



KASRAVI, AḤMAD V. AS SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORMER

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During the last five years of his life, Kasravi founded the “Society of Free Men” (Bāhamād-e āzādegān), announced his call for *pākdini* (pure faith)—born out of his sense of prophetic mission—and became the most outspoken intellectual against religious superstition and illusion. More specifically, he rallied against the role of the Shi‘ite clergy in Iranian society and became one of the fiercest critics of some of the most sacred tenets of Shi‘ism that he considered to be “un-Islamic.”

Historical context. Students of the modern history of Iran are presented with two distinctive religious reform movements since the mid-19th century. The first was begun by some disciples of Shaikh Aḥmad Ahsāi‘i and Sayyed ‘Ali-Moḥammad Bāb (q.v.). Later, those influenced by and close to Sayyed Jamāl-al-Din Asadābādi (see [afgāni](#), [jamāl-al-din](#)) used new religious concepts to challenge the established Shi‘ite hierarchy as well as the social order. This socio-religious reform movement left two lasting legacies. One was the creation of the Bahai faith (see [BAHAISM](#)), and the other was unquestionable,



though indirect, influence it had on the 19th-century Modernity Movement and early 20th-century [Constitutional Revolution](#) in Iran (see [ISLAM IN IRAN xiii. MOVEMENTS IN 20TH CENTURY IRAN](#)).

The second wave of religious reformism in Iran began in the early 1930s. It was influenced by the advancement of secular institutions in the post-Constitutional Revolution era and buoyed by policies of Reza Shah. Some reform-minded clerics began writing and speaking openly against the centuries-old superstitious beliefs and practices condoned or encouraged by the ulama. One such outspoken cleric was Moḥammad Ḥosayn Šari‘at Sangelaji, a well-known and respected mojtahed and religious scholar in Tehran (Ja‘fariān, 2008, pp. 348-50). Others joined *Homāyun*, a monthly religious and social magazine published in Qom by ‘Ali-Akbar Ḥakamizādeh, son of a very conservative and well-known cleric, Shaikh Mehdi Pāyin-šahri (Sadr Hašemi, *Jarāyed o majallāt* IV, pp. 338-39).

The early call for religious reform. The first issue of *Homāyun* was published in October 1934, and one of its most outspoken writers was Aḥmad Kasravi. He wrote in the first issue that religion should become the foundation of everyone’s life, and one must challenge atheism as one of the greatest errors in the world and at the same time battle superstitious beliefs and erroneous religious teachings, which are themselves examples of anti-religious practices (*Homāyun*, 1, 1934).

Kasravi had begun his temperate critique of what he then believed to be superstitious practices that have influenced Islam in the first volume of *Āyin* in 1932. In *Āyin*, Kasravi appears as an intellectual who has questions about the proper role of religion in the fast changing world. He wrote *Āyin* at a time when secular Europe was besieged by political and economic turmoil with no clear outlook. As accomplished a historian and judicial expert as he was, Kasravi was a newcomer to the world of disparagement of established religious beliefs and practices and a novice in the movement to reform them. Nevertheless, he had developed a profound acrimony towards Shi‘ite clergy from his personal experiences. He documented the many occurrences that had shaped his opinion of mullahs during the period 1900s-10s (Kasravi, 1990, pp. 8-16, 26-28, 35-38, 41-46, 79-85) and while serving as judge in the 1920s in Tehran and Zanjan (Kasravi, 1990, pp. 148-62).

A year after publication of *Āyin*, Kasravi published the first issue of *Peymān*, a literary and social monthly, which lasted for 7 years. From successive issues of



Peymān, one can observe the gradual transformation of Kasravi's views on religion and notice the gradual escalation of his dedication to religious reform. He wrote rather boldly that all discussion about Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim and other faiths had become an impediment to humanity and is all useless and nonsensical. He stated that God and the prophets were averse to these labels; Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, and Moḥammad were all emissaries of God, and one should accept them all as equal (*Peymān* 1, p. 258).

Revealing his prophetic mission. By the time Kasravi published *Rāh-e rastegāri* (The road to salvation) in 1937, his disapproval of the prevailing interpretation of Islam had become sharper, and his insistence that religion must be subordinate to rational thought (*kerad*) had become more noticeable. He wrote that the pathway of religion is separate from that of science, and the sciences have embarked upon a clear and open path toward progress; what mankind has discovered about the earth, sun, stars, and many other phenomena is clearly at odds with the imaginings of faith. He concluded that scientific discoveries have encouraged some people to presume that science will destroy the foundation of religion, but In Kasravi's opinion, "scientific progress and ensuing knowledge, do not conflict with the essence of religion" (Kasravi, 1937, pp. 18-19).

After Iran was occupied by Allied forces in 1941, the downfall of Reza Shah and the ensuing openness of society and freedoms which did not exist before resulted in dramatic increase in activities of religious groups in Iran. Islamic schools, organizations, newspapers, and gatherings were tolerated, and within two years. Shi'ite clerics and fundamentalist religious organizations were at the center of Iran's socio-political life (see [ISLAM IN IRAN xiii](#)).

Kasravi was one the very few secular intellectuals who observed this development not only as a backlash against previous limitations, but as a significant impediment for what he believed to be Iran's hesitant and timid modern secular institutions (Kasravi, 1944c). The resurgence of religious groups and the return of people to mosques and mass assemblies, where mullahs spoke with passion against symbols of modernity, attacking secular education, women appearing in public in Western clothing and without *hejāb* (see [čādor](#)), and the judicial system, was in direct contrast with the vision Kasravi had about the country he esteemed and cherished. He wrote to Prime Minister Sahāmal-Solṭān Bayāt, claiming that the government was in collaboration with mullahs. Referring to actions of the government in the previous three years, he argued that Radio Iran had become a clerical tool; as



the religious forces gained influence and became more brazen, the radio had engaged in broadcasting *rawżakvāni* (rhetorical Shi'ite preaching on martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn). He predicted that soon they would transform the radio from a news and entertainment instrument to one that worshipers gather around to cry for the martyrs (idem, p. 11).

Shi'ite writers and clergy strongly condemned Kasravi's criticism of their activities and demanded judicial authorities take steps to restrain his publications and curtail his activities. Rather than keeping quiet or lowering his rhetoric, Kasravi published a new book titled *Kodā bā māst* (God is with us) in the spring of 1942. He was no longer the mild-mannered religious reformer of five years earlier. He wrote that it is the clergy's desire to dissuade people from paying attention to their life and livelihood by encouraging them to pray and seek absolution and listen to mullahs (Kasravi, 1942a, p. 7). He openly admonished the clergy for blaming women's "un-Islamic" wardrobe and the moviegoing youth for famine and rampant inflation.

A few months later, in *Dar pīrāmun-e eslām* (About Islam), he became even more direct in his criticism of the prevailing religious beliefs. He wrote that there were two version of Islam—one that was established by that noble Arab man one thousand three hundred fifty years ago and lasted only for a few centuries, and the other that was practiced by people in Kasravi's time. He argued that nothing was left of the original Islam and what was being promoted in the name Islam was an institution for the benefit of mullahs, from which people received nothing but colossal misery (Kasravi, 1943a, pp. 4-7).

It is evident from Kasravi's writings during the final years of his life that his assessment of Islam, in particular Shi'ism and to some extent Bahatism, as not based on a desire to return to the origin of Islam and emulate the 'forefathers' (as advocated by *salafi* Muslims). Rather he upheld *kerad* (that is, reason and knowledge) as the most valuable faculty bestowed on mankind by God. But Muslims do not distinguish this faculty—which all should recognize and cherish as a part of a universal creed—as a God-given gift. Instead, they affirm the opposite by believing that the past was better than today, and the future promises no hope (Kasravi, 1943b, pp. 8-9).

A decade after Kasravi added "religious reformist" to his already impressive resume as linguist, historian, and jurist, he had become Iran's fiercest critic of the established religion and its representatives. He went further than any



other well-known religious reformer before him in modern-day Iran when he declared that the institution of Shi'ite clergy must be eradicated: should this institution survive, it would restrain the masses from progress as it had in the past. At a time when the world was witnessing a scientific breakthrough and people were striving for progress everywhere, the religious institutions of Iran and other Muslim lands would cause misery among the Easterners and keep them forever backward (Kasravi, 1943a, p. 40).

In *Ši'igari*, he took the bold, and in the eyes of true believers, blasphemous step of questioning the Imamate as initiatory guide for Shi'ites. He challenged both the esoteric aspect of the Imams as well as their theological role. He challenged the centuries-old belief among Shi'ites that the Imams received inspiration and guidance from celestial beings as the prophet did (Kasravi, 1943b; *Ši'igari*, ed. Amini, 2011, pp. 94-99, 102-4).

He also ridiculed the tradition of pilgrimage to the shrines of the Shi'ite Imams in Iran and Iraq (see *'atabāt*) and called it a decadent way to squander wealth (Kasravi, 1943b, pp. 150-52). He despised such self-mutilating practices as *sina-zani* (beating the chest), *zanjir-zani* (beating shoulder and back with chains), and *qama-zani* (beating the head with a dagger), which were common in Iran during religious mourning rituals (ibid., p. 182).

In *Ši'igari* followed by *Bahā'igari* (1943c), Kasravi left no doubts that he sought no dialogue with the most ardent proponents of the sanctified belief that the Twelfth Imam (*Imām-e zamān*) disappeared and will return on the Judgement Day. To him, it made no difference that Shi'ites believed that the Imām-e Zamān is yet to appear and Bahai faithful saw Bāb as personification of the absent Imam. Kasravi wrote that the entire concept of believing in an absent Imam was ludicrous, against reason, and therefore a hindrance to progress and enlightenment (ibid., pp. 138- 45). He saw no shortcuts or back roads toward a modern and secular Iran without an intellectual confrontation with some of the most sacred tenets of the dominant religious thinking (ibid., pp. 224, 233-34).

By 1944, Kasravi had become the focal point of the clergy's agitation against all things secular and progressive. He was declared apostate and blasphemous and accused of planning to declare himself a new prophet (Serāj Ansāri, 1945; Nur-al-Din Širāzi, 1945; Āl-e Aḥmad, 1993, pp. 398-99). Although some have argued that his *pākdini* was tantamount to a new religion (Adibpur, 1945; Āl-Aḥmad, 1993, p. 42), he denied all such accusations (*Peymān* 6, 1940); he



published *Dādghāh* in response to what he called lies (Kasravi, 1944a, pp. 23, 27-29) and continued this refutation to his death.

He did leave some room for such interpretation when he wrote in *Kodā bā māst* that he wished to rid the country of all separate faiths and unite people in one (Kasravi, 1942a, p. 7). In *Payām be dānešmandān-e orupā va Āmrīkā* (Kasravi, 1942b, pp. 17-19), reiterated in *Dar pīrāmun-e eslām*, he also wrote that it is God's wish that from time to time a new divine movement will rise and a new prophet will appear to redeem people and explain the path for salvation to them (Kasravi, 1943a, p. 9). But, as Kasravi had articulated during his life, his ardent followers stated after his death that Kasravi's task was not one of prophecy or divinity but religious reformism and social change (Fazā'i, 2003, p. 259).

Kasravi was not successful in provoking a lasting reform within the established religious orders in Iran. He was a religious reformist from outside the establishment. But he influenced many intellectuals and young activists during his life and long after his assassination in 1945 (Ārianpur, III, pp. 90-103; Nāṭeq, 1977, pp. 3-23).

For Kasravi's bitter criticism of mysticism and Sufi literature, see below, vi. For a comprehensive bibliographical survey on Kasravi, see below, vii.

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