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Reza Gholami (2015)

This is a draft of the introductory chapter of *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora* (Ashgate 2015) by Reza Gholami. Please do not cite.

Introduction: The State of Play

Two questions broadly frame this book: (1) How is the secular implicated as a *mechanism* in processes by means of which people effect major changes to their lives – that is, the whole of their living experience – as they continuously attempt to ‘stylize’ their desired self and achieve ‘freedom’? (2) How can we better understand the power relationship between secularized and secularizing freedom practices/experiences and devout Muslim diasporic consciousness and subjectivity? Already, the three key words of the book have been mentioned: secular, freedom and diaspora. These will need to be defined, qualified and contextualized, and I do this below. Further, my questions are pregnant with more specific, more concrete research questions which will also be outlined below. Allow me, therefore, to proceed with the first order of business, contextualizing the book. This contextualization will take place in the form of a review of the two bodies of literature which I deem most pertinent to the book, namely, the study of ‘diasporic religion’, especially Islam, and the study of the secular. However, given the number and complexity of the concepts that need to be discussed in this introductory chapter, not to mention important issues of fieldwork and writing, the review offered here is only an initial one. There will be a more comprehensive review of these bodies of knowledge in the next chapter.

I am concerned with diasporic Muslims or, more aptly, diasporans from Muslim backgrounds, as well as with studies of these communities. In such studies, which have flourished in recent years, explorations of the secular are noticeable only by their paucity. Whilst in recent decades Migration and Diaspora Studies has duly paid a great deal of attention to forms of Muslim religiosity as constitutive of diasporic notions of identity, community and consciousness, diasporic Muslim modes of the secular have not received

much attention. Where the secular has been considered (e.g. Fernando 2009; Levey and Modood 2009; Casanova 2009; Modood 2005), the focus has generally been on the relationship between Muslim minorities and secular Western nation-states (the ‘hosts’) and their politics, not on the secularisms *internal* to diasporic Muslim communities. For a variety of reasons explored in Chapter 1, there is now what I call a fixation (academic and popular) on the religions of migrants, especially Muslims. The majority of studies assume *a priori* that not only does ‘the Islamic’, whether as religion or culture, constitute a (or *the*) key marker of identity for immigrants from Muslim backgrounds, but that for the latter and subsequent generations the process of migration and the formation of diasporic networks and consciousness tend to intensify religious beliefs and practices (see *inter alia* Bauman 2004; Geaves et al. 2004; Hinnells 2007; Jacobsen 1998; Knott 1997; Lewis 2007; Vertovec 2000).

In many cases, that is certainly true. And my aim here is in no way to refute or to detract from the significance of religion and religiosity for diasporic Muslims. But I do argue that the fixation carries a hazard whereby the assumptions of research at times resemble some of the essentializations associated with the excesses of functionalism and structuralism. Consider the following assertion by Martin Bauman: ‘We would argue that it is the absence of the formation of religious institutions in the settlement and long-term establishment of a migrant group that would be surprising. Constructing *no* places of worship and forming *no* religious associations seem to be the exception rather than the rule’ (Bauman 2004: 173, original emphasis). The ‘rule’, then, is that migrants are primarily religious; that we should be *surprised* to find otherwise. Even if we were to accept this view, the problem remains that such a perspective draws attention away from the ‘surprising’ cases, glossing over the many shades of secularity/secularism¹ within migrant communities from Muslim backgrounds.

¹ Some social scientists have drawn a strict distinction between ‘secularism’ and ‘secularity’ whereby the former ‘involves organizations and legal constructs that reflect the institutional expressions of the secular in a

One of the upshots of such an approach is that within the literature on immigrant Muslims there is today a plethora of books and articles which intrepidly purport to be exhaustive guides to ‘Muslim life’ in various Western countries, covering much of the West in the course of seven or eight chapters (e.g. Goody 2004; Haddad 2002; Hunter 2002; Malik 2004; Nielsen 2004). Nowhere in these books, however, is analytical attention paid to groups and individuals from Muslim backgrounds that consciously construct and experience migration and diaspora primarily through secularities *specific to their own* social, cultural and political histories and presents. At best, Muslims are sketchily divided into categories of ‘devout’ – in which case they usually seem to struggle against Western secularism – or ‘cultural/nominal’ (and far less often ‘secular’) – in which case they do not practise Islam in any ‘religious’ way but rather negotiate multiple cultural identities, having largely embraced Western secularism (usually just referred to as ‘secularism’). But important questions remain. What kinds of secularism can be found in diasporic Muslim communities? What is the specific nature of the relationship between these secularisms and Islam? In a Muslim diaspora, how do ideas of diasporic identity, community and consciousness come to be constructed, experienced and lived primarily through these modes of the secular? What implications does this have for diasporic Muslim *religiosity*? What implications does it have for the study of the secular? These questions derive from the two broad question outlined above; they have preoccupied my research and will be explored in the chapters that follow.

nation’s political realm and public life’ and the latter ‘involves individual actors’ personal behaviour and identification with secular ideas and traditions as a mode of consciousness’ (Kosmin 2007: 1). I do not adopt such a distinction and think it is of marginal relevance – *secularism* may just as well denote individual modes of consciousness. Thus, both terms describe both sides of the distinction. However, as long as this is acknowledged, I have no objection to using both terms as a way to subtly highlight the mutually constitutive relationship between institutionalized practices and individual subjectivities.

And they have, I believe, far-reaching implications. For instance, a key aim of the book is to show that ‘diasporic Muslim religiosity’ cannot be adequately studied without taking due account of ‘diasporic Muslim secularity’. That is, we cannot continue to study Muslim religiosity as if it were isolated from or unaffected by *intra-diasporic* modes of the secular.

As far as Muslim migrants are concerned, what I have said so far will have to suffice for now. But I will have much more to say about all the issues raised here, including a theoretical discussion of the diaspora concept, over the coming chapters. Let me therefore turn to the second key body of knowledge, which concerns the secular. Recent scholarship has shed a great deal of light on the genealogies of the secular and how it – as a modern discourse of power – shapes and – as a historically contingent category – is shaped by human consciousness and practices. Rather than a simplistic decline of religiosity or a clear-cut separation between religion and politics, current theories conceptualize the secular, on the one hand, as modern epistemologies and ontologies which give rise to certain ways of inhabiting the world, and, on the other, as a form of theological politics that problematizes the notion of belief and organizes certain, often hegemonic, political doctrines (Asad 2003; Eisenlohr 2006; Hurd 2008; Levey and Modood 2009; Mahmood 2006; Taylor 1998, 2007). Studies of the secular in Islamic societies, moreover, have questioned the unproblematic conflation of the secular with the West and Eurocentric discourses of modernity and placed it in a different trajectory whereby ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’ can be virtually inextricably intertwined in all sorts of identities and politics (Al-Ali 2000; Navaro-Yashin 2002). They have thus also undermined the rigid religious-secular dichotomy, though not enough, as we shall see.

The religious-secular dichotomy along with the question of whether ‘secular’, as concept and discourse, has outlived its usefulness has recently been flagged up as a major research problematic within the field (see Cady and Hurd 2010). I aim to contribute to these

debates by suggesting a way for moving beyond the religious-secular impasse whilst retaining 'secular' as a concept – in fact, I do not think that it *can* be discarded given the last few centuries of world history. I therefore draw attention to people's *desire to achieve freedom* and how it is implicated in their everyday living and experiences. A shift towards this rather phenomenological approach already exists within the literature, especially in the work of Charles Taylor (2007). However, I focus on people's hard physical, mental and emotional work – for example their attempts to let go of deep-seated, religiously inculcated fears and anxieties – as they try to stylize their desired free self.

Looking at these micro-processes requires that we think of the secular as a *mechanism* – a mechanism for subduing or eradicating the undesired, 'religious' aspects of the self believed to hinder freedom. Studies of the secular, and for that matter also studies of self-making and freedom practices, have hitherto been neglectful of the mechanisms by which people 'free' themselves of their unwanted 'religiosity' and the difficulties such an undertaking entails. The secular has usually been viewed as an end, a goal which is concomitant, sometimes synonymous, with 'modernization' and 'democratization'. 'Secular' has therefore tended to signify something that (secular-inclined) individuals and societies – in a variety of ways, of course – either *are* or aim to *become*. It has not received much attention as a means, process or indeed mechanism. True: 'secularization' is typically used to denote a process by which 'secularism' is actualized. But in secularization processes, the objectives or outcomes are usually predetermined, often very specifically. In other words, the process of secularization and its result (e.g. the establishment of secular social systems) are already heavily laden with all kinds of powerful and disciplining meanings and discourses which shape societies and individuals. Contemporary French *laïcité*, for example, has as one of its tenets a ban on the *Burka*. This means that the (secularization or secularizing) processes, which were at once legal, political and cultural, and through which the ban was legalized and

normalized, already had the ban prefigured within them. On this basis, it can also be argued that to subscribe to French *laïcité* is to support the ban, even if only partially, a position which is constitutive of an individual's identity, subjectivity and politics.

In this way, 'being secular' means living a certain way, holding certain beliefs. However, as we will see below and throughout the book, the secular as we encounter it in this study does not specify any objectives or aims for individuals or the community; it does not come pre-laden with meanings. It is worked and re-worked by groups and individuals with particular reference to their present diasporic condition and is brought to bear on social, cultural and personal situations defined through a desire for freedom. The aim, thus, is not to be or become 'secular'. Rather, certain modern knowledges, sensibilities and discourses which have come to be referred to as secular (see Asad 2003) are reconstructed and utilized by a desire for freedom as *a mechanism for creating a space free from a particular religious tradition* so that other/'free' notions of identity and community can be constructed, experienced and lived, even if these are not necessarily 'modern' or 'democratic' and are fraught with characteristics from other religious traditions. Let me clarify by delving a little deeper into this mode of the secular.

The Key Concepts: Non-Islamiosity, Freedom, Diaspora

Non-Islamiosity

The mode of the secular I am referring to is one which I have come to call non-Islamiosity. It is so called because the more I explored the depths and interstices of my participants' secularity the less I felt that their experiences and practices were adequately captured by the epithet 'secular'. In fact, as I discuss in Chapter 3, in this case 'secular' seemed to obscure

much more than it revealed. Nor could the life-worlds I was studying be unproblematically approached through ideas of ‘non-religiosity’ – they were replete with religious references and practices. It seemed, rather, that what broadly distinguished these life-worlds was their conscious, unreserved and at times extreme opposition to and detestation of ‘Islam’; hence ‘non-Islamiosity’ – perhaps not the most linguistically appealing or easily pronounced of words, but one which I have nevertheless found quite useful. Non-Islamiosity, therefore, is at the very heart of this book. And in this section I will begin the challenging task of trying to articulate what it is. But I should mention that this task will not be completed here. Whilst I will define the concept in more detail over the next three chapters, non-Islamiosity will in fact unfold and be explored throughout the entire book. Ultimately, I do not aim for the book to conclusively define non-Islamiosity. If anything, I see this as an exercise in *introducing* a concept which may be useful in certain types of analysis but which must be taken up, critiqued, reworked and expanded upon by the research community.

Non-Islamiosity is an attempt to ‘capture’ theoretically a particular and closely related set of sentiments, sensibilities, consciousnesses, discourses and modes of practice within the Iranian diaspora. Non-Islamiosity is all of those things at once – sentiment, sensibility, consciousness, discourse, mode of practice. And it operates both at individual and collective, and at explicit/conscious and implicit/un- or pre-conscious, levels. All this, of course, makes non-Islamiosity extremely difficult to pin down. At times, it even seems paradoxical: for example, although it is primarily predicated upon a detestation of Islam – and it is this aspect which interests me most – Iranians also utilize it to distance themselves from mainstream understandings of Islam (such as the Iranian regime’s brand) to be able to practise other forms of the religion. Or as I delve into later, explicit and quite extremist attempts, in the media for example, to construct clear-cut discourses and communities of non-Islamiosity coexist with implicit, unassuming or even unconscious consumptions and practices of non-

Islamiosity. As I will show in these pages, however, these conceptual issues and the fieldwork challenges they potentially give rise to should not stand in the way of theorizing and applying non-Islamiosity, a concept whose theoretical and methodological benefits, I believe, outshine said challenges.

I think the most important step towards greater clarity of the concept is to stipulate unequivocally at the outset that *non-Islamiosity is and ought to be studied as a mode of the secular*. It is a mode of the secular in that it is predicated upon certain discourses and sensibilities which coalesced at a specific juncture in European history and have come to be called ‘secular’ (see Chapter 1). It is also a mode of the secular because it *necessarily* defines and problematizes ‘Islam’ and compels the subject to cathect it – to invest in it in one way or other; to take towards it a position. Furthermore, in keeping with the tradition and spirit of *laïcité*,² non-Islamiosity possesses what I call an *eradicative impetus* which treats Islam with unprecedented acrimony and intolerance. It is important to reiterate that non-Islamiosity points the business-end of its eradivative impetus (its secular power) not at ‘religion’ but at ‘Islam’ – and Islam alone. (In so doing, it also often defines other religions positively.) And this, as we will see, forms the basis of identity and subjectivity. Thus, as an initial attempt to put it concisely, *non-Islamiosity is a mode of the secular by means of which some Iranian Shi`a construct, live and experience diasporic identity, community and consciousness in a way that marginalizes, excludes or effaces (only) Islam – it aims to eradicate ‘the Islamic’ from ‘the Iranian’*. (This focus on Iranian Shi`a is itself quite new within studies of the secular, which have generally concentrated on Egypt and Turkey, Sunni majority countries. As a result, we do not know much about the secular among Shi`a Muslims or indeed among Iranians).

² [A form of secularism primarily attributed to France. Laïcité differs from the sort of secularism generally seen in Britain or the USA in that it developed along a different historical trajectory and tends to be more intolerant of religious beliefs and practices \(see also Chapter 1\).](#)

Other studies have already pointed out that some diasporic Iranians will do almost anything to avoid Islam or identifying as and with Muslims. For example, studying Iranians in Sweden, Graham and Khosravi have written that some Iranians present themselves as ‘Persian’, emphasizing Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage as the main marker of their identities, or change their name in order to ‘*escape* the Islamic Iranian identity’ (Graham and Khosravi 1997: 120, my emphasis). Such practices are also quite common in London. During my research I met many Iranians from a Muslim background who had legally or nominally changed their (Muslim/Arabic) name to either Western names or pre-Islamic ‘Persian’³ ones. Common amongst the former names were: Daniel, Jason, Bobby, Joseph, Geoffrey, Sam, Jasmine, Natasha and Honey. Persian names tended to be the names of Kings and mythic heroes such as Koroosh, Dariush, Siavash, Baabak, Aarash and Anahita. Some would also play on the similarity between their somatic features and that of southern Europeans or Latin Americans and choose names such as Nino or Diego. The most common reason given for name changes was that individuals did not like or believe in Islam; nor did they ‘feel’ Muslim. Many did, however, ‘feel’ Persian. Some also felt that a Muslim name made it easier for them to be associated with terrorism or with the Iranian government. Others – young men especially – said that a Muslim name jeopardized their chances of attracting the opposite sex (e.g. in nightclubs). Others still gave the reason that a Western name helped them to avoid prejudice in British society. In this vein, it is increasingly difficult to come across parents who are willing to give their new-borns originally Arabic but nevertheless common Iranian names such as Ali, Mohammad and Hossein.

Non-Islamiosity does include name changing and related practices, but it is about much more than these. It thus transcends the rather superficial accounts and explanations that so often plague studies of the Iranian diaspora, such as the study quoted above (see Chapter

³ I problematize ‘Persian’ in Chapter 6.

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3). It not only denotes but also examines, not least through individual life histories, the nooks and crannies of a historically complex *relationship* between Iranians and Islam. Mike⁴, for example, used to have an Islamic name, one of God's names. Back in Tehran, over twenty years ago, he used to teach the Qur'an, the *Hadith* and religious treatises dealing with every aspect of morals, ethics and conduct. 'I used to believe. And I looked the part. Everything about me screamed Islam,' he said to me. Here in London, he is an immigration lawyer in his fifties who enjoys indulging in intellectual debates. During our long conversations, he was always very confident and grateful that he was no longer being 'duped' by Islam. He once said:

I have read. I have done research. I have compared books and had discussions. And I have come to the conclusion that the teachings of Islam simply don't make sense ... They [both Islam and Iran's government] use people's ignorance – and in Iran, we're still very, very ignorant. They use hocus-pocus and superstition to trap your mind. And if that doesn't work, they use force. And once you're in, it's very hard to get out. It's been like this throughout history. But today, no rational, educated person will take this stuff [Islamic teachings/practises] seriously... (October 2010, Greenford, London)

In his living room there was no sign of his past, except a copy of the Qur'an which was tucked away on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. (He used it occasionally to show people the 'fallacies' of Islam.) The top shelves, which caught one's eye as one entered the room, were reserved for scientific, legal and medical books. There were also works of Persian poetry and history. Next to the bookcase, also in plain view, was a selection of alcoholic beverages, from which Mike would offer his guests a drink...

⁴ Pseudonyms have been used throughout the book.

As we will see, stories like Mike's, common though they may be, often tell of more than a straightforward 'conversion' or 'lapse of faith'. They typically involve extremely hard emotional and physical work – risky outward *and* inward migrations. It is not about simply 'choosing' to live a secular life; it is about preparing and enabling the circumstances in which the self can *make a choice* to live without Islam. This study, therefore, asks *why and how* such a dramatic change has taken place in Mike's life. It looks for the mechanisms through which this change has been made possible and also traces its implications. Examples such as Mike's, of course, require thicker description and deeper analysis, which I offer in the chapters that follow. The point is that looking simply at Mike's name change and being content with the reason he gave me when I first met him – which was, predictably, that he felt more at ease among 'the English' – does not allow us to delve deep enough into his life-world as a secular Iranian. (This also betrays the importance of ethnographic research, which I come back to below.) In this way, non-Islamiosity is also a method, a way of studying a specific relationship – based primarily on a detestation of 2 and a desire to 2 eradicate Islam and be 'free' – that people from Muslim backgrounds have with their inherited religion. I talk more about non-Islamiosity-as-method below and in the concluding chapter.

I foreground this relationship because I think it is the key to opening up and analysing the many facets of non-Islamiosity. Throughout the book, therefore, I consider ample cases where Islam is marginalized, belittled or jettisoned as a way of studying this relationship. In Chapter 5, for example, we will see not only attempts to 'purify' Iranian language, history and culture of its Islamic influences but also 'national' media representations which deliberately and rancorously disrespect key Islamic texts and figures – one such representation wants Iranians to place a higher value on pornography than on the Qur'an. The proponents of such views see the current Iranian regime as an inevitable outcome of the 'misguided' religion of Islam. They in turn see Islam as a disease which has befallen 'the

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Iranian Nation'. And thus, they argue, Iranians can never be truly free unless they rid themselves of Islam and all things Islamic. In this way, contrary to much of popular belief, non-Islamiosity involves more than a simple opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Although it is certainly about turning sentiments of suffering and loss caused by the regime into agentive notions of resistance, dissidence and community/nation building.) As I have mentioned, it points to more deep-seated, often highly individual beliefs, pains, anxieties, fears, desires and so on. Non-Islamiosity in this context is a mechanism by which individual and social consciousness and spaces are 'freed' from Islamic theological, cosmological and eschatological doctrines; it is a force that demarcates and guards certain boundaries around an idealized space in which certain desires and sensibilities can take roots, flourish and give rise to alternative identities and experiences.

What we have here, then, is the complete (re)construction of life-worlds *outside* of Islam. But what is equally important to remember, as I hinted at in the previous section, is that the processes of non-Islamiosity do not prescribe specific goals for individuals or groups other than being free from Islam. There are ideologies that oppose Islam and the regime and offer their own blueprint for Iranian society. These tend to be affiliated with political parties and factions. But lived reality is characterized by an almost-infinite constellation of individualized freedom practices which may or may not subscribe to any faction and which proceed from an explicit *or implicit* problematization of 'Islam'. As also mentioned, the goal for these people is not necessarily to 'be secular'; it is to be free to live as they wish. As a matter of fact, I suspect that given the popularity of Zoroastrian symbolism in Iranian diasporic pop culture (see figure below), many people would be opposed to living in a secular state which, like France, bans religious symbols.

INSERT FIGURE 0.1 HERE

Figure 0.1: Party advertisement depicting a ‘Persian’ girl (Imperial College Iranian Society).

Non-Islamiosity’s relationship with Islam is further significant because it is unprecedented in Iran’s nearly 1400-year Islamic history. It is true that at least in its modern history Iran has always been home to secularists and anti-religious dissenters. But I do not believe that we have ever witnessed such a popular and active opposition to Islam on this scale. Partly, this is due to Iranian migrations and diasporic formations as well as the possibilities – technological, political, etc. – of the contemporary world; hence the importance of studying these trends and phenomena in the transnational context of migration and diaspora.⁵ It is also in part due to the vicissitudes of Iranian history. It is interesting that the secularists of the past were often just that: secularists – i.e. Western educated elites who directly superimposed what they had learned in the West onto Iran. Yet today, much of what passes for Iranian secularism is busy showing its teeth to Islam alone, sometimes hunting it down with a vengeance, often in ways that are markedly Iranian as well as Western. What is more, there can no longer be talk of secularism being imposed from the top by the educated elite – although they still play a huge part. Non-Islamiosity, I would argue, transcends all kinds of differences: as a mode of agency, it embodies the subjectivity and desires of all classes, all genders, all generations.

Yet despite this problematization or detestation of Islam, fascination with, and invocations of, ‘the religious’ or ‘the supernatural’ continue to permeate the Iranian diasporic landscape. In the mainstream (or public sphere), ideas of identity and community are often represented and coalesce in crucial ways around practices emanating from other religious

⁵ I believe that similar studies should be conducted inside Iran as well, albeit obvious obstacles make this a very difficult task.

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traditions, especially those of pre-Islamic Iran, such as the Iranian New Year, *Norooz*, or the autumn festival, *Mehregan*, both of which originate in Zoroastrianism, but also Christian/Western holidays such as Christmas and St. Valentine's Day. These highlights of discontinuous calendars and temporalities constitute a major part of the constantly-emerging experiential and ontological 'present' of many London Iranians. One, therefore, finds them copiously advertised and celebrated in the media and on the ground. However, one would be hard-pressed to find an Islamic holiday – such as *Eid-e fetr* (marking the end of Ramadan) or *Ashura* (commemorating the martyrdom of the Shi'i Imam Hussein) – celebrated or commemorated with the same nationalist fervour and passion, or even simply mentioned. This is *one* of the ways in which 'not-being-Islamic' is a form of diasporic consciousness, self-making, living and experience.

However, the fact that these non-Islamic traditions are not performed as 'religious' events does not mean that they have lost their links to notions of faith, supernatural invocations and spiritual well-being. For example, during the important, pre-Islamic festival of *Charshanbe Soori*, which takes place on the eve of the last Wednesday before *Norooz*, it is customary for people to light fires and jump over them, fire playing a central part in Zoroastrian cosmology. As people jump, they typically chant, addressing the fire: *sorkhi-ye to az man, zardi-ye man az to*, which can basically be rendered as 'give me your red colour [associated with beauty and vitality] and take away my yellow colour [symbolizing disease and weakness]'. Many people I asked at the *Charshanbe Soori* festivals I attended during fieldwork told me that they genuinely believed, or at least they liked to believe, that the fire, being associated with the sun, which is in turn associated with *Ahura Mazda* (God in Zoroastrianism), had certain properties which could bestow health and prosperity upon an individual and take away their ill health and misfortune. Those who did not share this belief nevertheless thought of *Charshanbe Soori* as an important Iranian cultural heritage which

should be preserved and passed on. No one objected to its religious roots and connotations, or to the fact that it seemed to inspire, perpetuate and propagate belief in the supernatural.

Finally, let us not forget that non-Islamiosity exists in a vastly heterogeneous Iranian diaspora. It is also characterized by a strong emphasis on individual freedom. Therefore, it does not refer to a unified concept and cannot give rise to a singular identity. It is, rather, a multi-faceted concept that can be adopted by individuals and groups to varying degrees and in a variety of ways, depending how they define *their* freedom. On the whole, Iranians display an array of secularities, with varying degrees of amicability towards Islam. In fact, non-Islamiosity can be thought of as the extreme end of a spectrum of what we might call ‘Islamic undecidability’ in Iranian society, both historically – going back at least to the nineteenth century – and at present (cf. Keddie 1980; Mottahedeh 1986; Rahnema 1998; Roy 1998; Thiebaut 1999). ‘Undecidability’, in Jacques Derrida’s thought, is used to upset hierarchical binary oppositions. A ghost, for example, is neither present nor absent, or is at once present and absent (Derrida 1994, 2004; Reynolds 2004). But since this quality is not inherent to Islam, it comes to exist only in social relations through articulation and interaction. Thus, Iranians’ relationship with Islam is by no means straightforward. A great number of people show confusion and anxiety in relation to Islam – a sense of wanting to let go of the Islamic, yet *not* wanting to let go because of spiritual and worldly needs, or not *being able to* let go because of fear. Kathryn Spellman (2004: 74), for example, has shown in her important study of London Iranians that many otherwise secular Iranian women attend religious gatherings in order to ‘push’ God and holy Islamic figures to grant their wishes. They particularly ask for help in such matters as finding an appropriate marriage partner and passing their exams. Other interesting examples, in my opinion, include the demand for dowry and the process of burial and grieving death: in both cases often an Islamic etiquette is

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adhered to, even in secular settings.⁶ ‘Undecidability’ thus foregrounds multiple, unfinished and competing meanings and practices vis-à-vis Islam. Having said that, I believe that much of Iranian Studies has been caught up for too long in the ‘spectrum of undecidability’. Content simply that there are multiple relationships with Islam, studies have failed pay specific attention to (diasporic) Iranian modes of the secular.

My interest in non-Islamiosity arises from the fact that I find its eradivative impetus, its outright rejection of the Islamic, its often radical and unrelenting modes of subjectivity, and its highly complex and multivalent nature highly unique. Furthermore, as I alluded to above, I think we are witnessing in non-Islamiosity a source of some potentially unprecedented transformations in Iranian diasporic society. For example, later on I argue that facilitated by burgeoning diasporic media, non-Islamiosity is engaged in relentless efforts at gradual institutionalization, normalization and dominance as the ‘authentic’ and/or ‘essential’ Iranian identity in diaspora. This has two interesting implications. On the one hand, it has meant that some practising Muslims and new migrants (and tourists) believe that to experience what it really means or should mean to be Iranian, or to be a ‘real’ Iranian, is to adopt or display a degree of non-Islamiosity; on the other hand, some devout Muslim Iranians now feel that their religiosity constitutes them as ‘Other’, leading to painful stigmatization. It would seem, therefore, that the assumed contours and hierarchies of Iranian national and religious identity are being transformed.

Freedom

⁶ A good example is the burial ceremony of one of the most famous female singers in recent Iranian history, Mahasti, in Los Angeles in 2007. This ceremony was attended by the A-list of secular Iranian celebrities all chanting *la ellaha el Allah* (there is no god but God [Allah]).

As I discuss in detail in Chapter 4, the idea of freedom is right at the heart of non-Islamiosity. The way my respondents defined and experienced freedom is related to certain key processes and trajectories that punctuate and run through the history of modern Iran and continue right up to the present day. From an academic perspective, within the diasporic context of non-Islamiosity ‘freedom’ demands undivided attention not least because it is nearly impossible to spend time with diasporic Iranians without hearing the word used in a number of ways. This centrality will become inescapably clear in the course of the coming chapters. Therefore, it is necessary at the outset to outline two caveats regarding the way the freedom concept is used and represented in the book.

Firstly, some readers may ask why I do not use the word liberal or even liberty alongside/instead of freedom given especially that many of the lives and situations I describe unfold and assert themselves along the individualistic discourses, logics and practices of (neo-) liberalism. Some may even suggest (as indeed a few have) that ‘freedom’, almost in contrast to individualism, implies ideas of collective action on a grand and revolutionary scale. I will deal with the concept of freedom in more depth in Chapter 4. Suffice it to say that I insist on using ‘freedom’ because the Iranians amongst whom I studied insisted on using it, whether in Persian or English. In fact, in both languages, I would argue it is one of the most commonly spoken words in the vocabulary of diasporic Iranians. The Persian word *azadi*, which people most commonly translated into English as freedom, is used in all sorts of interactions and settings. It has also come to occupy a unique place in Iranian discourses and sensibilities because it was one of the key words in the main slogan of the Islamic revolution, ‘independence, freedom, Islamic Republic’ (*esteghlal, azadi, jomhuri-ye eslami*).

Since then, however, both the Islamic regime and its many oppositions have continued to use it in a variety of ways. ‘Freedom’ is therefore a contested term which evokes conflicting memories and emotions of not just the revolution but of Iran in general. It has also

become engraved into the ‘body’ of Iranian cities since many streets, squares and neighbourhoods have been dubbed *azadi*. By the same token, however, ‘freedom’ has also come to be used *completely casually* by Iranians, implying nothing grand whatsoever. It has come to be associated with mundane individual practices. Alongside its more grand connotations, therefore, my use of the term is also meant to emphasize this casualness, the fact that it is taken for granted in diasporic Iranian daily living. But in the context of non-Islamiosity, it is undergoing further changes, which are also of interest to me. Thus, ‘freedom’, with its references to both the idealized and the prosaic, is a useful concept both to study and with which to study the non-Islamious discourses and practices of the Iranian diaspora.

This brings me to the second caveat, which is related to the theoretical framework within which the concept of freedom is conceptualized throughout the book. For many London Iranians ‘freedom’ is closely associated with liberalist attitudes towards consumption and politics. However, the concept of freedom which I am trying to develop here, and which I argue non-Islamiosity mediates and facilitates, extends beyond liberalist understandings. Within the context of non-Islamiosity, freedom is micro-practical and relates to *the ability* to do with one’s life whatever one wishes. These wishes, however, are predominantly shaped in some sort of a response/opposition to ‘Islam’. As such, Foucault’s theory of techniques of the self is an apt model for studying non-Islamious⁷ notions of freedom. That is, I am interested in the many ways in which individuals use these techniques to fashion or ‘stylize’ themselves into the sort of being they think and feel they ought to be (see Foucault 1988b; Laidlaw 2002). This theoretical framework is further useful because it allows us to study practices of self-making and experiences of freedom as *ethical* conduct, which, of course, has important implications for social hierarchies and relations of power. Thus, the concept of non-

⁷ I discuss the term ‘non-Islamious’ in Chapter 1.

Islamiosity sheds light on the relationship between ‘diaspora’ and freedom practices which proceed through a problematization of Islam; and in so doing, it makes a contribution to theories of freedom and self-making by drawing more specific attention to the *mechanisms* of self-making.

Finally, I am also aware of and interested in the tensions and seeming contradictions that arise from the clashing of discontinuous freedom practices, not only with each other, but also with wider social structures. Non-Islamiosity can be both unabashedly explicit and unassumingly implicit. The majority of the Iranians I encountered would probably fit into the latter category: they did not go around hating Islam or being anti-Islamic every second of every day. Rather, non-Islamiosity inhered in the normalized and normative discourses and practices through which they lived and experienced their selves every day. For them, the emphasis was emphatically on living free lives; yet, freedom desires and practices were already shaped and articulated through non-Islamiosity. Thus, we are dealing with detestation and problematization of Islam in various forms and levels, not all equally *manifestly* extreme or violent. In fact, detestation can form the basis of what I later call a ‘vague self’ which is constantly mimetically (re)performed by subjects. Each performance, however, is ultimately unique and can also articulate ‘benign’ and non-violent subjectivities. I come back to this below and in detail in Chapter 4. What is important to note here, though, is that the explicit and implicit dimensions stand in a mutually constitutive relationship. Hence, explicit (often extremist) non-Islamiosity authorises/enables certain modes of non-Islamious subjectivity, which in turn allow for ever more radical and ‘gutsy’ freedom practices.

Diaspora

Closely related to non-Islamiosity and freedom is the concept of diaspora whose usage also needs some qualification. For non-Islamious Iranians, the awareness that they are ‘diasporic’ or ‘in diaspora’ shapes their subjectivity and experience in important ways. These subjectivities and experiences to a great extent imbricate across the most salient academic conceptualizations of the diaspora concept. As such, even the most rigid of these viewpoints retains some usefulness in the study of non-Islamiosity. I will discuss all of this in detail in Chapter 3; but by way of an example, for many Iranians, being diasporic is significantly tinted with a sense of sadness, ennui and nostalgia, and they do not attempt to hide the fact that – at least in principle – they desire to return to (an Idealized) Iran. In turn, such sentiments manifest in the media and other social settings and become pivotal in animating the discourses and practices of non-Islamiosity. Another way in which diaspora has been conceptualized relates to the concept’s potential to destabilize fixed notions of national and local boundaries and identities. Here, too, I find theoretical necessities for the study of non-Islamiosity: despite its undeniable relationship with the past and present of Britain as well as with the specificities of life in London, non-Islamiosity is at once connected in complex ways to many places and times, with huge implications for all aspects of diasporic living in London. The mentioned media discourses, for instance, are typically beamed into London from Los Angeles; yet, they themselves greatly rely on events unfolding in London and elsewhere. It is, therefore, important to consider the local and global aspects of the Iranian diaspora simultaneously and as mutually constitutive.

Useful though these perspectives are, I show preference for yet another conception or dimension of the diaspora concept. This has two theoretical facets. On the one hand it is underpinned by the work of people such as Brah (1996), Hayes-Edwards (2001) and Raman (2003) who espouse a more genealogical and historically-aware approach to diaspora. What is important here, as Raman points out, is to look at what diaspora does, rather than what it is

– which is to say that we must examine the circumstances under which a group chooses to identify itself as a diaspora at a certain period, and be aware that these definitions are highly malleable through time and space. Such an approach helps to concretely contextualize non-Islamiosity within the contemporary West and its relations with especially the Muslim world. But it also draws attention to the subjectivity of the diasporans themselves – that is, to their practices, interactions, experiences and the whole way in which they are *making* their diaspora.

Closely related is the second theoretical facet, noticeable in the work of Bachu (1993), Tompsett (2005) and Gilroy (1987; 1993), among others, which places emphasis on diaspora as a site of regeneration and self-making. Here, ‘diaspora’ provides the circumstances for subjects to re-fashion themselves and transcend their social limitations. Diaspora, hence, far from being synonymous with loss and nostalgia, is a cause for joy and celebration. And for me, this is the most important aspect of the diaspora concept in the context of non-Islamiosity. Throughout the book I routinely refer to diaspora as the idealized physical and social spaces within which non-Islamious freedom practices become possible and play out. As we will see in the coming chapters, most of my respondents enjoyed and appreciated their diasporic status, knowing fully that without it their freedom would not have been guaranteed, if not impossible. Thus, being ‘free’ and being ‘diasporic’ often go hand in hand, and the physical and social spaces of the London-Iranian diaspora, as my ethnographic analyses will make clear, are ideal and idealized in providing *safe*⁸ sites in which the new and creative epistemologies and ontologies of non-Islamiosity can play themselves out, be lived and experienced.

⁸ In Iran, of course, the government will not tolerate practices which it deems transgressive. Certain types of social practice, therefore, have to take place in secret and in great fear of the regime, whose violent crackdowns are well documented.

Why Not Just ‘Islamophobia’?

In recent decades, we have seen the term ‘Islamophobia’ gain increasing purchase in various quarters. In an important critical re-evaluation of the term and its opposite ‘Islamophilia’, Andrew Shryock (2010) highlights that the concept of Islamophobia generally signifies any type of situation or practice in which Islam and Muslims are hated and/or feared. He also states that although today Islamophobia is common in most places, ‘the word is most frequently invoked, and has its richest connotations, when it is used to describe a sentiment that flourishes in contemporary Europe and North America’ (Shryock 2010: 2).

Already, I think we can see a conceptual gap between Islamophobia and non-Islamiosity: the former dichotomizes too strongly ‘the West’ and ‘Muslims’. It immediately conjures up connotations of political conflict and warfare between what it represents as essentially different camps. Shryock himself is only too aware of this. He points out that Islamophobia works by bestowing upon Muslims ‘enemy status’ thus nullifying lived and moral nuances. It always casts Muslims as the ‘Other’ and convinces ‘us’ that ‘they’ are really different (ibid.: 8). Furthermore, due to the ease with which Islamophobia can be applied negatively – and indeed the prevalence of such applications – the concept is too reductive to have any real analytic value; it is misleading for interpretive purposes.

Shryock also mentions that Islamophobes often display immense ignorance about Islam, couching their stereotypes and representations in terminology that resemble past discourses of prejudice, such as those levelled at Jews, blacks or communists. Given these difficulties and inconsistencies, Shryock’s edited volume tries exactly to transcend the idea of

Islam as both an object of hatred and desire. He argues that contrary to what the concept usually signifies, as a lived condition Islamophobia does *not* result from a simple polarization and difference. It is, rather, owed to the convergence of multiple cultural and ethnic spaces. Separation is what Islamophobes want but cannot quite achieve (ibid.: 18). Therefore, Shryock concludes that lived situations engender much more complexity than the rigid concept of Islamophobia is able to accommodate. He calls for more rigorous analyses which can account for the many nuances of relations involving Muslims.

Far from being synonymous with Islamophobia, non-Islamiosity can make a useful contribution to the sort of problems Shryock flags up. ‘Non-Islamiosity’ *does* underscore issues of fear and detestation; but it does so in light of lived complexities, *without* polarizing Muslims and ‘the West’ – or indeed anyone else. It moves decisively away from the sort of analysis which centres only on Muslims against others and/or Muslims *as* ‘Others’. In fact, in the cases I consider, ‘the problematic Muslim Other’ is to a large extent identified as a part of the self. Implicit in the concept of Islamophobia is also the idea that ‘one’s own’ way of life must be preserved or defended against an encroaching Islam (see ibid.: 8). Certainly in the Iranian case, studied here as/through non-Islamiosity, ‘preservation’ is not the aim. If anything, it is about the (re)construction (some call it ‘rejuvenation’) of a self whose freedom, coherence and integrity, it is believed, has been undermined or rendered impossible by ‘Islam’. Thus, it is not necessarily about resisting Islamization; it is about finding oneself already Islamized and working (*against one’s self*) to ‘remedy’ this – to move away from Islam. But I reiterate that the only aim in this – in so far as it can be called an aim since for many it is semi-conscious (or implicit) at best – is to be free to stylize a self outside of Islam, which means that there are no generally applicable aims. That is to say, there is nothing *to* preserve. The self is a constantly-experienced and iterative process. It is the *freedom to this process* which must be achieved/safeguarded. Non-Islamiosity, therefore, foregrounds the

ways in which groups and individuals ‘wrestle’ with themselves against the Islamic aspects of their culture, heritage and identity. These struggles, we will see, are by no means clear-cut; they give rise to numerous shades of secularity *and* religiosity which ought to be studied in their own right.⁹ In sum, unlike Islamophobia, non-Islamiosity is interested in a whole variety of ways in which people from Muslim backgrounds grapple everyday with what it means to be Muslim or secular, not necessarily in relation/opposition to the West, but in relation to the specific circumstances in which they find themselves, and which result from their own life-histories and wider historical trajectories (albeit it is not denied that ‘the West’ has more often than not had a hand in determining those trajectories).

Islamophobia is also intransigently transfixed by (especially post 9/11) ideas of conflict and discrimination (and so is Islamophilia). It is further transfixed by ‘religion’ and ‘religiosity’. There is as such no theoretical focus on actual secular Muslim practices. It is therefore not particularly helpful in a case – such as this one – where one wishes to study ‘not-being-Muslim’ (non-Islamiosity) as a mode of practice, agency and self-experience. I argue here that far away from the Islamophobic ideologies of the West, many an individual from a Muslim background has been carrying all kinds of sentiments within himself, sometimes for decades, which stem from *his own* desires, confusions and anxieties, and which give rise to a galaxy of ‘non-Islamious’ practices and experiences that ‘Islamophobia’ neither acknowledges nor has the theoretical agility to explain. Again, I am not denying that such sentiments may have been partially historically shaped by the imperialist discourses of the West. What I am saying, echoing Shryock, is that there is often much more to the story. As such, much in the same way that I have found ‘secular’ to be limiting, I cannot see how I could have adequately approached the life-worlds I studied through the concept of Islamophobia, simply because my aim was never to merely point out that some Iranians hate

⁹ I do not claim to study all of them here.

or fear Islam, or that Islamophobia – that is, relations of conflict and discrimination centred on Islam – exists within the Iranian diaspora. The aim was/is to study a particular modality of secular living and its wider implications within a Shi`a diaspora. It has therefore been necessary to move away from the macro-political approach of the concept of Islamophobia towards a greater focus on micro-processes, which non-Islamiosity favours.

Finally, there is the issue of Islamophobes' ignorance of Islam, which Shryock rightly draws attention to. Given the ubiquity of this ignorance, Shryock asks: 'Can we be sure that Islamophobia is ultimately about Islam at all?' (ibid.: 3). Non-Islamiosity is predicated on a desire for freedom which recognizes and actualizes itself in relation (or response or opposition) to Islam. It is, as such very much about Islam. Therefore, in the context of non-Islamiosity there cannot be much talk of ignorance of Islam. Many of my respondents often cited and problematized Islamic history and theology with impressive depth of knowledge. They were also satisfied that they knew 'Islam'. In fact, as we saw above in the case of Mike, their discontent and animosity towards Islam stemmed exactly from this knowing, having 'found out', having lifted the Marxian false consciousness, if you will; it stemmed *not* from their ignorance. It may be countered that some (not all) second- and third-generation diasporans do display ignorance. They certainly do. But I refer the reader to Chapter 4 where I explore a 'vague self' which has already been shaped by non-Islamiosity. Knowledge here may be implicit, but it is still knowledge which is productive and operational in/for the subject. Furthermore, many of these children/youths live inside homes and are exposed daily to encounters characterized by various degrees of explicit non-Islamiosity. I do not think, therefore, that they can be described as ignorant in the same way that Shryock's Islamophobes can. In any case, as a diasporic community, ignorance of Islam would certainly not be a distinguishing feature of Iranians. This lack of ignorance, this 'knowing', however, does not mean that they somehow 'truly' know Islam, or know 'the truth' about Islam; or that

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their representations are of Islam as it ‘really’ is. Rather, these representations and sentiments are shaped by, take place within, and give rise to specific regimes of power/knowledge. Non-Islamiosity is not only a means of subverting Islamic epistemologies. It is equally a mechanism for creating alternative, often individualized, epistemologies and ontologies. In this way, resonating Foucault, we are dealing with a micro-physics or micro-dynamics of power which is at once repressive/hegemonic and productive/enabling (see Chapter 7).

Trials and Tribulations: Researching Non-Islamiosity

Researching non-Islamiosity has been an intriguing but also challenging enterprise. Driven by my enthusiasm for the topic, I embarked on this project without fully appreciating the severity of the challenges that I would have to face and try to surmount. I have had to negotiate these obstacles at every stage of the project from fieldwork to writing. In addition to general issues of fieldwork and writing, in this final section I want to discuss some of these challenges and, where possible, the strategies I employed to overcome them.

Issues of Fieldwork

The data for this study were collected predominantly between February 2009 and October 2011, a period which included fourteen months of fieldwork mainly in London but with research trips to major cities in the UK and to Aarhus and Hannover in Denmark and Germany respectively. As I hope to show, rich studies of London Iranians in particular are highly necessary to gain a deeper understanding of Iranians in diaspora generally, and for the issues of this book specifically. The vast majority of the existing literature, however, has

focused on Iranians in the US (see Chapter 3). I chose to make London my primary fieldwork site because the city is widely considered to be one of the main cultural and political hubs of the Iranian diaspora – second only to Los Angeles, for most people. Since the early days of post-1979 Iranian migrations, London has been a highly desirable destination for Iranian migrants. As I will discuss in the coming chapters, this is no doubt because many of those who left Iran in the wake of the Islamic revolution tended to belong to the elite and already enjoyed a great deal of economic, social and cultural capital in London. These powerful settlements have themselves played a big part in attracting other Iranians to the metropolis (though as we will see, Iranians have also settled in other major cities around the UK). In more recent years, especially young and often educated Iranians not just from Iran but also from the wider EU have moved to London because they see it as a vibrant place of opportunity, as well as a place where racism, Islamophobia and xenophobia are less palpable. Today, it is safe to say that if anything ‘interesting’ happens in the Iranian diaspora, it almost certainly *also* happens in London, if it has not originated in the city. All this means, of course, that Iranians in London influence and shape ‘the Iranian diaspora’ in important ways politically, culturally, intellectually and economically – much more so, I would argue, than Iranians in Aarhus, Hannover, or even some other giant metropolises of Iranian settlement such as Dubai.

I also believe that London is a unique place in which to study modes and trends of community building among diasporic Iranians – a major focus of my study. One of the arguments of this book is that although diasporic Iranians have tended to be characterized by a lack of communal unity, there is now evidence that discourses and practices of collective cohesion and identity are emerging – their relationship to non-Islamiosity is what interests me most. Because of the ‘special place’ which London continues to occupy in the Iranian imaginary, which is borne out by the fact that the majority of British Iranians reside in

London (see Chapter 3), and because of the sheer volume of social, cultural and political activity which London Iranians initiate or are involved in, London is a key setting in which to study the emerging issues and dynamics of community building and analyse their wide-reaching implications. My experience of other British cities – including Birmingham, Newcastle, Cardiff and Edinburgh – has been that these trends are far weaker in intensity and therefore much more challenging to study. This is possibly due to relatively fewer numbers of Iranians¹⁰ and less communal activity. I believe the same to be true of especially smaller cities around Europe. In many conversations, non-London (but British/European) Iranians have themselves acknowledged this. For example, in 2010 an Iranian man said of his city, Edinburgh: ‘...of course there are Iranians here, but you don’t often see them in one place. You have to really look for them...’ In 2011, a woman from Hannover said: ‘What you have over there [in London] is something else. London is London! It’s totally different here; not much happens apart from the odd concert or party.’ For some people, such statements are coupled with a feeling that Iranians who live in London are somehow ‘in the middle of it all’, and they often described London as having ‘centrality’ (*markaziyat*).

My research methods were predominantly qualitative and consisted of participant observation and un-structured (sometimes semi-structured) interviews. I also employed other methods such as archival research and ethnographic analysis of media texts and modes of production/consumption. Furthermore, I attended and observed in excess of twenty non-Islamious social gatherings, such as *Norooz* celebrations. Most were attended by well over 100 people.¹¹ I also attended private functions such as birthday parties. In all, these public and private gatherings offered me valuable opportunities to observe the ways in which non-Islamious consciousness becomes embodied and shapes the parameters of notions of ‘Iranian

¹⁰ See Chapter 3.

¹¹ These take place literally all over London, in places as famous as the Hammersmith Apollo as well as in smaller venues and restaurants.

community' and diasporic collective life. Other research sites included Iranian associations, libraries, shops, cafés, restaurants and internet sites/blogs, all of which I describe in relevant chapters. These sites gave me the chance to study and compare everyday and institutionalized interactions both locally and transnationally. In addition, I interviewed around 80 people – and 'spoke' to many more – of highly different ages, classes, genders, backgrounds and legal statuses. However, given the topic of study, I sought out and was particularly interested in Iranians from Shi`a backgrounds. As far as possible, I disclose the age, gender and profession of respondents wherever I present interviews throughout the book. When this is not done, it is because the informant has specifically requested that these details be excluded. In terms of methodology, finally, I had in the early stages of my research become intrigued by and wanted to employ Judith Okely's ideas on doing research through sensory and vicarious knowledge whereby the researcher uses his senses to insert himself as much as possible into the experiential life-world of his informants so as to know and experience their lives vicariously (Okely 1994; see also Stoller 1989).

So, what were the challenges? With the exception of twenty or so devout Shi`a, about whom I write in Chapter 7, almost everyone else I met and interacted with during fieldwork was either explicitly hostile towards Islam or implicitly lived in a way which proceeded by a problematization of Islam. Although I was aware that to an extent this sort of problematization is embedded within the everyday discourses and embodied practices through which many Iranians – including myself – live their selves, I still found that I, often strongly and fundamentally, disagreed with my informants. In short, I did not share many of their views on Islam. Nor did I agree with them about the nature and ideal future of the 'Iranian community'. An example is the publication of pornographic material in a community magazine which took place in August 2009 (see Chapter 5). My personal view was that such material should not be published in a 'national' newspaper which is available to all

(regardless of age) free of charge. Most of my respondents, however, thought that such publications marked an important moment indicating Iranians' willingness to 'break free' from Islam.

These disagreements also exerted themselves on the participant dimension of my participant observation. Engaging in very harsh slander and invective against all things Islamic was a practice I often came across. This sort of practice mainly took place in private settings when families or friends gathered to spend time with each other. Observing such practices, I could never bring myself to actually participate in them.¹² Another example is the consumption of alcohol, a practically taken-for-granted practice within my research context: again, my choice not to drink alcohol often unambiguously set me apart from my informants, casting me no doubt as more of an observer than a participant. These difficulties surrounding the limits of participating, though, are a common aspect of most ethnographic research projects. As Dewalt and Dewalt have pointed out,

Largely, the establishment of our ... limits to participation depends on our own background and the circumstances of the people we study. Our personal characteristics as individuals – our ethnic identity, class, sex, religion, and family status – will determine how we interact with and report on the people we are studying (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002: 30).

As such, I am also fully aware – and so, too, is the reader now – that my data have been collected and analyzed under the mentioned circumstances. Here, incidentally, we also have the limits of Okely's 'vicarious knowledge': as the people around you become progressively

¹² I would not have participated in slandering any religion or life-style. I cannot see what is achieved by causing offence to other people's beliefs and ways of life.

more intoxicated, for instance, and you remain completely sober, how can you possibly claim to have even a vicarious understanding of their experience at that moment?

The disagreements and my periodic lack of participation affected my work negatively in yet another way. Sometimes, as a direct consequence of my non-participation or ‘difference’, fieldwork interactions degenerated into polemical debates in which I found myself being accused of all sorts of baseless charges which I then had to spend a great deal of time and effort defending myself against. A common suspicion among respondents was that I worked for the Iranian government – something I have never done, am not doing at the time of writing, and will never do in the future. As a matter of fact, I have no affiliation to *any* political party or faction, Iranian or otherwise. But for some people, these explanations were not convincing. They did not believe that my interest in these matters was purely scholarly.¹³ Rather, my accusers always tried to locate *me*. They asked me what my beliefs were. Whose side was I on? What was I trying to prove? And, surprisingly, what would my study conclude?

An unfortunate implication of these interactions was that I inadvertently elicited mistrust and anxiety from some informants. Of course, this is to some extent understandable given the nature of Iranian politics and the politically turbulent personal histories of some of my informants. But taking into account the difficulties of access and establishing trust, due again to the sensitive nature of the topic, the loss of trust was a frustrating hindrance. I often did not know how to tackle or ‘rescue’ such situations and ended up having to cut interviews short and accept that I had lost a particular informant. Once, for example, I was talking to a middle-aged man and his 20-year-old son in their home. Our conversation, as was often the case, turned to the regime. Despite concurring with them in condemning the regime’s

¹³ I am not suggesting that the social sciences exist outside politics, or that I am an apolitical person. My point is that I did not actively pursue an agenda other than enthusiastically trying to answer my research questions.

violence against protesters during the 2009 election crisis, the pair had made up their mind that I was lying – that I was there to defend hardline Islamism. The son kept showing me Youtube clips of revolutionary guards visiting violence upon protesters, whilst the father repeatedly asked: ‘See? How can you even suggest that there is anything good in this religion?’ I had *not* suggested that Islam was good or bad. The point I had made was simply that government violence can exist irrespective of the presence of Islam. My original question to them had been whether Iranians can/should simply do away with Islam after nearly 1400 years. I was frustrated by the fact that they did not seem to believe or even hear me. They only became more and more agitated. The atmosphere turned quite tense as they began using hostile and threatening language – saying, for example, how ‘those blood-thirsty, bastard criminals [the Mullahs]’ should be executed along with anyone who practises the ‘stone-age religion of Islam’. I decided to cut the conversation short and leave..

These problems were no doubt also entwined with my ‘insider’ status. Soraya Altorki (1988) has written about some of the difficulties with being an insider (see also Voloder 2013). These involve expectations to abide by the same norms as those amongst whom one studies and the reluctance of participants to share intimate knowledge for fear of being morally judged.¹⁴ In a similar vein, tense episodes such as the foregoing were exacerbated by my being Iranian, which confused some respondents. Many expected me to share their views as a matter of course, given that they believed their views to be completely unproblematic and ‘Iranian’. This also meant that for them any Iranian person not sharing those views was effectively not a ‘real’ Iranian, much in the same way that both Islam and the regime (often used synonymously) were deemed to be essentially alien impositions on a pure Iranian self.

¹⁴ Among Iranians, however, these are not the only reasons. Fear of the ‘evil eye’ (*cheshm*) or notions of *cheshm-o ham-cheshmi* (a concept similar to ‘keeping up with the Joneses’) are also reasons why information may be withheld from an ethnographer or disclosed in an altered manner.

In addition, I had to be wary of another, more practical, problem with doing research ‘at home’:¹⁵ if the ethnographer is too familiar with ‘the field’, there is a risk that certain aspects of the studied culture could escape her attention, which impacts on data collection (Spradley and McCurdy 1972: 23-36). However, I never felt as though this applied to me. As the foregoing example has hopefully elucidated, my insider/outsider status, my familiarity with ‘the field’, was not purely determined by my place of birth/residence, ethnic background and cultural knowledge. It was determined in the main by how different I was perceived to be by my respondents and how similar to them I perceived myself. As such, in the sort of setting mentioned above I was almost always closer to being an outsider, feeling many of the novelties, insecurities and anxieties that any ‘outsider’ ethnographer feels in the field. Just to be on the safe side, however, I pre-empted the problem by being extra aware – taking my cue from anthropologists who have overcome familiarity through a more assiduous process of data collection. As Altorki explains, ‘the researcher can counteract familiarity by close observation, meticulous recording of ethnographic scenes, and detailed probing to uncover the “taken-for-granted” world he or she may share with members of the community being studied’ (Altorki 1988: 55-6).

But being an insider – even if only some of the time – also had its advantages. Apart from the ability to ‘set up shop’ relatively quickly in the field, as Altorki (1988: 49) puts it, I believe one of the main advantages was my native-speaker fluency in the vernacular, which meant that I was attuned to cultural subtleties and allusions conveyed through language.¹⁶ (Kathryn Spellman [2004: 40], for example, has expressed frustration at her inability to speak

¹⁵ I suppose I was also ‘at home’ in the sense that I was working in London where I also lived.

¹⁶ The vernacular is mainly Persian (*Farsi*) but also English. Some people, especially the young, also mix the two to make hybrid language sometimes referred to as ‘Fenglish’. I am fluent in the speaking and writing of, and confident in translating between, these languages.

Farsi fluently.) Another advantage was that I was ‘by default’ privy to the meanings of some everyday practices that may (at least in the beginning) be unobservable/unintelligible to the non-native eye – such as subtle movements of various parts of the body or the complicated shades of *ta`arof*.¹⁷ (see also Tierney 1984: 585).

Overall, however, my situation was clearly quite complicated and I was neither (perceived as) a complete insider nor a complete outsider – not that anyone ever is! But I saw this positively. Much of the time, the fact that I fell somewhere between the first and second generation of Iranian immigrants (also called the ‘1.5’ generation by some) was actually fun and afforded me an interesting position and vantage point: some members of the first generation considered me unfamiliar with ‘Iranian culture’, i.e. somehow less Iranian, only a semi-insider, because I mainly grew up outside Iran. As such, they saw it as their duty to ‘educate’ me about the ‘Iranian way’ – I collected many personal histories in this way. However, for the second and third generations, who were born and raised in the UK, I *was* a ‘proper’ Iranian because I had been born in Iran and had spent some of my formative years there. Thus, they perceived me as a semi-outsider and interacted with me as such – i.e. educated me about being British-Iranian. Throughout my years of living and interacting with the Iranian diaspora, I have found this semi-insider/outsider status to be a very accurate description of my experience. There are many discourses and practices of both the first and subsequent generations that were, and are, unfamiliar to me.

Finally, there was the issue(s) of gender, another encumbrance in the research process. As will become clear in the chapters that follow, gender relations are by no means straightforward in the Iranian diasporic context. Individualized ideas and practices of freedom and subjectivity are giving rise to a vast array of gender identities. At the same time, the ‘old’ (more patriarchal) perceptions of gender relations are still current and constitutive. To make

¹⁷ A system of often socially necessary behaviours or etiquette specific to Iranian culture.

matters more complicated, there are forces of explicit (often extremist) non-Islamiosity that are actively reshaping notions of Iranian-ness, creating in the process new understandings of gender roles. This made being a male researcher difficult as I was never quite sure how to go about interviewing women. In some cases, such as when speaking to university students on campus, there were no problems at all. In many other cases, however, I found that gender relations and interactions tended to be more restricted and controlled, although the extent of this varied. A few people explained that although they themselves were completely open about ‘such things’, they mistrusted other Iranians – ‘you never know with Iranians,’ one man explained. Restrictions were thus also a protective strategy. Further, it was sometimes the case that although a female participant herself did not adhere to gender restrictions, she came from a family or was married to someone who took these seriously. It is also noteworthy that gender restrictions were by no means purely a ‘religious’ phenomenon. They existed equally in secular settings and were adhered to by men *and* women, who often articulated and justified them in terms of honour, tradition, patriotism, (family) pride, purity, and so forth. Within this context, men and women would not meet up alone unless they knew each other very well or unless the meeting was a necessary or professional one – with a lawyer or a doctor, for example. Otherwise, the situation would likely be an awkward one, making them feel tense and uncomfortable, perhaps even afraid of the potential repercussions.

I tried to navigate through these issues – not least also to save myself trouble and discomfort – by being respectful, empathic and sensitive to specific cases. Where possible, as on university campuses, I simply interviewed female respondents. In other settings, however, I had to speak to respondents in the presence of their family or friends. But I soon found that this type of situation either became superficial (even artificial) or quickly developed into a group discussion; or even worse, the respondent might withhold certain information out of respect, fear or embarrassment. For these reasons, I occasionally enlisted the help of two

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female Iranian¹⁸ students, one of whom was also an informant, as research assistants. Between them, they conducted four interview sessions with a total of nine women in their twenties and thirties. Interviewees were selected on the basis that they were willing to share their views on issues such as female sexuality, subjectivity and education in relation to Shi`ism, Iranian culture and Islam more generally.

Organization of the Book

Writing this book has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Organizing it, however, has been an enormous challenge. My efforts have been driven by a desire to strike the right balance between introducing and theorizing the concept of non-Islamiosity, engaging with relevant bodies of literature, and presenting my ethnographic data. The truth is that non-Islamiosity – its complexities and nuances – has taken me somewhat by surprise. I had not envisioned that it would/could grow so much in the course of the research. But it has; and that, whilst enriching, has made the writing of the present text something of a balancing act. It has also forced me to humbly accept that neither my fieldwork nor this book have managed to ‘capture’ the many (and emerging) facets of non-Islamiosity. In turn, this complexity has influenced, indeed determined, every aspect of the book’s organization.

Apart from this introductory chapter, the book is divided into seven chapters. It has been my aim, as far as possible, to explore non-Islamiosity in all its dimensions to see how groups and individuals utilize and interact with it, and how diasporic community and consciousness are shaped by and experienced through it. I have also been interested in how non-Islamiosity itself is shaped within these interactions and what its wider implications are, especially for devout Shi`a. As such, whilst each chapter on the whole deals with a particular

¹⁸ Three students in total assisted, but one of them was not Iranian. ~~of whom two were Iranian.~~

aspect of the non-Islamious Iranian diaspora in London, it is simultaneously concerned with a number of sub-themes as well. Chapter 6, for example, revolves mainly around issues of consumption and community-making. But it also looks at the history (and present) of ‘Persian’ identity, the role of ‘new media’, *and* the concept of experience – a brief synopsis of chapters will follow shortly. This approach has necessitated that the three elements of the book – theorizing non-Islamiosity, engaging with relevant literatures and presenting data – not be separated but rather interspersed throughout every chapter. Some readers may object at not being presented with long(er) ethnographic narratives. But I hope my choice of structure will create a cumulative effect, so that by the end the reader has a rich and deep sense of life among non-Islamious Iranians.

I was also keen for the book’s organization to somewhat reflect the nature of my fieldwork. Iranians are not only dispersed throughout London, they are also by and large busy professionals. It was therefore not a case of ‘just hanging out’ with a group of people, or in a particular place, for several days. Rather, to me, fieldwork often felt like a series of episodes and encounters. Of course, I revisited as many people and places as I could, and I spent as long as possible with people in various locations. But I seldom felt a sense of continuity or routine in my fieldwork. Any ‘routine’ was owed to the hustle and bustle of daily living in the postmetropolis that is London. This made for some interesting experiences, though: traversing the cacophonous spaces of the city and encountering superficially its myriad faces, it was strange to suddenly arrive, just off the side-walk, in a ‘Persian’ space where so many disjunctive temporalities and subjectivities had congregated to live and to form a non-Islamious diaspora. But usually after a few hours, these spaces, which sometimes paid homage to thousands of years of history and frequently essentialized identity in such a way that one momentarily forgot its malleability, dissolved just as quickly as they had materialized. It is therefore often these ‘episodes’ that are presented throughout the coming

pages. But this is not to say that the book is comprised of a series of loosely-connected anecdotes. I felt fully immersed in and committed to my fieldwork and ‘did it’ every day. Rather, put together, these episodes *are* the London Iranian diaspora. And they include all sorts of gatherings and social interactions – formal/informal, important/prosaic, public/private, crowded/quiet, happy/sad... In this way, as I saw it, spending time in an Iranian shop watching people go about their daily business, or having tea with a project manager at ‘Iranian Association’ in the afternoon talking about ‘boring stuff’ are also episodes. This is because every time I left them behind, I *almost* felt as though I had left the Iranian diaspora! That is, they seemed to me like nodes that I had to travel between, a travelling to and fro in a city in whose tapestry Iranians are a near-invisible pattern.

There are two remarks to make in relation to this, though. One, I emphasized ‘almost’ a few sentences ago exactly because Iranians *are* becoming more visible in the London spaces between the nodes: Iranian restaurants, shops and billboards catch the eye more frequently now, albeit in some parts of London more than in others¹⁹ (but nowhere near as extensively as, say, the South East Asian presence in Southall, west London). Two, all this talk of nodes and episodes should not yield illusions of clear separation or boundedness of spaces; the heterogeneity of the Iranian diaspora cannot be stressed enough. These Iranian spaces are, therefore, replete with all kinds of histories, desires and subjectivities. The episodes, in other words, are not empty narratives of events; they are filled with people; with complex and disjunctive life-worlds; with individuals. And I do a great deal of my analyzing through the histories and stories of individuals. The individuals’ accounts I have included here are virtually all single examples echoing wider collective experiences, beliefs, attitudes and discourses. Thus, one voice is often employed to speak for many. However, it has also been important to me stay true to the individuality of the accounts. I thus write with the

¹⁹ [Areas such as Ealing and Finchley.](#)

belief that much of what interests me as a theorist is latent within the nooks and crannies of my respondents' individual stories (see also Stoller 1989; Ellen 1984: 248).²⁰

With all this in mind, Chapter 1 sets the ethnographic and theoretical scene in more detail by delving deeper into the concept of non-Islamiosity and particularly the idea of 'non-Islamious' practices and consciousness. Moreover, it probes further into the two key bodies of literature discussed earlier – diaspora studies and the secular – exploring contemporary impasses and the contributions the concept of non-Islamiosity can make. Chapters 2 and 3 somewhat continue this 'scene setting'. Chapter 2 explores the historical trajectories of non-Islamiosity, trying to understand why and how it has become a possible and viable mode of consciousness and action. It considers the history of Iranian modernity as well as trends within Britain's racialized politics of difference and immigration in the post-WW2 period. The aim here is also to lay bare the connections of these histories to contemporary diasporic non-Islamiosity. Chapter 3, on the other hand, focuses specifically on Iranian migrations following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The revolution occupies a paramount place in the formation of the discourses and practices of non-Islamiosity. It led to the largest wave of emigration in Iranian history and effectively gave rise to what is currently known as the Iranian diaspora. Therefore, the chapter starts by looking at its chronology. Following this, 'topography' of the Iranian diaspora in London is offered. I then explore 'the diaspora' more theoretically, critiquing prevalent ideas in Iranian Studies vis-à-vis diasporic Iranians as 'secular'. Finally, I begin to explore the question of why Islam is so despised by some Iranians.

In Chapter 4, I concentrate on the micro-practices of daily living in the context of non-Islamiosity. I locate the idea of 'being free' at the heart of non-Islamiosity and try to analyse the latter as a mechanism for the achievement of individual understandings of

²⁰ I must also acknowledge a debt to Lila Abu-Lughod's 'ethnographies of the particular' (1991).

freedom. We see non-Islamiosity as instrumental, indeed indispensable, in the hard emotional, mental and physical work involved when individuals effect major changes to their lives. I also explore ‘diaspora’ as the idealized field for the realization of these individualized freedom practices and experiences. Finally, I try to show through the prism of gender how non-Islamious freedom practices are creating tensions within the Iranian community, and how these affect ideas of belonging to ‘the community’. Overall, Chapter 4 explores the nature and dynamics of the relationship between non-Islamiosity and ‘the self’. As such, an important question running through the chapter is how does non-Islamiosity mediate people’s reconciliation of communal/collective notions of identity with individualized, and often highly contradictory, practices of freedom and the self? I explore this question through what I call a ‘vague self’.

Chapter 5 picks up on the tensions identified in the previous chapter. It is mainly concerned with issues of community production and reification and examines the creation and articulation of a discourse of non-Islamiosity in diasporic media and performing arts. The chapter focuses on the extremist dimension of non-Islamiosity, which is rampant within diasporic media, to gauge the extent to which non-Islamiosity is becoming the discourse through which the epistemological, ethical and ontological contours of an emerging ‘Iranian diasporic community’ are demarcated. By extension, Chapter 6 is an exploration of issues of non-Islamious consumption. It asks: to what extent is ‘community’ lived and experienced through consumption? I examine a trend whereby Iranians increasingly identify not as ‘Iranian’ but as ‘Persian’. Most analysts view these identifications as a way of creating distance between the self and the negative connotations that ‘Iran’ carries today. However, I try to show that this mode of identification is also about highlighting a felt crisis of identity and articulating a demand for cohesion, a demand which is in turn ‘answered’ by non-Islamiosity’s productions. I then explore (re)productions – what people produce through ‘new

media' subsequent to consumption – and argue that experiences of non-Islamiosity are ongoing processes which are necessarily socially productive.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I explore what it means to be a devout and practising Shi'a within the social and power relation increasingly dominated by non-Islamiosity. I am interested in the ways in which non-Islamiosity is constitutive of and immanent in how devout diasporic Iranian Shi'a experience themselves as such in their daily lives. I aim to complicate current theories of the relationship between Muslims and secularism in diasporic contexts not least by drawing attention to intra-diasporic modes of the secular. Through an ethnographic account of a Shi'a birthday party, I try to show how some Muslims do not necessarily negotiate their religious identity – 'negotiation' is a favoured concept within the literature. Rather, they are engaged in a micro-physical/political power-resistance relationship with non-Islamiosity which at times *entices* them to make *concessions* to it. I also explore the lives of some Shi'a who have chosen to be 'openly religious' – that is, to resist at all costs making concessions – and the harsh circumstances they face daily as a result. In their lives, too, non-Islamiosity has an undeniable presence, leaving indelible marks on their social and individual lives as well as on their everyday religious self-experience.