Muslim Perceptions of the West; Iran

Roger Savory

Trinity College of the University of Toronto

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation

Savory, Roger (1985) "Muslim Perceptions of the West; Iran," Comparative Civilizations Review: Vol. 13 : No. 13 , Article 7. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol13/iss13/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The first Muslim contacts with Europe occurred in the middle of the 7th century A.D. In 711 A.D., the Arabs seized Gibraltar, and went on to overrun the Iberian peninsula and cross the Pyrenees into southern France. Their thrust northwards was checked by Charles Martel at Poitiers in 732 A.D., and for the next three and a half centuries there was a period of uneasy coexistence between dār al-islām, the “House of Islam,” and dār al-ḥarb, the “House of War,” that is, those parts of the world as yet unconquered by Islam. During this period, corresponding roughly to the early Middle Ages, it is not possible to perceive a distinctively Iranian attitude toward the West, and the same is true of the two centuries during which the crusading activity of the West was at its height, the period between the capture of Jerusalem by the Crusaders in 1099, and the final expulsion of the Crusaders from the Holy Land in 1291. For approximately six centuries, Iran had no separate political identity, but was merged into the larger entity of the Islamic Empire, what Le Strange called “The lands of the Eastern Caliphate.” As far as Arab Muslims were concerned, even Iran’s ethnic, linguistic and geographical distinctiveness was acknowledged only by the vague and pejorative term cajam, or “non-Arab.” From the tenth century onwards, the Persian language resurfaced in Muslim garb as the medium for a rich literature consisting primarily of poetry and belles-lettres. For scientific writing, however, in the fields of theology, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, philology, mathematics, and even history, Persian Muslims continued in the main to use Arabic for about another two centuries. This ensured the widest possible circulation of their works, since Arabic remained the lingua franca of the Islamic empire from Spain and Morocco to South-East Asia until about the
beginning of the 13th century. During the whole of these six centuries, therefore, it is probable that the average Persian Muslim’s perceptions of the West were similar to those of the average Arab Muslim. It may be noted en passant that many leading Muslim geographers and scientists during this period were Persians and not Arabs. It would not be necessary to make this rather obvious point but for the absurd claims of Arab nationalists and their untutored supporters in the West.

Two interconnected events changed this general picture: the first was the two waves of the Mongol invasion of the Iranian world in 1219 and 1256; the second was the destruction of the historical caliphate by the Mongols in 1258 A.D. A number of consequences flowed from the cataclysmic events. The Mongols destroyed the caliphate, the outward and visible symbol of the unity of the Muslim world, and adopted a policy of tolerance toward all the major religions (some might argue that Mongol official policy was based more on indifference toward the latter). By these actions, the Mongols, no doubt unconsciously, produced a religious climate in which heterodoxy could flourish, and Persia, long the home of the heterodoxy, benefited from this policy. By establishing an empire in Iran and Mesopotamia which corresponded closely to the heartlands of the old, pre-Islamic, Persian empires, the Mongols, again no doubt unconsciously, accelerated the revival of Iranian national identity. It is significant that one Western chronicler, William Adam, termed Hûlegû imperator Persidis. As John Boyle put it: “The Mongol was, in fact, mutatis mutandis, as much Emperor of Iran as the Norman William was King of England.”1 The monopolistic grip of the Arabic language over Islamic culture was broken, and the Mongol rulers commissioned Iranian men-of-letters to write histories in Persian. Was this renaissance of the Persian language and the revival of Iranian nationalist sentiment reflected in a perception of the West which differed from that of other Muslims? Initially, I think not. To be sure, the monumental history of Bâshîd al-Dîn marked a major departure from earlier Islamic historiography. Bâshîd al-Dîn accepted “the Pax Mongolica as the natural order of things”2 and the breadth of his historical view included China and India. As far as the West is concerned, however, his viewpoint was “standard Muslim,” “which regarded world history as the history of the salvation of God’s own people—the Muslims—by His revelation.”3

The advent of the 16th century A.D. marks a watershed in Iranian history. For the first time, the Ithnâ’î Ashârî form of Shi’ism became the official religion of the Iranian state, and it has remained so ever since. This policy, introduced by the new Safavid rulers of Iran, has had an immense effect on all subsequent Iranian political and social history. A rapidly evolving Ithnâ’î Ashârî Shi’i worldview was superimposed on the standard Muslim world-view, with results that are still with us today. The rule of the Safavids (1501-1736) coincided roughly with the heyday of the Ottoman empire, and the adoption of Shi’ism by the Safavids as the official religion of the state was designed in part to save Iran from being absorbed into that empire. In this regard the policy was a success. On the other hand, it made the Sunni Ottomans the arch-enemies of the Safavid state, and, since the Ottomans lay across the natural lines of trade and communication between Iran

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol13/iss13/7 74
and Western Europe, the policy had the effect of making Iran, already isolated
from the West by virtue of its geographical position, still further isolated.

The precursors of the Safavids as rulers of Iran, the Turcoman dynasties of the
Black Sheep and the White Sheep, since the geographical locus of their power lay
in the region of Lake Van and in Diyar Bakr respectively, had been in closer
contact with the Ottomans and had therefore adopted at an earlier date the use of
firearms, both hand-guns and artillery. The purchase of these weapons necessi-
tated at least commercial contact with infidels, but cannon, for example, whether
purchased from the Venetians or the Portuguese, were termed indifferently
“Frankish cannon.” For the Safavids, as for the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria, the
chivalrous conduct of war precluded the use of “ungentlemanly” weapons like
firearms, and it required the devastating demonstration of Ottoman fire-power at
the battle of Chaldiran in 1514 to persuade the Safavids to change their minds.
The infidel suppliers of firearms and cannon most conveniently at hand were the
Portuguese, who had recently (1507) arrived in the Persian Gulf under their
redoubtable commander Afonso de Albuquerque. The Portuguese are not iden-
tified by name in the contemporary Safavid chronicles Ahsan al-Tavarikh and
Habib al-Siyar, although there is a reference to the “King of Portugal” (padishah-i
portuqal) in the former.4

Despite contact with the Portuguese during the 16th century, however,
Iranian knowledge of Western Europe continued to be rudimentary until the
accession of Shah e Abbâs I in 1588. The celebrated audience granted in 1562 by
e Abbâs’s grandfather, Shah Tahmâsp, to the English merchant-adventurer An-
thony Jenkinson, is well known but may bear repetition here. Jenkinson had
made his arduous way to the Safavid capital at Qazvîn via the realm of Tsar Ivan
the Terrible and the Caspian Sea. On arrival at the Persian court, Jenkinson
presented the friendly letter of Queen Elizabeth I, the purpose of which was “to
treate of friendship and free passage of our Merchants and people, to repaire
and traffique within his dominions, for to bring in our commodities, and to carry away
theirs, to the honour of both princes, the mutual commoditie of both Realmes,
and wealth of the Subjects.” The Shah received Jenkinson affably until he
discovered that he was not a true believer. His manner then changed drastically;
“Oh thou unbeleever,” he said, “we have no neede to have friendship with the
unbelievers.” With this succinct restatement of the classical Islamic view of
infidels, from whatever part of the globe they came, the Shah dismissed Jenkin-
son from his presence. Further, and this may be called the Shiî ‘added touch,’
the physical presence of an infidel was considered to have ritually polluted the
audience-hall, and Jenkinson, as he left the royal presence, was disconcerted to
notice a servant following him “with a bassinet of sand, sifting all the way that I
had gone within the said pallace.”9 One aspect of this story is of particular
interest: the calm assumption on the part of the Shah (until he was advised
otherwise) that a visitor to his court, even from such a benighted region as
England, would be a Muslim. This, of course, merely demonstrates Shah Tah-
mâsp’s ignorance of Europe.

The reign of Shah e Abbâs I (the Great) (1588-1629) marked the high point
uring Safavid times as far as contact between Iran and Europe is concerned. The
Portuguese, Dutch and English, rivals for control of the East Indies trade, established factories in Iran and the Persian Gulf, and foreign religious orders, encouraged by the tolerant religious climate prevailing under cAbbas I, founded convents at Isfahan and elsewhere in Iran. cAbbas I’s personal knowledge of European political affairs was unique among the rulers of the Safavid dynasty. He could without difficulty distinguish between the various categories of Franks, although he made no distinction between the Spanish and the Portuguese (there was no compelling reason why he should, for the thrones of Spain and Portugal were united at that time). In 1599 he dispatched as his ambassador to Europe the English gentleman-adventurer Sir Anthony Sherley; Sherley bore letters from the Shah to the Pope; the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, King of Bohemia; Henry IV of France; Philip III of Spain; the King of Scotland; the Queen of England; the King of Poland; the Seigneur of Venice; and the Grand Duke of Tuscany. cAbbas I, realising that trade with Europe would increase Iran’s prosperity, ignored the *odium theologicum* of the *ulama* and introduced pragmatic policies granting rights and privileges to infidels. There seems little doubt that, at least during the reign of cAbbas I, the Safavid capital was a multicultural society with little friction between the different ethnic groups. It is a moot point, however, whether these enlightened policies initiated on the personal authority of the Shah changed the basic perceptions of the Iranian “man-in-the-street” vis-à-vis Europeans and the West in general. For Muslims in general, Europeans were unbelievers, and for Ithna cAshari Shi‘is in particular, those who professed the Christian religion were considered to be *najis*, unclean. Despite the generally tolerant atmosphere prevailing under cAbbas I, Thévenot noted that Christians were not allowed to enter the coffee-houses, or the public baths, in Isfahan, because they were *najis*, impure,⁶ and that if they were apprehended in the Masjid-i Shāh, they were driven out with cudgels like a dog; however, Thévenot entered the Masjid-i Shāh in the “habit of the Countrey, and received not the least affront.”⁷ This perception of Christians as impure occurs with great regularity. For example, there is no doubt in my mind that Shah cAbbas I accepted the help of the English East India Company in driving the Portuguese out of Hormuz in 1622 without any qualms whatever; he had been seeking the means of achieving this since his accession. However, Iskandar Beg Munshi, the author of the *Tārikh-i Ālam-ārā-yi Abbāsī*, depicts the Shah, as a good Muslim, hesitating about co-operating with infidels: “Shah cAbbas decided to accept the offer of help made by the English. As the saying goes:

> Although the water from the Christian well is impure,  
> It only washes a dead Jew, so what is there to fear?”⁸

The overthrow of the Safavids by the Afghans in 1722 was followed by more than half a century of bloody civil war between two rival factions: the Zands in the south and the Qājārs in the north. With the eventual triumph of the latter and the establishment of the new Qājār dynasty in 1795, Iran was once again free to look at the world outside its borders. This world had radically changed while Iran had been preoccupied with its own internal affairs, and the period of European domination of the Muslim world had begun. Two disastrous wars with the Russians, and Napoleon’s scheme to march the Grande Armée across Iran to
invade India, made the Persians aware, not only of their military inadequacies, but of how little they understood of the plot of the play now that they had been so brusquely thrust on to the stage of world politics. The solution, it was thought, lay in imitation of the West, and in 1815 the first Iranians travelled to Western Europe for their higher education. Thus was created a dichotomy in the Iranian body politic and in the Iranian psyche which is still not resolved; or, to put it more accurately, the dichotomy which had existed since 1501, when the Ithna 'Ashari form of Shi'ism was declared to be the official religion of the Iranian state, was brought out into the open and resulted in a love-hate relationship with the West which is more evident than ever in Iran today. This dichotomy derived from the fundamentally opposed aims and objective of two groups: the 'ulamā, and the Western-educated intellectuals. Stately baldly, the theory of government subscribed to by the 'ulamā was that, in an Ithna 'Ashari Shi'i state, the only legitimate government was that of the 12th Imam, the Mahdī, a messianic figure who had been in occultation since 873 A.D. In his continuing absence, the mujtahids, or most eminent jurisprudents, had acted as his representatives on earth. This theory of government had little practical significance while Iran was still governed by a Sunni ruler. Even after the establishment of the Safavid Shi'i state, with the resulting potential for conflict between the 'ulamā and the shah, the voices of the mujtahids had continued to be muted. The Huguenot jeweller Jean Chardin, who was present at the coronation of Shah Sulaymān in 1666, explains why:

The clergy, and all the holy men of Iran, consider that rule by laymen was established by force and usurpation, and that civil government belongs by right to the sadr and to the church ... but the more generally held opinion is that royalty, albeit in the hands of laymen, derives its institution and its authority from God; that the king takes the place of God and the prophets in the government of the people; that the sadr, and all other practitioners of the religious law, should not interfere with the political institution; that their authority is subject to that of the king, even in matters of religion. This latter opinion prevails: the former opinion is held only by the clergy and those whom they supervise; the king and his ministers close the mouths of the clergy as it pleases them, and force the clergy to obey them in everything. In this way, the spiritual is at the moment completely subordinate to the temporal.9

With the advent of the Qajars, the potential for conflict was realised as a result of two important changes in the situation: (1) the Qajar rulers had no way of asserting their own legitimacy vis-à-vis the claims of the 'ulamā; (2) the process of Westernization was set in train by the increased contacts between Iran and the West. As Iranians returning from Europe began to circulate ideas of democratic constitutional government, and as the number of Western-educated intellectuals in Iran swelled, the 'ulamā increasingly perceived the West as the source of un-Islamic, and therefore unwanted and dangerous, ideas. At the same time, the policy of the Qajar shahs of granting sweeping economic concessions to European
entrepreneurs aroused the always latent xenophobia of the 'ulamā. Throughout the 19th century, therefore, and continuing down to recent times, there have existed these two diametrically opposed perceptions of the West: the perception of the intellectuals, that the West is desirable because it is the source of rational thought, of democratic constitutionalism, of secularism, of the emancipation of women, and so on; and the perception of the 'ulamā, that the West is undesirable for precisely the same reasons. The perception of the West by the 'ulamā as the source of undesirable ideas was superimposed upon and reinforced their traditional perception of the West as the enemy of Islam.

Some quotations from representative 19th and 20th century Iranian writers will illustrate these two antithetical perceptions. First, an example of what may be called 'standard' 'ulamā perception. The writer is an 'ālim named 'Ali Davānī, who completed the Persian translation of volume XIII of the Bihār al-Anwār [the celebrated work in Arabic of the great Safavid theologian and jurisprudent Muhammad Bāqir Majlīsī 'Isfahānī (d. 1110/1699)] under the title Mahdi-yi Mawcūd, 'The Promised Messiah.' In the course of a lengthy (180-page) introduction to his translation (3rd edition, Tehran, 1966), 'Ali Davānī takes the opportunity to inveigh against Iranologists like E.G. Browne, and historians of Iran like Sir John Malcolm. It is no accident, of course, that the 'ulamā should turn their guns on two Western Orientalists who have added so much to our knowledge and understanding of Persian culture and history. It is precisely because men like E.G. Browne, Sir John Malcolm and Sir John Chardin understood Iran so well that the 'ulamā still feel the need to attempt to discredit them.

'Ali Davānī begins with the splendid exordium that "Muḥammad Bāqir Majlīsī, in conformity with the tenets of the religious law of Islam, was opposed to Sūfis, idolators, Jews, Christians, and the fellow-countrymen of Edward Browne"10 (of course the Englishmen who were contemporaries of Muhammad Bāqir Majlīsī became aware that they were the "fellow-countrymen of Edward Browne" only two hundred years or so after their own death). Browne is attacked for suggesting that the dominant position in the state achieved by the "great ecclesiastics" during the reign of Shah Sultan Husayn (1692-1722 A.D.; he was derisively dubbed "Mulla Husayn" by foreign observers) "hardly made for spiritual unity or national efficiency."11 In other words, comments Davānī, "he is saying that the thesis that religion and politics are separate, a thesis which is a fabrication of the colonial powers and disseminated by propagandists like Browne and their Iranian lackeys, must be put into effect in Iran!"12 Browne continued by saying that the admirers of the "redoubtable" Mullā Muḥammad Bāqir-i Majlīsī, "the persecutor of Sūfis and heretics," "call attention to the fact that his death, which took place in 1111/1699-1700, was followed in a short time by the troubles which culminated in the supreme disaster of 1722, and suggest that the disappearance of so saintly a personage left Persia exposed to perils which more critical minds may be inclined to ascribe in part to the narrow intolerance so largely fostered by him and his congeners."13 Browne is attacked again for quoting with approval Krusinski's reference to the religious tolerance of Shah 'Abbās II (1642-66): "he openly protected the Christians, whom he would not have in the least molested for their religion, saying, 'That none but God was master of their
consciences; that, for their own part, he was only governor of externals; and that all his subjects being equally members of the State, of what religion soever they were, he owed justice to them all alike.' "14 One may note in passing that only one of three leading mujtahids was prepared to support Article 8 of the Supplementary Fundamental Laws of October 7, 1907, which enunciated the principle of the equality of all Iranian citizens before the law. Malcolm is similarly attacked for implying that the fall of the Safavid capital to the Afghans in 1722 was the result of the dominance of the Safavid administration by the religious classes, and for praising Shah ʿAbbās I for encouraging Armenians and other Christians to play a larger role in the Safavid state. Davānī's concluding blast is directed at E.G. Browne for showing undue interest in heterodox movements such as Babism. The reason is clear, says Davānī: a strong Ithnā ʿAsharī religious establishment in Iran would be a hindrance to the economic and political schemes of the colonialists, and so Browne, by belittling the religious establishment and espousing the cause of Bābis, Bahā'īs and Azalis, was not devoid of political motives. From this it is but a short step to Davānī's conclusion that Browne was not a friend of Iran, as his apologists maintained, but an agent of British Intelligence.15 This type of polemic lives on today in the rhetoric of Ayatullah Khumayni, who has included 'Western Orientalists' among his categories of 'enemies of the people.'

Second, the impressions of the West gained by Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh and various Qājār princes during visits to Europe in the 19th century: Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh paid three visits to Europe during that century—in 1873, 1878, and 1889—and he left a diary on the occasion of his first two visits.16 Redhouse, in his Preface to his translation of the 1873 Diary, credits the Shah with "an especially keen talent of observation,"17 but this is hardly borne out by his diaries. Perhaps Redhouse thought that comments like the following showed great discernment:

The nobleness, the greatness, the gravity and sedateness of the women and men (of England) shine out from their countenances. One sees and comprehends that they are a great people, and that the Lord of the Universe has bestowed upon them power and might, sense and wisdom, and enlightenment.18

Although the Shah thought that, when one had seen one city in Firangistān, one had seen them all,19 he was aware of sharp differences between nations and peoples in Europe. For example, on crossing the border from Germany to Belgium, he exclaims:

What a difference has the All-Wise and Almighty Creator placed between the two nations and the two countries! . . . In one moment a total change came over the people, the language, the religion (sic!) . . . the tongue of all is French, the people more tranquil, the arrangement and uniform of the troops and citizens utterly different . . . they are chiefly of the Romish faith. This nation has more liberty than is enjoyed in Germany.20

Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh had a novel solution to the problem of the Jewish diaspora:
As Others See Us

The celebrated Rothschild, a Jew also, who is exceedingly rich, came to an audience, and we conversed with him. . . . I said to him: 'I have heard that you brothers possess a thousand crores (10 billion) of money. I consider the best thing to do would be that you should pay 50 crores to some large or small state, and buy a territory in which you could collect all the Jews of the whole world, you becoming their chiefs, and leading them on their way in peace, so that you should no longer be scattered and dispersed.' We laughed heartily, and he made no reply.21

Of far greater interest are the accounts of the residence of three Qajar princes in England in 1835-36.22 The princes were all sons of Husayn Ali Farnān-Farmā and hence grandsons of Fath Ali Shah Qajar, whose death in 1834 was followed by a disputed succession in which these princes were involved; the purpose of their journey to England was to solicit aid and protection from that country. These diaries, particularly that of Rīzā Quli Mirzā, reveal most interesting perceptions of the West on the part of these princes of widely differing character and temperament.23 There were numerous British officials in England at this period who had served either the Government of India or that of Whitehall in Iran, so the princes did not lack for escorts who were familiar not only with their country but in many cases with their language. However, considerable British involvement in Persian affairs since the beginning of the 19th century had apparently made no impression on Rīzā Quli Mirzā, because the latter, on meeting at Bath Sir John Henry Willock, a sometime instructor to the Persian army and former British ambassador to Iran, commented:

I was extremely astonished as to how it could be that in this foreign land someone should turn up who not only knew Persian but knew it well.24

Lord Palmerston at first suspected that the Qajar princes had come to London with the idea of challenging the succession of Muhammad Mirzā, who had proclaimed himself shah on 9 November 1834. After Lord Palmerston had been assured by “Maknī Khān” (Sir John McNeill, for fifteen years British ambassador in Tehran) that Vālī Mirzā, one of the three brothers, was not plotting seditious activity in Iran, he called on Vālī Mirzā and from then on London society was open to the princes. They were escorted to the Waterloo Day celebrations by another former British ambassador to the Persian court, Sir Gore Ouseley, who later invited them to his London residence and subsequently to his country house, which he had purchased four years previously at a cost of £150,000. Rīzā Quli Mirzā was particularly impressed by Sir Gore’s library of works in Arabic and Persian, a library “such as few rulers of Iran” had possessed. He was informed that Sir Gore had spent £15,000 on one Persian manuscript alone, which he acquired in India.25 Invitations from aristocracy and royalty followed thick and fast: Rīzā Quli Mirzā was visited by Lord Palmerston, and attended a reception given by the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne; he was received at the homes of Lord Salisbury; of Sir John Hobhouse, the former British ambassador to India; of Sir James Carnac, Chairman of the English East
India Company; and of the aforementioned Sir John Henry Willock, who had lived in Iran for twenty-one years, spoke excellent Persian, and whose children wore Persian dress in honour of their visitor. The climax came with an invitation to visit H.R.H. Princess Victoria at Windsor, following which the Princess sent her portrait to the princes and asked that they write a few lines to her in Persian, and with an audience with the King (William IV). Rizā Qulī Mīrzā notes in passing that the King of England has no legislative powers. In view of the continuing Iranian aversion to Freemasons, whom they consider to be a branch of British intelligence, Rizā Qulī Mīrzā's comment after he had visited the Duke of Sussex, a brother of the King and grand master of the Freemasons, is of interest: "It seemed to me that if a person observed the rules and customs of Freemasonry, he would acquire many benefits from religion and this world." 26 Rizā Qulī Mīrzā was recalled to a consideration of Islam by a visit to the house of Muhammad Ismā'īl Khān, the ambassador of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ḥaydār, the ruler of Lucknow [King of Awadh/Oudh (1827-37)]. The wife of the latter complained to Rizā Qulī Mīrzā that she had left India intending to perform the pilgrimage, but had now been detained in London for fourteen months "in association with infidels." 27 She found comfort in visiting Rizā Qulī Khān and reading passages from the Qur'ān to him. Possibly this episode may have put the prince in mind of his own religious duties, for he purchased a pump for shipment to Najaf so that pilgrims to that Shīʿī shrine might pray for him. 28

The diary of Rizā Qulī Mīrzā is chiefly of note, however, for a lengthy (pp. 510-586) discourse on the geography of England and on the manners and customs of the English. The geographical section begins in a manner reminiscent of Caesar's De Bellico Gallico; "The English realm consists of three islands (sic): England, Scotland and Ireland." His ignorance of the existence of the Welsh is surprising in view of the furor stirred up in the Persian capital by Sir Harford Jones only a few years earlier! The course of English history is telescoped in rather remarkable fashion:

At all events, at an earlier period, according to what is recorded in their chronicles, the people of Farangistān, especially the English, were beasts and animals and had no arts and crafts. Mostly they lived on the seashore, and in defiles of the mountains; they wore the skins of animals, and the food of the majority was vegetation. If a king appeared among them, it was not long before they killed him; sometimes the king gained the upper hand and slaughtered large numbers of them. In general, there was hostility between the king and the people, and oppression and tyranny occurred on an excessive scale, and the people of those parts . . . scattered to the New World and other islands in the ocean but found no rest. 29

By some process which the prince does not explain, things improved, and now:

In every city of England which we visited . . . the people are so civilised, and behave in such a measured way, that they have no governor or
higher authority, for they have no need of a governor, and there is no arbiter among them. Just and upright conduct are themselves the final arbiter and the determinant of important matters, and complete freedom reigns in that country.  

For how long had the English been in this blissful state? For about 250 years, that is, since the reign of Elizabeth I. Before that, they had been “animals and beasts.” Obviously it was not Riza Quli Mirzā’s perception that freedom in England had slowly broadened down from precedent to precedent! However, Riza Quli Mirzā had no doubt that freedom existed in the West. “It is impossible,” he wrote, “that oppression should occur in a European country,” and he contrasted this freedom with the oppression and enmity which were well-known in the countries of Asia and the lands of the East (bilād-i mashriq). The later history of Europe notwithstanding, Riza Quli Mirzā had grasped a basic truth about Western civilization. In this respect, his perception stands in stark contrast to that of a member of the Iranian religious establishment who also visited Europe during the 19th century and whose views will be described shortly.

Riza Quli Mirzā’s perception of the system of education and the level of literacy in England was also rather idealistic, but not altogether inaccurate:

Their children are taught perhaps twenty subjects in various languages, and not one moment of time is wasted. According to them, to waste time is a most evil characteristic [an accurate description of the Protestant work ethic!]. In the entire population, some twenty-seven million, it is impossible that a single soul should not be able to read and write, unless he be blind from birth.

Riza Quli Mirzā comments with considerable perspicacity on English upper-class society:

The inhabitants of that realm [England] are sensitive and quick to take offence. Most of their elegant wives and womenfolk are more delicate and more fine than a rose-petal. Without exaggeration, their waists are narrower than a ring on one’s finger, and their nature is delicate and quick to take offence (zūd-ranj). However, they conduct themselves politely in social intercourse. Even though they are daggers-drawn (dar kamāl-i khusūmat) with one another, they still preserve the rules of etiquette. If they are intent on destroying one another, they speak to each other with great politeness. Abuse is never (God forbid!) used. The worst insult is if one person accuses another of lying. This is the most deadly insult. Of course, if someone wants to destroy another, he may utter such a charge and accuse him of lying, then that encounter will lead to murder [the Prince proceeds to talk about the practice of duelling].

The English do have some faults. They “place great emphasis on displaying their virtues and on self-advertisement, to such an extent that anyone who possesses some trifling virtue or merit invokes a thousand different means to
display his merit and advertise it. Love of worldly status is extremely strong among them, and, unlike the people of the East, they do not strive to show hospitality and to entertain strangers. They are very alien and aloof. As long as they see no advantage in an affair, they will not lay out a single dinar; but if they do see some advantage, they do not begrudge the spending of crores. Even though the benefits of that expenditure do not accrue for a hundred years, they will still go ahead.\footnote{34}

However, the English are not guilty of ignoring the poorer classes:

They make every effort in charitable expenditure and aid to the needy and orphans. A person who has an annual income of 1,000 tumans spends 50 tumans on the poor.\footnote{35} As a result of high prices and the shortage of foodstuffs, the poor are numerous—perhaps out of 27 million people, 7 million are poor and needy persons—but not one of them begs for a living; in the whole country not a single beggar exists. Penalties are imposed for begging. In every quarter there is a poor-house, to which the poor can repair, and where a reliable superintendent, with several attendants, ministers to the needs of the poor. Every year the sum which is paid from charitable funds in respect of each person is allotted to the superintendent, and dispensed on a daily basis for the food and clothing of the poor, and every month an accounting for this money is made to the general public.\footnote{36}

It is clear that the princes, and Rizā Qulī Mīrzā in particular, had enquired intelligently into many aspects of English life, and their perceptions, though somewhat out of focus, were far from superficial. The same cannot be said of the perceptions of our third Iranian traveller to Europe during the 19th century. Ḥājjī Muhammad ʿAlī Pirzādeh was a Sufi who made two trips to Europe: in 1860 and 1886. He was persona grata with the Iranian Establishment and with the Shah himself, partly, we are told, because of the “unassailable purity of his spirit,” and partly because of “the neatness of his dress and his personal cleanliness.”\footnote{37} Ḥājjī Pirzādeh shared a murshid (spiritual director) with the Iranian ambassador to the Sublime Porte. He may be called, therefore, an “Establishment Ṣūfī.” On some matters, his views coincided with the standard ʿulamā perception. For example, Paris was a den of vice, and he hoped a way could be found to prevent Iranians from going there.\footnote{38}

May God have mercy on our Iranian youths who come to Paris and see its external glitter and are lost, and abandon both the prescriptions and laws of their religion, its dogmas (ʿaqīda), moral and ritual purity, the fear of God, and performance of the Islamic rituals and prayers. They do not know what to do, since they imagine that if they drink wine and eat pork and crab and do not perform their ablutions or their prayers, and do not tell the truth, they will become as wealthy and powerful as most Franks. May God curse those who condemn a whole nation on the basis of the behaviour of Iranians abroad!\footnote{39}
For Hajji Pirzadeh, the vaunted freedom of Europeans was nothing more than sexual licence, again, a standard perception of the 'ulama:

The word 'freedom' in the countries of Europe, and especially in Paris, denotes 'the freedom of women with men,' so that no one will take offence whatever anyone does. The reality of this 'freedom' is loss of honour and chastity, for no one has control over his wife. If a woman wants to have an affair with a strange man, she is free to do so. Her husband cannot object or prevent her. Why? Because that woman is 'free,' and Farangistān is the home of freedom! So the meaning of freedom is the exercise of free will on the part of women in regard to female unchastity—otherwise, people have absolutely no freedom in Farangistān, and have no freedom of action. For example, if someone runs fast in a side-street, the police seize him and ask him why he is running fast. And if a person walks slowly, the police will ask him why he is walking so slowly! The collars and cuffs of one's shirt must be changed every day, and if they are slightly soiled the person cannot leave his house if he has no money to have them laundered. At the table, he must sit in such and such a way, and eat in a certain manner, and place his knife on the right-hand side of the place and fork on the left, and if he does the opposite it is a major fault; and he must eat and drink in such and such a way, and eat this dish before that, and that before this, and if a person eats them in the wrong order great exception is taken, and people criticize him and stare at him. For example, one must not eat cheese before the meat, or vegetables before the cheese. Everything has its special order, and if a person departs from the normal order, he is criticized.  

In other words, because people in polite society in Europe conformed to the whims of social fashion, etiquette, table manners, and so on, in Hajji Pirzadeh's opinion they could not be regarded as free. Since Hajji Pirzadeh was a Sufi, one regrets that no one was on hand to explain the situation to him in the classic Sufi manner in terms of the zāhir, the exoteric phenomena which appear to be the reality, but are not, and the bātin, the hidden esoteric reality, vouchsafed only to the initiated.

Hajji Pirzadeh found himself among the guests at a party given by the Iranian ambassador in London, Mirzā Malkum Khān, in honour of the British Prime Minister and other members of the government. Hajji Pirzadeh met such luminaries as Sir Henry Rawlinson (the eminent Assyriologist (1810-1895)), who described himself facetiously as a "cracked walnut" (jawz-i shikasta) and an "old dervish," and he had a fascinating conversation with Gladstone himself, who tried to find out on the basis of his experience with the Sudan, why dervishes were so militant. Hajji Pirzadeh replied that dervishes were of various types: for some, the Şīfī Path meant holy war and the proselytization of others; for others, it meant seclusion and prayer; for yet others, travel. The true dervish, he said, was he who was unencumbered by the world and its appurtenances. Gladstone said: "People who go to the Sudan and are captured by the dervishes, have their
clothes ripped off and replaced by a long shirt. "Now," say the dervishes, "you are a dervish too." Hajji Pirzadeh replied that the wearing of a shirt did not make one a dervish. "So what is being a dervish?" demanded Gladstone. "Self-discipline, war against the carnal soul, and the refining of one's characteristics," replied Hajji Pirzadeh. Gladstone then asked about dervishes in India: "Why do they inflict wounds on their bodies and commit violence on themselves?" Hajji Pirzadeh replied: "They follow the Hindu faith; the faqirs and dervishes of Islam do not behave in this way."

Hajji Pirzadeh's perceptions of the West thus lay between the two poles of the "satanic" perception of the ulama, and the "rosy" view of the intellectuals. In some of the extracts quoted above, he voices the conventional, superficial ulama perception of the West. But, since he mixed with government circles, and obviously had pretensions to being a literary man, his views on occasion were closer to those of the intellectuals. For example, he also was interested in the incidence of literacy:

*The inhabitants of Paris and of the whole of France, both men and women, rich and poor, upper and lower class, are literate and can write, and know something of geography, arithmetic, geometry and other sciences which men need.*

He could appreciate, too, Western scholars who had demonstrated an interest in Islam and in Iran. This again sets him apart from the standard view of the *ulama*, who have neither curiosity about Western scholarship nor interest in those in the West who study and attempt to understand Islam (except as targets for abuse). Hajji Pirzadeh's appraisal of E.G. Browne makes an interesting contrast to the views of Ali Davami quoted above. E.G. Browne, whom he calls *mester browni*, was twenty-five years old at the time. He was, says Hajji Pirzadeh, "an extremely intelligent, wise and cultured young man. He had acquired a good knowledge of Persian, and spoke Arabic well and elegantly, and also knew Turkish extremely well. . . . He has a strong predilection for Oriental languages and for the Islamic faith." Here lies the clue to Hajji Pirzadeh's benevolent attitude toward E.G. Browne: he hoped that the latter would become a convert to Islam. "Because of his predilection toward Islam, his intelligence and his educational accomplishments, I gave him the title of Mazhar-i *Ali*, 'the Manifestation of *Ali.*' If Almighty God wills it, by virtue of the blessings conferred on him by this blessed name, may he find guidance and direction on the straight path of the Islamic faith and the religion of Muhammad (the blessings of God and peace be upon him)."

With the advent of the 20th century, little changed as regards Persian perceptions of the West. Throughout all the turbulence of the Persian Revolution of 1905-11, the use of an unwilling Iran by the Great Powers as a cockpit of war in World War I, and the subsequent reign of*Rižā Shāh* (1925-1941), the basic dichotomy between the perception of the *ulama*, for whom the West was a sink of corruption and the source of unwanted ideas, and the perception of the intellectuals for whom it was a panacea, persisted. It was not until after World War II that some of the intellectuals, too, finding that the application of Western
remedies by those who frequently had but a superficial understanding of them, did not cure all Muslim ills, and unwilling themselves to accept the idea that along with democratic freedoms go duties and responsibilities, joined forces with the ʿulāmā in a chorus of denunciation of the West. But this was "une trahison des clercs." The intellectuals posed as allies of the religious classes, as supporters of Khumayní's Islamic state, in order to overthrow the late Shah in 1979. They adopted protective Islamic coloration. Pro-Khumayní Western-educated Iranians like Bani-Sadr were careful not to wear ties, because the term kirāvātī ("a person who wears a tie"), is a term of derision and abuse applied to Westernized intellectuals. Since few, if any, of the intellectuals of the National Front, the former supporters of Dr. Muṣaddiq, really wanted an Islamic state, but wanted instead some form of secular state, they have suffered from ideological schizophrenia. They have been unmasked as Westernizers in mullās' clothing, and both they and Iran have paid the penalty for their folly.

About eighty years ago, at the time of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, one of the leaders of the Constitutionalists, Sayyid Hasan Taqizadeh, expressed the view of many of his supporters when he declared: "We must Westernize ourselves, body and soul!" Similar sentiments were expressed by intellectuals in many parts of the Middle East at that time. As Bernard Lewis has written:

"The West was great and strong; by study and imitation, it might be possible to discover and apply the elusive secret of its greatness and strength, and generations of eager students and reformers toiled in the search. They may not have loved us, or even understood us, but they did admire and respect us. Today they usually do neither."

When the importation of Western political ideas and programmes for economic development not only failed to usher in the millennium, but actually brought social disruption and political fragmentation to the Middle East, disillusionment set in. Since it is human nature to take the credit oneself for the good that occurs, and to blame someone else for the evil and unpleasant happenings and for the mistakes which are committed, the intellectuals did not find too much difficulty in perceiving the West, formerly the source of all good, as now the source of all evil. In order to sublimate their frustrations, it was satisfying to vent their rage on the West. This transformation in their perception of the West naturally brought the Iranian intellectuals ever closer to the religious classes, in whose world-view xenophobia had been an unchanging element. In Iran, since the late Shah had identified himself with a policy of Westernization and rapid modernization, he became the target on the one hand for the resentment produced by rapid social change, and on the other for the frustration felt by the intellectuals of the National Front when it proved impossible instantly to transplant Western ideas of liberal democracy into a traditional Islamic society. In their eagerness to overthrow the Shah, the National Front intellectuals could not resist the temptation to make use of the tremendous populist appeal of the mullās at the grass-roots level of society. In allying themselves with the ʿulāmā, the National Front intellectuals ignored the lessons of modern Iranian history. They ignored the fact
that the aims and objectives of the ‘ulamā and of themselves were poles apart. They forgot that the temporary alliance between the ‘ulamā and the radical intellectuals during the constitutional movement in the early years of this century, had fallen apart the moment the ‘ulamā realized what the secularizing aims of the intellectuals meant in concrete terms. Most disastrous of all for their fortunes, the intellectuals forgot, if they had ever understood, that in Iran there are only two symbols to which the masses will rally: the throne and the mosque. When the former was overturned, the loyalty of the masses was transferred to the latter, and the Islamic Republic of Iran came into being.

What I have called the “standard ‘ulamā perception of the West” has not changed through all the political vicissitudes which Iran has experienced this century. In 1907, at the time of granting of the Persian Constitution, a mulla in Artillery Square (maydān-i tūphāna) in Tehran harangued the crowd as follows:

If ye drink wine, if ye give yourselves up to gambling and adultery, murder, and every form of crime, the All Merciful will pardon you, but Allah keep you from becoming partisans of the Constitution, friends of the friends of the Majlis! Rather, do ye kill them in as great numbers as possible! Kill especially the young men, who have drawn their education from European sources; kill whosoever weareth a starched collar and carrieth a stick! For such a one is a follower of the Europeans and their devilries, and the law requires that he shall be killed!

As he spoke, the mob shouted: mashrūta namikhvāhīm; āzādi namikhvāhīm (“We do not want a Constitution! We do not want freedom!”). As he spoke, the mulla’s eye fell on the gleaming white, starched collar, the “standard of the Constitution,” of a young man who had just emerged from the Bahārīstān, the parliament building. “With his finger, the mulla pointed out to the crowd the hated emblem,” and in a flash the crowd had torn the young man to pieces; another innocent bystander suffered the same fate.45 Today, nothing has changed. In his work on Islamic Government, Khumayni explains that he is opposed to democratic constitutional governments, because under such governments there tends to be a lack of that obedience on the part of the people which “facilitates the State’s responsibilities.” The “poisoned cultures and thoughts” of the West, he says, must be eradicated.46

Iranian intellectuals, if they are to survive, will sooner or later have to come to terms with the West. Xenophobia, which is the product of the resentment felt at the intrusion into one’s own culture of an alien culture, has served both the National Front intellectuals and the ‘ulamā as an admirable weapon to use in mobilizing a rootless urban proletariat against “the Great Satan.” As the basis for one’s relations with the other members of the community of nations, however, it is counter-productive and, ultimately, self-destructive.
Notes


12. ʿAlī Davānī, introduction, p. 111.


15. Davānī, p. 121.


18. Redhouse, p. 142.


23. Fraser, pp. 18 ff.


29. Rıza Quli Mırzā, p. 524.
30. Rıza Quli Mırzā, p. 525.
31. Rıza Quli Mırzā, p. 529.
32. Rıza Quli Mırzā, pp. 529-30. Between 2/3 and 3/4 of the working class were literate in the 1830s and 1840s. I am indebted to my colleague Professor Ann Robson for this information.
35. The tumān at the time was worth approximately 14 shillings sterling.
36. Rıza Quli Mırzā, p. 527.
38. Pirzádeh, p. 10.
41. Pirzádeh, p. 248.
42. Pirzádeh, p. 287.