

# Secularization Versus Secularization: Understanding the System in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Amélie Chelly

*Doctor in Sociology (EHGESS) and associate researcher at CADIS,  
specializing in secularization issues*

## ABSTRACT

Secularization is a process culminating in a new state of affairs loosely characterized by a growing separation of the public and the religious spheres, and in a decline of religion. This is how the human sciences of the West define secularization, as a process coextensive with Western modernity and expressive of a world becoming disenchanted.

Present-day Iran is the result not only of the intertwining of two different secularizing movements, but also of a three-stage process: desacralization of traditional religion, *resacralization* of politicized religion, and desacralization of politicized religion.

*Keywords:* Iran, Shiism, Secularism, secularization, blasphemy

# Secularización versus secularización: entender el sistema en la República Islámica de Irán

## RESUMEN

La secularización es un proceso que culmina en un nuevo estado de cosas que se caracteriza por una separación cada vez mayor de las esferas pública y religiosa, y en un declive de la religión. Así es como las ciencias humanas de Occidente definen la secularización, como un proceso coextensivo con la modernidad occidental y expresivo de un mundo que se desencanta. El Irán actual es el resultado no solo del entrelazado de dos movimientos secularizadores diferentes, sino también de un proceso de tres etapas: desacralización de la religión tradicional, *resacralización* de la religión politizada y desacralización de la religión politizada.

**Palabras clave:** Irán, Shiismo, Secularismo, secularización, blasfemia

## 理解伊朗伊斯兰共和国内的体制

### 摘要

世俗化是一个在以公众与宗教空间逐渐分离、宗教影响力下降为大致特征的新事务状态中达到高潮的过程。这是西方人类科学对世俗化的定义，即世俗化过程与西方现代性共存，且表达一个摆脱宗教束缚的世界。

如今的伊朗是由两个不同的世俗化运动相互交织，且由三个阶段组成的结果：传统宗教的去神圣化、政治化宗教的再神圣化、政治化宗教的去神圣化。

关键词：伊朗，什叶派，世俗主义，世俗化，亵渎神圣

Secularization is a process culminating in a new state of affairs, loosely characterized by a growing separation of the public and the religious spheres, and a decline of religion. This is how the human sciences of the West define secularization, as a process coextensive with Western modernity and expressive of a world becoming disenchanted.

The West has studied the phenomenon mainly in terms of the elimination of religion from the public sphere. Regardless of whether one sees it, like Blumenberg,<sup>1</sup> as a withdrawal of religion, requiring new ways of thinking, or, like Schmitt,<sup>2</sup> as a transfer of content from the religious to the political domain, within structures modeled initially by theology, it is unanimously agreed that the concept of secularization describes a space governed by the separation of religion and state. While, strictly speaking, the theoretical debate revolves around the elimination or the conversion of religion, missing from the various meanings of the term “secularization” is the more literal one of how elements from beyond this world can be applied to the earthly world. This literal definition could paradoxically have led Western thought to decry the contradiction: How could secularization, conceived as religion’s loss of hegemony over society, include the idea of the total investment of the secular world with elements whose origin was transcendent? This second view of secularization, envisaged in particular by sociologists such as Farhad

1 See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985 [1966]).

2 See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985 [1922]).

Khosrokhavar,<sup>3</sup> should be understood as the process whereby issues “from transcendent become immanent,”<sup>4</sup> thus becoming landmark concepts for resacralized globalizing political ideologies.

The current Iranian regime, which relies on *velayat-e faqih*, that is, the guardianship of the religious jurist, paradoxically entered the circle of secular ideologies through a complex, two-stage process, symptomatic, in our view, of any such entry into modernity: traditional religion was desacralized in such a way as first to make its transcendent pillars of belief secular and modern, and then resacralized to be established as political religion. This type of secularization, in the sense of immanentization, came from above, unlike the new secularist aspirations currently observed in Iran that take the form of a popular movement, spreading through society below the level of the state, and coextensive with disenchantment with the theocratic model.

Placing this second meaning alongside the traditional definition of secularization forms an Archimedean point for understanding present-day Iran: the Islamic Republic is neither the result of a break with secularization nor of a “desecularization,” as Peter L. Berger in particular puts it.<sup>5</sup> Seeing the establishment of Islam and its traditions in Iran as a step backward would amount to restricting oneself to simply applying the Western concept of secularization to the Iranian context.

The Islamic Republic is in itself a secularization of Shiism, that is, a *theocracy*, a government according to the laws of God. It is both the outcome of and the reason for two forms of secularization in Iran: the one initiated by the policy of modernization and Westernization of former regimes—especially that of the Pahlavi dynasty—and the other consisting of a desire to define an identity specific to Iran by rejecting foreign elements.

## **Western-Style Secularization: Between Assimilation and Rejection**

**W**esternization, in its political and economic aspects, entered Iran from the nineteenth century, and it was very quickly perceived by many Iranian intellectuals as a cultural phenomenon that threatened Iranian *identity*. While earlier events bore witness to the initiation of this process (we are thinking in particular of the Tobacco Protest against Talbot’s Régie in 1890), the 1906 Constitutional Revolution seems to us to be the culmination of a dual effect

---

3 See Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Two Types of Secularization: The Iranian Case,” in *Worlds of Difference*, ed. Saïd Arjomand and Elisa P. Reis (Sage Publications, 2013).

4 *Ibid.*, 121.

5 See the collection edited by Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: The Resurgence of Religion in World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

emerging from the confrontation with the West: it embodied both the integration of Western ideas (a constitutional political model inspired by the Belgian format, the nature of the demand for rights, etc.), and their rejection through the opposition to a power that allowed the West and its modernity to “plunder” the country. This was how much of the population felt at the time.

It was also in the early days of the Constitutional Revolution that the voices of religious figures began to be heard in politics. The first waves of modernity were thus accompanied by a dual movement reflecting a significant paradox: through the use of the tools of Western modernity in particular, Iran turned its back on modernity; its rhetoric presented itself as the complete opposite to Westernism, and yet it spoke through the integration of its structures. This unacknowledged Western influence, so brilliantly and accurately depicted by Daryush Shayegan in his *Regard mutilé* (English title: *Cultural Schizophrenia*),<sup>6</sup> was apparent up to the time of the Pahlavis, with the important difference that, under the final dynasty of the Iranian Empire, the population no longer saw Westernization as an external enemy, but rather one that had been imported into the country. In other words, the attitude of withdrawal from and rejection of the West was the result first of the feeling of external alienation (concessions granted to Russia and Britain to allow the Qajar court to enjoy its lavish lifestyle and the mismanagement of central government) and then of an internal weariness entirely opposed to the Pahlavi modernizing process, which was deliberately confused with Westernism: again, in the view of the people, the empire was now dealing with a Trojan horse, as the foreigner had been wheeled into the country. The Islamic Republic is therefore the result of the Shah's secularist policy twice over: first, because this policy and all of its counterparts were rejected, and then because the tools imported “by force” from the West (such as the critical human sciences) were used in the process of turning against it. Modernization was accompanied by the importation of Western educational models (which Saeed Paivandi named *madreseh djadid*, “the new school”<sup>7</sup>) and the human sciences, which helped develop critical faculties capable

6 “In short, a whole new, suspect jargon, inspired by Western social and political philosophies, invaded the country. Such aggressive, previously unknown concepts could not fail to frighten defenders of the divine order, all the more so as, compared to Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, Iran lagged far behind on its modernizing path .... In fact, lay people took on the task of modernizing. The mullahs only made an appearance much later. They tried to gather some ideas from it and adapt them to their vision of the world. The mullahs of the period of the constitutional movement, probably more flexible and perhaps even more open than those of today, showed themselves to be skilled strategists.” Daryush Shayegan, *Le regard mutilé: Schizophrénie culturelle: pays traditionnels face à la modernité* (Paris: Editions de L'aube, 1996), 221–2. **Translator's note:** Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.

7 See Saeed Paivandi, “La religion d'état à l'école: l'expérience de l'islamisation de l'école en Iran,” *Journal des anthropologues* 100–101 (2005), URL: <http://jda.revues.org/1582>; and *Religion et éducation en Iran: L'échec de l'islamisation de l'école* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006). Paivandi explains that the Shah's policy of modernization in Iran, particularly the modernization of the education system, brought two teaching models into competition with each other in the country from the end of the nineteenth century: the *madreseh djadid* (the new school based on the Western model) and the

of undermining the legitimacy of the monarchy (under the Qajars formerly, and even more so under the Pahlavis).

The 1970s witnessed the emergence of ideologues who undertook to think the unthinkable: regarding the legitimacy of power or a reinterpretation of major figures and major religious principles. In this context, rethinking the immutable and the absolute truth is not blasphemous, it is a paradigmatic symptom of secularization, in the sense of the secular application of religion. Several of the great pillars of Shia Islam were immanentized in order to be politicized: the figure of the Imam was embodied in the Supreme Leader; the *Ummah* become the nation; the traditional wait-and-see attitude was redirected in favor of revolutionary then political action; and, finally, the martyr of God become the martyr of the state, falling for the nation.

The secularization of Shiism in the sense of the literal application of religion in the secular world is therefore, on the one hand, the expression of Iran's entry into modernity, and, on the other, a circumstantial response to resentment, an affect studied in particular by Jalal Al-e Ahmad<sup>8</sup> under the name "Westoxification" (*gharbzadegi*).<sup>9</sup>

## **Secularization as the Immanentization of the Main Pillars of Islam**

**T**he figure of the Imam is central to Shiism, creating its nature, its dynamic, and its eschatological framework. The centrality of the Imam is such that it defines the various branches of Shiism<sup>10</sup> and forms its very essence. The fig-

---

*madreseh ghadim* (the old school, modeled on the *maktab*, the traditional Islamic school). "This new school was at the heart of the reformist project and the modern discourse in Iran, symbolizing progress throughout the nineteenth century .... The Iranian new school was independent of the religious establishment and taught secular material while maintaining the obligatory religious and moral teaching." ("La religion d'état à l'école").

8 Jalal Al-e Ahmad (an Iranian essayist, critic, writer, and translator, 1923–1969) developed the idea of *gharbzadegi* (a term first used by Ahmad Fardid, which can be translated into English as "Westoxification" or "Occidentosis"). See also Morteza Motahhari *Dah goftâr* (Tehran: Sadr, 1361/1982).

9 The term was initially coined by Ahmad Fardid, a Heidegger expert and professor of philosophy, but the concept of Westoxification was primarily developed by the writer and translator Jalal Al-e Ahmad in an essay published in 1962, entitled *Gharbzadegi*.

10 The largest branch is Twelver Shiism (present in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, among other countries). This branch is based on the recognition of twelve Imams, the first being Ali and the last Mahdi, for whom no successor could be accepted because of his disappearance. We also have the Ismaili branch, originating on the death of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq. His succession led to a schism: Ismailis believe that the eldest son, Isma'il, was the successor to the leadership of the community, while Twelver Shiites consider that the Imam was delegated to Musa al-Kadhim, the younger brother of Ja'far al-Sadiq. Zaidi Shiites (mainly present in Yemen), acknowledge only the first five Imams (they believe that Zayd ibn Ali was the fifth and final Imam). These various currents themselves have internal divisions that may be caused by nuances of mystical belief (for instance, the Nazarite current in the Ismaili branch) or, more radically, by claims of separation from Shia Islam, as is the case with the Druze (stemming from the Ismaili branch) and the Alevis (from the Twelver branch. Alevism, it should be noted, as well as identifying as a breakaway from Shia Islam, is also a mystic current).

ure of the Imam was desacralized first through a process of humanization during the period of revolutionary Shiism, and later during the institutional Shiism of the *velayat-e faqih*. The institutionalization of Shiism, under the Islamic Republic, also needed to involve a desacralization of the figure of the Iman, in response to the requirements of a theocracy. The embodiment of God's stewardship by the Supreme Leader divested the Imamic essence of immortality, esotericism, and infallibility. The title of "Imam" was certainly granted to the Ayatollah Khomeini only as an honorific, since this designation does not occur in the Constitution, but nonetheless it remains significant. It was even discussed at the time with regard to his successor Ali Khamenei.<sup>11</sup> The infallibility (*isma'*) coextensive with the Imam became relativized within the framework of a secular grounding.

Moreover, from this political and temporal appropriation of the figure of the Imam emerges the requirement of a properly secular, geographical delimitation of the transcendent notion of *ummah*. The geostrategic circumstances in which Iran had to develop, as well as its theocratic identity, forced a redefinition of the Islamic ideal of community. Traditionally, the *ummah*, the ideal society, is a community bonded more by a common faith than by blood. In some respects, it is the horizontal axis of *religare*, bonding, with faith as its vertical axis. In the Koran, the term refers to a community of conventions for acting based on the religious principles of Good and Evil.<sup>12</sup> In the early days of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini's messages sought to encompass the entire scope of this ideal, but incompatibility with the political realities of the secular sphere meant that it had to be focused around the term "nation." As well as the striking examples of national withdrawal at the time of the Iran-Iraq war, there was also the Damascus uprising in 1982: Khomeini clearly forgot about his plan to unify the peoples of Islam, allowing the Syrian government to massacre thousands of Muslims recognized as belonging to their own Islam, since it was a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood that Damascus crushed in blood.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the conflict with Iraq clearly demonstrated the need

---

11 In April 2010, a lecture entitled "Why should we say 'Imam Khamenei?'" (*Tcherâ bâyard beguyim 'Emâm Khamenei'*?) was given in Tehran by Mohammad Ali Ramin, a political analyst, adviser to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and official at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. He was responsible for organizing the International Conference to review the Global Vision of the Holocaust, and he worked within a new movement to officially award the title of Imam to Ali Khamenei. In August 2010, the Lebanese satellite of the Islamic Republic, Hassan Nasrallah, announced on television: "The Imam Khamenei is following the same path as the Imam (Khomeini) after his death" (*'Emâm Khâmenei hamân râh e emâm râh ba'ad az rehlât ishân edâme'h dâdand'*). His words were published widely by Fars News, a newspaper linked to the regime.

12 This idea relies mainly on verse 110 of the Surah Ali 'Imran 3: "Ye are the best folk that hath been raised up unto mankind. Ye enjoin the Just, and ye forbid the Evil, and ye believe in God. And if the people of the Book had believed, it had surely been better for them! Believers there are among them, but most of them are perverse." (*kuntum hayra 'ummatin 'uhrijat li-n-nasi ta'muruma bil-ma'rufi wa tanhawna 'ani-l-munkari wa tu'minuna bi-l-lahi wa law 'amana 'ahlu-l-kitabi lakana hayran lahum minhumu-l-mu'minuna wa 'aktaruhumu-l-fasiqun*). *The Koran*, translated by J. M. Rodwell, edited by Alan Jones (London: Hachette, 2011).

13 In 1982, Hafez al-Assad crushed the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in the city of Hama.

to defend the nation (with such holy terminology was the language of war articulated), conflating the “protection of Islam” with the “image of the Iranian nation.”<sup>14</sup>

The mobilized personnel were thus encouraged to sacrifice themselves for the holy nation on the basis of an appropriated religious belief: one based on the secular incarnation of a redesigned purity. Another keystone of Shiism was also immanentized here: that of the martyr. While the martyr had already been humanized during the period of revolutionary Shiism, before the theocracy was established, the new martyr followed in perfect continuity, illustrated by the sacrificial spirit of Fahmideh,<sup>15</sup> an icon for the Islamic Republic. Hossein Fahmideh was a very young soldier who, armed with a grenade belt with the pins removed, threw himself under the wheels of an Iraqi tank, in the hope of tipping the balance, however slightly, in the armed conflict. The unnerving effect this had on the Iraqi troops, faced with a hitherto unknown phenomenon, boosted the Islamic Republic’s policy of promoting martyrdom, under the guise of religion, to serve the interests of the nation.

Humanization of the martyr thus became embedded in the geostrategic realities of the Islamic Republic, but its long story began earlier, in the period of revolutionary Shiism in the 1970s. The Imam Husayn<sup>16</sup> in particular is given human characteristics through the pen of one of the most influential theorists of revolutionary Shiism, Ali Shariati.<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, Husayn, in his capacity as Imam, is

---

The number of deaths recorded varies according to the source (between 10,000 and 40,000, with 2,000 quoted by an official Defense Intelligence Agency report. See [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp\\_uploaded\\_documents/DIA-Syria-MuslimBrotherhoodPressureIntensifies.pdf](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp_uploaded_documents/DIA-Syria-MuslimBrotherhoodPressureIntensifies.pdf)). The Hama uprising was distinctive by its isolation: not only was it so savagely repressed as to stifle all revolutionary desires, but it also received no support from outside.

- 14 See the speech by Khomeini on March 22, 1982, in Khorramshahr, reported by Yann Richard: “May your lives be made holy, brave fighters and soldiers in the way of God, you who have protected the honor of Islam, exemplified the Iranian nation, and lifted up the heads of those who are committed to the way of God. The great nation of Iran (*mellat-e bozorg-e Iran*) and the children of Islam are proud of you who have placed your fatherland on the wings of angels and lifted it above all the nations of the world.” *L’islam shi’ite* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 265.
- 15 Born in 1968 into a religious family in Qom, Mohammad Hossein Fahmideh was quickly won over to the causes championed by Khomeinism and the Islamic Republic. He joined the Basij organization, which was responsible for sending volunteers to the front of the Holy Defense. In 1980, then aged thirteen, he fought at Khorramshahr, though not on the front lines as he was so young. On October 30, he saw five Iraqi tanks advancing toward Kout Sheikh, to the despair of the Iranian armed forces. He took the decision to throw himself at the tanks, armed with a grenade belt, thus dying as a martyr while destroying the tanks and unnerving the Iraqi armed forces, who were faced with an unprecedented phenomenon.
- 16 “Those who became martyrs took Hossein as their model; those left behind must pass on their message and take Zeyneb as their model; if not, they are like Yazid (the Umayyad Caliph)”. Ali Shariati, *Complete Works*, n° 19, 200. Translated into French by Amir Nikpey, *Politique et religion en Iran contemporain: Naissance d’une institution* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), 124.
- 17 Ali Shariati (1933–1977) is considered the ideologue of the Iranian Revolution, and, according to some Iranologists, such as Yann Richard, he had “at least as much influence as Khomeini on the Islamization of the political ideology and the politicization of Islam before the Revolution. He also

infallible (*ma'sum*), incapable of committing errors. This is the essential distinction between the Imam and the rest of humanity, aside from the question of the blood of the prophet. Humans are sinners by nature, or at least are capable of error, however unfortunate it may be. It is here that the traditional martyr finds its meaning: incapable of being mistaken, Husayn did not surrender at Karbala, hoping to defeat Yazid's men, and he yielded to his symbolic death. His death thus became a message: a comprehensive expression of the oppression of the righteous and their devotion, pitted against overwhelming injustice.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the martyr appears to be beyond human reach. The remembrance ceremonies of the Passion of Husayn (on Ashura) are not intended to be an imitation of the martyr, rather they constitute a yearly homage, or even a way of resurrecting the martyr by proxy, further endorsing the impossibility of the thing experienced through the other (in this case Husayn the infallible and the superhuman). Along with the secularization of the figure of the martyr, Shariati pursued the secularization of Shiism as a whole. The quietist eschatological dimension of traditional Shiism became revolutionary, and values were reversed: authentic (quietist) Shiism became inauthentic and inauthentic (activist) Shiism became authentic.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, it must be noted that this distortion also conceals the figure of the martyr in a striking exotericism, as he is reduced to his biological dimension. The martyr is traditionally (beyond the original legal meaning of witness<sup>20</sup>) the

---

pursued quite a different path, creating tensions within Islamic militancy. Born in Mashhad into a family of clerics laicized by the anti-religious measures of Reza Shah, he took 'modern' studies at school and university, then studied in Paris on a bursary from 1959 to 1964: he associated with a number of French intellectuals and academics such as Gurvitch, Jacques Berque, and some militants for independence in Algeria and the third world, such as Frantz Fanon .... On returning to Iran, he became a thinker on independence and the Revolution, using Islamic, and especially Shiite, themes such as the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his revolt against injustice, the eschatological expectations of the Imam-leader, ... Shari'ati's writings, freely published since his death, became a source of inspiration for political activism and militancy among young intellectuals who rejected the Western model and the alienating dictatorship subject to the Shah's West, as well as the traditional interpretation of Islam given by the ulama". Yann Richard, *100 mots pour dire l'Iran moderne* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2003), 188–90.

18 Husayn ibn Ali was massacred along with his seventy-two companions by Yazid's thirty thousand men. Their families were tortured by the Umayyad Caliph.

19 Shariati was an apologist for revolutionary Shiism: "The dust of oblivion simply covered it, and it had to wait until Europe put it back on the agenda before it could once again reach Iranian intellectuals. This was about 'soul-searching'. While you know I rely on religion and on Islam, you must also know that I mean an open Islam, considered with a fresh, clear eye, and on the basis of the Islamic intellectual renaissance. I have not come to this vision, after considering the various currents and the different religions, by finally choosing Islam as the 'best religion.'" Ali Shariati, *Retour à soi* (Paris: Albouraq, 2011), 20. "Fake Shi'ism, called Safavid Shi'ism (*tashayyo-è safavi*), is denounced by Shari'ati as the religion of quietism, submission to the oppressive government and apolitical behavior, whereas genuine Shi'ism, called 'Ali-like Shi'ism (*tashayyo-é alavi*), is glorified as the religion of revolutionary and heroic martyrdom." Khosrokhavar, "Two Types of Secularization: The Iranian Case," 125.

20 The original meaning of the term "martyr" is "witness," in the legal sense, both for the English term taken from Greek (itself borrowed from Latin) and for the Persian term taken from Arabic; this is



person who places his ideas above his biological life. A Sunni tradition described by Al-Bukhari highlights the beauty of this death, since the purity that emanates from the martyr's blood only begins to make sense on the day of resurrection (therefore, outside the secular sphere).<sup>21</sup> Thus, even considering the religious texts most focused on corporeality, the modern, quasi-fetishistic conception of the body has more to do with a form of secularization, since it consists in a sacralization of that which is most basely biological. For the new martyr, salvation does not happen at the time of resurrection, but at a specific time T in the secular world, the moment when the blood flows from a dying body. Salvation is no longer something that comes from out of this world but is contained within biological death itself.

Thus, Shariati's thought contributes to the construction of a martyr-loving Shiism that Farhad Khosrokhavar calls "deadly," since it constructs identity in death. The humanization of the martyr is such that it is brought within reach of any human. It enables the old criteria for social ascension, such as education or birth, to be transcended. Thus, it is within the context of this social ascension through the sacrifice of life that the "individual in death" emerges, a notion that Farhad Khosrokhavar developed in *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs* and in "Le nouvel individu en Iran."<sup>22</sup> The politicization of martyrdom now not only makes it accessible to humans, but, in its institutionalization, it finds a highly secular expression due to the fact that even the idea of happiness is now translated into financial and social terms: various state foundations promise economic security and social distinction to the families of martyrs.<sup>23</sup>

With the disenchantment born of the recognition of institutional Shiism, the new martyr henceforward embodies something that transcends the modern Iranian context, the Islamic Republic, its revolutionary message, and its disillusion: it is one of the figures that bears witness to the impossibility of theocracy. The political hijacking of the martyr embodies the expression of a new insight into the impossibility of combining these literally different dimensions. The marriage

---

the case in both Christian and Muslim traditions. In his work *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Glen W. Bowersock explains the development of the concept of the martyr among Muslim populations during the conquest of Palestine in the seventh century: the notion of the witness (*shahid*) from then on designated holy death, referring to the Greek idea of *marturos*, and it took on the same dual meaning (that of the legal witness and the privileged witness of God, and, similarly, that of the person who bears witness and who is the embodiment of a witness).

- 21 "If a person gets wounded in the way of Allah, he will come on the Day of Judgment with his wound in the same condition as it was when it was first inflicted; its colour being the colour of blood but its smell will be the smell of musk." *Sahih Muslim*, book 20, hadith 4626.
- 22 Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Le nouvel individu en Iran," *Cahiers d'Etudes sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien* 26 (1998).
- 23 These *bonyads* (foundations) include the Foundation of the Oppressed and War Veterans (mostaz'afan va janbazan), founded in 1979, the Foundation of Martyrs, founded in 1980, that of the Fifteen Khordad (panzdah-e khordad), created in 1981, and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, founded in 1979.

between the mobility of the real and the immutability of dogma is impossible, and the martyr who emerges from a system that no longer believes in its foundations goes forward to death through despair at seeing such a union celebrated.

## From Disenchantment to the Secularization of Society

The restructuring of the criteria for social ascension on a secularized religion under a theocracy brought about the emergence of opportunism. A particular group of committed actors saw the possibility of gaining social position, more than the expression of real commitment to serving the state. In our view, this group already contained the seed for a desacralization of secularized Shiism, in the form of the *velayat-e faqih* (the guardianship of the religious jurist). Such opportunists, who did not necessarily seek death in order to exist, but who accepted risking their lives in order to gain the social ascension promised by the armed Pasdaran corps, used the system in order to ensure themselves a place of honor: using here means desacralizing, and thus we discover a possible perspective for calling into question this modern political Shiism.

The critical movements reacting against politicized Shiism have been emerging for decades, but have found full expression—and, more importantly, an expression that extends to the whole population—through the Green Movement, which formed in protest of the 2009 presidential election.

The 2009 demonstrations, in response to the farce of the election, were the expression of the clash between one secularization (of the elements of Shiism) and another (attempting to relegate Shiism to the private sphere to be replaced by new values). This movement came from a desire to reintroduce a private space; to assert the law in the face of duty; to break down the totalizing discourse, replacing it with a reforming approach; to open up the path to pluralism; to desacralize the nation in favor of civil society (the very cradle of the new process of secularization); and to assert oneself, no longer through death, but through denial of the other type of secularization, which was dismissed as utopian.

In this new context, the most paradigmatic secularized element is certainly that of *keramat*, generally translated as “dignity,” which has been encountered in slogans chanted during the Arab uprisings of 2011<sup>24</sup> and in Palestine,<sup>25</sup> as well as in the name of the international flotilla ship that left Greece for Gaza on July 19, 2011.<sup>26</sup> Initially, the term had a traditional and religious meaning,<sup>27</sup> generally

---

24 Consider the Tunisian slogan, “*shughl, hurriyya, karama wataniyya*” (work, freedom, national dignity), chanted since the first demonstrations in December 2010.

25 See the writings of Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi on the pursuit of collective dignity (*Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997]).

26 The flotilla bore the name “Dignité/Al-Karama.”

27 Among these is the Sufi idea that although a miracle is the work of the prophet, *karamat* are ex-

associated with mystical graces, charism, and the immateriality of the body.<sup>28</sup> Secularized, the term has gradually come to include the Western concept of “dignity.” While the 1979 revolution defended the collective honor of Iranian identity against “Westoxification” (Islam was considered a major component of Iranian identity—see the works of Al-Ahmad and Shariati), in 2009, Iranians wished to be recognized as individuals with rights and a voice that could be expressed through the vote.

The deeply individuating claim of dignity thus responds to secularization in its first sense, or even in the sense developed by Carl Schmitt, making religion the ultimate horizon of politics: the popular demands in today’s Iran suggest an opposition between individual opinion and the absolute truth of the *velayat-e faqih*, which attests to the certainty that religion may be called into question in the context of politics. This opposition is possible only through the recognition of the individual’s decision-making capability and dignity. Yet, as we have seen, dignity in all its modern aspects (philosophical, legal, bioethical) involves the secularization of a concept that was initially religious<sup>29</sup> (hence the idea that religion is the ultimate horizon of politics in a secularized society). It is in the name of this dignity that the right to participate in political life is claimed. This position is accompanied by a detachment from religious customs, to create consistency in the distinction between the public and private spheres. As Farhad Khosrokhavar explains, describing the demonstrations of 2009, “the festive atmosphere was a symbol of the secularization, people distancing themselves from the public religious norms that are prevalent under the Islamic regime.”<sup>30</sup> This distancing was expressed through various social phenomena symptomatic of secularized societies: diversity; a greater role for women; education as a measure of the individual’s position on the social ladder (rather than level of devotion); lack of interest in religion, in a desire to redefine the public sphere; and the replacement of honor by dignity.

---

traordinary acts that may be performed by faithful Muslims elevated to the rank of saints. *Karamat* should not be confused with the miracle (*mu’jizat*), itself the privilege of beings escaping from the human condition: “A miracle performed by a saint is termed *karamat*, i.e. a ‘favour’ which God bestows upon him, whereas a miracle performed by a prophet is called *mu’jizat*, i.e. an act which cannot be imitated by any one. The distinction originated in controversy, and was used to answer those who held the miraculous powers of the saints to be a grave encroachment on the prerogative of the Prophet. Sufi apologists, while confessing that both kinds of miracle are substantially the same, take pains to differentiate the characteristics of each; they declare, moreover, that the saints are the Prophet’s witnesses, and that all their miracles (like ‘a drop trickling from a full skin of honey’) are in reality derived from him.” Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (Forgotten Books, 2008), 95.

28 See Anne-Marie Eddé, *La principauté ayyoubide d’Alepp (579/1183–658/1260)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1999), 416–8.

29 Although a concept of *dignitas* can be found in Ancient Roman literature, associated with honor and charisma, the Western concept of dignity has been mainly built on the Biblical tradition and the idea that man was created in God’s image (man resembles the Creator [Genesis 1:26], was modeled by the divine hand [Genesis 2:7], the breath of life was breathed into his nostrils [Genesis 2:7], and he received the command to be the steward of creation [Genesis 1:28]).

30 Khosrokhavar, “Two Types of Secularization: The Iranian Case,” 141.

The primary characteristic of this second wave of secularization lies in the fact that it privileges society above the state sphere. The flourishing of the phenomenon of people voicing their opinions outside of official and traditional forums of expression is its most paradigmatic feature: the mobilization of the internet and the emergence of a new intellectuality stemming from every professional sector situate secularist aspirations *in society*, and no longer through the government. The new intellectual breaks free of the sphere of intellectualism as it has conventionally been viewed: traditionally, the intellectual was seen as an individual whose profession consisted in the production of thoughts related to established facts, originally circumstantial or conceptual, within a theoretical field. He or she represented a socio-professional group. This conception imploded with the emergence of the phenomenon of the intermediary. This phenomenon is linked to three established facts, with the Iranian now individuated through the expression of what he or she denies, opening up a breach in the public space: he or she uses new technologies, seeks answers by looking beyond religious solutions, and intends to participate in public life. The new secularization is a social dynamic that goes beyond the system of the Islamic Republic, whose political course of action must now be developed using tactics aiming toward permanence. This holistic system, in order to continue to maintain a discourse that is increasingly misaligned with a society that has succeeded in separating from it, and individuating itself, must use “makeshift” methods to justify its continuation (project for a national internet, forfeiture of the vote, etc.). The new core of individual subjectivity is progressing with a public clarity, capable of using the regime’s own weapons: the absorption of the private sphere by the public sphere has driven the individual to pursue his or her own reflections secretly, then to express himself or herself in denial. Similarly, there is now a clear desire on the part of the individual for the private sphere to absorb the public sphere, and the body has become a preferred vehicle for this. Removing one’s veil in public, for example, becomes a political demand,<sup>31</sup> and expressing a sexuality that goes against the rules imposed by the Islamic Republic becomes a sign of political identity in opposition.<sup>32</sup> Beyond the very latest means of telecommunications, the new secularization is now expressed above all through the innovative mass involvement in the public space by individuals who are “formed” in the private sphere. Today, to display is to deny.

Present-day Iran is the result not only of the intertwining of two different secularizing movements, but also of a three-stage process: desacralization of traditional religion, *resacralization* of politicized religion, desacralization of politicized

---

31 See in particular the movement by Iranian women who posted photographs of themselves online without the veil, which started in May 2014. The journalist Masih Alinejad launched this movement, called “#MyStealthyFreedom,” from the United Kingdom, and it enjoyed widespread coverage.

32 See Eric Butel, “L’individu postislamiste en Iran : la nouvelle jeunesse,” *Cahiers d’Etudes sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le monde Turco-Iranien* 26 (1998), URL: <http://cemoti.revues.org/37>.

religion. The 2009 demonstrations also embody the expression of the desacralization of the legitimacy of power: the sacralized leader, as well as his political decisions, are now subject to criticism, which, in itself, constitutes the implosion of a comprehensive approach, which by definition is absolute and immutable. The development of secularist social aspirations clears away any concerns around the issue of blasphemy. Theocratic power is now “attackable” in the name of human dignity, the right of each person to take part in political life, and the decision-making capacity of each person being equal to that of everyone else, including the Leader of the Revolution. The question “who must govern?”—the traditional question of jurisprudential Shiism—is now replaced by that of “how to govern?”