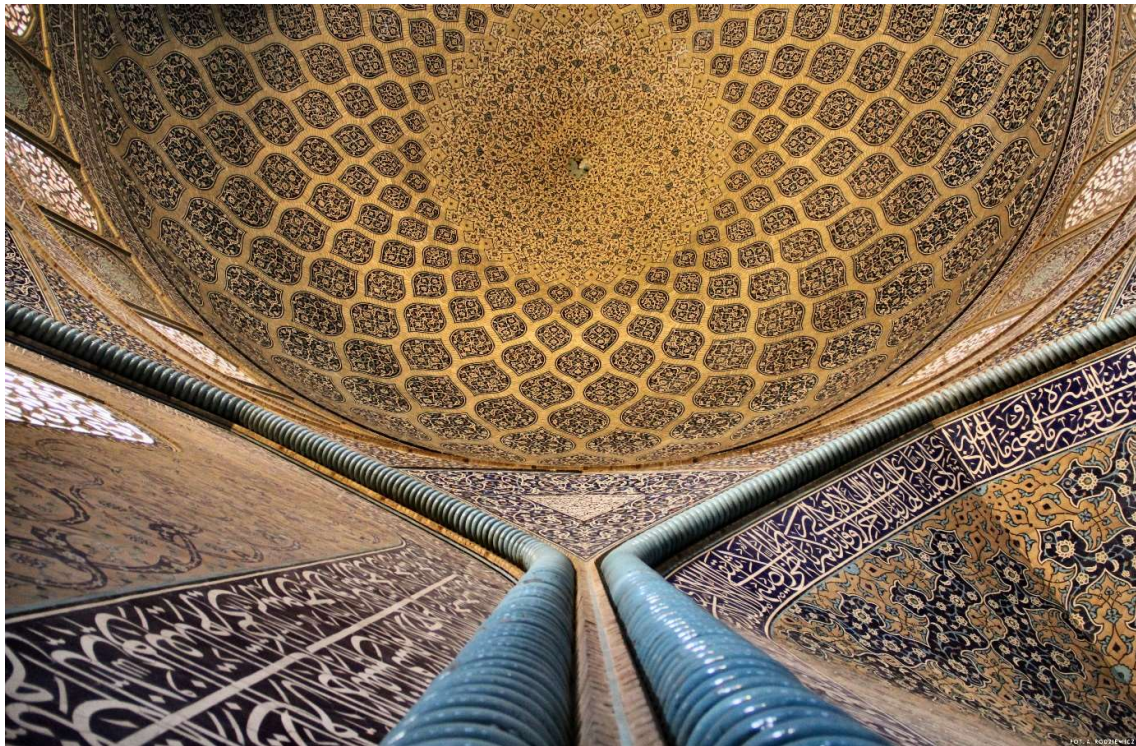


International Conference
Reason and Religion in Iran 1925-2025



Organized by the Beyond Sharia Research Team

Utrecht University
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Friday 27 September 2024
Drift 21, room 0.05 (Sweelinck Hall)





The research project *Beyond Sharia* has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 101020403).

In this conference, we seek to explore the complex relationship between reason and religion in Iran over the past century. While this relationship is often oversimplified as a clash between rational modernity and secularism versus reactionary, irrational religious thought, it is far more nuanced than the popular image suggests. By critically examining the various forms and manifestations of the interplay and juxtaposition of these two concepts, we aim not only to trace their historical trajectories, but also to discern their profound significance within the Iranian intellectual tradition. We also seek to identify key moments and socio-political developments that have been shaped by reflections on the interaction between reason and religion.

This exploration includes both the traditional understanding of their relationship – for example, the positioning of ‘rational sciences’ (*‘ulūm-i ‘aqlīya*) vis-à-vis ‘transmitted sciences’ (*‘ulūm-i naqlīya*) – and their evolving dynamics in the new discourses that have emerged as a result of the political and intellectual transformations of the last two centuries. By closely examining key figures, historical junctures, intellectual movements, and shifts in the socio-political landscape, the seminar aims to unravel the tensions, dialogues, and synergies that define the intricate interplay between reason and religion in Iran.

Programme Friday 27 September 2024

09.30 Welcome and opening by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab & Lloyd Ridgeon

09.45 **Lloyd Ridgeon (Glasgow University)**

Sharīʿat Sangalajī and the “Demolition of Delusion” (maḥv al-mafhūm)

10.30 **Olmo Gölz (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg)**

Mostazafin in Hegel's Mirror: Unpacking Iran's Revolutionary Ideology

11.15 *Coffee break*

11.45 **Magdalena Rodziewicz (University of Warsaw)**

Navigating Between Reason and Emotions: The Contemporary Debate on Mourning Rituals Among the Iranian Shiʿi Clergy

12.30 *Lunch break*

14.00 **Oliver Scharbrodt (Lund University)**

Islamizing Democracy / Democratizing Islam?: the concept of shawra (consultation) in the political thought of Mahmud Taleqani (1903-1979)

14.45 **Stanisław Adam Jaśkowski (University of Warsaw)**

Religion, Rationality and Nationalism on the Verge of the Constitution: What did the deputies and the public talk about when they could talk about anything?

15.30 *Wrapping up and drinks*

Sharīʿat Sangalajī and the “Demolition of Delusion” (*maḥv al-mafhūm*)
(Lloyd Ridgeon)

Sharīʿat Sangalī (d.1944) was a cleric based in Tehran who emphasised the use of reason to understand Islam which meant that in many respects he had more in common with the royal Pahlavī court and the non-*hawza* based intellectuals. To this end his religious critics accused him of being a “court-cleric.” In this presentation the focus is on a short treatise composed by Sangalī just before his death, in which he was at pains to reject the commonly held view that three individuals, Khiḍr, Iliyās and Jesus, discussed in the Qurʾān had eternal life. Such a treatise on this topic may seem fairly innocuous, however, in the context of Shīʿā Iran it was inflammatory. This is because belief in the living Twelfth Imam (who vanished from human eyes in 874 C.E, but is considered still alive in occultation) is one of the cardinal elements of dogma. In effect, Sangalajī was asking Shīʿas, in an indirect fashion, to question the whole basis of their belief system.

This presentation includes a brief survey of Sangalajī’s life and the context of Iran in the 1930s when the Shāh and many of the non-religious intellectuals were attempting to modernise Iran and belittle Islam. Discussion is then made of Sangalajī’s sidelining from official discourse since the Islamic Revolution. Subsequently, focus is turned to the text itself.

The episode surrounding Sangalajī is of interest because it demonstrates the elasticity of religious belief when it is stretched by reason. In addition, it reveals the breaking point, the limits of tolerance within the *hawza*: while the Shāh was attempting to reform Shīʿa Islam by restricting the performance of religious rituals of secondary importance, the real challenge came from within the ranks of the clerics, via Sangalajī’s argumentation. It is perhaps for this reason that the

Islamic Republic focuses its vitriol on the Pahlavī regime, and maintains a resounding silence vis-à-vis Sangalajī.

Lloyd Ridgeon is Reader in Islamic Studies at Glasgow University. His education includes a B.A. in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from Durham University (UK) , an M.A. in International Relations from the International University of Japan (IUJ), and a PhD from the University of Leeds (UK), where he was supervised by Professor Ian Netton. He has published widely on various aspects of medieval Persian Sufism, including monographs on ‘Azīz Nasafī (1998) and Awḥad al-Din Kirmānī (2018). He has also published on modern Sufism, focusing on the Anjuman-i Ukhuwwat and Zahīr al-Dawla of the Ni‘matullahī order. His work on modern Sufism also includes a study of the criticisms of Aḥmad Kasravī, titled Sufi Castigator (2006). He has edited three collections of essays on Sufism: Sufis and Salafis in the Contemporary Age (2015), The Cambridge Companion to Sufism (2015) and the Routledge Handbook on Sufism (2021). More recently he has paid attention to aspects of jurisprudence in Iran under the Islamic Republic, and has published a 7 monograph on the topic of the ḥijāb. His latest work with Cambridge University Press (2023) looks at the worldview of the rationalist seminarian Aḥmad Qābil. He is also the chief editor of the peer reviewed British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, which produces five issues per year. He served as editor of IRAN, the journal of BIPS from 2013- 2021.

Mostazafin in Hegel's Mirror: Unpacking Iran's Revolutionary Ideology

(Olmo Gölz)

The dichotomy of “mostazafin” (the oppressed) and “mostakberin” (the oppressors) plays a central role in the Islamist revolutionary discourse in Iran, significantly influenced by central ideological figures of the revolution such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Shariati, and Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari during the pivotal 1970s. This distinction has not only shaped the Iranian Revolution but can also be viewed as a successful discursive export to the broader Islamic world. Its success is evident as it has recently been adopted by groups claiming to represent the Muslim struggle against imperialist forces.

While the mostazafin/mostakberin-dichotomy is primarily contextualized within the framework of third worldism, encompassing influences from thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Marxist ideology, its incorporation of Islamic principles adds a distinctive dimension. However, this perspective, while valuable, remains insufficient in its analysis. To enrich this discourse, I propose exploring the mostazafin/mostakberin-dichotomy through the philosophical lens of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. Through the theoretical lens provided by Hegel’s dialectic, we can expand and compare the conceptualization of oppressed and oppressors. Hegel's dialectic, articulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, illuminates the pivotal conflict between master and slave as a transformative process of self-awareness and self-realization, considered by many to be a primary mover of historical development. This philosophical framework offers a deeper understanding for interpreting the Islamist revolutionary discourse, particularly how individuals categorized as mostazafin, in the discourse of Khomeini and his contemporaries, come to recognize their strength and pursuit of justice amidst oppression, ultimately catalyzing the Islamic Revolution. In contrast, the mostakberin, akin to Hegel’s master, undergo moral and spiritual degeneration due to their reliance on oppressive structures.

This is not merely a theoretical exercise; rather, it reflects a critical examination of the current dynamics in Iran, where ideologists and representatives of the discursive tradition, now in a hegemonic position, assert their role as spokespersons for the mostazafin, purportedly representing the oppressed. This situation prompts consideration of how a discourse of subversion can be sustained under these circumstances. Drawing on Hegelian insights, one might argue that the Islamic Republic's perpetuation of the mostazafin/mostakberin-dichotomy could potentially precipitate its own dissolution over time.

Integrating the Hegelian perspective into existing analyses aims to deepen our understanding of not only the political and ideological underpinnings of the Islamic Revolution but also those of the present Islamic Republic."

Dr. Olmo Gözl is a scholar of Islamic studies and Iranian studies. He is a senior lecturer at the Oriental Seminar of the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany, where he coordinates the Islamic studies programs. His research focuses on gender history, particularly in Iran and the Middle East, the sociology of heroism, war and violence, the history and sociology of martyrdom in Islam, and contemporary history of Iran and the broader Middle East. His current research project examines propaganda and visual iconography in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Olmo Gözl earned his Ph.D. in 2016 from the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg with a dissertation on violent actors in Iran during the 1940s to 1960s. In his dissertation, he analyzed the processes surrounding the 1953 coup d'état in Iran through the lens of critical theory, particularly the works of Horkheimer and Adorno. Following his doctorate, Gözl worked as a postdoctoral researcher (2016-2020) and later as a principal investigator (2020-2024) in the Collaborative Research Center "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroism" in Freiburg, where he delved deeply into masculinities in Iran and the sociology of martyrdom. He has brought these perspectives together in numerous

publications in relevant academic journals, special issues and collected volumes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Olmo Gözl collaborated with Kevin Schwartz (Oriental Institute, Prague) to explore the mobilizing power of martyrdom in times of social crisis, thoroughly investigating the propaganda of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This collaboration resulted in several publications, including articles for *Visual Studies* and the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. In their current book project, Gözl and Schwartz focus on visual propaganda in Iran.

Navigating Between Reason and Emotions: The Contemporary Debate on Mourning Rituals Among the Iranian Shi‘i Clergy

(Magdalena Rodziewicz)

The objective of this paper is to examine the current discourse within the Shi‘i clergy in Iran on the mourning rituals commemorating the martyrdom of the third Shi‘i imam, with a particular focus on the performance of religious delegations (sing. *hey‘at*) led by the eulogists (sing. *maddāh*). Although Shi‘i authorities have concurred that participating in Moharram congregations is of spiritual benefit to the faithful, they have also perceived them as a potential space for distortions, falsifications and deformities of the story of Ashura (e.g. Mohdas Nouri (d. 1902) and Morteza Motahhari (d. 1979)). In the recent years, due to the significant shifts in generational demographics, political landscapes, technological advancements, and the role of social media, profound transformations in the content and form of Moharram rites have occurred. These changes have reignited some long-standing concerns among a section of the clergy who identified certain contemporary innovations as detrimental and potentially dangerous. One of the key areas of debate concerned the relationship between the notions of reason/understanding (*sho‘ur*) and emotion/passion (*shūr*) and their mutual interdependence. The

debate focused on the perceived imbalance between the intellectual contemplation of the tragedy of Karbala and the purely emotional experience of its recollection. The paper, based on statements and positions of Shi'i clerics, in addition to an analysis of the clerical discourse, also draws attention to the considerations of the role of the religious scholars in shaping religiosity and the image crisis of turban wearers among the Iranian society, which can be perceived as one of the reasons behind the rational, knowledge-based component of the religious rites for which the clergy feel responsible being overshadowed by the emotional dimension embodied by other participants of the religious scene.

Magdalena Rodziewicz holds a PhD in Iranian Studies and currently works as a lecturer in the Department of Iranian Studies at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw. Her research interests lie in the field of contemporary Iran and its intellectual and religious tradition. Her study focuses on the Shi'i clergy, their religious and socio-political activities, and the image crisis currently facing them in contemporary Iranian society. Furthermore, she is interested in the cultural context of moral concepts such as *aberu* and the social and political significance of Iranian cinema. She is currently working on a book on the socio-political dimensions of the Shi'i clerical garb (*lebas-e rouhaniyat*) in contemporary Iran. She is the author of several scholarly publications, including: *In Search for a Spiritual Authority. Shi'i Clergy in Iranian Post-revolutionary Cinema* ("British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies," Vol. 50: 5, 2023: 1167–1188; *Religion in the First Year of the Pandemic: Shi'i Jurisprudence on Covid-19 in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, "The Middle East Journal," Vol. 75: 4, 2022: 551–573; *The Status of Ābirū in Contemporary Iranian Shī'ī Narratives* "Journal of Islamic Ethics," Vol. 6: 2, 2022: 257–283; and *A Close Encounter. Iranian Shi'i Clergy and Artificial Intelligence* ("Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies," Vol. 14: 3–4, 2021 (published 2024), 135–157.

**Islamizing Democracy / Democratizing Islam?:
the concept of *shawra* (consultation) in the political thought of Mahmud
Taleqani (1903-1979)**

(Oliver Scharbrodt)

Embedding constitutionalism and parliamentarism in Shia Islam was one of the objectives of the clerical supporters of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905-1911). Mohammad Hosayn Na'ini (1860-1936) was one of the most senior Iranian clerics, based in Najaf, who supported the Constitutional Revolution and sought to legitimise the establishment of a constitutional government from a Shia religious perspective in his *Tanbih al-umma wa-tanzih al-milla*. In 1955, Mahmud Taleqani rediscovered this work and published it with his own extensive commentary. The republication of Na'ini's work initiated Taleqani's own exploration of the nature of an Islamic state and its relationship to constitutional and democratic forms of government. As a vocal opponent of the Westernising and secularising policies of the Pahlavi dynasty, Taleqani was primarily concerned with means to prevent the rise of political autocracy and engaged with the concept of *shawra* (consultation) in order to embed democratic-participatory elements within an Islamic framework.

This paper discusses Taleqani's engagement with the concept of *shawra* in his commentary of Na'ini's work (1955), his Qur'an commentary *Partovi az Qor'an* (1962-1978) and other articles and speeches in the 1960s and 70s. Taleqani emerged as one of the leading clerical figures of the Islamic Revolution and, similar to other clerical dissidents, argued for Islam's political role and the establishment of an Islamic government (*hokumat-e eslami*). Taleqani's understanding of an Islamic government differs markedly from Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih* (the guardianship of the jurisconsult). He rejected the concentration of religious and political authority within a single person, whether a king or a cleric, and warned about the dangers of religious despotism (*estebdad-e dini*). An Islamic order needs to include elements of popular sovereignty with

its leaders – clerical or otherwise - having secured a popular mandate. By discussing Taleqani’s political thought, the paper sheds new light on an understudied clerical opposition figure of the Pahlavi era and illustrates the wide range of political orientations of clerical activists in the lead-up to the Islamic Revolution.

Oliver Scharbrodt is Professor of Islamic Studies at Lund University. He has published on the intellectual history of modern Islam, Sufism, Twelver Shiism and Muslim minorities in Europe in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *Die Welt des Islams*, the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, *Contemporary Islam* and the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. He is the author of *Islam and the Baha’i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad ‘Abduh and ‘Abdul-Baha ‘Abbas* (London: Routledge, 2008) and co-authored *Muslims in Ireland: Past and Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Together with Yafa Shanneik he co-edited the volume *Shi’a Minorities in the Contemporary World: Migration, Transnationalism and Multi-locality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). He was editor-in-chief of the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* (Leiden: Brill) from 2015 until 2020. His latest book [*Muhammad ‘Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity*](#) (London: IB Tauris, 2022) illustrates ‘Abduh’s complex engagement with Islam’s diverse intellectual traditions in his reformist discourse. From 2018 until 2023, he served the principal investigator of the project “[Creating an alternative umma: clerical authority and religio-political mobilisation in transnational Shii Islam](#)” which was funded by a Consolidator Grant of the European Research Council (grant agreement no. 724557).

**Religion, Rationality and Nationalism on the Verge of the Constitution:
What did the deputies and the public talk about when they could talk about
anything?**

(Stanisław Adam Jaśkowski)

Before Iran's first constitution, or rather the part that regulates the position of the parliament in the country's political system, was signed in the last days of 1906, the parliament had already been working for a few months. At the time, it had no strong legal basis and no official duties, so its debates, which focused on the constitution and the crisis in the country, often moved on to other issues. Newspapers tried to limit information on miscellaneous subjects, which were considered irrelevant to the duties of a legislative body, but reports on such subjects have survived. Among the issues discussed were the matters of religion, nationality, education and the progress of science, modernity, rationality and the legal system, as the Majles oscillated between its roles of legislator, court and representative of the people vis-a-vis the state. Even the deputies were unsure whom they represented – the people as a whole, their own class, or where they the middlemen between those and the state. Also, deputies often served with their own experience: merchants would focus on economic issues, religious scholars would offer advice on *Shari'at*, etc.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine how the above issues were addressed during these pioneering sittings of the first Iranian Majles, until it found a more legal basis with the signing of the constitution. For this purpose, a number of accounts of the debates was used, mostly published in the contemporary newspapers (*Majles* and *Habl Al-Matin*), in British accounts of events in Iran (largely based on the newspapers), and a seemingly unique full account of one of the sittings. As we shall see, just as the Majles of the time was conflicted between number of roles, it was also conflicted on these issues.

Dr. Stanisław Adam Jaśkowski is an assistant professor at the Department of Iranian Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, where he received his MA (2010) and PhD (2015, based on the thesis *Historian, Social Critic, Prophet - Ahmad Kasravi and His Struggle*). His research interests include history and intellectual history of Iran from the Safavid to Pahlavi period, and the auxiliary sciences of history. He is the author of *Parcham – Journal of Ahmad Kasravi and His Followers. A Snapshot from the History of Press in Iran* (2017), and a co-author (with Dariusz Kołodziejczyk and Piruz Mnatsakanyan) of *The Relations of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with Safavid Iran and the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin in the light of archival documents* (2017). He also prepared an annotated selection (bilingual) of the Qajar religious and socio-political texts for the use of the Polish students. His present research concerns the history of reporting and protocol-writing in Iran, especially the period of first Majles (based on the grant Minutes of the First Iranian Parliament (1906-1908). Translation and linguistic, literary and historical analysis, grant no. 2019/35/D/HS3/00041 from the National Science Centre, Poland). He teaches Persian, Persian diplomatics and paleography at the University of Warsaw.