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Vicissitudes of Nourūz*:*
Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Historical Time Scales

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Introduction

This article focuses on a temporal mark—specifically, a festival—in order to elucidate within what historical time scales people conceptualize this temporal mark that comes at regular intervals, and the different time scales that have existed between the pre-modern and modern era. By making this consideration, we can assess the relationship between the secularization of time and the history of a nation-state; in this case, Iranian national history. The subject of this study will be the festival of *Nourūz*, the first day of the New Year of the traditional calendar used mainly in Iran and Central Asia, marked by particular festivities.[1]

Nourūz was closely related to Zoroastrianism in the period of the ancient Persian empires, and, while eschewing its Zoroastrian features, it generally continued to hold a high position under Islamic domination after the fall of the Sassanid Empire (224–651). Since the advent of the modern era, *Nourūz* has been regarded as an Iranian national festival. In the course of the vicissitudes, *Nourūz was understood in different time scales in different eras*.

In the pre-modern Islamic era, *Nourūz* was a symbol that denoted the beginning and end of time, distinct from those past and coming momentous religious things that occurred or would occur on the day itself. It was sensed within a closed time scale from Creation through the End

1. For a comprehensive depiction of *Nourūz,* see Mary Boyce, A. Shapur Shahbazi and Simone Cristoforetti, "NOWRUZ," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, http://www.iranica.com/articles/nowruz-index (accessed June 30, 2010).

of Time shared between Zoroastrianism and Islam, as based on their eschatologies. In this context, therefore, Islamic theologians—in particular, Shi'ite ones—generated a discourse concerning *Nourūz* which was parallel to that of Zoroastrians. However, this time scale was completely transformed in the modern era. Modern nationalists considered *Nourūz* part of Iranian heritage in the secular time scale that was created to accommodate the master narrative of Iran, in which past occurrences pertinent to *Nourūz* were linearly set in chronological order.

In the course of nation-building, this linear timeline connecting events becomes "history," and some symbolic elements on this line are rendered as the "tradition" necessary for the invention of national identity.[2] In the modern era, *Nourūz* has been regarded as the epitome of Iranian tradition in the modern era; however, it had an entirely different nature in previous eras, when one day was imagined on a divine time scale. Within that time scale, there was no chronological order between Islamic and Zoroastrian *Nourūz*. This transition to a national time scale resulted in the effective secularization of time, whereby national history and tradition on the time scale had been conceptualized as a result of people's self-extrication from the earlier closed divine time scale. Constructing national history is thus comparable to connecting past events in chronological order premised on the secularization of time.

1. Secularization of Time

Before discussing this topic in detail, it is worth briefly mentioning some of the recent discussions about secularization. The secularization thesis, which may be the only theory that has attained a truly paradigmatic status within the modern social sciences, has been shaken in recent decades, given the global tendency toward religious revival in public spheres.[3]

2. For the relationship of nation-states to generating history and tradition, the following classical works are still thought-provoking: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
3. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Peter Berger, the scholar who previously led the discussion of this thesis, radically changed his view concerning the notion of secularization.[4] Talal Asad also treated this thesis from another direction; specifically, he deconstructed prima facie self-evident discourses concerning secularization and revealed their biases of Western-ness and modernity.[5]

Under these circumstances, some scholars have been reconsidering the definition of secularization and, in this process, issues concerning time sometimes arise. For instance, Karel Dobbelaere distinguished "latent secularization" from "manifest secularization" and used the fact that mechanical clocks were introduced in the Occident in the fourteenth century as an example of the former—an assertion that was, no doubt, based on the thesis of Jacques Le Goff. "The developments of science, industry and commerce demanded another system for regulating time from a system which the rings of churches and monasteries offered, in order to make rhythm for the sequence of prayer times. The invention of the mechanical clock offered the possibility of emancipating time from its religious charge, and secularizing it."[6]

Le Goff's excellent comparison between "merchant's time" and "church's time" addresses the secularization of daily time reckoning.[7] The theme treated in this article, on the contrary, is a time scale of longer duration: specifically, the transformation of a religious time scale that stretched from Creation through the End of Time, to one invented in the modern era.

In addressing the aforementioned topic, *Nourūz* is an apt subject because studying festivals provides a suitable way of analyzing the impact of modernity on religion.[8] In addition, festivals are merkmals in time

4. Peter Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999): 1–18.
5. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).
6. Jean Baubérot, "Sécularisation et laïcisation," in *Sécularizations et Laïcités*, ed. Masashi Haneda (Tokyo: UTCP, 2009): 17; Karel Dobbelaere, "De la sécularisation," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 39, no. 2 (2008): 179.
7. Jacques Le Goff, "Au Moyen Age: temps de l'Eglise et temps du marchand," *Annales E.S.C.*, XV (1960): 417–438; rep. in *Pour un autre Moyen Âge: temps, travail et culture en Occident*, Jacques Le Goff (Paris: Gallimard, 1977): 46–65.
8. Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen Âge*, 338; Jack Goody, *The Theft of History* (Cambridge:

measurement, so they are proper subjects for elucidating the secularization of time.

2. Validating Nourūz *in the Islamic Context*

When celebrating the festival of *Nourūz* under Islamic domination, Muslims, particularly Shi'ites, validated it in their religious context. According to Rasūl Ja'fariyān, although Islamic theologians sometimes condemned the festivities of *Nourūz*, particularly the sprinkling of water and the lighting of fires, which they viewed as reminders of its heathen nature, some Shi'a clerics justified the celebration of *Nourūz* on the basis of *hadīth*.[9] *Hadīth* is a tradition originating from the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad and, in the case of Shi'a Islam, also including those of Imams. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, *hadīth* in which *Nourūz* was regarded as the day on which various significant events concerning God, the prophet Muhammad, his previous prophets, and the first Shi'ite Imam, 'Alī, occurred, first became known.[10] Subsequently, the statement that *Nourūz* "is an attribute of ours and our Shi'ites" appeared in a *hadīth* recorded in the *Bihār al-Anwār*, an encyclopedic compilation in Arabic of Shi'ite traditions by Muhammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1699 or 1700), as follows:

> O Mu'allā, the day of *Nourūz* is the day God accepted the covenants of his servants to worship Him and not to associate anything with Him and to believe in His prophets and proofs and to believe in the Imams. It is the first day upon which the sun rose and the winds blew and the splendor of the world was created. It is the day Noah's ark grounded upon Mount Ararat [...] It is the day on which Gabriel came down to the Messenger of God [...] It is the day on which the Prophet ordered

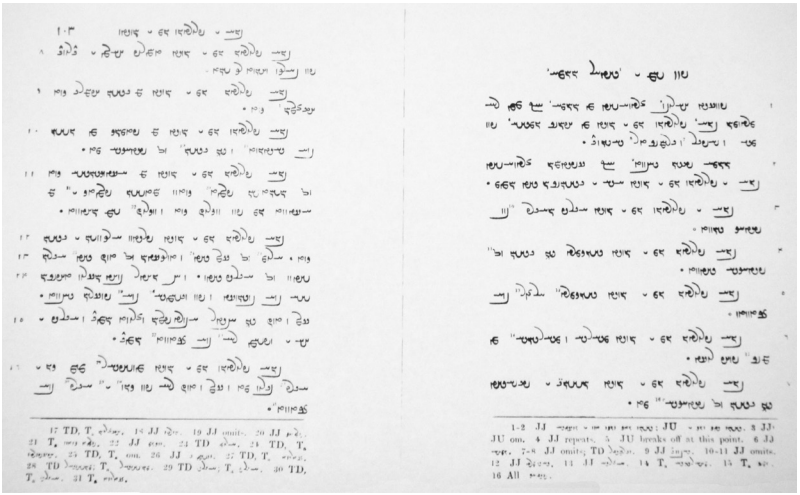
Cambridge University Press, 2006): 15–16.

9. Rasūl Ja'fariyān, "Nourūz dar Farhang-e Shī'e [Nourūz in the Shi'ite Culture]," *Nāme-ye Mofid*, 9 (1376/1997): 206–211 (in Persian), whose scope is not limited to the Shi'ite sources, despite the title.
10. Ibn Fahd Hillī, *al-Muhadhdhab al-Bāri'*, vol. 1 (Qum: Mu'assasa al-Nashar al-Islāmī, 1408/1986–7): 194–195 (in Arabic); Ja'fariyān, "Nourūz dar Farhang-e Shī'e," 209.

> his companions to pledge allegiance to ʻAlī as Commander of the Faithful [...] It is the day on which our Mahdi shall appear with his deputies. It is the day on which our Mahdi shall triumph over his antagonist Dajjāl and crucify him at the rubbish-heap of Kūfa. No *Nourūz* comes unless we expect release from suffering, for this day is an attribute of ours and our Shiʻites. The ʻAjam [non-Arabs] sustained it, while you [Arabs] let it perish.[11]

Interestingly enough, according to John Walbridge, these statements were similar to those made in a Pahlavi treatise[12] called "*Māh ī Farvardīn Rūz ī Khordād* [The Day *Khordād* of the Month *Farvardīn*]"[13] in which Zoroaster asks Ahura Mazda why men have been commanded to venerate the day of *Khordād* that fell on the Great *Nourūz*. Ahura Mazda responds with a list of events that have happened or will happen on that day, which correspond with the statements of the above-cited *hadīth*. In both texts, the world was created and the primal covenant by the divine being was made on *Nourūz*. Whereas Gabriel came down to Muhammad to reveal the *Qurʾān*, Zoroaster accepted the religion of Mazda-worship from Ahura Mazda on the same day.[14] The appearance of Mahdi on that day is correlated with that of Bahrām, the ancient Iranian god of victory. In addition to these events, various religious covenants and triumphs were ascribed in the texts to occurrences on *Nourūz*.[15]

11. Muhammad Bāqir Majlisī, *Bihār al-Anwār*, vol. 56 (Beirut: Muʾassasa al-Wafāʾ, 1403/1983), 92 (in Arabic); John Walbridge, "A Persian Gulf in the Sea of Lights: The Chapter on Naw-Rūz in the *Bihar al-Anwar*," *Iran*, XXXV (1997): 88–89, on which this translation basically relied.
12. Pahlavi (Middle Persian) was mainly adopted during the Sassanid Empire, when Zoroastrianism was advocated as the dynastic religion; it was followed by New Persian, represented in Arabic script, after the Muslim conquest.
13. Ebrāhīm Mīrzā-ye Nāzer insists that this treatise was written in the reign of the Sassanid king Khosrou II (r. 590–628), since he is the only historical personage appearing in it. See Ebrāhīm Mīrzā-ye Nāzer, *Māh-e Farvardīn, Rūz-e Khordād* [The Month *Farvardīn,* the Day *Khordād*] (Mashhad: Tarāne, 1373/1994): 50 (in Persian). On the contrary, according to Mary Boyce, these texts may well have their origins in the priestly schools of the Achaemenid period, some sentences of which were added until the Sassanid period. See Mary Boyce, "NOWRUZ i. In the Pre-Islamic Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.
14. Jamaspji M. Jamasp-Asana, ed., *The Pahlavi Texts*, vol. 2 (Bombay: Fort Printing Press, 1913): 37.
15. Cf. Walbridge, "A Persian Gulf in the Sea of Lights," 89.



Texts of the *Māh ī Farvardīn Rūz ī Khordād*[16]

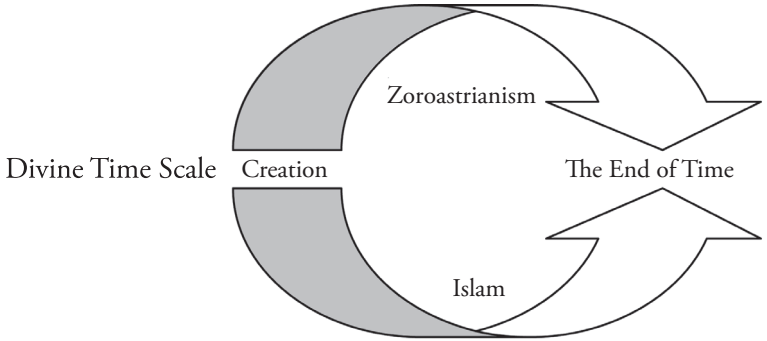
Walbridge properly stated that "such parallels do not indicate a precise literary relationship but rather a common spiritual and intellectual universe."[17] In considering the parallels in this universe, the time scale shared by both religions is particularly crucial. In both Islam and Zoroastrianism, *Nourūz* was put into the same time scale—from Creation to the End of Time—based on their respective eschatologies. On this time scale, these religious times were connected in parallel.

3. Creating a Master Narrative in Modern Iran

In the modern era, however, the relationship between these two religions and Nourūz became different than it was previously. In parallel with the fermenting nationalism of the latter part of the Qajar dynasty (1796–1925), the history for the nation-state of Iran was gradually constructed. An important part of that process was the invention of Iranian traditions

16. Jamaspi M. Jamasp-Asana, ed., Sa'īd 'Oryān, ed., *Motūn-e Pahlavī* [*Pahlavī Texts*] (Tehran: Ketābkhāne-ye Mellī-ye Jomhūrī-ye Eslāmī-ye Īrān, 1371/1992): 102–103.

17. Walbridge, "A Persian Gulf in the Sea of Lights," 89.



that allowed sharing of the "Iranian identity." Under these circumstances, discourses concerning the relationship between Iran and Islam (particularly, Shi'a Islam) were put onstage and reflected two main strands of thought, as stated by Hachioshi.

Those in the first strand regarded Islam, introduced by outsider Arabs, as the main cause of backwardness, and they attempted to return to their brilliant "Iranian" origins, which predated the Islamic domination. This strand, represented by Fath'alī Ākhondzāde (1812–78) and Mīrzā Āqākhān Kermānī (1853–96), was strengthened when it coincided with anti-foreign tendencies during the period of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11). Finally, it converged with the principal ideology of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79), which ascribed its own legitimacy to a revival of the glorious past, including, for example, the eras of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 700–330 B.C.) and the Sassanid Empire. On the other hand, there was a second strand, which regarded Islam as an inseparable and crucial element of the Iranian tradition. This belief was well expressed by 'Alī Sharī'atī (1933–77), one of the most influential intellectuals in twentieth-century Iran, who stated, "it is inconceivable and unimaginable to seek the Iranian culture without Islam, or, to the same extent, to see the Islamic [culture] without Iran."[18] The Islamic Revolution in 1979, needless to say, was a watershed which brought this Iran-Islamic discourse, which had been pushed to the background in the Pahlavi era, back to the surface.[19]

18. 'Alī Sharī'atī, *Bāzshenāsī-ye Hovīyat-e Īrānī-Eslāmī* [*Reconsideration of* the *Iran-Islamic Identity*], 9th ed. (Tehran: Elhām, 1388/2009–10): 194 (in Persian).

19. Makoto Hachioshi, *Iran Kindai-no Genzō* [*Modern Iran as She Was: from the Constitutional*

In the first strand's exaltation of the brilliant Iranian past, *Nourūz* received special attention as part of an Iranian heritage from the pre-Islamic period. Thus, issues concerning *Nourūz* were keenly analyzed, by both Iranian scholars and western Orientalists, especially when they offered evidence of its profound origin and continuity throughout the history of Iran.[20] For instance, Edward Browne (1862–1926), whose work remains among the most original and influential studies of Iran, put *Nourūz* into a framework of national historiography that connected philological facts with Iranian identity. In this framework, the formation of national identity was ascribed to the ancient Persian empire, and the appearance of the New Persian language during the 9th–11th centuries was regarded as a sign of the national revival of Iranism.[21] In his magnum opus *A Literary History of Persia* (1902–24), Browne occasionally referred to *Nourūz* as the great "national" festival that continued from ancient times and embodied Persian customs.[22]

Among Iranian nationalists, Seyyed Hasan Taqīzāde (1878–1970) promoted Iranian national customs and characteristics through his newspaper, *Kāve* (1916–21), to which he and his colleague, historian Mohammad Qazvīnī, contributed articles concerning *Nourūz*.[23] In these articles, *Nourūz* was connected with mythical King Jamshīd, who appeared in the national epic, *Shāhnāme*, as the founder of *Nourūz*. Whereas the aspects of *Nourūz* that related to Iranian heritage were emphasized, its symbiotic relationship with Islam, central to the beliefs of the second strand, was also pointed out. The *Īrānshahr*, another nationalist journal, published by Hosein Kāzemzāde, also drew attention to *Nourūz* festivities and the "Iranian" calendar. Kāzemzāde assigned

Revolution to the Nation-State in Iran] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1998): 113–115 (in Japanese).

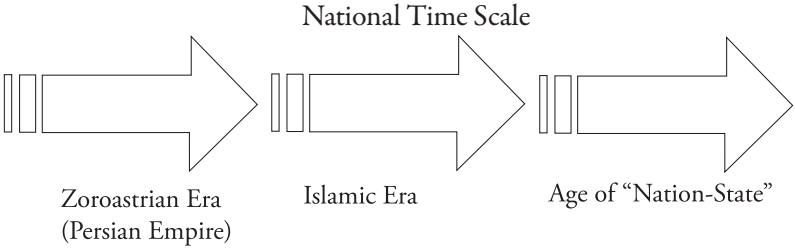
20. It is well known that the Aryan Theory throws a sharp shadow over many intellectual writings of this period. For this issue, see Mostafa Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation: the Construction of National Identity* (New York: Paragon House, 1993).
21. Vaziri, *Iran as Imagined Nation*, 104–5.
22. Edward Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956): 114, 259, *passim*.
23. Seyyed H. Taqīzāde, "Nourūz-e Jamshīdī [The *Nourūz* of Jamshīd]," *Kāve*, 5–6 (1917) in *Kāve 1916–1922*, ed. I. Afshār (Tehran: ʿĀmm, 1977): 29–32 (in Persian); Mohammad Qazvīnī, "Jashn-e Nourūz [*Nourūz* Festival]," *Kāve* 27 (1918) in *Kāve 1916–1922*, 199–200 (in Persian).

most of an issue of a journal published in 1923 to a series of articles concerning *Nourūz* in various eras, from the ancient to the Safavid dynasty (1502–1736) in which, he insisted, *Nourūz*, in concordance with the Shi'ite faith, reached a new, splendid age.[24] Afterward, *Nourūz* continued to be a regular topic in most cultural journals; for example, Mohammad Mo'īn, the eminent Iranian scholar and lexicographer, published a paper on this theme in which he used sources ranging from Zoroastrian texts to Muslim writings.[25]

Taqīzāde's article on *Kāve*[26]

24. Hosein Kāzemzāde, *Īrānshahr*, 10 (1302/1923) in *Majalle-ye Īrānshahr (sāl-e avval)*, (Tehran: Eqbāl, 1363/1984–5): 249–273 (in Persian).
25. Mohammad Mo'īn, "Jashn-e Nourūz [*Nourūz* Festival]," *Jahān-e Nou*, 1 (1325/1946): 3–9; rep. in *Majmū'e-ye Maqālāt*, ed. Mohammad Mo'īn (Tehran: Mo'īn, 1364/1985), vol. 1, 157–179 (in Persian). For further discussion of this paragraph, also see Nematollah Fazeli, *Politics of Culture in Iran: Anthropology, Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2006): 36–37.
26. *Kāve 1916–22*, 29.

In the discourses of modern scholars and national thinkers, *Nourūz* was referred to as an Iranian festival that previously held Zoroastrian characteristics and then existed in harmony with Islam in the Islamic era. Without exception, Zoroastrian and Islamic *Nourūz* were depicted in chronological order within the new nationalist time scale. Under the Pahlavi dynasty, *Nourūz* was finally adopted as the day marking the beginning of the Iranian New Year in a revised calendar that starts with the year in which the ancient Persian empire was supposedly established.[27] With this event, the new time scale, which commenced with the Zoroastrian *Nourūz* of the Persian empire and continued through the Islamic era to the Pahlavi era, was completed.



4. History—Setting Time

Nourūz was conceived in different time scales in different eras. In the premodern Islamic era, Shi'ite theologians validated the day in the religious time scale, in which there was room to generate parallel discourses concerning *Nourūz* and its relationships to Islam and Zoroastrianism. On the contrary, modern nationalists presented *Nourūz* as a part of a secular time scale that was created to reflect the master narrative of the nation of Iran, whereby *Nourūz* was set in chronological order and regarded as the epitome of Iranian tradition. By observing the differences in these approaches, the relationship between the secularization of time and the history of the nation-state is revealed, both of which are striking products of modernity. It is clear that the secularization of time is crucial to

27. Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 191.

constructing the history of the nation-state.

When we pay attention to the fact that time scales in the pre-modern era were radically different from present-day conceptualizations, and that there is a close relationship between the modern time scale and national history, it becomes possible to write a history that goes beyond the national time scale in this post-nation-state era. Although historians have already taken various new approaches to this problem, hopefully this article has clarified some of the facts and provided additional clues needed to write history suited to this new age, from the standpoint of time.

The framework detailed here in regards to the secularization of time is naturally confined to some religions that have particular eschatologies, such as Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic religions. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to scrutinize the time scales of other religions and regions in order to make this study more meaningful.

* This work is supported by a Grant-in-Aid for JSPS Fellows (09J10434).

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