

DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE
JOURNAL OF
IRANIAN STUDIES



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
Department of International and Area Studies

Volume 3 (2018)



The UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies

Published under the auspices of:
The OU Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies,
the Department of International and Area Studies, and
the College of International Studies at
the University of Oklahoma

Volume 3 (2018)

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From the Faculty Advisors

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This third volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As co-editors-in-chief, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

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Ritual Impurity and Decline of the Safavid Dynasty

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The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the rise of the Safavid dynasty and the establishment of Iran as a stronghold of Shi'a Islam.¹ The body of research on these two centuries of Persian history provides us with a fairly coherent view of the status of religious minorities and their social and economic interactions with Shi'is. The focus of this work will be limited to the concept of *najes*, or ritual impurity, its application in Shi'a religious law, and its effect on the lives of the *ahl al-kitab* – People of the Book.² I will argue that the application of taboos and restrictive religious laws governing interactions between the *ummah* and *dhimmi* populations was unique, or at least original, to the Safavid period, and the relationship between Muslim rulers and *dhimmi* populations in Iran would never again be the same. The Safavid *ulama*'s focus on this element of Shi'a Sharia had a profound impact on the daily lives of Jews in particular, barring them from particular areas of Islamic society and placing restrictions on their behavior, dress, and economic activity. Manifestations of religious intolerance became more widespread in the advancing years of the Dynasty, which I will argue further weakened Safavid authority and contributed in part to its disintegration. The interpretation and application

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¹ Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran* (Yale University Press, 2010), 112.

² Roger Savory, "Relations between the Safavid State and Its Non-Muslim Minorities," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, no. 4 (October 2003): 235–458.

of religious law in avoidance of *najes* during the Safavid dynasty was not monolithic, and under each Safavid ruler its emphasis was different. We will explore why this concept came in or out of focus, why the Safavids were unique in their stance on the subject during their time, and how this ideology affected the populations and behavior of religious minorities at different points of Safavid rule.

Safavid Iran was religiously diverse in the early years, but by most accounts the latter portion was one of the darkest periods for minorities in Iran's history. The most salient religious minorities were Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and even Sufis and Sunnis, whose interpretation of Islam was at this point distinct from Shi'a doctrine. As a whole, the Safavids were not known for their kindness towards or acceptance of other religious groups, whether Muslim or *ahl al-kitab*, and many scholars have defined the Safavid period as one of large-scale forced conversion to Twelver Shi'ism, beginning with the reign of Isma'il I. Violent conversion efforts were focused primarily on Sunnis, who were seen as *kafirs* by Shi'ites, an epithet in this context meaning "unbelievers" or "one who covers the truth" of true Islam.³ Many would argue that the Safavid period gives one of the few examples of true forced conversion in Islamic history.⁴

For non-Muslims, the pressure to convert was not so dire in the beginning, and some *dhimmi* populations were even embraced by the Safavid monarchy, albeit for their own economic expediency.⁵ The general attitude towards Jews during the period ranged from oppression with instances of prosperity to rather severe persecution. Jewish economic activity was not allowed to make up a large portion of the Safavid economy, as the majority of occupations available to Jews were those which Muslims could not fill due to restrictive religious law. According to Jean Chardin, as well as many other accounts, most Jews found themselves forced to take up the lowest and least lucrative professions in the economy, including dyeing, scavenging, entertaining as minstrels, and cleaning excrement pits.⁶

³ Ignác Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 168.

⁴ Mehrdad Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Bahai Faith* (I.B. Tauris, 2011), 36.

⁵ Savory, "Relations between the Safavid State," 454.

⁶ Vera Basch Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism* (The American Academy for Jewish Research, 1987), 150-151; Daniel Tsadik, *Between*

The position of Zoroastrians was somewhat parallel with that of the Jews, ranging from periods of simple segregation to full-on conversion “by sword.” Zoroastrians, like other *dhimmis*, were expected to stay in their quarter and maintain a distance from Muslims but, by the midpoint of the dynasty, Zoroastrians were no longer free to practice their religion. The desecration of their sacred fires and destruction of their properties was a constant threat, but sadly their persecution would only worsen in the Qajar period.⁷

The most prosperous religious minority of the Safavid period was without a doubt the Armenian populace, although they were at times “despoiled” of their wealth.⁸ Armenian Christians were particularly favored by Abbas I, who relocated (initially) 3,000 Armenians from Julfa, Azerbaijan to the newly designated quarter of Isfahan south of the River Zayandeh, called New Julfa.⁹ While forcible relocation is always a form of oppression, the Armenians of New Julfa flourished economically, and possessed more religious freedoms than any other *dhimmi*.¹⁰ The Armenians had strong trade relations in the silk market, which was demanded more than any other commodity at the time. Abbas sought to capitalize on these traders and artisans, and engineered this resettlement in hopes of generating more economic activity in his new capital.¹¹ The tolerance afforded to Christians was contemporary with the first major attempts of European espionage and discrete influence in Iran, as well as increasing hostilities between the Safavids and the Ottomans, who at the time were actively persecuting Christians and Shi‘is.¹²

The final religious minority whose general experience I will give brief summary are the other Muslims within Safavid Iran, consisting primarily of Sufis and Sunnis. While the Safaviyyah Sufi order was instrumental in

Foreigners and Shi‘is: Nineteenth-Century Iran and Its Jewish Minority (Stanford University Press, 2007), 11.

⁷ Aptin Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 100.

⁸ Moreen, *Iranian Jewry’s Hour*, 139-140.

⁹ David Morgan, *Medieval Persia 1040-1797*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 135; Kiyarad, “Zemmi Merchants,” 160.

¹⁰ Habib Levy and Hooshang Ebrami, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora* (Mazda Publishers, 1999), 256.

¹¹ Katouzian, *The Persians*, 125; Sarah Kiyarad, “Thou Shalt Not Enter the Bazaar on Rainy Days! Zemmi Merchants in Safavid Isfahan: Shi‘ite Feqh Meeting Social Reality,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 160.

¹² Katouzian, *The Persians*, 115.

the Safavid's Dynasty's origins, Sufis were later persecuted and this treatment only worsened over time.¹³ After the Safavids adopted Twelver Shi'ism, mystical Sufism was seen as a real threat to the desired ubiquity of Shia adherents, and Isma'il began his violent reign by launching a fierce attack on the rival Sufi orders within Iran, although Isma'il's bloodshed seems to be intended for intimidation rather than extirpation.¹⁴ Some scholars have asserted that Isma'il proclaimed Shi'ism as the official religion of Iran for political expediency, as his charismatic rise to power was augmented by the dynamic ideology of his radical Shi'i followers, who viewed the newly proclaimed shah as a god-king – a topic that will surely be discussed later.¹⁵

Non-Muslim Treatment

While overall oppressive and rather harsh, the treatment of non-Muslims was not consistent, and each Safavid ruler held a different set of opinions and biases which shaped their tolerances and management of non-Shi'is; although, overall attitudes of the shahs became more conservative as the dynasty matured.¹⁶ Isma'il, for instance, was concerned with establishing Safavid dominance of the region, and any threat to that dominance was eliminated. The casualties of this transitional period can be designated as a byproduct of revolutionary war, but the extent to which pain, including torture, was inflicted *en masse* was certainly not requisite.¹⁷ After the dust of revolution settled, the young Safavid monarch Tahmasp calmed the animosity directed towards religious minorities and focused his efforts on diplomacy with Turkey, suppressing tribal conflict among the Qizilbash military and the vitrification of Twelver belief within the dynasty.¹⁸ Tahmasp continued to rule over the dynasty his father began for 52 years, one of longest individual reigns Iran has seen. He was concerned with reducing Sunni numbers in a more humanitarian fashion, through the production and dissemination of Twelver propaganda, the elimination of art forms which did not “praise Ali” and the Twelve Imams,” and the

¹³ Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 73.

¹⁴ Colin Paul Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2009), 24-25.

¹⁵ Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 117-118; Katouzian, *The Persians*, 114.

¹⁶ Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 39.

¹⁷ Katouzian, *The Persians*, 115.

¹⁸ Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson, *Ritual Cursing in Iran Theology, Politics and the Public in Safavid Persia* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2015), 125-126.

institution of other orthodox social restrictions, rather than through acts of fratricide.¹⁹

Tahmasp's son's fourteen-month reign as Isma'il II is only worth mentioning because of his surprising attempt to retreat from Shi'i orthodoxy. Perhaps an attempt at filial retaliation against his outwardly pious Shi'ite father, or one at undermining the strengthening Shia clerical jurists, it nevertheless failed to gain traction amongst the *ummah*. His confidence that the *ummah* was still malleable in their adherence to Shi'i doctrine brings into question the practical and theological differences between the two factions.

Followers of Shi'ism and Sunnism adhere to very similar foundational beliefs, diverging in only a handful of significant cases. The foremost distinction between the two sects is their acceptance, or lack thereof, of the successor to the Prophet Muhammad as the "Leader of Faithful," *amir al-mu'minin*.²⁰ Sunnis accepted Abū Bakr as not only the practical, but the rightful successor to Muhammad, whereas Shi'is believe that Ali', Muhammad's brother-in-law and trusted companion, was designated as caliph and subsequently slighted by Abū Bakr after Muhammad's death. Succession to the caliphate is not the only disagreement between Sunnis and Shi'is, but the scope of this work extends only to the difference in interpretation and application of Quranic law regarding ritual impurity. Put simply, most Sunnis do consider *kafirs* as *polluted*, but their view differs from that of Shi'is in that they do not consider *kafirs* as *polluting*, except in the transmission of their saliva. Sunnism was of course the state religion of the Ottoman Empire, and by contrast to *dhimmi* subjugation under the Safavids, Ottoman *dhimmis* benefitted from the religious and social freedoms of the *millet* system.²¹

Shia religious law of the Safavid period was conspicuously more harsh and inflexible towards adherents of differing faiths than other interpretations of Islamic law. The scripture which justifies the rather intolerant posture of Shi'is towards non-Muslims is Qur'an 9:28, which states among other things that "unbelievers are unclean" and must not be allowed to near the Sacred Mosque.²² The word "unclean" is expressed by the Arabic word *najes*, the exact meaning of which Shia jurists would

¹⁹ Ibid., 126.

²⁰ Katouzian, *The Persians*, 64, & 69.

²¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 335.

²² Qur'an 9:28.

focus much energy on defining and specifying in Shia *fiqh*, or understanding of Islamic law.²³ *Najes*, which can also be described as ritual impurity, affects the otherwise spiritually pure state of pious Muslims, known as *tahara*, and can be imparted unto Muslims through contact with things and people who are deemed *najesa*. Non-Muslims are among the ten things considered unclean in this ideology, and the most brief instances of contact with non-Muslims or articles they have handled can render a Shi'i *najes*. The following are considered *najes* by Shi'is: the bodily substance of a non-Muslim, excrement, things associated with death including carrion and carrion eaters, blood, menstruation, the milk of an animal deemed *najes*, wine and other spirits, the meat and byproducts of an animal which was either slaughtered by a non-Muslim or was slaughtered without proper Islamic ritual, *zabiha* (a drinking vessel used by a non-Muslim), and especially any liquid that has been in contact with a non-Muslim, or anything that liquid touches.²⁴ Safavid Shi'is were particularly concerned with the cleanliness and ritual propriety of their foods, but much more so than the usual adherence to a *halal* diet by other Muslims. As mentioned, livestock slaughtered by *kafirs* was considered *najes* and thus *haram* for Shi'is.

The opportunity for non-Muslims to participate in trade was extremely limited, as foodstuffs and almost all organic goods handled by *kafirs* were rendered permanently *najes* with exemptions only for articles which could be purified through washing, such as cloth, which perhaps was a factor in the continual financial success of Armenian silk traders. Food cooked by Jews and Christians was also considered *haram*, despite Qur'an 5:5, which states that the foods of the *ahl-kitab* are lawful for Muslims to consume. The verse goes on to even say that Muslims may lawfully wed chaste *ahl kitabi* women, who would be considered incurably *najes* by Safavid jurisprudence. As the initiator of scholarship on this subject, Goldziher, phrased it, the Shi'i interpretation of verse 9:28 "had no use for the orthodox Sunni mitigation of certain narrow-minded old conceptions" referring to the Sunni adherence to more liberal mandates such as verse 5:5.²⁵

According to Shia belief, Muslim men are naturally and perpetually *tahir*, until they choose to be or are inadvertently made unclean, whereas women will naturally become ritually impure during menstruation, and

²³ Kiyarad, "Zemmi Merchants," 159.

²⁴ Ibid., 169.

²⁵ Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 213.

contact with a menstruating woman would render a Muslim *najes*, according to many Shi‘i jurists. Liquid was considered to be the primary medium of defilement, and somewhat ironically, liquid was also the medium for purification. According to *fiqh*, a Muslim must perform ritual cleansing – *wudu* for ablution of mild offenses or *ghusl* for more absolute cases of *najes* – to regain their spiritual purity, which involved for most Shia schools of thought very specific techniques of passing water over parts of the body, which must be performed correctly before prayer or handling the Qur’an. The transmutable quality of water fostered an obsession with the potential for spiritual contamination, which culminated in the establishment of rain laws. These laws were aimed primarily at Jews but were also applicable to other non-Muslims, stating that they would not be permitted to leave their homes during rain or snowfall, “because the drops from their clothes and shoes could render Muslims *najes*.”²⁶

An Examination of Jewish Position in Safavid Iran

The prohibition of Jews from the bazaars and even outdoors during rainfall speaks to the lowly position of the minority in Safavid Iran, and the extent to which *najes* avoidance jurisprudence shaped the daily lives of *dhimmi*s. Several of the oppressive effects of this ideology have already been mentioned, such as the extremely narrow window of economic opportunity for *kafirs*, which restricted most non-Muslims, aside from Christian Armenians, to very low average levels of income, and kept them in an enduring state of poverty. *Najes* avoidance law forged a strong barrier which curtailed almost all social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. This barrier was reinforced by regulations instated by Muhammad Taqi Majlesi and his son, Muhammad Bakir Majlesi – referred to henceforth as Majlesi, who is considered the most powerful Shia ‘ālim, certainly of his time.²⁷ Such regulations included the mandate that all Jews must wear distinguishing garb, usually drab clothing with a colored patch, and the consequences for noncompliance were severe.²⁸ Many Jews tired of this extreme oppression and were encouraged, and in some cases compelled, to overcome the great barrier by converting to Islam. Jews who were coerced into conversion were called *anusim*, although many of these converts practiced Islam outwardly while retaining their

²⁶ Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 172; Kiyarad, "Zemmi Merchants," 171-172.

²⁷ Levy and Ebrami, *Comprehensive History*, 293-295.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

Jewish identity and belief, a practice known as crypto-Judaism.²⁹ As the Safavid Dynasty carried on, the Jewish population declined due to the increasing number of *anusim* and hardships faced by the intact Jewish community. The conversion of non-Muslims to Islam was accelerated by the Safavid Law of Apostasy which stated that a convert to Islam could assert legal claim to the lineage of property of their non-Muslim family.³⁰ Along with increasing the rate of conversion, the inheritance law worsened the already meager position of Jews, having had their property or inheritance usurped from them.³¹ As some have noted this had a profound effect on the affluent Armenian community as well.³² The Jewish population was also irregularly reduced by sporadic force conversions under several shahs, a salient instance being the forced conversion of the entire Jewish population of Isfahan under Abbas I.³³ Most of these retained their Jewish identities, which they openly reclaimed after the death of Abbas I, until 21 years later, when Abbas II ordered the conversion of every Jew in Iran. The *anusim* of this wave of forced conversion were so desperate to have their freedom of religion, they were extorted to financial destruction in efforts to purchase their freedom, according to the *Kitabi Anusi* – the Book of a Forced Convert, written by Babai ibn Lutf and studied by Vera Moreen.³⁴ These forced conversions were in contradiction of Sharia law, and eventually the ruling elite came to realize that the remaining Jewish community would sooner die than relinquish their religion and communal loyalties.³⁵

Another way that the effects of Safavid purity laws shaped the lives of Jews in particular can be observed by the lack of contributions to the development of *Halakha*, or Jewish religious law. This had been contributed to the extreme poverty faced by most Jews of the period, and is highlighted by the preoccupation of their European, particularly Eastern European, contemporaries with Talmudic and legal studies. Talmudic and Torah studies is a hugely important aspect of Judaism, and was long before the Safavid period, so it is telling that at a time when European Jewish

²⁹ Khanbaghi. *The Fire*, 106.

³⁰ Laurence D. Loeb, *Outcaste: Jewish Life in Southern Iran* (Gordon and Breach, 1977), 17.

³¹ Levy and Ebrami, *Comprehensive History*, 282-283.

³² Kiyarad, "Zemmi Merchants," 176-177.

³³ Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 42.

³⁴ Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour*, 152.

³⁵ Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 43.

education systems were flourishing the Persian Jews were experiencing a “cultural stagnation.”³⁶ Apparently there were no community members wealthy enough to be inclined to support Jewish educational institutions or scholars of traditional studies.³⁷ Although there may have been, we have no evidence of the existence of a Jewish educational system in Safavid Iran, or any references to the religious education of Jewish children and adults, so it is likely that the general level of religious education from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century was very low.³⁸ In this vitally important aspect of Jewish life, Safavid purity law certainly had a shaping, prohibitive effect.

The Importance of *Najes* Avoidance

Why was *najes* avoidance such an important element of *fiqh* for Safavid Shi‘is? The relatively extreme interpretation of Qur’an 9:28 by Shia *ulama* marks a conspicuous divergence between Sunni and Shia *fiqh*, and I would postulate that this conflict in opinion was shaped over time by the Ottoman/Safavid conflict. The Safavids sought to distance themselves as much as possible from Sunnism, and perhaps more relevantly, from the Ottomans. It is much easier to forge and reinforce an identity through division and an “us versus them” ideology, the framework of which was already set up in the Sunni/Shi‘i dichotomy. The ostracization of non-Muslims fits directly into this “us/them” framework, which empowered the individual Shi‘i identity and was further reinforced through substantiation of this discrimination in the scripture. Some scholars have also observed this aspect of Shi‘ism as “a binary conception of humanity” which puts Muslims and non-Muslims in opposing camps.³⁹ It would be impetuous to assume that the Ottoman/Safavid conflict had a foundational effect on purity law, because much of the “classical” Shi‘i components of *najes* avoidance had been formed by the eleventh century, far before the Ottoman Empire or Safavid Dynasty existed.⁴⁰ Rather, the discord between the neighboring governments may have had a *shaping* effect on the application of this ideology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

³⁶ Moreen, *Iranian Jewry’s Hour*, 155.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁹ David Freidenreich, “The Implications of Unbelief: Tracing the Emergence of Distinctively Shi‘i Notions Regarding the Food and Impurity of Non-Muslims,” *Islamic Law and Society* 18, no. 1 (January 2011): 64.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

Some scholars have asserted that *najes* avoidance jurisprudence became so important to the Safavids due to a parallel ideology in Zoroastrianism. While not recognized by most modern Zoroastrians, ancient purity rules have been documented that instruct reverent Zoroastrians to not come into contact with non-Zoroastrians in order to avoid being polluted by them. The instructions go on to say that one must not accept food from a non-Zoroastrian, including honey and butter specifically, but that “polluted” fruit may be first washed and then consumed.⁴¹ According to this purity law, if one does come into contact with a non-Zoroastrian, they must “purify [them]self with [consecrated] bull’s urine (*nirang*).”⁴² We can see clear parallels between this spiritual law and Shi‘i *najes* avoidance jurisprudence, however it would be hasty to read too much into this parallel relationship in terms of influence. While Persian ideology could have strengthened the acceptance of *najes* avoidance law for Zoroastrian converts to Shi‘ism, the general knowledge of this element of Zoroastrianism was likely very low in Safavid Iran. The purity rules seem to have been part of an intentional revival of unwritten Zoroastrian belief in the 16th century, emanating mostly from India. Considering that this discourse occurred virtually simultaneously with Safavid ideological consolidation, it is highly unlikely that any influence was exchanged between the two inward-looking religious groups at a time when interfaith dialogue was at an extreme low. However, it is possible that Zoroastrian converts in the early centuries brought Zoroastrian conceptions of ritual purity with them after conversion to Shi‘i Islam. The experience of religious minorities in the Safavid period was unique not solely because of the Shi‘i interpretation of Quranic instruction, known in Islam as *ijtihad*, but more so because of the official and practical application of *ijtihad* by Safavid religious leadership. The reliance on *ijtihad* for societal structuring and regulation is one of the major aspects of the Safavid Dynasty which sets it apart from Sunni caliphates and even other Shi‘i imamat.⁴³ The importance placed on *ijtihad* stems from the Twelver ambition to deduce what the Hidden Imam would have decided on particular legal cases, which can only be achieved by the most

⁴¹ James Hastings, John Alexander Selbie, and Louis Herbert Gray, *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics: Fiction-Hyksos* (T. & T. Clark, 1914), 153-154.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴³ Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 156.

knowledgeable members of the *ulama*.⁴⁴ While many Shi‘is from centuries earlier had accepted purity laws in terms of impure foods and inherently polluted substances, the earlier view was concerned primarily with the ritual of slaughter, *zabihah*, and specifically the invocation of the name of God before the act.⁴⁵ In fact most Shi‘is, including Imami jurist Ibn Babawayh and the foremost Isma‘ili jurist al-Nu‘man ibn Muhammad, followed the fifth imam, Muhammad al-Baqir’s ruling that the invocation of God’s name guaranteed purity of butchered meat, regardless of the butcher’s religious belief. It was not until the eleventh century that the first systematic Imami legal treatise by al-Shaykh al-Mufid provided that non-Muslims are “categorically unfit to invoke God’s name,” and thus the meat butchered by a non-Muslim is unfit for consumption.⁴⁶ This view aligns much better with the Safavid view, but it was still far from the *ijtihad* that anything a non-Muslim touches is just as impure as *haram* meat.

Although the Imami position on the purity of non-Muslims had been formed by the eleventh century, it would not be until well into the Safavid Dynasty that the unique experience of religious minorities would find institutional authority by the acceptance of this element of *fiqh* by ordinary citizens of the empire. Up to this loosely-identifiable point, the ritual purity of non-Muslims was only a real concern for the *ulama*, and therefore rather distanced from impacting the daily lives of non-Muslims. The power wielded by the highest echelon of religious authority, known as the *mujtahids*, was derived from the acceptance of their authority and their *ijtihad* by the *ummah*. The overall acceptance of *mujtahid* religious authority by ordinary Shi‘is is what confronted the daily lives of religious minority with the perception of them by jurists of the seventeenth century, although some have argued that the full embrace of *mujtahids* as *fuqahā’* – absolute experts in *fiqh* – was not complete until the triumph of Usulis in the late 18th century.⁴⁷ However, many scholars agree that the consolidation of *mujtahid* political power had occurred by the end of the seventeenth century with the rise of Sheikh Mohammad Baqer Majlesi, the most powerful of all Safavid *ulama*.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shii Islam: the History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (Yale University Press, 1985), 186.

⁴⁵ Freidenreich, "The Implications of Unbelief," 70.

⁴⁶ Freidenreich, "The Implications of Unbelief," 65-66.

⁴⁷ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, 186; Katouzian, *The Persians*, 147.

⁴⁸ Katouzian, *The Persians*, 129.

Majlesi's rise to power and his intolerant stance towards non-Muslims as well as Sufis and Sunnis played a key role in defining the Safavid period, and played a major role in the fall of the dynasty. Never before had purity law been applied so ubiquitously to non-Muslims and with such political organization. The force of religious conformity increased drastically with the rise of the *mujtahids*, whose political power was legitimated by Shi'ism.⁴⁹ The political objectives of these religious leaders aligned conveniently with the religious intolerance evident in their *ijtihad*, and they were successful in oppressing non-Shi'i religious groups, except perhaps the resilient Sunni strongholds which had persisted in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ For the sake of clarity, it was not that the *ulama* had amassed control out of secular political agendas, rather the *ulama* viewed the shah's state as "usurping the kingdom of God," which could legitimately be ruled by none other than the infallible Imam, of whom the next best substitute was *ijtihad*. There was likely no real distinction between religion and politics at this time, so the reference to political power represents the modern conception of politics, without cynical connotations.⁵¹ Eventually, the Afghan Sunnis tired of the anti-Sunni policy of the Safavid government and began to revolt. The tribal Afghan revolts sparked unrest throughout the Caucasus and the Khorasan province, which would last until the foreshadowed demise of the dynasty in 1722.⁵² Many have suggested that the political power of the clerical aristocracy increased to fill the vacuum created by inadequate shah leadership, gaining traction during the "incompetent" leadership of Shah Suleyman I. This clerical aristocracy reached their apex in authority during the reign of Sultan Husayn, who by most accounts was little more than a figurehead under the control of Majlesi.⁵³

Conclusion

With the *mujtahid* consolidation of power and increased intolerance of religious minorities came a decline in the economic activity of non-Muslims, which further weakened the economy of the failing dynasty. Aside from the political authority shift of the late seventeenth century, the

⁴⁹ Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 37, & 44.

⁵⁰ Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 146-148; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 116.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

most important factor in the demise of the Safavid Dynasty was the alienation and antagonization of its non-Shi‘i subjects. Ritual purity law defined the social experience of non-Muslims under Safavid rule, particularly true for Jews in the latter half of the dynasty. This experience was not a positive one, and served to further entrench non-Muslims in their respective religious identities while dividing Safavid society, much to the chagrin of Safavid conversionists. With a fragmented populace and characteristically weak leadership in the last half century of the dynasty, an opportunistic outside threat would be all that was needed to bring the Shah to his knees, which was inadvertently facilitated by the fanatical anti-Sunni policy of Majlesi.⁵⁴ From the economic bludgeoning of its Jewish and Christian subjects to the rousing of militarily capable Sunni Afghan tribes, religious intolerance shaped the loyalties and animosities of the people, and thus the circumstances under which the Safavids fell.

Not only was the Safavid dynasty typified by religious intolerance, but the interpretation of Qur’an 9:28 as a proof-text for the ostracization of non-Muslims during this period would go on to shape the whole of Twelver Shi‘ism and the perception of the religion by the rest of the world. This was the first time that the concept of *najes* would be applied in a political sense to the entire population, affecting almost every arena of Safavid life by strictly defining the heterogeneous relationship between Shi‘is and non-Muslims. Never before had the perception of non-Muslims as communicable sources of pollution been implemented in the rule of law. The implementation and acceptance of the purity laws were the responsibility of the *ulama* and, more specifically, the powerful *mujtahids* who rose to power near equal that of the shah, such as Majlesi. The longstanding relationship between Muslim rulers and *dhimmis* would never again be the same in Iran, because the intermediary “controlling hand” of the shah had failed to intercede on communal affairs and uphold the legal protection afforded to *dhimmis*.⁵⁵ The Safavid period has gone down in history as an exceptional period in both Islamic and Iranian history, with the unique interpretation of *najes* avoidance and the establishment of Twelver Shi‘ism as the state religion, shaping both Shi‘i ideology and the life experiences of non-Muslims. In the end, the obsession with *najes* and the oppression of non-Shi‘is played a significant role in the dynasty’s fall and over half a century of decentralized state control.

⁵⁴ Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, 116.

⁵⁵ Savory, “Relations between the Safavid State,” 455.

Minor in Iranian Studies

The Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies is pleased to announce the OU Board of Regents approved the establishment of a Minor in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. The minor is administered through the OU College of International Studies and the Department of International and Area Studies. Students wishing to petition for the minor must satisfy the listed requirements. Please contact the advisers below for more information about the minor's requirements and procedures.

More information

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The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA
College of International Studies
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

Requirements for the Minor in Iranian Studies:

The minor in Iranian Studies consists of a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework, nine of which must be at the upper-division level. The credit hours are divided into required courses and elective courses as listed below:

Required Courses

All students petitioning for the minor in Iranian Studies must complete:

IAS 2003 Understanding Global Community (3 hours)
PERS 2113 Third Semester Persian (3 hours)

Elective Courses

Nine (9) additional upper-division hours from the list of three-credit-hour courses below. At least three of the hours must be taken in the Department of International and Area Studies. Other courses not listed below may also be approved for the minor, if they include significant Iran-related content and are approved by the faculty advisers.

IAS 3223 Modern Iran
IAS 3403 History of US-Iranian Relations
IAS 3413 Iran and Islam to 1800
IAS 3493 Iran Since 1979
IAS 3763 Women and Gender in the Middle East
IAS 3683 Poverty and Inequality in the Middle East
IAS 3753 Youth Culture in Contemporary Iran
FMS 3843 Topics in National Cinema: Iranian Cinema
ARCH: Survey of Middle Eastern Architecture