The Qur'an and its Readers Worldwide

Contemporary Commentaries and Translations

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Persian Qur'anic Networks, Modernity and the Writings of 'an Iranian Lady', Nusrat Amin Khanum (d. 1983)

TRAVIS ZADEH

Early Patterns of Vernacular Exegesis

The Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (d. 1666) spent the last years of his life confined to the Red Fort of Agra, imprisoned by his fratricidal son Awrangzeb, who had won the throne in a violent battle of succession. In the popular imagination, Shah Jahan is remembered as looking out through the lattice-framed balconies of the fort over the bend of the Yamuna River, pining for his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The empress had been buried years earlier on the bank of the Yamuna in the magnificent tomb–mosque complex known in her honour as the Taj Mahal. Here, too, Shah Jahan would finally be laid to rest. According to the court chronicles of the period, Shah Jahan spent his time in prison praying, reciting and transcribing verses of the Qur'an.[1]

What is not readily remembered is that Princess Jahan Ara Begum (d. 1681), who accompanied her father during his final days, also was involved in similar acts of piety. An initiate in both the Chishti and Qadiri orders, Jahan Ara sponsored the construction of mosques and gardens, and also composed a Persian biography (*tadhkira*), entitled the *Mu'nis al-arwah* (*Solace of the Souls*), on Chishti saints, along with a short Persian autobiography, the *Risala-i sahibiyya* (*Epistle on Spiritual Mastership*) that details her spiritual progress as a disciple of the Sufi saint Mulla Shah Badakhshi (d. *c.*

1661).[2] She was also a skilled calligrapher, as attested by the *Ayat-i bayyinat*, a collection of Qur'anic verses that she selected and finished transcribing in the winter of 1663 while in the company of her imprisoned father. Interlinear Persian translations and marginal notes in Persian accompany this collection of Qur'anic verses. Many of the verses suggest the comfort that the princess found in the Qur'an. It is hard not to see an allusion to Awrangzeb's treachery, for instance, in her selection of the Qur'anic command to be kind to one's parents in old age and to address them in terms of honour.[3]

For Jahan Ara, translating the Qur'an into Persian would not have been a particularly exceptional activity, as it had long been routinised in the history of scriptural hermeneutics. The marginal notes speak rather to Jahan Ara's spirituality and mystical orientations. Commenting on a Qur'anic verse (Q. 17:70) that treats the blessings bestowed by God on humanity, Jahan Ara writes in the margins that the ulama have spoken on the merits and virtues available to all humankind. According to her, however, spiritual charisma is reserved for the prophets, saints and believers, and is derived through the charisma of prophecy, sainthood and the guidance of faith.[4]

Such ideas resonate with broader discourses of Islamic piety. The notion of a select spiritual elite (*ahl-i haqiqat*), who understand the deeper esoteric message of scripture with their charismatic authority, is a motif that runs throughout the exegetical writing of the Qadiri saint Mulla Shah Badakhshi, the spiritual guide of both Jahan Ara and her brother Dara Shikoh (d. 1658). Mulla Shah's commentary, the *Tafsir-i Shah wa shah-i tafasir* (*Commentary of the King and the King of Commentaries*), is a testament to the fully articulated discourse of mystical Persian exegesis. In this work, which consists of commentaries on four selected suras (Q. 1–3 and 12), Mulla Shah switches seamlessly between Arabic and Persian and draws extensively from his own Persian poetic verses as a way of illustrating the hidden meanings of scripture, which often radically depart from the literal sense of the text.[5]

Such is the case when he turns to the Qur'anic verse *pilgrimage to the House (bayt) is a duty to God for people who can undertake*

it (Q. 3:97).[6] Mulla Shah, who is well aware of the literal interpretation that this is a command to undertake the pilgrimage to the sacred shrine (*bayt*) in Mecca, finds a deeper significance in the verse: he sees it as an injunction for an inner spiritual journey and the House as truly a reference to the heart.[7] Such esotericism was fully established in both Arabic and Persian mystical exegesis, even if more soberly expressed, as in the case of the selected Persian commentary (Q. 1 and 67–114) by Ya'qub b. 'Uthman Charkhi (d. 1434/5), the Naqshbandi saint of Samarqand. Charkhi's commentary is filled with advice for the dervish on the mystical path, and draws extensively from Jalal al-Din Rumi's (d. 1273) Persian epic poem, the *Mathnawi-i ma'nawi*.[8]

The interlinear translation of Jahan Ara's *Ayat-i bayyinat* follows the original Arabic quite closely, and as a whole speaks to the performative use of the Qur'an in pious religious observance. For the premodern period, this calligraphic example of a woman actively engaged with scripture is not entirely unique. However, it is a telling contrast to what has been, historically, a male-dominated field of learning. Jahan Ara received her education from Sati'l-Nisa' Khanam (d. 1647), an Iranian-born member of the Mughal court and sister to the poet laureate Talib-i Amuli (d. 1626). Like other women of the court, Sati'l-Nisa' was trained in the recitation of the Qur'an and had a thorough knowledge of Persian literature.[9] Yet, beyond the spheres of court culture, as in pre-industrialised societies around the world, Muslim women were often excluded from the formal fields of religious learning. This is not to say, however, that they did not study scripture or participate in the broader frameworks of Islamic piety. There are countless examples of Muslim women in the public sphere who articulated themselves as active agents in their own spirituality.[10] The many cases of early women Hadith transmitters and ascetics are testaments to women's roles as religious authorities.[11]

Regarding the early use of Persian, the Arabic spiritual autobiography of the Central Asian ascetic Abu 'Abd Allah al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi (fl. 883) is illustrative, as it details the mystical visions that his wife experienced, and outlines her spiritual progression. In the course of these dreams she communicates in Persian to the

Prophet Muhammad, who relates to her that she has reached a spiritual status equal to that of her husband.[12] Such an example underscores the early linguistic reality of diglossia, in which Arabic, as the formal language of scripture and learning, was the privileged medium of expression. Persian, in contrast, was a second-tier language that was almost entirely absent from the written spheres of religious authority for the first centuries of Islamic history.

However, by the time Jahan Ara copied out her collection of Qur'anic verses and interlinear Persian translations, the practice of translating the Qur'an had long been an established feature of scriptural hermeneutics in the Persianate realm of learning and education. By the eleventh century, the Shafi'i jurist of Nishapur, 'Imad al-Din Shahfur Isfara'ini (d. 1079), could write in the introduction to his multi-volume Persian commentary, *Taj al-tarajim fi tafsir al-Qur'an li'l-a'ajim* (*The Crown of Translations among the Commentaries of the Qur'an for Non-Arabs*),[13] that the use of Persian had become entirely commonplace in the written spheres of Qur'anic exegesis and in the oral practices of religious education, in the pulpit, and in the mosques of both the elite and the masses.[14] Isfara'ini goes on to argue, against the grain of Shafi'i precedent, that if one did not know Arabic, it would be permissible to use a translation of the Qur'an even for the performance of ritual prayer.[15]

Historically, Hanafi juridical authorities of Iraq, Khurasan and Central Asia advocated the qualified use of translation for ritual prayer; they based their ruling on the position of the two main disciples of Abu Hanifa (d. 767), namely Abu Yusuf (d. 798) and Muhammad Shaybani (d. 805). Abu Hanifa had advanced the unqualified use of Persian liturgical material in all formal religious observance, including the recitation of the Qur'an, regardless of one's knowledge of Arabic. However, Abu Yusuf and Shaybani restricted this ruling to those who had no mastery of Arabic. This qualified acceptance of liturgical translation emerged as a largely normative position in the early development of Hanafi jurisprudence.[16] Such is the view of the famed Hanafi legal scholar from Transoxiana, Muhammad b. Ahmad Sarakhsi (d. 1090), who maintained that the miraculous nature of the Qur'an was not only in its

language, which is limited to Arabic speakers, but was also present in its meanings, which are accessible to all. Thus, he reasons, those who do not know Arabic can access the Qur'an, even during ritual prayer, through translations.[17]

The question of the proper expression of ritual prayer, needless to say, is quite distinct from the diverse forms of scriptural interpretation. Generally speaking, while the other juridical traditions did not allow the use of translations in the space of ritual performance, the development of Persian scriptural hermeneutics transcended sectarian and juridical divides.[18]

Just as a broad range of Arabic religious and scientific material made its way into Persian – from the 'Abbasid Arabic translation of Dioscorides' *Materia medica* to the theological *summa* the *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* (*The Revivication of the Religious Disciplines*) of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) – the practice of translating Arabic commentaries is itself a well-attested phenomenon in the pre-modern period.[19] There is the famous example of the so-called *Tafsir-i Tabari*, which, according to its introduction, is a translation of the voluminous Arabic exegesis of Abu Ja'far al-Tabari (d. 923), produced for the Samanid ruler 'Abd al-Malik b. Nuh (r. 954–61) under the supervision of a committee of Hanafi scholars from Khurasan and Central Asia.[20] Given its archaic language and internal references, the Persian commentary appears to have been produced in the tenth century. However, upon close inspection it is clearly not a translation of Tabari's Arabic commentary, as it is known today. Rather, the text, which weds Persian mythology to the salvation history of Islam, is oriented around extensive passages of historical material, many of which are drawn from Tabari's universal history, and other historiographical sources.[21] As for the accompanying practices of interlinear translation, this becomes the paradigmatic means of integrating Persian into the calligraphic presentation of the Qur'an. We can juxtapose the case of drawing on Tabari's renown as a major authority of religious and historical knowledge with Isfara'ini's extensive use of *al-Kashf wa'l-bayan* (*The Revealing and the Elucidation*) by the Shafi'i exegete of Nishapur, Abu Ishaq al-Tha'labi (d. 1035). When comparing the two works, it is evident that Isfara'ini paraphrases, in Persian, large

sections of Tha'labi's Arabic commentary, and does so without ever acknowledging it.[22]

The writings of scholars from Khurasan and Central Asia greatly shaped the field of Qur'anic exegesis. Many of the earliest Arabic commentaries were composed and transmitted by non-Arab Muslims from the region, such as al-Dahhak b. Muzahim al-Hilali (d. *c*. 723), Muqatil b. Hayyan (d. 753) and Muqatil b. Sulayman (d. 767). These early Arabic commentaries were concerned foremost with uncovering the basic meaning of the Qur'an, at the levels of grammar, syntax and lexicography.[23]

Another point to consider when viewing early practices of engaging with the Qur'an in Persian is that the doctrinal position that affirms the chief miracle of the Qur'an to be its linguistic superiority took several centuries to develop. The Qur'an is rather unique in its own awareness of itself as scripture; it contains several verses that highlight its status as an inimitable articulation beyond the power of humans or *jinn* to reproduce. The question as to what made the Qur'an inimitable, however, was highly contested in a sectarian milieu occupied with theological debates concerning the nature of divine speech and its intersection with the temporal realm of human existence. These debates came to be shaped in part through the rise of Mu'tazili rationalism (a theological school indebted to Hellenistic philosophy), which began to flourish during the latter half of the eighth century. The introduction, absorption and subsequent appropriation of philosophical and scholastic models from classical and late antiquity, which arrived largely by way of the 'Abbasid translation movement,[24] offered early Muslim theologians epistemic frameworks through which to conceptualise the Qur'an as the speech (*kalam*) of God, articulated in the temporal and contingent form of the Arabic language. While the Mu'tazila, followed by many Shi'i theologians, claimed that divine speech and, by syllogistic extension, the Qur'an itself, were created and thus temporal, traditionalist jurists argued for the eternality of both, as divine attributes of the eternal Godhead. Between these positions there developed a middle road promoted by both the Ash'ari and Maturidi schools of theology that viewed divine *kalam* as eternal and indivisible speech residing in God, and posited the

Qur'an as a temporal expression or representation of this eternal speech. Often, such reasoning suggested that the archangel Gabriel, who, according to the early historical and exegetical records, communicated the divine message to Muhammad over a period of more than twenty years, served as an angelic translator, interpreting this undifferentiated speech in the temporal expression of the Arabic language.[25]

As the field of Persian Qur'anic translations and commentaries developed through the institutional support of Islamic colleges, Sufi lodges and royal courts, the Arabic linguistic form remained the *sine qua non* of the Qur'an. In general terms, translation served as a supplementation and hermeneutical expansion, but did not replace the original Arabic text. The Hanafi insistence that non-Arabic speakers could use translations for the performance of ritual prayer, however, deserves further consideration, especially as only a small fraction of the Qur'an actually needs to be memorised for ritual praxis. In the course of its development, Hanafi jurisprudence took root across Mesopotamia, Central Asia and South Asia, that is, in regions inhabited predominately by non-Arabs. The historical record of early conversion narratives suggests that Abu Hanifa was following, rather than determining, cultic practices among early non-Arab converts.[26] Also, one must appreciate that the formation of the Qur'an as a fixed and closed canon was itself a historical process. Thus, for instance, according to the *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani (d. 827), the Companion and early Qur'anic reciter 'Abd Allah Ibn Mas'ud (d. 652/3) permitted a host of re-arrangements and substitutions while reciting scripture, and allowed for the mixing of verses and words, as long as the text recited did not contradict the broader message of the Qur'an.[27] Hanafi scholars promoted this line of reasoning in their argument for the permissibility of translations for Muslims who had not yet mastered the Arabic liturgical material of Qur'an. Such is the case with the prominent jurist of Samarqand, Abu Hafs Najm al-Din al-Nasafi (d. 1142), who claimed that only recitations that contradicted the actual meaning of the Qur'an would be invalid, thereby privileging the greater significance of scripture over its literal linguistic form.[28]

Nasafi, who is renowned for his well-known credal formulation, is an interesting case. In addition to his extended Arabic commentary, he also produced an interlinear Persian translation characterised by its driving rhetorical force and its attendant rhyme and rhythm. As with other premodern Persian translations and commentaries, Nasafi's text was copied and used in madrasa education; it gives us an indication of the rhetorical strategies deployed by Persian-speaking Muslims in their interaction with scripture.[29] The use of such rhyming translations is further represented in a fragment of the Qur'an preserved in the shrine of 'Ali al-Rida in Mashhad; the fragment appears – from codicological as well as linguistic evidence – to have been produced in the tenth or eleventh centuries.[30] The accompanying translation consists of rhyming prose filled with rhetorical embellishments that suggest it was intended to carry a homiletic force when recited aloud in the performance of sermons, as a pericope used to explain the Arabic text, or even possibly in the cultic performance of ritual prayer itself.

Such literary engagements with the Qur'an are common in the history of Persian poetry. The macaronic incorporation of Arabic phrases and verses from the Qur'an is a standard literary device in the Persian *mathnawi*s of Hakim Sana'i (d. 1131) and Farid al-Din 'Attar (d. *c.* 1220).[31] This process of exegetical poetic expansion was further developed by Rumi, whose *Mathnawi* has long been referred to as the Qur'an expressed in the Persian language. Rumi repeatedly presents the oral, spontaneous composition of his poetic opus as drawn from the same revelatory source as the Qur'an. It is to this end that Rumi's disciples viewed the *Mathnawi* as a key to uncovering the inner secrets of scripture, which could be articulated in any language.[32]

These homiletic and poetic uses of the Qur'an highlight the fact that the Persian language emerged as a legitimate vehicle for religious expression. This formed part of a broader phenomenon of the use of Persian throughout the fields of religious learning, from translations of prophetic sayings to formalised manuals of jurisprudence. Persian increasingly gained legitimacy as a cosmopolitan language, with a sphere of influence that, in the premodern period,

stretched across Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

The manuscript record of Persian commentaries highlights the interconnected linguistic networks that facilitated the broad circulation of knowledge. Such is the case with a manuscript of Isfara'ini's commentary produced for the Madrasa Nizamiyya of Balkh, in modern-day Afghanistan, in 1085/6; a subsequent copy was made in 1132, which in turn was gifted as a religious endowment to the shrine complex of Hajji Bektash Wali (fl. 1240) in central Anatolia.[33] Numerous manuscript copies of translations and commentaries are held in various archives around the world and are indicative of the extensive phenomenon of interpreting the Qur'an through the medium of Persian.[34] An interesting example is a volume, produced in 1233 and housed in the Süleymaniye Madrasa of Istanbul, of the *Tafsir-i basa'ir* (*The Commentary of Insights*), a major Persian exegesis, composed by the chief judge of Ghazna, Muhammad b. Mahmud Nishaburi (fl. 1153), and dedicated to the Ghaznavid sultan Yamin al-Dawla Bahram Shah (d. 1157).[35] Another volume of this commentary can be found in the shrine of Jalal al-Din Rumi in Konya.[36] Its influence across the Persianate sphere is further evinced by its appearance in South Asia; it is cited, for instance, in the bibliography of canonical works by the North Indian Chishti mystic, Rukn al-Din Dabir Kashani (d. after 1337).[37]

Another Persian exegetical work listed by Rukn al-Din is the *Kashf al-asrar* (*The Unveiling of the Mysteries*), a Sufi commentary by Rashid al-Din Maybudi (fl. 1126) that is itself an expansion of the commentary of the Hanbali mystic of Herat, 'Abd Allah al-Ansari (d. 1089). Also cited is the *Lata'if al-tafsir* (*The Subtleties of Exegesis*) by Abu Nasr Zahidi (fl. 1125).[38] Zahidi's commentary, originally composed in Bukhara, was particularly popular in South Asia, and was referenced extensively in the *Miftah al-jinan*, a Chishti work of ethics by the North Indian scholar Wajih al-Din (fl. 1370).[39] This work and Nishaburi's *Tafsir-i basa'ir* are sources for a variety of later Persian exegetical works produced in India, such as the extensive commentary the *Bihar al-mawwaj* (*The Oceans of Waves*) by Shihab al-Din al-Dawlatabadi (d. *c.* 1445), which was dedicated to the sultan of Jawnpur, Ibrahim Shah Sharqi

(d. 1440).[40] In this broad circulation of material, exegetical writing in Persian formed a discrete and fully synthesised body of literature that was studied and reformulated over time.

One of the most influential writers of this later period was the Khurasani preacher Kamal al-Din Waʿiz Kashifi (d. 1505), who produced a systematic prolegomenon to the study of the Qur'an, *Jawahir al-tafsir* (*The Jewels of Exegesis*), which also consisted of a commentary on the first four suras. He dedicated this work, which draws extensively from both Arabic and Persian exegetical material, to Mir ʿAli Shir Nawa'i (d. 1501), a high-ranking courtier in the Timurid administration.[41] However, based on the surviving codicological record we can conclude that it is his *Mawahib-i ʿaliyya* (*The Sublime Gifts*), a concise commentary on the entire Qur'an that was also dedicated to Mir ʿAli, for which he is most well known. Countless manuscripts and lithographs of this work are known to have survived. The commentary in turn was translated into Urdu, Turkish and Pashtu, underscoring the broad impact of Persian exegetical writing, which in its very form is deeply connected to pre-existing Arabic exegetical models.[42]

Within the Shiʿi milieu, during this later period, we find a growing body of exegetical writings that build upon earlier Arabic and Persian sources. Such is the case with the *Tarjumat al-khawass* (*The Translation of the Singularities*) of Fakhr al-Din Zawwari, a commentary composed under the patronage of the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp I (d. 1576),[43] and the *Manhaj al-sadiqin* (*The Curriculum for the Righteous*), a major commentary by Zawwari's pupil, Fath Allah Kashani (d. 1570), which was abridged into a widely copied collection entitled the *Khulasat al-manhaj* (*The Abstract of the Curriculum*). This abridged commentary, in turn, has had an enduring influence on the field of Shiʿi hermeneutics.[44]

Premodern Persian commentaries were intended to make the meaning of the Qur'an available to a wider audience. This emphasis on accessibility helps to contextualise the later refashioning of early Persian and Arabic commentaries as part of a process of interpreting scripture within a medium of expression that could be readily used and comprehended. By writing in Persian, exegetes could be sure that their works would be widely disseminated across the Islamic

societies of the East. A large part of this religious scholarship took place in madrasas and in Sufi orders. In addition, as with Jahan Ara's personal transcription and translation of selected verses, royal courts had long promoted Persian exegetical writing. Thus, for instance, the accomplished poet Zib al-Nisa' (d. 1681), the daughter of Awrangzeb, followed in her father's footsteps by sponsoring the production of a multi-volume Persian commentary written by Safi b. Wali Qazwini (fl. 1671); the commentary bore her name, *Zib al-tafasir* (*The Adornment of Commentaries*), and engaged in both Sufi hermeneutics and classical theology.[45] While the sponsorship of such exegetical material should be seen in concert with the broader patronage of learning and art across Persianate societies, the ruling elite's practice of promoting and shaping the interpretation of the Qur'an also offered a means by which they could gain legitimacy and spiritual authority through the power of scripture. The frameworks of linguistic and sectarian identities, religious institutions and political authority have continued to shape the ways in which Persian exegetical traditions have developed during the modern period.

Contested Modernities

By the time the reformist intellectual Shah Wali Allah al-Dihlawi (d. 1762) wrote the introduction to his Persian translation *Fath al-Rahman bi-tarjumat al-Qur'an* (*The Revelation of the Compassionate through the Translation of the Qur'an*), he could observe that translating and commenting upon the Qur'an in a Persian milieu had become a normative component of scriptural hermeneutics. As the head of the Madrasa Rahimiyya founded by his father in Delhi, Shah Wali Allah explicitly situated his translation of the Qur'an as a pedagogical aid to be used in the context of madrasa education. In his introduction, he explains that the many translations of the Qur'an in circulation were either too long, and thus not fit for a madrasa curriculum, or excessively short, and thus not fully comprehensible in their own right.[46]

Shah Wali Allah sought to make scripture accessible to a community whose native language was not Arabic, and, in many cases, was not even Persian. With the evolution of the language,

and gradual shifts in usage and syntax, Persian translations of previous centuries had come to seem archaic and dated. Thus, what was suitable for the purposes of didactic instruction in the study of the Qur'an for one generation would often need to be reconfigured for the next.

The process of making the Qur'an more accessible was greatly accelerated by technological advancements in the mechanical reproduction of text, first with lithographs, and then, with increasing frequency, with moveable type. During the nineteenth century, Shah Wali Allah's translation, for instance, was widely disseminated through several lithographic editions. In these editions, his Persian interlinear translation of the Qur'an was often creatively configured within a constellation of other exegetical material, such as the Urdu translation by his son Shah Rafi' al-Din (d. 1818), set as another interlinear line within the body of the text, and the short Arabic commentary, the *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (*The Commentary of the two Jalals*), by Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli (d. 1459) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 1505), situated along the margins of the interlinear translation.[47] The promotion of such multilingualism through the dissemination of printed material points to how local or vernacular linguistic forms were facilitated by the technological advancements of mechanical reproduction.[48] The printing press thus not only contributed to a rise in literacy but also offered vernacular linguistic communities a platform for greater articulation. In the context of South Asia, Persian was used as an official administrative language and a language of high culture and learning under the Mughals and then under British colonial rule until the mid-nineteenth century.[49]

The modern period, however, is marked by an ever-shrinking sphere of Persian linguistic activity. While scholars throughout the Ottoman, Qajar and Mughal dynasties of the nineteenth century communicated through the medium of Persian, a cosmopolitan language of the educated elite, by the end of the twentieth century the linguistic and cultural reach of Persian had narrowed drastically. In the field of scriptural hermeneutics, this shrinkage came to signify a specific identification of Persian commentaries and translations of the Qur'an with the Shi'i intellectual history of

Iran during the last century. The major thirty-volume Persian commentary *Lawami' al-tanzil wa sawati' al-ta'wil* (*Flashes of Revelation and Sparkles of Interpretation*) by the Kashmiri-born Shi'i scholar Abu'l-Qasim Lahuri (d. 1906/7), published in a partial lithograph edition in Lahore (1907/8),[50] is an indication of the long-lasting presence of Persian as an exegetical vehicle in South Asia. Yet, at this point in time, Lahuri's choice of language speaks more to an identification of Persian with Shi'i exegesis than with a robust continuation of Persian as a vehicle of religious scholarship in the region.

Compared to the Shi'a of Iran, Sunni Muslims during the modern period have played a comparatively small role in the development of Persian translations and commentaries, though there are examples of such works in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, where dialects of Persian continue to be spoken. In contrast with premodern configurations, modern Persian exegetical writing has developed largely in the context of Shi'i hermeneutics, and in the specific intellectual traditions that emerged from the Shi'i clerical seminaries and reformist circles of Iran. Furthermore, the relationship of reformist Iranian intellectuals (both within and beyond the clerical elite) with a largely secular base of political power has had a direct bearing on the ways in which the Qur'an has been interpreted and positioned in the public sphere.

The secular, nationalist regimes of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–41) and Muhammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–51, 1953–79) sought, at various times, to curtail, control and co-opt the power of the clerical establishment. During the second half of the century, at the height of the Cold War, the pro-Western Muhammad Reza Shah enacted a campaign of repression and torture against political opponents, for the most part prominent leftist and religious activists. It is against this larger historical canvas of oppression and civil strife in pre-revolutionary Iran that the specific scriptural hermeneutics of social reform and religious activism developed in the face of a totalitarian secular regime. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the field of Qur'anic studies, long the domain of the clerical elite, became directly connected to the ruling apparatus of the government.

In addition to the theological, juridical and pedagogical dimensions surrounding scriptural hermeneutics, the activity of writing about the Qur'an has long represented a charismatic engagement with the sacred and the numinous, formalised expression of piety. While the voluminous body of Persian exegetical material produced in the nineteenth century, largely within clerical circles, represented an extension of such earlier models of piety and pedagogy, it also came to serve as part of a broadening articulation of religious identity in public discourse. The space and role accorded to religion and the clerical elite in society was one of the most contentious elements in the formation of Iranian modernity, itself highly fragmented and diverse. Towards the end of the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925), Persian underwent a significant transformation as new idioms arose to account for the paradigmatic shifts that occurred through dialogical interactions with European epistemologies. Within the larger arc of Iranian nationalism, secular intellectuals, both before and after the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11), developed a vocabulary of modernity that sought to situate Iran within a progressive nationalist historiography, one which viewed Islam and clerical institutions of education as reactionary and foreign to a putative transhistorical Iranian people.[51] Prominent secular currents in the society positioned the language, culture and history of Persia as distinct and separate from Islam.

Yet, as Persian had long been the vehicle for religious expression amongst the Shi'a of Iran, it could also serve as a means to resist secularism and Westernisation. A vocal contingent of the clerical establishment opposed the Constitutional Revolution and the establishment of a parliamentarian government, which was supported by secular intellectuals, as well as many notable clerics. Thus, for example, Ayatullah 'Abd al-Husayn Lari (d. 1924) criticised the parliament for being a 'house of corruption'; he viewed human legislation as fallible and imperfect compared to the superiority of Islamic law and the religious scholars (i.e. *mujtahid*s) who were its authorised interpreters. Lari wrote extensively on the Qur'an in Persian, and promoted a hermeneutical engagement with questions of social justice and political oppression, as reflected, for instance, in his Persian treatise *al-Ayat al-nazila fi dhamm*

al-zulm wa'l-jawr (*Verses Revealed on Condemning Tyranny and Oppression*).[52]

In the particular context of Shi'i salvation history, the language used in discussions of social justice drew upon the symbolically charged oppression of the earliest leaders of the Shi'a community at the hands of tyrannical rulers. This is most prominently epitomised in Twelver Shi'i hagiographical literature on the martyrdom of the first eleven imams starting with 'Ali b. Abi Talib, and only ending with the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, who, according to the soteriological framework of Twelver Shi'i thought, will return at the end of time as a divine legislator to restore justice to the world. In the absence of the Twelfth Imam, all forms of human government are in some manner imperfect; this formulation has led to a strong vein of quietism running through Twelver Shi'i history and resulting in what has been, at times, a pronounced disengagement from political power on the part of the clerical class.[53] However, partly through an increasing formalisation of seminary education and partly in response to shifting centres of political power, the clerical elite have been, historically, in a position to delegate themselves as the primary voices of religious and social authority in the absence of the Twelfth Imam.[54]

For all intents and purposes, the professionalisation of religious education limited who could engage in Qur'anic hermeneutics. As a formalised field of religious scholarship, the study of the Qur'an during the modern period has been promoted by networks of religious scholars linking the main seminaries (*hawza 'ilmiyya*) of Najaf in Iraq and Qom, south of Tehran.[55] Seminary education has long been conducted in both Persian and Arabic; thus, many within the religious elite of Iran and Iraq, as well as of Lebanon, are connected not only through family ties but also through bilingual education. The bilingualism promoted in seminary education is itself indicative of the highly specialised nature of religious education.

In practical terms, such specialisation has meant that commentaries on the entire Qur'an have been primarily the domain of a largely male religious elite. That said, in the course of modern Iranian intellectual history the Qur'an has served as a primary site of inspiration and a source of religious and social authority for a

range of public intellectuals, such as Jalal Al-i Ahmad (d. 1969), ʿAli Shariʿati (d. 1977), Mahdi Bazargan (d. 1995) and Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945),[56] who have operated outside the formalised circles of the clerical establishment and, in their own ways, have promoted religion in public life and civil society. Such engagements with scriptural hermeneutics are the result of the modern expansion of education outside historically defined boundaries of religious learning. For reformists, both within and beyond the clerical elite, the established use of Persian in the field of Qur'anic hermeneutics facilitated the dissemination of political thought grounded in the authority of scripture.

Exegetical Transformations

A broad range of modern Iranian intellectuals have read messages of social justice and societal transformation in the Qur'an. Yet, the traditional genre of the major Qur'anic commentary, defined generally as commenting on the entire Qur'anic corpus, has remained largely under the auspices of formalised religious education. Needless to say, as in the premodern period, commentaries on sections of the Qur'an have also served as established paradigms for engaging with scripture. The revolutionary cleric Ayatollah Mahmud Taliqani (d. 1979), who spent over ten years as a political prisoner under the Pahlavi regime and was greatly influenced by the Iranian leftist movement, explored in his partial commentary *Partuwi az Qur'an* (*Illumination from the Qur'an*) such issues as dialectical philosophy, Marxist ideology and religious political authority.[57] Equally influential in the ideological formation of the Iranian Revolution was Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari (d. 1979), who likewise never produced a complete commentary, though he lectured extensively on the Qur'an and wrote several works bearing directly upon Qur'anic hermeneutics.[58]

The deployment of new media, particularly in the form of taped audio lectures, played an important role in the dissemination of ideologies of social resistance and political transformation in the lead-up to the revolution. Major clerics such as Mutahhari and the

future supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989), recorded sermons in assemblies attended by students and activists; these recordings were in turn copied onto cassettes and spread clandestinely through various resistance networks.[59] The use of sermons prior to and during the revolution followed previous models of clerical authority. The mimetic technologies of print, audio and television have come to shape the manner in which Qur'anic hermeneutics have been publicly presented. The commentary *Tafsir-i mawdu'i-i Qur'an-i majid* (*The Thematic Commentary of the Glorious Qur'an*) by the influential Ayatollah Jawadi Amuli (b. 1933) of Qom is heavily influenced by traditions of Shi'i philosophy and gnosticism. It is organised around major themes within the Qur'an, particularly monotheism, revelation, prophecy, ethics and gnosticism.[60] The genesis of this thematic commentary, a common form for modern exegesis, was a series of lectures that Amuli delivered. Today, large portions of Amuli's seminary lectures commenting on the Qur'an, as with a wide array of other Persian exegetical material, are available to stream over the Internet; such transformation is indicative of how religious discourse has adapted and responded to technological evolutions in presentation and transmission.[61]

The division of Qur'anic material into thematic units of analysis offers a readily transmittable form for print and broadcast media, as it is not meant to be an entire interpretation of each verse of the Qur'an in sequential order. To be sure, the genre of the thematic commentary as it developed in the course of modern exegesis finds parallels in earlier models, most notably in the collections of juridical rulings (*ahkam*) derived from Qur'anic verses and organised around the primary categories of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). An example of these collections is the Persian commentary by the Shi'i scholar Abu'l-Fath Jurjani (d. 1568/9), known as the *Tafsir-i shahi* (*The Royal Commentary*), which focuses on the verses of juridical rulings (*ayat-i ahkam*) in the Qur'an.[62] Yet despite such structural similarity, the thematic analysis of specific motifs in the Qur'an has been deployed in the modern period as a key means of addressing a range of discrete topics in the space of a single work. A further iteration of this form is the exegetical monograph dedicated

to a single issue, such as Ayatollah Muhammad Bihishti's (d. 1981) 'Khuda az didgah-i Qur'an' ('God in the View of the Qur'an'),[63] the lectures by Ayatollah Mutahhari, *Jihad wa mawarid-i mashruʿiyyat-i an dar Qur'an* (*Military Struggle and its Juridical Legitimacy in the Qur'an*),[64] and the work of meteorology and thermodynamics, *Bad wa baran dar Qur'an* (*Wind and Rain in the Qur'an*), by Mahdi Bazargan, first prime minister of the Islamic Republic. The latter positions the Qur'an in accordance with discoveries of modern science.[65]

While there has been a proliferation of such thematic studies in Persian, the major Qur'anic commentary retains its prestige and prominence as a formal genre. Thus, for instance, Ayatollah Jawadi Amuli, besides having written many works on the Qur'an,[66] has produced a multi-volume verse-by-verse commentary, *Tasnim: Tafsir-i Qur'an-i karim* (*The Paradisiacal Fountain: A Commentary on the Noble Qur'an*).[67] Arguably the most influential modern Shiʿi commentary is *al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an* (*The Balance in Commentary of the Qur'an*), by the philosopher and scholar 'Allama Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (d. 1981).[68] Based in Najaf, Tabataba'i was instrumental in the curricular revitalisation of Islamic philosophy and gnosticism, interests that are prominently reflected throughout his exegesis. Originally written in Arabic, the *Mizan* continues to enjoy great popularity amongst the Shiʿa of Iraq and Lebanon. The commentary was translated into Persian in serial form, concomitant with its serial publication in Arabic, by multiple prominent Shiʿi scholars of Qom, including Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi (b. 1935) and Ayatollah Nasir Makarim Shirazi (b. 1924).

The modern phenomenon of translating primarily Arabic commentaries into Persian (a practice with premodern roots) has served as a dominant means of constructing and defining the field of Persian Qur'anic exegesis. Several Shiʿi Arabic commentaries from the premodern period have been translated into Persian over the last hundred years, such as the *Majmaʿ al-bayan* (*The Confluence of the Elucidation*) by Amin al-Din al-Tabrisi (d. 1154),[69] the *Kanz al-ʿirfan* (*The Treasure of Gnosis*) by 'Abd Allah al-Suyuri (d. 1423),[70] *al-Safi fi tafsir al-Qur'an* (*Clarity in the Commentary of the Qur'an*)

by Fayd al-Kashi (d. 1680),[71] and much of the writing on Qur'anic hermeneutics by the 'illuminationist' (*'ishraqi*) philosopher Sadr al-Din Shirazi 'Mulla Sadra' (d. 1641).[72] This process of translating Arabic exegetical material extends beyond Shi'i intellectual traditions, and is represented in modern Persian translations of a broad range of exegetical sources, such as the *Asbab al-nuzul* (*Contexts of Revelation*) by Abu'l-Hasan al-Wahidi (d. 1076);[73] the *Mafatih al-ghayb* (*Keys to the Unseen*) by the Ash'ari theologian Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209);[74] the general work in the field of Qur'anic studies, *al-Itqan fi 'ulum al-Qur'an* (*Perfection in the Disciplines of the Qur'an*) by the Sunni polymath Suyuti;[75] and the modern commentary *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (*In the Shadow of the Qur'an*) by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966).[76] This process has also extended into the field of modern Shi'i exegesis, as reflected in the Persian translations of the Turkish commentary *Kashf al-haqa'iq* (*Unveiling the Realities*) by the *qadi* of Baku, Azerbaijan, Mir Muhammad Karim b. Ja'far al-Musawi (fl. 1905),[77] and the major Arabic commentary *al-Tafsir al-kashif* (*The Revelatory Commentary*) by the Lebanese reformist Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya (d. 1979).[78]

As a means of accessing and transmitting currents of learning that extend beyond both sectarian and linguistic spheres, translation has served as a paradigmatic pattern throughout the historical development of Persian exegesis. A novel iteration of this exegetical pattern is the *Tafsir-i numuna* (*The Model Commentary*), a multivolume Qur'anic commentary completed prior to the Iranian Revolution by a committee of clerics under the direction of Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi, and reissued with explicit reference in the introduction to the monumental events of the revolution.[79] The committee worked together over the course of several years to interpret the Qur'an verse-by-verse by drawing upon a set corpus of Qur'anic exegesis as their textual canon. The majority of the works they consulted were written in Arabic and translated in the context of the commentary. Of the over fifteen titles listed as primary sources, several are major medieval commentaries from the Sunni exegetical tradition, such as the *Anwar al-tanzil* (*Lights of Revelation*) by the Shafi'i jurist 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar al-Baydawi (d. *c.* 1286);

al-Durr al-manthur (*Scattered Pearls*) by Suyuti, based on the sayings of the Prophet and the early Companions; Razi's major theological commentary (referenced above); and the *Ahkam al-Qur'an* (*Juridical Rulings of the Qur'an*) by the Maliki jurist Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qurtubi (d. 1272). Included on the Shi'i medieval exegetical side are Shaykh al-Ta'ifa al-Tusi (d. *c.* 1067), Abu'l-Futuh al-Razi (d. *c.* 1131), Tabrisi, 'Abd al-'Ali al-Huwayzi (fl. 1662), as well as Fayd al-Kashi and Sayyid Hashim al-Bahrani (d. 1696). The capstone of Shi'i material is reflected in the *tafsir* of 'Allama Tabataba'i, with its strong current of modernist thought underpinning the entire project. This is further expressed in the other titles of modern Sunni exegetical works directly connected to the intellectual development of Islamic reformism. These include the *Tafsir al-Manar*, based in part upon the lectures of the Egyptian Islamic reformist Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and developed in collaboration with his student Rashid Rida (d. 1935);[80] the exegetical writings of Ahmad Mustafa al-Maraghi (d. 1945),[81] also based upon lecture notes, and published, in part, through the aid of his students; and the influential exegetical collection by Sayyid Qutb.[82]

The place of religion within the secular nationalist regimes that developed in the wake of European colonialism is a concern that runs throughout the modern exegetical writings featured in the *Tafsir-i numuna*. It is clear from the list of primary titles that the clerical elite closely followed the reformist movements outside Iran, and drew inspiration, regardless of particular sectarian profession, from a wide array of Muslim intellectuals. As stated in the introduction to the commentary, this formed part of a larger aim of making the Qur'an relevant to the pressing societal and political issues of the day:

> From [the beginning of Islam] until now hundreds of works on the interpretation of the Qur'an have been written, in different languages and in various manners, some literary, some philosophical, some ethical, others based on Hadith, others on history, still others based on new sciences, each of them viewing the Qur'an from within the frameworks of their own perspectives . . . Each age has its own particularities, necessities and demands that change in

> the course of time and that appear with new questions and fresh concepts.[83]

One of the primary stated objectives of the commentary is to translate the intellectual heritage and culture of Islam 'into today's language (*zaban-i ruz*)' to address the issues facing society in 'a contemporary language that is in the heart and mind of today's generation'.[84] While this desire to make scripture accessible is a motif running throughout premodern Persian exegetical writing, it takes on an added significance in the particular context of Iranian modernity, where the Qur'an is explicitly positioned as an agent for social and political transformation.

With the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there has developed an interconnected network of governmental agencies and clerical institutions that have promoted, shaped and overseen the activities of Qur'anic translation, interpretation and dissemination within the public sphere. In the premodern history of Persian hermeneutics, there are numerous examples in which the ruling and religious elite drew upon the authority of scripture to gain political and spiritual legitimacy. Despite such precedents, the extent to which the modern Iranian state promotes itself as the guardian of the Qur'an, symbolically and through the apparatus of specific governmental agencies and programmes, is of an entirely distinct order. This is in part the result of the far-reaching interconnections between the ruling class and the clerical establishment that developed after the revolution. Many prominent figures within the government have participated in the field of Qur'anic hermeneutics, including, notably, the supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini[85] and his successor Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei (b. 1939).[86] Several members of the Assembly of Experts, a deliberative governmental body of leading *mujtahid*s, the Council of Guardians of the Constitution, and the Iranian parliament are known for their work on the Qur'an. One of the most prominent examples is Ayatollah 'Ali Akbar Hashimi Rafsanjani (b. 1934), the former president and chairman of the Assembly of Experts, who has overseen two extensive exegetical works, together totalling over fifty volumes of printed material. He wrote the *Tafsir-i rahnama* (*Guiding*

Commentary), a chapter-by-chapter commentary on the Qur'an, which treats key concepts and themes,[87] and the *Farhang-i Qur'an* (*Dictionary of the Qur'an*), a thematic encyclopaedia covering a wide range of social, historical and religious topics.[88] Both works were undertaken and published through the Markaz-i Farhang wa Maʿarif-i Qur'an (Centre of Culture and Qur'anic Sciences), housed in the office of Islamic propagation in the seminary of Qom. This centre also published the *Da'irat al-maʿarif-i Qur'an-i karim* (*Encyclopaedia of the Holy Qur'an*), a multi-volume Persian encyclopaedia that addresses themes and topics related to the Qur'an. Similarly, the centre's website offers an extensive digital library of Persian and Arabic resources for the study of the Qur'an.[89]

The governmental use of broadcast media also characterises the modern dissemination of Qur'anic material. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting agency (IRIB), a semi-autonomous authority affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, operates a radio station dedicated to Qur'anic recitations and Persian-language programming focusing on scriptural hermeneutics.[90] The Iranian Quran News Agency (IQNA), also supported by the government, was established in 2003 and inaugurated by President Muhammad Khatami (b. 1943) with the goal of promoting the Qur'an across Iranian society; it offers historical, cultural and social information about the Qur'an through its website and bi-weekly bulletin. The website details current international events in the field of Qur'anic studies and pays particular attention to the prominent activities of the clerical elite, both in the government and the religious seminaries, related to the study of the Qur'an.[91]

Another government-funded agency is the Markaz-i Tarjuma-i Qur'an-i Majid (Centre for the Translation of the Holy Qur'an), an institute established in 1994 in Qom with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.[92] The centre has been involved in researching the history of Qur'anic translation, archiving and cataloguing manuscripts and printed translations, establishing a bibliographical survey of Persian translations, studying various methodological approaches to translation and producing

translations of the Qur'an in multiple languages. The activities of the centre, along with scholarly articles written by Iranian academics, are featured in its quarterly journal *Tarjuman-i wahi* (*Interpreter of Revelation*), established in 1997 and available in print and online.[93] The journal has also been active in publishing Persian translations of scholarly essays written in English and other languages.

As in the past, it is through translation that the majority of Iranians today are able to access the Qur'an for the purposes of comprehension. While the liturgical recitation in Arabic plays a central role in the ritual expressions of daily piety, the message of the Qur'an is entirely enveloped in the linguistic, cultural and social cadences of modern Persian. The proliferation of modern interlinear Persian translations of the Qur'an is a testament to this reality. So, too, the increasing number of modern poetic translations are indicative of how important the question of linguistic and literary form is in the comprehension of scripture for Iranian society, which has long privileged verse as a means of literary expression.[94]

The role of the state, the prominence of religious education and the adaptation of the Qur'an into readily accessible linguistic, cultural and ideological models all have precedents within pre-modern engagements with scripture. In the context of modern Iran, however, these permutations have taken on radically new significances, particularly in the intersection of political legitimacy and scriptural authority. The use of new media and the burgeoning of an educated society, of both men and women, have meant that the Qur'an can be transmitted to and accessed by an unprecedented number of Iranians.

Women and the Qur'an

The active participation of women in the Iranian Revolution, though a widely studied topic, has generally been poorly understood outside of Iran.[95] The question of the rights of women in post-revolutionary Iranian society is also a complex topic. In Western media this has been largely reduced to discussions about the law, enacted early in Khomeini's rule, that requires women to wear a

veil covering their hair in public. Head covering was one of the more visible signs of juridical transformation ushered in by the post-revolutionary government. As a symbol, it was posed in direct opposition to the policies of Westernisation enacted under the Pahlavi regimes. The government of Muhammad Reza Shah in 1936 banned veiling in public; this was a polarising policy that many Iranian women resented, as they viewed the centuries-old practice as a way of maintaining public modesty before male eyes.[96] The many women who felt estranged by such Westernising forces found a powerful means of resistance during the revolution in the act of donning the chador, a full-length garment of a single piece of fabric covering the head, but not the face, and falling to the feet, traditionally worn by Shi'i women in Iran, Iraq and the Levant. Less noticeable outside Iran were a series of rights that women had attained prior to the revolution with the Family Protection Law of 1967, which was significantly amended in 1975. After the revolution, these rights were repealed with the enactment of Islamic law as interpreted by the clerical elite.[97]

Many religious Iranians viewed the transformation of women's roles in the public sphere as symptomatic of the broader erosion of values and traditions which they associated with the Westernisation and modernisation promoted by the Pahlavi regimes. The issue of women's rights was all the more problematic, as the putative oppression of women in Islamic societies has been positioned, historically, as a justification for European colonisation, intervention and superiority.[98] The ideologies of resistance that arose in response to such criticism have attempted to re-inscribe women as active participants in society, though configured through normative Islamic gender hierarchies. Likewise, the discourses of liberation that developed through revolutionary scriptural hermeneutics of resistance have been used by Iranian women's movements for the advancement of women in society.[99]

The debate about women's roles in the traditionally male dominated clerical establishment is emblematic of these transformations. The number of all-women religious seminaries has increased under the Islamic Republic, just as the public integration of women in the fields of Qur'anic hermeneutics has risen. The participation of women as

religious teachers and preachers has precedents throughout Islamic history. However, in contemporary Iranian society, seminary education, formal and informal study groups in private homes, and the gathering spaces for public piety – such as Shi'i congregational halls for commemorative ceremonies (*husayniyya*s) and mosques – have provided an entire generation of women with access to scriptural and juridical learning that historically has been reserved almost entirely for a male elite. While Iranian women have been integrated both as students and as teachers in religious institutions of learning, the highest juridical office, that of the *marja'-i taqlid* ('a source for emulation') remains open only to men.[100]

The formalised religious education in post-revolutionary Iran that has been made available to women builds upon earlier trends in Iranian society. The most prominent case is that of Hajjiyya Sayyida Nusrat Amin Khanum (d. 1983) of Isfahan, who lived for nearly one hundred years, and was one of the most extraordinary religious intellectuals in the history of modern Iran.[101] Nusrat Amin was born at the end of the nineteenth century into a wealthy merchant family of Isfahan. At the age of four, she was sent by her parents to a Qur'an school (*maktab*) for girls run in the house of Khadija Begum.[102] While she recalls that the school produced no small amount of dread in the students,[103] she also relates her own desire at a young age to pursue the study of religious learning: 'When I was a child I would not play like other children, rather I enjoyed being alone so that I could contemplate and think, I would get lost in myself; if I went to public gatherings I would again become enthralled in contemplation.'[104] At fifteen, Nusrat Amin married her paternal cousin and bore eight children, of which only one survived.[105] She recalls spending over ten years learning Arabic.[106] This formed the basis for her study of religion, following the traditional curriculum of Arabic grammar, rhetoric, logic, jurisprudence and its principles, Hadith, the study of the Qur'an and Shi'i gnostic philosophy ('*irfan*). Nusrat Amin studied under several prominent clerics from the religious seminary of Isfahan through private individual courses at her home; these were conducted while she was separated from them by a curtain.[107]

The first work that she published was an Arabic commentary on forty sayings drawn from the corpus of Shi'i Hadith, entitled *al-Arba'in al-hashimiyya*, which focused on questions of theology, philosophy, and gnosis, as well as ethics, jurisprudence and poetry.[108] After the publication of this collection in 1936, she came to the attention of several clerics from Najaf, who, through written correspondence with her, were greatly impressed by her juridical acumen.[109] She was granted the formal status of *mujtahid*, the title for a legal scholar trained in the official seminary curriculum and capable of deriving independent juridical rulings.[110] Like her male counterparts, Nusrat Amin received written certificates of authorisation (*ijazat*) from several prominent scholars, including Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Najafi Isfahani (d. 1943), a cleric who taught in the seminaries of Najaf, Qom and Isfahan; and Ayatollah 'Abd al-Karim Ha'iri (d. 1937), who was the primary force behind the revitalisation of seminary education in Qom.[111]

As a guarantor of authority, the *ijaza* serves as an integral dimension of the formalised transmission of religious knowledge, linking – through a body of texts and through charismatic transference – successive generations to the earliest history of Islam.[112] This authority positioned Nusrat Amin in a broader network of religious scholars, and added to her credentials in such fields as Hadith, jurisprudence and Qur'anic exegesis. In her role as a formally trained scholar she could, in turn, transmit knowledge to others, as was the case with an *ijaza* that she granted to Ayatollah Sayyid al-Mar'ashi Najafi (d. 1990), one of the most influential clerics of Qom.[113]

Nusrat Amin Khanum and the Qur'an

During her writing career Nusrat Amin produced several works on such topics as ethics, spiritual guidance, religious history, gnosis, and philosophy, but she is most famous for her fifteen-volume verse-by-verse Persian commentary of the Qur'an, entitled *Makhzan al-'irfan dar 'ulum-i Qur'an* (*The Treasure of Gnosis in the Sciences of the Qur'an*). She published the commentary in serial

form over a period of nearly twenty years, with the first volume issued in 1957.[114] Starting with the first two suras, the commentary then jumps to the shorter suras located at the end of the Qur'an, and then works its way recursively backward through the entire text.[115] As a rationale for this order, which she admits goes against the established practice of exegetes, Nusrat Amin stated that she feared she would not live to see the entire commentary to fruition, as she began the project late in life.[116]

While the order of her commentary certainly runs against the normative pattern of full commentaries of the Qur'an, there are examples of exegetical works which focus on a selection of Qur'anic passages, or specific groups of suras, such as the medieval Persian commentary by Ya'qub b. 'Uthman Charkhi, which opens with the first sura and then turns to the last two sections (*ajza'*) of the Qur'an (Q. 67–77, 78–114). Nusrat Amin, likewise, moves from the first two suras, which occupy the opening two volumes of her commentary, to suras 67–114, which represent the last two sections of the thirty traditional divisions of the Qur'an. Save for the *Fatiha* (the opening sura), the rest of the suras of the Qur'an are arranged roughly in decreasing order of length from *Surat al-Baqara* – the second sura, and the longest of the entire Qur'an, with 286 verses – onwards. The Qur'an is further divided into thirty sections, roughly of equal length, which are used for the night recitations of Ramadan, wherein the entire Qur'an can be recited over the course of the month. There is a clear pedagogical motivation for turning to these last two sections, as they consist of the shortest suras, which are the first to be taught and memorised. Furthermore, as Nusrat Amin herself argues, these last suras, the majority of which are thought to have been revealed to Muhammad at the beginning of his prophecy while he was residing in Mecca, form a conceptual and rhetorical unity, associated with the earliest period of Islam.[117]

The publication of the commentary in serial form reflects a process of composition that relates to Nusrat Amin's work in the field of religious education. In 1965, while writing her commentary, she established a school for girls, the Dabiristan-i Dukhtarana-i Amin, in Isfahan, where she gave weekly courses on the interpretation of the Qur'an.[118] Similarly, she delivered lectures on exegesis

and topics of religious inquiry at the seminary for women, the Maktab-i Fatima, which she established in the city in order to offer women formalised education in religious studies through a standard curriculum of Arabic and Persian language instruction, Qur'anic exegesis, jurisprudence and its principles, logic and philosophy.[119] The foundation of a religious institution for the education of women built upon her previous efforts to teach the Qur'an and gnosis to large numbers of women from her home.[120]

Nusrat Amin's work for the advancement of women within the framework of religious education fits into a larger pattern of resistance amongst the clerical elite toward the platform of secularisation formally promoted by the Pahlavi regime. The Literacy Corps (Sipah-i Danish), founded in 1963 as part of Muhammad Reza Shah's 'White Revolution' (Inqilab-i Safid), drew upon earlier state initiatives linking modernisation with secularisation. The establishment in 1967 of the Women's Literacy Corps (Sipah-i Danish-i Dukhtaran) was a further manifestation of how the state integrated the question of women and their rights in society into a larger set of issues pertaining to national identity and development.[121] Nusrat Amin's activism in the field of education offered an alternative religious norm to the dominant pressures of secularisation, through an affirmation of women's participation in the traditionally male-dominated spheres of religious learning.

At various points in the *Makhzan*, Nusrat Amin addresses the role and status of women in the family and society at large. However, these questions are by no means the primary focus of the commentary. Rather, the underlying interest, as the title itself suggests, is in the philosophical and gnostic dimensions of religious knowledge, which are arguably the most prestigious fields of learning in the traditional religious curriculum of Imami Shi'ism. As for the question of women, in her writings and public lectures Nusrat Amin presents a view that in many ways is in keeping with traditionally constituted notions of gender difference as based upon the divine ordering of the cosmos.

Nusrat Amin was a vocal proponent of women wearing the hijab, which she viewed as a Qur'anic injunction meant to maintain social order. She held that the greatest struggle (*jihad*) for women was to

maintain modesty in the face of mounting societal pressures to adopt Western values.[122] On the question of equality between men and women, she argued for a divine design that, while distinguishing men from women, did not in and of itself determine the nature of all women:

> One cannot say that all men are superior to women, for we have the likes of Fatima, Khadija, Maryam and many other women who are far superior to many men. The superiority that in some instances God has granted men is a general matter and not an individual one . . . [One] deficiency is that women are disposed to showing off and being ostentatious, and they demonstrate less concern with their own spiritual perfection. Indeed, this is an instinct that God has established in women – the legal obligation of the hijab is founded upon this. However, these are all general descriptions, for there are indeed women who are not like this, and there are women who are free from such characteristics, and thus not all women at an individual level can be described in such universal terms.[123]

As for the advancement of women in society through education, Nusrat Amin argued that 'women should study and obtain knowledge ('*ilm*), but with the preservation of the soul and respect of Islam; tearing off the hijab in reality is to shred up the pages of the Qur'an, for the Qur'an ordered the hijab'.[124] When juxtaposed with the policies of secularisation promoted by the Palahvi regime, particularly in the contested sphere of women's bodies, Nusrat Amin's activism also aimed for a greater articulation of religious resistance to secular ideals of modernisation. This reflects a form of religious criticism that succeeded, nonetheless, in drawing upon many of the material and ideological developments of modernity.

The education of women and their incorporation into public life is often advanced as a characteristic of modernity. Nusrat Amin's discourse of modesty and her promotion of outwardly traditionally minded notions of religious piety is grafted onto a transformational pattern of women's participation in society. Her publications are a further manifestation of how twentieth-century Iranian women

negotiated a space for themselves in public arenas of authority. Yet, the staged anonymity of her nom de plume, 'an Iranian Lady' (*yak banu-yi Irani*), under which she published her works, served as an affirmation of the ideals of modesty and limits of public disclosure that she promoted for women.[125] The activism of Nusrat Amin stands in marked contrast to the largely secular forces driving women's rights within Iran, forces that were represented, for instance, in the figure of Sadiqa Dawlatabadi (d. 1961), who established women's organisations and publications in Isfahan and Tehran, and became, in 1936, the acting director of the Women's Centre (Kanun-i Banuwan) under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, which promoted the eradication of the veil amongst Iranian women.[126]

For Nusrat Amin, the question of modesty fits into a broader vision wherein full advancement for women depends upon active participation in their own spirituality. Spiritual progress is inseparable from what she viewed as the traditional articulations of Shi'i piety, values and learning. With regard to women, this is defined primarily in the domestic sphere, which she positions as the normative foundation of family life and, by extension, society. A resistance to the industrial forces of modernisation within Iran, which challenged traditional gender boundaries, runs throughout her writings. Writing in 1952 on the role of women in society, she argues:

> They say, 'What difference is there between a man and a woman that makes her remain in the home, excluded from every perfection and benefit?' However, they don't realise that complete freedom for a woman, notwithstanding that it would not give her any benefit, would result in many evils and societal dangers, so much so that it would harm women themselves. Such is the case that we see these days that, in the name of freedom and independence, they have ripped off the veil from women, producing the opposite effect, resulting in extraordinary torments. For women cannot obtain a livelihood like men, who carry such a burden, and if a woman wished to undertake the affairs that are assigned to men, she could do so only through their assistance.

> Women cannot by themselves undertake political work or administrative work, save on the rare occasion of a woman who, of her own accord, completes an important job. What nobility and independence is there for a woman, who after countless indignities appears in the station of a servant, slave or lowly helper, and does not reap the benefit of her own natural vocation, but rather her own independent personality is stripped away from her?[127]

This reactionary current fits into a paradigm of resistance against what she viewed to be primarily foreign economic and cultural threats to Iranian society. The homiletic character of her writing draws from her own pedagogical work of preaching to and teaching women, as reflected, for instance, in her critique of Western ideals of women: 'Do you fancy that if you leave your house all dressed up in chic and modern clothes without the veil that you will be honoured and that men will look at you with sanctity, and that everyone will address you as "My lady"?'[128] While Nusrat Amin's reflections on gender serve to re-inscribe a range of historically expressed patriarchal hierarchies through the authority of a female voice, they also form part of the reconstitution of women within the sphere of religious education, which traditionally had been open only to men.

Philosophy, Gnosis, and Scriptural Authority

The danger of viewing Nusrat Amin solely through the prism of the veil and gender roles in an increasingly secular society is that it inevitably overlooks the broader significance of her life and her teachings. The *Makhzan*, arguably her greatest intellectual achievement, forms part of a legacy of teaching and educating both men and women. Its incorporation into the seminary curriculum of gnostic exegesis highlights its enduring importance in the field of modern Shi'i hermeneutics.[129] The work, at times, is highly didactic, often posing questions, usually of theological and juridical import, which are then answered through Nusrat Amin's authoritative voice as a trained exegete, reflecting a scholastic dialogical pattern that is found throughout premodern Persian commentaries.

The use of a wide range of Arabic and Persian sources in her commentary is a testament to the breadth of her training and knowledge. She draws extensively from the broad historical sweep of Shi'i hermeneutics. This is reflected in her citations from such Shi'i exegetes as Muhammad al-'Ayyashi (fl. 900), 'Ali al-Qummi (d. *c*. 919), Tusi, Tabrisi, Abu'l-Futuh al-Razi, Fath Allah Kashani, Mir Muhammad Karim (fl. 1905) and Tabataba'i. While the original form of these commentaries includes Arabic, Persian and Turkish, her citations are all streamlined into a fluid Persian prose that she often presents as her own direct or periphrastic translations. The same is true in relation to her citations from Sunni exegetes, such as the medieval authorities Tabari and Baydawi, as well as the Egyptian modernist and teacher Tantawi Jawhari (d. 1940); their voices are all rendered into flowing Persian. Her use of Sufi commentaries, such as the *Kashf al-asrar* (*The Unveiling of the Mysteries*) of Maybudi and the *Ruh al-bayan* (*The Spirit of the Elucidation*) of Shaykh Isma'il al-Burusawi (d. 1725), is not only a reflection of her encyclopaedic depth but is indicative of the profoundly esoteric character of her work. This is most clearly manifest in her consistent recourse to the illuminationist philosophy of the Shi'i religious authority Mulla Sadra, who is arguably the intellectual axis for the entire commentary. This indebtedness is reflected in her extensive translations and paraphrases from Mulla Sadra's theosophical summa, *al-Hikma al-muta'aliyya* (*The Sublime Philosophy*), a work that she considered to be the most significant contribution to the understanding of philosophy and religion.[130]

This expansive body of exegetical material is matched by a full panoply of mystical Persian poetry, with extensive quotations from Farid al-Din 'Attar, Rumi and Sa'di Shirazi (d. 1292). This classical poetic material is used to illuminate various exegetical points, from the linguistic to the esoteric; as a corpus, it reflects a standard nationalist canon of Persian literary expression, one which largely transcends sectarian divisions. While a broad cross-section of material is presented, both in prose and verse, the deployment of Shi'i Hadith literature, ranging from the *Kafi* (*Sufficient*) of Abu Ja'far al-Kulayni (d. 941) to the *Bihar al-anwar* (*Oceans of Illuminations*) of Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi (d. 1698), squarely

situates the authority of the Prophet and the imams as the centre of gravity. All of these sources are built into the architecture of the commentary, whose form offers multiple points of hermeneutic engagement with the Qur'anic text. The most elemental level of interpretation consists of a literal Persian translation of a given unit of verses. This, in turn, forms the basis for what Nusrat Amin refers to as the 'elucidation of the verses' (*tawzih-i ayat*) or simply 'the elucidation', which offers the primary field of semiotic analysis. Here, she moves the interpretation beyond the closure of the literal translation into the polysemous expanse of exegetical divergence, at the core levels of vocabulary, grammar, syntax and rhetoric. Largely through the commentaries of Tabrisi, Abu'l-Futuh al-Razi and Kashani, Nusrat Amin draws on several early exegetical authorities, such as 'Abd Allah Ibn 'Abbas (d. c. 687), Dahhak, Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) and Qatada b. Di'ama (d. 735), who, in the aggregate, open up the semantic range of interpretation. This core element of meaning is further developed through her use of al-Raghib al-Isfahani's (fl. end of tenth century) work on Qur'anic lexicography, *al-Mufradat fi gharib al-Qur'an* (*The Vocabulary of Rare Qur'anic Terms*), which she employs as part of her broader method of translation. After this survey of the semiotic expanse of a range of exegetes, in which she addresses the actual meaning of a given passage and its various constituent parts, she often delves into the contextual background on the life of the Prophet and the early community, as well as into the stories of the lives of the prophets who preceded Muhammad.

These issues of meaning and context, however, are circumscribed by the commentary's focus on theology and philosophy, which forms the basis for a larger set of ethical and metaphysical inquiries into the providential course of human history in the divine order of existence. At times, this is achieved through answers offered to questions or objections, as well as through discrete investigations, often titled 'an important point of attention' (*nukta-i qabil-i tawajjuh*), 'a subtle explanation' (*tawjih-i latif*), or merely 'explanation' (*tawjih*). All of these exegetical expansions build upon the core component of her category of semantic elucidation (*tawzih*), which follows her literal translation of Qur'anic passages.

This pattern echoes earlier exegetical structures – such as the hermeneutical method deployed by Maybudi's Persian Sufi commentary, which promotes multiple levels (*nawbat*) of entry into the Qur'an – and crosses a semantic hierarchy of interpretation which stretches from the literal meaning to exegetical inquiries into grammar, syntax and historical context, and culminates in the vast mystical dimensions of the revelation itself.[131]

This move from literal, apparent meanings to deeper esoteric levels not only forms a general basis for a range of Sufi exegetical practices but also represents a pronounced current within Shi'i hermeneutics. This esoteric focus shapes Nusrat Amin's notion of semantic polyvalence, and creates a space for her to insert her own voice into the heterogeneity of exegetical interpretations. In the introduction to the *Makhzan*, she comments that her hermeneutical method is rooted in several scriptural injunctions to contemplate and consider the Qur'an, a practice that she holds as distinct from mere interpretation by independent opinion:

> It is through contemplating the Qur'an that its secrets and mysteries are to be uncovered. Understanding the meaning of its expression is distinct from interpreting it by way of independent opinion (*tafsir-i ra'i*), for any Bedouin Arab will understand that which is forbidden and the literal meanings of the Qur'an; they do not need to think about or contemplate it. It has thus been commanded to contemplate and think about the Qur'an and elucidate its meaning. Nonetheless, interpretation by way of independent opinion has been forbidden. By scientific law (*qanun-i 'ilmi*), it cannot be that an injunction to do something (*amr*) and a prohibition against it (*nahi*) would correspond to one specific predicate (*mawdu'*), for the predicate of enjoining has to be separate from the predicate of forbidding.[132]

She argues that to understand this age-old exegetical dictum against independent opinion, long a standard, largely rhetorical, trope, not fully indicative of actual exegetical praxis,[133] it must be limited to the semantic field of theological ambiguities (*mutashabihat*), as the command to contemplate scripture necessitates the application of human reasoning and understanding to the text.[134]

Nusrat Amin sees her way around textual ambiguity in the illuminative power (*nur*) of the sayings of the Prophet and the imams, which lends insight into the inner semiotic stratum (*batin*) of the Qur'an. While recourse to these esoteric dimensions is a key component of the commentary, it is generally folded into a largely Shi'i cosmography of existence, which stretches from the divine orchestration of creation to the eschatological events surrounding the return of the Hidden Imam and the end of the world. As expected, Nusrat Amin follows interpretive patterns particular to Shi'i hermeneutics, such as identifying in the Qur'an references to the providential role of the immediate family of the Prophet, and the line of imams ending with the Mahdi.[135] Her philosophical framework, however, is to be found in the realm of metaphysics, as particularly developed in the teachings of Mulla Sadra. This framework informs her approach to such theological questions as the unique dimensions of prayer, the transformative power of piety, the revelatory and miraculous status of the Qur'an, the benefit of knowledge, theodicy and the ultimate goodness of God.

Her reflections on the nature of time, which are integrated into her treatment of *Surat al-'Asr* (Q. 103), demonstrate the way her exegetical method intersects with ontological questions concerning the order of existence. The title of the sura derives from the first verse, generally rendered as 'By the afternoon/evening' (*wa'l-'asr*), which follows the pattern of divine oaths found throughout the Meccan suras, where God pronounces an oath upon various natural phenomena, such as a fig (Q. 95:1), a star (Q. 53:1) or the morning light (Q. 93:1).[136] As Nusrat Amin outlines, there has been a point of exegetical divergence regarding the interpretation of the word *'asr*. One opinion is that God makes an oath by time (*dahr*), 'for in this there is a sign, for those possessing insight, of the cycles of night and day, which are evident from the orbits of heavenly bodies and the rotation of the heavens'. A second opinion is that what is meant is evening, and that God makes an oath by the last part of the day, as in it is a proof of the unity of God, 'for at the end of the day and the beginning of night is the waning of the sun's power', a point which suggests that ultimately all power belongs to God. Others argue that *'asr* signifies the evening prayer (*namaz-i 'asr*), the age

(*'asr*) of prophecy and the advent of the Prophet of Islam, or both evening and day, which are called in Arabic 'the two times' (*'asran*). Nusrat Amin draws all these opinions, which are pegged to such early exegetes as Ibn 'Abbas, Muhammad b. Sa'ib al-Kalbi, Muqatil b. Sulayman and Hasan al-Basri, from Tabrisi's commentary on the sura.[137] From here, however, she delves into an extended discussion of the ontological reality of time (*haqiqat-i zaman*) itself:

> First, many [philosophers] hold that the moments of time are an 'ever-changing continuous quantity' (*kamm al-muttasil ghayr qarr al-dhat*), while others refer to time as a substance and as an independent definite existence, while still others hold that time is a non-continuous secondary hypothetical abstraction (*amr-i i'tibari-i intiza'i-i ghayr muta'assil*) and derived from mental concepts . . . When we say that time is either an 'ever-changing continuous quantity' or a 'secondary hypothetical abstraction', we know that neither of these formulations posits an ontological external reality in and of itself. For this reason, [time] cannot serve as an object of an oath, unless the meaning of *wa'l-'asr* is the realm of eternity, which is the opinion of many researchers and scholars, and the realm of eternity is the vessel and spirit of time and encompasses time. We call time that which is in the position of intermediary motion in relation to discrete motion, that is to say fully comprising all moments and hours.[138]

Nusrat Amin pauses to reflect that the ontological status of time as interconnected with the motion of the cosmos is one of the very wonders (*'aja'ib*) of God's creation. This point leads her to an exposition of Mulla Sadra's foundational concept of substantive motion (*harakat-i jawhari*), as outlined particularly in his *Risala fi huduth al-'alam* (*On the Incipience of the Cosmos*). Mulla Sadra develops this theory, which he weaves into his larger philosophical and ethical ontology, as a critique of Aristotelean metaphysics, wherein existence transforms through constant motion and flux.[139]

Nusrat Amin uses these moments of exegetical expansion to integrate gnostic ontological formulations on the nature of being into the field of Persian hermeneutics. While the study of mystical philosophy has formed part of the historical cycle of Shi'i religious

education, Nusrat Amin brings to her metaphysical ruminations a profound awareness of modernity and its influence upon classical epistemologies. Indicative of this is her use of Jawhari's twenty-six volume scientifically based (*'ilmi*) commentary, which includes illustrations, tables, and photographs, and promotes the Qur'an as fully consistent with modern scientific discoveries.[140] She draws upon the scientific wonders (*'aja'ib*) of the natural world as teleological proof of the existence of God. This discourse of divine design, nonetheless, is firmly based in classical Islamic epistemology, and is one of the major themes of the Qur'an itself.[141]

While the Qur'an is positioned as foretelling modern scientific discoveries, modernity – as represented through technological advancements and secular science – is viewed with great anxiety. Throughout the *Makhzan*, Nusrat Amin asserts epistemic authority as located, above all, in the fields of religious learning. She moves against 'the inventors of modern technologies', who fancy that beneficial knowledge is limited to 'mind-dazzling inventions . . . such as the invention of electricity, the radio, wireless telegraphy and thousands of other modern inventions'.[142] She argues that knowledge of particularities of existence is distinct from knowledge of universal ontological concepts and divine gnosis; the latter form of learning she deems to be superior to everything else.[143] She views the ethical foundations of modern science, when stripped of any religious mooring, with unease, for 'billions of human souls have been decimated by the consequences of these very inventions'.[144] She contrasts her criticism of the materialism and concomitant militant exploitation associated with modernity with mystical learning that seeks the esoteric, ontological knowledge of reality, wherein one follows the path of true happiness by separating oneself from the material world and purifying one's heart of ethical impurities.[145] For Nusrat Amin, this is a course that the greatest intellects of the world have taken; they did not rely on the physical world of nature, which is fundamentally transient, but rather sought an eternal world of salvation through the ethical improvement of the soul.[146] From the vantage of this larger soteriological framework, she views the current age of shifting social values in often rather apocalyptic terms.[147] Her attack against

exploitative materialism is set in contrast to the ethical universe of the Qur'an, which, she argues, contains the formulation of societal laws for ordering all human society and civilisation.[148] Such an articulation is in concert with a history of Islamic reformers who have sought to situate religion as the guiding principle within an ethical organisation of civil society.

Exegesis, Education and Normativity

The legacy of Nusrat Amin as a leading religious intellectual and active participant in the discourses of Islamic reform continues in Iran today in many notable ways. Foremost, she has been championed as an advocate for the integration of women within the circles of religious learning. While maintaining conservative values of modesty and gender hierarchies, she has nonetheless served as a model for the advancement of women in the historically male-dominated space of seminary education. After the revolution, her commentary, along with many of her other writings on ethics, philosophy and religious history, was reissued through the state-run publishing society, the Nahzat-i Zanan-i Musalman (Muslim Women's Movement), which published a wide spectrum of revolutionary and religious materials ranging from works by Ayotallah Khomeini and pamphlets entitled *Hijab wa inqilab* (*The Veil and Revolution*) and *Zan dar Islam* (*Women in Islam*), to treatises on gnosis and explanations of the philosophy of Mulla Sadra.[149]

In Iran, the life and works of Nusrat Amin have been feted with academic conferences and biographies. Her legacy served as a larger umbrella under which the status of women in Islam and the role of women as religious authorities across Islamic history has been discussed.[150] In 1992, the Islamic Republic of Iran issued a stamp commemorating the work of the Lady Jurisconsult (*banu-yi mujtahida*) Nusrat Amin, picturing her tomb in Isfahan and a collection of her books, including her Persian translation of Miskawayh's (d. 1030) *Tahdhib al-akhlaq* (*The Refinement of Ethics*) and her Qur'anic commentary the *Makhzan al-'irfan*, for which she is best known. She has been the subject of television documentaries and her collected works are available in a software programme,

and on a website which is dedicated to her life and the preservation of archival voice recordings.[151] This cultural apotheosis fits into a larger pattern of governmental and religious institutions articulating and shaping normative ideals for women, their piety and participation in society.

The increasing numbers of women schooled in Qur'anic exegesis is one indication of Nusrat Amin's enduring legacy. Of her many disciples, 'Alawiyya Humayuni (b. 1917) is perhaps the most noteworthy;[152] she served as the director of Nusrat Amin's seminary for women in Isfahan, translated her *Arba'in* into Persian, went on to teach at the Zahra' University of Qom,[153] and has written on the status and role of women in Islam.[154] While Nusrat Amin was certainly not the first Iranian woman to engage in Qur'anic hermeneutics,[155] she has become, arguably, the most famous. In this vein, the proliferation of post-revolution Iranian women writing on the Qur'an is certainly part of her legacy. Today, there are numerous examples of Iranian women engaging in the various fields of Qur'anic learning. Much of this energy is directed toward education and instruction; such is the case, for instance, with the recent Persian translations and commentaries by Zahra Rusta, Farzana Zanbaqi and Sayyida Sadiqa Sahibkar Khurasani, all of which are written in lucid prose and are designed for either adolescent education or general readers.[156] Various institutions that intersect directly with the state are also actively involved in promoting the study of the Qur'an amongst women, particularly as a form of instilling normative religious beliefs and practices in society. This can be seen most clearly in the Markaz-i Banuwan-i Qur'an Pizhuh (Centre for Women Qur'an Researchers) which, since 2003, has sponsored a yearly international symposium featuring the work of women scholars of the Qur'an.[157] These public conferences, and the other activities sponsored by the centre, feature religious and governmental authorities, and are designed to encourage awareness and understanding of the Qur'an amongst women. These activities fit into a broader governmental effort, which extends to the supreme leader and which explicitly seeks to promote the Qur'an amongst women as a means of broader religious socialisation.[158] The centre falls under the larger umbrella of the Mu'assasa-i Ma'arif-i Islami-i

Imam Rida (Imam Reza Islamic Sciences Institute), an organisation with offices in Qom and Tehran that sponsors a variety of activities and publications associated with the promulgation of religious learning and values.

The public participation of Iranian women in religious education and Qur'anic exegesis, in such settings as schools, seminaries, mosques and *husayniyya*s, fits into the historical development of Persian as a sacralised vehicle of religious expression. It also reflects the circumscription of women in the models of religious piety promoted in the wake of the revolution.[159] Throughout Iranian modernity, the providential power of scripture has formed an axiomatic site of political and societal transformation. This paradigmatic structure builds on patterns of translation fully established throughout pre-modern Persian engagements with the Qur'an. However, in the acts of appropriation and re-inscription, access and recourse to scripture have taken on radically new meanings in modern public life. While who speaks for the Qur'an and through it remains tied to structures of political and religious authority, an ever-widening range of voices have joined the polysemous expanse of formal Qur'anic exegesis. It is a field of study that remains largely dialectic in nature, and thus it continues to be a location not only for the affirmation of societal and political normativity, but also for its subversion and transformation.

NOTES

1 The opening section of this article, 'Premodern Paradigms', offers an abstract of arguments and materials explored in greater depth in Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*: *Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis*, Qur'anic Studies Series 7 (Oxford, 2012).

2 Qamar Jahan Begam, *The Princess Jahan Ara Begam: Her Life and Works* (Karachi, *c.* 1991), pp. 82–5; cf. Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals*: *History, Art and Culture* (London, 2004), pp. 143–66. The author would like to thank his wife, Supriya Gandhi, for her comments and many suggestions on this material.

3 Jahan Ara Begum, *Ayat-i bayyinat*, MS 1/55, Habibganj Collection, Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University, fols. 38b–39b, on Q. 17:23.

4 Ibid., fol. 45a.

5 Mulla Shah Badakhshi, *Tafsir-i Shah wa shah-i tafasir*, MS India Office Delhi Persian 1420, British Library, London, fols. 272a–412a.

6 The author's translation.

7 Badakhshi, *Tafsir-i Shah wa shah-i tafasir*, fol. 356b.
8 See Ya'qub Charkhi, *Tafsir*, MS Or. 9490, British Library, London, fol. 9b.
9 Begam, *The Princess Jahan Ara Begam*, p. 6.
10 See Rkia Elaroui Cornell, 'Introduction' to her translation of Sulami's (d. 1021) section on women mystics from his biographical work, *Tabaqat al-Sufiyya*, in *Early Sufi Women* (Louisville, KY, 1999), pp. 15–70.
11 See Asma Sayeed, 'Gender and Legal Authority: An Examination of Early Juristic Opposition to Women's *Hadith* Transmission', *Islamic Law and Society* 16, no. 2 (2009), pp. 115–50.
12 Abu 'Abd Allah al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, 'Buduww sha'n Abi 'Abd Allah', in his *Khatm al-Awliya'*, ed. 'Uthman Yahya (Beirut, 1965), pp. 30–32; cf. Nasrollah Pourjavady, 'The Use of Persian as a Religious Language in the Early Centuries of Islam', in Fereydun Vahman and Claus V. Pedersen, eds., *Religious Texts in Iranian Languages* (Copenhagen, 2007), pp. 237–45.
13 Charles A. Storey, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey, Vol. I, Part I: Qur'anic Literature* (London, 1927), p. 3, § 4.
14 'Imad al-Din Shahfur Isfara'ini, *Taj al-tarajim fi tafsir al-Qur'an li'l-a'ajim*, partially ed. Najib Mayil Harawi and 'Ali Akbar Ilahi Khurasani, 3 vols. (Tehran, 1995), vol. I, pp. 8–9.
15 Ibid., vol. I, p. 9.
16 For further information on the juridical question of Qur'anic translation in the sphere of ritual performance, see Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, pp. 53–91.
17 Muhammad b. Ahmad Sarakhsi, *Kitab al-Mabsut*, ed. Isma'il al-Shafi'i, 30 vols. in 15 (Beirut, 2001), vol. I, pp. 137–9; cf. idem, *Kitab al-Usul*, ed. Abu'l-Wafa al-Afghani, 2 vols. (Hyderabad, 1953–4), vol. I, p. 282.
18 See Muhammad Ja'far Yahaghi, 'The Development of Koranic Commentaries in Early New Persian', in Vahman and Pedersen, *Religious Texts in Iranian Languages*, pp. 247–62.
19 Mahmoud M. Sadek, *The Arabic Materia Medica of Dioscorides* (Quebec, 1983), pp. 24–6; a Persian translation of Ghazali's *Ihya*, made in 1223 in the reign of Sultan Iltutmish (d. 1236) for his vizier al-Junaydi, by Majd al-Din Jajarmi, is housed in the British Library, MS Or. 8194; cf. Glyn M. Meredith-Owens, *Handlist of Persian Manuscripts Acquired by the British Museum, 1895–1966* (London, 1968), p. 5.
20 Storey, *Persian Literature*, vol. I, pp. 1–2, § 1.
21 For further details, see Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, pp. 302–22.
22 See ibid., pp. 382–406.
23 Claude Gilliot, 'L'exégèse du Coran en Asie Centrale et au Khorasan', *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999), pp. 129–64.
24 Abdelhamid I. Sabra, 'The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement', *History of Science* 25 (1987), pp. 223–43.
25 For an overview of the theological debates summarised here, see Josef van Ess, 'Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology', in Stefan Wild, ed., *The Qur'an as Text* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 177–94. See, also, Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, pp. 188–91.
26 See Muhammad b. al-Hasan Shaybani, *al-Jami' al-saghir* (Karachi, 1987), pp. 82–3; see, for instance, the account preserved in the twelfth-century Persian

translation of Abu Bakr Narshakhi's (fl. 943) *Tarikh-i Bukhara*, ed. Muhammad b. Zufar b. 'Umar (Tehran, 1940/1), p. 57.

27 For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, pp. 97–9, 102–5.

28 Abu Hafs Najm al-Din al-Nasafi discusses this issue in a widely disseminated juridical treatise on the permissible errors in recitation, *Zallat al-qari'*, see MS R. 13.14, Trinity College, University of Cambridge, fols. 141b–6b.

29 Abu Hafs Najm al-Din al-Nasafi, *Tafsir*, ed. 'Aziz Allah Juwayni, 3rd edn (Tehran, 1997), see Juwayni's introduction, pp. 11–58.

30 Mashhad MS 2309, edited by Ahmad 'Ali Raja'i as *Puli miyan-i shi'r-i hija'i wa 'arudi-i farsi dar qurun-i awwal-i hijri* (Tehran, 1974). See, also, Benedikt Reinert, 'Hazaj: Genese Eines Neupersischen Metrums', in Beatrice Gruendler, ed., *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Terms: Festschrift for Wolfhart Heinrichs* (Leiden, 2008), pp. 68–98. For further analysis of the homiletic dimensions of this translation, see Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur'an*, pp. 269–79.

31 See Shams al-Din Aflaki (d. 1360), *Manaqib al-'arifin* (Tehran, 2007), pp. 112–13.

32 Ibid., pp. 127–8. See also Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 395–6, 418–19.

33 Isfara'ini, *Taj al-tarajim*, MS 126 Hajji Bektash Wali, Bölge Yazma Eserler Kütüphanesi, Konya, fol. 173a.

34 While there is no comprehensive survey of all Persian translations and commentaries, one of the most exhaustive to date, though it under-represents the manuscript holdings of South Asia, Central Asia and Anatolia, is 'Ali Sadra'i Khu'i, *Fihristgan-i nuskhaha-yi khatti-i tarjumaha-yi farsi-i Qur'an-i karim* (Qom, 2004).

35 Muhammad b. Mahmud Nishaburi, *Tafsir-i basa'ir*, Fatih MS 301, Süleymaniye Madrasa, Istanbul, fols. 254b–55a.

36 Muhammad b. Mahmud Nishaburi, *Tafsir-i basa'ir*, MS 64, Mevlana Müzesi, Konya.

37 Rukn al-Din Kashani, *Shama'il al-atqiya'*, lithographic edn (Hyderabad, 1928), p. 4. The entirety of Kashani's booklist is examined in Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden, Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2004), pp. 252–63.

38 Kashani, *Shama'il al-atqiya'*, pp. 4–6.

39 Wajih al-Din, *Miftah al-jinan*, MS India Office Islamic 927, British Library, London, fols. 118b, 123b, 165b.

40 Storey, *Persian Literature*, vol. I, pp. 9–10, § 16; Shihab al-Din al-Dawlatabadi, *Bihar al-mawwaj*, MS 3/16, Habibganj Collection, Maulana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University, vol. I, fol. 2a.

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111 Hassun and Mashkur, *Aʿlam al-nisaʾ*, pp. 750–65; Nasir Baqiri Bidhindi, *Banu-yi numuna*, 3rd edn (Qom, 1998/9), pp. 95–103.

112 On the institution of the *ijazat al-ijtihad* within the Imami curriculum, see Stewart, *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy*, pp. 223–6.
113 Hassun and Mashkur, *A'lam al-nisa'*, pp. 754–6; Bidhindi, *Banu-yi numuna*, pp. 105–7; 'Ali Rafi'i, 'Mar'ashi, Najafi', *Danishnama-i Qur'an*, vol. II, pp. 2029–33.
114 Her commentary has been published several times, starting in serial form in Isfahan (1957). The two subsequent editions are based upon the original typeface, first in Tehran under the auspices of the Nahzat-i Zanan-i Musalman (1982), and then in Isfahan (1992), this latter edition renumbered the volumes to correspond to the traditional Qur'anic sequence. All references are to the Tehran edition (1982), hereafter *Makhzan*.
115 See, for example, *Makhzan*, vols. I–II, Q. 1–2; vols. III–IV, Q. 67–112; vol. V, Q. 55–67; vol. VI, Q. 43–54, etc.
116 Ibid., vol. III, p. 2.
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118 'Alawiyya Humayuni, introduction to her translation of Nusrat Amin's *al-Arba'in al-hashimiyya* (Tehran, 1986), p. xii; and her introduction to Tayyibi, *Zindagani*, pp. 12–13.
119 See also Roswitha Badry, 'Zum Profil weiblicher *'ulama'* in Iran: Neue Rollenmodelle für "islamische Feministinnen"?' *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, 40, no. 1 (2000), p. 34; Tayyibi, *Zindagani*, pp. 74–5; for a description of the curriculum, see pp. 132–3.
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121 Farian Sabahi, 'Gender and the Army of Knowledge in Pahlavi Iran, 1968–1979', in Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin, eds., *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran* (Surrey, 2002), p. 102.
122 Nusrat Amin, *Akhlaq*, p. xiv.
123 Ibid., pp. xiii–xiv.
124 Ibid., p. xv; cf. eadem, *Makhzan*, vol. VIII, p. 254; also see Anne Betteridge's discussion of her interview with Nusrat Amin, conducted in 1976, 'To Veil or Not to Veil: A Matter of Protest or Policy', in Guity Nashat, ed., *Women and Revolution in Iran* (Boulder, CO, 1983), pp. 109–28.
125 The term '*banu*' in modern Persian carries a normative, moral and prescriptive connotation, much akin to 'lady' in English. Nusrat Amin's introduction to her commentary is particularly instructive in terms of the rhetorical strategies of effacement that she deploys in order to affirm her authority amongst the pantheon of exegetes, an issue which is itself wrapped up within discourses of modesty: Nusrat Amin, *Makhzan*, vol. I, pp. 2–4.
126 Mehranguiz Manoutcherain, 'Dawlatabadi, Seddiqa', *EIr*, online edition, available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dawlatabadi-seddiqa (accessed September 2013).
127 Nusrat Amin, *Rawish-i khushbakhti wa tawsiyya ba-khwaharan-i imani* (Isfahan, 1952), p. 74, see, also, pp. 88–98; on Nusrat Amin's view on the ontological difference between men and women as being rooted in the Qur'an, see eadem, *Makhzan*, vol. II, pp. 322–7.
128 Nusrat Amin, *Rawish-i khushbakhti*, p. 96.

129 See 'Barnama-i rishta-i takhassusi-i tafsir', *Payam-i hawza* 3 (1994), http://www.hawzah.net/fa/article/articleview/5965?ParentID=76259 (accessed September 2013). See also Frida A. Home and Kari Vogt, 'Islamic Education in Qom: Contemporary Developments', *Acta Orientalia* 69 (2008), pp. 35–75; Michael M.J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), p. 250.
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135 See, for instance, ibid., vol. VIII, pp. 223–5; vol. X, pp. 313–14.
136 See Gerald R. Hawting, 'Oaths', *EQ*, vol. III, pp. 561–6.
137 Nusrat Amin, *Makhzan*, vol. IV, p. 264.
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139 Sadr al-Din Shirazi 'Mulla Sadra', *Risala fi'l-huduth* (*Huduth al-'alam*), ed. Sayyid Husayn Musawiyan (Tehran, 1999), pp. 93–103; Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Albany, NY, 1975), pp. 94–121.
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141 See, for instance, *Surat al-Rahman* (Q. 55).
142 Nusrat Amin, *Makhzan*, vol. I, p. 248.
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144 Ibid., vol. I, p. 249.
145 Ibid., vol. I, p. 248.
146 Ibid.
147 See, for instance, Nusrat Amin, *Rawish-i khushbakhti*, p. 97.
148 Nusrat Amin, *Makhzan*, vol. I, pp. 170–71.
149 See the list of publications at the end of each volume of the *Makhzan*.
150 See the range of articles presented in *Majmu'a-i maqalat*.
151 For sound recordings, see http://www.vade.ir/post/535/ (accessed September 2013); Nusrat Amin's commentary in a searchable form is hosted on http://www.noorlib.ir (accessed September 2013).
152 See Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*: *The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), p. 283.
153 Tayyibi, *Zindagani*, pp. 133–4.
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156 See Zahra Baygum Rusta (interviewed), 'Bayani az Qur'an', *Gulistan-i Qur'an* 150 (2003), pp. 19–20; Farzana Zanbaqi (interviewed), 'Shiwaha-yi ashnasazi-i kudakan wa nawjawanan ba mafahim-i Qur'ani', *Gulistan-i Qur'an* 189 (2004), pp. 37–8. See also Mahdi Mahrizi, 'Zan dar tafsir-i *Makhzan al-'irfan*-i Banu-yi Amin Isfahani', *Ayina-i pizhuhish* 7, nos. 98–9 (2006), p. 16; idem, 'Jinsiyyat wa tarjuma-i Qur'an-i karim', *Bayyinat* 13, nos. 49–50 (2006), pp. 33–41.

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Appendix: Selected Works by Nusrat Amin Khanum

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