Imagination, meaning and revolution: The sources of the revolutionary power of Islam in Iran
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Preface

Like many other immigrants of Iranian background, physically disconnected from my origins, and yet feeling attached to Iranian cultural and religious heritage, I have been deeply affected by the Revolution of 1979. The enigma of this tormented experience is still haunting many millions of Iranians whose lives have forever changed as a result of this revolution. Numerous books, studies, memoirs, reports and films produced by the Iranian émigré show how fascinated and yet puzzled they still are with the events that shook Iran almost twenty years ago, and that created aftershocks, which are still being felt. Inside Iran, the quest to discern the meaning of this significant historical experience is even more intense and more curious. Naturally, the citizens of Iran are still dealing with the consequences of this huge social, cultural and political experience. For me, searching for the meaning of the Iranian Revolution, has become an eternal quest. This quest has been my basic motivation in producing the present work.

Since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, there has been an increasing interest in studying analytically and critically the role of Islamic traditions in creating and sustaining a revolution in modern times. One may say that this new interest is gradually taking the shape of a distinct discourse, which could bridge the perceived historical break between modernity and tradition in the minds of Iranians. This historical break had been created throughout the twentieth century through the political, cultural and intellectual encounter with West. Modern secular intellectuals were the main voices of modern progress against traditional backwardness. In its fascination with progress, the secular political and literary discourse thus disconnected itself from the living traditions, and championed the ideas of freedom and social justice against “political despotism” and “religious dogmatism”. They had a dream of a modern revolution that would usher in a world of enlightenment, freedom and prosperity at the expense of the dark world of oppression, poverty and superstition.

With the rise of a religious revolution in Iran, this arbitrary and idealistic division of tradition and modernity is being seriously re-examined by a new generation of both secular and religious intellectuals. Even some of the secular intellectuals and activists of the Pahlavi period are realising that by breaking from the Islamic traditions, they had also severed themselves from the society at large. This was perhaps the reason why Iranian modern secularism, despite all its ingenuity and passion for a modern revolution, failed to inspire a revolutionary movement in its own right. This failure could, in a sense, be considered as a consequence of the ignorance of the secular intellectuals of the political and revolutionary potentials of the sacred texts, symbolism and rituals.

The secular intellectuals and activists, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, failed to realise that despite the apparent lack of relevance of the Islamic traditions to the problems of modernity, new interpretations of the old traditions were exercising an underlying and fundamental influence on the course of political events in Iran. The influence of the new interpretations of traditions was mainly due to their capacity to continue, and at the same time bring into question, a tradition that, in the form of a vast cultural repertoire, had for centuries made collective existence meaningful for Iranians. The modern interpretations of these traditions did eventually make them relevant to the contemporary social and political developments. The credibility of the traditional religious and literary texts in the eye of the public was such that they were
even made into powerful sources of revolutionary inspiration and validation of modern political action. The significance of the Islamic tradition is also evident in the new forms of political imagination in Iran today.

The basic premise of my project to search for the meaning of the Iranian Revolution is the hypothesis that human behaviour, in this case collective behaviour, is mediated by meaning. On the basis of this premise, I have linked in this text, collective action with the understanding of things encountered and with the motivation that such an understanding instigates in collectivities. By understanding, I mean neither any limiting concept such as a deliberated and deeper than usual understanding of things, nor a pure, unbound sense experience. Rather, I am concerned in this work with a type of understanding that occurs as a result of interpretation of cultural symbols and narratives - an understanding, which I believe constitutes the soul of a society. The signs, symbols and narratives, contained in religious, juridical and literary texts, and invoked in law making, institution building, economic transactions, day to day social life, celebrations, commemorations and rituals, are rooted in the collective imagination of every collectivity. They connect each and every society, not only to its past, but also to its future via shared interpretations of collective memories.

Collective imagination as a real political force is a neglected subject in the existing literature on revolutions. It is particularly rare in the existing discourses on the Iranian-Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979. The general theme of the arguments developed in this work is to demonstrate the radical power of creative imagination in shaping a modern revolution through novel interpretations of religious traditions. It will be argued that the imaginary of revolution emerges in a condition that new interpretations of the collective historical experiences of a given community open up the possibility of new variations of power by offering alternative meanings of the texts that transmit the experiences of the past to present generations. The political force of the imaginary lies in its capacity to become the source of the motivations that drive the community to create new variations of power by revolutionary means in the process of reproduction of social relations.

I understand the Iranian Revolution of 1979 as a concrete example of a modern revolution driven by a religious imaginary. I will argue that Islamic imaginary was responsible for inspiring the political thought and action, which led to the Iranian Revolution, and which has continued to define political life in Iran ever since. The source of the Islamic imaginary, I suggest, should be located in the collective search by Iranians for meaning through creative interpretation of the religious and literary texts, rituals and other symbolic structures, which form the basis of the modern Iranian-Islamic culture. I will therefore attempt to develop a hermeneutic understanding of the meaning of the radical imaginary that anticipated and precipitated the Iranian Revolution, and that has shaped the image of a desired future in the minds of Iranians as a modern nation. As such, I hope I will also contribute to generating a new interest in grasping the meaning of such phenomenon as the rise to power of a religious revolution and government in our “post-modern” world.

I suggest that by understanding the structure and operation of the religious imaginary around which the Iranian Revolution was made, it will be possible to shed a new light on the process of the modern rise of the political power of Islam in Iran and its domestic and international repercussions. Without appreciating the power of the imaginary and the meanings, which motivated the Iranian-Islamic Revolution, it would be difficult if not impossible to properly understand these repercussions.
My contention is that locating the source of the imaginary of the Iranian Revolution in the new interpretations of cultural and symbolic structures will make it clear how this collective action became meaningful and thus desirable for its participants. I will argue that the primary source of the attraction of this revolution for Iranians was its emancipatory potentials. The emphasis on emancipatory aspirations of the Iranian Revolution will in turn make it possible to offer an internal critique of the violence and repression that has been generated in the process of this revolution and during its subsequent institutionalisation. I suggest that this violence has been generated by the political and religious tendencies that, in violation of the emancipatory aspirations of this popular movement, have tried to turn it into an instrument of establishing a new system of domination.

I shall often refer to the Iranian Revolution as the Islamic Revolution due to the centrality of the Islamic revolutionary ideology and the utopia of an Islamic government in making this revolution meaningful and hence desirable. I view the ideologies and utopias that motivated the Islamic Revolution as manifestations of the political imagination of generations of Iranian intellectuals and social reformers, rather than one or another political or religious leader.

I will explore the roots of the ideology of the Islamic revolution and the utopia of an ideal Islamic government in the interaction of various religious, philosophical and literary discourses of power that pervaded popular politics in Iran prior to the fall of the monarchy there. These discourses were in turn produced out of varying interpretations of the shared symbolic structures. I will argue that the ideology of revolution and the utopia of a desired future created among a large section of the Iranian population a common appreciation of the necessity and urgency of revolutionary action. I shall demonstrate that this appreciation arose when through creative interpretations of the past traditions a common purpose was formed in the mind of the public - a purpose that motivated the people to take drastic action to change the existing political and social order for the better. And yet, it was in the course of this very action that great sacrifices were demanded, and violence was generated.

My aim in this work is to develop a hermeneutic understanding of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. But, in order to achieve this understanding, I have had to look deep into the past of the Iranian society, and how this society broke with its past in the 1979 Revolution in search for an uncertain future, a future that is yet to be decided. I have considered the imaginaries that have depicted the origins of this society as the main resources to dig for the schemes, which were used by the revolutionary actors in Iran as models for building the future. Religions, customs, laws, poems, fables (and the signs, symbols and rituals associated with them) have been rich sources for collective and creative references to the past. They are collected in the sacred texts, myths, mystical poetry, narrative histories, fictions, cultural fantasies and public rituals, which have constituted the collective conscience of the Iranian society; and are constantly used as points of reference in day to day life. This collection of traditions contains imaginary categories and yet are perceived to be “authentic” by Iranians even as a modern nation.

These imaginary categories consist of the foundational stories and narratives about the genesis of Iran, particularly the historical narratives, myths and religious stories about Iran and Islam as the source of human culture and civilisation. There are also stories about the manner and the purpose of the constitution of Iran as a society; the stories that prescribe the form and content of social existence, including those that portray the institutional and moral character of the society. Whether or not these
imaginary categories have historical or logical proof, and whether or not they are recognised by other societies, they constitute the original understanding of Iranians of themselves as a collectivity, and project the image in which this collectivity strives to reconstruct itself. As such, during the revolution, these categories, notwithstanding their imaginary roots, were taken more seriously than other categories with historical reality or logical proof, particularly when the recent historical realities did not create pride and enthusiasm in Iranians.

These imaginary categories have shaped, at least partly, the earliest part of the social consciousness of Iranians. Naturally, therefore, the manner of early inculcation of the messages of these imaginaries has become very important in social and family life of the Iranian society. The most usual form of this inculcation has been via the interpretation of the traditions and texts, or simply the grand narratives, which contain these imaginaries. These interpretations have developed throughout the Iranian history, and have become part and parcel of the way of life of the people. Their referents are the customary practices of the society, the theological and jurisprudential texts, and the literary texts including poetry, prose, fables and collective fantasies. These texts have been a fertile ground for the emergence of legendary figures and national heroes; but more than that they have been instrumental in giving rise to creative imaginations in building the future. They have provided the people with a common background, familiar and understandable to every body, against which new interpretations of the old texts continue in new forms of spoken and written language.

An advantage of the review of the discourses of the Iranian Revolution is that it enables one to map the horizons within which these discourses of power are situated and the space they occupy with respect to each other. This will provide a perspective of the variety of purposes for which the Iranian Revolution may be studied. For example, the Iranian Revolution may be studied, as it has been widely the case, in terms of social and economic developments, or alternatively, in terms of the distinction between its cultural, political, scientific, sexual and artistic aspects. This variety of perspectives also demonstrates the futility of attempts such as those made by Crane Brinton to draw an anatomy of a typical revolution.

In my reading of the meaning of the Iranian Revolution, I will argue against the notions that there could be found a fixed set of characteristics that every revolution must have, or that a prototype of revolutions could be constructed. Rather, I believe that each revolution is inspired by particular motivations that are in large part peculiar to that revolution. It goes without saying that this differentiation does not preclude the possibility of revolutions sharing certain characteristics; for otherwise we would not be referring to them all as revolutions. A corollary to this positing each revolution as subject to specific environmental factors that befall it is that revolutions are not teleological, and hence any effort to predict their course has to be tentative, unless, of course, one wishes to engage oneself in prophetic conjectures.

Here, I should emphasise that denying a fixed model for revolution is basically a logical extrapolation of an empirical observation: revolutions are collective phenomena and as such a product of social structures. The empirical evidence of historical change in social structures indicate that each revolution is a variable of the functions of society and hence a changing phenomenon. Also, as I indicated before, none of the officially recognised paradigms of social science alone are able to fully understand revolutions. Revolutions are by nature multifaceted phenomena involving political, social, economical, psychological and historical factors, breaching the arbitrary divisions of these disciplines.
Within the confines of objective scientism, which excludes from its domain the generative forces like passions, motivations, needs, etc. instrumental reason appears not as a towering presence, but as a retarded agent, deprived of its potential capacities to reach beyond a crude and cruel understanding of life. Revolutions may only be understood when such factors as passion, enthusiasm, love and hatred, which are their main driving forces, are fully accounted for as alternative forms of rationality and reason. It is the neglect of the logic of these apparently non-logical factors that makes revolutions unpredictable and by that virtue non-teleological.

Revolutions as such belong to a world whose rational understanding has been neglected by the discourse of reason as developed since the Renaissance. It has not, however, totally lost to the world of practice. People have got engaged in revolutions even as they did not understand them. This may be cited as a characteristic of a subliminal world that transcends the mundane instrumental understanding of reason. Just as we have excluded madness from reason when it came to studying it in a rational, scientific perspective, we have detached revolutions from the world of reason and relegated it to the world of heterogeneous. Revolutions have thus been devalued; and when they are recognised as an object of study, it has only been with the intention to suppress or at best contain them. Attempts to include revolutions in the domain of reason were made (Marxism is but one example), but were caught entangled in a reverse exclusion. As such, revolutions were left open to becoming excluded from the normal practice of human sciences. The horizon of the putative, sovereign reason has persisted, and with it the need for a discourse that could accommodate ideal and real at one and the same time, not one at the exclusion of the other. For a long time, solutions have oscillated between totalitarianism and anarchism.

Our unpreparedness to accept that we are capable of violence of extreme levels has perhaps originated from the internalisation of the institutions of law and order, and from the liberal myth of socialisation. The problem is our actual experience of and involvement in violence on the mass scale (wars and revolutions) despite our order instituting tendencies. This line of argument may be further developed to assert that although we, as humans, carry the baggage of our animal past, and act even more violently than animals; we are equipped with language, symbols and meanings. Yet, in our collective behaviour, our actions do not necessarily take place at the level of pure intentionality, consciousness and rationality. Rather, we tend to follow our unconscious impetus to overcome the forces that tend to deprive our need for meaning, or our “will to meaning” in Victor Frankl’s terminology.

In this context, the Iranian Revolution with its significant economic, political or social expressions cannot be understood only in terms of the conflict between master and slave, feudal and serf, or capitalist and proletariat. Nor can it be understood solely as the expression of economic interests, political independence or conquest of other lands. It is rather constituted by the meanings pursued by a collectivity of humans to explore the purpose and meaning of life; meanings such as freedom, honour, prestige, blood, millennium, equality, sovereignty, security, recognition, etc. which have been extracted from their guiding traditions and texts (mythical, scriptural or ideological). It is in this context that revolutionary movements, such as the Islamic Revolution, can be understood and explained in terms of their essences.

Whether in the form of a collective conscience (Durkheim), a collective unconscious (Jung), a repressed unconscious (Freud), an intuitive consciousness (Husserl), a being as possible versus a being as factual (Sartre), or a consciousness that cannot be fully expressed (Derrida), all revolutionary movements have a common
point. Their meaning structure is independent of individual intentions or, more generally, of that which is intended. It was, therefore, the search of the unknown certainty that motivated the Iranian Revolution, not the certainty of a well-defined objective. And it was the sacred power of the unknown that empowered the masses and prepared them for killing with the view of being killed in the name of martyrdom.

The absent, the unknown, the hidden, the unrevealed appeared sacred and at the same time ecstatic, and may well be erotic. It was power generating; it empowered those who claimed it, and through them established authority over those who rejoiced in not knowing it. The sacred demanded sacrifice. For, in sacrifice, the authority of the sacred was recognised. In sacrifice, those under the authority of the sacred proved their loyalty; and in so doing they competed, innovated, energised and often let out violence. For, those who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice have to be given to violence. Since the martyr knew his absence was his worth, he would seek his own destruction. But, one who seeks destruction has to engage others in violence and thus instigate them to destroy. Or alternatively he has to self-destruct.

Submissive sacrifice, in this view, is of little sacred value. Sacrifice has either to involve self-destructive attack to destroy the enemy, or instigate a violent struggle to destroy, with the ultimate aim of being destroyed, hence the search for the honour of martyrdom. So, in the very process of this violent engagement, what is sought is honour and prestige, a type of otherworldly pleasure, a pleasure caused by some kind of mystifying and at times erotic ecstasy, an ecstasy created by the perilous adventure. Yet, all this is possible at its purest form when it is acted out within the context of a crowd. Being spectacular is an impressive reward even in one’s death. Like other revolutions, the Iranian Revolution was a spectacular event acted in the context of the crowd, and thus was essentially an inter-subjective phenomenon.

The assumption that collective behaviour is constituted by meaning, is the cornerstone of my attempt to search for the meaning of the Iranian Revolution. I will pursue this objective mainly through the understanding of the Iran’s cultural experience, an experience, which is rooted very deeply in mythology and history, and continues to influence modern Iranians through constant contact with their religious and literary texts, and narratives. This contact, as mentioned earlier, is maintained through education, religious and literary pursuits, day to day social and cultural interactions, and the commemoration of mythical and historical events in regular ceremonies and rituals.

Culture in the conventional sense is grounded in the development of reason and rationality, and the impetus to organisation, order and progress. Culture in the sense that has been proposed here is an eclectic construct encompassing reason and unreason, rationality and irrationality. It has been understood as a stock of shared memories and imaginations, full of latent generative forces and represented by a plethora of symbols and narratives. It contains collective memories that, depending on the ways they are interpreted in a particular present, may motivate order or disorder, hence presenting order-shattering as well as order-enhancing potentials. The meanings constructed by interpreting the signs and symbols inherited from the past is, in this sense, basically a subjective entity, which is directly related to the feelings generated as a result of the encounter with the images of the past. This constructed meaning, however, transcends pure subjectivity and becomes objectified as the constitutive element of collective action, be it in the pursuit of the basic means of survival, or in the quest for more elaborate goals, such as an ideal human society.
In this, I have followed Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilisation*, who portrayed the traditional understanding of culture as a means for differentiating between reason and unreason, which has been emphatically established in the West since the Enlightenment. Such understanding of culture, I might add, has penetrated, albeit in a distorted manner, into the East in the colonial period, and has laid the foundation for the construction of two distinct worlds. One, containing the categories of reason, order and sanity; and the other, containing the categories of irrationality, chaos and madness. It is conceptually accepted that humanity by and large resides in the world of reason and has a responsibility to resist any infringement upon this world by the world of madness. Consequently, it is a given that in a stable and orderly society, the world of sanity must be firmly in control of the world of madness, or put it another way: rationality has an exclusive right over irrationality. This understanding of order has created a culture, which may be called *normal culture* of the society; and it has been based largely on the objective or empirical reason, and rooted in human consciousness.

Against the background of this *normal culture*, however, there have been flares of another type of cultural understanding. The revolutionary understanding of culture has pulsed the modern history of the people of the East with attempts to give legitimacy to revolution in order to breach the constructed consensus over the rational-irrational division of the human world. Revolution, while in operation, actually takes over the normal culture or, to put it differently, creates a culture of its own, and in ways that might seem mysterious, brings the two opposing worlds into unity. Revolution does not bring the two worlds together in the sense of putting them side by side, and hence keeping their individual integrity intact. Rather, it, at least temporarily, destroys the constructed distinction between the two worlds in a totally practical way. As such, the phenomenon of revolution when viewed by its actors can be experienced as logical, fair and legitimate, whereas when viewed by an outsider, it may be perceived as total mayhem. Revolution as a legacy, however, cannot hold the unifying force of the revolution in operation. It has to give way to the return of the *normal culture*, which is naturally affected by the division of the worlds, and as such is subject to divisive interpretations.

The Iranian Revolution has now become a legacy, and hence must be subjected to opposing interpretations. Despite the wishes of the jurists in power, who want to preserve the sacred and impeccable image of the revolution, there are forces already emerging, even within the ranks of the clergy, who want to allow critical interpretations of the revolution. These interpretations tend to view the revolution both as a destructive and a constructive force. As a destructive force, it is seen as a threat to order and harmony, and thus in need of control and containment to minimise the damage. As such, it is viewed as a consuming passion, which once helped release the creative energies of the repressed groups in shattering the stagnant structures of the past and setting new horizons and hopes. But now, it is seen as wasting these energies by keeping them burning in constant mobilisations and encouragement of vigilantism with the purpose of total regulation of the social and moral behaviour of the population.

In their attempt to build a desired future, Iranians have invoked, more than anything, the symbols and narratives contained in their religious texts to produce new meanings, which would institute the existential essence of the new society they wished to construct. There are several important sacred texts, which contain the constitutive elements of the Iranian society, and are constant points of reference for
various social activities, as well as for transcendental experiences. But, there are also philosophical and literary writings, not to mention the more recent religious, political, literary and poetic writings. The symbolic structures of the Iranian culture consist also of the public rituals and ceremonies that mark the ancient Iranian and Islamic calendar. One and often more of these texts, symbols and rituals have found their place in almost all Iranian households over centuries, and are invoked on a day to day basis by the ordinary people. They are invoked for spiritual consolation, mystical experience, patriotic inculturation, literacy and social education, defining and regulating relationships, arranging birth, marriage and death ceremonies and even provide guidelines for economic transactions.

Of particular interest to me is developing a hermeneutic understanding of the fundamental motivations that fuelled the actions of the human agents of the Iranian Revolution, actions that involved great sacrifices but also let out violence and aggression. These motivations were felt primarily in terms of the meanings constructed on the basis of new interpretations of the religious tradition. But they were also inspired by political ideologies of both religious and secular persuasions. The Shi'i jurists in the seminaries and centres of religious sciences, the modern religious intellectuals, and the Marxist as well as liberal ideologues and activists, were the primary source of the ideological discourses that provided for the political force of the revolution.

Since more than a thousand years ago, Shi'i scholars and mystical philosophers and poets had founded a tradition of religious and intellectual disputation and dialogue on the basis of hermeneutic interpretations of the sacred and literary texts, and historical and mythical events. The science of exegesis (tafsir) and the knowledge of the hermeneutic interpretation (ta'wil) of the Qur'an had thus become two of important subjects of philosophical contemplation, artistic creativity, intellectual dialogue, and religious and political dispute. This tradition was readily used by the modern revolutionary ideologues to create various discourses of power that contested the political rule of the Pahlavi State, and challenged what was perceived to be a modern social order.

Yet, this turn to traditions was not a literal return to the past; it was a quest to address the political, economic and social problems of Iran as a modern nation through novel interpretations of traditions. It was an effort to assert belonging to a tradition in order to both continue and bring it into question. It was a partial break with the past to venture to an unknown future, but it was also a partial return to the past in order not to lose all connections in an imperilled and tormented encounter with modernity. And most importantly, it was a deeply modern collective desire for a dignified identity, and involved a forceful demand for the recognition of this identity by others.

1 The Qur'an and to a lesser extent the collections of hadith, the Nahj-al-Balagha, the story of the martyrdom of the third innocent Imam, Hussein, the story of the disappearance of the twelfth Imam, Mahdi, and various Shi'i collections of prayers are among the canonical texts of reference. Kulaini's Al-kafi, Sheikh Saduq's Wassa'al-al-Shi'i and Muhammad Baqir Majlisi's Behar-al-Anwar are three of important collections of hadith. Among the important canonical texts of prayer are the Sahife-ye Sajjadiyya and Majatish-al-Jinan.

2 The most influential philosophical and literary writings include the Shefa of Ibn-e Sina (Avecinna), the Shahnaneh of Abol-Gasem Ferdowsi, the Divan of Khajje Shams-ad-Din Hafiz, the Masnavi of Jalal-ad-Din Rumi, and the Bustan and Golestan of Sheikh Mosleh-ad-Din Sa'adi. This list may well be extended and is by no means exhausts Iran's enormous cultural heritage and the rich variety of this heritage.

3 Among these rituals Nowruz (the first day of ancient Persian calendar, Ashura (the day of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein)), Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca), and the birthdays and death anniversaries of the Islamic and Shi'i saints are significant.
This expert knowledge of traditions did not preclude the existence of new understandings of these traditions at the level of ordinary people, and particularly modern intellectuals and activists. New popular understandings of these texts were constructed by orators and preachers in the mosques as well as by writers, poets and other artists in poetry reading sessions, public speeches, films, newspapers, magazines, books, etc. In fact, the interpretations that formed the guiding models for social and individual life consisted of the expert, popular and artistic understanding of the grand narratives that had transmitted the traditions to present generations. These interpretations, notwithstanding their plurality, had already constituted the society in terms of its collective imagination of the past. As such, the plurality of interpretations had not undermined the broad acceptance of the fundamental unity of a cultural tradition and the intense belonging to a territory among various ethnic, lingual and religious groups that called themselves Iranian during a long historical period. This unity in plurality has been the basis for the recognition of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of social and political institutions and a major factor in maintaining social cohesion in the Iranian history.

This broad social agreement has provided a common cultural field in which political and economic interests, and the quest for social justice, have found meaning for Iranians. In this sense, the process of reconstitution and reproduction of the Iranian society in modern times can be explained at a fundamental level in terms of the traditional and textual categories, which have been sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously understood, and internalised, by the general public. As such, the attempts to explain the modern historical developments of the Iranian society merely in terms of the economic and political interests of certain interest groups - pursued consciously on the basis of calculation and organisation to seize the apparatuses of power - is superficial if not naive. There is no denial, of course, of the significance of the role of conscious political and economic interests in determining the course of development of every society. But this role, and any significance that it might have, are themselves constituted in terms of certain interpretations of the existing grand narratives (religious, nationalistic, etc.), which are broadly agreed on by the collectivity, and which accord legitimacy to that role.

I believe this is a general phenomenon, which has also informed the concepts and institutions of the modern Nation-States and determines their political legitimacy. The States known as Western democracies, for example, are constituted around social, political, economic and military institutions, which have been legitimated by the consent of the people. But the concept of legitimacy based on the consent of the people in the West, although a modern phenomena, has its roots in the imaginary traditions to which the West, as a modern entity, proclaims to belong. These imaginary belongings to the past, which have been a key element in the sense of nationhood in Western democracies, are based on the flourishing of the interpretations since the Renaissance of the political and religious concepts developed in the context of connection with the ancient Greek and Christian traditions. People have thought, doubted, questioned, and fought for their political rights, and social and economic wellbeing, in the context of this imaginary, yet real, attachment to what is perceived to be Western civilisation. The same traditions in their imaginative variations have also been used as the basis of the legitimacy of the authority of the political and social institutions, and an element of political and social stability and sustained development that the Western States have been enjoying compared to many States in Asia and Africa.
However, the development of democratic institutions, in many States in the non-Western world such as Iran, has come up against great difficulties and anomalies. Here, democracy has been encountered not as a concept in the Greek texts to be experienced and interpreted in the context of the existing native culture. Rather, it has appeared as a model already interpreted and shaped by the modern West, and posed in the form of a calculated and conscious plan of “development” for the non-West. This plan has prescribed the pattern of development of the rest of the world since the colonial period in terms of Western economic and political institutions and concepts. Yet, the successes of the Western global push for a prescribed pattern of economic and political development for the non-Western world can by no means conceal its failures, which have created a deep sense of resentment and in some cases active rejection among many nations in the non-Western world.

This sense of resentment has found one of its strongest expressions in the Muslim world and especially in Iran, where the West and particularly the United States are seen as pursuing their selfish economic and political interests under the guise of a hypocritical rhetoric promoting economic and political development. The Iranian people saw the Western presence, and particularly the presence of the United States in Iran, as an strong element to prop up political regimes, which neither reflected their cultural identity, nor their economic interests and political aspirations. In a sense, the Iranian Revolution may have confirmed Theda Skocpol’s assertion that revolutions in the modern world are attempts by the weaker nations to bring to power strong States in defence against the hegemony of rival strong States. But what primarily motivated this defence against hegemony was a quest for dignity. The Shah’s regime, despite its apparent military build-up, was certainly seen by the Iranian nation as a State too weak to redress the Iranian sense of indignity vis-à-vis the West; because people felt that it was ultimately manipulated by Western powers, particularly the United States. The challenge of the Islamic Republic to the West surely made it look strong, at least temporarily, in the eye of the Iranian public, but the militancy of the Islamic regime has yet to be translated to a lasting sense of pride dignity for Iranians. If anything, the violence and repression produced by the Islamic revolutionary regime, and its failure to even secure a descent social and economic standard of living for Iranian, have seriously damaged the earlier trust and pride in the revolution.

The quest for collective dignity through national identity, and not political hegemony and military might, were the main pillars of the strength of the Islamic Revolution. And the consent of the Iranian people to the Islamic Republic had been largely due to the challenge it had posed to an international order, which was perceived to be unfair, in defence of the national and cultural integrity of Iran. The religious posture of the government further legitimised its position and had been instrumental in justifying the implementation of religious laws. The historical affinity of the Iranian people with Shi‘i Islam together with the belief in the legitimate political authority of the Household of the Prophet Muhammad (Ahal-al-Beyt) were the sources of initial popular trust in the Islamic government.

For the majority of Iranians, the Islamic government had appeared as the protector of their national integrity and religious identity, which they have come to perceive as inseparable. The radical political rhetoric of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, which fuelled the Islamic Revolution and the rise to power of the clergy, should be seen in this light. One should not forget that the Iranian people, despite their religious beliefs, had never before advocated the rule of the clergy. This is perhaps why the clergy in power is currently facing a stiff domestic challenge, which has questioned its
wisdom and prowess in running the social and economic affairs of the nation. Hence, the flourishing of new interpretations of cultural symbols, grand narratives and religious texts to effect change in policies of the State as well as the nature and role of the State and religion with respect to the nation.

The resentment of the Iranian people toward Western powers, which was expressed during the revolution, their desire to challenge the world order, and the anti-modernist manifestations of the Islamic Revolution, should not be mistaken for an inherent desire for a fundamentalist traditionalism. Nor are they to be attributed to a lack of desire for democratic pluralism, civil liberties and human rights. They are rather the expression of a lack of trust in the Western modernisation as a policy for the development of Iran, a policy, which was perceived to have been modelled by foreign powers (mainly Britain and the United States), and implemented by the Pahlavi regime. This distrust has come about mainly because the policy of modernisation in Iran failed to deliver on three of the main demands of the people of Iran as a modern and young nation. Firstly, it failed to provide economic benefits for the majority of the population, who while in poverty, were witnessing the increasing affluence of a small minority. Secondly, it failed to provide the opportunity for political participation for the members of the modern middle-class who were mainly young and educated and were increasingly questioning the autocratic style of the government. And thirdly, and perhaps more importantly, it thwarted the rise of the collective aspirations for a religious nationalism that would combine the sense of nationality with religious identity.

It is important to note that although revolutionary practice was adopted by Iranians to make social, economic and political life easier, the actual operation of the revolution proceeded in ways that endangered immediate socio-economic and socio-political well being of the people. It created economic hardship, social unrest and political violence. Revolutionary moments were the perfect example of the occasions, where in pursuit of the betterment of the material condition of their existence, Iranian people also sought something that would make their material life more meaningful. The revolutionary actors in Iran thus saw, at least temporarily, a higher moral value in accepting hardship as a price to be paid for a meaningful material life. In Iran, like in other rare occasions in the human historical experience that revolutions have become an acceptable form of collective action, an ideological reinterpretation of traditions had already succeeded to offer a compelling justification for the acceptance of hardship, exercise of self-denial and the use of violence in the interest of collectively agreed higher truth claims. More than material life, it was the need of human beings for dignity that were of immediate concern in the very moments that the people took action to address the material condition of their existence.

Thus, the doctrinal and political innovations in religion, offered in the course of the Islamic Revolution, should be seen, not as merely pragmatic moves of the clergy to secure their own political interests, but also as a collective effort to secure a dignified collective identity by restoring the meaningful authority of a tradition in decline. They should be understood in terms of a realisation on the part of an important sector of the modern Muslim of this collective need for identity, and their appreciation that the only hope for the survival of the Islamic culture, as the core of this identity in modern Iran, was to assume political power.

It was in their effort to reproduce the Islamic cultural traditions in political forms that a generation of religious intellectuals and activists derived political meanings from the sacred texts and cultural traditions in support for an Islamic revolution, and created an Islamic ideology that was considered to be the essence of
the teachings of Islam, teachings that they claimed had been neglected thus far. In doing this then, they naturally assumed political power, which could offer the most effective instruments for the propagation of their constructed meanings at the collective level. Ironically, the use of hermeneutic interpretations of sacred texts to offer modern political readings of the Islamic traditions should be seen as genuine attempts at realising, at a political level, the mystical belief that the teachings of the Qur'an are eternal, not merely in a literal sense, but also in a metaphoric and symbolic sense.

However, with the successful assertion of identity comes the need for recognition of this identity by those whose recognition is worthy of having. For Iran, these are the European powers like Britain and Russia, and the most omnipresent United States of America, which have come to form the political image of the West in the Iranian psyche. Consequently, these Western powers, which have been most present in recent Iranian historical experience, have formed the image of the other in the Iranian collective memory and conscience.

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the concern for recognition by the West has been the main motivation of the efforts for institutionalisation of the revolution. The quest to gain recognition for the Shi'i national identity has been the motif of the construction of the Islamic Republic in all its political, social, economic and cultural manifestations. The enforcement of a set of interpretations of religious codes, the obsession with regulation of pleasure, the notion of the export of revolution, the repressive and violent push for domestic unity and uniformity, the expression of an aggressive tone in foreign policy, and the stress on creating a unique Islamic economic system, should all be understood in the context of this politics of recognition.

With the preponderance of misguided and absolutist tendencies in the post-revolutionary Islamic politics, and the intransigence of the United States (the most significant part of the other of the Iranian psyche) in refusing to recognise the authenticity of the aspirations of the Islamic Revolution, the quest for recognition has been distorted and turned increasingly violent and repressive, to the extent that the concern for recognition has all but lost its voice. The history of mistrust and animosity between Iran and the United States (particularly the memory of the CIA-sponsored 1953 coup against democracy in Iran and the American support for the Shah, the object of hatred of the Iranian Revolution), and the reluctance of both sides to break this mistrust, have aggravated this sad situation.

From the arguments in this work, it should become clear that Shi'ism, as a "supra-national" identity structure, transcended rigid doctrinal boundaries to turn the Islamic Revolution into an agent for motivating Iranians to seek a modern national identity. The project of nation building, that had begun by the rapid modernisation and Westernisation of Iran under the Pahlavi, regime, was an unmotivated project as far as the Iranian population was concerned. Shi'ism through the Islamic Revolution infused a soul to the corpse of the Iranian nationalism. The understanding of Iranians of the relationship of religious identity and nationality differed from the understanding that puts these two elements in competition or opposition with each other. In this understanding, whose origins went back to the 1960s, religious commitment not only reconciled religion and nationality, but also resolved the problem of the lack of national enthusiasm and pride, which was weighing on the Iranian psyche prior to the revolution.
It had always been a problem for the Pahlavi regime to understand why its efforts to modernize Iran, and its goal to turn Iran into the Japan of the Middle East, could not flare a broadly-based nationalist enthusiasm among Iranians. In the late 1970s, the shah was clearly at a loss to see the people he had assumed should be grateful to him for his modernizing efforts, had turned so blatantly against him. He thought the economic modernization and the cultural attraction of the glory of the pre-Islamic Persian Empire, which he frequently invoked, should have filled Iranians, and particularly the army and the modern middle-class professionals, with honour and pride, enough for them to rise in his support. Iranians, however, had ignored these efforts of the Shah, and had demanded his ouster. The Shah had failed to see that the image of the pre-Islamic Persian monarchy as an ancient superpower was not a convincing image for Iranians, who were witnessing the subservient position of the modern day monarchy vis-à-vis the modern day superpowers, particularly the United States. Nor did the economic modernisation created any public reverence toward the ancient heroes of the Persian monarchy, such as Cyrus, the Great, and Darius, the king of kings. Nor did the tiny minority who were content with their disproportionate gains from the oil-driven economic boom of the 1970s, had the moral fortitude to risk their lives in defence of what they knew was devoid of moral value.

The unpredictability of the Islamic Revolution and its unprecedented appeal to Iranians was perhaps due to the fact that it was operating as a subliminal and ambiguous underlying process, rather than a conscious an organised movement expressed openly and clearly. Iranians had got engaged in a collective unconscious effort to transcend the conventional standards of progress, and the symbols of past glory and power, long before the Islamic ideologues defined the ultimate aims of their movement, and shaped a social and political consciousness in support of an Islamic Revolution. Neither the Westernised modernisation, nor the ancient conquests, could reconcile Iranians with the limitations that they felt were imposed upon their freedom by the existing temporal and spatial situation. They thus constructed in their imagination an alternative time-space continuum beyond their merely real condition of existence in the world. In this imaginary life-world, they relived and reinterpreted their political memories, which were alive and well in the existing texts, narratives and rituals, and were predominantly religious.

In this process, which made the people mentally prepared to transgress the existing power structures, an empowering consciousness was formed that energised them to act against a power, which seemed invincible. They thus transcended their routine, stagnant and real conditions to enter an imaginatively constructed, and yet sublimated, space and time, an imaginary that created motivation and produced real action. It was within the frame of reference of this transcendentental life-world that Iranians were motivated to take action to change their image as a nation. Yet, this episodic surge of energy and solidarity came at the price of the coercive subordination of a vast reservoir of creative imaginations and legitimate desires about the future to limitations of certain ideological interpretations of traditions. Thus, one discourse of power claimed to be the sole heir to the revolutionary heritage at the expense of alternative imaginations and desires, which contested for power, and whose truth claims also claimed legitimacy.

It was astonishing that against all odds - despite the military strength of the monarchic regime, its means of propaganda, and the backing that it received from the world powers - the nation managed to challenge the apparently almighty system of monarchy. More than that, it managed to run its own affairs virtually without a State during the period of the revolution. Independent of and in opposition to the State, the
nation did not plunge into chaos and mayhem; rather, it exercised an almost magical discipline and co-operation in the provision of social services, such as healthcare, electricity, water, fuel, and the distribution of food and other basic goods. And this was while it was in an all-out confrontation with the military power of the State, running a general strike, broadcasting radio messages and engaging in sporadic street battles with the troops. And yet, this environment disappeared with the rise of the theocratic and absolutist discourses of power, which tried to bring the Islamic cultural repertoire under their own absolute control, and claimed to be in possession of the only credible interpretations of this vast and diverse tradition.

To use the Iranian-Islamic mystical terminology, the time-space continuum in which the event of the revolution occurred did not belong to the external world of appearances (afaq), but to the inner world of meanings (anfus). Iranians, therefore, did not refer to their pre-Islamic glory to create the foundational event of their modern nationhood. Rather, they chose to look to the tragedy of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in order to derive an honourable and prestigious foundation for their collective identity. The success of the Muslim ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s in creating a general political will against the military might of the Pahlavi regime, lay in their tormented and puzzled triumph in inspiring a moral and physical fortitude to stand up to the army and sacrifice lives. This triumph did not come as a result of conscious and well-defined plan, but was achieved in the course of a partly conscious and partly unconscious effort to create in the public mind the possibility of objectifying the esoteric mystical notions heroism, love and self-denial.

The sense of being a “historical victim” played an important part in instilling a revolutionary ideology in the collective political consciousness of the Shi’i believers in Iran. The myth of the usurpation of the political power of the Shi’i innocent Imams, particularly the collective memory of the tragic but heroic death of Imam Hussein in Karbala in the hand of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, had created a peculiar political consciousness among Iranian Shi’is of being historical victims. According to this collective conscience, Imam Hussein’s uprising and his martyrdom had marked the genesis of the historical victimisation (mazlumiyat) of the Shi’i Islam. It is believed that Hussein’s struggle against the subversion of the path of true Islam must be continued until the day that the Shi’is are not victims any more.

Iranians still mourn the loss of Hussein in huge and nation-wide annual rituals. In a ritual of self-flagellation, the mourners chant the name of Hussein calling him mazlum (the victim). They cry for Hussein’s innocence and his victimisation, become ecstatic, and renew their allegiance with the Ahl-al-beyt, pledging that they would be prepared to die and become a martyr (shahid) like Hussein, a death which is in the path of God (fana-fi-llah) and in which one becomes consummated in God to reach leqa-o-llah. The mystical belief in the concealment of the twelfth Imam Mahdi (the rightly Guided One), and the eschatological expectation for his inevitable return to institute the government of absolute justice, provides for the true Shi’i believer the hope in the possibility of the reversal of their historical misfortunes and victimisation.

The messianic notion of the Mahdi entered the Shi’i tradition most probably since the demise of the Prophet Muhammad as the spiritual and political leader of the Muslim community. In what dominated the Muslim world after the Prophet under the rubric of Sunni, the expectation for a Prophetic spiritual-political leadership was given

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1 Notions such as martyrdom (shahadat), annihilation in God (fana-fi-llah) and union with God (leqa-o-llah) became the battle cry of the true Islamic revolutionary believers in their struggle against the Pahlavi regime, and the continued state of civil strife and external war for many years to come.
up in favour a dynastic system of caliphate, which was seen as the protector of the tradition (Sunnat) of the Prophet, and thus as continuity in the Islamic community (jama'at), but which itself was not considered to be of a sacred nature of the order of the Prophetic authority. For the minority Shi'i believers who later came to populate Iran, however, the desire and hope for a political authority with and spiritually impeccable nature remained alive in the chiliastic expectation (entezar) for the Mahdi.

The messianic tradition itself had undeniably entered the Islamic faith from the Judo-Christian tradition. However, the Shi'i conceptualisation of the Mahdi had its own peculiarities. Unlike the Christian Messiah, the Mahdi would not emerge to redeem humanity in eternal sin. Rather, he would appear as the leader of the innocent against the oppressive and corrupt sinners. And unlike the Judaic Messiah, which is bound to represent the salvation of a particular community (Israelites), the Mahdi would arise to save the whole world from corruption and oppression.

The Shi'i believers of Iran had long been in an extremely affectionate relationship with the heritage of Shi'i Islam. This heritage consisted primarily of the Qur'an and the memory of the twelve Shi'i Imams, who were believed to be innocently and unjustly deprived from their rightful and legitimate claim to political power. The memory of the Ahal-al-Beyt consisted of two main elements. First was the element of lamentation, aroused by the narratives that tell how, since very early on, the Shi'i innocent Imams had been deprived of their legitimate right to power. They tell stories about the constant persecution and in many instances execution, or assassination of the Imams by the unjust and cruel rulers. The cases of the third and eighth Imams have been typical in supporting this incessant reconstitution of the element of lamentation in the popular culture.

Thus, the narratives of lamentation play an important politico-cultural function in their capacity to invoke feelings of remorse and guilt, and pledges of political allegiance with the House of the Prophet. In the ceremonies of lamentation, passions run high and crowds of men and women (in separation) publicly scream and sob in the memory of the lost Imams. Every Iranian child raised within a Shi'i family would have been inculcated by this psychic awareness before he/she even began formal schooling. The mythology of the battle of Karbala and the “brutal” and “unjust” killing of the third Imam has been one the strongest of the several narratives that have had a deeply passionate connection with the collective soul of Iranians.

The narration and re-enactment of the story of the battle of Karbala, and the citation of the detailed account of Imam Hussein's martyrdom, have been a routine affair in Iranian households and neighbourhoods in the form of rowseh-khani (homilies) and ta'ziyeh (passion plays). In this regard, they could only be approached by the narration of Shahnameh, the epic history of Iran, in local coffee-houses. The influence of the Shi'i tradition of victimisation (mazlumiyat), enveloped in an intense sense of Iranian nationalism, had thus drawn the silhouette of the Iranian soul in modern times.

Abol-Qasem Ferdowsi, the ninth century author of the Shahnameh, was a perfect example of the personification of Iranian nationality and Shi'i identity. Ferdowsi was a Shi'i believer, and in his verses frequently praised and acknowledged the House of the Prophet as the highest moral authority. Yet, Ferdowsi wrote the history of the Iranian ancient kings and heroes in a nostalgic bid against the Arab and Turk domination of Iran. He was, nonetheless, critical of the kings and by no means accorded them a sacred and impeccable position. Meanwhile, his praise for the Prophet and the Shi'i Imams was absolute and devoid of any criticism. The House of the Prophet was to him, as to any other Shi'i believer, sacred and impeccable.
The annual public show of lamentation has been traditionally organised by the grass-root communities. The intensity of one’s public show of passionate guilt and remorse and intense expression of lamentation, and the amount of the contributions that one may make to holding lamentation ceremonies, are important even in enhancing one’s social credibility and public respect. The members of the lamentation processions despise and curse the people of Kufeh (an ancient city in Iraq), who first offered refuge to Imam Hussein against the army of his enemy, the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, but later on turned him down. The Kufeans are resented because they left Imam Hussein, the victim (mazlum), together with his relatives and a handful of close followers to die at the hands of Yazid and his troops. The mourners lament and passionately pledge that should they be given a chance, they would fight and die for the Imam to redress his victimisation.

This feeling of guilt prepares them to make sacrifices for the only descendent of the Imam Hussein, the twelfth Imam known as the Mahdi, and praised as baqiyyat-Allah (the remains of God on earth), should he return. The belief in the emergence of the twelfth Imam in the future (entezar) comprises the second element of the memory of the house of the Prophet, namely the element of hope. This hope has been inspired by the belief in the narrative of the disappearance of the Mahdi, who is believed to be hiding from views in the period known as the Greater Occultation (Gheybat-e Kobra). True Shi’i believers firmly believe that the Mahdi will re-emerge at the end of Time to institute justice and the Government of God, hence his acclamation as the Lord of the Age (Valyy-e Asr) and Proprietor of Time (Saheb-az-Zaman). The celebration of the birthday of the twelfth Imam in Iran is matched in grandeur only by the Nowruz, a national festival which goes back to the time of Iranian pre-history. These original imaginaries had thus shaped the common political and social attitudes of the Iranian public.

Although the true believers of the Islamic Revolution would not admit it consciously, their sense of being historical victims, and the resolution that they sought for it in resorting to a revolution, had a subliminal echo of the grievances and aspirations of the Israeli Jews. The notion of historical victimisation has been arguably a main driving force in the philosophy of government in both Islamic Iran and its archenemy, Israel. Similar to the committed Zionist Jews, the Islamic revolutionaries desired a modern sovereign State that was legitimised by a religious dream, and would seek to redress their historical victimisation. Although there are marked differences between the political philosophies of these two States, the collective memories of the Iranian Shi’s and the Israeli Jews reflect certain shared historical experiences and sentiments. The sense of being “historical victims” is in fact a part of the vast reservoir of the collective imaginaries that have been constructed on the basis of two sets of partly different and partly shared symbolic structures, which form these two variant political cultures.

One main difference between Iran and Israel is that, in Israel, a modern State based on religion has already been successfully established; but in Iran, this process has become complicated by internal as well as external factors. In Israel, the proponents of a religious State, who had the imaginary of the kingdoms of Solomon, David and Moses in mind, and are still expecting the rise of the Messiah, are now in control of the apparatus of the State. However, their influence on the State is largely in conformance with democratic principles. The largely different experience of the Jews, particularly their suffering in the modern time under the Nazis, overshadowed their past sufferings at the hand of the Pharaohs and Babylonians, and accelerated their move from orthodox aspirations for an absolutist theocratic State to a religious
but secular democratic State. They still refer to their ancient traditions, but have gradually offered vastly modern interpretations of them. In this, the favourable assistance and the good will of the Western democracies, and particularly the United States, have been of vital importance. As such, although the extremist elements and advocates of theocracy have remained contenders of power and exert some influence on the political processes in Israel, their influence have become proportionate to the numerical strength of their constituency.

In Iran, however, although a religious government came to power as a result of the Islamic Revolution, there was no immediate chance for the development of democratic reforms. Here, the proponents of absolute theocracy came almost immediately in the direct control of the State, and, referring to the their political traditions too literally, rejected the idea of building a religious government on secular and democratic principles. On top of that, the historical experience of Iranians of secularism and democracy (and particularly the conduct unbecoming of the presumably Western democracies) made it possible for the religious and political conservatives to question the existing models for democratic institutions. One may even claim that the unfavourable approach of particularly the United States to the Iranian Revolution helped political conservatives in Iran in pushing the body politic further toward political models akin to the caliphates and sultanates of the past.

But, the important point is that the in Iran, the essence of resistance to absolutism has remained strong and is emerging once again in the context of the past traditions of critical disputation and religious pluralism. The post-revolution institutionalisation of modern political structures, such as parliament, political parties and popular elections in Iran, is also favourable to prospects of civil society and political pluralism. It goes without saying that it is vital for this emerging resistance to absolutism to find support within and without Iran in its pursuit of a vastly new experiment with freedom and democracy within the context of a religious political culture.

It is true that the differences in the internal developments in Iran on the one hand, and Israel on the other, have been important in giving rise to two different forms of religious governments. Yet, it must be re-emphasised that the Western support played a momentous part in the development of democracy in Israel, whereas, the lack of this support has intensified political extremism in Iran. However, after around twenty years since the revolution, it is now becoming increasingly clear for the Iranian people that the power of the proponents of absolutist theocracy far outweighs what its numerical constituency would justify; and hence the growing indications that they have decided to speak in democratic terms. In this again, the role of international community has been and will be of utmost importance.

The obsessive infatuation with the politics of recognition, and the continuation of repression and violence by the hard-line religious leaders have led increasingly to dismay with the Islamic Republic on the part of the general public and even many of the formerly active supporters of the revolution. Meanwhile, economic and social needs of the people have become acute. There is a sense among the public that they have tolerated too long a period of sacrifice and restraint under a regime of repression and self-denial, and have had enough of the constant states of emergency arising from war and domestic unrest. The recent upsurge in political, social and cultural dissent, even within the religious and government ranks, should be understood in this context.

If such a situation should lead to the decline of the role of religion in certain areas of life, it does not necessarily mean that it should result in the decline of religious experience as a meaningful part of modern life in Iran, in general. In fact,
many modernist religious thinkers agree that in the areas of life, which may be called profane, religion should not have had any serious involvement in the first place. It would be primarily upon the new generation of religious intellectuals, activists, and politicians to use their skills and positions to forge an alliance with the receptive secular dissenters in order to address the fundamental problems of the Iranian society. As many religious intellectuals and reform-minded political leaders have already admitted, Iran faces serious and fundamental problems in all walks of life (be it political, social, economic and cultural), which need to be addressed urgently. But the most immediate need seems to be to identify the areas that the sacred and the profane should be separated. In other words, there is urgent need for a political will on the part of the reform-minded religious and political leaders to demarcate the role of religion in politics. This is evidently an issue of political common sense. The point is that the continued success of the involvement of religion in politics depends on the success of religious leaders to create a reasonable balance between the divine and the profane so as not to alienate the public.

Some secular intellectuals, and particularly artists, within Iran have already taken heart from the new modernist views of religion, and have begun to openly question the absurdity of the censorial intervention of the clerics in intellectual and artistic creativity. There have also been numerous new movements from bottom-up that demand political, social, legal, and economic reforms. New interests in the rights of women are being expressed in the form of demands for reform in custody and divorce laws and increased opportunities for employment. Workers' demands for higher wages and better conditions of work, right to strike, and a social welfare system are also being voiced. There has also been a proliferation of political and cultural publications that are increasingly critical of the lack of political freedoms, civil rights, and public services.

Neither Ayatollah Khomeini, nor his clerical successors, could exercise the control they would have liked in determining the course of social, political and religious developments in Iran. The leaders of Protestant movement in Europe did not have total control over the events that flowed from the revolution they had created in Christianity. Such figures as Calvin and Luther did have conscious intentions to which they remained essentially faithful all the way, but the outcome of the doctrinal changes that they initiated was vastly different to what they intended. Just as Christian reformers, Khomeini made innovations in his received traditions, and certainly made pragmatic calculations. However, just as was the case for the early Protestant leaders, Khomeini's innovations are already deviating from what he intended. Moreover, the analogy suggested between Christian Reformation and the Islamic reformation should not create any teleological expectations. The course of developments in Iran may or may not follow the course of religious reformation in the West, but it is highly likely that it will not be totally different from it either.

There could be no doubt that Iran's political and religious history has been haunted by the spectre of repression and injustice. In this history, democratic freedoms and institutions have been effectively missing. To be sure, the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 brought a semblance of modern discourses and institutions of freedom and justice to Iran, and the Pahlavi regime modernised the economy. But, authoritarianism as the dominant feature of political and religious culture has remained almost intact at institutional level, repressing civil liberties and preventing the rise of a culture of citizenship. Yet, despite the weakness of democratic institutions and the culture of citizenship in Iran, the ideals of freedom and democracy
are alive as ever. In fact, it would be impossible to assume that any people could be alienated from these natural rights. The traditions of political and religious dissent under repressive political and religious authorities still resonate in the collective memory of Iranians; and they are constantly renewed by fresh references to the texts that contain this heritage. From bloody rebellions against oppressive rulers to the movements of refusal to pay taxes, to expression of religious dissent through alternative religious and philosophical thinking, political and religious dissent has a strong tradition in Iran. Fictional and factual stories of the past movements for freedom from Mani and Mazdak to Babak, Maziar and Abu-Muslim, and the mystical tradition of religious dissent of Hallajj and Hafiz, have and will feed the literary, artistic, philosophical and political imagination of Iranians for new creativities.

Since the victory of the Revolution 1979, Iranians have resisted both the wishes of some theologians to turn Iran into a monolithic theocratic entity, and the attempts of the monarchists and nationalists to return Iran to an even worse authoritarian trap. Instead, they have opted for an uncertain but cherished imaginary of the future. They have thus remained faithful to an eclectic and yet ideal version of Iranian culture, which has combined the memories of what it cherishes as Iranian with what it has willingly borrowed from all other cultures that have come into contact with it. This culture has combined the mythological narratives and pantheistic traditions of pre-Islam, the spiritual and mystical tradition of Islam and the modern ideas that correspond to the inalienable human right to freedom. It is in the context of this eclectical perseverance that the modern Iranian culture has been transformed into a melting pot of the ancient Persian culture, the Islamic Shi'i culture and the modern Western culture.

Even on the issue of nationality, despite the weakness of the culture of citizenship, there is a strong attachment to national identity among Iranians, which they have never found to be anti-Islam, nor inherently anti-West. The despotic monarchs and the scholastic theologians could not check the belief in eschatological aspirations for justice, symbolised by the imminent appearance of the Mahdi and the tomb of the Imam-zadeh (the imaginary or real saints allegedly related to the innocent Imams), although they described such beliefs as pagan. Nor could they eradicate the unruliness and the free spirit of the unattached mystical tradition. Just the same, the modern-day theologians do not seem to be successful to convince people that the pre-Islamic festivities such as Nowruz, Yalda and Cheharshanbeh-suri belong to the pagan past, nor to deny the relevance and need for modern institutions such as parliament and elections.

The people have not accepted, nor is it conceivable that they would accept, to choose between their national and religious identities, or to give up their right to freedom and social justice. Historical evidence indicates that despite religious, lingual and ethnic multiplicity in Iran, there has never been any strong movement for a radical change in the Iranian collective identity. Even the occasional flares of ethnic movements around the country have been mainly concerned with the right of citizenship, and have predominantly expressed allegiance to the Iranian nationhood.

As many modern historians would agree, Iranians, within the context of Islam as a cultural milieu, have preserved pre-Islamic traditions in the explicit form of fictions and rituals, as well as in the form of implicit, subtle variations to the Arabic version of Islam. The story of Imam Hussein and the tragedy of Karbala, commemorated passionately by the Persian believers, have no precedent among the

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1 In this regard, one may note the ethnic movements in Azarbijan, Kurdistan, Khorasan, Baluchestan, etc.
The development of the narrative of Ashura seems to have some underlying connection with the pre-Islamic narrative of Siavash narrated in the Shahnameh by Ferdowsi. Given that the narrative of Ashura was developed in its present version in the Safavid period, it is likely that it was partially inspired by the narrative of Siavash. In both of these narratives, heroic social and political reformers, (Imam Hussein and Siavash), rise against social injustice, political oppression and corruption by confronting powerful despotic rulers (Yazid and Afrasiab) and claiming political authority. Hussein and Siavash are not only brave and thoughtful, but also pure and innocent. They rise against the existing order in the knowledge that they have very little chance for material success. But, they are prepared to sacrifice their lives to achieve a symbolic victory of right over wrong. And finally, both of these heroic figures die a tragic but legendary death by decapitation, which turns them into martyrs to be mourned and remembered by the living as models for courage, dignity and pride.

Iranians also adopted new traditions after their conversion to Islam, which would give a peculiar from and content to the Shi'i Islam in Iran. Sufism and mystical philosophy are two of these traditions, which have been constantly accused of heresy and apostasy; but have never deviated from their firm commitment to Islam as the source of their religious and literary inspiration. At the level of popular culture too, Iranians have kept in high esteem the pre-Islamic rituals, such as Nowruz and Yalda, alongside the Islamic rituals, such Ashura, sofreh-ye nazr. Also in modern times, Iranians have cherished the democratic ideas of freedom, democracy and social justice since the late nineteenth century in events like the Tobacco Movement (1890s), the Constitutional Revolution and the Oil Nationalisation Movement (1950s), and in figures like Seyyed Jamal-ad-Din Assadabadi, Sattar Khan and Muhammad Mossadeq.

Iranian Muslims like other ordinary believers may falter in their religious practices. But, this by no means breaks the entirety of their conviction to Islam. The mechanism of towbeh (repentance) has left the door of absolution open. According to an Iranian observer, the popular culture of Iranians "admires both Rostam (the Persian epic hero) and Ali; does not fear accusations of heresy; prefers common sense over philosophical and jurisprudential schools and has never rebelled against its own eclecticism." By the same token, Iranian national culture does not exclusively consist of a static collection of memories, fables, myths and rituals. Iranian nationalism is an imaginary construction, which consist of both the past traditions and the modern innovations that enrich the past traditions.

There could be little doubt that the persistence of Islam as one of the fastest growing religions in the modern time owes a lot to its resilience in adapting itself to modern socio-political developments. In this area too, there are numerous examples to cite against the view held by many monarchist, nationalist and leftist intellectuals that Islam, and particularly Shi'i Islam, have no capacity for secularisation. The richness of the Iranian-Islamic traditional philosophy of the likes of Ibn-e Sina, Sohrevardi and Mulla Sadra, which emphasises the religious character of reason, agreement and innovation, is widely recognised. In the same tradition, religious movements such as

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1 It is interesting that sofreh ritual (a religious party convened by women for women to make offerings, usually food, in gratitude to God for a wish that has come true) is being widely practised among the professional and highly educated Iranian women, who now live in the West.

Mu'tazelite, Usuli, Isma'ili, Horufi, Sheikh, Babi and finally Sufi have endeavoured to offer alternative interpretations of the religious texts.\footnote{Ibid, p. 32}

The mystics particularly offered a reading of religion, which radically questioned the literal readings of the jurists. They successfully incorporated in their religious vocabulary what had been considered the taboo of the Shari'at. They offered Tariqat as an esoteric understanding of Islam, which used symbolic instead of literal meaning of the religious texts. Words such as love, dance, wine, lover, drunk, madness, etc, entered the religious language via the mystics. This influence was such that even some theologians expressed interest in mysticism (\textit{irfan}).\footnote{Most recently, Ayatollah Khomeini was known to be in favour of mysticism. His mystical poems, published after his death, indicated his deep affection for the style of the mystical poet Hafiz, who lived in the thirteenth century. Although Khomeini's poems lack originality; nonetheless, they show the degree of the success of alternative religious thinking within the Islamic tradition.}

There are also the traditions of religious tolerance in the early development of Islam, such as the tolerance of hedonistic Persian poets and the adaptation of Greek philosophy.\footnote{Seyyed Hussein Nasr has emphasised the role of Muslim translators of Greek texts in transferring Greek philosophy to Western Christianity.} The Islamic modernist movement, which arose in the late nineteenth century and continued unabated throughout the twentieth century, was also significant. It set out to innovate Islam in order to adapt it to modern times.\footnote{Since the late 19th century religious modernists like Seyyed Jamal Asadabadi began to address modern political and social issues in religious terms. This trend continued unabated throughout the 20th century by the likes of Shari'at Sangalagi, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali Shari'ati, Ruhollah Khomeini, Morteza Motahhari, Mehadi Bazargan, and recently Abdol-Karim Soroush.} To this, one might add the creative interpretations of the revolution itself and the politically emotive narratives that have flourished in Iran since the victory of the revolution. Interestingly, some secular intellectuals have recognised the politicisation of Islam as a sign of its reformation. They have particularly referred to the developments within the Islamic Republic, which defy the claims that this regime has a mere traditionalist view of politics.\footnote{Ervand Abrahamian, for example, has noted the modernist nature of politics of the Islamic Republic in his \textit{Khomeinism, Essays on the Islamic Republic}, 1993.} In fact, it was clear from the beginning that, despite the expectations of many secular intellectuals, the Islamic Revolution and the State that came out of it represented a modern phenomenon and not merely a return to the past.\footnote{Despite its repressive nature, the Islamic Republic has initiated certain important reforms in the three spheres of politics, culture and economy. In the sphere of politics, it has adopted a constitution that largely complies with the constitutions of the Western societies. In the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the separation of legislative, judicial and executive powers has been recognised. It also makes clear references to the necessity of guarding freedom, equality and social justice. There has also been a burgeoning of non-government local councils, committees, foundations and organisations in Iran over the last decade. In the cultural arena as well, there has been signs of development toward allowing alternative forms of artistic expression, especially in creative writing and the production of film and theatre. In the sphere of economy also there is interest in a balanced development of private and public sector economies alongside each other.}

\textbf{The meaning of the Islamic Revolution is best understood when one considers it as the representation of total transformation of the Iranian society within the contour of the common soul of that society. As such, in order to seek the meaning of the Iranian Revolution, we need a particular domain of investigation that at the same time includes and transcends empirical science. Although empirical studies could provide valuable information about the body of the revolution, they have very little to say about its soul. A curious characteristic of the Iranian Revolution is that it included and at the same time transcended the routine workings of the society by means of reversing, suspending or recasting the social mould on the basis of a utopian view of life. This utopian view, as I have noted, was inspired by the millenarian expectation}
for the return of the \textit{Mahdi} and the feeling of responsibility associated with the feelings of guilt about the loss of Imam Hussein. These feelings of responsibility made the Iranian \textit{Shi'i} believers prepared to fight for the institution of the government of the \textit{Mahdi} when they perceived that its advent was imminent.

To the Iranian revolutionaries, the human existence seemed to be punctuated either with a quest for meaning or a plunge into despair. And meaning was sought mainly in the narratives of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and the return of the Concealed Imam \textit{Mahdi}. This was an endless search not only bent on finding and proving, but also prepared for exploring and understanding. There were few, if any, fields of human activity that were not affected by these \textit{imaginary} narratives. There seemed to be a constant search for a resolution to a conflict that had marred the perfectibility of every sphere of life, a search that could not cease if despair was to be avoided. Each and every field of human activity seemed to be impaired by an original sin, which had created in its wake an impetus for perfection, which motivated action for seeking retribution against the sinners, and which had animated the strive for the purification of human experience. The revolution was but the vehicle for such endeavours in all walks of life, be it religious, social, economical, political, scientific, artistic, etc.

The true believers of the revolution were not backward looking in the sense of searching for a lost utopia. Their political referent, for example, was not the rule of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina, which is considered as a success story; but the rule of Imam Ali, which had ended in tragedy. They did not mean to rebuild the government of the Prophet, but to make a success of incomplete work that Ali had started and his eleven "innocent" descendants had followed. Their military referent was not the victorious battles of the Prophet (ghazavat), but the tragic battle of Karbala. They sought to make a victory out of defeat. In this sense, the Muslim revolutionaries of Iran were forward-looking and future oriented.

Although the individual incidences that characterised the Islamic Revolution occurred over specific aspects of social, political and economic relations that structured people's lives, these incidences alone did not constitute the revolution. For example, an industrial, ethnic or political conflict could give rise to a strike, riot or rebellion involving violence, armed struggle and even a change in a government policy, but these categories by no means could be considered as the intent of the Islamic Revolution. At most, they were only the side effects of the main battle, which was being waged for the total transformation of social, political, cultural and economic relationships in order to make them comply with the requirements of the faith. More often than not the revolution could only be represented and understood in transcendental terms involving religious revitalisation and invocation of sacred narratives.

Yet, transcendental elements are inherent in every human society as latent phenomena, and they obviously do not inspire revolutions while they remain latent. Otherwise, revolutions would be a daily exercise rather than rare events. The question is; what motivated the flow of a latent and universal characteristic to a manifest, spatially and temporally specific, socio-political event in Iran? The answer, I believe, could be found in the successful invocation of collective imaginations and provision of relevant and legitimate interpretations of traditions to create a new variation of power. As such, the identification of the Iranian Revolution with change in Iranian society did not necessarily mean that changes were caused by the revolution. In fact, in many instances the revolutionary events were themselves surface representations of changes already effected, and in turn sources of subsequent changes.
A characteristic of this revolution — which is shared by other great revolutions — was the spontaneity of its events, enacted by the people without any elaborate planning and prior organisation. In fact, the revolution was carried out in its most crucial moments by those who had not yet formed or been absorbed into organised associations or interest groups operative in the context of the old regime. The organised groups — political, professional, social, cultural or religious — could not initiate a revolutionary movement due to their roots in the functions of the social system as it existed before the revolution. Without the uprooted elements of the population, who by the virtue of their uprootedness were prepared to transcend the existing social relations, no revolution was conceivable.

The Iranian Revolution was not conceivable without heroism and sacrifice. In this sense, it resembled a great war in which the participants engaged themselves in acts of bravery, camaraderie and sacrifice for transcendental objectives, such as belief, dignity, honour and prestige symbolised by emblems, flags and drills; objectives which justify violence and destructiveness. What may have been considered madness, when viewed from one perspective, looked quite legitimate and worthwhile from another.

The objective possibilities created by recent breakthroughs in technological developments have produced strong beliefs in rationalisation of technologies of life, be it in the production of goods or in the organisation of social relations. The main impetus for such an enterprise is the encouraging results of the empirical studies of the effects of material development and economic growth or what is called economic rationalism on the quality of human life. However, I know of no definitive empirical support for the same assumptions in the area of the rationalisation of human psyche and soul. Quite the contrary, there is ample empirical evidence that, while human reason is capable of infusing the world of objects, and plan and implement an effective program of rationalisation in that field, it has had far less efficiency in applying the same rigorous principles and techniques to human relations.

There have been many attempts at applying the objective methods and tools to investigate psychological, social and political processes. Nonetheless, there is an increasing awareness that human psychic development is of a different order than that of the physical world, and cannot be expected to develop at the same pace and along the same lines. For example, the understanding of the development of authority structures and power relations in their human forms, and their conceptualisation in practical experiences of the people, are quite distinct from the understanding of the development of the objective world detached from human experience. This is notwithstanding the possibility and desirability of developing an understanding of the objective in unity with the subjective as practised by mystical philosophy.

Over their long history, Iranians, like people elsewhere, have tried to develop a system of political authority, a system of legitimate exertion of power, a system that would primarily be based on legitimacy rather than coercion. The rule of Ali Ibn-e Abitalib, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, was perceived in the collective imagination of the Iranian Shi'is as the most desirable and legitimate political authority. But, the subversion of Ali's rule by the Umayyads made Shi'ism the vehicle for the continuation of the path to that legitimate political authority. Ever since, for the Shi'i Iranians the existing systems of authority have been subject to constant suspicion and subversion. The existing political authorities have thus appeared to the people in a dual role: as a protector of the welfare and security of the members of the collectivity, and as a threat to individual freedom and desire for autonomy and dignity. This ambiguous relationship between the political authority and the members
of the society may be cited as the source of the latent political discontent in the Iranian history. Often, this discontent has been manifested in the form of a feeling of injustice and a communal sense of duty to restore justice. The discontent has also been manifested as the loss of legitimate authority and lack of moral community with a concomitant sense of duty to restore loyalty and solidarity.

The existing systems of authority guaranteed that the society should be divided into two basic classes at all its operational levels, such as the operation of economy, politics and laws. This was perhaps a characteristic of all authority structures throughout human history. The division of society along authority lines has meant, as Ralf Dahrendorf has suggested, the recognition of a class of authority holders, who issue policies, and a class of those dispossessed of authority, who are subjected to policies. Regardless of the historical changes that have taken place in the forms of exertion of power, the essence of the authority structure has been preserved. That is, whether policies were made under the whimsical feats of a despot, decreed as a godly command, or legislated by a group invested with power by the people, the society remained divided into those who wielded political power and those who were dispossessed of it.

Essentially, this has meant that Iranians, in their collective experience, formed a negative understanding of power. As such, they saw power as a diabolical force that, if not under religious or State control, would cause them injury and harm. For a long time, they were willing to forget that injury and harm might be coming from the very act of escaping power. Like many other collectivities across the international political spectrum, they handed the power to others. Yet, like everywhere else, those who were handed power wielded it in the knowledge of its negativity. From the despot, who believed in his role as an oppressor and admitted cruelty as a tool of his trade, to the elected politician, who saw as justified manipulating the minds of the electorate, the holders of power recognised the essential negativity of power. They thus insisted on the essential separation of politics and ethics.

For Iranians, the giving up of power for a long time entailed accepting that they, as ordinary people, were incapable of being in control of their own destiny, and have to be watched over, guided, corrected and punished. They also allowed that the standards of correction and punishment to be determined by the despot, father, leader, prophet or legislator, depending on the type of the socio-political arrangements at hand. This situation had naturally created a sense of powerlessness that - in the absence of strong sources of security, pride and dignity - had produced among Iranians a sense of misery, despair and deprivation. These feelings became particularly intense in the 1960s and 1970s, when exposed to the radical revolutionary rhetoric of religious and secular ideologues of the revolution. Once the people realised they had access to empowering factors, such as a militant culture, a belief system, a dignified identity and a hope in the future, their misery, despair and perceived deprivation were converted into open discontent, protest, anger and aggressive behaviour. But in this, there was also a subliminal quest for power and prestige.

Discontented crowds, whose members might have never been closely associated with each other, but had been pulled together by feelings of frustration and anger, began to act in unison. As if suddenly spelled by a magic touch, they began to behave like the most intimate comrades-in-arms, engaging themselves in acts of bravery, sacrifice and almost invariably violence. This involved a sudden change of heart, but not necessarily a sustained development. Power was handed over from one group to another and, in the absence of true autonomy of the people, circulated beyond their reach.
Yet, the experience of the revolution has fundamentally questioned the traditional practice of giving up power to authorities and the notion that all power is corrupt and corruptive. And this is the essence of any authentic revolutionary movement in which the revolutionary actors seek to transcend the existing structures by enacting their dreams of utopia and as such creating new variations of power. Although the utopia is essentially illusive, it is a real factor in perpetuation of popular drives of high stake. Subjective parameters like human needs, emotions, passions, values, love, affection and recognition, were the determining parameters in the revolutionary endeavour of Iranians, factors that were perhaps even more objective for the human actors of the revolution than strictly politico-economic or organisational parameters.

The Iranian Revolution thus appeared to its actors as the last chance for salvation, a path that had been obstructed by the existing institutions of authority. It inspired a collective identity and a general will, which was objectified in a religious resurgence in a condition that the collapse or disintegration of the existing socio-political structure was perceived to be imminent.

As I mentioned earlier, the ability or inability of the social and political institutions of the modern Nation-States to obtain the consent of the people determines their legitimacy or lack of it, and hence their stability or instability. This legitimacy, which is the basis of the power of modern institutions, is itself based on the flourishing of the new interpretations of the social and political concepts developed in the ancient texts, symbols and narratives. It was in the context of these interpretations that wars and revolutions in the West led to modern political, social, economic and cultural forms. In their revolution, the Iranian revolutionaries, like their counterparts in other revolutions, attempted to free themselves from what they saw as bondage, domination, humiliation and loss of humanity by building institutions, which would gain legitimacy in the eye of the people. Despite their various political persuasions, they aspired to achieve a government of their own that would institute the rule of law. The people did not take to the streets barehanded, risking their lives, facing with armed troops, in order to destroy the existing order for the sake of disorder. Rather, they had already subscribed to various utopias legitimated by varied interpretations of their grand narratives.

The revolution against the seemingly unassailable monarchic regime was not won by military might, but by the withdrawal of popular consent from the Shah and the image in which he was building Iran. Rather than the interpretations that portrayed Iran in terms of its 2500 years history of monarchy or the modern history of modernisation, the majority of the people subscribed to new ideological and utopian interpretations derived from the Islamic cosmological epistemology, which provided an Islamic image of Iran. It was also over this variety of interpretations that the domestic conflict arose after the victory of the revolution over the old regime. The battle between Khomeini’s version of Islam against socialist and nationalist and alternative Islamic versions was, in the last analysis, won through the success of the Khomeinists to gain legitimacy in the eye of the public for their image of the Iran of the future.

One may argue that Khomeini’s version of faith, which were driven by the imaginary of an Islamic community (a view that he had developed during his years of exile in Najaf), was accepted collectively by Iranians because of two main reasons. Firstly, because it had its roots in the collective cultural traditions of Iranians; and secondly, because of Khomeini’s personal success in selecting certain appropriate and
relevant traditions and offering logically, ethically and normatively acceptable interpretations of them.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, which defines itself as the legitimate product of the revolution, has retained power as a result of the victory of certain interpretations of the Shi'i Islamic narratives, which were preserved in the sacred, philosophical and mystical texts. The main political thesis of this interpretation has been the velayat-e faqih or the theory, which legitimises the government of the jurists. This thesis was put forward by the late Ayatollah Khomeini and gained legal legitimacy by being included in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, despite objections raised by its opponents.

Yet, the thesis of velayat-e faqih has come up against serious problems in sustaining its legitimacy in terms of its relevance to the present state of development of the Iranian society. The necessities of the modern world, which motivated the Iranian Revolution in the first place, namely the demand for economic prosperity, social justice and political participation, and a desire for a dignified national and cultural identity, have created an urgent need for reinterpretation of sacred texts to accommodate the legitimate collective aspirations. People have not relinquished their demands for economic development, political pluralism and social freedom; but they demand these in context of the Islamic imaginary. It seems that in the context of broad acceptance of Islam as the main element of a common culture in Iran, any reinterpretation of traditions has to adhere to the basic tenets of the Islamic imaginary contained in the religious texts and grand narratives.

Already various interpretations are being presented both by the Shi'i jurists themselves and by the Muslim intellectuals who oppose the absolutist jurists in power. (I shall discuss some of these interpretations in this text.) Among these, two main trends are emerging. First is the trend among the jurists and non-jurists alike to argue that there can be no single interpretation of the sacred texts in the absence of the Prophet and the infallible Imams. According to this trend the unity of “ultimate Truth” does not imply the unity of interpretations; and various interpretations may be valid in the search for the same “ultimate Truth”. The proponents of this view draw upon the original sources of Islam, such as the Qur'an and the hadith, as well as the heritage of Islamic mysticism, in order to support their claims.

Second is the trend among modernist Muslim intellectuals to promote religious pluralism through rationalistic philosophical arguments, which present Islam as concomitant with democracy, pluralism and civil society. According to this trend the Islamic government should provide a suitable condition for the development of a civil society in Iran, and should avoid the temptation to Islamicise the social and political spheres. According to both of these trends, religion should be defined as the experience of the sacred and as an individual commitment to faith out of free will. They oppose the narrow understanding of religion in juridical terms, which gives the jurists the power to regulate all day to day human interactions (economic, social, political, sexual, etc.)

Having noted the importance, sensitivity, and at the same time the uncertainty and ambiguity, of the Islamic Revolution and the post-revolutionary religious, political and cultural developments in Iran, I shall offer in this text a detailed theoretical and historical account of the construction of the imaginary of the Islamic Revolution and its continued operation in the complex relationship of various discourses of power.