


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Ritual cursing as an oath of submission: The problem of religious difference across Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan

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(Received 9 September 2020; revised 19 February 2021; accepted 22 February 2021)

## Abstract

This article undertakes a comparison between Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan with the aim of highlighting the similarities and differences between their respective state projects of crafting ‘Islamic’ polities. The comparison proceeds through a focus on the state-sanctioned practice of ritual cursing of Sunnis and Ahmadis in Safavid Iran and Pakistan respectively. In both cases, the states made extensive legal efforts to mark out these religious Others by vilifying them on charges of heresy and innovation. This article argues that this vilification was oriented towards creating homogeneity among political subjects of the polity, who were required by the state to curse and condemn these religious Others in order to demonstrate their submission to sovereign power. Ritual cursing thus functioned as an oath of submission that was elicited by the state to draw subjects into the project of sacralizing the polity and to discipline them into reproducing the normative order of the sovereign power. There are also significant differences between the two cases that throw light on the historical specificity of different modes of sovereignty in early modern and modern Muslim polities. While Safavid kings sacralized their realm through the diffusion of scriptural law moulded to enhance their own sovereign power, the Pakistani state is engaged in the sacralization of the national body politic through its official religious nationalist ideology.

**Keywords:** Ritual cursing; religious minorities; sectarianism; Safavid empire; Pakistan

## Introduction

This article is part of a collaborative and comparative conversation aimed at rethinking the issue of how Muslim rulers and states dealt with the problem of

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religious difference across Islamic history. The central problematic, as elaborated by A. Azfar Moin, involves the issue of swearing oaths to seal formal treaties between monotheists and non-monotheists.<sup>1</sup> Not only does the Islamic legal corpus lack a formula for sealing treaties with non-monotheists, except by requiring the latter's conversion to monotheism, it restricts Muslim kings from accepting oaths on non-biblical deities. As Moin demonstrates, the solutions devised by Muslim kings to skilfully sidestep the scriptural prohibition against such oaths and treaties were diverse and ingenious, ranging from ritual substitutes for the words of oaths to elaborate policy frameworks that suspended or nullified scriptural law. The latter is exemplified by the Mughal policy of *sulh-i kull* (Universal or Total Peace), which forms the point of departure for this article.

The accommodation of different religious communities as equal imperial subjects constituted a central principle of governance in early Mughal India. After 1582, under emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), this was systematized through the notion of *sulh-i kull* and became a concrete and violently enforced state policy.<sup>2</sup> By deeming Muslims and Hindus as equally entitled to state protections, the policy of *sulh-i kull* essentially provincialized Islam, situating it as one religion among the multitude found in India. Significantly, the policy of *sulh-i kull* was meant to regulate religious differences not just between Muslims and non-Muslims but among the various Muslim sects as well. For example, when two Sunni courtiers waylaid and murdered a Shi'i for publicly cursing the companions of Muhammad, Akbar ordered the execution of the Sunnis.<sup>3</sup> Moin characterizes *sulh-i kull* as an oath of peace that denotes the state's requirement that subjects of the Mughal polity take an oath of loyalty to the emperor, as part of which they submit to living in peace with all fellow imperial denizens regardless of religious or sectarian affiliation. To live in Akbar's polity, in other words, was to undertake an oath shunning religious bigotry and prejudice in all its forms.

Akbar's defence of Shi'is is particularly striking because it stands in sharp contrast to the neighbouring Safavid empire in Iran where, by the 1580s, a doctrinally rigid Twelver Shi'ism was officially upheld as the state religion. In Iran at the time, the cursing of Prophet Muhammad's companions—deemed rivals and enemies of the revered Ali—was not only pursued as a state policy but was also required of all Safavid subjects of the realm.<sup>4</sup> The Safavid empire thus

<sup>1</sup> See Moin's framework article in this special issue.

<sup>2</sup> A review of the relevant literature is available in Moin's framework article in this special issue. See also Rajeev Kinra, 'Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility: The Global Historical Legacy of Mughal *Ṣulḥ-i Kull*', *The Medieval History Journal* 16, 2 (2013), pp. 251–295; Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign, with Special Reference to Abul Fazl, 1556–1605* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975); Iqtidar Alam Khan, *India's Polity in the Age of Akbar* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See Moin's framework article in this special issue. This was not an isolated incident. On another occasion, Akbar was infuriated when he heard that one of his judges had ordered the execution of a Brahman for allegedly cursing Muhammad and ordered that the judge be exiled to Mecca. Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age, 1000–1765* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), p. 235.

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson, 'The Tabarra'iyan and the Early Safavids', *Iranian Studies* 37, 1 (2004), pp. 47–71.

exemplifies a distinct political-theological project of creating a sacred Shi'i polity through a requirement that subjects of the realm undertake ritual cursing of Sunnis. In effect, ritual cursing is a type of oath in which one demonstrates one's loyalty by cursing, and thus excluding from the polity, the enemy of the true sovereign. While Mughal emperors required oaths of loyalty that forced subjects to rise above their particularistic religious or sectarian affiliation and accept all religions and sects as equally valid, the Safavids required ritual curses that absorbed their subjects into one sectarian affiliation and explicitly banned Sunni religious Others. Although embedded in a shared Turko-Persian Islamicate milieu, the Mughals and Safavid thus instituted two radically different solutions to the problem of religious difference.<sup>5</sup>

Essentially, the trajectory of religious change in the two polities moved in opposite directions in the course of the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> While the Mughal empire moved away from a Sunni confessional identity to universal accommodation of all religions and peoples, the Safavid empire became increasingly beholden to its self-imposed project of supporting Twelver Shi'ism. Over time, the Mughal kings adopted the trappings of sacred kingship whereby all religions were subordinated to the sacred body of the king, a process that reached its peak in the person and policies of Akbar. The Safavid empire, on the other hand, moved from sacred kingship—where the messianic saint-king Ismail I (the founder of the Safavid empire, r. 1501–1524) was above all scriptural law—towards the state support of a single confessional religion. In this, to a large degree, the Safavid empire resembled the Ottoman empire (which also supported a confessional religion—Sunni Islam), and its early modern European counterparts (where political units were aligned with specific confessions, depending on the religion of the ruler). In short, while both Mughal and Safavid kings articulated and legitimized their sovereign power through tropes of sacred kingship, the latter increasingly turned to scriptural law to anchor their claims to divine rule.

In its radical accommodation of religious difference, the Mughal empire stands in sharp contrast not only to its early modern neighbour in Iran but also to the post-colonial Muslim state of Pakistan. Since Pakistan's inception in 1947, non-Muslim minorities have faced discrimination with respect to both fully participating in the political life of the nation and from practising their religion with impunity. For example, the demands of Pakistan's Hindu politicians that a secular and inclusive vision of the nation be upheld in the constitution, which was debated in the immediate post-independence period,

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Canfield, 'Introduction: The Turko-Persian Tradition', in Robert L. Canfield (ed.) *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 1–15; Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. 3: *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Sadia Saeed, 'Islam, Modernity, and the Question of Religious Heterodoxy: From Early Modern Empires to Modern Nation-States', in Karen Barkey, Sudipta Kaviraj and Vatsal Naresh (eds) *Negotiating Democracy and Religious Pluralism: India, Pakistan, and Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 31–58 (in press).

<sup>6</sup> A. Azfar Moin, 'Millennial Sovereignty, Total Religion, and Total Politics', *History and Theory* 56, 1 (2017), pp. 89–97.

were explicitly rejected.<sup>7</sup> In 1985, under military ruler General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), the state introduced a series of anti-blasphemy laws that disproportionately target religious minorities, in particular Hindus and Christians.<sup>8</sup> However, it is the Ahmadiyya religious community, a minority ‘sect’ of Islam, that has undergone the most active state-sponsored vilification through a host of constitutional amendments and legislations.<sup>9</sup> Sunni Pakistan thus bears more resemblance to Shi’i Safavid Iran than its Mughal ancestor since both imposed novel ritual cursing mechanisms to solidify their narrow sectarian identities.

This article deploys a historical sociological approach to undertake a comparison between Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan. It aims to highlight the structural similarities and differences between their respective state projects of crafting ‘Islamic’ polities. In keeping with the broader aims of this collection of articles, the Mughal case forms the silent but active backdrop against which this comparison is deployed. The comparison proceeds through a focus on the specific state-sanctioned practice of ritual cursing of Sunnis and Ahmadis in Safavid Iran and Pakistan respectively. Certainly, Sunnis in Safavid Iran and Ahmadis in Pakistan are not the only minorities targeted by these states. The Safavid also undertook suppression of Sufis and non-Muslim minorities at various times, just as the Pakistani state discriminates against Hindus and Christians.<sup>10</sup> Both cases are striking, however, with respect to the intensity with which they have targeted and sought to discipline and punish domestic religious Others, notably the ‘innovators’ and ‘heretics’ within the Islamic tradition itself.

There are also significant differences between the two cases that can be productively deployed to compare how early modern projects of sacralizing Muslim empires differ from modern state projects of desecularization. Safavid Iran was an early modern state that developed a sectarian Shi’i confessional identity that eliminated all forms of Sunnism *to fulfil the aspirations of Safavid kings*. The Pakistani state is a modern nation-state that has undergone desecularization by focusing its energies on criminalizing the Ahmadis *in the*

<sup>7</sup> Sadia Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 89–93.

<sup>8</sup> Osama Siddique and Zahra Hayat, ‘Unholy Speech and Holy Laws: Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan –Controversial Origins, Design Defects and Free Speech Implications’, *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 17, 2 (2008), pp. 303–385.

<sup>9</sup> Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization*.

<sup>10</sup> On the suppression of Sufis in Safavid Iran, see Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). The forcible conversion of Christians captured by Shah Abbas I as he expanded his imperial realm northwest is discussed in Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004). Also see Roger M. Savory, ‘Relations between the Safavid State and its Non-Muslim Minorities 1’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, 4 (2003), pp. 435–458. The Pakistani state’s treatment of its religious minorities is documented in numerous reports compiled and published by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent non-governmental organization founded in 1987. See <http://hrqp-web.org/hrqpweb/publications/>, [accessed 23 June 2021].

*name of the Pakistani people.* While Safavid kings and the Pakistani state both undertook projects of sacralizing their polities, the earthly locus of sacrality is different in light of the different forms of political rule: pre-modern empire and modern nation-state. While Safavid kings sacralized their realms through the diffusion of scriptural law moulded to enhance their own sovereign power, the Pakistani state is engaged in the sacralization of the national body politic through its official religious nationalist ideology.

This article argues that Safavid kings and the Pakistani state enforced ritual cursing of Sunnis and Ahmadis respectively as a means for ordinary political subjects to show submission to their projects of crafting sacred polities. I thus characterize ritual cursing as an oath of submission that is elicited by sovereign authority to discipline its subjects into (re)producing its project of sacralizing the polity through marking and excluding the religious Other. However, while ritual cursing of Sunnis in Safavid Iran was justified through scriptural law, that of Ahmadis in Pakistan is justified by arguments about the religious sentiments of Pakistanis. In both cases, oaths of submission constituted by ritual cursing are required by the state from ordinary people to both project and legitimize state power and draw people into its project of sacralizing the polity. A comparison between Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan also draws attention to one of the key practices—ritual cursing—through which Muslim sacred polities have been realized across time.

### Sacred nations and religious others: Iqbal's case against the Ahmadis

In 1934, the esteemed Indian Muslim poet Muhammad Iqbal (in)famously called on colonial state authorities in British India to declare the Ahmadiyya community a 'separate community' from Indian Muslims.<sup>11</sup> The Ahmadiyya movement had originated in colonial India under the leadership of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), who made a series of claims, spread out over time and expounded in different writings, about being a Muslim reformer, *mahdi*, messiah, and finally, a prophet who was in communication with God.<sup>12</sup> Iqbal's demand is particularly consequential because he was one of the most renowned Indian Muslim intellectuals of his time. Furthermore, he was also a politician involved in a host of prominent political committees and causes.<sup>13</sup> Most notably, he served as president of the All India Muslim League in 1930. His presidential speech, delivered in this capacity, called for an autonomous political entity composed of the Muslim majority states of India. It has been widely perceived, especially in Pakistan where he is hailed as the country's 'national poet', as one of the first calls for 'Muslim separatism' in British India. Finally, Iqbal's thought has exhibited considerable malleability

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *Islam and Ahmadism* (Lahore: Ashraf Printing Press, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed analysis of Ahmadiyya religious faith, see Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Iqbal Singh Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal: Islam and Nationalism in Late Colonial India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 14.

and has been appropriated by various ideological groups in Pakistan, including secularists, *ulema*, and Islamists, to gain legitimacy for their causes.<sup>14</sup>

Iqbal's demand was made in the context of India's ongoing anticolonial movement. At this time, various visions and blueprints of the future Indian polity were in circulation as it increasingly became a foregone conclusion that India was resolutely moving towards self-government.<sup>15</sup> For Indian Muslims, this moment was characterized by contentious debates over the place of Muslims in India. A host of Muslim religious, political, and intellectual figures vied with each other over the question of the relationship between Islam and Western ideologies such as nationalism, liberalism, and communism. These debates were intimately entangled with contemporary constitutional questions about political representation, federalism, and minority rights.

Iqbal emerged as one of the key authorities on these questions and was in active dialogue with other prominent Indian Muslim ideologues and visionaries such as the educationalist Syed Ahmad Khan, Indian National Congress leader Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the Deobandi *alim* Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani, and the jurist Syed Ameer Ali.<sup>16</sup> Iqbal is the exemplar par excellence of this new group of Muslim intellectual elites of the colonial era: versed simultaneously in European philosophy and Islamic history; embedded in, yet critical of, secular colonial politics; and engaged in negotiating the 'modern' and the 'traditional' for new Muslim publics by discoursing on the desirable and undesirable aspects of both.<sup>17</sup> Such debates were occurring all across the Muslim world as modernists, *ulema*, and Islamists debated with each other in the context of the fragmentation of religious authority, rise of Western education, greater scope for non-traditionally trained scholars to interpret Islam, and democratization of public spheres through the proliferation of political and civic associations, public meetings and debates, and print publications.<sup>18</sup> In India itself, these debates were undertaken with an acute consciousness that Indian Muslims had gone from being rulers of the Indian sub-continent to being subjects of non-Muslim rulers. This realization was a key propellant of diverse projects within the Indian Muslim community, including religious reform movements such as Syed Ahmad Khan's efforts to steer Muslims towards gaining Western and scientific education, the Deobandi movement, and Iqbal's emphasis on reform and regeneration.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Iqbal's engagements and debates with these interlocutors are discussed in Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal*.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 13–24.

<sup>18</sup> On these historical developments, see Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'Introduction', in Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds) *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 1–46; and Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> On the Deobandi movement, see Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982). On South Asia's reformist *ulema*, see

Iqbal enumerated a number of intellectual reasons for his anti-Ahmadiyya demand.<sup>20</sup> Chief among these was that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claim to prophecy violated the fundamental Islamic tenet that prophethood ended with Muhammad. Iqbal noted correctly that Ahmad's claim had 'medieval' precedents when ordinary people had sought messiahs and revelation-bearing prophets, and had lived in an oppressive and self-negating state of expectation. However, times had now changed: 'Islam has already passed into the broad daylight of fresh thought and experience; and no saint or prophet can bring it back to the fogs of mediaeval mysticism.'<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, living in a state of messianic expectation, or looking to the messiah to reform society, militated against individual striving and thus hindered the development of individual personality. From this reasoning followed Iqbal's critique of the colonial state: 'Any religious adventurer in India can set up any claim and carve out a new community for his own exploitation. This liberal state of ours does not care a fig for the integrity of a parent community.'<sup>22</sup>

While Iqbal's invocation of the liberal state seems straightforward enough, it is, in fact, marked by a deep contradiction. By Iqbal's own admission, 'religious adventurers' had abounded and thrived in medieval India, successfully elaborating transgressive beliefs centred on the transmigration of souls, occult sciences, and saintly predictions. If pre-modern Muslim polities allowed 'religious adventurers' and if Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claims were traditional in that they had historical precedents, why did Iqbal hold the British colonial state to a higher standard of instituting what can only be described as religious orthodoxy? If pre-modern polities such as the Mughal empire did not 'care a fig for the integrity of a parent community', why should the modern state do so? Indeed, does it even make sense to speak of a 'parent community' in the context of sprawling and diverse pre-modern empires whose rulers had universalist aspirations?

As noted above, Iqbal was writing at a critical juncture when the end of empire as a political form of rule was imminent and the potential shapes of new post-colonial polities were being actively debated across the colonized global South.<sup>23</sup> His polemic against the Ahmadiyya community is striking because it conceptually straddles two distinct sociopolitical milieus: early modern

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Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that Iqbal had a personal animosity towards the Ahmadiyya community's spiritual leader Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmood Ahmad. Specifically, Iqbal's denunciation of Ahmadis was preceded by political rivalry between the two over the leadership of the All-India Kashmir Muslim Conference, a prominent political organization that championed the cause of Muslims under Hindu rule in the princely state of Kashmir. See Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 353–355. Sadia Saeed argues that this rivalry is indicative of the tensions attending democratic politics structured by separate electorates in British India. See Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization*, pp. 58–61.

<sup>21</sup> Iqbal, *Islam and Ahmadism*, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). For territorial imaginations of the budding Indian Muslim national community, see Devji, *Muslim Zion*.

Muslim empires ruled by kings and modern states governed in the name of the national community. Iqbal's 'religious adventurers' took many shapes and guises in the early modern world. From kings claiming divinity (as the Mughal emperor Akbar was accused of) to Sufi saints seeking royal status (as the Safavid dynasty achieved), a rich cast of characters sought to gain religio-political authority to proselytize and institute their vision of the ideal society.<sup>24</sup> Iqbal's scornful dismissal of this complex history of Islam under post-Mongol empires and his call for state regulation of the boundaries of the authentic Muslim community point to the new grip of nationalism on the imagination of Indian Muslim intellectuals.<sup>25</sup>

Nationalism entails a closure of the 'imagined community' of the nation.<sup>26</sup> The nation is composed of a historically delimited group of people whose bonds, in the face of the structural impossibility of maintaining direct interpersonal relationships, are nurtured through discursive articulations of shared history, language, customs, or some other salient attribute.<sup>27</sup> Nationalist ideologies function to legitimize and produce homogeneity among people comprising the nation, while marking out and excluding those people who do not share the core defining characteristics of the nation. This is the case for both liberal-secular nationalisms that uphold 'civic' values such as secularism, democracy, and rights as criteria for inclusion in the nation, and ethnic and religious nationalisms that make descent or religious identifications the criteria for inclusion in the nation.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, the nation is perceived as a historically exclusive, singular, and sacred entity that is greater than the sum of its individual parts and exerts, by virtue of holding sovereign power, a constitutive force on the polity that represents it.

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<sup>24</sup> Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs*; A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Shahzad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nūrbakhshīya Between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> A central idea animating political developments at this time in British India was the idea of national self-determination, which was given further impetus by international developments surrounding the end of the First World War. See, for example, Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). On developments in India at this time, especially the growing animosity between Hindus and Muslims, see Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Nationalism, Modernity, and Muslim Identity in India before 1947', in Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (eds) *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> This aspect of nationalism is elaborated in Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

<sup>28</sup> On the dichotomy between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalism, see Geneviève Zubrzycki, "'We, the Polish Nation": Ethnic and Civic Visions of Nationhood in Post-Communist Constitutional Debates', *Theory and Society* 30 (2001), pp. 629–668. For a discussion of the structural similarities between the two types of nationalism vis-à-vis exclusion of Others, see Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). For a good review of scholarship on religious nationalism, see Rogers Brubaker, 'Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches', *Nations and Nationalism* 18, 1 (2012), pp. 2–20.



Iqbal's demand that the colonial state officially cast Ahmadis outside the 'parent community' is indicative of his views on nationalism. As Iqbal Singh Sevea demonstrates, while Iqbal was deeply sceptical of liberal-secular nationalism that rendered religion a private affair and thus irrelevant to the task of modern governance, he fully endorsed religious nationalism as a basis for forming political communities.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Iqbal's religious nationalism was not tethered to territorial statehood and could be accommodated within a federal structure in a united India provided Muslims formed a majority ruling community in some states. It did, however, necessitate a neat and precise delineation of the boundaries of the Muslim community so as to distinguish between authentic Muslims—those who unequivocally upheld Islamic tenets of *tawhid* (oneness of Allah) and *risalat* (prophethood of Muhammad)—and those who did not.<sup>30</sup> Iqbal thus sought a homogenous Indian Muslim community constituted by a strict adherence to what he held to be the core tenets of Islamic faith. The Ahmadiyya community, by virtue of recognizing Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claims to be a messiah, generated disruptive centrifugal tendencies and was best expelled from the community of Islam.

British authorities did not pay any heed to Iqbal's demand. Indeed, one of the key self-justifications of British rule in India was its policy of religious non-interference.<sup>31</sup> It was only half a century later that Iqbal's ideal of state intervention in defining the boundaries of the Muslim community was realized, when in 1974 Pakistan's first democratically elected parliament officially declared Ahmadis a non-Muslim minority. This episode and the ensuing state-sanctioned demonization of Ahmadis illustrates the modern impulse towards *sacralizing the nation*, as I discuss below. This project was thoroughly driven by the *ulema* and Islamists in Pakistan and forms a logical next step to Iqbal's conception of Muslim nationalism.

Iqbal's project of establishing a homogenous polity lies in marked contrast with that of sacred kingship in the Mughal empire. It thus constitutes a rejection not only of the British colonial policy of secularism but, equally significantly, of the Mughal policy of *sulh-i kull*. As recent scholarship is increasingly demonstrating, the Mughal polity is the product of the post-Mongol milieu.<sup>32</sup> Following the Mongol invasions and the end of the institution of the Caliphate, Muslim rulers increasingly gravitated towards sacred kingship, with sovereignty deriving from the charisma of the saintly king.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal*, pp. 126–163.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>31</sup> Faisal Devji, 'Comments on Rajeev Bhargava's "The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism"', in T. N. Srinivasan (ed.) *The Future of Secularism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007); Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*; Matthew Melvin-Koushki, 'Early Modern Islamic Empire: New Forms of Religiopolitical Legitimacy', in Armando Salvatore et al. (eds) *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2018); Lisa Balabanlilar, 'Lords of the Auspicious Conjunction: Turco-Mongol Imperial Identity on the Subcontinent', *Journal of World History* 18, 1 (2007), pp. 1–39.

<sup>33</sup> See Moin's framework article in this special issue.

Post-Mongol rulers, in other words, had to contend with a world that had been significantly altered by Mongol political theology wherein the king was a divine entity.

The Mongol social contract with their subjects consisted of three elements: the superiority of the Mongol race; the acceptance of the legitimacy of the *yasa*, an informal body of law consisting of Chinggis Khan's injunctions; and a universalist ethos respectful of religious difference. Christopher P. Atwood argues that the Mongols engaged in a fundamentally novel project of religion-making.<sup>34</sup> The religious worldview of Mongols was based on the conviction that all people ultimately prayed to the same god. They accepted the truth of all (recognized) religions and saw the holy men of various religions as a valuable resource in that they gave Mongols further access to heavens (god) via their prayers. This was the outlook that was revived in the Mughal policy of *sulh-i kull* which also rejected the foundational biblical distinction between 'true' and 'false' religions, or what Jan Assmann calls the 'Mosaic distinction'.<sup>35</sup> Muslim Asia after the Mongols was awash with eclectic modes of inquiry, including occult sciences (such as lettrism and astrology), ancient philosophies, and mystical pursuits, producing highly innovative syntheses, often-times infused with the spirit of radical ecumenism.<sup>36</sup>

Herein lies Iqbal's primary significance for the arguments developed below. His demand that Ahmadis be placed outside a neatly delineated Muslim community exemplifies the impulse towards re-sacralization of the polity that had been secularized by the British. At the same time, it also constituted a critique of the pre-colonial accommodation of heterogenous and heterodox tendencies emanating from within the Islamic tradition. Infused with a religious reformist impulse, and deeply steeped in nationalist politics, Iqbal's demand is emblematic of a search for a new source of sovereignty in a post-Mughal and post-colonial era. Iqbal's demand that Ahmadis be expelled from the category 'Muslim' is both a critique of pre-colonial Muslim society where movements like the Ahmadiyya supposedly thrived and of the British colonial state that sought to render religious beliefs a private matter. As discussed below with reference to the Ahmadi question in Pakistan, Iqbal's demand anticipates the majoritarian and exclusionary logic of politics in contexts characterized by religious nationalism.

Before turning to the case of Pakistan, however, I will first analyse that of Safavid Iran. Scholars of British India have shown that colonialism led to the hardening of religious identities through governance techniques such as the census, systemization and imposition of personal religious law, and separate

<sup>34</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, 'Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in the Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century', *The International History Review* 26, 2 (2004), pp. 237–256. For a more recent perspective, also see Atwood's article in this special issue.

<sup>35</sup> Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Melvin-Koushki, 'Early Modern Islamicate Empire'. Also see Daniel J. Sheffield's article in this special issue.

electorates.<sup>37</sup> While these techniques were imbued with a colonial modern ethos, the broader process of state-imposed homogenization of religious communities through law has early modern precursors in the Muslim world. As I discuss next, armed with distinct repertoires, ideologies, and disciplinary techniques, Safavid kings too sought the homogenization of their realm through adopting Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion. Among other things, this project entailed the imposition on the population of cursing of enemies of Ali, that is, Sunnis. Strikingly, Sunnis of the realm were also required to undertake this ritual cursing. In a similar vein, Iqbal sought to penalize Ahmadis by demanding that the state forcibly evict them from the official category of 'Muslim', a policy ultimately adopted by the post-colonial Pakistani state. Furthermore, the latter also instituted the ritual cursing of Ahmadis by all Pakistanis. Below, I turn to these cases to demonstrate the continuities and differences between these two distinct projects of sacralizing polities through ritual cursing of religious Others.

### Sacralizing empire: Ritual cursing of Sunnis in Safavid Iran

The Safavids sacralized their imperial realm through the institutionalization of objectified sacred law, or the state *madhab* (school of jurisprudence). While the state *madhab* was a feature of a host of early modern Muslim empires, including the Timurid, Uzbek, and Ottoman empires, it was the Safavids who institutionalized it most rigorously.<sup>38</sup> The official religion that was proclaimed in the Safavid empire by its founding king Shah Ismail was Twelver Shi'ism.<sup>39</sup> At that time, although 'Alidism was rampant, including in its more extreme (*ghuluww*) forms, doctrinal Twelver Shi'ism was not. Consequently, there was little institutionalized Shi'ism in early sixteenth-century Iran. When Shah Ismail captured Tabriz in 1501 and proclaimed Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion, his supporters were hard pressed to find extant scholarship that would give practical guidelines for what this project would entail. No one among Shah Ismail's supporters seemed to know doctrinal aspects of Twelver Shi'ism and after a concerted effort, only one book on the topic could be produced.<sup>40</sup>

The declaration of Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion was propelled from the start by a concrete political agenda.<sup>41</sup> The driving force was the Persian

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> On the state *madhab* in early modern empires, see Guy Burak, 'The Second Formation of Islamic Law: The Post-Mongol Context of the Ottoman Adoption of a School of Law', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, 3 (2013), pp. 579–602.

<sup>39</sup> For a general account of Safavid empire, see Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008). For general accounts of religion and politics in Safavid Iran, see Michel M. Mazzaoui, *The Origins of the Safawids: Si'ism, Sufism, and the Gulat* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1972); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Social Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*; Colin Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Mazzaoui, *The Origins of the Safawids*, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Colin Mitchell, 'Sister Shia States? Safavid Iran and the Deccan in the Sixteenth Century', *Deccan Studies* 2, 2 (2002), pp. 44–72.

religious landscape, a cauldron bubbling with all stripes of religious groups and orientations, including militantly millenarian ones characterized by messianic expectations.<sup>42</sup> The practical issue confronting Shah Ismail was not Sunni heterodoxy but the realm's heterogeneity which was potentially inimical to his project of empire building. Consequently, the solution adopted was the tempering of this heterogeneity through pursuing homogeneity as a mode of social discipline.

The self-imposed challenge for Safavid Shahs was to create a doctrinally uniform Shi'i state, a project that was fulfilled by their patronage of *ulema*. As Rula Jurdi Abisaab demonstrates, Twelver Shi'i doctrines took shape slowly through the agency of a number of 'imported' scholars from Arab lands, particularly Jabal 'Amil from Syria.<sup>43</sup> These scholars transformed Shi'ism from 'a religion of the community to that of the state'.<sup>44</sup> The state in turn, especially under Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576), was active in disseminating the emerging positive law downwards to low-ranking scholars, political figures, merchants, and artisans. This downward dissemination was undertaken through the commissioning of new works, the production of accessible, abridged works and their translations, and official decrees.

The Safavid empire increasingly came to see itself as the guardian of *shari'a*. This led to Safavid kings conferring unprecedented authority and privileges on religious scholars of the realm. The supposed revival of *shari'a*, to be accomplished by leading *mujtahids*, would root out 'innovations' introduced by Sunnis. Consider the following lines in the text of a decree issued by Shah Tahmasp in 1533:

We consider the elevation of the banners of the sublime Prophetic Law (*shari'a*)—from the effect of the appearance of whose sun the marks of oppression and ignorance become removable from the space of the world and its Inhabitants—supportive of the pillars of sovereignty and rules of success; and we consider the revival of the customs of the Law of the Lord of the Messengers and the showing of the rightful path of the infallible Imams, God's benedictions be upon them—which have, like the truthful morn, lifted the darkening dust of the innovation of the opponents [i.e. the Sunnis]—as preliminaries to the appearance of the sun of the spread of justice and the nurturing of religion, the Lord of Time (*sahib al-amr*), peace be upon him.<sup>45</sup>

Here, Shah Tahmasp explicitly describes the upholding of *shari'a* as 'supportive of the pillars of sovereignty and rules of success' and situates the task as necessary in the face of 'the innovation' of Sunnis. Under Safavid rule, Sunnis

<sup>42</sup> Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*.

<sup>43</sup> Abisaab, *Converting Persia*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Said Amir Arjomand, 'Two Decrees of Shah Tahmasp Concerning Statecraft and the Authority of Shaykh 'Ali al-Karaki', in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.) *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 253.

routinely underwent extortion, intimidation, and harassment; as a result the practice emerged of a Sunni paying a 'protection fee' in exchange for buying testimony to his Shi'ism by a Shi'i.<sup>46</sup>

A principal aim of defining orthodoxy was the social disciplining of the imperial masses. This was undertaken through a range of social practices given scriptural sanction by the *ulema*. One such practice was the ritual cursing of the first three caliphs of Sunni Islam. Adherence to such practices of Twelver Shi'ism, it was perceived, would suppress 'millenarianism, shamanism and popular Sufi expressions' and 'inculcate popular conformity to clerical rulings across ethnic and class divisions'.<sup>47</sup> The evolution of the Safavid polity thus entailed a slow process of 'suppressing' the very tendencies—*ghuluww*, exaggerated 'Alidism, Sufism fused with Mazdean conceptions of cyclical time and dualisms—that were originally pivotal in creating the revolutionary Safavid brand.<sup>48</sup>

Upon assuming power, Shah Ismail massacred, imprisoned, and harassed religious groups and circles, especially those with Sunni leanings, that did not readily embrace his state doctrine.<sup>49</sup> Such policies were also adopted by subsequent Safavid Shahs. In pursuing these policies, Safavid kings subverted Mongolian statecraft practices discussed above which had militated against the Mosaic distinction between true and false religion. Initially, the primary difference authorized by the *ulema* was that between Sunnis and Shi'is. The prominent and virulently anti-Sunni Sheikh-ul Islam Abd al-'Ali al-Karaki sanctioned ritual cursing of companions of Muhammad held in reverence by Sunnis. He also sought to temper Shi'i 'exaggerations' by issuing a *fatwa* calling for the public cursing of Abu Muslim, the deeply revered iconic figure who, it was held, had been pivotal in ending corrupt Umayyad rule. The hero of popular epics termed *Abu Musilmnamehs*, his praise was now deemed a heretical act.<sup>50</sup>

The Safavid project of disciplining imperial subjects entailed not just a top-down imposition of the force of law but also, indeed through it, the formation of a community with core shared values, sentiments, and affects—that is, shared conceptions of taboos and revered objects, the profane and the sacred. One of the principal means by which this social disciplining was undertaken was through the institutionalization of the ritual curse. The practice of cursing, referred to as *sabb* in Arabic, dates back to Islam's first civil war (656–661). During the succession struggle between Ali and Mu'awiya, Ali initiated the practice and Mu'awiya and his supporters responded in kind. It appears that supporters of Mu'awiya continued the practice of cursing Ali even after their leader's death.<sup>51</sup> Over time, however, cursing (of Ali) was abandoned

<sup>46</sup> Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson, 'Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities during the Reign of Tahmasp I', *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994), pp. 123–133.

<sup>47</sup> Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*. Also see Said Amir Arjomand 'Religious Extremism (Ghuluww), Şūfism and Sunnism in Safavid Iran: 1501–1722', *Journal of Asian History* 15, 1 (1981), pp. 1–35.

<sup>49</sup> Mitchell, 'Sister Shia States?', p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 174.

by Sunnis, while cursing (of enemies of Ali) emerged as a routinized religious practice among the Shi'is.

Ritual cursing took on a distinct significance under Safavid rule. I argue that the ritual curse in Safavid Iran functioned as an *oath of submission*, the sign through which loyalty to the project of sacred empire was demonstrated. In keeping with established Shi'i practice, the central objects of the curse were the first three of the four so-called rightly guided caliphs of the Sunni faith: Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman. Other figures such as the Prophet Muhammad's wives Aisha and Hafsa, daughters of Abu Bakr and Umar respectively, were also routinely included.<sup>52</sup> More broadly, the state-imposed ritual curse served to demonstrate the power of the state, in particular its ability to procure an enunciation that *may or may not be* a personal truth. At the same time, it was also a pedagogical, and hence a disciplinary, resource since it was deployed to hasten the outward submission of the Sunni population to Twelver Shi'ism.

The social embedding of the ritual curse occurred in three phases: *the formative phase*, when ritual cursing was imposed on the Sunni notables of conquered lands; *the establishment phase*, when ritual cursing was undertaken by a group called *tabarra'ayan* at the behest of the state and imposed on the ordinary populace; and *the routinization phase*, when ritual cursing became entrenched as an ordinary, that is, non-coerced, and ubiquitous characteristic of public religiosity. The role of the ritual curse in the formative phase of Safavid empire can be gleaned from the revealing account of Zeyn al-Din Vasefi (1485 to c. 1551), a minor poet based in Timurid Herat.<sup>53</sup> Vasefi's account of Herat in the years surrounding its conquest by Shah Ismail in 1510 throws light on the practice of ritual cursing by Shi'is. Vasefi first narrates a personally witnessed incident involving the ritual curse *before* Herat's capture. A certain Hasan Ali the Eulogizer who, upon publicly singing ritual praises of Ali, followed by cursing of the companions of Prophet Muhammad, was taken to the city's Sheikh-ul-Islam by a Sunni mob, charged with heresy, and put to death by hanging. The rage of his companion at witnessing the cursing, and Vasefi's response that 'there are many ill-fated ones like him [Hasan Ali the Eulogizer] in this city just as there are many Sunnis like you and me', suggests that at the time Herat had a significant Shi'i presence.<sup>54</sup> At this point, ritual cursing was a practice undertaken mostly by lone eulogizers or by specific groups with 'Alid leanings. We also learn that this incident occurred at a time when Shah Ismail was campaigning in nearby Iraq, which possibly gave confidence to Herat's Shi'is to publicly engage in ritual cursing.

Upon Herat's capture, ritual cursing immediately assumed a different function. Significantly, it was deployed by the victorious army as a performance of sovereignty. However, it was not merely the victorious army that engaged in

<sup>52</sup> Stanfield-Johnson, 'The Tabarra'ayan'.

<sup>53</sup> Azfar Moin, 'Shah Isma'il Comes to Herat: An Anecdote from Vasefi's "Amazing Events" (Badayi' al-Vaqai')', in Behrad Aghaie and Mehdi Khorami (eds) *A Persian Mosaic: Essays on Persian Language, Literature and Film in Honor of M. R. Ghanoonparvar* (Bethesda, MD: Ibex Publishers, 2015), pp. 86–101.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

public cursing, a practice that would not have been possible under Sunni rule. Rather, the victory proclamation that was handed to Herat's Sunni notables to be read aloud as a sign of their acquiescence to the new ruler explicitly contained execrations of 17 of Prophet Muhammad's companions, raising the dilemma of whether the unfortunate Sunni notable chosen to deliver the proclamation ought to engage in this deeply repugnant practice. While the Sheikh-ul-Islam of Herat was in favour of reading the victory proclamation, as prepared, on grounds of expediency, especially since the victorious Qizilbash was standing guard and overseeing the ceremony, the appointed notable refused to read the ten lines containing the curses. Consequently, he was cut to pieces on the spot by the Qizilbash. Vasefi's account provides a vivid picture of both the extent of anti-Sunni sentiment among the Qizilbash as they overtook the streets of Herat chanting 'Sunni dogs' and 'dissenters', and undertaking rituals of conquest such as the burning of the shrine of the revered Naqshbandi saint Nūr ad-Dīn 'Abd ar-Rahmān Jāmī.<sup>55</sup>

Although accounts by Safavid court historians describe Shah Ismail as authorizing the cursing and vilification of the first three Sunni caliphs in his victory address at Tabriz in 1501, Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson argues that these represent post hoc projections. She estimates that Shah Ismail formally endorsed the practice after obtaining a favourable *fatwa* from al-Karaki in 1511.<sup>56</sup> Based on her analysis of Al-Karaki's writings exhorting ritual cursing, Christiane Gruber argues that for Al-Karaki, the cursing and his hatred of enemies of Islam is sanctioned by the Quran itself and was, in Al-Karaki's own words, 'a most beloved form of devotion'.<sup>57</sup> Al-Karaki maintained that the enemies of Islam (that is, usurpers of Ali's authority) were cursed by God himself and would eventually find themselves in hell. Al-Karaki, Gruber argues, both 'turned the popular practice of cursing into a quintessential marker of Shi'i orthopraxy' and was pivotal in legitimizing 'the state-sponsored program to implement Shi'i ideology across Persian lands'.<sup>58</sup>

Al-Karaki's *fatwa* was announced through a royal decree and signified to the Shi'is of the realm that the practice of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), historically adopted by Shi'is under Sunni rulership, could now be abandoned. That Shah Ismail obtained clerical approval demonstrates the extent to which the project of sacralizing the empire was perceived as proceeding through the agency of the *ulema*. Public religiosity would be managed by the state through the agency of its clerical elites.

In the first conquest phase, as noted above, the ritual curse served to humiliate and intimidate the now-subjugated Sunnis in the newly acquired imperial realm. In the second establishment phase, the ritual curse was introduced in post-conquest social life, including in courtly ritual, religious

<sup>55</sup> Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign*, p. 83.

<sup>56</sup> Stanfield-Johnson, 'The Tabarra'iyan', p. 59.

<sup>57</sup> Christiane Gruber, 'Curse Signs: The Artful Rhetoric of Hell in Safavid Iran', in Christian Lange (ed.) *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 297–335, 305; Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics*, pp. 72–73, 77–79.

<sup>58</sup> Gruber, 'Curse Signs', pp. 312, 330.

gatherings, and public life. This phase saw the emergence of a novel social group, the *tabarra'īyan*, who would pronounce the *tabarra'* (ritual curse).<sup>59</sup> *Tabarra'īyan* (lit. 'dissociaters' or 'disavowers') were an occupational group whose role was to engage in, promote, and act as guardians of the ritual curse. They emerged as a corporate group under Shah Tahmasp. They were recruited from the lower sections of society, in particular indigent Sufis (*qalandaran*). Being signed up to serve within the *tabarra'īyan* is likely to have been a route to upward mobility. They formed part of the Shah's entourage during his public assemblies, preceding him and crying out ritual curses. Similar displays were enacted for the benefit of foreign dignitaries. They also took part in popular ceremonies, cursing the companions of Muhammad, Ottomans, and other enemies, past and present, of the Safavids. They were also known to shout and sing ritual curses in public squares and bazaars of major cities. For these functions, *tabarra'īyan* received compensation both from the state directly as well as from people, and over time they became respected members of the court.

Significantly, the *tabarra'īyan* also acted as local vigilantes, spying on people in order to identify practising Sunnis, monitoring public places, and overseeing the performance of the ritual curse. Through them, the ritual curse became a pervasive element of public life. The *tabarra'īyan* appear to have had real, everyday power since the group often engaged in extortion, harassment, and threats in order to procure protection fees from the vulnerable among the populace, most likely the crypto-Sunnis. On the whole, accounts of Shah Tahmasp's rule convey the public pervasiveness of the ritual curse: it was instituted in mosques (it was substituted for Sunni Friday prayers), in royal ceremonies, in city streets and markets. The cursing could be an impromptu or a highly formulaic ritual. And the objects of cursing could include a wide group, ranging from Muhammad's companions, his wives, Sunni imams (founders of *madhabs*), prominent Umayyad and Abassid caliphs, revered Sunni figures, and Ottoman rulers.

The prominence of ritual cursing under Safavid rule can be witnessed by a letter written by the Ottoman sultan Suleyman (r. 1520–1566) to Shah Tahmasp in which he specifically protested against the practice of vilifying the first three Sunni caliphs.<sup>60</sup> Shah Tahmasp's response to Suleyman demonstrates the critical role of the *tabarra'īyan* in routinizing the practice:

We in the God-protected realms have ordered that *the ritual disavowers and indigent darvishes and the multitude of people* who have been chanting the curse of the enemies of the family of the lord of the prophets and the sayyid of the guardians of the faith through cursing in the heart and aloud (*bi la'n-i jali*), from this day should count you and your followers among the accursed Bani `Umayya, Bani Marwan, Barmaka, and Bani

<sup>59</sup> The discussion of *tabarra'īyan* draws on Stanfield-Johnson, 'The Tabarra'īyan'.

<sup>60</sup> Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, p. 18. Colin Mitchell's study of chancellery materials of the Safavid court reveals that ritual curses could also be included in diplomatic correspondence, depending on the occasion. Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics*, p. 79.



‘Abbas [whom they curse] in the markets, quarters, mosques, academies, and from the pulpits.’<sup>61</sup> (Italics mine)

That Shah Tahmasp mentioned ‘the ritual disavowers’ and a wide array of public places—the markets, neighbourhoods, mosques, academies, pulpits—depicts his aspiration to sacralize ordinary social spaces in his imperial realm through inundating these with ritual cursing. Clearly, ritual cursing became a means of controlling and disciplining individual bodies (tongues) and minds while drawing people directly into the Safavid project.

The protest against ritual cursing by the Ottoman sultan depicts that ritual cursing also had an international significance. Indeed, Ottoman ire at the practice ran deep. One of the key clauses present in the Peace of Amasya, a treaty signed by Shah Tahmasp and Sultan Suleyman in 1555 following the end to an Ottoman-Safavid War, held that Safavids would end ritual cursing of the first three caliphs. By then, state-institutionalized ritual cursing had become a Safavid import, especially to the Shi’i Deccani kingdoms in Mughal India. By one account, some 300 *tabarra’i* were sent to the Adilshahi state of Bijapur in a 1519 Safavid embassy. Akin to Safavid Iran, this group was tasked with patrolling settlements and ‘forcing’ local populations to ‘publicly defame the first three caliphs’.<sup>62</sup>

The next stage in the development of the ritual curse was initiated by the Sunni-leaning Shah Ismail II. His short reign saw critical policy reversals, which included the banning of the ritual curse and dismantling the *tabarra’i-yan*.<sup>63</sup> Ismail II also instituted monetary prizes for those who could prove that they had never cursed the first three caliphs or the wives of the Prophet, especially Aisha. By one account, Ismail II sought to procure a *fatwa* in favour of his decree against cursing from al-Karaki’s grandson Sayyid Husayn al-Karaki, who refused to sanction Ismail II’s decree upon pain of imprisonment. Soon thereafter, Ismail II died mysteriously. Clearly, the sacred empire had become a non-negotiable element of sovereignty by this time. A Safavid king who did not endorse the sacred empire could not survive. Upon Ismail II’s death, the *tabarra’iyan* ruthlessly pursued, tortured, and harassed the crypto-Sunni statesman Mirza Makhdum Sharifi at whose behest, it was believed, Ismail II has undertaken his pro-Sunni activities. After this incident, the *tabarra’iyan* do not appear in Safavid accounts, suggesting that they were not reinstated by future kings.

The ritual curse subsequently underwent a third routinization phase. Starting with Shah Abbas (r. 1588–1629), the ‘Shi’itization of the Safavid empire’ started undertaking new forms such as fiscal incentives for converting to and maintaining the Shi’i faith, intensification of clerical activities, and forced conversions of Christians captured in Shah Abbas’s westward military excursions.<sup>64</sup> The primary targets of Shah Abbas’s policies were no longer

<sup>61</sup> Stanfield-Johnson, ‘The Tabarra’iyan’, p. 51.

<sup>62</sup> Mitchell, ‘Sister Shia States?’, pp. 56–57.

<sup>63</sup> Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics*, p. 150.

<sup>64</sup> Abisaab, *Converting Persia*, pp. 57–59, 61–64.

Sunnis but rather Christians and 'heterodox' groups such as the Nuqtavis.<sup>65</sup> By this point, anti-Sunni sentiments had become suitably normalized and presumably did not require the coercive power of the state. Ritual cursing was a critical element of public religiosity, as for example in the annual Muharram processions, which also included other intensely anti-Sunni rituals such as the burning of effigies of Caliph Umar.<sup>66</sup>

We also know that ritual cursing remained in use well beyond the Safavid period. In fact, the post-Safavid Afghan Sunni ruler Nadir Shah (r. 1736–1747) tried unsuccessfully to create rapprochement between Sunnism and Twelver Shi'ism by presenting the latter as a fifth, Ja'fari, *madhab* of Islam. He proposed to the Ottomans that they accept the Ja'fari *madhab* as legitimate in exchange for which he would prohibit practices objectionable to Sunnis, in particular ritual cursing, in Iran.<sup>67</sup> These efforts came to no avail. However, they suggest the social pervasiveness of the ritual curse and its gradual autonomy from the state. The practice of ritual cursing of the first three caliphs of Islam was brought to an end by *fatwas* issued in modern post-revolutionary Iran in the face of national and international contingencies that formed the impetus towards Sunni-Shi'i ecumenism.<sup>68</sup>

### Sacralizing the nation: Ritual cursing of Ahmadis in Pakistan

The sacralization of Pakistan via the Ahmadi question has strong parallels with the sacralization of the Safavid empire through the demonization of Sunnis. Both polities deployed state-sanctioned ritual cursing of internal Others as oaths of submission, thereby ensuring that ordinary subjects would become complicit in, and faithfully reproduce, their sacralization projects. Through enforcing these oaths, both polities sought religious homogenization among the people. Finally, both sought to discipline ordinary subjects by benefiting from vigilantes and spies acting as enforcers of religious orthodoxy. On the whole, similarities between Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan throw light on the recurring practices through which projects aimed at sacralizing Muslim polities have been pursued across time.

<sup>65</sup> The Nuqtavis were a religious group that emphasized belief in cyclical renewal beyond Islam, apocalypticism, messianic ideas, continuous prophecies, and Gnosticism. It was largely tolerated by Shah Tahmasp but underwent intense persecution under the reign of Shah Abbas. On the Nuqtavis, see Kathryn Babayan, 'The Safavid Synthesis: From Qizilbash Islam to Imamite Shi'ism', *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994), pp. 135–161, and Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 73–89.

<sup>66</sup> Jean Calmard, 'Shi'i Rituals and Power II: The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion', in Charles Melville (ed.) *Safavid Persia: The History and Politics of an Islamic Society* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 139–190.

<sup>67</sup> Ernest Tucker, 'Nadir Shah and the Ja'fari Madhhab Reconsidered', *Iranian Studies* 27 (1994), pp. 163–179.

<sup>68</sup> Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought*, p. 46. However, Sunnis are not an officially recognized religious community in Iran today. The object of the state's ire, however, is another unrecognized religious community, the Baha'is, who have undergone intense persecution. On Baha'is in Iran, see essays in Dominic P. Brookshaw and Seena Fazel (eds) *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Sovereignty in modern nations ensues from the principle of national self-determination. This principle refers both to the political right of a group to form its own government when it constitutes a majority in a particular territory, and the right of this national group to preserve its existence as a unique social group with distinct cultural expressions.<sup>69</sup> These latter cultural rights are upheld even in those cases when the ruling classes paternalistically deem the people to be unfit to vote responsibly. Authoritarian leaders also typically justify their rule in the name of the people they supposedly represent. The rejection of democracy here is undertaken in the name of those who, it is argued, will fare better—‘develop’—with a strong leader at the helm guiding affairs, coordinating bureaucracies, and representing the nation in international affairs.<sup>70</sup> The task of the state, even in these situations, is to give expression to the nation by articulating its distinction and genius, both for national and international audiences. It is precisely this relationship between ordinary people and sovereign power that distinguishes colonial states from post-colonial ones.<sup>71</sup> While the former too justified their rule in the name of bringing development and civilization to the people they governed, they perceived and treated colonized people as racially inferior and themselves as racially superior.<sup>72</sup>

Herein also lies the critical difference between modern and pre-modern imperial polities. In the latter, ordinary people were locked into naturalized status differences with their primary significance resting on producing surplus value that could be procured by the imperial state through tributary modes of production.<sup>73</sup> In pre-modern societies, ordinary subjects served the state, with their roles defined on the basis of their status, ethnicity, religion, and/or hereditary. Imperial projects such as Akbar’s policy of *sulh-i kull* and the Safavid policy of instituting a confessional empire were thus not undertaken in the name of ordinary subjects. Rather, these represented good and worthy policies that dovetailed with imperial values, such as delivering justice or establishing God’s rule, and enhanced the glory and grandeur of the king. In modern societies, on the other hand, the state serves the people, who are formally equal and provide the *raison d’être* for the very existence of the political community.

As scholars of anticolonial nationalism have demonstrated, national consciousness in the global South emerged in tandem with anticolonial movements

<sup>69</sup> Yael Tamir, ‘The Right to National Self-Determination’, *Social Research* 58, 3 (1991), pp. 565–590.

<sup>70</sup> For a critical appraisal of the development idea, see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>71</sup> David Gilmartin thus refers to the ‘enchanted individual’ in modernity. This sovereign and autonomous political subject is constituted through the act of voting for their chosen representative. David Gilmartin, ‘Towards a Global History of Voting: Sovereignty, the Diffusion of Ideas, and the Enchanted Individual’, *Religions* 3 (2012), pp. 407–423.

<sup>72</sup> Partha Chatterjee terms this ‘the rule of colonial difference’. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> On the tributary mode of production, see Samir Amir, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

that sought to end colonial rule.<sup>74</sup> The people, conceived of as a single unified nation, were thus first sacralized in the course of anticolonial struggles. Yet, even as these anticolonial movements were unfolding, traditional differences and fault lines continued to interrupt, and expose the contradictions in, the project of creating homogenous nations out of multi-religious and multi-ethnic empires. The result in the South Asian subcontinent was the ultimate adoption of the so-called two-nation theory. The theory was articulated by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the All India Muslim League (AIML), in a speech delivered on the occasion of the passage of the Lahore Resolution in 1940. It called for an autonomous and sovereign state constituted by the Muslim-majority provinces of India. Upon emerging as 'the sole spokesman' of the Indian Muslim community by virtue of AIML's electoral victories in the key 1945–46 elections, Jinnah was able to turn the two-nation theory into a concrete reality.<sup>75</sup> However, the problem of religious difference was not limited to the Muslim/Hindu distinction. A critical issue that occupied both the Pakistan movement and the subsequent independent polity that it produced was the question of the boundaries of the Indian Muslim community, which eventually turned on the place of the Ahmadiyya community in the budding nation. As noted above, the Ahmadi issue was addressed by Iqbal himself before the creation of Pakistan, and his solution to the 'Ahmadi problem' was the forcible declaration of Ahmadis as non-Muslim by the British colonial state.

Although not phrased as such, the Pakistani state has authorized practices that closely parallel the ritual cursing of Sunnis in Safavid Iran. In Pakistan too, 'cursing' of Ahmadis functions as a sign of submission to the project of sacralizing the Pakistani nation. In fact, the official cursing of Ahmadis is as old as the Pakistan movement itself and dates to the pre-independence period when the contours of the Indian Muslim community were being defined by the AIML. As noted above, Iqbal himself was a key member of AIML, serving as its president in 1930.

Anti-Ahmadiyya sentiment at this time was particularly acute in the state of Punjab, the place of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's birth and residence, and the site of intense polemical and physical clashes between Christian missionaries, Hindu reform movements (in particular the Arya Samaj), mainstream Muslim groups, and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and his followers.<sup>76</sup> Colonial Punjab, and especially the environs of Qadian, the city in which Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and the subsequent Ahmadiyya community operated, were thus a hotbed of religious controversy. Furthermore, colonial Punjab witnessed the intense propagation of anti-Ahmadiyya polemics by both local *ulema* armed with *fatwas* declaring Mirza Ghulam Ahmad a heretic, and local militant political groups such as the Majlis-e-Ahrar-Islam-e-Hind (in short, Ahrar) intent on establishing their

<sup>74</sup> On post-colonial nationalism, see Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, and Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>75</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>76</sup> Spencer Lavan, *The Ahmadiyah Movement: A History and Perspective* (Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1974).

Islamic credentials since they were politically aligned with the secularist Congress party.<sup>77</sup>

As the Pakistan movement gained traction in the aftermath of the disastrous 1936–37 elections that witnessed an extremely poor showing by the AIML, the Ahmadiyya community sought to contribute to the movement's success. This entailed crafting a place for itself within the AIML which was, however, resisted by the organization's Punjab wing.<sup>78</sup> In fact, the latter not only denied membership to Ahmadis but also instituted a specific declaration that all members of the Punjab AIML intending to run for elections for seats in the Punjab Legislative Assembly were required to make:

I solemnly promise that if I am elected, I will seriously struggle to get 'Mirzais' declared a separate minority from the Muslims for the betterment of Islam and Hindustan.<sup>79</sup>

Although the exact date at which this oath was made mandatory is not known, it was in place in 1938 when the Ahmadiyya community officially complained about it directly to Jinnah. It also appears that the oath was discarded by the time of 1945–46 elections since the Ahmadiyya community actively sought, albeit unsuccessfully, to field candidates on AIML tickets. The brief appearance of the oath nonetheless demonstrates that even before the adoption of the two-nation theory in 1940 by the AIML, loyalty to the Indian Muslim community in the Muslim majority province of Punjab was pegged to the denunciation and vilification of 'Mirzais', a pejorative term for Ahmadis. The declaration, however, was made compulsory not for individual AIML members but for those seeking to represent the Indian Muslim community of 'Hindustan'.

Another aspect of the cursing of Ahmadis can be gleaned from the literal cursing of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad that was almost ritualistically undertaken in polemics against Ahmadis by *ulema*, both before and after Pakistan's independence. This aspect was brought to fore in the official inquiry conducted by two judges of the Lahore High Court in 1954 in order to inquire into, and impute responsibility for, the breakdown of law and order that followed the anti-Ahmadiyya movement of 1952–53. This was a broad-based movement centred in Punjab in which the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, led by Abul A'la Maududi, allied with boisterous political groups, notably the Ahrar, demanded that the Pakistani state officially declare Ahmadis a non-Muslim minority.<sup>80</sup> The state explicitly rejected this demand, imprisoned Maududi and other prominent leaders of the movement, and launched an inquiry. The resulting voluminous Munir Inquiry Report (as it is popularly referred to) explicitly notes the routine practice of vilifying Mirza Ghulam Ahmad by

<sup>77</sup> Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization*, p. 59.

<sup>78</sup> Note that after the independence of Pakistan, Punjab would become the dominant province of Pakistan, especially after the civil war of 1971 which led to the creation of Bangladesh in what was formerly East Pakistan.

<sup>79</sup> Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization*, p. 69.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94–97; Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 131–142.

*ulema*. It cites, as a ‘specimen’, the following from a speech by an Ahrari leader delivered in November 1949:

We don’t blame Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, false as he was, because he committed fornication only occasionally. Our objection is to the present khalifa [current leader of the Ahmadiyya community] who commits fornication every day.<sup>81</sup>

The Munir Inquiry Report summarizes the vitriol levelled against Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and subsequent community leaders, in particular Sir Zafrullah Khan, the Ahmadi foreign minister of Pakistan. Among other things, the Report notes the following: ‘the writings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad are quoted ad nauseam and twisted and obscene and indecent inferences drawn’; ‘Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and the present khalifa are described as adulterers and given to unnatural indulgences’; ‘the Ahmadis are described as traitors who have no loyalty towards Pakistan’; and ‘Sir Zafrullah is vilified and abused [... and] often described as an “ass” and as a “knave” and it is imputed to him that he will barter Kashmir to safeguard Ahmadi interests at Qadian’.<sup>82</sup> Such rhetoric was deemed problematic by the Report because of its ubiquity and almost ritualistic pervasiveness in the public meetings organized by the Ahrar and its associated *ulema*, which were widely attended by Pakistani Muslims, especially in Punjab.

After 1954, the mantle of leading anti-Ahmadiyya agitation was passed to a new group that was formed in the early 1950s for those members of the Ahrar dedicated to the anti-Ahmadiyya cause solely as an act of religious piety and not for political gain. Named the Majlis-e-Tahaffuz-e-Khatme Nabuwat (lit. The Assembly to Protect the Finality of Prophethood, MTKN), this group came to closely approximate the *tabarra’iyan* of Safavid Iran. As its name suggests, the group declares its central mission to be the protection of the doctrine of the finality of prophethood. In majoritarian Islam, the institution of prophecy is deemed to have terminated with Prophet Muhammad who holds the ‘seal of prophecy’. The principal charge levied against Mirza Ghulam Ahmad by orthodox *ulema* is that he had sought to usurp the status of Muhammad by proclaiming himself a prophet. The Ahmadiyya position on prophecy, however, is more nuanced. Initially in his career, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad claimed to be a *mujaddid* (renewer of faith), a messiah, and the *mahdi* (the rightly guided one).<sup>83</sup> His subsequent claims to prophecy drew on medieval Islamic notions centred on expectations around the appearance of non-legislative prophets whose appearance was foretold by Muhammad himself. According to these traditions, non-legislative prophets would appear as *zilli* (shadowy) and *buruzi* (manifestational) prophets, that

<sup>81</sup> Lahore High Court, *Report of the Court of Inquiry Constituted under Punjab Act II of 1954 to enquire into the Punjab Disturbances of 1953* (Lahore: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1964), p. 15.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>83</sup> Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous*, pp. 105–118.

is, as extensions of Muhammad himself.<sup>84</sup> These claims and interpretations are rejected by orthodox *ulema*.

The MTKN was formed principally as an anti-Ahmadiyya group and situates its enmity with Ahmadis as a sign of its devotion to Muhammad. This enmity is expressed through inundating Pakistani Muslims with 'truths' about Ahmadis. This is accomplished through its printing press, which almost exclusively generates anti-Ahmadiyya polemical literature, and by preaching against Ahmadis in small towns and major cities all over Pakistan. Furthermore, members of MTKN serve as vigilantes and spies, monitoring the actions of Ahmadis as well as keeping anti-Ahmadiyya sentiment alive among the populace. Akin to the *tabarra'iyān* of the Safavid empire who were motivated by their devotion to Ali, anti-Ahmadiyya groups have been motivated by their devotion to Muhammad. In both cases, devotion to religion entails rooting out the heretical innovators within. Just as in the Safavid empire, where *walāya* (the believer's spiritual drawing closer to Ali) entailed distancing and disassociation from enemies of Ali, in Pakistan, the drawing closer to Muhammad entails the disavowal of enemies of Muhammad, in particular the Ahmadis, whose leader Mirza Ghulam Ahmad sought to usurp Prophet Muhammad's charisma.

In 1974, a large-scale religious movement was launched by a coalition of MTKN and Islamist parties. At that time the latter formed a numerically small opposition in Pakistan's first democratically elected National Assembly during the Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto era (1971–77). They successfully campaigned for the issue of the religious status of Ahmadis to be placed before the National Assembly, which was subsequently converted into a Special Committee to debate the religious status of Ahmadis by posing questions directly to the spiritual leaders of the Ahmadiyya community, who were invited to appear before the Committee. The Second Constitutional Amendment of Pakistan, adopted by a unanimous vote of the Assembly, describes a Muslim in terms of what they are not, as follows:

A person who does not believe in the absolute and unqualified finality of The Prophethood of Muhammad (Peace be upon him), the last of the Prophets or claims to be a Prophet, in any sense of the word or of any description whatsoever, after Muhammad (Peace be upon him), or recognises such a claimant as a Prophet or religious reformer, is not a Muslim for the purposes of the Constitution or law.<sup>85</sup>

A Muslim is thus defined as a person who actively does not believe in or recognize claimants to prophecy after Muhammad. The term 'religious reformer' is also inserted to ensure that Ahmadis do not wiggle out of the circle of 'not a Muslim' by claiming, as some Ahmadis do, that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a religious reformer and not a prophet.

Strikingly, the justifications given for declaring Ahmadis non-Muslim during the course of the Special Committee's proceedings were not grounded in

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124–132.

<sup>85</sup> Constitution (Second Amendment) Act of 1974, Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

traditional *shari'a* rulings but in wholly modern claims about the imperatives of democratization in a Muslim nation-state.<sup>86</sup> However, the issue was brought to the National Assembly on largely Islamic grounds. The 22 members of the National Assembly belonging to opposition parties (mostly Islamist) who were at the forefront of the campaign to get the state to declare all followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad 'not Muslims' justified their demands on the following grounds: Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's 'false declaration to be a prophet, his attempts to falsify numerous Quranic texts and to abolish Jihad were treacherous to the main issues of Islam'; Mirza Ghulam Ahmad 'was a creation of imperialism for the sole purpose of destroying Muslim solidarity and falsifying Islam'; the entire Muslim *ummah* considers Ahmadis 'outside the pale of Islam'; and Ahmadis are 'indulging in subversive activities internally and externally by mixing with Muslims and pretending to be a sect of Islam'.

During the proceedings, the attorney general of Pakistan Yahya Bakhtiar, who served as the state's advocate, provided the primary justifications for the inquiry on strictly secular and constitutional grounds. A brief discussion on the first day of the proceedings explicitly dealt with the issue of the authority of the Pakistani state to determine the religious status of Ahmadis. Although Ahmadiyya community representatives consented to appear before the National Assembly, their spiritual head Mirza Nasir intimated that religion was a matter of 'heart and conscience' and that the very fact of the proceedings interfered with the constitutional right, enshrined in Article 20 of the Pakistani Constitution, to freedom of religious expression. It thus became incumbent on the state to present statist reasons and justifications for the proceedings.

Some of these justifications included, first, the 'hurt sentiments' of Pakistani Muslims, which is a modern nationalist argument. Second, it was noted that limits to freedom of religious belief and expression were practised even by liberal secular states, as seen, for example, by the abolition of the Hindu practice of *sati* (widow burning) in British India. In this instance, justifications for setting limits to religious freedoms, which is undertaken (at least in theory) by liberal states to curb illiberal religious practices, were invoked by an illiberal but democratic state to curb a constitutionally guaranteed right. Third, reference was also made to the preamble to Pakistan's constitution as well as specific constitutional clauses. These included Article 20 that makes religious freedoms 'subject to law, public order and morality'; the clause in the constitutional preamble, or the Objectives Resolution, that enjoins the Pakistani state to take steps that enable Muslims to live their individual and collective lives in accordance with the teachings and principles of Islam; and Article 2 of the Pakistani Constitution which declares Islam the state religion of Pakistan.

Lest there be any confusion that the Second Constitutional Amendment deemed Ahmadis non-Muslim, a subsequent constitutional amendment was made through an executive order by military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) in 1983 which names all non-Muslim communities of Pakistan and includes the Ahmadiyya community alongside Christians, Hindus, Sikhs,

<sup>86</sup> This discussion is based on Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization*, pp. 128–133.



and Buddhists.<sup>87</sup> Subsequently in 1984, the Pakistani state introduced legislation that explicitly criminalizes Ahmadis who refer to themselves as Muslim or their places of worship as mosques.<sup>88</sup> Titled 'Anti-Islamic Activities of the Qadiani Group, Lahori Group and Ahmadis (Prohibition and Punishment) Ordinance, 1984', it added two sections (298B and 298C) to the Pakistan Penal Code. The first section stipulates that the use of 'epithets, descriptions and titles, etc., reserved for certain holy personages or places' such as *Azan* (call to prayers) and *Masjid* (mosque) is reserved for 'Muslims' and 'misuse' by Ahmadis is liable to punishment by fines and imprisonment. The second section criminalizes any Ahmadi who refers to themselves as Muslim, who 'preaches or propagates' their faith, or 'in any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims' (italics mine). The latter phrase seeks to provide a rationale for the Ordinance within the text of law itself. By elevating the sentiments and 'religious feelings' of the putative Muslim Pakistani citizen, this law defers to those religious actors who claim to know the sentiments of Pakistani Muslims. This ordinance, undertaken in the name of the Muslim citizens of Pakistan, effectively consolidated the anti-Ahmadiyya religious establishment's vision of an Islamic polity within the domain of law.

As noted above, state-appointed *tabarra'iyān* in Safavid Iran were pivotal in the normalization of anti-Sunnism through imbuing public spaces with ritual cursing. In Pakistan, on the other hand, routinization of ritual cursing is undertaken through other technologies, in particular through the institutionalization of various oaths denouncing Ahmadis which are administered by the state. In a nod to the anti-Ahmadiyya sentiments of Pakistan's religious establishment, the constitutional oath to be taken by the president and prime minister of Pakistan, the highest political offices of the country and which are constitutionally limited to Muslims, explicitly contains a reference to the necessity of active disbelief in prophecy after Prophet Muhammad. The oath begins as follows:

I, \_\_\_\_\_, do solemnly swear that I am a Muslim and believe in the Unity and Oneness of Almighty Allah, the Books of Allah, the Holy Quran being the last of them, the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the last of the Prophets *and that there can be no Prophet after him*, the Day of Judgement, and all the requirements and teachings of the Holy Quran and Sunnah.<sup>89</sup> (Italics mine)

The phrase 'and that there can be no Prophet after him' is an almost direct reference—and one that is understood by all Pakistanis—to Ahmadis. The assumption of the office of president and prime minister of Pakistan thus

<sup>87</sup> Martin Lau, *The Role of Islam in the Legal System of Pakistan* (Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2006), p. 114.

<sup>88</sup> Zia-ul-Haq's project of Islamization also entailed instituting puritanical laws such as the Hudood Ordinances and anti-Blasphemy Laws, which were put in place in 1979 and 1980 respectively.

<sup>89</sup> Articles 42 and 91 (4), Third Schedule (Oaths of Office), Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

entails an implicit vilification of Ahmadis by situating their faith as outside Islam.

The most extreme denunciation of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and thus the Ahmadiyya community, through ritual cursing was initiated with the adoption of the following 'declaration' that all Pakistani Muslims are required to sign in order to obtain their national identity cards or passports:

Declaration in Case of Muslim

I hereby solemnly declare that:-

(i) I am Muslim and believe in the absolute and unqualified finality of the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) the last of the prophets.

(ii) I do not recognize any person who claims to be a prophet in any sense of the word or of any description whatsoever after Muhammad (peace be upon him) or recognize such a claimant as prophet or a religious reformer as a Muslim.

(iii) I consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad an impostor prophet. And also consider his followers, whether belonging to the Lahori or Qadiani group, to be non-Muslims.<sup>90</sup>

Because all Pakistanis are required to declare their religion for the purposes of obtaining national identity cards and passports, Ahmadis are left with two choices. Either they can declare themselves Ahmadi (and hence non-Muslim) and bypass having to sign this declaration, or they can refer to themselves as Muslims and thus become required to vilify and curse their revered spiritual leader. For non-Ahmadi Muslims, on the other hand, the declaration concretizes the realization of the sacred nation by marking out the 'impostors' within. The Pakistani nation is sacred, Pakistanis are told, because it will not tolerate the Ahmadiyya faith.

This declaration functions as an oath of submission precisely because it is not dependent on the personal beliefs of individuals signing the declaration. It instead demonstrates the power of the state to elicit an enunciation that may or may not be a personal truth. Through signing the declaration, which Pakistani Muslims must do if they are to procure national identity cards and passports, ordinary Pakistanis participate in the project of sacralizing the nation. At the same time, exposure to such denunciations of Ahmadis has the effect of normalizing anti-Ahmadiyya polemics, helping to establish these as mundane truths. The declaration thus has the effect of disciplining both Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis, albeit in different ways.

Returning to the comparison with Safavid Iran, we can readily note the differences between the two contexts. Sacralization of empire was an early modern, pre-colonial project and the sacralization of the nation is a distinctly modern, post-colonial project. The Safavid anti-Sunni project was top-down,

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, the official form for obtaining a Pakistani passport: [http://www.pakembassyankara.com/userfiles/files/Form\\_A\\_Passport\\_Form.pdf](http://www.pakembassyankara.com/userfiles/files/Form_A_Passport_Form.pdf), [accessed 23 June 2021].

with state-appointed spies and vigilantes reaching deep into social spaces in order to regulate and discipline religious enunciations, and, ultimately, affects and dispositions. The Pakistani anti-Ahmadiyya project is bottom-up, extending from religious groups and political parties into the higher reaches of the state. The Safavid state organized *tabarra'īyan* to sacralize the imperial realm. These agents of the state were sent outside to public places to discipline ordinary people. Anti-Ahmadiyya groups organize the Pakistani state's project of sacralizing the nation. The Safavid state needed the *tabarra'īyan* to go to the people in order to discipline and monitor them. The modern Pakistani state, like all modern states, makes people come to it to be disciplined and surveilled. It draws people towards itself since it is the primary disseminator of a range of goods and resources—the national identity card, the passport, birth and death certificates, and so on—which all citizens need to function in society. Ultimately, then, it is the Pakistani state itself that performs the contemporary functions of the *tabarra'īyan* by helping to realize the project of sacralizing the nation.

## Conclusion

This article has undertaken a comparison between Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan to highlight the structural similarities and differences between their respective state projects of sacralizing their polities. Both cases demonstrate that Muslim polities may be more troubled by 'deviant' religious groups from within the Islamic tradition—Sunnis in Safavid Iran and Ahmadis in Pakistan—than non-Muslims. In both cases, the states made extensive legal efforts to mark out these religious Others by criminalizing them on charges of heresy and innovation. This criminalization was oriented towards creating homogeneity among political subjects of the polity, who were required by the state to curse and condemn these religious Others in order to demonstrate their submission to sovereign power. Ritual cursing thus functioned as an oath of submission that was elicited by the state from all subjects. Crucially, both Sunnis and Shi'is in Safavid Iran were required to engage in ritual cursing of enemies of Ali. Similarly, Ahmadis are required to participate in the normative order that is established by the Pakistani state through institutionalizing the cursing of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. The utterance of oaths of submission draws religious subjects into the project of sacralizing the polity while disciplining them into reproducing the normative order of the sovereign power. Simultaneously, it serves to punish criminalized Others for holding religious views that challenge the normative order of the sovereign. In both cases, the power of ritual cursing proceeds from the ability of the state to procure an enunciation that may or may not be a sincerely held belief.

There are also significant and revealing differences between the two cases that throw light on the historical specificity of different modes of sovereignty in early modern and modern Muslim polities. The Safavid empire was an early modern imperial polity and its kings articulated their sovereign power through their commitment to a doctrinal Twelver Shi'ism. Certainly, this was not the only ideological discourse available to Safavid kings. As extensive scholarship

on Safavid Iran has documented, Safavid kings drew on and synthesized diverse discourses of sovereignty that were available in the Persianate milieu of the time, including saintly and messianic kingship, Alid genealogy, and pre-Islamic Persian kingship. Nonetheless, there was a slow and steady entrenchment of the expectation among religious and courtly elites that Safavid kings would act as guardians of Twelver Shi'ism. At the same time, the Iranian population slowly converted to Shi'i Islam. Although this historical process remains obscure, it was most likely a result of a combination of coercive and non-coercive factors that disciplined Safavid subjects into acquiescing to the normative religious order of the empire. The cursing of Sunnis, decreed by leading jurists at the behest of Safavid kings and overseen by a professional group of *tabarra'īyan*, was critical to the normalization of this religious order.

In contrast, Pakistan is a modern nation-state that was established on the basis of the internationally sanctioned principle of national self-determination. However, leaders of Pakistan's national movement adopted religion as the basis of their national identity. Sovereign power in Pakistan is exerted in the name of Pakistani citizens who identify their primary national characteristic as constituted through a Muslim identity. These Pakistani Muslims supposedly desire a polity wherein they would be able to 'order their lives in the individual and collective spheres in accordance with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and Sunnah', as stated in the Objectives Resolution. Consequently, the cursing of the Ahmadiyya community through various oaths of submission instituted by the state is legitimized on the grounds that it reflects the wishes of the Pakistani nation.

The locus of sovereign power in the two polities is thus distinct, lying with kings in the case of Safavid Iran and the nation in the case of Pakistan. Oaths of submission were therefore legitimized through different ideological discourses. When Safavid kings upheld Twelver Shi'ism, they were realizing their self-articulated aspirations and not acting in the name of Safavid subjects. When the Pakistani state upholds Islam as the basis of national identity, it does so in the name of the Pakistani people. Consequently, the modes of Othering are distinct in the two cases. Safavid kings drew on clerical authority to institute laws and practices that would sanction the ritual cursing of Sunnis. The Pakistani state draws on institutions such as the National Assembly, courts, and bureaucracies—all of which derive their legitimacy from representing and/or serving the Pakistani nation—to legislate against the Ahmadis.

This article has also pursued an implicit comparison between the persecutory policies of Safavid Iran and Pakistan, and the ecumenical policies of the Mughal empire. In so doing, it has sought to affirm the radical difference of the latter with respect to managing religious differences. The Mughal polity is strikingly different from both its neighbour Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan in its policy of accommodating all religions and instituting amicable relations among India's diverse religious communities. Religious policies in Safavid Iran and Pakistan completely shunned this ecumenical and accommodative stance of Mughal emperors, realized most fully in Akbar's policy of *sulh-i kull*. The historical sociological approach deployed in this article has sought to

draw out these various similarities and contrasts in order to illuminate novel and revealing comparisons across Islamic history.

**Acknowledgements.** I would like to thank A. Azfar Moin for inviting me to be part of the conference 'Peace with All Religions (Sulh-i Kull)' at the University of Texas at Austin and for his comments on earlier drafts of this article. My thanks also go to the participants at the conference and the two anonymous reviewers of *Modern Asian Studies*.

**Competing interests.** None.

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**Cite this article:** Saeed, Sadia. 2022. 'Ritual cursing as an oath of submission: The problem of religious difference across Safavid Iran and modern Pakistan'. *Modern Asian Studies* 56 (3), pp. 993–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X2100007X>