly corrupt, their books demonstrate how, beyond the framework it offers for ethical existence, the Islamic intellectual history that they inherited stimulated a critical method that is was concerned with social justice as was the religion this critique sought to displace.

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Notes

1. For these citations, see respectively, Masroori, "European Thought in Nineteenth-Century Iran," 666, and Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 66.
2. Ākhundzāda, *Maktūbāt-i Mīrzā Faṭḥ-ʿAlī Ākhundzāda*. Citations from *Maktūbāt* are taken from the Persian edition cited above, with pagination given parenthetically.
3. For discussions of *Maktūbāt* beyond those cited in passim here, see Jahanbegloo, *Democracy in Iran*, 26, and Sharma, "Redrawing the Boundaries of 'Ajam,'" 56.
4. The literature on religious debates at the Mughal court is vast and varied. Most recently, see Lefèvre, "Dialogue and Asiatic Otherness at the Mughal Court" and Alam and Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations."
5. Cited from Manekji's Gujarati essay in Stausberg, "Manekji Limji Hataria and the Rediscovery of Ancient Iran," 440.
6. Zia-Ebrahimi, "An Emissary of the Golden Age," 381. Zia-Ebrahimi's book *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism* was published too late to be taken into consideration here, but it also discusses Ākhundzāda.
7. Their correspondence has been published in Ākhundzāda and Manekji, 222–3.
8. For a full discussion of Jalāl al-Dīn Mīrzā's work, see Amanat, "Pur-e khāqān."
9. Although Marashi claims that the two met (*Nationalizing Iran*, 61), Zia-Ebrahimi asserts the opposite ("An Emissary of the Golden Age," 383). A second divergence within current scholarship concerns Manekji's possible influence on the *Maktūbāt*. While Marashi and Sharma suggest that Manekji may have served as a model for Kamāl al-Dawla, Zia-Ebrahimi points out (*An Emissary of the Golden Age*, 388) that Ākhundzāda wrote the text prior to his first correspondence with Manekji in 1871.
10. See Zia-Ebrahimi, "An Emissary of the Golden Age" and Kashani-Sabet, "The Evolving Polemic of Iranian Nationalism," 165–6.
11. For kindred works in this direction, see Stuurman, "Cosmopolitan Egalitarianism in the Enlightenment," and his and other contributions to Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*.
12. Recent titles contributing to this trend include Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History* and Duara, Murthy, and Sartori, *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*.
13. This dictionary is not found in the partial version of Subḥdam's edition that is available to me. See instead the edition of Ḥamid Maḥmudzāda, 28.
14. For a recent study of the *ākhūnd* in Ākhundzāda's milieu, see Spannaus, "The Decline of the Ākhūnd."
15. Ādamiyat, *Andīshahā-yi Mīrzā Āqā Khān Kirmānī*, Sanjabi, "Rereading the Enlightenment."
16. For a traveler's account of Voltaire and other European thinkers in nineteenth-century Iran, see Gobi-neau, *Les Religions et les Philosophies*.
17. See Ākhundzāda, *Maqālāt*, 121–4, for the fictional letter attributed to Hume, and *Maqālāt*, 93–5, for Ākhundzāda's brief essay on Mill's *On Liberty*. For a further discussion of Ākhundzāda and Hume, see Masroori, "European Thought in Nineteenth-century Iran," where Ākhundzāda's letter attributed to Hume is translated in his appendix.
18. For imitations of Montesquieu's text, see Neiman, "A Hebrew Imitation of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*".
19. See for example the classic work of Zarrīnkūb, *Naqd-i adabī*.
20. Cited in Parsinejad, "An Introduction to Literary Criticism in Iran," from a manuscript held in the Iran National Library.
21. While rejecting the racialist essentialism implicit in "Arab civilization," I use the term here because it closely reflects Ākhundzāda's own stated views.
22. Masroori, "European Thought in Nineteenth-century Iran," 668.
23. See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ākhundzāda's intimate familiarity with Russian literature (albeit Pushkin and Lermontov more than Dostoevsky) is of course relevant in this connection.
24. See chapter eight of Alam and Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*.
25. On Mughal-sponsored translations, see Truschke, "The Mughal Book of War."
26. See Ākhundzāda and Manekji, *Alifbā-yi jadīd va maktūbāt*, 406, 430. The edition in question is *Hādhā Kitāb-i Dabistān al-madhāhib*, ed. Ibrāhīm Ibn-i Nūr Muḥammad. Future citations are to this edition.
27. *Dabistān* was originally attributed by William Jones to the Kashmiri poet Muḥsin Fānī when he first learned of its existence in 1804. For the earliest attribution in Islamic sources, see Bīlgrāmī, *Ma'āshir al-Kirām*, 22.
28. In his edition, Rīḏzāda Malik asserts that Kaykhusraw Isfandiyyār, the son of Ādhar Kaywān, was the author of the text. See Malik, *Dabistān-i madhāhib*, 9–76. For the most recent scholarship on Ādhar Kaywān, see Sheffield, "The Language of Paradise in Safavid Iran."

29. See the eighth chapter (*ta'lim-i hashtum*) of Malik, *Dabistān-i madhāhib* and Amanat, "Persian Nuḡṭawīs."
30. Recent scholarship has nuanced the stereotype of Awrangzeb as a religious bigot. See Brown, "Did Aurangzeb Ban Music?," and Alvi, "The Historians of Awrangzeb."
31. For introductions to Nuḡṭawī thought, see Mélékoff, "Fazlullah d' Astarabad et l'Essor du Hurufisme en Azerbaydjan" and Norris, "The Hurufi Legacy of Fazlullāh of Astarābād."
32. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, 163.
33. *Ibid.*, 163.
34. See Bashir, *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis*, 113.
35. The full title is *Sitārihgān-i farīb khudih ya hikāyat-i Yūsuf Shāh Sarrāj*. For the connection between this text and the massacre, see Amanat, "The Nuḡṭawī Movement of Maḡmūd Pisīkhānī," 297 n17.
36. For a recent important study of this concept, see Kinra, "Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility."
37. This passage has attracted the attention of many commentators. See inter alia the seminal essay on Ākhūndzāda by the Azeri writer Cəlil Məmmədquluzadə (1866–1932), "Mīrzə Fətəli Axundov dinlər haqqında," 279.
38. See the Azeri edition of his collected essays: Ākhūndzāda, "Darbareh-ye mullah-ye Rūmī va tasnīf-i u."
39. See Masroori, "European Thought in Nineteenth-century Iran," 669–71.
40. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment and a Revolution of the Mind*.
41. Amanat, "Persian Nuḡṭawīs," 390. The remaining citations in this paragraph are all from this page.
42. See for example al-Baghdadi, "Print, Script and Free-thinking."
43. For Ākhūndzāda's Soviet reception, see Kasumov, "Bor'ba M. F. Akhundova protiv religii islama."
44. Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 66 (referring to *Alifbā-yi jadīd*).
45. Kirmānī, *Ṣad khaṭābah*. A manuscript of this work, dated 1917, can be downloaded from Princeton University Library's William Miller Collection of Babi Writings and Other Iranian Texts at <http://findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/C0723.1-47/c0273>.
46. Kirmānī, *Sih maktūb*. The manuscript is available for download from the same collection listed in n45. For a discussion of these two texts, see Ādamiyat, "Sih maktūb."
47. Dashtī, *Bīst va sih sāl: risālat*.
48. Citation is from Matin-Asgari, "The Berlin Circle," 63.
49. Parsinejad, *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran*, 189. Parsinejad specifically mentions the influence of Ākhūndzāda on Kasravī on pp. 64 and 77. For the Persian edition of this work, see *Rawshangarān-i Īrānī va naqd-i adabī*.
50. Āl-i Aḡmad, *Gharbzadegi*. For the connection between Kasravī and Jalāl Āl-i Aḡmad, see Tavakolī-Targhī, "Tajaddud."
51. The following works were all edited by scholar Bahrām Chūbīnah: Kasravī, *Panḡ maqālah va zindagī-nāmah*, Dashtī, *Bīst va sih sāl*, Kirmānī, *Sih maktūb*, and the Frankfurt edition of Ākhūndzāda's *Maktūbāt*.

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