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The critique of religion as political critique: Mīrzā Fatḥ ‘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 Fatḥ ‘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. 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). 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. 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-nīhal (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 Shâh Jahân (1628–1657). Āḵūndzāda’s most important source, the Dabistān-i madhkūh (School of Religions), was composed during the latter’s reign.4

Āḵūndzāda’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 Āḵūndzāda’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, Parsees), 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 (Nāmah-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, Āḵūndzāda proudly declared that both his own Maktūbāt and Jalāl al-Dīn’s Nāmah-yi khusravān would awaken Iranians from the “sleep of neglect [khwāb-i ghaflat]” in which he considered them to have become immersed.7 For Āḵūndzāda, corresponding with Manekji was a means of linking his own work with that of his enigmatic contemporary.8

Following the completion of his Maktūbāt, Āḵūndzāda 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 Āḵūndzāda, 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 Āḵūndzāda’s efforts to reform the modern Iranian world. Yet, in the light of the preponderance of studies on Āḵūndzāda as a reformer alongside a scarcity of attention to anything else, this essay shifts the focus. I examine Āḵūndzāda’s non-European precedents as well as his subsequent impact on Iranian intellectual history. Recent scholarship has shown how Āḵūndzāda’s Persian lineages were wired in proto-nationalism, and awash in anti-Arab sentiment, and other prejudices.10 While critical engagement with Āḵūndzāda 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 Āḵūndzāda 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 Āḵūndzāda perceived between religious tolerance and the critique of religion. In the dictionary of key terms that prefaces his Maktūbāt, Āḵūndzāda 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 [gānūn-i tabī’ āt].”13 Elsewhere, Āḵūndzāda insists on the impossibility of being liberal while maintaining religious beliefs (iʿtādād (Maktūbāt, 56). In his view, liberalism and religious faith exclude each other. Given Āḵūndzāda’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 Āḵūndzāda,
that seeks to destroy this authoritative foundation, be productively engaged together? These ques-
tions 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 inter-
section 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, hadīth, 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 edu-
cation available in nineteenth-century Nukha. Literally rendered, Ākhūndzāda means “son of an
ākhwānd [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 pro-
foundly indebted to prior Muslim thinkers for many of his key insights. Contemporary scholar-
ship 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 knowl-
edge. 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 speci-
cally 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 [ulamāʾ] 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, Ağhündzâda’s Mughal prince engages a much wider set of comparisons.

Alongside comparing cultures, Kamâl al-Dawla engages in cross-temporal comparison. Like many Iranian reformers of his age, Kamâl 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 Khaldûn and al-Sharastâni. Here Ağhündzâda 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 Ağhündzâda’s engagement with the longue durée of Islamic history notably surpassed that of Montesquieu.18

As with his concept of secular liberalism, Ağhündzâda’s concept of critique was inflected by European norms. This influence is evident in his definition of qerîtika – a term Ağhündzâda 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 Ağhündzâda, qerîtika 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 Ağhündzâda’s Maktûbât 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 Ağhündzâda’s sophisticated epistolary framework, it would be a gross simplification to read the polemic against Islamic and Arab civilization 21 that permeates Kamâl al-Dawla’s letters as a straightforward reflection of the author’s worldview. Ağhündzâda 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. Ağhündzâda’s fictional letters metafictively 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 Ağhündzâda’s text between content and form. “In developing Jalâl al-Dawla’s defense,” writes Masroori, “Ağhündzâda tried hard to provide the strongest arguments, although he opposed Jalâl 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 Kamâl al-Dawla’s critique. Inasmuch as, for Ağhündzâda, the formal and the analytical dimensions of the text are inseparable from each other, grasping the form of his Maktûbât necessarily entails engaging its incendiary content.

The most striking aspect of Ağhündzâda’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 crystalized more forcefully in the Maktûbât than anywhere else in Ağhündzâda work. Central to Kamâl 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 Mirzā 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 (takhallus) Mūbad Shāh in
his poetry. Inasmuch as a mobad is a Zoroastrian priest, the takhallus 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‘l‘Ibiqār al-Ḥusainī that is given in one manuscript is disputed in the most recent critical edition. 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 Nuqtāwīs, a religious group that, although declared heretical by the Safavids, attained widespread popularity throughout the early modern Persian-speaking world. Many Nuqtāwīs were part of the inner circle of the Indian prince Dārā Shikhā (1615–1659), to whose significance for Ākhūndzādā I now turn.

Dārā Shikhā was assassinated by the same Awrangzēb (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. Ākhūndzādā promotes this identification even to the extent of stretching historical plausibility, for Kamāl al-Dawla’s letters are dated 1863, and Awrangzēb died in 1707. In affirming the Dabistān, Ākhūndzādā’s protagonist rejects his father’s orthodoxy in favor of the more ecumenical forms of governance that preceded Awrangzēb’s reign. In voicing his critique of Islamic orthodoxy through the persona of a late Mughal prince, Ākhūndzādā 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 Nuqtāwī 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 Nuqtāwī cosmology. The second pertains to Persian memories of Arab conquests.

**Unities of being**

Materialist in their cosmology and pantheist in their ontology, the Nuqtāwīs derived their name from the Arabic/Persian nuqta, meaning “particle” and “point.” In Nuqtāwī 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.” The Nuqtāwīs 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 Nuqṭawīs 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.”

Nuqṭawī 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 Nuqṭawī 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. Yūsuf was executed a few days later, when the shah decided to reclaim the throne. The incident precipitated a Safavid massacre of the Nuqṭawīs, 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). This play attests to Ākhūndzāda’s awareness of and interest in Nuqṭawī 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 Nuqṭawī 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 Nuqṭawī 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 Nuqṭawī 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 [zuilm] of despotism. One the other side they are held back by force of the clergy’s fanaticism. (6)

In this quote, sivilization, 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 Nuqṭawī, 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, jealously, 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 sulh-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 Nuqtawī 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 Nuqtawī 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-Rahmān 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 Nuqtawī 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 Ṣūfī 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. In Amanat’s view, “counter-rationalism” in the early modern Islamic world, which included both the Nuqtāwīs 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 Nuqtāwī 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 Nuqtawī 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. 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. 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.”\textsuperscript{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 eclecticicism 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 Khan Kirmānī (1854–1896), whose One Hundred Sermons deploy the same fictional personas found in Ākhūndzāda’s Maktūbāt.\textsuperscript{45} In addition to One Hundred Sermons, Mīrzā Āqā Khan composed an untitled treatise that, similarly to the Maktūbāt, deploys the frame narrative of an epistolary correspondence between a Qajar and Mughal prince.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{47} Finally, Ahmad Kasravī (1890–1946), arguably Iran’s “most original thinker during the 1930s and 1940s,”\textsuperscript{48} produced critiques of Islam and of Sufism that continued the line of critique pioneered by Ākhūndzāda.\textsuperscript{49} 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.”\textsuperscript{50} 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 Ahmad (1923–1969).\textsuperscript{51}

That the same Baha’i scholar Bahrām Chāubiñah has edited the key works of all four writers mentioned here – Ākhūndzāda, Mīrzā Āqā Khan, 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.\textsuperscript{52} 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 Khan, 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. Ḥākūndzāda, Maktūbāt-i Mirzā Fath-ʿAlī Ḥākūndzāda. 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.”
6. Zia-Ebrahimī, “An Emissary of the Golden Age,” 381. Zia-Ebrahimī’s book The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism was published too late to be taken into consideration here, but it also discusses Ḥākūndzāda.
7. Their correspondence has been published in Ḥākūndzāda and Manekji, 222–3.
8. For a full discussion of Jalāl al-Dīn Mirzā’s work, see Amanat, “Pur-e khāqān.”
9. Although Marashi claims that the two met (Nationalizing Iran, 61), Zia-Ebrahimī 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-Ebrahimī points out (An Emissary of the Golden Age, 388) that Ḥākūndzāda wrote the text prior to his first correspondence with Manekji in 1871.
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 Subḥyām’s edition that is available to me. See instead the edition of Ḥamīd Maḥmudzāda, 28.
14. For a recent study of the Ḥākūnd in Ḥākūndzāda’s milieu, see Spannaus, “The Decline of the Ḥākūnd.”
15. Ādāniyāt, Andishahā-ye 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 Gobineau, Les Religions et les Philosophies.
17. See Ḥākūndzāda, Maqālāt, 121–4, for the fictional letter attributed to Hume, and Maqālāt, 93–5, for Ḥākūndzāda’s brief essay on Mill’s On Liberty. For a further discussion of Ḥākūndzāda and Hume, see Masroori, “European Thought in Nineteenth-century Iran,” where Ḥākūndzāda’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, Naqā’-i adabī.
21. While rejecting the racist essentialism implicit in “Arab civilization,” I use the term here because it closely reflects Ḥākūndzāda’s own stated views.
23. See Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. Ḥākūndzāda’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.
27. Dabīstān was originally attributed by William Jones to the Kashmiri poet Muḥsin Fānih when he first learned of its existence in 1804. For the earliest attribution in Islamic sources, see Bilgrāmī, Maʿāṣir al-Kirām, 22.
28. In his edition, Riḍāzāda Malik asserts that Kaykhusraw Isfandiyār, the son of Ādhar Kaywān, was the author of the text. See Malik, Dabīstān-i madhāhib, 9–76. For the most recent scholarship on Ādhar Kaywān, see Shefield, “The Language of Paradise in Safavid Iran.”
29. See the eighth chapter (ta'lim-i hashtum) of Malik, *Dabistān-i madhāhib* and Amanat, “Persian Nuqtawīs.”

30. Recent scholarship has nuanced the stereotype of Awrangzeb as a religious bigot. See Brown, “Did Awrangzeb Ban Music?”, and Alvi, “The Historians of Awrangzeb.”

31. For introductions to Nuqtawī thought, see Melikoff, “Fazlullah d’Astarabad et l’Essor du Hurufisme en Azerbaydjan” and Norris, “The Hurufi Legacy of Fazlullah of Astarābād.”


33. Ibid., 163.

34. See Bashir, *Fazlullah Astarabad and the Hurufis*, 113.

35. The full title is *Sīṭārīghān-i fārīb khudīh ya hikāyāt-i Yūsuf Shāh Sarrāj*. For the connection between this text and the massacre, see Amanat, “The Nuqtawī Movement of Mahmūd Pišḵhānī,” 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 Cālīl Mommādquluzada (1866–1932), “Mirzā Fāṭeľ Axundov dīnlar haqqinda,” 279.

38. See the Azeri edition of his collected essays: Ākhūndzāda, “Darbareh-ye mullah-ye Rūmh va tasnīf-i u.”


40. See Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* and *A Revolution of the Mind*.

41. Amanat, “Persian Nuqtawīs,” 390. The remaining citations in this paragraph are all from this page.

42. See for example al-Baghdādi, “Print, Script and Free-thinking.”

43. For Ākhūndzāda’s Soviet reception, see Kasumov, “‘Bor’ba M. F. Akhoundova protiv religii islama.”

44. Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*, 66 (referring to Alīfā-ye jadīd).


46. Kirmâni, *Ṣih maktūb*. The manuscript is available for download from the same collection listed in n.45. For a discussion of these two texts, see Ādamiyat, “Ṣih maktūb.”

47. Dastfī, *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 *Ravshangarān-i Irānī va naqd-i adabī*.

50. Āl-ī Ṭājīmad, *Gharbzadegi*. For the connection between Kasravī and Jalāl Āl-ī ʿĀlīmad, see Tāvakolī-Targhī, “Ṭajeddūd.”


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