Structure and Social System of the Clergy in Safavid Era
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Abstract
The Safavid Era is a significant period in Iranian history. This era which lasted more than two centuries was shaped by the two institutions of politics and religion. Efforts made by and collaborations between these two institutions caused their theorized religion to last for several hundred years and influence many of Iran’s religious-political developments. Establishment of a government by Shah Ismail was not initially concerned with religious ideas; in fact, it was by the increasing of his power that his government was directed to religion. Therefore, an institution called the “religious institution” was formed which both legitimized the Safavids and strengthened its own origin. From this time onwards, this class brought about vast political, social and economic transformations in Iranian society. This group had a solid governmental and public structure. This made it possible for this class to have two completely different social stations. Securing income and financial resources gradually provided them a financial independence which was also considered a strong point in confronting the government. Thus, this study attempts to delve into the nature and anatomy of the institution of religion in this historical period.

Keywords: The Safavid, political institution, religious institution, Shia

Introduction
Solidity and endurance of religion (faith) depends on two fundamental elements; one is the content of the religion and the other those who have guiding roles i.e. the clergy. The content of the religion of Islam, though immutable, went through some changes when it arrived in Iran because religious beliefs were used to be expressed in various forms. Sometimes beliefs were based on the Prophet’s teachings and decrees and sometimes based on teachings mingled with pure superstitions and traditional customs and fictions. In addition to these beliefs, the Shia faith also caused problems and disputes concerning religious principles and doctrines which resulted in the weakening of religion.

The structural role of religion (the clergy) could be regarded as one of the most important factors of this religion’s internal weakening. That is because when the ruler is in direct relation with religion and influences religious organizations, modification of religion and the clergy’s religious guidance should also be in line with and in orchestration with the governmental system, not the religion’s origins. Thus, the national solidarity which had been the fruit of the establishment of Safavid government in Iran had such a result. Using religion and efforts made by the rulers of this dynasty helped them establish a favorable relationship with religion and have great influence on religious organizations they had propagated themselves.

Revitalizing Monarchy through Dervish Experiences
Undoubtedly, the Safavids’ coming to power in Iran was the product of patient formation of ideology by Khanqah⁵ institutions and the innumerable followers of Sheikh Safi’s descendants. The position of Dervish was a platform for the sheikh’s offspring to achieve sociopolitical position. In addition, Ismail successfully combined the three most powerful elements of his time, namely Tariqa, Sharia and Monarchy by exploiting all the facilities left by

⁵ Dervish Convent
his predecessors and avoiding the bitter end his brother, father and grandfather had met and eventually, with the measures he and his followers took the new governmental system was founded.

The importance of Ismail is in the fact that he managed to defend his religious aims with determination and indomitable will and endeavored to formalize it with pragmatism and perseverance. He had declared that in this path, he “[did not] fear anybody” and that he would “God willing draw [his] sword if the people protest and kill everyone with God’s help” (Anonymous, 1363, p. 64). Obviously, this was a difficult job and it would also put other problems in his way including people’s ignorance about “the religious matters of the Haq-e Ja’fari faith and principles and doctrines of the Twelver-Imam” people because there were no Imamieh jurisprudence books available (Rumlu, 1357, p. 86). Thus, this government was actually founded on the political Sufic theory of the Murshid and the Murid; obedience to Shah Ismail by followers and devotees was also based on this notion. Hence, Shah Ismail’s theorists were not religious jurisprudents and did not have the least knowledge in this regard. At the beginning of this ruler’s reign, there were few religious jurisprudents to consolidate the principles of Shia.

The Shah and his Qizilbash had absolute power and the country was run by radical Sufic thinking. The sacredness of the Shah and exaggerations about him had even “made them stray from the direct institution of religion and faith.” (Turkaman, 1387, V. 1, p. 43) However, the Chaldoran incident suddenly changed all these assumptions and beliefs. The Battle of Chaldoran had many consequent changes and transformations two of which were negation of Shah Ismail’s infallibility and sacredness (Danesh Pajouh, 1350, p. 916) and consolidation of the Shia as another pillar of the Safavids’ power (Kaempfer, 1360, p. 171).

Since the Murshid-Murid relationship which entailed blind and unconditional submission had lost its charm, it had to be substituted with another power. Shah Tahmasp’s position and station was completely different from his father. Apart from personal qualities, that revolutionary spirit which was found in Ismail was not to be seen in Tahmasp and the Murshid of the Sufis’ Khanqah changed into the religious Sultan Malek-ul Reqab and Sufic Shia gave its way to jurisprudent Shia. The Safavid Family’s relation with the Family of the Prophet (Abdul Latif Qazvini, 1386, pp. 266 & 268) and representativeness of the Innocent Imam-in-Occultation in the present age were introduced and henceforth the Safavid claimed that their family was connected to the Shia Imams and were installed by them to establish a Twelver-Imam Shia system (Aqajari, 1389, p. 93). Therefore, now it was necessary that the Shia be scrutinized in jurisprudent and systematized form so that this family’s rule could be legitimized.

The Clergy alongside the Rule

This policy quickened the penetration of the immigrant clergy into the governmental system (Al-sheibi, 1374, p. 393). It is worth mentioning that the immigration of Shiite clergy to Iran had occurred before this incident and people like Ali Karaki had already settled in Iran (Qomi, 1383, V. 2, p. 935; Husseini Khatun Abadi, 1352, p. 448; there were also other people like Sheikh Zein-uddin Al and Sayyid Nematullah Helli). However, this issue was left unnoticed because the Safavid ruler had not yet considered it a governmental policy, but it was adopted as a fundamental policy since the time of Shah Tahmasp. The theory of the eligible Islamic jurisprudent, initially introduced by Muhammad Ibn Makki Jazini (1320-1386 C.E), was no reintroduced and revived. According to this theory, the throne belongs to the eligible Islamic jurist who possesses all the authorities otherwise possessed by an Innocent Imam in the Occultation period. Introducing such theory in this interim seems to have been very politic and calculated because even though the presence of Karaki in the Safavid court goes back to the period of Shah Ismail and he was highly respected then, no theory regarding the leadership of an
Islamic jurist had been proposed. At the time of Shah Tahmasp, however, conditions were congenial for on the one hand, Shah Tahmasp was interested in Shiite jurisprudents (Qomi, 1383, V. 1, pp. 428 & 587; Hussein Astar Abadi, 1364, p. 87; Qazvini, 1367, p. 32) and on the other hand, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Shah’s rule in terms of religious theory was considered necessary. Thus, the Safavid rule was divided into two parts; political power which belonged to the Shah and religious affairs which was administered by the Islamic jurisprudents. The Shah easily gave his consent to this deputation i.e. the eligible Islamic jurisprudent’s deputation, but the Qizilbash forces would not succumb to it and their insurgency increased. This insurgency plagued the country into anarchy and chaos until the time of Shah Abbas I.

The Islamic jurisprudents believed that the Sultan owed his legitimate political power to them because he himself did not have qualities and station of Islamic jurisprudence. Nevertheless, documents show that Shah Tahmasp sought the advice of the Innocent Imams in dreams in order to solve the problems of his society (Safavi, 1362, pp. 12 & 22; Qomi, 1383, V. 1, p. 183). He also believed that he had such high jurisprudent station that he could issue Fatwa in Islamic law. Regarding the edict he had issued for Karaki, Tahmasp declared that questioning and disputing the religious jurisprudents’ decree was tantamount to “heresy” (Khansari, 1360, V. 5, p. 169). Only the religious jurisprudence is qualified to issue such decrees, not a political authority.

This kind of thinking became prevalent once with Karaki’s order missionaries were sent off to various regions in Iran to propagate Ja’fari religion (Ja’farian, 1388, V. 1, p. 240). Enforcement of taxing ordinances was entrusted to tax collectors so that taxes could be henceforth collected based on Islamic laws (Khansari, 1360, V. 5, p. 167). This devolution of power and authorities lasted with fluctuations until the end of the Safavid rule. Although Shah Abbas, because of his peremptoriness and authoritarian actions, reduced many of the religious jurisprudents’ authorities, religious affairs were still run by Shaykh al-Islam and Sadr al-Islam authorities. Improvement of the relative relationship between the Shah-the royal family-and the Sharia scholars (Monajjem Yazdi, 1366, p. 353; Hussein Astar Abadi, 1364, p. 139) prolonged the survival of this position and set a new trend for the successors of Abbas I. The bond and relationship between the religious jurisprudents and last Safavid kings, namely Shah Abbas II, Suleiman, and Hussein, became tighter than ever so that the Islamic jurists’ religious power overcame Sultan’s secular power.

The Structure and Organization of the Clergy in Safavid Era

Gradually, with the increasing of the clergy’s power in this period, this class affecting and affected by other classes of the society gave a new shape to the Iranian society of the Safavid age. In fact, two major tendencies can be identified in this social class. First, it was the tendency to cooperate and concur with the Sultan and governmental and administrative authorities to enjoy the bountiful benefits and profits which awaited them. This group profited through delegation of jobs, titles and labels, financial exemptions, family connections by way of marriage which was, indeed, a mutual relationship between political and religious leaders.

The second tendency was to cooperate with and join the masses. Obviously, this group of the clergy included those who believed in the popular Islam and made effort to enforce its decrees (Nasr, 1386, p. 115). Most of them were poor and self-denying in their way of living and served the underprivileged masses. They stood beside them in adversity and since they lived like the people of the lower class, they were also popular among these people. This group of the clergy, who were largely poor, earned income through teaching and social and religious activities which was not sufficient for them. Therefore, they turned to secondary jobs such as writing and more lowly jobs associated with people’s lives. Thus, these two different tendencies in the religious class of the Safavid Age put the society’s forces in two completely different social
stations. If a person from the second tendency gained the favor of one from the first tendency, his life would change completely as in the cases of Mullah Muhammad Saleh Mazendarani and Sayyid Nematullah Jazayeri who were helped by Majlesi the father and Majlesi the son (Tonekaboni, 1386, pp. 282 & 597).

The clergy occupied such governmental positions as chancellorship, Shaykh al-Islām, superintendence, accounting, judicature, Friday Prayer Imam, magistrateship and administrative positions including notary public, monitoring over royal houses, viziership, chaplainship, and nongovernmental jobs like teaching and preaching, but their social ranks and stations were different. Generally, three ranks could be distinguished in this regard. In the first rank stood the top clergy who occupied Shaykh al-Islam and Sadr al-Islam position and also, as mentioned before, shared some power with the government. They were detached from the public and ordinary people and they had nothing in common. Seldom did the lower class reach such positions.

The second rank belonged to those clergy who played roles in administrative departments of the Safavid government as judges, chaplains, notary publics, secretaries, observers of royal houses, viziership, magistrates, etc. This group was subordinated to, chosen and monitored by the first group. Probably, the one significant commonality between the two groups could be said to have been their familial relationship with the royal household (Afooshtei Natanzi, 1373, p. 567; Monajjem Yazdi, 1366, p. 353; Hussein Astar Abadi, 1364, p. 139). On the whole, those who had governmental jobs were better off. The third rank of the clergy were outside of the governmental structure including seminary teachers, preachers and mullahs who in clergyman uniforms preached, delivered sermons, ministered to minor issues and enforced religious laws in the villages and smaller divisions of Iran (Ja’farian, 1388, V. 1, p. 204). The clergy of the latter group were more in number, but less educated. The only difference of rank between these clergy was their social position and station. Financially, they all had meager incomes and lived in poor conditions. They had close bonds with people because they had a common sense of living and livelihood and it was easier for them to understand each other.

If we delve into the clergy’s involvement in social life, we will see that that the judicial and the legal areas which were in some ways associated with Islamic laws and running religious donation and revenue affairs which were, in fact, part of the country’s financial revenue (Floor, 1388, pp. 108 & 121) were not in the jurisdiction of the third-rank clergy. Other social activities such as organizing religious ceremonies such as prayers, sermons, etc as well as charitable social activities such as senior support using the donations collected from Moslems according to Islamic law and education (Careri, 1383, p. 172) were among the main duties of this group of clergies.

The Clergy’s Financial Incomes

The Iranian society in the Safavid Era had merged with religion and it had taken root in all the spiritual and material corners of the country influencing the individual and social life. Doubtlessly, the clergies as bearers of this thinking had significant social importance be it in cities or villages. Extensiveness of their social, cultural, religious and judicial activities, having authority in mosque facilities, religious teaching houses, mourning ceremonies, etc. gave this class high social status. Therefore, these extensive facilities had somehow provided them with economic independence. The clergy’s main income came from the following sources:
1. a share of people’s income they received according to Islamic laws and Islamic jurisprudential creeds; Khoms and Zakat were collected in the Safavid period, too, as in the past, though with

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6 Maktab Khaneh
7 One-fifth

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some slight differences in the way they were spent (Mullah Muhammad Baqer Sabzevari reports that until the time of Shah Tahmasp, people did not pay their Zakat (Sabzevari, 1383, p. 169). The best way to find this out is the religious students’ stipend which has been considered one way to spend Khoms. Basically, the religious students who gathered in seminaries were divided into several categories in terms of expenses and lifestyles. The first category included those who covered their own expenses; the most famous examples are Mullah Sadra and Sheikh Baha’i who lived off their father’s wealth all their life (Mullah Sadra, 1378, p. 262).

The other group was those whose fathers were among the clergy and mullahs who supported their sons with the amounts people gave them, like Allameh Majlesi. What is worth mentioning is that it was usually the clergy from one these two groups that achieved the highest degrees even though there were few people in the first category who would spend money on their educational path.

The third group was usually gifted and understanding people who were identified by the religious scholars and invited to pursue religious education. The expenses of these students were mainly covered by the same scholars or in some cases by merchants and rich businessmen who were willing to pay Khoms or Imam’s Share. The fourth group included ordinary people whose expenses were paid by merchants and rich families and if any problems arose, scholars assisted them. Sometimes there were people whose entire expenses were covered by the scholars (Turkaman, 1387, V.1, p. 149). This group formed the majority of religious students. The last group of students included those who earned for their living and education mainly by laboring for others. Therefore, they had to turn to secondary jobs besides their studying and most of these students were known by the craft or profession they had (Tonekaboni, 1386, p. 337). The last two groups were mostly destitute and impoverished (Chardin, 1338, V. 5, p. 46) and most of the schools’ endowments were allocated to these groups.

To conclude, since religion had affected all parts of people’s social and private life in this period and the clergy enjoyed a distinct position and high respect, businesspeople and traders were determined to purify their income by paying the Khoms of their “earning through trading” (Nasr Abadi, 1378, V. 1, p. 173; Kaempfer, 1360, p. 129). Hence, the market was the major source of providing for the religious students’ and scholars’ expenses through Khoms payments. 2. payments and rewards they received in exchange for their social activities such as teaching, judging and preaching (Tonekaboni, 1386, p. 337). The Twelver-Imam Shiites had a particular feeling of love and sympathy toward Imam Ali and his family and deep hatred toward the three caliphs (Abu Bakr, Omar and Osman). In order to express this devotion and detestation, they manifested whatever was related to these two with a reaction. Therefore, they celebrated birthdays and mourned death anniversaries in Bani Hashem Family. All around the cities of the country, mosques and houses were opened for these activities for which the clergy were mainly responsible. Of course, preaching and advising the masses about morals during weekdays, especially Fridays, was also in their craft. These kinds of affairs were considered important sources of income for preachers.

Teaching of various branches of learning was done in mosques and religious schools. Principally, the expenses of mosques and religious schools were paid from donation and endowments, but religious teaching houses acted independently and the government had no role in their management. Organizers of religious teaching houses paid their teachers with the collected donations (Bayani, 1319, p. 17; Chardin, 1374, V. 3, p. 932). After acquiring the elementary knowledge in teaching houses, the students started to attend schools for religious sciences and received stipend. Kaempfer considers the religious school teachers’ payment to be...
“completely satisfactory” (Kaempfer, 1360, p. 141). It is worth noting that the teaching position was adopted both by those clergy who had a governmental job and those who were independent and official occupations did not prevent them from their teaching obligation (Hazin, 1334, p. 13).

3. Governmental salary which was considered a substantial income, especially for top scholars. One other source of income for the clergy in this period was Soyourgal. This governmental payment was payable to special groups and top scholars. “Soyourgal was a kind of proprietorship upon which special royal properties in some areas were given to some people and families and this property remained in the possession of the proprietor’s family for years and even generations. Of course, whenever that person lost his merit, the right would be waived. Soyourgal was most of the time for the noble people, the descendents of Imam Hussein and the clergy.” (Bastani Parizi, 1378, p. 154) Although Soyourgal was not exclusive to the descendents of Imam Hussein and the clergy and was given to people of all tribes, those who gained this prize received substantial benefits.

In addition to the income they earned proportionate to the position and job they occupied in the society, the clergy who worked in administrative offices received payment from the government, too.

4. Donations, tributes, offerings and gifts were other sources of income for the clergy class. The people’s and the Safavid government’s faith in the clergy and scholars was to the extent that sometime offered their gifts and vows to them. Apart from the special people to whom gifts were offered by the Sultan (Turkaman, 1387, V. 1, pp. 149-150), gifts were also offered to the clergy and scholars in different regions (Qomi, 1383, V. 2, p. 920; Afooshtei Natanzi, 1373, pp. 344 & 365). People acted the same way and they would even travel a long distance to offer the offering individually (Aqajari, 1389, p. 555; quoted in A’yan-ul Shi’a).

5. Income, benefits and pensions from endowments. Endowment was an admirable social act because the revenue from endowments was spent in social matters. The income from bequeathed bazaars, public baths, caravanserais, schools, etc. was charitable and was spend for the public. Chardin, who had understood the second half of the Safavid rule, distinguished between royal and non-royal endowments (Chardin, 1345, V. 8, p. 267; Tavernier, 1369, p. 588). Royal endowments were usually devoted to the Holy Shrines in Iraq, the Fourteen Innocent Ones, holy places and sometimes religious schools. The endowments made by the aristocrats and landlords, however, were more regional and since they were done upon need, they resolved people’s problems.

One of the endowments paid to the clergy was the pension. “The pension was originally paid from bequeathed properties and its receivers, as documents show, have always been the clergy (Bousse, 1367, p. 183). Therefore, since the income from the endowments was substantial because of the people’s devotion and belief and because of the political conditions, they could cover all classes of the clergy in centers such as schools, mosques, houses for religious ceremonies, etc. and be an important source of income for this group.

Conclusion

Before the Safavids, Iranian society had a largely traditional society in terms of religion; however, with the Safavids, the society transformed into a dominantly Shiite population through a gradual process in the period. By accepting the clergy next to the political institution, their power and influence increased and the institution of religion formed completely.

The institution of religion was initially intermingled with the political institution, but it was gradually separated from it and by using the existing favorable possibilities and conditions continued to develop and expand its position and influence. In addition, by increasing the
number of schools and taking over the endowments (financial resource) improved the number and quality of religious scholars and clergies more than ever. This trend progressed to the extent that by the time of the last Safavid king, this institution was able to disentangle itself from state domination and even influence the political institution.

The religious institution formed in this period was run by a solid structure and organization. Although there were changes in its structure during time, its administrative structure remained firm and stable until the demise of the Safavids. Indeed, this did not include the entirety of the clergy class; there was also a nongovernmental group who had a stronger bond with the masses and they had greater influence on the public. Even though they did not have the conditions the administrative clergy had, they strived to keep this institution alive in the Safavid society by every means they had including Khoms, Zakat, endowments, schools, preaching, etc.
References


