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Introduction

All terms become new when they are transferred from their proper context to another ... When we ascend to heaven, we must speak before God in new languages ... When we are on earth, we must speak with our own languages ... For we must carefully mark this distinction, that in matters of divinity we must speak far differently than in matters of politics.[1]

Martin Luther

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.[2]

Carl Schmitt

Seyyed Hashem Aqajari (b. 1957) was not a cleric but a longstanding member of the Mojahedin Organisation of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (*Sazman-e mojahedin-e enqelab-e eslami-ye Iran*, SMEEI), a prominent reform-oriented political organisation. He also happened to be a veteran of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah-e pasdaran-e enqelab-e eslami*, IRGC), and had served on the front of the Iran–Iraq War. His commitment to one of the twentieth century's last great revolutions and his homeland were beyond reproach. As there was for thousands of others who had served in the war, there was a physical price to pay for such unwavering commitment. Aqajari lost a leg to a landmine in the course of the brutal eight-year conflict.

On 19 June 2002 [29 Khordad 1381] in commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of the Iranian intellectual and political activist ʿAli Shariʿati, Aqajari – now a respected history

[1] Quoted in Sheldon D. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought Expanded Edition*, 2nd ed., Kindle ed. (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 152.

[2] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, foreword by Tracy B. Strong, ed. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 36.

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professor – delivered a lecture in the mid-western city of Hamedan entitled 'Dr. Shariʿati and the Project of Islamic Protestantism'.[3] In this pugnacious lecture he lamented that, despite some 100 years having elapsed since the publication of the Qajar-era diplomat and author Mirza Yusef Khan Mostashar al-Dowleh's *Yek kalameh* (1870), and post-revolutionary reformist politicians' regular demands calling for 'the rule of law', 'law has still not come to rule'.[4] *Yek kalameh* or *One Word* was an intellectual touchstone of late-nineteenth-century reformers and Iran's Constitutional Revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century. Whatever its author's original intention, it had come to signify the struggle for the rule of law and the constraint of arbitrary power. This was the least controversial of Aqajari's comments, however. What would with great rapidity provoke enmity – not to mention a death sentence,[5] later commuted to a five-year jail term[6] – was his simple but acerbic attack on the clergy and their claims to act as intermediaries between God and the faithful. His opponents, and even some of his allies, thought he had a crossed a line.

Like many Islamic reformers before him, Aqajari distinguished between 'historical Islam' (*Islam-e tarikhi*) and 'essential Islam' (*Islam-e zati*).[7] The 'Islamic Protestants', he instructed his audience, are only concerned with the latter, while the former is little more than a human artifice manipulated to guarantee the prerogatives of a worldly caste. Just as Shariʿati had once authored searing criticisms of the much-revered Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi, the powerful Shaykh al-Islam of Isfahan during the latter stages of the Safavid dynasty,[8]

[3] Hashem Aqajari, 'Doktor Shariʿati va porozheh-ye porotestantism-e eslami', in *Aqajari* (Tehran: Jameh daran, 1382 [2003]), p. 13.
[4] Ibid., p. 18.
[5] Unsurprisingly, the rightist cleric Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi vociferously defended the death sentence against Aqajari. Reza Sanʿati, *Gofteman-e Mesbah: gozareshi az zendegani va mavazeʿ-e ʿelmi-siyasi-ye Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi* (Tehran: Markaz-e asnad-e enqelab-e eslami, 1387 [2008]), p. 776.
[6] Nazila Fathi, 'Iran: Another Death Sentence Is Lifted', *New York Times*, February 15, 2003.
[7] Aqajari, 'Doktor Shariʿati va porozheh-ye porotestantism-e eslami', p. 28.
[8] This has become a topos of the Iranian religious reformist genre. For a recent critique of Majlesi, which even elaborates upon many of Aqajari's criticisms of the Safavid-era cleric, see Ali Rahnema, *Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics: From Majlesi to Ahmadinejad* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 189.

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Aqajari decried Majlesi for injecting what he regarded as arbitrary beliefs, superstitions, and practices into the realm of unimpeachable sanctity – for example, wearing an agate ring on the left hand and ascribing to it salvific qualities.[9]

For Aqajari, 'Islamic Protestantism' and 'Islamic humanism' went hand in hand and ultimately entailed the clergy's obsolescence. He attributed to Luther the credo that every man can act as his own priest,[10] and it is in the Lutheran tradition that he saw the relationship between individual conscience and scriptural understanding consummated. It was in collaboration with a class of like-minded intellectuals and their supporters that he hoped to provoke something akin to a 'Puritan revolution' in the Islamic Republic.[11] The same republic he had fought to establish he would now seek to reform. The analogy was hardly new, but it proved effective, bestowing an almost historical 'objectivity' and vindication to the reformist project by proxy. Early Western observers of late-nineteenth-century Islamic reformers had been quick to invoke the 'Protestant Reformation' as a key point of comparison and analogous meta-narrative, albeit without devolving much thought to the great many differences separating these distinct historical phenomena or the diverse circumstances which had provoked their arrival on the scene.[12]

9 Aqajari, 'Doktor Shariʿati va porozheh-ye porotestantism-e eslami', p. 30. Aqajari was certainly not the first to make such objections. The reform-minded cleric Shariʿat-Sangelaji had uncompromisingly criticised such practices during the Reza Shah period. Ali Rahnema, *Shiʿi Reformation in Iran: The Life and Theology of Shariʿat Sangelaji*, Kindle ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 40.

10 Aqajari, 'Doktor Shariʿati va porozheh-ye porotestantism-e eslami', p. 25.

11 It was of course Christopher Hill who famously said that the depiction of the English Revolution as a Puritan one was a 'nineteenth-century invention'. Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century*, Kindle ed. (London: Pimlico, 2001), Loc 123. Hill was translated by Iranian reformists such as Saʿid Hajjariyan and read widely in reformist intellectual circles. See Christopher Hill and Saʿid Hajjariyan, 'Seh khoda dar enqelab-e engelestan' *Rah-e now* 1, no. 1 (5 Ordibehesht 1377 [April–May 1998]).

12 Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA, & London: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 149; Loc 2304.

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Aqajari caustically mocked the clerical hierarchy and its titles of Ayatollah, Hojjat al-Islam, and Thaqat al-Islam, remarking that 'some of their titles are so new, their lifespan doesn't exceed fifty to sixty years'.[13] He fulminated against the clergy's putative monopoly on the Qurʾan and its claim to mastery of '101 sciences and specialisations', decrying them baseless; the office of Friday prayer leader was an innovation, without precedent at the inception of Islam.[14] He stressed, 'Shariʿati wanted to remove such false intermediaries (*vaseteh-ha-ye kazeb*). In Islam, we did not have any clerical class (*tabaqeh-ye rowhani*); the clerical class is a new class in our history.'[15] So as to make his endgame all the more unequivocal, he categorically declared that 'in essential Islam there is no clergy at all'.[16] Continuing his general line of argument and remarking upon a theme that repeatedly graced the pages of reformist intellectual periodicals,[17] he lambasts the hierarchical relationship of master (*morad*) and disciple (*morid*) analogous to that of *marjaʿ* (source of emulation) and *moqalled* (one who emulates or partakes in *taqlid*), asking rhetorically, 'are people monkeys to imitate (*taqlid*) him [i.e., the *morad*]?'[18] The teachers of religion (*din-shenasan*), he argues, are supposed to act as educators, whereby the student learns, understands, matures, and is thus capable of acting on the basis of his own reasoned conclusions. In principle, as the student progresses he will be able to dispense with the teacher and independently comprehend and reflect upon the sacred texts for himself.[19] The *moqalled*, on Aqajari's understanding of Osuli Shiʿi jurisprudence, is forever bound to unthinkingly imitate and thus is deprived of the ability to think and reason for himself, manacled and bound in a state of interminable infancy. '*Ejtehad* does not belong to a special group or class.'[20] These recognisable tropes of rational deliberation and respect for the individual's moral autonomy are the core of Aqajari's and fellow religious intellectuals' call for 'Islamic humanism'.[21]

[13] Aqajari, 'Doktor Shariʿati va porozheh-ye porotestantism-e eslami', p. 33.
[14] Ibid., p. 31–2. [15] Ibid., p. 33. [16] Ibid., p. 33.
[17] Ahmad Naraqi, 'Baznegari-ye rabeteh-ye morid-moradi dar ʿerfan', *Kiyan*, no. 2 (Azar 1370 [November–December 1991]).
[18] Aqajari, 'Doktor Shariʿati va porozheh-ye porotestantism-ye eslami', p. 36.
[19] Ibid., p. 36. [20] Ibid., p. 45.
[21] Ibid., p. 37. Hassan Yusefi-Eshkevari, 'Tarhi az oumanism-e eslami', *Baztab-e andisheh*, no. 40 (Mordad 1382 [July–August 2003]), p. 64.

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Aqajari's political and intellectual trajectory were by no means unique and were shared by many of his generation. In this book I will look at a range of intellectuals and political actors who at one time had committed themselves with every fibre of their being to the last great revolution of the twentieth century, only to feel, by its second decade, that the state which subsequently emerged had lost its way and palpably failed to live up to the utopian aspirations which surfaced in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the Pahlavi regime's demise. In this respect, Aqajari's biography speaks to the broader subject of this book and how the project for political and religious reform in post-revolutionary Iran was born and historically articulated. By elaborating the complex genealogies of political and religious reform in post-revolutionary Iran, I will not only shed light on how 'reform' was theorised and thought about by the religious and loyalist intelligentsia and part of the political class but also analyse some of the specific limitations of the way in which 'reform' was conceived and framed by these elites.

Aqajari hailed from a religious-mercantile family in Abadan, in the south-western province of Khuzestan, and his father had been a fervent supporter of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini from at least the early 1960s, when the latter first came to national prominence with the uprising of June 1963 [15 Khordad 1342].[22] After his father's draper's business went bankrupt and his 'petit-bourgeois' existence was thrown into disarray, Aqajari the elder left Iran for the Persian Gulf sheikdom of Kuwait,[23] leaving his eldest son, Hashem, who was only nine years old at the time, with little choice but to help support his five brothers and sisters. During his formative years and adolescence, he did everything from selling lottery tickets to manual labour and selling fruit and vegetables on the streets of Abadan.[24] As a young teen he joined the Hojjatiyyeh Society, a religious organisation established following the 1953 coup d'état against the nationalist premier Mohammad Mosaddeq by the Mashhad-born Shaykh Mahmud Halabi. The chief

[22] Hashem Aqajari, Reza Khojasteh-Rahimi, and Amir-Hosayn Balaʾi, 'Sharh-e zendegi-ye yek enqelabi-ye naaram: goftogu ba Hashem Aqajari', *Andisheh-ye puya* 2, no. 11 (Mehr–Aban 1392 [October–November 2013]), p. 37.

[23] Aqajari uses the term *khordeh-borzhvazi* himself to describe his class-economic background up to the age of nine years old or so, which, following his father's bankruptcy, 'reached a level beneath the proletariat'. Ibid., p. 37.

[24] Ibid., p. 37.

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objective of the society was to ideologically counter Bahaʿi religious activism and doctrine.[25] Aqajari later left the society, unpersuaded by its 'apolitical' demeanour, and found himself spellbound by the revolutionary rhetoric and proclamations of ʿAli Shariʿati, Khomeini, and the pre-1975 People's Mojahedin Organisation.[26]

With the revolution, at the tender age of twenty-one Aqajari headed an armed intelligence-security committee in Abadan and identified 'repressive agents' of the *ancien régime* for arrest.[27] Moreover, as a committed Islamist revolutionary he joined an organisation, the Mojahedin Organisation of the Islamic Revolution (see Chapter 3), whose *raison d'être* was to act as a bulwark in defence of the newly established clerically- led order and to ensure under the threat of violence that Ayatollah Khomeini's political and religious authority remained unchallenged by ideological adversaries, both real and imagined. His specific role was one of recruiting supporters and propagating against Marxist organisations and the People's Mojahedin on Iran's university campuses.[28] Even though many of the leading lights of the Iranian left and People's Mojahedin had been killed at the hands of the former regime's security apparatus or had found themselves in exile for long stretches of time, it was believed that the ideological potency and revolutionary visions of such groups had to

[25] ʿEmad al-Din Baqi, *Dar shenakht-e hezb-e qaʾedin-e zaman* (Tehran: Nashr-e danesh-e eslami, Esfand 1362 [February–March 1984]), p. 29. It is worth noting that numerous reformist-inclined intellectuals, ideologues, and politicians were either members or sympathetic to the Hojjatiyyeh prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1978–9. These include not only Aqajari but also ʿAbdolkarim Sorush, ʿEmad al-Din Baqi, Mohammad-Taqi Banki, ʿAtaollah Mohajerani, Mohammad-Javad Zarif, and Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, to name but a few. Its membership was not by any means exclusive to would-be Islamic leftists/ reformists. Mohammad Quchani, 'Farzand-e maktab-e Khorasan: pazhuheshi dar risheh-ha-ye fekri-ye Anjoman-e Hojjatiyyeh: az mobarezeh ba falsafeh ta talash baraye enhelal-e hezb-e Tudeh', *Mehrnameh*, no. 25 (Mehr 1391 [September–October 2012]), p. 77.

[26] Aqajari heard Shariʿati in person when the latter gave a speech at the Oil Academy in Abadan, after which he would devour everything Shariʿati wrote (p. 37). Moreover, as a university student he would attend classes held by Ayatollahs Beheshti and Motahhari and also became familiar with ʿAllameh Tabatabaʾi's critical engagement with Marxism in his *Osul-e falsafeh va ravesh-e reʾalism* (p. 38). Aqajari, Khojasteh-Rahimi, and Balaʾi, 'Sharh-e zendegi-ye yek enqelabi-ye naaram'.

[27] Ibid., p. 39.

[28] One of the SMEE 'sympathisers' under his supervision was none other than ʿEmad al-Din Baqi. Ibid., p. 39.

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be forcefully countered amongst the impressionable youth. The university and the wider student movement, after all, had proven time and again to be a hotbed of discontent and rebellion against the political status quo.

After factional disagreements within the Mojahedin Organisation of the Islamic Revolution came to a head, Aqajari resigned in January 1983 along with thirty-six others, many of whom would become leading proponents of reform following the 1997 presidential election. As a member of the Revolutionary Guards, Aqajari participated and witnessed first-hand one of the most brutal inter-state conflicts of the twentieth century, the Iran–Iraq War (1980–8), only to see, in the wake of Ayatollah Khomeini's death, rightist clerical rivals and their supporters seize the reins of high office to the exclusion of their erstwhile, albeit ambivalent, allies. Many of the ideals which had been championed at the outset of the revolution were perceived as having given way to despair and indifference, while the new leadership faced the unenviable task of rebuilding a ravaged nation in the absence of its inimitable founder and thus sought to redefine its mission and place in the world.

Like many others around this time, Aqajari gradually began to reexamine and critically appraise many of his most earnestly held ideological convictions. He began graduate work and research at the Presidential Strategic Research Centre as part of a quite different political trajectory to the one he formerly embodied as a young firebrand.[29] Then came May 1997 and the emergence of the 2nd Khordad Front, as well as the surprise victory of the relatively unassuming former minister of culture and Islamic guidance, Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Khatami, which marked the return of the Islamic left to the forefront of Iranian high politics and a historic watershed in terms of the advent of what is commonly referred to as the 'epoch of reforms' (*dowran-e eslahat*).

Despite the overwhelming popular mandate enjoyed by the new administration, its success was far from assured. On the one hand, Aqajari's arrest and condemnation was one of many attempts at reversal and fierce opposition to the newly minted reformists' attempts to

[29] Hashem Aqajari, 'Jonbesh-e eslah-talabi, chalesh-e dow farhang-e siyasi va hamelan-e an', in *Hokumat-e dini va hokumat-e demokratik* (Tehran: Zekr, 1381 [2002]), p. 250.

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realise their political programme and ambitions.[30] On the other, expectations were high that reformists would respond to persistent pressure from the burgeoning middle and lower-middle classes, which, after a decade and a half of fear, instability, and exhaustion, had returned to the assiduously managed public sphere to make their demands heard once again. This monograph examines the origins and development of the intellectual and political networks which participated in, but above all theorised, the project to reform the Islamic Republic of Iran from the mid-1990s until 2005 and which continues to cast a long shadow over the political and ideological contestations enveloping Iranian state and society in the present.

* * *

It is perhaps cautious to start any academic endeavour by beginning negatively and stating what this work is not trying to do or demonstrate. For starters, it will not provide an exposition of the collective output of Iran's post-revolutionary 'religious intellectuals' (*rowshanfekran-e dini*) in its entirety. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for a single volume to do justice to their voluminous writings and the disparate notions and interpretations elaborated therein, not to mention the various periods of their intellectual development over the course of four decades. Nor is this book a conventional political history which carefully and meticulously chronicles a series of events, their causes and ramifications, and the myriad carefully crafted readings which accumulate and congeal into established historiographies.

The core of this book delineates a potted intellectual history of Iran's post-revolutionary reformists (*eslahtalaban*). Specifically, it will address the political dimensions of the post-revolutionary religious intellectuals' published writings and provide a contextualised account of their political-ideological milieu and the intellectual, social, and institutional networks from which they originated. It will focus on their contribution to the various debates over the role and powers of the Shiʿi clergy and the nature, modus operandi, and structure of the post-revolutionary Iranian state. It will map these intellectuals' transformation from ideological legitimators of the newly established

30 In Aqajari's case even his own party organisation, the SMEEI, failed to come to his aid and publicly dissociated itself from the positions he enunciated in the Hamedan lecture. Aqajari, Khojasteh-Rahimi, and Balaʾi, 'Sharh-e zendegi-ye yek enqelabi-ye naaram', p. 37.

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theocratic-populist regime to internal critics whose revised vision for the politico-religious order coalesced and converged with the growing disillusionment and frustration of what will be referred to as, inter alia, the 'Islamic left' – a constellation of political forces within the political elite of the Islamic Republic, which, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, increasingly felt itself marginalised and on the outskirts of power. This term, along with 'Islamic *chap*', will be used interchangeably and is elaborated upon in detail in Chapter 3. For the present, let it suffice to stand for Khomeini's disciples who in the 1980s both ascribed this ideological affiliation – i.e., left (*chap*) – to themselves and for the most part advocated broadly speaking statist solutions in the domain of economic policy and social engineering. On questions of foreign policy, they also tended to be more radically inclined and willing to directly challenge the imperial hegemony of the United States and its allies within the region and beyond. In the wake of Ayatollah Khomeini's death, that would slowly start to change, and in the space of several years many of the ideological positions of the Islamic left and loyalist intelligentsia would cease to be recognisable.

In the years following Khatami's election as president in May 1997, they recast themselves as 'reformists' (*eslahtalaban*) within the political class and sought to negotiate reforms in a gradualist process from above. Sociologist Tom Bottomore distinguishes the 'political class' from the 'political elite' or 'governing elite'. The 'political class' refers to all those groups which 'exercise political power or influence and are directly engaged in struggles for political leadership'. The 'political elite' or 'governing elite' consists of those individuals who in fact 'exercise political power in a society at any given time'.[31] Antonio Gramsci, in a similar vein, contends in the *Prison Notebooks* that 'the "political class" is nothing other than the category of intellects of the dominant social group' – a conceptual formulation which goes to underline the discernible overlap and interpenetration of segments of the post-revolutionary loyalist intelligentsia and the political class.[32]

The central contentions of this book are that: 1) the political marginalisation of the Islamic left in the course of intra-elite factional

[31] Tom Bottomore, *Elites and Society*, Kindle; second edition (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 7: Loc 148.
[32] Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 252.

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struggles during the early 1990s, as well as; 2) the perceived shortcomings of the hierocratic-populist system which came to light in the actual process of governing and 3) failure to fulfil the grand expectations of its devoted cadres in the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq War, the death of the revolutionary patriarch, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, elicited a critical re-orientation away from the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary politico-ideological milieu which preceded it and provided the conditions under which the Islamic left, in concert with the intellectual current known as the *rowshan-fekran-e dini*, sought to partake in an elite-mediated project to redefine the central ideological categories of the post-revolutionary political order. These intersecting socio-political transformations, at both the structural and agential levels, engendered the conditions under which the politico-ideological *dispositif* of 'reform' and 'reformism' emerged onto the post-revolutionary scene in the mid-1990s.[33] In the effort to reassert their political claim on the 'regime' as a political-ideological construct and 'regime of truth',[34] in tandem with a sustained period of critical reflexivity on the margins of state power, the Islamic left and their 'religious intellectual' allies sought to accumulate symbolic power and capital in their struggle to rethink the political and religious foundations of the Islamic Republic. This process of appropriation and the project to foster a form of civil hegemony reached its apogee with the electoral victory of Mohammad Khatami on 23 May 1997 and the first three years of his presidency.[35] The book ends by examining the ideological and political challenges faced in the latter's second term as president. At a far more general level, the ambition of this book is to analyse and unravel

[33] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 194–5. Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and David Pedatella, Kindle ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), pp. 1–24.

[34] This notion will be addressed in further detail in Chapter 1. But it should be acknowledged that it has had different valences throughout Foucault's career. Michel Foucault, 'The Political Function of the Intellectual', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 17 (1977), p. 13. Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979–1980*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell, Kindle ed. (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), Loc 2419.

[35] Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, no. 100 (November–December 1979), p. 13.

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