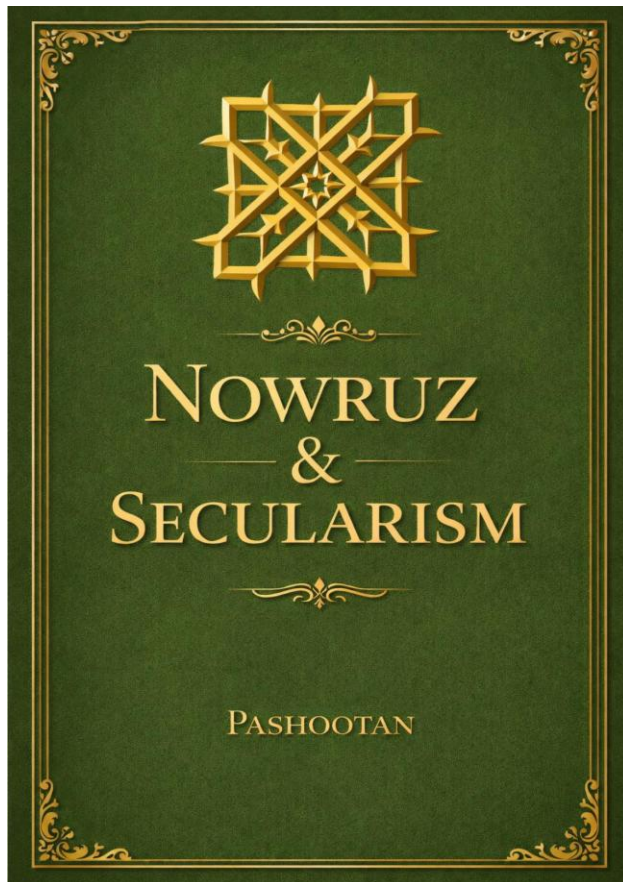


Nowruz and Secularism

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A newspaper-style essay on chronology, rational governance, Nowruz, and secularism



The original cover image frames the essay around Nowruz, Iranian identity, and secular thought.

In this writing, an effort has been made to examine the connection between Nowruz and secularism through a fresh and new perspective, with attention to Iran's intellectual framework and role. At first, the relationship between these two terms may perhaps not be properly understood. This text also attempts, through various questions and answers and through multiple examples, first to awaken the questioning mind of the individual, and then to answer those questions. Now that we celebrate 2585 years of Nowruz, perhaps it is good to view this treasure not only as a festival, but also as a mode of thought that holds a special place.

1. What is chronology, and what kinds does it have?

The Persian word for chronology corresponds to the English word "Chronology."¹ Upon analysis, it can be divided into two parts: the originally Greek words "chrónos" meaning time, and "logos," meaning study and inquiry. In German too, the equivalent "Zeitrechnung"² is used, meaning the measurement of time. In Persian, this is called gāhshomāri (chronology/calendar reckoning), which itself is formed from two words: gāh meaning time, and shomār meaning counting. Of course, during the eras of the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians, there existed terms and equivalents with meanings identical or like chronology. Iranian chronology itself was a combination of Egyptian, Sumerian, Babylonian, and Avestan calendar systems, and in different periods different forms of it emerged. In this essay, these are discussed only briefly. For a more precise study and knowledge of the details, one may read *The Chronology of Ancient Iran* by

Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh. Some points from this book will be mentioned below.

1.1. What was the Egyptian calendar like?

At the outset it should be said that agriculture formed the core of the cycle of life through the Nile River. Unlike many other regions of the world, the mostly clear and star-filled skies of Egypt attracted the attention of people and thinkers, leading them to seek the mysteries of the world in the heavens. Certainly, throughout the whole earth, the moon and the sun are visible in the sky. But although the stars are also present everywhere, they may be less closely studied in

places where the weather is usually cloudy. Regions of the earth with clear skies are especially suited to such observations. One of the stars that drew special attention was Sirius, or the Shi'ra-ye Yamānī (the Dog Star). The annual changes in the Nile's waters and the climate of Egypt were tied to a periodic flooding of the Nile. This flooding usually took place in July, corresponding roughly to the Persian months of Tir and Mordad. In this period, sky-observing scholars and thinkers noticed the movement and rising of a special star called Sirius — specifically, the first day in the year on which this star appeared in the eastern horizon just before sunrise. The Egyptians regarded this star as sacred and associated it with the goddess Isis, interpreting it together with Osiris. This event occurred every 365 days. They still did not know the Earth's axial revolution around the sun, but through this observation they accidentally arrived at the number 365 days. By paying attention to the moon's phases and cycle, they also arrived at the number 12 months, and because the lunar cycle is about 29.3 days, they rounded each lunar month to 30 days and then added five extra days. In this way, a 365-day year with 12 months emerged — one that became the beginning point for

¹ Chronology etymology in English

² The book *Chronology in Ancient Iran*, by سید حسن تقی‌زاده, Chapter One, page 1

³ The book *Chronology in Ancient Iran*, by سید حسن تقی‌زاده, Chapter Two, page 41

many later calendars, including the Avestan and Julian systems. In this calendar there was no weekly division of the year. Instead, every one of the 30 days in each month had its own special name. It should also be noted that before the monthly division described above, the earliest Egyptian years were divided into 72 periods of 5 days each, and then an additional 5-day epagomenal period was added, making 73 periods of 5 days.

1.2. What was the Babylonian calendar like?⁴

The Babylonian calendar, around 3000 years ago, was at first influenced by the Sumerian calendar. Initially it was a lunar calendar, but later, in order to stabilize the year, they devised a luni-solar leap system. Various kinds of calendars existed in Babylonian civilization, but two of them became widespread. The first was a religious-agricultural calendar. It began with the month of Tishri, with the festival of the god Bel, and corresponded to autumn. The months alternated between 29 and 30 days, and every two or three years, a 13th month was intercalated as a leap month. Apparently this type of year was common in the city of Ur. Another calendar existed in the city of Nippur and later in Babylon, and it began in spring. It had 360 days. Later, it seems both calendars were combined and the calendar of Ur became more widely accepted; yet in this combined form both spring and autumn

were celebrated. The Sumerian year as well, from about 2400 BCE, seems to have begun in spring — that is, with a month corresponding to Nisan.

1.3. What was the Iranian calendar like?

At the beginning, according to Seyyed Hassan Taqizadeh in *The Chronology of Ancient Iran*, Iranian civilization stood between two or three different civilizational zones: to the west, principally Egypt and Babylon — though these same regions also included Sumer, Assyria, Akkad, and cities such as Eridu, Nippur, Lagash, Uruk, Larsa, Kish, and Ur — as well as the civilizational sphere of the Greek islands, Crete, and Mycenae; and to the east, other major civilizational zones such as India and China. He considers the Chinese civilization to be very distant from the others, but Indian civilization, especially northern India, shares roots with Iranian civilization in certain respects. In the field of chronology in particular, Iran stood more in interaction with India, Egypt, and Babylon.⁴ Now let us take a look at the different types of calendars in ancient Iran. First, among the ancient Iranian calendars, we may refer to the Old Avestan year. This year was calculated approximately like the Egyptian year explained above: it had 365 days, and five additional days were added to it. These five days were called Gāhenbārān or Panjeh. However, unlike the Egyptian system, the months in this calendar did not necessarily all consist of 30 days. Still, there was a festival called Gāhenbārān, apparently roughly corresponding to the harvest festival in ancient Egypt and to the moment of the new year. This festival was held in early Tir. The year was divided into six sections, each described as follows:

- Maidyōzaremaya: 40 days, beginning at the spring equinox
- Maidyōšhem: 60 days
- Paitišahya: 75 days
- Ayāthrima: 30 days
- Maidyāirya: 80 days
- Hamaspathmaedaya: 75 days⁵

Second, we may refer to the Old Persian year, which was current up to the time of Darius I, especially in contact with Babylonian and Elamite governments. According to the trilingual inscriptions of Darius I, the year began with a month called Bagayādīsh, which corresponded roughly to October and marked a great festival associated with the

autumnal equinox. Its name appears to have come from Bag or Mithra, the greatest god before the rise of Zoroastrianism.⁶ Third, we refer to the New Avestan calendar, which emerged after Cambyses' conquest of Egypt and under Egyptian influence. Its difference from the old Avestan system was that the year was divided into 12 months of 30 days each, plus the additional five Gāhenbār days. As before, there was no weekly division, and each of the 30 days of the month had its own name. This New Avestan calendar, with minor differences, continued into the Parthian and Sasanian periods, and under the Sasanians the naming of the months became based on yazatas and divinities, including Farvardin, Ordibehesht, Khordad, and so on. Festivals such as Mehregan and Sadeh were celebrated in this system.⁷ After the arrival of Islam in Iran, years were mostly measured on the basis of the moon's motion. A lunar year consists of 12 lunar months, whose total duration is 354 or 355 days, and it has no solar leap-year correction. Its essential problem is that it

5 The book *Chronology in Ancient Iran*, by سید حسن نقی‌زاده, Chapter Four, page 101-110

6 The book *Chronology in Ancient Iran*, by سید حسن نقی‌زاده, Chapter Four, page 114-115

7 The book *Chronology in Ancient Iran*, by سید حسن نقی‌زاده, Chapter Four, page 115-119

does not correspond with the seasons. Although the names Jumada al-Awwal and Jumada al-Thani literally suggest winter months, these months may in fact fall during the hottest days of the year. This itself represents a kind of irrationality in chronology. All civilizations before that had, certainly, calculated calendars more accurately. Even the most primitive human groups had better ideas than this. Matters eventually reached a point where, for the calculation of annual taxation, Iranian bureaucrats and administrators created another calendar called the kharāji calendar in order to keep the year fixed. Here the Persian proverb is fully visible: "If the architect lays the first brick crooked, the wall will go crooked up to the heavens." Yet despite the coming of Islam, Iranians continually tried to preserve the Sasanian calendar and Nowruz. They struggled in this path, and the Shu'ubiyya movement attempted to preserve Nowruz and the Iranian calendar. Although figures such as Imam Muhammad al-Ghazali, in his book *Kimiya-ye Sa'adat*, spoke ill of Nowruz and condemned it, Iranians never gave up, and through their efforts they arrived at the Jalali calendar.⁸ The Jalali calendar is a solar calendar established in the year 457 Solar Hijri / 1079 CE, by order of Jalal al-Din Malik Shah Seljuk and through the efforts of Iranian scholars such as Omar Khayyam. It is considered one of the most accurate calendars in the world and forms the basis of Iran's calendar today. This calendar was solar, and the sun's annual motion in the sky was observed. As will be explained later, this observation began the year at the spring equinox, around March 21

in the northern hemisphere. It had 12 months, such that the first 6 months had 31 days, the next months had 30 days, and the last month had 29 days in ordinary years and 30 in leap years. In this type of calendar, the months corresponded with the seasons, and it was calculated even more precisely than the Gregorian calendar. Today, with scientific and technological progress and the knowledge that the Earth revolves around the sun, after Copernicus they took the Earth's orbital period as approximately 365.24219 days, which roughly matches both the Jalali and Gregorian calendars. (It should be noted that both systems had already reached nearly this approximation. Also, except for the Islamic calendar, the other calendars likewise kept the months aligned with the seasons, though with minor differences in precision.) In Khayyam's time, the apparent motion of the sun in elliptical paths was studied. In this way, an understanding of the sun's changing position over the course of the year was obtained. In addition, by attending to differences in the length of day and night and to the sun's position, they were able to determine the spring and autumn equinoxes and celebrate them.

1.4. At what time was Nowruz celebrated, and from when did it become the

beginning of the new year? Nowruz has always been celebrated from ancient times as the spring equinox. It was in some sense an inheritance from Babylonian festivals, because in Babylon both the spring and autumn equinoxes were of great importance. As explained earlier, the autumnal equinox may at times have held greater significance, and some groups may even have regarded it as the beginning of their new year, while still celebrating the spring equinox as well. Thus, speculation regarding the exact temporal origin of the official new year is difficult, because even in the Achaemenid era several calendars existed and different systems were in use. However, from the Sasanian period, solid evidence exists showing that Nowruz was officially celebrated as the beginning of the new year.

2. What is secularism?

Secularism is a philosophical, political, and social concept referring to the separation of religion from government and public institutions. This idea means that the laws and policies of a country should not be based on religious principles, and the state should remain neutral toward all religions. A country should not have an official religion. If a country does have an official religion, that very fact is the first cornerstone of discrimination against other religions. In the following paragraphs, we will proceed through questions and answers to show how this is so. When we say the separation of religion and politics, we mean that policymaking and legislation should not be based on the teachings of a particular religion. For example, in

France, ethical foundations are not derived from religion, but rather from an institution called the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, which studies and analyzes ethical, philosophical, social, political, economic, and legal issues and their impact on society.

2.1. The Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in France

The members of this academy consist of prominent scholars, philosophers, politicians, and economists chosen by previous members. This institution does not play a direct legislative role, but it has an important intellectual and advisory influence on France's policymakers and legislators. The academy publishes scholarly studies and ethical analyses on important social, political, and cultural matters, which later serve as a basis for legislative decision-making. The French government and parliament make use of the academy's

8 The book *Chronology in Ancient Iran*, by سید حسن نقی‌زاده, Chapter Five, page 153

views in drafting laws concerning human rights, democracy, economics, education, medical ethics, new technologies such as artificial intelligence, and the environment. This institution also holds sessions attended by legislators and politicians. By contrast, in countries with religious rule, ethical issues are usually analyzed and reviewed in religious centers, or they borrow from secular institutions in other countries such as this French one. In countries lacking such a secular institution but still wanting to decide in a secular way, the views of such academies may be used as a reference. But in countries with religious rule, it is the religious authorities who determine the ethical boundaries of society. Questions and answers are interpreted from sacred books and take on the character of divine command. A legal example from a religious state can be seen in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where one observes how much the seminary in Qom and the hierarchy of ayatollahs legislate on the basis of the sharia, to the point that in criminal law, compensation (diya) is classified in such a way that the role of the camel in Islamic punishment may appear greater than that of the victim. Another feature of a secular government is that religious freedom must exist. That is, people must be free to have any religion, or no religion at all, without state interference. In Muslim countries with religious rule, if a person is Muslim, changing religion according to juristic laws may amount to apostasy. In Iran, for example, there is no explicit statutory punishment for apostasy, but according to Article 167 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, a judge may, in the absence of a written law, refer to authoritative Islamic sources and fatwas and issue a ruling on that basis. Since the Islamic Republic is founded as a non-secular religious government, this same Article 167 helps demonstrate the point: leaving religion may involve mortal danger from the ruling order, which is contrary to freedom of religion and freedom of religious choice.

2.2. What kinds of secularism exist in political practice?

a. Strong Secularism

In this model, religion is completely separated from politics and the state, and has no influence at all on laws and government policy. In some cases, even religious activity in public spaces is restricted. France, with its policy of strict secularism, is an example of this type.

b. Soft Secularism

In this type, religion is separated from politics, but religious influences in social and cultural life are permitted. The state does not directly support religion, but religious activity in public life is allowed. This model is seen more in countries such as the United States, where religion does not directly govern politics, but remains an important part of culture and society.⁹

c. Theoretical Secularism

This form of secularism is more of a theoretical principle than an implemented political one. It seeks to separate political religion from all levels of government and society and aims to establish a social and political order based on science and rationality.

d. Cultural Secularism

In this kind of secularism, religion is separated from politics, but religious roles may remain in culture and society. In other words, although religion has no direct influence on politics, it may still play roles in cultural and social life, especially in individual and group behaviour.

e. Liberal Secularism

This type seeks to secure freedom of religion for all individuals and allows them to follow their religious beliefs, but those beliefs must not affect public laws and policies. This model emphasizes equal rights and individual freedoms alongside the separation of religion and politics. In the United States, this can be seen in this way. Of course, the two first types — strict and soft secularism — are the basic ones, and the other divisions are more analytical categories for discussion. Now that we have become familiar with institutions and different forms of secularism, perhaps it is not inappropriate to examine the etymology of the word. Usually this would happen at the beginning, but to connect it better to the third section, we preferred to address it here.

2.3 What is the etymology of the word secularism?

Secularism comes from the Latin word “saeculum,” meaning a generation, a human life-span, a span of time, or a century. In sum, it refers to time — time that can be measured. In a world where time can be measured, we now understand why this text began with the measurement of time and the year. One of the reasons lies precisely here. Now let us turn to the etymology of another word. Laïcité is a noun formed by adding the suffix “-ité” to the Latin adjective “laicus,” which itself derives from the Greek “laikos,” from “laos.”

In English, this could be rendered as “layman” — meaning ordinary people, those not specialized in religious sciences, can also play a role in governing.

3. Nowruz & Secularism

3.1. What is the relation and connection between Nowruz and secularism?

Today, Nowruz is celebrated on the basis that the Earth revolves around the sun. In addition, we know that between the longest night of the year and the longest day of the year there are two days — one in autumn and the other in spring — when the length of day and night become equal. Iranians chose the spring equinox, because it conveys the message of the birth of plants, the rebirth of the earth, renewal, and freshness. Countries of the world, when they honour a day, usually attach religious or doctrinal interpretations to it. For example, in Shi‘i Islam, the 15th of Sha‘ban is celebrated as the birth of the Imam of Time by Twelver Shi‘is. But since lunar months rotate through the solar year, this date is not fixed with respect to the seasons: sometimes it falls in cold weather, sometimes in heat. We are not concerned here with personal religious beliefs, but surely others cannot bring their personal beliefs into government and declare such a day an official holiday. Some Shi‘is may themselves not believe in the Twelfth Imam. Then what is to be done? At minimum, one must offer rational grounds for decisions in the field of chronology. The calendar suitable for a secular government is one that is trans-religious, not one founded on religious interpretations. In Christianity, it is said that Christ was born on the night of December 24. I do not know whether he was indeed born on that date, whether he was born at all, or whether the matter is legend or reality. But I do know that official holidays of this sort carry a religious rather than a rational basis. In ancient Egypt, if a new year was held according to the harvest season, it was based on labour and tangible consequence. Yet in that same Egypt, naming the days of the months after gods gave rise to many religious interpretations in governance, to the point that the pharaohs might steer affairs in directions far from rationality. Because of these

simple naming, temple priests certainly interfered in public affairs, and misplaced sacralization drew government toward irrational administration. But if the spring equinox was celebrated, then it was simply a spring celebration — a festival of joy and happiness — not a religious interpretation. Religious meanings came afterward, built upon an initial rational foundation. Even the religious meanings later created in ancient Egypt came after the primary rational basis. So, there was still some rationality in it. It was not a case where a governmental legal matter was wholly devoid of reason. Of course, everyone is free to hold whatever interpretation they wish. But such interpretations have no place in a national, governmental, or state calendar. This example of chronology and festival is offered as an exercise in understanding secularism. If secularism means counting all religions equally, then how can you include religiously interpreted days of celebration and mourning as official dates in your calendar and still claim to be secular? Nowruz is pure rationality. It comes from careful measurement and evaluation of time. Even if in the past it was not measured with complete precision because of limited knowledge, that deficiency has now been corrected. Nowruz, and even other Iranian and non-Iranian festivals, if defined beyond religion, can become official holidays. Someone opposed may ask: Do you want to eliminate religions? They may accuse us of hostility to religion. The answer is very clear. If you wish to make each religion’s holy days official holidays, then you have committed injustice against those who do not share that belief. On the other hand, affairs of state must be separate from your religious affairs. State affairs must draw on a more universal principle, one that can regard all religions equally. If you can find a day better than Nowruz for celebrating the new year, we are ready to hear it. Another person asks: Why should a single day become the beginning of the year at all? The answer is simple. Human life depends on the measurement of time. The cycle of seasons exists, and affairs of state require a point of origin for measuring the year. If you can design a better point of origin, do so. Another asks: Why do we need celebration? The affairs of a state also need holidays — rest and recreation. You are free to cry on your day of rest, but a country must become happy, so that after rest it can be more effective on working days. Therefore, if a holiday is to be based on celebration, that is rational. If you can design a better beginning than Nowruz, do so.

Nowruz is among those festivals that can do everything. It is defined beyond religion. It excludes no religion. And it alone is suitable for governing a country. Yet it will not allow religions to enter the affairs of the state. If this is not secularism, then what is?

3.2. Nowruz as an index of secular government

As stated, contemporary Nowruz is pure reason in the measurement of chronology. Chronology is part of statecraft and governance. The current Iranian solar calendar exists today in the most secular possible form, far removed from religious interpretations. This part of Iranian state administration is a sign of the complete separation of religion from politics. Now imagine that in Iran an institution like the French Academy of Moral and Political Sciences is established. The first question is: what could be the secular benchmark of such an institution for the ethical foundations of

⁹ Secularism." Secularism & Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives. Ed. Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keyser. Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC), 2007

lawmaking? The answer is simple. To create ethics and legislation for society, you must move toward something that, like Nowruz, is universal. It must not incorporate religion within itself, must not discriminate in favor of any religion, and must be a criterion grounded in pure reason, rational inquiry, and philosophy — a criterion beyond all gods. And if these laws conflict with the religious laws of some group or people, that does not indicate discrimination against that religion. So long as such laws remain personal, they remain in the personal sphere. But if they seek to impose themselves upon society, a secular government will inevitably confront that religion. For example, if in a future free Iran people wish to make the 15th of Sha‘ban an official occasion, the answer of that future government will be no. It may be celebrated privately, but it certainly will not be an official holiday. And if that same religious observance attempts to impose itself by force, it will be met by force. The only thing that has been defined is the sphere of activity of religions, not their elimination. If religions move outside their proper sphere, they will be confronted. For example, if we wish to legislate on abortion, on what basis should this be done? First, it must be said that no religious interpretation has the right to intervene or set the ethical criteria. For example, one cannot say that, from the standpoint of Christianity, a human being becomes living from the moment the fertilized egg is formed. Rather, if you wish to define the beginning of human life on that basis, you must state and prove it without recourse to Christianity, and without appealing to religious sanctities. Personal sacred beliefs are usually followed privately. For instance, in the state of Texas in the United States, abortion after six weeks, when a heartbeat appears, has been declared forbidden. At least a scientific reason has been

given for it, though even there the philosophical-ethical path remains incomplete. Still, ethics there have, at least outwardly, been examined apart from Christianity. In Islam, perhaps abortion may be permitted under specific conditions up to four months, because the ensoulment of the fetus is counted as occurring up to that time. But that would be a non-secular path. The ruling of Islamic religious scholars cannot be a source for legislation. In France, however, on this matter they have arrived at a figure close to three and a half months or fourteen weeks, following a philosophical path. They refer to the woman’s right over her own body. In addition, they study the fetus itself and must answer such questions as: by which week has the heart formed? By which week does sensation arise? When do fetal movements begin? From what point does the fetal nervous system feel pain? This path is examined both scientifically and philosophically, ethically, and independently of divine command. They may perhaps arrive at numbers similar to those of religion, but the systems of thought are entirely different. In legislation, religion cannot determine ethical standards and norms. Rather, it is human questioning and humanism that enables human beings to manage themselves. In precisely these kinds of legislative efforts, we arrive again at the benchmark of Nowruz. Scientific measurement in the stages of fetal development is like scientific measurement of the motions of the moon and stars.

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