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Chapter Seven

The Ideology of Revolution

Introduction

The imaginary of the Islamic Revolution was fundamental in motivating the social actors in Iran of the late 1970s to embark upon a massive project of social and political reconstruction. This project was a collective effort for political, economic and most importantly cultural reproduction of the Iranian society as a modern nation. It was expressed in the form of a utopian-ideological revolution, which was destined to go beyond the existing political structures in an effort to actualise the dream of an alternative society. The Islamic revolutionary ideology, relying on new interpretations of the dominant religious tradition, convinced the people to imagine the future in terms of an Islamic society run by an Islamic government. It was imagined that a true Islamic society was a just society where religious laws would bring freedom and equality to the people. There were various social fantasies: the fantasy that the Islamic government would pay the share of each citizen of the oil income to their doors, and that the people no longer had to pay for energy.

The true believers of the Islamic Revolution also believed that a true Islamic government would facilitate the return of the Mahdi who would create a government of absolute justice, where money would be abolished and economic transactions would become a free exchange of commodities. It was dreamed that at the time of the government of the Mahdi, people could obtain their requirements not with the payment of money, but by reciting a prayer in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. These social fantasies had long existed in the collective conscience of the Shi'i believers in Iran in the form of a passive expectation for the Mahdi. The Islamic ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s incorporated these fantasies into an Islamic revolutionary imaginary, which would offer a model for the reproduction of the Iranian society on an Islamic model.

While the Islamic ideological agitation was getting momentum through new political interpretations of popular religious scriptures, symbols, rituals and fictions, the Pahlavi polity was increasingly losing its will, agility, ability and probably interest in effectively addressing the expression of desire of the growing Islamic movement for an Islamic identity for Iran. In his speeches, behaviour, and policies, the Shah made it increasingly clear that he had no intention in allowing modern Iran to be culturally identified as an Islamic society. In fact, it was becoming clear that he was more interested to make a fundamental break between modern Iran and its dominant religious traditions. His increasingly aggressive and insulting language against politically minded ulama – whom he called the “black reactionaries” – his repressive policies against the Shi'i tullab (seminarians), and his economic pressure on the religious endowments and the bazaar did not leave any opportunity for peaceful participation of the religious leaders in politics.

Culturally, the Shah tried to eradicate the Shi'i Islamic influence by frequent references to Persian pre-Islamic glory, violating Shi'i moral codes in the public, organising huge ceremonies and festivals to glorify the ancient kings, and changing the Islamic calendar. He also financed numerous studies of the Persian ancient religion and history at the cost of Islamic studies. By the early 1970s, he dropped his

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1 The Shah did not take part in public prayers and drank wine in the public.
earlier pretensions to commitment to the Islamic faith, and almost completely omitted from the language of the State all references to the Islamic and Shi'i saints, and the sacred events of the Islamic history.

To put it more clearly, with the huge increase in the oil income and the industrial and construction boom in Iran, the Shah, as the absolute head of the State, appeared to be convinced that he had already brought Iran into the course of modernity, progress and prosperity. In his numerous speeches and interviews, he frequently referred to the era of “Great Civilisation”, which he insisted was around the corner, where the people could relax and reap the fruits of modernisation and progress. Until the eve of the revolution, he proclaimed wishfully that his “White Revolution” and his pre-Islamic sense of nationalism had made the nation economically content, and had created a proud identity to please the Iranian psyche. In his communication with the people, he seemed increasingly removed from the social reality. As if he had only to prove himself to the Western media, his language was predominantly one of the portrayal of a rosy picture of Iran, referring to it as the Japan of the Middle East. As such, The Shah became increasingly an object of ridicule by both religious and secular intellectuals.

As it turned out, the Iranian national psyche was deeply injured under the Shah by a crisis of identity, threat of an alien culture, and a sense of loss of community. Even the relative economic prosperity of the 1960s and 1970s had not alleviated this sense of psychic injury. Ironically in the late 1970s, the economic prosperity turned into a source of further aggravation of the cultural problems when there appeared a slight downturn in the living standards. This was the case, although the living standards in Iran were still high compared to many other Third World societies.

The Islamic utopia therefore found an explicit and effective political expression in addressing the problems of cultural and identity crisis. As such, it took the form of an ideology of dissent with order-shattering potentials. Its final stages of development owed a lot to the development of a powerful imaginary of revolution and a theory of State in the context of the religious reform movement during the two decades preceding the fall of the monarchy. In this chapter, I shall concentrate on the religious intellectual developments in the 1960s and 1970s, which found expression in a coherent ideological formulation of an Islamic utopia and an Islamic revolutionary ideology.

**Religious Reform Movement (1960s & 1970s)**

In the early 1960's, there emerged a reform movement within the religious community which - being overshadowed by the State’s socio-economic reforms - did not attract much attention at the time from the local and foreign analysts and media. It was initiated by a number of reform-minded ulama and lay religious intellectuals like Jalal Al-e Ahmad Ali Shari'ati, Mahmoud Taleqani, Murtaza Motahhari and Mehdi Bazargan as an effort to revive the Shi'i faith. These men wished to revive the faith because they believed it was becoming stagnant and losing touch with the exigencies of time under the domination of the conservative ulama of the Qom religious establishment. The genesis of this reform movement was marked in 1960 with a series of public lectures organised by some reform-minded ulama and Muslim intellectuals in Tehran and other main urban centres.

There were three main trends of religious debate going on at this time within Iran. One was organised by the collaborative efforts of the modernist ulama and the Islamic intellectuals like Motahhari and Bazargan. It appealed largely to professional
intellectuals of traditional background, such as the members of the Islamic
Association of Engineers. Public lectures organised by this association were published
over several months periodically under the title of Guftar-e Mah (Monthly Lectures). The
academic nature of this attempt at religious reformation and the fact that it did not
involve political issues explicitly limited its public exposure and consequently its
closure in 1963 by the government did not raise much public protest.

The second trend was that initiated by Al-e Ahmad and continued by Ali
Shari’ati. In the early 1960s, the author and political activist, Al-e Ahmad, had
popularised the notion of Gharbzadegi (Westoxication), which articulated the
problems of Iranian intellectuals in their confrontation with Western modernity. His
discourse of Ghabzadegi was basically a critique of the tradition of secular
intellectualism in Iran, which had begun in the early twentieth century with a strong
dose of fascination and awe with respect to the modern advancement of the West. Ale-Ahmad, who himself had experienced an intellectual transformation from
secularism to religious conviction, had tried to reduce the sense of intellectual
selflessness and alienation before the West that he thought had undermined the
authenticity of Iranian collective identity and the sense of national dignity and pride.
He had offered Shi’i tradition as the core of modern Iranian national identity, and had
advocated the reversal of the intellectual tendency away from the living religious
tradition. He thus had attempted to bridge the gap between modern Iranian
intellectuals and the Shi’i ulama and forge an alliance, which he believed would
create a powerful political force to reverse the political, economic and social
backwardness of Iran in modern times. But Al-e Ahmad’s ideas, although they were
warmly received by the reform-minded and radical ulama, failed to sway the secular
intellectuals. This was the case, perhaps, because his criticisms of the political
incapacity and cultural alienation of modern intellectuals was too harsh, and his praise
for the political and cultural virtues of the ulama too uncritical.

Shari’ati, a French-educated Muslim intellectual, was deeply influenced by Al-
e Ahmad; but at the same time he saw serious shortcomings in Ale-Ahmad’s
theoretical and practical solutions to the problem of intellectuals, and thus sought to
remedy these shortcomings.1 He began to deliver his social and political message
mainly through public lectures. But instead of relying on the ulama or appealing to the
older generation of secular intellectuals, he tried to educate a new generation of the
youth who were coming of age in the intense political and social environment of the
1960s and 1970s. He combined traditional and modern learning to bridge the gap
between religious and modern thought and bring a new brand of Shi’ism as an
ideology of revolution to the Iranian youth.2 The main arena for Shari’ati’s agitation
was the Husseiniyeh Ershad in Tehran, a religious foundation funded mainly by the
bazaar merchants. Shari’ati’s discourse appealed to a younger and more radical
audience from traditional background consisting of the university students and those

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1 Shari’ati completed his primary and secondary schooling in Iran. He also received religious education under the
guidance of his father who was a religious scholar. Shari’ati went to France in the 1960s where he completed a
doctorate degree in religious studies. He could be best described as a sociologist of religion. Shari’ati returned to
Iran in the mid-1960s. But upon his arrival, he was arrested and jailed for six months. After his release, he began
his career as a university lecturer and public orator.
2 Apart from his dedication to the Shi’i tradition and its saintly figures, he was influenced by modern French
thinkers like Raymond Aron, Henry Corbin, Frantz Fanon, Roger Garaudy, Louis Massignon, and Jean-Paul
Sartre. He also made references in his works to German philosophers like Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Jaspers,
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who had recently graduated from high schools and universities to professional occupations. It concerned itself with social and cultural issues, but it stopped short of targeting the State directly and explicitly. Shariati’s movement was emotionally stirring and had a far more mobilising revolutionary power than the liberal approach of the Goftar-e Mah contributors to the reform.

The third trend was that of Ayatollah Khomeini, which directly targeted the State authority from within the ranks of the radical ulama in the Qom establishment. Although Khomeini’s movement existed as an underlying trend since the 1940s, but as a religious reform movement, it made an emphatic appearance in the anti-regime rebellion of 1963 and continued thereafter. The radical religious movement led by Ayatollah Khomeini directly attacked the regime’s modernisation programme of the early 1960s, and attracted a strong following at the depths of the society, not only among the traditional middle class, but also among the lower classes with millenarian aspirations. It thus drew under its hegemony many modernist members of the reform movement in sparking off the 1963 uprising.

The main questions addressed by the first trend were more systematically reflected in a collection of essays written by the Guftar-e Mah contributors and published in 1961 under the title Bahsi dar Barey-e Marja’iyyat va Ruhaniyyat (An Inquiry into the Religious and Spiritual Leadership).1 Shahrough Akhavi has summed up the cardinal issues considered by this movement as subject of religious reform. These issues were: “the nature and significance of the imamate (the leadership of the Muslim community); the concept of delegation of authority and sustaining the practice of Imam Ali in rulership (velayat); the problematic of emulating the best and the brightest of society’s learned men in the absence of the Imam (marja’iyyat); the doctrine of creative deduction of points of law from the traditional corpus of jurisprudence to satisfy the exigencies of new situations (ijtihad).”2 Other important points were also stipulated like: “the need for an independent financial organisation for the clergy; the necessity of aShura-yi fatva - i.e. a permanent committee of mujtahids ... to issue collective authoritative opinions in the matters of law; ... (and) an interpretation of Islam as a total way of life, therefore incorporating social, economic and political issues into religious ones.”3

As for the second trend, for a period during the 1960s and 1970s, Shari’ati and his Islamic Shi’i ideology dominated the political-religious intellectual scene in Iran. Although Shari’ati’s thought could be studied under the category of Islamic reformism, it was distinct from more conventional forms of Islamic reform tendencies in two respects. First, in contrast to mere attempts to reform the religion to adapt it to the demands of modern social structures, Shari’ati advocated a revolutionary interpretation of Shi’i Islam, hence deviating from the prevailing quietist doctrine of the Imami theology. He by-passed the abstentionist traditions of later Imams and referred directly to the militancy of early Imams, notably Imam Ali and Imam Hussein. He proclaimed, for example: “Hussein, the heir of Adam who had given life to humanity, the heir of the great prophets who had taught humanity how to live, has come in this age to teach the children of Adam how to die”.4

Second, probably as a result of his Western higher education, Shari’ati developed an ideological interpretation of Islam in a style that could be confused with Western populist ideologies. He insisted that the Islamic principle of towhid (the unity of God) should correspond to a classless social order. His interpretation of Shi’i Islam was basically concerned with the oppression of the people by the forces of domination

1 Akhavi, S. 1980, p. 119
2 Ibid, p. 117
3 Ibid, 119-120
4 Shari’ati, A. Shahadat (Martyrdom), The Abu Zar Foundation, Tehran, 1977, p. 75
manifested in internal despotic and external imperialistic forms. He advocated an intensified effort to adopt an Islamic as against a Western identity.

Questioning the governmental image of progress and Western rationalism, Shari’ati, following Al-e-Ahmad, formulated a theory of social and political alienation by incorporating Western concepts into the Islamic language and symbolism, and raised the question of identity crisis among the Iranian young intellectuals. In the 1970’s, terms like gharbzadegi, the title of one of Al-e-Ahmad’s books, found widespread use among the intellectuals, who denounced the growing trend of Westernisation of life and society.

But, despite his Western education, Shari’ati formulated his main arguments in terms of Qur‘anic verses, stories and metaphors, with frequent references to Islamic cultural traditions. He used the Islamic symbolism particularly to revive the charisma of an ideal Islamic community and to identify an external enemy, the West. He then proceeded to shift the blame for the recent backwardness of the Islamic community to the enemy. The tendency to use Islamic symbolism in rationalistic arguments, which gave an intellectual dimension to the new anti-Western Islamic movement, was important in its capacity to attract the radical youth. Shari’ati elaborated on the Shi‘i paradigm of martyrdom to glorify struggle. He said: “Shahadat (martyrdom) in our culture, in our religion, is not a bloody and accidental event; shahadat is a sacrifice by heroes who are killed in struggle against the enemy.”

Increasing numbers of young Iranians joined the Islamic Shi‘i opposition to the Shah’s regime, especially because Shi‘i thought, a traditional belief system, was now providing an intellectual articulation for social dissent. Shari’ati associated Islam with struggles against colonialism and great power domination - a theme, which gave more impetus to the articulation of the social dissent in Islamic terms. His ideas, in many respects, inspired the radical religious intellectuals who provided the revolution of 1978-1979 with an updated religious discourse.

Although Shari’ati’s concern lay with the revival of Islam and Shi‘ism, he was a Western educated layman and this could not have been without effect on his worldview, neither could it be ignored by the orthodox ulama. Shari’ati’s contribution to the Islamic ideology contained an element of defiance of the dominant religious structure which, to him, had vulgarised Islam by suppressing its socio-political concerns, limiting it to nonsensical rituals of chanting and praying. In this respect, he was in fundamental agreement with the more radical ulama. But this affinity was overshadowed by Shari’ati’s indiscriminate attacks on the clerical institution as outdated and redundant. The conflict between Shari’ati’s interpretation of Islam and that of the ulama was never fully resolved. Nevertheless, it made its impact on the traditional religious orthodoxy and further galvanised the development of revolutionary ideological interpretation of Islam within the ranks of the ulama. There began a militant tendency within religious orthodoxy, which demanded radical political action.

Shari’ati’s approach was also different from that of the liberal religious reformers like Bazargan, who were trying to promote the credibility of the teachings of the faith by finding affinity between Islam and modern positive sciences. Shari’ati, on the other hand, as Mehrzad Boroujerdi has noted, was critical of positivism and scientism, and “preferred mythology over history” because, for him, “the former

1 Ibid, p. 75
2 Shari’ati, A. Va Bar-e Digar Abu Zar, (And Once Again Abu Dharr), The Abu Zar Foundation, Tehran, pp. 35-61
represented history as it should have happened, whereas the latter embodied realities that were made up by others.”

The third trend, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, was central in instigating and enhancing collective revolutionary action. Khomeini’s push for politicisation of Islamic tradition laid the foundation for emergence, in the ranks of religious authority, of militant young clerics of lower ranks. He was politically significant because he not only attracted the militant clerics such as Hussen-Ali Montazeri and Mahmud Taleqani, but also a more liberal minded ulama and intellectuals such as Mortezza Motahhari, Muhammad-Hussen Beheshti, Mehdi Bazargan and Abo-Hassan Bani-Sadr. The leading militant ulama who have occupied the highest positions of power since the revolution have been, with rare exceptions, drawn from the large groups of former Khomeini students. Personalities like Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Seyyed Ali Khamene’ie are conspicuous examples of this trend. The younger militant clerics were looking forward to political action as a factor to create avenues of rapid upward political mobility through restoration of prestige and status of the religious authority.

Although these three reform tendencies within the religious community were divided on their attitude towards the degree of reforms needed in the orthodox religion, they shared the idea that only through a religious revival was social progress possible. For instance, in 1970 Ayatollah Motahhari gave a series of talks to the Islamic Association of Engineers, which were published under the title of Khadamat-e Moteqabel-e Islam va Iran (The Mutual Services of Islam and Iran). In these lectures, he deplored the fascination of the intellectuals of Islamic countries with the imitation of the Western patterns as well as their propensity to resort to non-religious materialist and nationalist themes. He also emphasised the need for an Islamic consciousness in order to tackle issues of a modern society in a changing international situation.

According to Motahhari: “In the first stage, the intellectuals of underdeveloped (Islamic) countries engage in pure imitation of Western patterns of life, which are assumed to be leading to prosperity. In the second stage, they become aware of the nation to which they belong, but turn to its past history, folklore, and myths - nationalism, imitative of Western nationalist ideology. In the third stage this is replaced by Islamic consciousness appropriate to a unified Islamic community of believers.”

These groups tended to turn Shi’i political philosophy into a modern Islamic ideology in different fashions, and came to co-operate in the first phase of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979. In the second phase of the revolution, however, one version of the ideological Shi’ism - that of Khomeini - came to dominate the political scene. This ideology contained traces of the revolutionary ideology of Shari’ati, the traditional ideology of Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, the nationalism of the constitutionalists, the anti-imperialism of international Marxism, and the so-called fundamentalism of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Other Marginal Religious Developments

Mention should also be made in passing of other religious developments, which although marginal were effective in the making of the Islamic Revolution. One was the continuation of the line of the traditional Shi‘i doctrine of political “abstentionism”, which denounced the direct involvement of religion in politics. This


line was objectified in the grand Ayatollahs who were recognised as having the highest religious knowledge, and advocated the idea of the separation of the State and religion formulated in the early twentieth century Constitution. Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmedari was the most prominent representative of this group.

Also in the 1960’s, one group of young Islamic militants that had originally followed the Islamic liberals like Bazargar developed a revolutionary ideology of its own. This ideology was based on the theme of monotheism and the monotheistic classless society taken from Shari’ati, the Islamic-socialist trend in the thought of Ayatollah Taleqani, and the techniques of armed struggle of some Palestinian guerrilla organisations. This group constituted itself as a radical guerrilla group under the name of *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (People’s Holy Warriors).

Another religious development was, as I have mentioned before, the emergence in the 1970’s of a rapidly growing conversion to *Shi’i* religious fervour among a newly urbanised population who had settled in the shantytowns ringing the major urban centres, notably Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz. These groups, which had a traditional upbringing in the provincial and rural areas, were among the most recent and the most unfortunate internal migrants. Hit by the recession of the late 1970’s, most of these migrants were much worse-off than the earlier migrants. As the rural areas were only of minor concern to urban-centred clerical authority, these groups had little religious knowledge prior to their moving to the cities. Once in the cities, marginalised and alienated as they were, they learnt that they had no hope of aspiring to the indulgent lifestyle of the upwardly mobile new middle-class.

These migrants therefore were well placed to identify with the *imaginary* of a miraculous emancipation by a religious utopia. Largely illiterate, they presented “little inclination towards the more abstract and arid branches of theology.” Most of these migrants, particularly the youth, were also eager for excitement and ecstasy. In the prosperity of the mid-1970s, some of them succeeded in securing a decent urban lifestyle. Other less fortunate ones were blinded by the attractions of outrageous urban entertainment and found consolation in audio-visual ecstasy, sexual laxity and intoxication. However, with the economic downturn of the late 1970s, and the rise of economic and psychological frustration, most of them turned to the religious radical propaganda.

They thus rapidly found affinity with the *Shi’i* militancy, which rejected the “evils” of the “sinful” lifestyle of the “arrogant infidels”. They formed a receptive audience for the militant *Shi’i ulama*, but remained marginal until the early days of 1978. Then with dramatic suddenness, they were massively mobilised against the *Pahlavi* regime by Ayatollah Khomeini. Ever since, these groups have developed a revolutionary, totalistic worldview with stress on religious solemnity, and have become intolerant of any deviation from what they regard the “righteous path of Islam”. The ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Islamic Revolutionary Committees, which were formed as revolutionary militias after the victory of the revolution, were filled by these men. Some of them even ascended to high political positions. These groups have been referred to as the “sans-culottes” of the Iranian Revolution.

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2. Muhammad Ali Raja’i was a protagonist of this trend. He worked his way up from peddling to become a teacher, and was destined to become the Prime Minister and then the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, only to be assassinated shortly afterwards.
In order to establish a reasonable basis for understanding the unexpected explosion of the revolution in Iran under religious leadership and the rapid disintegration of the monarchy, it is essential to discuss the role of the Islamic ideologues, who formulated the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. Here, I have selected for discussion three of these ideologues, Ali Shari’atī, Morteza Motahhari and Ruhollah Khomeini.1

**Shari’atī’s Revolutionary Interpretation of Shi’ism**

The influence of Shari’atī’s discourse on the Islamic Revolution is beyond doubt. As Hamid Dabashi has suggested, Shari’atī’s power lied in his belief in “the magic of the Shi’i collective mythology”, which he saw inherent in the charisma of the Shi’i Imams as well as in the Persian mystical tradition. For him, Hussein, the martyred Shi’i Imam, and Hallajj, the martyred Persian mystic, were two figures of frequent reference. Yet, Shari’atī’s references to these and other mythical, religious and historical figures such as Cane and Abel, Abraham and Hajar, Salman and Abu-Zar, and others were not made merely for mystical contemplation.2 Rather, he was seriously concerned with the re-interpretation of these figures into images of revolutionary inspiration to be used as models for social action at present time.

For example in the case of Mansur al-Hallajj, Shari’atī sought to extend Louis Massignon’s “ascetic mystical” reading of Hallajj in order to construct a “puritanical revolutionary” image of him.3 As Dabashi suggests, Hallajj’s asceticism, his self-denunciation and his mystical conviction became, in Shari’atī’s hands, quite adaptable to the promotion of his idea of political revolution. But it should be noted that Shari’atī’s fascination with Hallajj as a source of emulation was not as intense as Dabashi describes. He was, in fact, critical of the social weaknesses of Hallajj’s mysticism.

In his lecture entitled *Ravesh-e Shenakht-e Eslam* (The Method of Understanding Islam), Shari’atī, compared the personalities of Imam Hussein, the saint, Ibn-e Sina, the philosopher and Hallajj, the mystic. In describing Hallajj, he said: “And Mansur al-Hallajj is on fire; an individual on fire is not responsible for his actions. Why is Hallajj burning? Out of his love for God, he is holding his head in his hands running in the alleys of Baghdad, loudly crying: ‘break open this head of mine that has rebelled against me, and free me from this fire that is burning inside me. I am nothing. I am God’. Which means I do not exist; whatever there is, is God.” He then went on to say: “But suppose, for example, that there were 25 million people (referring to the population of Iran at the time) like Hallajj living in today’s Iran. Iran would then turn into a madhouse where everybody would be running the streets screaming: ‘kill me. I cannot bear this life any more. I have nothing. There is only God in me’.”4

**Shari’atī’s Contribution to the Islamic ideology**

Many of the secular Iranian intellectuals and activists of the 1970s, particularly the Marxist agitators of the Tudeh party and the Fada’iyan-e Khalq, tried

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1 In my discussion of these ideologues, I should acknowledge my debt to Hamid Dabashi’s text *Theology of Discontent*, which is thus far the most comprehensive study of “the ideological foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran”.

2 This is the case although Shari’atī was passionately devoted to philosophical and mystical contemplation as is evident from his *kevir* writings.


4 Shari’atī, A. *Ravesh-e Shenakht-e Eslam*, n.d., Mashhad, pp. 15-16
to undermine the originality of Shari’ati’s political thought. They, for example, despised Shari’ati’s references to Sartre and Fanon in describing the West as consciously trying to make the colonised people into “mindless imitators” of the West, who would provide markets for the capitalist goods. They portrayed these references as not based on genuine understanding of the Western philosophers. They thus claimed that Shari’ati’s formulations were politically backward looking, as those of Allama Muhammad-Hussein Tabataba’i, the apolitical philosopher of religion.

The reason for such views was the tendency of Shari’ati, and Tabataba’i for that matter, to question the simplistic understanding of the Western notions of “the government of the people, by the people and for the people”. To be sure, both Shari’ati and Tabataba’i believed that the ultimate source of law was God and not the people, and that Islam was neither merely democratic nor did it advocate communism. But contrary to the claims of the Marxist intellectuals, they understood God not as a tyrant whose interests were opposite of the interest of the people. Philosophically speaking, they understood God as the Haqiqat (Truth) and Haqq (Right); and therefore, they saw no difference between God and people’s interests. They believed in God’s edalat (justice), which was believed to be the ultimate guarantor of redressing the injustices done by the man-made institutions. In this sense, they proclaimed that even the most popular man-made institutions might do injustice to the people, and therefore could not guarantee the institution of true justice.

The understanding of politics, which call for an absolute trust in goodness of the human agency, and the tendency to relegate evil to the enemy, have long faced criticism. It is hardly acceptable that the misgivings about the over-optimistic understandings of politics from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Nietzsche should mean these political philosophers have been backward looking. Like their philosophical predecessors, in their political positioning, Shari’atis and Tabataba’is of our time were reacting to the fact that the banner of democracy raised by the West in former colonies in the post-colonial period did not mean nearly the same as what it had meant in the West. They observed the daily struggle of the people of the former colonies against a cruel and selfish face of the Western democracy, loaded with hypocrisy. Shari’ati and Tabataba’i were expressing the true popular feelings when they compared the social outcome of the plunder of the Western democracy in Iran to the outcome of the brutalities of Alexander, the Great, and Genghiz Khan.

The difference of Shari’ati’s philosophy to that of the leftist Western intellectuals like Sartre was similar in many ways to the difference between the religious and irreligious existentialists. In his religious philosophy, Shari’ati was more like Kierkegaard and Heidegger than Marx and Sartre. Although in his political attitude, he resembled the two latter thinkers. Indeed throughout his works, especially in his writings and lectures, such as Irfan, Barabari, Azadi (Mysticism, Equality and Freedom) and Bazgasht be Khishtan (Return to Self), he had frequent references to philosophers like Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Whereas, in his more explicitly political works such as Che Bayad Kard (What Is to Be Done) and Khodsazi-e Enghelabi (Revolutionary Construction of the Self), he had more references to Marx and socialist existentialists like Sartre.

As Fischer and others such as Akhavi, Abrahamian, Algar, Arjomand and Dabashi have noted, Shari’ati called for a rethinking of the message of Islam as an essentially social and political message. He saw himself both as a modern political revolutionary, such as Lenin and Fanon, and as a religious reformer, such as Luther and Calvin. At times, he presented Islam in “sociological” rather than “metaphysical”
terms. At other times, he saw Islam suffering from a condition similar to “medieval Catholicism”, and hence in need of a “Protestant Reformation”.¹

As Fischer has noted, Shari’ati offered “a linguistic-phenomenological analysis of key Islamic terms”. For example, he defined the term ummat as a “dynamic” form of community in contrast with the concepts of nation, class, society, race and tribe, which he defined as “static”. In his definition of the term Imam, he also offered an innovative conceptualisation. In his definition, the Imam or leader is not “a hero created by the fantasies of men in their need to identify with a powerful figure.”² Rather, he is a revolutionary figure like Ali or Abu-Zar, who rises to leadership because of the purity of his soul, detachment from worldly attractions, commitment to the cause of the people and persistent struggle against injustice. Yet in his Eslamshenasi (the Study of Islam), Shari’ati tried to portray Islam in terms of the modern concepts of progress and democracy.³

As Boroujerdi has suggested, Shari’ati found affinity between the phenomenological notion that “concrete objects and subjects are only appearances of a primary reality” with the religious-mystical notion that “the primary reality is hidden, unknown and beyond one’s grasp.”⁴ He clearly stated that the language of modern philosophy and human sciences, despite its negation of religion and metaphysics, was the best language for understanding religion.

These apparent contradictions in Shari’ati’s writings, if properly understood, would turn out not to be contradictions at all, but dialectical aspects of the totality of his thought. In other words, his rejection of Western democracy did not mean that he rejected the idea of human freedom. Quite the contrary, as he has made it clear in his Mysticism, Equality, Freedom, he believed that the human freedom would neither be achieved through the democracy of Western capitalism, nor through human equality of the Western socialism. Rather, he formulated a utopia in which both of these endeared human goods might be realised via an individual and social endeavour to free one’s self and society from the symbols of corrupt wealth, power and hypocrisy (zar va zour va tazvir). This third way, he sought in a true understanding of irfan (gnocism/mysticism).

By irfan, Shari’ati did not mean to promote the conventional practice of certain mystical Sufi orders in Iran or Buddhist monks in Eastern Asia in retreating from worldly affairs and resorting to reclusive contemplation, although he did not reject the merit of such practice for spiritual self-discipline. He did not even view irfan as an Oriental production, but as an ingredient part of the essence and meaning of human development. Ironically, the god-fearing Shari’ati agreed with Darwin as far as the physical evolution of life form less to more complex forms was concerned, but he argued that the physical evolution of man from the primates was of a different order than the development of man as source of meaning.⁵ He thus defined irfan in terms of a “primitive feeling” that marks the departure of humanity from animal world, a feeling that had been manifested in a “mysterious relationship” between human beings and “sacred symbols” or objects of worship from the very beginning. For Shari’ati, irfan is in general terms “the inner feeling of anxiety in human beings in the material world”, which had found philosophical expression in the “Eastern

¹ Fischer, M. 1980, p.165
² Fischer, M. 1980, p. 166
³ Cited in Ibid, pp. 166-167
⁴ Boroujerdi, M. 1996, p. 107
⁵ Shari’ati, A. Irfan, Barabari, Azadi, Husseiniyyeh Ershad,, Tehran, (n.d.) p. 4
According to Shari'ati, the inner anxiety and tension is an inherently human phenomenon arising from impossibility of full satisfaction of human beings in the natural world. Hence, the essential “alienation” of man from the world and the “nostalgia” for a world beyond in order to fulfil his spiritual needs that cannot be satisfied in this world. In this sense, the material progress of man does not diminish his “solitude” and “strangeness” in this world. On the contrary, the more man gains mastery over nature, the more he becomes alienated from it, and in order to escape this alienation, he turns to a world that is not here, a world that is “absent” and “concealed”, and by that virtue “mystical”. In short, for Shari’ati, the nature of man is essentially mystical, and irfan or mysticism is the human way for discovering and understanding the concealed world to which man tries to connect himself. Shari’ati even attributes the human quest for progress to the mystical nature of man, which underlies his discontent with what is known to him, and his dynamism to discover the unknown. In this vein, Shari’ati concludes that contrary to materialist views that equate mysticism with social stagnation and decadence, the elimination of mystical tendencies in man would abort his dynamism and repress his desire for a progressive movement.

Shari’ati’s understanding of irfan also put him in opposition to the conventional understandings of religion, particularly that of the Shi’i establishment in Iran. In affinity with the tradition of Islamic philosophical mysticism, he argued that beyond the moral and legal codes of religious dogma, all religions had a common mystical bond. For him, the variation in religions, “Eastern or Western, monotheistic or polytheistic”, did not affect this mystical bond, but only reflected the “evolutionary development” of this generic essence. He therefore concluded that the degree of sophistication of a religion is determined by the “advancement” of the mystical feelings in its believers, and that the more advanced human beings in this sense were those who expressed a stronger measure of discontent with the status quo. He thus criticised the conservative religious establishment in reducing religion and irfan to a set of “superstitious” practices and an instrument for “legitimation of the ruling class”, which had thus blocked “the progress of free human spirit.”

Shari’ati’s understanding of irfan is a modern interpretation of the tradition of Islamic philosophical mysticism whereby alternative interpretations of sacred texts and events created the possibility of intellectual and social dissent against the dominant religious and political establishments. Shari’ati appealed to the spirit of mysticism in the tradition of the medieval mystic Mansur al-Hallajj, which was epitomised in his cry of An-al-Haqq (I am God), and which led to his takflir (being accused of blasphemy) and hanging at the behest of the official religious establishment. He thus discarded the institutional forms of mysticism in various Sufi orders and orthodox versions of religion. His appeal was thus to the revolutionary spirit of irfan in order to empower modern Iranians by means of novel interpretations of the traditions to which they belonged. He was particularly concerned with empowering the youth in confrontation with both, the Western revolutionary ideologies, which he considered inauthentic and alien, and the established religious

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1 Ibid, p. 5
2 Ibid, p. 6
3 Ibid, pp. 6-7
4 Ibid, p. 7
5 Ibid, p. 9
authority and conventional religious practices, which he considered as bankrupt and corrupt.

Shari’ati referred to irfan in the context of Iran as a modern Third World society, which was in the grip of modern political, social, economic and cultural problems of the post-colonial period. He tried to use irfan as an ideology of dissent, which would enable the Iranian youth to overcome the sense of inferiority that they felt due to the poor economic and political position of Iran in the modern world. In the tradition of mysticism, poverty was considered a virtue, and the ultimate achievement of a mystic was to empty himself from his ego so that he could be filled with God. Shari’ati interpreted these concepts in a way to encourage Iranians to turn their material poverty and weakness into spiritual dignity and pride. The new Islamic identity that he preached would be created through “the submission of the people to God” in order to rebel against all other authorities and systems of oppression.

Shari’ati said: “In Islam, there is a conflictual relationship between man and God, which consists of negation and affirmation, total annihilation of the ego before God in order to gain a godly power in the material world.” Shari’ati portrayed Imam Ali as an example of a true aref (mystic). He described Ali as a soul full of anxiety and discontent with the miserable condition of material life, an anxiety that created in him an insatiable love for a world beyond this. Yet this love that pushed Ali toward a world that seemed all too subjective, turned him in the “objective” world into a socially and politically conscious individual who was concerned with the plight of the poor, the humble and the disinherited.

Yet, as Fischer has suggested, Shari’ati failed to provide a bridge between Islam and the secular thought of the West, and as such “reinforced isolation and increased the possibilities for political demagoguery rather than knowledgeable self-reliance”. Nonetheless, such critique should remain qualified and not be reduced to the type of criticisms, which have held Nietzsche responsible for the demagogic abuse and distortion of his thought by the Nazi propaganda.

Shari’ati also made a clear political miscalculation in thinking that one should nostalgically search for the leaders of the forthcoming revolution beyond the official religious establishment and the secular intellectual circles, among the ordinary masses. Fischer is right to criticise Shari’ati for his intransigent belief that the Iranian intellectuals were fully assimilated by the West, and as such totally incapacitated in making any contribution to the revolution. Shari’ati was also obviously wrong in insisting on the assumption that the clerical establishment had totally exhausted its potentials to provide leadership for a modern revolutionary movement.

Selective Invocation of Traditions

In his treatment of Shari’ati’s dedication to a revolutionary cause, Dabashi suggests that Shari’ati resorted to Shi’i Islam as a political ideology because he had witnessed the failure of the radical secular ideologies in Iran and other Islamic countries. Shari’ati thus recognised “the fundamental problem of introducing a secular political ideology into a religious world” and, at the same time, aimed at mobilising “the masses for political ends that the very secular ideology had articulated.” According to Dabashi: “Shari’ati sought to achieve his revolutionary ends through the same ancient

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1 Ibid, pp. 30-31
2 Ibid, pp. 31-32
tradition that other secular ideologies considered as the opium of the masses. To achieve this, he had to reconstruct, single-handedly, the entire history and ideology of Islam.

However, the emphasis on the importance of Shari'ati's political agenda should not cause losing sight of the activist core of the Shi'i political philosophy. Therefore, Shari'ati did not need to reconstruct the whole Shi'i history to promote it as a political ideology. Others before him, in the Islamic world, had already sought to invoke the revolutionary spirit of Islam in general, and Shi'ism in particular. Seyyed Jamal-ad-Din Asadabadi, Muhammad Iqbal, and Muhammad Abduh were only recent examples of this trend. Yet, Shari'ati possessed a rare creative capacity, which contributed to the production of a novel understanding of religion in the context of the interaction of the existing Shi'i Islamic traditions with modernity.

What should be understood is that Shari'ati neither reinvented Shi'ism, nor did he resort to a pragmatic copying of his predecessors. This way of thinking leads to the assumptions, made by many analysts, that Khomeini's revolutionary reading of Islam had to be understood in turn as a pragmatic copy of Shari'ati's understanding of the modern political situation in Iran. It is true that pragmatic considerations have had a role in the formation of new ideas out of the old ideas. But reducing the imaginative creation of new interpretations of past traditions to one or a few does not explain the spontaneous appeal of these new readings to the people. Nor does it explain why many other interpretations have not been successful in touching a common cord with the people.

It is more sensible to suggest that the invocations of the past traditions are selective, due to the fact that certain traditions have gained certain qualities and others have not. Moreover, new interpretations must have been able to prove their own validity and meaningfulness in the context of the traditions in order to be embraced by the people on a massive scale. Simple imitation of others would not have made for the charisma of leaders like Khomeini and Shari'ati. Nor should it be lost to the observer that Shari'ati did not turn to Islam mainly due to the failure of other rather secular political ideologies. Dabashi's assumption that Shari'ati and his mentor Al-e Ahmad turned to Islam simply due to the failures of leftist ideologies in simplistic. It is a gross understatement that undermines the underlying influence of Shi'i Islamic traditions on people like Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati, which had roots in their environment of upbringing and outpoured in specific conditions. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain why many other Iranian leftist political activists did not turn away from their secular convictions, nor why they did not converted to the Islamic ideology, even after the failure of the radical leftist ideologies in Iran and in the world.

In confusing the problem of religious belonging with political pragmatism, Dabashi in fact turns away from his own earlier arguments about the roots of religious convictions in the psychical operations of the collective unconscious. For Shari'ati, and Al-e Ahmad for that matter, Shi'ism was in truth a comprehensive ideology of revolution, but had been turned into a collection of sermons and prayers in the hands of the conservative official clergy. Its revolutionary spirit was then to be revived through a religious renaissance.

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1 Dabashi, H. 1993, p. 110
2 Jalal Al-e Ahmad was an author and activist who popularised the concept of Gharbzadegi (Westoxication) in his critique of obsessive imitation of everything Western in the 1960s. He was a member of the Tudeh Party before turning into a staunch advocate of the political authority of Shi'i Islam. He wrote extensively in the criticism of Western-oriented secular intellectuals and the political meaningfulness of Islamic history, symbolism and rituals. Al-e Ahmad's account of his pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) was an early contribution to modern Shi'i political discourse, which powerfully demonstrated the intertwining of religious symbolism, spiritual ecstasy and political power.
Yet, it was not only for Shari’ati and Al-e Ahmad that there was in Shi‘ism a “built-in mechanism of ideological preparation” for a “political revolution”. This was the case for many other mystics, philosophers and social reformers since the medieval time. As Dabashi himself acknowledges, the symbolic structures for creation of new political ideologies were already there “in people’s collective imaginations and shared sensibilities.”

The Responsibility of Being a Shi‘i

In his Tashayyo‘e Alavi and Tashayyo‘e Safavi (the Alavid Shi‘ism and the Safavid Shi‘ism), Shari‘ati set out to present his revolutionary reading of Shi‘ism in terms of the revival of the Shi‘i faith in association with the time of Imam Ali. He did this with the intent of distinguishing Ali’s Shi‘ism from the Shi‘ism that dominated Iran since the Safavid period, which for Shari‘ati, meant the rise of a corrupt official religious establishment, whose task it was to provide religious legitimacy for the Safavid dynastic rule in Iran. He thus embarked on a radical re-interpretation of the tenets of the faith, such as the imamat (the right of the twelve Shi‘i Imams to the leadership of the Muslim community), gheybat (the period of the disappearance of the twelfth Imam before his eventual return), etc.

However, Shari‘ati did not empty these concepts totally from their traditional content. He still emphasised on the traditional meanings of etrat (the originality of the Prophet’s household) and esmat (the purity of the innocent Imams) against non-believers, but he extended these concepts in quite logical ways to adapt them for use in the new social and political environment. In his Che Bayad Kard? (What Is to Be Done?), he began to elevate the position of those, who would engage in asceticism, self-denial, contemplation and education for the purposes of the Islamic renaissance, close to the position of saints.

Also, in his Mas‘ouliyyat Shi‘i Boudan (the Responsibility of being a Shi‘i), Shari‘ati, offered a new meaning of the concept of gheybat, which would free it from interpretations that rendered it as a “passive expectation” (entezar-e manfi) whereby present political and social responsibilities would be given up. He particularly emphasised the responsibility of the people of knowledge, alluding to the ulama, during the gheybat to continue the true path of the Prophet and the Imams. He also offered a creative interpretation of the ijtihad (the authority to derive updated rulings out of the Islamic traditions). He said: “The ijtihad is the free research by the responsible researcher in order to make it possible for the people to better understand the new ideas; and in order to provide new solutions to address the needs of the time and necessities of the leadership of the society on the basis of the faith.”

How to Be?

As Dabashi has noted: “Shari‘ati consciously believed and propagated the idea that his version of Islam, the true Islam, the Islam that was there but forgotten or never learned, was different from and opposed to the historically received Islam.” Hence, he set out to attack the whole Shi‘i establishment as outmoded, concerning itself with virtuosity while forgetting the revolutionary message of the faith. He did not advocate the return to a religion that was concerned only with individual purity or transcendence. Rather,

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1 Dabashi, H. 1993, p. 111
2 Shari‘ati, A. The Responsibility of Being a Shi‘i, Mahhad, n.d., p. 21
3 Dabashi, H. 1993, p. 113
he preached the revival of Islam as a new collective consciousness, which would preserve its imaginary connections with past, but would strive to achieve a collective utopia, a utopia where “freedom”, “equality” and “irfan” (mysticism), were the hallmarks.

Even in the tradition of irfan, Shari’ati sought a path to collective salvation. This does not mean that he rejected individual transcendental elevations. His writings on the kevir (sand deserts of central Iran) - which comprise a large part of his corpus - involved a deep engagement with individual contemplative spirituality, which he said brought him closer to his soul. But, as a socially and politically concerned individual, suffering from the material, cultural and spiritual poverty that bemoaned the Islamic lands, he found himself an advocate of the disinherited. He felt that he had a social responsibility to educate the young to enable them to have a direction and a commitment in life, an ideological conviction that would make them the builders of a better future for the disinherited of their land.

Thus, Shari’ati’s political activity was carried out almost entirely as a teacher and an educator delivering lectures to his young, enthusiastic and growing audience. In his lecture entitled How to Be? he advocated an “ummi” (communitarian) Islam, a collective conviction that is “constructive and creative”; a “social-revolutionary ideology” that changes the social relations and environment. The Islam he advocated was not a civilisation, a form of political power or a scientific culture. It was, as he put it: “a human resurgence flowing from deep-inside the conscience of the people; a mental-spiritual revolution that becomes a new divine emergence.”

Shari’ati was also concerned with Islam as a global force of good that must confront the forces of evil, namely the colonialism and the world imperialism. He explicitly called for the construction of an “Islamic ideology” that would reconstitute the religious thought as an alternative to the existing radical secular ideologies, particularly Marxism. He also wanted to inspire ordinary people to gain religious revolutionary consciousness first hand, and as such free themselves from the need for the Shi’i priesthood. This was a position that he intensely advocated and consequently brought him in discord with even the revolutionary ulama, such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Motahhari, who were politically very close to him.

Mystical Love: A Revolutionary Reading of Symbolic Structures

More than anything, Shari’ati used his oratory skill and common-sense logic to read revolutionary meanings in the Shi’i texts, symbolic structures and rituals. He insisted that the sacred texts such the Qur’an and the hadith must be interpreted to make sense in the context of the “direction” of the “true path”. Otherwise, he said: “The Qur’an without a direction will become meaningless, as will the traditions”. “Direction”, in this context, was not for Shari’ati the direction of fiqh, which he prematurely considered to be non-ideological and hence outmoded and conservative. He saw the Islamic ideology as a movement in the “direction” of tackling the crisis of modernity.

He said: “One who thinks in terms of a logical, humane and progressive Shi’i Islam, must know what is his/her direction with respect to colonialism, Marxist ideology, capitalism, bureaucracy, automation, commercialisation of human beings, the sexual liberation, the modern civilisation, etc.” As a means to deal with the problems of modernity, he

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1 Shari’ati, A. The Revolutionary Constitution of the Self, Husseiniyyeh Ershad, Tehran, n.d., pp. 17-18
2 Ibid, p. 34
3 Ibid, p. 41
rejected both, the Western nihilism and Oriental obsession with private piety and individual asceticism. Instead, he advocated the construction of an Islamic ideology, which would protect its adherents against the power of the Western civilisation, the Marxist ideology and the nationalist and racist tendencies.

Shari'ati used the metaphor of "fire" to reintroduce the "mystical love" (eshq-e infani) into modern Shi'i political discourse. Accordingly, the mystical love is a fire that throughout human history, "has impregnated cultures, moral values, human creativity and revolutionary movements" with "meaning" and "direction"; a fire that "exists within all religions and philosophies, and inspires all nationalisms"; an eternal feeling that "offers a divine reading of the world", a feeling that has "pre-existed ownership and social classes".

Struggle for justice was also high on Shari'ati's agenda for a "revolutionary constitution of the Self". For him, this was a struggle for the elimination of discriminations and against oppression and tyranny. He criticised the evolutionary project of Enlightenment and its claim to Truth as responsible for the rise of scientific justification of three human evils: the domination of the weak by the strong, the decline of real human freedom, and the repression of the human capacity for irfan.

A Teacher's Recipe for the Revolutionary Constitution of the Self

As a teacher, Shari'ati urged his students to learn not for utilitarian purposes, but for the purpose of reconstituting their selves in preparation for an Islamic revolution. This construction of the self involved a radical reconstitution of an Iranian, Islamic identity vis-à-vis the West, which he described as the dominant civilisation. But he did not advocate any form of "prejudicial violence" against the West. Rather, he believed that the only means of resistance against the Western domination is to know both oneself and the other. Just as, he believed, the present Western superiority over the East came from both its knowledge of the East and its knowledge of itself.

Shari'ati said: "The medieval Europe was a cultural colony of the Islamic East, and only after feeding on the Eastern civilisation learned how to stand against it. It even came to know its own religion and philosophy through the Muslim philosophers like Ibn-e Sina (Avecinna) and Ibn-e Rushd (Averros). (And) it returned to itself, and began the Renaissance movement, which was a rebirth, that is a return to the golden age of the ancient Greece." He therefore called for a deep and rich understanding of the West as a means for a conscious and responsible return to self and for a cultural renaissance in Iran.

As such, Shari'ati introduced a list of reading to his students that consisted of two main elements: first, the general Western history, and second, the Western history of ideas. In the Revolutionary Constitution of the Self, he listed in detail the areas and lines of reading he would like to see his audience to pursue. His list of reading included not only believers but also non-believers. From Luther and Calvin to Marx

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1 Ibid, pp. 42-43
2 Ibid, p. 47
3 Ibid, p. 183
4 Ibid, pp. 183-184; Shari'ati's list of reading included: 1) The history of Renaissance with an emphasis on its economic roots, the growth of cities, the rise of trade and its relationship with the Islamic East. 2) The history of the Protestant Movement, the ideas of Luther and Calvin and their influence on industrial civilisation, scientific and material development in Europe and the decline in the medieval thought. 3) The ideas of the main figures of the modern European philosophy, such as Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Pascal, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Nietzsche, Darwin, Spangler, Schiller, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, etc. 4) The history of the social movements and the ideas of the social and political thinkers in the West and in the East, such as the French Revolution, the industrial revolution, the Russian Revolution, the anarchist movement, the social democratic movement, Saint Simon, Prouhon, Marx, Mill, Durkheim, Mead and Fromm.
and Nietzsche to Kierkegaard and Bergson to Sartre and Fromm were included in this list. Nor did he neglect the Eastern tradition, recommending the reading of the teachings of Lao Tsu and Confucius, as well as the texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Mitraism, Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism and Mazdakism. As such, Shari’ati’s Islamic ideology appealed not only to the young religious intellectuals, but also to some extent to the secular intellectuals.

The Utopia of a God-Worshipping Socialist

No doubt, Shari’ati was influenced by Marxism and Western existentialist philosophies through his higher education in France. As such, he advocated the cause of free will against the call of the traditional religion for pre-destination, and hence provided a theology of political responsibility. For him, this was an essential reformulation of the faith in order to combat what he called, following Al-e Ahmad, cultural alienation and Westoxication.

To ensure his followers of his Islamic convictions against those who criticised him as a Western-educated, Marxist or existentialist, he expressed his views completely in religious terms, invoking the religious symbols, texts and events, as well as the symbolism of rituals. His symbolic philosophy of history was constructed on a progression of history from the murderous confrontation of Cain and Abel to a modern “universal revolution”. This progressive history went right through the era of Prophets (Nabovvat), the period of the infallible Imams (Imamat), and the period of the greater Occultation (Gheybat), leading to a “universal revolution” in the modern time. His dialectical philosophy was based on the incessant confrontation between the forces of good and evil, reminiscent of the Manichaean dualism; and his utopia portrayed the formation of the ummat as a classless society inhabited by the “perfect man” (ensan-e kamel).

Shari’ati’s monotheism (towhid), entailed an ethics of sacrificing self-interest for the sake of human values. The ritual of hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) was for him an example of this unity in diversity. For Shari’ati, as Dabashi explains: “Between the two opposing ideals of individualism and socialism, the hajj pilgrimage objectifies an ideal that supersedes the evils of both these extremes. In this ideal state, the divine attributes are expostulated in the ‘I’ of the individuals. Realisation of these Divine attributes in the ‘I’ of individuals, as objectified in the hajj ceremonies, precludes the possibility of any sacrifice of one for all or all for one. Opposing this ‘I’, which is the true ‘I’ and entails potential godly virtues, are ‘I’s fabricated by race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, family, guild, etc.”

Shari’ati also tried to find in the Islamic tradition a concept equivalent to socialism, which would enable him to rival Marxism in its own terms. He therefore popularised Abu-Zar, a disciple of the Prophet, as a “God-worshipping socialist” in a play by the same title. He introduced Abu-Zar as a man of virtue and strong faith who was prepared to confront the rich and powerful in defence of the rights and equality of the downtrodden. Imam Ali’s total justice was also epitomised as a true egalitarian tradition whose existence in Islam predated the Western socialist ideas. After all, Abu Zar was trained in Ali’s school.

Shari’ati also criticised the Marxist analyses that advocated a socialist revolution in Iran, particularly those of the Tudeh Party. In response to the communist agitation, he retorted that the Iranian society differed from the industrial societies of
the West. Borrowing the concept of the “Asiatic mode of production” from Marx himself, he proposed that Iran was characterised mainly by an “Asiatic mode of production”, and thus it was not in need of a socialist or bourgeois revolution, but a renaissance and a religious reformation.¹

Dabashi’s reading of Shari’ati is by far the most comprehensive and most erudite study of the ideas of this revolutionary ideologue. But his analysis is at times burdened by a pre-ordained belief that Shari’ati was mainly concerned with the synthesis of the Western ideas of revolution with the Shi’i symbolic structures. Whereas, Shari’ati’s work could be better conceptualised as the struggle of an idealist socialist, who attempted to bring about human salvation via a socialism of his own making in rivalry with the Western socialism. It was in this context that he turned the religious concept of monotheism into “a worldview more scientific than materialism” in order to provide an alternative “socialist utopia”, namely the “jame’e-ye bi-tabaqey-e towhidi” (the classless, monotheistic society).² It is also in this context that one could speak, as Dabashi does, about Shari’ati’s effort to turn faith into “human progress”, martyrdom into “the responsibility to keep the flame of struggle alive”, and the notion of waiting for the Mahdi into “the source of continuity of a revolutionary movement.”³

In his study of Shari’ati, Dabashi mentions but does not attempt to seriously tackle the notion of irfan in Shari’ati’s thought, which is the key to the originality of his thought. Through the introduction of the concept of irfan, Shari’ati intersected an indigenous concept into the global struggle to address the problems arising from the crisis of modernity. Shari’ati’s thought, in this sense, was an original contribution, which went beyond the Iranian context in order to tackle the wider global cultural conflicts. It has been reasserted forcefully in various forms in the post-revolution and particularly post-Khomeini political discourses in Iran. (See Chapter 8 for more detail.)

The Dream of an Islamic Renaissance

One of the significant features of the development of political thought in Iran was that it did not involve a religious reformation or renaissance. Bayat was reaffirming this point when she noted that the politicisation of religion in Iran occurred almost exclusively in the domain of the turbaned ulama. This view has been shaped around the idea that the development of philosophical thought, as it occurred in Europe after the Renaissance and Reformation, did not occur in Iran. Accordingly, the European Renaissance and the Christian Reformation took the West to what was imagined to be the true source of the Western thought - that is the Greek philosophy - in order to find a shape or a contour for its own projection into the future. On the basis of this understanding, in Iran this meaningful connection with the past was lacking. That is to say that in Iran modern philosophical thought, in its Western sense, did not develop; simply because there occurred no renaissance or religious reformation. Shari’ati’s political philosophy is best understood in this light.

Shari’ati was a strong advocate of an Islamic renaissance. In his Return to Self and other works like Mysticism, Freedom and Equality, What is to be Done? and the Revolutionary Constitution of the Self, he consistently argued for such a religious renaissance and the development of a modern philosophical discourse based on a

¹ Dabashi, H. 1993, p. 137
² Ibid, p. 143
³ Ibid, pp. 143-144
reformed Islam. In his the Responsibility of Being a Shi'i, he offered more arguments about the specific shape of the ideology that was to guide this reformation. In this, he himself played the role of a reformer, philosopher and ideologue combining the roles of Luther, Heidegger and Sartre. His philosophy, as mentioned earlier reflected a strong existential, socialist and to a lesser extent liberal bent. His ideology might yet serve as a rich source for the Islamic renaissance, which has begun with the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Shari'ati's understanding of Shi'ism is a novel understanding not in the sense that it was totally new, but in the sense that it was the first clear formulation of an action plan to implement a new interpretation of Shi'ism. His interpretation placed Shi'ism at the level of something like Protestantism without its dogmatic aspects; a system of thought that combined religious belief and philosophical analysis; a school of thought that wanted to achieve religious reformation and enlightenment simultaneously.

Maktab-e Tashayo'a, or Shi'i school of thought, was what provided for Shari'ati the cultural environment within which a rebirth of a new Islam was possible. This rebirth, he believed, would be necessary for the creation of a strong society, and would proudly stand as a source of political power in the international arena. Shari'ati’s concern was, in this sense, a global one; it criticised the foundations of the global dominance of the West. As such, he sided, in many aspects, with existentialist and socialist philosophers of the West in exposing the crisis of modernity. But at the same time, he criticised Western philosophers as part of the crisis-ridden modernity and, in the last analysis, as its apologists.

Shari'ati resented the uncritical adoption of Western ideologies of Marxism and liberalism by Iranian secular intellectuals, which he blamed for the disconnection of these intellectuals from the masses. He also despised the lack of regard of the “Westoxicated” intellectuals for metaphysics and mysticism, which he considered as the essence of civilisation. But at the same time, he was critical of the “obscurantism” of the Shi'i establishment for its political acquiescence and its failure to acknowledge the tremendous advancement of science and technology in the modern time. He thus advocated a doctrinal and institutional restructuring of orthodox Shi'ism on the model of Renaissance, Christian Reformation and modern scientific breakthroughs. Influenced by modern human sciences, he argued that the Islamic thought should be freed from the scholastic specialisation and organised into a systematic body of responsible knowledge about politics and society, which would make social and political awareness an essential component of government.

Shari'ati believed that the traditionalist Shi'i ulama were incapable of offering the leadership and organisation necessary for such a radical change in religious thought and practice. By turning Shi'i Islam into a modern political ideology, he meant to open the possibility for the transfer of religious leadership from the traditionalist ulama to a new generation of modern committed Muslim intellectuals, who would be able to offer new interpretations of the sacred texts and traditions fit to tackle the modern responsibilities of religion. He thus look forward to the emergence of a class of committed intellectuals, who were neither mere scientists with the knowledge of “facts” or things as they are, nor converts to the old and outmoded religious convictions. Rather, they would be a group of responsible Muslim ideologues who were prepared to speak of “truth” or things as they should be.¹

¹ Cited in Boroujerdi, M. 1996, p. 111
Shari’atī criticised the Iranian intellectuals who in their “intoxication” with the Western pre-eminence had lost their “identity”, and had become in his word “assimilé”. For him, these intellectuals had stopped short of even understanding the Western self-criticism. Shari’atī was therefore a representative of the attempt of the Islamic thinkers to project an authentic Islamic identity that would defy the sense of humiliation felt by the Muslims as a result of the Western cultural, scientific and technological superiority. This sense of humiliation was so strong that it had become the principle motivator of major political upheavals in the Iranian history and in this respect had overshadowed economic problems.

The list of reading given by Shar’atī to his intellectual audiences was demonstrative of the degree of emphasis he placed on the enhancement of knowledge of the modern Western philosophy. As mentioned earlier, he also encouraged the reading of Indian and other non-Islamic religious and philosophical writings of the East, such as the Upanishads, in order to become better prepared for a profound understanding of the Qur’ān and other the Islamic sacred and canonical texts. And more importantly, he urged young intellectuals to familiarise themselves with irfan (mysticism) as a source of emancipation and egalitarianism, and as an element of proud resistance against the Western concepts of freedom and equality. He held the view that the Western concept of freedom must be rid of capitalist appropriation, as the concept of equality must be freed from Marxist domination.

Upon the structure of his Shi‘i school of thought, Shari’atī then built his utopia of an Islamic Revolution and the society it would bring about. For him, such a revolution must be mainly concerned with building an authentic Islamic nation-State, ummat, which would be truly sovereign, and would be able to stand at an equal if not superior footing with the West in terms of cultural and political exchange. But, as mentioned earlier, he was never concerned with a military confrontation with the West in order to build this powerful nation-State.

To be sure, Shari’atī believed that military strength was an important factor in the early Islam in enabling the propagation of the true message of the faith, as it was today in the superiority of the West. But, in the tradition of the true bearers of Persian culture, he was basically concerned with knowledge as the ultimate guarantor of political power. He thus was concerned with establishing a strong State whose strength was demonstrated in its stability, resilience and tolerance based on the accumulation of knowledge and inspired by an authentic ideology and worldview. Such a system would find an existence of its own, and while being flexible would not be changing its entire character due to instability; and hence it would not need to be suppressive and intolerant.

In his Political Order in Changing Societies, Samuel Huntington has also located the source of the strength of the Western democratic States in their institutional capacity not to be manipulated by individual politicians and interest groups, while being able to allow change and accommodate non-conforming creativities. Shari’atī, an acute observer of his time, also dreamed of a State system with structural ability and enough flexibility to accommodate dissent and change, but strong enough not to allow the fundamental principles of lawful institutions to be undermined. For him, every society had a need for an ideological structure or worldview as the backbone of its stability and resilience. According to Shari’atī, Western democracies had achieved this through the reformation of Catholicism,
development of modern philosophy, and the ascendancy of Enlightenment; whereas the Islamic world had to address this need in its own way, not by imitation of the West, but by returning to its own "authentic self".

Shari’ati’s concept of “return to self” have undoubtedly been influenced by Fanon’s notion of “return of the oppressed”, but as Boroujerdi has suggested, Shari’ati differed from Fanon in his religious tone.¹ His “return to self” was, in this sense, a new version of Al-Ahmad’s quest for “authenticity”. In his quest, Shari’ati was competing with other native contesting claims to authenticity. His “return to self” was competing with at least for rival claims to authenticity: the secular nationalists’ quest for return to pre-Islamic glory, the liberal contention for the authenticity of the modern notions of freedom and democracy, the Marxist struggle to restore the power of the oppressed, and the effort of the conservative clerics to return to religious traditionalism.

According to Boroujerdi, Shari’ati’s quest for religious authenticity was “deceptive and intellectually flawed”, because it gave the impression of a return to past traditions, whereas it was in fact a discourse of present, which offered an “instrumentalist view of the role of religion in politics.”² In this view, Shari’ati’s rejection of the West was not that of “an Islamic mystic”, which he would like to be presented as, but that of “a disillusioned Western-educated intellectual”, who was trying “to inject aspects of modernity into the traditional socio-religious relations and value systems of Iranian society.”³ Boroujerdi has also criticised Shari’ati for his “naivete in wanting to imitate the Protestant Reformation” in an “age of modernity and universal secularism.”⁴

Although these criticisms are valid in a rational sense, but they do not detract from the sincerity of Shari’ati’s quest to find a resolution to the problem of identity crisis in modern Iranian politics. Although, in his lifetime, Shari’ati failed to inspire more than a young militant following and little constructive political consequence, but his anticipation for a religiously inspired national identity that could resolve the problem of the encounter of Iran with modernity in a lasting manner may still be valid. To be sure, as Boroujerdi acknowledges, “Shari’ati deserves credit for heralding the notion that the lay intelligentsia is as capable and, perhaps, even more successful than the ulama in addressing the perennial questions of Islamic thought.”⁵

**Freedom: A Religious Feeling**

Shari’ati defined freedom as an originally religious feeling, inherent in the notion of salvation: a progressive freedom, which was not only liberation from certain limitations, but “a flourishing that frees human soul from the vicious circle of reincarnation.” He understood freedom as an inner revolution against the bondage of the “social self”. The outer expression of freedom, he believed, would occur through an Islamic revolution, which would come out of a spontaneous upsurge of an authentic struggle for freedom and resistance against the external relations of domination. He thus called on Muslim believers to engage in an struggle for freedom on two fronts against both the inner evils of avarice, arrogance and hypocrisy and the

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¹ Boroujerdi, M. 1996, p. 112
² Ibid, p. 113
³ Ibid, p. 114
⁴ Ibid, p. 115
⁵ Ibid, p. 115
external evils, namely the domineering West and the official religious establishments, which legitimised the despotic and arrogant States.

For Shari’ati, this authentic struggle for freedom would come about through a sudden change of heart or a kind of revelation, which would turn the younger generation upside down in terms of their understanding of their political and social responsibilities. He provided a detailed action plan for the younger generation for their self-construction. He criticised the types of freedom practised in the Western democracies, which were, to him, the foundation of the present consumer society. And, he saw the present mode of regulation of pleasure in the West as a grand conspiracy by ultra-national corporations for devouring the world. He insisted that big corporations were engaged in creating false cultures that reproduced the consumer society, and thus urged the Muslims to resist the lure and fascination of such a society. He urged them to go back to their own source of freedom and power, i.e. irfan.

Shari’ati’s philosophy is important in its creating a movement in Iran, which successfully addressed the serious issue of building a modern Iranian identity. The background of this movement had been shaped by attempts under the Shah to present the Iranian people with a modern image of the Iranian nation. The Shah had tried to constitute an imaginary of the Iranian modern identity, which would match the image of Iran as a modernising nation on the track of fast industrialisation and commercialisation. As I noted earlier, this imaginary identity borrowed heavily from the pre-Islamic Persian tradition, and hence had to resort to ancient mythical and religious ideas. Its main purpose was to build an ideology, which would provide a sense of purpose and meaning to the aspiring Iranian nation. But the Shah was not successful in selling this image to Iranians. People rejected his national imaginary and gathered around their national religion as the cornerstone of a new sense of nationality.¹

The Third Woman: An Alternative View of the Muslim Woman

Shari’ati was perhaps the first modern Muslim thinker to attempt to tackle the issue of gender in the Iranian society and politics in a serious manner. In his Fatima is Fatima, The Story of Hassan and Mahboubeh and the Expectation of the Modern Age of the Muslim Woman, he portrayed his view of the female in a modern Muslim society. In constructing his image of a modern Muslim woman, he naturally referred to the past Shi’i history and mythology to find models for the present and future. Fatima, Ali’s wife and Hussien’s mother, and her daughter Zeynab, were the symbols to be reinterpreted in order to provide this new image of women.

In conformance with his revolutionary ideology, his admiration of these figures as part of the etrat (the Prophet’s household) was not in the conventional form of eulogy for the sufferings of the ahl-al-beyt (members of the Prophet’s household). To be sure, Shari’ati still referred to the pains and sufferings inflicted upon Fatima and Zeynab by the enemies of the household of the Prophet. But he interpreted these sufferings as the moments of active and conscious resistance against social and political injustice.

¹ As noted by Mehdi Abedi, scholars such as Pour-Davoud had made a significant scholarly contribution to building a modern Iranian identity based on pre-Islamic traditions. This attempt at forging a modern ideology to legitimise the Iranian State under the Shah followed the Shah’s failure in presenting himself as a devout Muslim to the Iranian people. His first attempt involved going to the hajj pilgrimage and writing a book called Mission for My Country in which he presented himself as a kind of Messiah chosen by a popular Shi’i saint Abbas, the brother of Imam Hussein.
For Shari’ati, the resistance of Fatima and Zeynab against the repressive political authorities of their time was to be used as a model of social and political activism of women in all ages and all places. And it was in this context that he offered his interpretation of these figures as an alternative not only for modern Muslim women, but also for the women of the world in general, whom he thought were increasingly perverted and exploited by Western capitalism. He thus criticised both the “anti-woman” and “perverted” traditions of the Middle Ages in the Catholic West under the guise of religion, and “the claims to women’s freedom” made by the “bourgeois culture”.

Shari’ati was particularly concerned about the threat to the position of women by the notion of sexual liberation, which he thought was systematically advanced by Freudianism as a scientific view to reduce the “mysteries of the depth of human soul” to the “representations of repressed sexual desires”. He thus criticised the efforts of the secular Iranian intellectuals to uncover instances of repressed sexuality in the figures of Islamic mysticism such as Hafiz and Mowlavi. He believed that these intellectuals undermined the moments of “human genius, spirituality and resistance to oppression” in the writings of these great mystics by reducing them to the level of sexual desires.

Shari’ati considered the modern bourgeois culture not only as “a means of cultural colonisation of the East by the West”, but also as “a mode of exploitation of the East and West by a global power structure.” This mode of exploitation, he argued, was also evident in contemporary art in general, and in the film industry in particular, where violence and sex had become fundamental ingredients. According to Shari’ati, the conventional notion of sexual liberation, especially among modern Western women, thrived on the basis of the critique of “patriarchal prejudices”. But he added that the intent of bourgeoisie was not to free women from the inhumane patriarchal bondage, but to prepare them for the acceptance of “the insidious capitalist exploitation”.

Shari’ati then turned his attention to the Islamic societies where outmoded and repressive traditions reproduced and reasserted themselves under the guise of religion. He thus insisted that tradition and religion should be separated in order to identify the essence of religion apart from “the collection of ideas, tastes, feelings, and social and legal practices”, which were peculiar to a certain people of a certain historical period. In this vein, Shari’ati proceeded to suggest that “the old and restrictive traditions and practices” that repressed women in the name of Islam, “should be destroyed in order to build new traditions”, which emanated from the “essence of Islam”, but were compatible with the exigencies of time. For him, Fatima and Zeynab were the symbols of this eternal and ideal essence of Islam, whom if properly understood, could serve as models for true liberation of women. He identified in these figures the capacity of women as social and political leaders to create change not only in the situation of women, but also in the social relations of power.

Shari’ati was acutely aware that he was a man preaching on the rights of woman, and as such he also showed concern about the role of men with respect to

1 Shari’ati, A. *The Expectation of the Modern Age of the Muslim Woman*, a speech in Husseiniyyeh Ershad, Tehran, 1354/1975, pp. 10-11
2 Ibid, p. 12
3 Ibid, p. 13
4 Ibid, p. 15
5 Ibid, p. 17
6 Ibid, p. 18
7 Ibid, p. 20
women. He thus emphasised the essentiality of the recognition of the antimony of the Islamic faith with the superiority of men over women. In this context, he referred to the unconventional practice of the Prophet to appear meek before his wife and his bold move to accept a group of young women to take part in the battle of Honein as warfront nurses. He thus ridiculed the propensity among modern Iranian intellectuals to buy the Western notions of sexual liberation as progressive and to neglect their indigenous models for true liberation of women.

Shari’ati then went on to propose his alternative view of a liberated Muslim woman, as “the third woman” who would reject both the repressive traditions of the past and the exploitative practices of modernity. He thus argued: “This third woman is a woman who wants to make a choice, a woman who neither accepts her inherited image, nor the imported image that is being pushed down her throat... None of these images are truly Islamic. The first image belongs to the traditions of patriarchy and even slavery. And the second image, which comes from the West, is neither scientific, nor humane and nor liberating... To select a third image, the Muslim woman of today should take heed of the objective images of the Shi’i culture, which are more authentic than history and more concrete than scientific and jurisprudential arguments.”

In relating the stories about Fatima, he portrayed her as a woman who accepted to suffer during her lifetime for a human cause, “a woman who made her presence felt as a socially responsible and politically conscious person, engaged in a constant struggle to shape the destiny of her community, and who defended the integrity of her people against social injustices and perversions.” And he recounted Zeynab as a revolutionary political leader who denounced the legitimacy of the powerful Umayyad caliphate after the military defeat and the tragic death of her brother Hussein in the battle of Karbala. Shari’ati also offered numerous other examples of the traditions of social and political activity of women in the early Islamic period as models to be emulated by modern Muslim women.

And finally, Shari’ati tackled the sensitive issue of the veil or chador in the Islamic tradition. Here too, he tried painstakingly to differentiate between the pre-Islamic traditions of veiling women in Persia and Arabia and the essence of the Islamic concept of the veil. He thus insisted that the Islamic concept of the veil was to be understood as a means for the protection of the integrity and dignity of women, and that the variety of outward manifestations of the veil must be tolerated due to varying climatic, social and cultural conditions.

Yet despite his innovative ideas about women within the Islamic tradition, Shari’ati failed to deal with the concrete issues of women’s rights and particularly with the issue of sexual desire. His emphasis on the liberatory nature of Islamic politics opened up new possibilities for political empowerment of Muslim women. But his strictly moral view of gender politics, and his categorical pessimism about the Western culture, did not allow him to appreciate the real depth of modern quest for women’s rights and the connection between the notion of sexual liberation and power relations. He remained deeply sceptical about psychoanalytical insights into the question of sexuality and other attempts to give weight to the autonomous function of sexual desire in social and political relations. Instead, he remained convinced that Freudianism and the notion of sexual liberation were Western designs for the moral

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1 Ibid, pp. 24-26
2 Ibid, p. 28
3 Ibid, p. 29
4 Ibid, p. 32
5 Ibid, p. 36
corruption of women in general, and the perversion of true political liberation of women in particular.

Shari’ati thus remained obsessively confined within the constraint of a romantic attachment to the Islamic notion of chastity and failed to connect the demand for political freedom for Iranian women with wider global quest for women’s rights. As such, his views about the liberation of Iranian women suffered from the same particularism that limited his views about political liberation in Iran in general. He thus reinforced the isolation of Iranian women form the secular Western thought by his overemphasis on the particularity of Shi’ism as the only source for their inspiration for liberation. His referents for political and social emulation for Muslim Iranian women remained limited to the shadowy figures of the early Islam like Fatima and Zeynab, just as his only models for true liberation of men were limited to Ali and Hussein and other early Islamic heroes.

Ayatollah Motahhari: An Islamic Philosopher

Shari’ati’s challenge to the ideology of the Pahlavi State was the challenge of a lay intellectual, who however sincerely presented himself as a devout Muslim, was not recognised as such by his clerical peers. The resentment of the clergy towards Shari’ati, as mentioned before, was mainly due to his radical anti-clericalism and his call for exclusion of the ulama from political life. By contrast, Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari was the revolutionary ideologue favoured by the radical ulama.

Like Shari’ati, Motahhari embarked on a program of modernising Islam to make it fit to stand against the Western modernisation advocated by the State. His main contribution to Islamic modernism may have been his introduction of philosophy as an Islamic field of knowledge that would empower Muslim intellectuals, and would make them free from reliance on secular Western philosophies. In this sense, he did in the clerical domain what Shari’ati hoped to achieve outside the religious establishment.

In the 1950s, Motahhari enhanced his knowledge of Islamic philosophy by reading Avicenna, Mulla Sadra, and other Muslim philosophers of the past. He also read, mainly through secondary sources, Western philosophers like Hegel. During this period, he studied under the tutorship of Ayatollah Khomeini and Allama Tabataba’i. As a result of his vigorous work on Islamic philosophy, he offered a rigorous critique of the materialist philosophy in his writings. These included his extensive notes on Allamah Tabataba’i’s Osul-e Falsafeh va Ravesh-e Realism (Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism), as well as his lectures and books such as Elai-e Gerayesh be Madigari (The Reasons for Tendency to Materialism), Materialism dar Iran (Materialism in Iran), and Ashna’i ba Olum-e Eslami: Manteq va Falsafeh (An Introduction to Islamic Sciences: Logic and Philosophy).

As Dabashi has noted, Motahhari insisted that philosophy was not a “prerogative of the West” where he believed philosophy was “in decline”. Like Shari’ati, he recounted the debt of the Western philosophy to the wisdom of the East. Motahhari proclaimed that the ancient Greek philosophers learned much of their knowledge from the texts of the ancient “Eastern” scholars and mystics including Iranians, Arabs, Chinese and Indians. His defensive mode against the West, like many other Islamic modernists, was due to the threat to Islamic knowledge and culture that he perceived was coming from the Western secular ideologies and what he described as “the decadent Western culture”. He thus advocated the formation of an Islamic ideology based on the Islamic philosophy he had developed. “His ideological agenda
was targeted essentially towards a collective resuscitation of a general Islamic consciousness", which could confront the secular ideologies "without resorting to religious dogmatism". As such, Motahhari, while warning the Muslims against the Western threat, often praised a deeply religious and mystical side of the West, which he identified with progress, knowledge and science untainted with ethical and cultural degeneration.

Motahhari’s philosophy was essentially a rationalist religious philosophy, which treated various subjects such as, realism, idealism, knowledge, perception, existence, necessity, possibility, causality, actuality, time, unity, multiplicity, substance, etc. from the perspective of a believer. He therefore, like Shari’ati, wanted a dialogue with the West in a fair and level playing field where he claimed Islam and Iran could make significant moral, philosophical and cultural contributions.

**Fiction: A Source of Public Morality**

Another area of Motahhari’s contribution to advancement of the Islamic ideology was his use of the Islamic fiction in providing imaginary models for creative thinking to the Muslim youth in order to “protect” them against Western cultural influence. In 1960, he published a collection of ethical stories in the simple language of fable under the title *Dastan-e Rastan* (The Story of the Virtuous). These stories, which were extracted from the Qur’an and other religious canonical sources, mainly dealt with issues of public morality. Motahhari thus revived a collective memory that was meant to lead the believers out of the rising tendency of relegating ethics to the private sphere. By bringing these stories out of the obscurity and technicality of the “canonical texts”, which were mostly in Arabic, he made them accessible to the general Persian speaking public. As Dabashi has noted: "The narrative simplicity, the short and concise context, and the anecdotal discourse of these stories not only rendered them easily comprehensible, but also turned them into compelling components of a kind of common folklore."

The apparently apolitical language of these stories, and their appeal to the children and the youth, even broke the barrier of the official censorship by making it to public broadcasting on the State-run national radio. Also, the recitation of these stories by the local preachers in the prayer gatherings in the neighbourhood mosques made them accessible to the illiterate ordinary folks, who were unable to read.

The main characters of these stories were the Prophets, the Shi’i Imams and other saintly figures of the Shi’i history and mythology, and the locations of the events were mostly the Shi’i holy sites. The main storey lines were concerned with the superior ethics of these familiar figures; and their occurrence in sacred spaces of the Shi’i collective memory facilitated their visualisation. As such, they succeeded in producing a field of shared memory and an imaginary and yet real utopia that could be held out as a model of Shi’i history, and could be used for construction of an alternative moral order.

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1 Dabashi, H. 1993, pp. 152-153
2 Recently, Motahhari’s dualistic view of the West has been echoed in the Islamic Conference in Iran by two of the prominent figures of the Islamic Republic. The supreme leader Ayatollah Khamene’i expressed views similar to the anti-Western-side of Motahhari’s views in attacking the evil and corruption of the West, comparing the Western culture to “an ethical quagmire”, which would eventually destroy it. President Khatami, on the other hand, praised the good sides of the Western civilisation, its religious origins, scientific achievements and advances in technology from which the Muslims must learn.
3 Dabashi, H. 1993, pp. 159-160
The Legitimate Leadership of the Muslim Community

Motahhari also made a contribution to the sensitive debate over the issue of political leadership in the Muslim society. In locating the source of legitimate authority within the ranks of the Shi'i ulama, he actually counterbalanced Shari'ati, who tried to find qualified leaders for the coming Islamic revolution outside the clerical circles within the ranks of the lay Muslim intellectuals. In his discussion of marja'iyat (the supreme religious authority), he voiced his contention that politics was included in the domain of religious authority. In his *Vala'ha va Velayat-ha* (Legitimacies and Authorities), he referred to the role of the founders of the Islamic faith as political leaders of the Muslim community in order to argue that political authority belonged to the ulama.

Referring to several Qur'anic verses, he extended the meaning of *Imamate* beyond its conventional meaning in the Sunni and Shi'i fiqh. In the Sunni fiqh, Imam was understood as the leader of religious congregations. In addition to this meaning, the Shi'i fiqh also understood the *Imamate* conventionally as the religious authority of the Infallible Imams. Motahhari went beyond these meanings to define the *imamate* as the leadership of social and political affairs of the community. He thus prepared the ground for future extension of this authority to the living religious leaders who had superior knowledge of the Islamic law and theology.

Like Shari'ati, Motahhari tried to find meanings in the Shi'i symbolic structures, such as martyrdom, in order to motivate a contemporary revolutionary politics of struggle against injustice. He insisted that such contemporary struggles were tantamount to the revolutionary struggle of Imam Hussein in Karbala. He thus criticised the conservative older generation of the ulama for their literal and legalistic understanding of the faith. He characterised the dogmatic mode of the Islamic knowledge as a mode of religious learning for the sake of learning and individual purification. To his conservative critics, he retorted that this kind of understanding Islam did not comply with the “essence” of the “true faith”, which to him was a recipe for social action.

In his *Ehya-ye Tafakkor-e Eslami* (Revival of Islamic Thought), Motahhari asserted that an Islam, which was not involved in moving and stirring the society, had no force, and consequently such an Islam was like “a dead and infested tree, which (was) standing lifeless and inanimate”. Like Shari’ati and Khomeini, he referred to numerous Qur'anic sources to prove that the activist essence of Islam had been historically and systematically distorted by the corrupt caliphs, kings and sultans in order to justify a quietist reading of the faith.

Motahhari’s concept of legitimate authority or *vala’e esbati* (affirmative legitimacy) was concerned with bringing all Muslims together around a leadership that derived its legitimacy from its affinity to the *Qur’an*, the Prophetic traditions and the purity of the Household of the Prophet. Interestingly, Motahhari’s engagement in issues concerning leadership and political authority in Iran was most intense during the 1960s and 1970s, coinciding with Ayatollah Khomeini’s treatment of the same issues in exile. But his presence in Iran was perhaps a reason that his arguments were less politically explicit than Khomeini whose use of a more radical rhetoric in dealing with these issues was certainly facilitated by the relative security of the exile.

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1 Motahhari, M., *Vala’ha va Velayatha*, Tehran, 1370/1991, pp. 53-54
2 Cited by Dabashi in *Theology of Discontent*, 1993, p. 177
Motahhari was also one of the first Shi’i clerics of modern time to attend to contemporary social issues such as gender, equality, and the ethical problems of technological development in a non-dogmatic language. As such, he, like Shari’ati, criticised the conservative versions of Islam preached by the traditional ulama on the nature of chastity and morality of the female component of the Muslim community. He was also a fervent advocate of scientific and technological developments without losing sight of the ethical dilemmas that an unbridled scientism could cause.

Critique of the West

I have already hinted at Motahhari’s concern with the threat of the Western modernity, which emanated from his fear from “penetrating” and “corrupting” influence of the Western culture on the indigenous culture via modern ideological formulations. In his lectures published under the title The Causes of Attraction to Materialism, he offered his detailed views on the sources of the materialist thought as a “pathological state of mind” in the West. In these lectures, he was basically concerned with offering an Islamic critique of the Western materialist ideologies. He argued that the materialist philosophies became attractive in the West primarily because of the inadequacies of the Christian religious conceptions. He particularly mentioned as examples of these inadequacies the Christian idea of portraying God in the image of man, and the violence of the Church against people in Medieval Europe.¹ He also argued that the weaknesses of Western philosophy were a secondary contributor to the tendency in the West toward materialism.²

Motahhari thus engaged in criticising August Comte as the foremost representative of the notion that advancement of positive sciences was possible only at the expense of belief in God and Creation. He argued that Comte’s logic of looking for God only where positive knowledge is lacking was a logical fallacy, which led to the decline of the concept of God with the advancement of positive knowledge. According to such views, he added: “Only some of the material events and objects of the world would have any sign of God, the events and objects whose causes are not known. Whereas the events and objects whose causes were known would fall outside the domain of God.”³

Motahhari, in line with Islamic cosmological philosophers, referred to various Qur’anic verses to argue: “all the worldly events, creatures and objects were the signs (ayat) of God, and that the world in its totality existed as a reflection of His Intellect, as He pre-existed time and location.”⁴ He also rejected as a logical fallacy the notion of God as immediate cause of the world. He compared the view of looking for God within the mechanism of the world to a view that looked for the watchmaker within the mechanical structure of the watch. This, he argued, entailed the denial of God due to inability to locate Him in the material interactions of the world. As such, this was like denying the watchmaker due to inability to locate him within the mechanics of the watch.⁵

Motahhari then went on to refute Comte’s division of human history into three progressive periods, namely metaphysical, philosophical and scientific, and instead offered his own Islamic philosophical view whereby all these three stages have

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¹ Motahhari, M. Elal-e Gerayesh be Madigari, Tehran, Fajr Publication, 1373, 1994, pp. 55-69
² Ibid, pp. 73-98
³ Ibid, p. 61
⁴ Ibid, p. 62
⁵ Ibid, p. 63
simultaneously existed in the history. As mentioned above, he also considered the violence of the medieval Christian Church in imposing religious belief upon the people as a source of the attraction to materialism in the West because of what he called “the disregard of this imposition for the freedom of thought”. He insisted that in Islam religious belief was valued only if accepted through “free will and rational decision making.”

**Activism vs Quietism**

As a secondary reason for the rise and perpetuation of philosophical materialism in the West, Motahhari pointed to what he considered to be the failure of Western philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Spencer and Sartre in explaining the original cause of existence. He saw the source of this alleged weakness of Western philosophy in its shift from “esalat-e vojud” (the authenticity of being) to “esalat-e mahiyat” (authenticity of essence). Following Avecinna and particularly Mulla Sadra, he set out to shift the point of argument from essence to being and to existence. Ironically in his argument, he sounded rather like Sartre, who insisted that the original cause constituted itself and hence was not constituted by any other cause. According to Motahhari: “The Truth of Being (Haqiqat-e Hasti) is equivalent with intrinsic causality (vojoub-e zati)...Therefore, the truth of Being implied autonomy, independence and the lack of need for anything other than itself.”

As another cause of the rise of materialism in the West, Motahhari named the inadequacy of modern social and political concepts, which according to him: “equated religion with social and political quietism and anti-religion with activism and revolution.” Instead, he suggested that Islam and particularly the Shi’i Islam contained an activist and revolutionary ideological core that must be revived. It was in pursuit of this revival that he embarked upon reinterpreting concepts such as taqiyya (dissimulation of one’s belief), which had conventionally been understood in terms of political quietism. In response to the activist critics of the Shi’i concept of taqiyya, he offered a new interpretation, which rendered dissimulation of one’s belief in the face of strong enemies a strategic positioning. As such, this strategy was justified only for preventing total destruction of own forces in the hands of the enemy while accumulating resources for an effective attack.

**Motahhari’s Theory of Revolution**

In addition to attempts at defending Islam against what he perceived to be a serious threat to the religious identity of Iran, Motahhari was also engaged in depicting the utopia of an Islamic revolution and an Islamic government. His plan for construction of this utopia contained three elements: a theory of revolution, a theory of State and a theory of society. He used several occasions to formulate his own vision of Iran of the future in terms of the negation of the secular ideologies of the West. This vision was entirely built on the basis of sacred Islamic traditions and texts. In referring to sacred texts, he had a great advantage over Shari’ati. Due to his official status as a member of the ulama, which he had acquired through years of disciplined learning in the Shi’i centres of religious scholarship, he enjoyed a level of credibility.

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1. Ibid, pp. 64-66
2. Ibid, pp. 67-72
3. Ibid, p. 82
4. Ibid, p. 81
5. Ibid, pp. 157-158
that no lay religious intellectual could dream of. His scholarly background involved studentship of the learned Ayatollahs such as Borujerdi, Khomieni and Tabataba’i. Motahhari also had the political and financial support from Ayatollah Khomeini who was involved in political agitation against the Pahlavi regime while in exile in Naraf during the 1960s and 1970s.

Motahhari’s theory of revolution contained the most explicit reference to a Mahdistic revolution. In his The Uprising and Revolution of the Mahdi form the Perspective of the Philosophy of History, he formulated his theory in terms of various themes such as “the contemplation of a final victory”, “the expectation of emancipation” and “the Qur’anic view of history and society”. He also developed other related concepts such as “the monotheistic interpretation of the evolution of history”, “the relation of Islamic thought with dialectics”, “the sanctity of struggle”, and “the ideal Islamic society”.

Motahhari emphasised that the idea of the rise of the Mahdi to establish the final victory of the forces of good over evil had been formulated in a coherent way only in the Islamic tradition. This, he explained, was due to the fundamental optimistic view of Islam of the future development of the human history in contrast to many other belief systems that had a negative view of the destiny of man. Motahhari added that this optimism was represented in the Islamic vocabulary by the term “entezar-e faraj” (expectation of emancipation), which was derived from a Qur’anic principle that forbade loss of hope as contradictory to the Ruholah (Spirit of God). This principle of hope and belief in final emancipation, he insisted, would protect the Islamic community against “meaninglessness”, “absurdity” and “depression”. Motahhari defended his positive version of entezar as one, which was “constructive” and “moving”, would bring about “commitment” and “energy”, and was thus “a kind of prayer”. At the same time, he rejected a rival interpretation of entezar, which he described as “destructive”, “bonding”, “paralysing”, and as such “sinful”. He thus radically contrasted the two types of entezar in terms of religious conviction and sin. This was in fact a bold challenge to the quietist interpretations of the concept of the Mahdi according to which the rise of the promised Mahdi would be hastened by the spread and intensification of oppression, inequality and corruption.

The quietist view, supported most fervently by a group called Hojjatiyya, claimed that the revolution of the Mahdi would be of an explosive nature emanating from the spontaneous tendency to a new order as a result of the total collapse of an existing order. In this view, the revolution of the Mahdi was understood as a miraculous and explosive appearance of a hidden force of good that would come to the rescue of a world which was totally overtaken by evil and in which all forces of good were annihilated.

Motahhari in a sarcastic tone criticised this view on the basis of its rejection of any attempt at reform of the present situation by the social reformers under the pretext that it would delay the emergence of the Mahdi by creating good in the world. He placed the value of this view even lower than the radical materialist views of revolution. Although opposed to reform as an act retarding the revolution, he noted, the radical Marxists at least believed in the struggle of people against oppression. The

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1 Ayatollah Khomeini, as marja’e taqdis (source of emulation), was the recipient of the Sahm-e Emam (the religious taxes), and he was authorised to use these funds as he saw fit in the upkeep of the faith.  
2 Motahhari, M. The Uprising and Revolution of the Mahdi, Amir publications, Qom, 1398, h.g p. 6  
3 Ibid, p. 7  
4 In this dense, the Hojjatiyya’s views about the end of the world is similar to that of the Jehovah Witnesses’ views about Armageddon.  
5 Motahhari, M. The Uprising and Revolution of the Mahdi, 1398 (h. g.), p. 62
proponents of the passive view of the Mahdi’s revolution on the contrary, he added, did not believe in any action and would leave everything to the miraculous powers of the Mahdi.

A Progressive Understanding of History

Against the negative view of the revolution of the Mahdi, Motahhari offered his own definition of this revolution by referring to various Qur’anic verses and hadith. Accordingly, the believers on earth, who were disinherited by the non-believers, were promised to be the eventual inheritors of the earth. He argued that in the light of such Qur’anic verses the rise of the Mahdi would be understood as a means for making the disinherited (mostaz’afin) the leaders and proprietors of the society and the forerunners of the “God’s Caliphate”. He thus insisted that the rise of the Mahdi must be seen as “the last link of the chain of struggles of the righteous against the wrong doers”, which had continued throughout history, and which would necessarily lead to the victory of the righteous. In this, although he remained committed to the dualistic Manichaean views of the pre-Islamic Persia, but his essentially optimistic view of the victory of good over evil on earth stood in sharp contrast with the Manichaean view, which saw no hope for the victory of good on earth.

Motahhari also referred to a hadith from the authoritative mohaddeth Sheikh Saduq who said that the rise of the Mahdi was possible when both the forces of good and evil (sa’eed and shaqi) were at the peak of their activity. Using the authority of this medieval mohaddeth (one who specialises in the knowledge of hadith), he went on to proclaim that according to the hadith, prior to the revolution of the Mahdi “a series of spontaneous rebellions by the righteous” would occur. He then asserted that “a government of the righteous” would come out of these rebellions, which would prepare the ground for the rise of the Mahdi. The promised Mahdistic movement, therefore, would “fulfil the ideal of all the Prophets and the righteous” as the last of these movements and rebellions.

Motahhari’s main line of reasoning in support of his interpretation of the revolution of the Mahdi was based on rationalist philosophical arguments and not on ecstatic and undisciplined millenarian aspirations of the populist claimants of the Mahdihood. His arguments were based on the premise that the events of the world at natural and social levels were causal. As such, he proclaimed: “Society has a nature, a character, a tradition and a law; in that it operates according to its nature; and its actions and reactions can be explained by means of a series of general laws.”

Motahhari also argued that the Qur’an viewed history as “a source of knowledge”, and “an object of thought”. Accordingly, the Qur’an rejected the belief that a lawless power of pre-destination determined all historical developments of the world, and asserted that people could make or break their destiny by means of their existing practices and traditions. He insisted that Islam and the Qur’an confirmed the progressive character of the history. But instead of a dialectical and materialist view of history, he offered what he called a “human essence” view of history.

1 Ibid, p. 64
2 Ibid, p. 65
3 Ibid, p. 66
4 Ibid, pp. 67-68
5 Ibid, pp. 9-10
6 Ibid, p. 13
For Motahhari, the materialist view was equal to an instrumental view of history, and as such was based on the belief that “in the beginning man was a raw material, which was gradually shaped by labour and the tools of labour”. By contrast, he suggested that in the “human-essence” view, “the first man was already invested with the seed of various potentialities and tendencies”, which must be “nourished with care and guidance”, and were not to be treated like an “industrial material”.1 As a result of a “comprehensive” and “dynamic” development of human nature, Motahhari added, “man would gradually diminish his dependence on his natural and social environment and would increase his autonomy by relying on faith and ideology”. This autonomy would then be turned into a complete inner freedom, which would be achieved in the future through total dedication to religious faith, and through the victory of reason over desire.2

Motahhari thus advocated a legitimate struggle of right against wrong in defence of monotheism, which would be the guarantor of the deliverance of the disinherited. But he insisted that because the main driving force of history was man, and because man was free, autonomous and selective by nature, there was no linear progressive historical movement. Instead, he argued that “historical movement had fluctuations”, and as such “a society could progress as much as it could decline”. In other words, in specific battles, right had the same chance to win as wrong. Nonetheless, he emphasised that the movement of history was in general progressive.3 Therefore, although he believed that historical events “were not accidental”, and hence differed from “fantasy”, he insisted that the lawfulness of history would not be of any practical value if it was not subjected to human will.4

Yet Motahhari’s concept of Islamic revolution and Islamic revolutionary ideology, although it was less idealistic than Shari’ati’s by virtue of its connection with the living tradition of the Shi’ism in the clerical establishment, was by the same virtue more limiting. Not only did it not connect the quest for political and cultural renewal of the Iranian society to secular revolutionary traditions, but also by virtue of its strict advocacy for the exclusive political authority of the Shi’i ulama, it failed to appeal to many lay Muslim intellectuals who were not too enthusiastic about the prospect of a clerical political rule.

To be sure, Motahhari tried to offer a reformist view of Shi’i Islam, which would question the conservative apolitical tendencies within the official religious establishment. But his insistence on the exclusive right of the Shi’i ulama to highest positions of political authority contributed to the rise of the absolutist interpretations of the powers of the velayat-e faqih (the authority of the jurist). Also his glorification of the sacred qualities of political leaders like Ayatollah Khomeini contributed significantly to the creation of a cult of personality and encouraged, which was detrimental to the liberatory aspirations of the revolution. No doubt, the limiting nature of Motahhari’s understanding of Islamic revolutionary ideology and Islamic government, which was to a large extent similar to that of Khomeini, encouraged the use of violence against alternative versions of government that was to come out of the Islamic Revolution. Ironically, he himself was one of the first victims of the post-revolutionary violence.

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1 Ibid, pp. 35-36
2 Ibid, pp. 37-39
3 Ibid, pp. 48-55
4 Ibid, p. 56
Re-interpretation of the Cult of Martyrdom

In close association with the revolutionary struggle to uphold the hopeful expectation of the rise of the Mahdi, Motahhari developed the concept of “shahid” (martyr). For Motahhari, the word shahid was of sacred value, “not as a signifier but as a meaning”. To confirm this sanctity, he forcefully made a reference to the Qur’an: “Do not suspect that those who have become martyrs in the path of Allah are dead; they are not; they are alive, and nourished by God.”

Following the mystical tradition of Persian poetics, he used the metaphor of “the burning candle” to construct the meaning of the shahid. Thus, the shahid, just as the burning candle, was consumed to shed light on the life of others. The shahid would shed light and give warmth to the lives of those who, as a result of the annihilation of the shahid, would get a chance to live. “Martyrs were the candles of the circle of humanity”, Motahhari wrote; “if this circle fell into darkness, none of the parts of the human society could possibly function properly.” To support his argument, Motahhari unconventionally referred to one of the poems of Parvin E’etesami, a nineteenth century literary woman, rarely referred to by the ulama. In this poem, a candle, as is so prevalent in the Persian poetry, stands as a metaphor for one who burns to lighten up the life of a loved one, glad that self-annihilation would bring happiness to the other. Motahhari also referred to a Qur’anic verse whereby the Prophet was metaphorically called saraj-e monir (glowing light). Following Mowlavi (Rumi), the famous thirteenth century mystical poet, he argued that the enlightening soul of the Prophet came at the cost of the consumption of his body.

Motahhari then extended the sanctity of the shahid from metaphoric meaning to the body of the martyr. He reminded his audience that according to the Islamic rituals of death, every cadaver must be washed and cleaned before burial except for the body of the shahid. The secret of this, he stressed, was that “the purity of the soul of the martyr was such that it would render the body pure.” He thus elevated martyrdom over all other types of death, be it natural death, death of disease, death by homicide or death by suicide. From an Islamic viewpoint, he insisted, life was always of a higher value than death except for the death of a martyr, which was a death superior to life. Martyrdom as such was achieved when one selflessly and voluntarily invited death in the name of “a sacred and humane cause in the path of Allah.” In this vein, Motahhari argued that losing one’s life in jihad ensured that one died a martyr’s death. He quoted Imam Ali in Nahj-al-Balaga (The Model of Eloquence), as saying: “Jihad is a gateway to paradise; a gateway that God does not open to everyone.” For Motahhari, martyrdom in jihad was “a responsibility” that, if fulfilled, would bring eternal happiness to the martyr’s soul.

Motahhari systematically moved from sanctity, responsibility and joy of the martyr to the logic of martyrdom. Martyr, he wrote: “combined two sets of logic: the logic of a social reformer who felt responsibility towards his society, and the logic of a mystic who wished to be consumed in his love affair with God.” And he went on to elaborate on the legend of the martyr and his/her eternity, emphasising the importance of the

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1 Motahhari, M., Shahid, Qom, 1393 h.g., p. 74
2 Ibid, p. 76
3 Ibid, pp. 77-78
4 Ibid, pp. 80-81
5 Ibid, p. 84
6 Ibid, p. 87
7 Ibid, p. 101
Islamic ritual of crying for the martyr as a symbol of the participation of the living society in the legend of the martyr, a legend that was revivifying and empowering. To demonstrate this he then engaged in a detailed discussion of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his followers in Karbala.

**A Theory of Government**

To construct his theory of government Motahhari’s main source of reference was Imam Ali’s *Nahj-al-Balaqa*. “One of the essential themes that Motahhari developed in his reading of *Nahj-al-Balaqa* was the question of the legitimacy of an Islamic government.” Accordingly, the highest political quality of a legitimate State was justice of which Ali was the epitome. In his interpretation of *Nahj-al-Balaqa* as a sacred text, Motahhari redefined religious concepts such as “asceticism”, “worship”, “love”, etc. in order to create a new “collective political consciousness” of legitimacy. For him, this new political consciousness must contain the core of a new nationalist sentiment, which combined religious belonging with territorial attachment.

In constructing this new nationalism, Motahhari did not refer to the secular concept of nationalism, which was associated with the concept of a secular State. Rather, he built upon the religious sentiments of the population to establish the inevitability of the integration of the concept of a religious State into Iranian nationalism. Motahhari’s theory of State was conceptualised around the belief that an ideal State was one in virtual unity with the nation. Just as he justifiably took the total devotion of the Muslim believers to the Islamic faith for granted, he naturally assumed that an ideal State for Iran as a nation of *Shi’i* believers was one that would be guided fundamentally by an institutionalised Islamic consciousness.

Motahhari, however, was by no means an advocate of a conservative or fundamentalist theocratic regime in a strict sense of the term. His utopia of an ideal Iranian State was not a backward one dreaming of restoration of the caliphate under the turbaned clerics. He, like Shari’ati, was primarily an educator, and fancied the flourishing of an Iranian-Islamic culture, which would gain a high status for Iran and Islam in a world where technological and scientific development, economic prosperity and political sovereignty set the standard of national pride.

However, as the leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Council (*Sowray-e Enghelab-e Eslami*), Motahhari, also fulfilled the tyrannical side of the image of a “philosopher-king”, which was natural to his ideological quest for authority and uniformity. He was at one and the same time a philosopher-scholar and a revolutionary commander, a fascinated disciple of the mystical power of Khomeini, and a revolutionary soldier of the kingdom of God. He, like his teacher and leader Khomeini was fascinated by *irfan* and Islamic philosophy, but was by no means an

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1. Ibid, p. 111
2. Dabashi, H. 1993, p. 190
3. Ibid, p. 193
4. The Islamic Revolutionary Council was the main instrument of the political authority of the Islamic Revolution after its victory. In fact, it had been formed before the victory of the revolution, and shortly before Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of the revolution, returned to Iran. After the arrival of Khomeini and his inevitable ascendance to the supreme leadership of the Islamic government, the Islamic Revolutionary Council remained in power until the appointment of the provisional government of Mehdi Bazargan. Thereafter, the Council continued for some time to operate as a de facto government in competition with the official government in a dual power structure, symptomatic of immediate post-revolutionary struggles for power. Besides his duties as the leader of the Council, Motahhari continued his duties as a scholar and university lecturer. He was also involved in the institution the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami*), which became the main military arm of the Islamic government. In 1980, barely a year after the victory of the revolution, he was assassinated by an ultra-radical Islamic splinter group, *Forqan*, and became a martyr.
ascetic recluse. On the contrary, he was inspired by eschatological politics of the Shi' i faith, as formulated by his spiritual and political leader. He was thus prepared to kill and become a hero in fulfilling his revolutionary responsibility, or to be killed and attain the ultimate fulfillment by becoming a martyr in joining with Allah.

Motahhari’s dream of a modern Islamic State, albeit he would never admit it, was one similar to that of the Jewish State, which would use the power of religious belief to inspire a nationalism that would restore the pride of a people who felt they were historical victims. Just as the Zionists interpreted the Jewish faith as the political foundation of a State for a nation that saw itself as a historical victim, Motahhari endeavoured to make Shi' i Islam the source of a modern nation and a modern State for Shi' i Iran as a nation that symbolised the historical victimisation of the Shi' i Imams. In one of his speeches on the occasion of the Israeli victory over the Arab armies in the six-day war, he even directly attributed the success of the Israelis, as enemies of Islam, to their return to the power of their faith. Whereas, he criticised the Arab regimes, which instead of depending on Islam were fascinated either by conservative interpretations of religion, or by the secular types nationalist and socialist ideologies.

Like Shari'ati, Motahhari had a premonition that Iranian Muslims were pre­ destined to lead the way of reforming Islam in order to bring out its true message. The kind of the Islamic renaissance he advocated was one that would revive the “true Islam”, which was none other than a revitalised Shi' ism, by a nation that was uniquely positioned in history to carry out this task. The Iranian nation, gifted with collective belief in Shi' ism, rich literary heritage, and mystical and philosophical excellence, would be a huge resource for supporting, motivating and enriching this renaissance. Motahhari even dedicated a series of lectures in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the discussion of “the mutual services of Islam and Iran”, which was later published under the same title. In these lectures, he analysed the Islamic and Iranian culture as two interacting cultural forms that, in their historical interaction and interconnection, had enhanced and enriched each other.

A Cleric’s Philosophy of Science

Motahhari, as a scholar and teacher, believed in the role of education as the most effective means of initiating religious and national reform. In this, he not only had in mind the education of the youth at the school level (he was engaged with other like-minded clerics in writing school texts on religious matters), but also reforming the religious thinking at the level of the Shi' i scholastic centres and seminaries. For example, he advocated a more active role on the part of the learned mujtahids in expressing innovative opinions on juridical issues. He in fact redefined the concept of ijtihad in a radical sense in order to break with narrow understandings that had limited the practice of ijtihad to attempts at minor modifications of religious rulings in matters of personal piety and hygiene.

Motahhari sought to break with “the hegemonic paradigms” of scholarship in the centres of religious learning in order to introduce “a whole new model of inquiry”.1 As Dabashi has noted, Motahhari, never read Thomas Kuhn, but he proposed similar ideas about the change of paradigms of knowledge in religious sciences as Kuhn did in the case of modern sciences. He argued that in jurisprudence, one scholar might introduce a new school, which the established paradigms would not

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1 Dabashi, H. 1993, p. 199
be able to easily reject. This new thinking then would gradually bring other schools under its authority. For Motahhari, such a religious scholar was a true mujtahid. As such, he rejected the claims to *ijtihad* by the clerics who accumulated religious knowledge without going beyond their received knowledge and making independent judgements as to how apply this knowledge to the social and political exigencies of time. He referred to these clerics as those who were “more learned than intelligent”.

Motahhari thus criticised the notion of *taqlid* (emulation) in the sense of blind following of the opinions of a cleric without using one’s own judgement and reason. He insisted that the Qur’an had taught the Muslims to give priority to reason as the measure of right and wrong over a passive receipt of traditions. Relying on the notions of judgement, intellect and reason, he even questioned the total and eternal validity of jurisprudential traditions that banned certain forms of arts, such as music and sculpture, on the ground that they “incited the passions”, or “caused dullness in the mind”. Motahhari thus opened the way for the possibility of issuing new rulings (*fatwa*) by the mujtahids to allow the artistic works that “would not corrupt feelings and distort rational thought.” However, Motahhari’s view of art, which might have been liberal by the scale of the official religious establishment, was not even remotely appealing to the community of Iranian modern artists who were predominantly modernist and secular, and had a strong non-religious and anti-authoritarian thrust.

**Rethinking the Position of Women**

Motahhari advocated the introduction of a new understanding of the role of women into the religious discourse. In this, he laid emphasis on the equal manner that the Qur’anic injunctions are addressed to men and women. However, he was quick to reject a total equality of man and woman in the Western sense, which as he claimed was instituted to justify the equal exploitation of men and women by Western capitalism. However, he did not propose any radical Islamic ideas about the rights of women beyond the reaffirmation of certain rights that has been recognised by the Qur’an in the settlement of marriage, divorce, and ownership of property. Motahhari insisted that the Islamic laws would protect the rights of women, but the extent of this protection was not nearly enough by modern international standards of women’s rights, of which many modern and educated Iranian women were acutely aware. For example, on issues such as the custody of children after divorce and inheritance - where women face a clear lack of equal rights under the existing interpretations of Islamic law - Motahhari did not offer any innovative solutions.

Motahhari like Shari’ati, while remaining committed to the traditional concepts of sexual morality and chastity, emphasised that Islam encouraged the participation of women in social, economic and political activities. He allocated a whole chapter in his *The Order of Women’s Rights in Islam* to the social independence of women in areas like choosing a partner, or making decisions about their lives. However, he never questioned clear limitations that the current interpretations of Islamic laws have put on women’s rights, for example the right to certain occupations, notably to serve as judges and high religious authorities. He also remained uncritical of the enforcement of the tradition of the veiling after the victory of

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1 Motahhari, M. *Ta’lim va Tarbiyat dar Eslam*, (Education and Learning in Islam), Tehran, 1362/1983, pp. 8-9
2 Ibid, p. 25
3 Dabashi, H. 1993, p. 202
4 Ibid, p. 206
the revolution. Meanwhile, he engaged in a bitter attack on the state of morality in the West, where he claimed: “women were commercialised and used as objects of men’s desire...and homosexuality was allowed to flourish.”

Motahhari’s opinions on women’s rights were part of his concerted effort to reform the traditional religious thinking on modern issues. In other areas, such as technological development, new forms of economic relations and transactions, and new forms of artistic activities, he also advocated reform. But at the same time, he was too conscious about the necessity of the defence of traditions against the intellectual trends that, he claimed, were out to destroy the religious tradition in its entirety. As such, in various occasions he attacked those who were attempting to reinterpret the figures and texts of highly acclaimed literary and mystical value in secular and at times atheistic terms.

Defending Traditions

In his defence of the Islamic traditions against anti-religious interpretations, he specifically targeted the works of the modern leftist poets and authors like Ahmad Shamlu and Ali Mirfetros. Shamlu, for example, had published a new reading of that Khadje Shams-ad-Din Hafiz in the early 1970s, in which he portrayed the personality and poetry of this mystical figure as a paradox. According to Shamlu, the paradox lied in Hafiz, the famous medieval mystical poet, while engaging in struggle against the dogmatic religious authorities of his time in the language that seemed at times blasphemous, still managed to hold a position of high spiritual regard among the public.

Shamlu had raised the possibility that Hafiz was a religious dissenter, had materialist views, and his references to the virtues of drinking wine and falling in earthly love could have been literal in at least some of his poems. He had also implied that Hafiz’s mystical poetry had not much to do with dogmatic religious convictions, but with questioning the corruption of the religious establishment and the despotism of the political rulers. The secret of Hafiz’s spiritual and cultural influence was then in his art to express popular grievances of his time in the poetic-metaphoric language of religious mysticism, which both revealed and concealed his intent, in order to survive the brutality of the political and religious suppression.

Shamlu had also identified certain poems of Hafiz, which he interpreted as evidence of the interest of this mystical poet, toward the end of his career, in religions other than Islam. He had thus portrayed Hafiz, as a potential polytheist or even atheist who was nonetheless a committed social revolutionary more concerned with the free human soul and the suffering of the lower classes than belief in any established church. The secret of the popularity of Hafiz, therefore, lay primarily in his advocacy of the cause of the disinherited, which he skilfully, artistically and symbolically expressed in a religious-mystical language.

The author and leftist activist, Mirfetros, had also written a book, which identified another famous mystical figure of Iranian history with religious and political dissent. In this book, he portrayed Mansur Hallaj as a staunch critic of religious dogma and a social revolutionary attempting in the language of “dialectics” to reject God in his cry of an-al-haq (I am God), and was executed by the defenders

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2 In one of Hafiz’s poems, for example, Shamlu pointed to the poet’s praise for a pre-Islamic faith that preached a mystical belief in sun (Mitra’ism).
of the faith for that very reason. In a classic Marxist fashion, Mirfetos had also tried to pose religion as a stagnant system of thought, which was an instrument of the psychological repression of the masses, and Hallajj as a hero of the battle for the survival of humanity against religious darkness.

Motahhari rejected Shamlu’s portrayal of Hafiz as ignorant of the language and the tradition of Islamic mysticism, whereby references to wine and other objects of desire were symbolic rather than literal. In sharp contrast to Shamlu, he portrayed Hafiz as a true believer and mystic who had memorised the Qur’an and defended the true faith against the dogmatic religious interpretations of his time. Motahhari also attacked materialist interpretations of Hallajj as irrelevant and as crude attempts to find justification in cultural traditions for the spread of the Western materialist ideas.

Motahhari’s close engagement in various areas of social, educational, literary and political debate and activity, while preserving his links with ordinary people as a public preacher and religious authority, served to solidify his contribution to the formation of the Islamic revolutionary ideology. Moreover, his ideas inspired a new religious thinking that also had a strong influence on shaping the political outcome of the Islamic Revolution, namely the Islamic Republic. As such, his critics have criticised him for serving as a State ideologue justifying religious absolutism. However, while one should acknowledge the validity of many of these criticisms, one should remain aware that Motahhari’s writings, particularly before the revolution, also reflected a deep resentment of religious absolutism. Motahhari specifically criticised the attempts of official clergy of all religions to offer their own interpretations of the sacred texts as the ultimate religious truth. His criticism of the absolutism of the Christian Church in the period Inquisition, and his warning against equating man-made laws with sacred laws in Islam were also examples of his disapproval of religious absolutism.

The challenge to the absolutist interpretations of the political philosophy of Islam in Motahhari’s work followed the age-old tradition of religious dispute with extensive historical precedents, which he advocated at an intellectual level while developing his ideological interpretations of the Shi‘i political philosophy before the revolution. After the victory of the revolution, however, Motahhari, particularly in his public speeches, tended to support or remain silent before the claims of the ruling clergy that the laws of the Islamic government were of sacred nature. As such, Motahhari’s discourse has offered possibilities for both, the legitimation of the institutional interests of the Islamic Republic, and the views of the religious critic of the Islamic regime in criticising the legitimacy of the official interpretations of the Islamic ideology and theory of State in the post-revolution era.

Motahhari, M. Materialism in Iran, Tehran, 1373/1994, p. 21
2 Ibid, p. 29
3 Ibid, p. 67
4 Recently, there has been a particular interest among many Iranian religious intellectuals to refer to Motahhari in order to provide new interpretations that support political and religious pluralism. Iranian religious intellectuals like Abdol-Karim Soroush and Muhammad Mujtahid Shabestari, and politico-religious organisations like Nehazat-e Azadi- Iran (The Liberation Movement of Iran), have supported their arguments against absolutist interpretations of the political philosophy of Islam by reference to that part of Motahhari’s views that had criticised religious absolutism. They have cast their arguments in terms of the rejection of the idea that the State laws under the Islamic regime are equivalent to sacred laws. The implication of this position has been the emphatic claims of the religious critics of the Islamic Republic that the laws of the State and the rulings of the ‘ulama should be open to legal challenge at religious and civil levels.

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Ayatollah Khomeini, the Idol-Breaker

If Shari’ati and Motahhari contributed to the construction of the ideology of an Islamic revolution and the utopia of an Islamic renaissance, Ayatollah Khomeini was the main agent in the creation of an actual Islamic revolution. He was also the main theorist of the Islamic State. Khomeini’s contributions were of highest political significance, and dwarfed Shari’ati and Motahhari in terms of the motivation and enthusiasm that they generated in a large section of the population in Iran. Khomeini’s contributions were important not so much for their erudition and depth of argument as for their clarity, simplicity, decisiveness and their power of appeal to vastest numbers of people. His contributions to the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic State were fundamentally political in that they were not limited to intellectual arguments or philosophical eloquence. Rather, they were based on developing a common sense but novel political opposition to the Pahlavi regime in the condition that no means of peaceful political activity in conventional forms was available.

Ayatollah Khomeini neither advocated an armed struggle (like that pursued by the guerrilla organisations against the Shah), nor did he give in under the dictatorship to a milder position of co-operating with or acquiescing to the authority of the regime. Instead, he successfully initiated a fundamental cultural campaign against the regime, which would shatter its legitimacy as the rightful political authority in the eyes of the public. Yet his success was not only based on the collapse of the legitimacy of the regime - because a mere decline in the legitimacy of the State in itself would not inspire the people to risk imprisonment, torture and death in rising up against the military might of the regime. It was also due to Khomeini’s success to make the Islamic ideology into an action plan for an Islamic revolution, and to motivate the people to take to streets by making the utopia of an Islamic government appear immediately accessible. It was in this manner that Khomeini combined the authority of living religious establishment and the eschatological enthusiasm about the government of absolute justice to mobilise vast numbers of people in support of his own politico-religious project. His imaginary of an Islamic revolution and an Islamic government thus made people feel strong about their responsibility to defend their dignity, freedom, identity, belief and cultural heritage against a regime, which was perceived to be jeopardising these values.

Ayatollah Khomeini was the man who successfully won the allegiance of the people for his imaginary of the Islamic utopia, which he systematically built on the basis of new interpretations of the religious symbols, texts and narratives. He was thus able to challenge the mighty monarchical regime head-on, bring it down in utter humiliation and disgrace and, like Abraham, triumphantly stand as the object of people’s admiration in the place of “the broken idols of power and wealth”.

The Political Beginnings

Both in his religious learning and his political experience, Ayatollah Khomeini was senior to Shari’ati and Motahhari. He began his mature religious and political activities as a senior cleric in the 1940s when he was in his forties. At this time,

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1 The image of Ayatollah Khomeini as “idol-breaker”, which compared him to Abraham, was one of the first and most potent imageries that was used along with other popular fantasies about him to solidify his meteoric ascendance to the undisputed supreme leadership of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini was also portrayed as an angel who would replace the demonic Shah, and as the deputy of the Concealed Imam, Mahdi.
Shari’ati was barely over ten years old; and Motahhari, in his early twenties, had just come under Khomeini’s tutorship at the Qom Seminary (Feyziyyah). Khomeini’s first serious political platform was voiced in Kasf-al-Asrar (Secrets Exposed) in 1944, which was targeted both against the State anticlericalism, pursued by Reza Shah in the 1930s, and the rising intellectual anticlericalism of the secular intellectuals, particularly Ahmad Kasravi.¹

The 1941 occupation of Iran by the Allied forces had brought about the forced abdication of Reza Shah, who had moved close to the Germans, and the ascendancy of the then fledgling reign of his young son Muhammad Reza. As I mentioned earlier, this situation had created an opportunity for the growth of various political expressions of religious, liberal and socialist persuasions. Khomeini’s political enthusiasm, however, subsided by the late 1940s, probably in deference to Ayatollah Borujerdi, the supreme marja‘e taqlid of the time, who had adopted a less radical political stance with respect to the regime. The formation of the Tudeh (Communist) Party and the anti-regime agitation of this Party were probably the reasons why Ayatollah Borujerdi did not express a strong opposition to the Shah.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Khomeini was mainly engaged in teaching jurisprudence, Islamic philosophy and mysticism and, in deference to the authority of Ayatollah Borujerdi, quietly witnessed the intensification of political developments concerning the oil nationalisation movement. As Dabashi has noted, during these years an experiment with “liberal democracy” was put to test in Iran under Muhammad Mossadeq who as Prime Minister had sought to check the unconstitutional tendencies of the Pahlavi monarch, and had eventually forced the Shah to leave the country.

During this period a number of radical revolutionary tendencies grew both among the religious forces, such as Fada‘iyan-e Eslam (Devotees of Islam), and among those committed to Marxist ideology, such as the Tudeh Party.² However, the restoration the Shah’s power with the help of a CIA-sponsored coup, and the ensuing suppression of both liberals and socialists after 1953, radically changed the views of Khomeini on the Iranian politics.

### The Islamic Ideology in Revolutionary Practice

Although Ayatollah Khomeini taught jurisprudence and philosophy, had a deep personal interest in politics, and conducted a mystical-ascetic lifestyle, his contribution to the development of the Islamic ideology of revolution should not be measured only in terms these qualities. Neither, his erudition as a philosopher, nor his political and social awareness, nor even his mystical asceticism in personal life, can fully capture the main feature of his contribution to the Islamic Revolution. All these Khomeini qualities, which on their own did not add any more sophistication or depth to the existing intellectual life in Iran, became significant in the context of his success to bring the already existing social, cultural and political fantasies into an ideological discourse. In this ideology the Islamic government was portrayed as the object of a utopian desire that was collectively shared by the Shi‘i Iranians, and summed up the

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¹ Ahmad Kasravi was a famous and influential nationalist intellectual of religious background who had turned against religious dogmatic beliefs and practices, which he equated with backward superstitions, and which he considered to be opposed to the national interests of Iran as a modern nation. Kasravi had become a staunch supporter of secularism and the separation of the Church and State, and his writings had caused great distress and strong resentment in the religious establishment. He was finally assassinated by the radical group Fada‘iyan-e Eslam (the Devotees of Islam).

² Dabashi, H. 1993, pp. 412-413
repression of the desire for recognition as a modern nation. But long-term political and cultural repression had displaced this desire into collective fantasies. Khomeini skilfully reformulated these fantasies in terms of a grand cause that had remained unfulfilled for centuries, at which now could be achieved. As such, he successfully related the Shi'i history of victimisation to his own political struggle against the Pahlavi regime.

Shari'ati’s discourse was the language of a modern thinker boasting to his knowledge of Eastern and Western thought including modern philosophy and sociology, full of references to the Third World liberation movements of various persuasions. Motahhari’s discourse, on the other hand, was well versed in the Islamic philosophy, education, and social morality. None of these discourses addressed concrete political issues in more than passing references. Rather, they were interested in creating a change in culture, education and worldview of Iranians as a premise for the construction of a collective Islamic consciousness and identity. For them, this collective consciousness was the component of an Islamic ideology of revolution, which would usher in the Islamic utopia. In their language there were almost no references to the Shah or specific political policies of the regime; they mainly addressed themselves to issues such as the alienation of the people, loss of identity, threat to the culture and religion, lack of social morality, etc.

Khomeini addressed all these issues, but not in abstract theoretical terms, but in the context of concrete political issues, directly criticising the incumbent monarchs (Reza and Muhammad Reza) and the whole history of monarchy. To be sure, he frequently spoke about moral and cultural problems, which he claimed were a result of modernisation and Western political and cultural onslaught. But he also directly attacked in a condescending language the political system and the person of monarch as responsible for this situation. Khomeini was also seriously concerned with matters of personal and public piety; but his ideological influence on the revolution had very little to do with his piety, as there were other clergy who would claim to be more pious than him. Rather, his influence had a lot to do with his combining religious conviction and millenarian ecstasy with political radicalism.

Since the 1940s, Ayatollah Khomeini had clearly offered the politically minded ulama as a political force to be reckoned with. In Kashf-al-Asrar, he explicitly proposed the ulama as a group of more experience, more knowledge and more political qualifications than the king and his secular Statesmen, a group with serious concern about the situation of Iran in the international arena with respect to foreign powers. He had even urged the Shah to take advice from the ulama if he did not want to end up like his father in exile at the order of a foreign power (Britain).

Khomeini’s location while in exile in Iraq was fundamental to his ability to voice his political opposition to the Shah, because there he was unfettered by the brutality of the regime. But Khomeini’s explicit political arguments were originally made while he was still in Iran; and his exile was actually a consequence of his political remarks against the regime. The political advantage of Khomeini’s residence in Iraq gave him the opportunity to sustain his radical rhetoric against the Shah. This became possible particularly because the government of Iraq at the time did not yet sense any strong Shi'i agitation against itself, and could even benefit from allowing the voices of dissent against the Iranian government to be heard. In this way, the Iraqi government in its traditional political rivalry and territorial disputes with Iran could put a measure of pressure on the Iranian government. But Ayatollah Khomeini was not a man to compromise on his principle politico-religious convictions for purely pragmatic purposes; and as such every now and again he came into conflict with the
Iraqi government due to his association with Iraqi Shi'i dissidents. His expulsion from Iraq in 1978 after the intensification of his Shi'i political agitation indicates that he did not enjoy an all too comfortable atmosphere for political activity there.

The ideology of the Islamic Revolution, therefore, is primarily identified with Ayatollah Khomeini, because this ideology gained significance and recognition as a social and political force only when put in motion by Khomeini to actualise what was hitherto seen as a remote utopia. Khomeini’s application of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution was instrumental in giving a motive and a voice to a popular movement of protest; a motive which had been repressed for a long time, and a voice which could have remained silent without him. In fact, many other political activists of religious, liberal and socialist persuasion had tried to arouse the people against the regime in a protest movement, but none had succeeded. As such, Khomeini moved the Islamic ideology from theory to praxis.

**A Dream Come True**

Through novel interpretations of the sacred texts and events, Khomeini not only gave Iranians a sense of dignity and self-worth, which they had not felt for a long time, but also offered them a real hope in the possibility of action to realise their legitimate wish for a better future. He particularly stressed the urgency of action, and thus held out the real possibility that if the people acted now, their dreams could come true. The dream in itself was a source of power. This dream had to be collective if it was to be of any social and political force; so it had to be imagined in terms of collective memories and common archetypes.

Ayatollah Khomeini patiently and arduously helped Iranians form a collective dream on the basis of the imaginary of a promised world of justice and glory, which was now in reach. Obviously, his tool for this moulding of a dream could not be coercive; otherwise he could not gain popularity. He had to base his influence on being presented as one who fulfilled wishes after he held out the possibility of them coming true. To do this, he had to rely on words, symbols and meanings and not on the force of coercion. Even in words, Khomeini never sounded authoritarian, neither before, nor after the victory of the revolution. In his writings and speeches, as Dabashi has noted, he always assumed “an advisory voice, one that gave guidance and issued warnings”.

The Iranian people were open to hopes and dreams as they had a peculiar consciousness of their historical background and destiny. This consciousness had been shaped by the imaginary of a glorious past drawn into decline by foreign invasions of various sorts. The memory of the Arab invasion in the seventh century, although it was not seen overwhelmingly as a moment of decline (because it had brought the Islamic faith to Iran), nonetheless, was enveloped in the humiliation of defeat. The memories of the invasions of the Mongol and Timurid armies in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as well as the defeats in two nineteenth century wars with Russia, were even more vividly in the minds of the people as moments of abject humiliation. They also remembered the humiliation of the CIA-sponsored coup, which occurred as recently as the early 1950s, and had remained in the public mind as the memory of the suppression of the rightful claims of Iranians to sovereignty and propriety over their own oil reserves and revenues.

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1 Ibid, p. 419
The Shi'i believers of Iran felt humiliated not only because of the instances of defeat in their recent national history. Even more intensely, they felt humiliated because of the defeat and martyrdom of Hussein, the third Shi'i Imam, in Karbala, in the hands of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid in the seventh century. They still commemorated this tragedy through rituals of self-flagellation and feeling guilty for not being able to protect Hussein and his innocent family. For the believers, these rituals had long been a means by which to reiterate their allegiance with Hussein; feeling prepared for making the ultimate sacrifice to compensate for his loss if they ever had a chance. They did this particularly by keeping the hope for the return of the Mahdi - Hussein’s blood descendent - alive.

Ayatollah Khomeini was acutely aware of these public sensitivities, and s such incessantly attacked the Pahlavi regime on two fronts. He attacked the submissiveness of the regime against the foreign intervention in Iran as a “shameful” position, which he blamed for the “alien” influence on Iranian politics, and which had caused national humiliation. And he attacked the anticlerical policies of the regime as a sign of the affinity of the regime with those who could be compared with the murderers of Imam Hussein. He thus portrayed the Pahlavi regime’s affinity with the “anti-Islamic” West as an alliance of those who strove to divert the true path of Islam in our time comparable to what the Umayyads had done fourteen centuries ago.

Khomeini’s highest moment in terms of linking with the public sentiments came perhaps in 1963-1964, when he defiantly criticised the regime for attack on the religious establishment and the grant of diplomatic immunity to ordinary Americans in Iran. Khomeini referred to these moves as “anti-Islam”, and as “a humiliating capitulation of the Iranian State to foreigners, which cannot be tolerated by the dignified people of Iran”. These incidents were followed by his arrest, his exile to Iraq, and his continued struggle against the regime from there.

The Invocation of Collective Memories

In his overwhelmingly cultural, rhetorical and textual struggle, Ayatollah Khomeini used two strategies to link his cause with the cause of the Iranian people and gradually make them appear as one. Firstly, he capitalised on Islamic symbolism to attract the public attention within Iran to the collective responsibility to preserve and respect the Islamic culture in the face of the Western cultural invasion through a puppet regime. And secondly, he began from the early 1970s onwards to systematically develop a theory of Islamic government, which would save the Iranian nation from tyranny and would represent their true will and wish. For example, he effectively used for political agitation the Shi'i Muslim calendar, which was strewn with the anniversaries of the birth and death of the Prophet and the twelve Imams. Birthdays were used as occasions to be celebrated and death anniversaries as moments to mourn and solemnly remember.

The joy of the birth of Imam Ali, the symbol of justice and love, and the pain of his assassination by the Kharijite Ibn-e Moljan, had already occupied a good part of the collective memory of the Shi'i Iranians. So had the birth of Imam Husseint, the beloved grandson of the Prophet, his heroic revolution against tyranny and his tragic murder. Besides, there was also the memory of the birth of the eight Imam Reza, who had actually come to Iran on an invitation from M'amoun, the Abassid Caliph, to become the Crown Prince, and the narrative of the treachery of the Caliph and the eventual poisoning of the Imam. There was also the memory of the glorious birth of the Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, which was celebrated even more passionately than the
ancient Now-Ruz in the expectation of his return to establish the Government of God. These memories and others covered only part of the Shi‘i calendar, and could be invoked at various occasions to arouse public emotions.

During the years immediately preceding the revolution, Khomeini frequently used these moments of remembering sacred memories to convey his political messages in a sacred guise. He successfully bridged the historical gap and made his political cause identifiable with the cause of the saintly figures of the Shi‘i chronology. He thus created a feeling of community among the believers in the moments of dramaturgical mourning, and established an analogy between the pain of self-flagellation in mourning the martyrdom of Ali and Hussein with the pain of the torturous path of political struggle against the regime. In the early 1970s, the occasion of the attempt by the regime to change the Islamic calendar to a calendar based on the foundation of the ancient Persian monarchy 2500 years earlier gave Khomeini a fresh excuse to criticise the Shah as “anti-Islam” and bent on destroying the “beloved” faith.

During the days of rising of the people against the regime - where millions of people took to the streets to call for the downfall of the Shah - every individual who fell to the brutality of the regime, became a martyr, for whom memorial ceremonies were held. Memorials were held on the third, seventh, and fortieth day of the death of the martyrs; and each ceremony turned into a new occasion for further demonstrations and protests against the regime producing new casualties and hence new martyrs to enable the cycle of congregations and demonstrations to continue. Khomeini incessantly encouraged these cycles of commemoration as a sacred political duty.

Khomeini’s Discourse of Revolution

Khomeini’s discourse of the Islamic Revolution contained traces of traditional, nationalist, and socialist tendencies. It combined the notion of return to Islamic traditions with the fashionable political concept of revolution. In this manner, it succeeded in mobilising the masses effectively against the monarchy with a deliberate political aim, and at the same time dominated the movement with the Islamic traditional rhetoric. Khomeini proposed the formation of an Islamic government, which was to be established by means of an Islamic revolution. He thus appropriated the most potent modern political rhetoric, namely the “myth of the revolution”.

This combination of traditionalism and revolutionary vitality had two important consequences.

First, it resolved the age-old duality between the State and the religious authorities in favour of the latter. It has been mentioned that Imami Shi‘i doctrine, elaborated on the messianic concept of the Mahdi, had been practised predominantly in an apolitical sense. The militant character of Shi‘ism had been contained by the quietist interpretation of the belief in the Concealed Imam during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Involvement in politics was postponed until the return of the Mahdi. But as Arjomand has suggested: “the Mahdistic tenet had remained inescapably chiliasm and would from time to time be activated.”

The most classic instance of this chiliasm occurred in 1844 around one thousand years after the reported date of the concealment of the Mahdi when Ali Muhammad Shirazi known as the Bab claimed the Mahdihood. As Arjomand has indicated, the rise of the Bab inspired a momentous millenarian movement, which resulted in a series of extremist uprisings in the mid-

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1 Arjomand, S. A. 1988, p. 105
2 Ibid, p. 101
nineteenth century. The rebellious nature of the Babi movement was threatening to both the Qajar State, and the orthodox religion. “The ulama dreaded this return of extremism (gholovv), whose success would have eliminated them and the orthodox Shi’ism they represented, and urged the government to suppress Babism.”

Ayatollah Khomeini, himself a proclaimed orthodox believer, did not claim to be the promised Mahdi. In fact, he consistently refused the legitimacy of any such claim. But he comfortably enjoyed the omnipresent and omnipotent popular yearning for the Mahdi and put forward an ideological interpretation of the Shi’i political doctrine, which would enhance the political authority of the leading mujtahid to the level of that of the Concealed Imam. By encouraging his own acclamation as the Imam, Khomeini further consolidated the notion of the imamate as the political authority of the leading mujtahid, a notion, which would authorise the ulama to claim political authority of the twelve Imams, but not their infallibility. As such, he inserted a strong millenarian component in the popular movement, which aimed at “bringing about an immediate and profound social transformation that (was) expected to replace the present corrupt order with a utopian one through the intervention of a divine or divinely commissioned leadership.”

Khomeini might have let his followers entertain the idea that his return to Iran had heralded the return of the Mahdi, a theme Zonis and Brumberg have stressed. However, any claim that put too much stress on the utilisation of the Mahdistic tenet by Khomeini only for pragmatic political purposes finds little, if any, justification. Ayatollah Khomeini was indisputably a man of faith. For him, the ideals of the Shi’i faith, puritanical as they were, not only had to be believed, but also had to be practised in a social scale. Politics to Khomeini meant the social realisation of faith, traditionally a matter of high personal achievement. Khomeini’s personal lifestyle was a model to be emulated by the community of believers. By the activation of the Mahdistic tenet of a millenarian revolution, he facilitated the rise of militancy within the religious community and attracted to political activity or marginalised the apolitical ulama.

The second consequence of the incorporation of the notion of revolution into the traditionalist Islamic movement was the creation of a potential in the Islamic movement to attract layers of the Iranian society whose main concern lay with nationalism or anti-imperialism rather than with Islam. The radical groups mainly those on the left of the political spectrum, which had propagated the myth of revolution in their own right, did not join the forces of Khomeini because of their interest in the utopia of Islamic government. For the groups such as the Tudeh Party, the Marxist Fadaivan-e Khalq (Devotees of the People) and the Maoist splinter groups, the revolution itself was the main source of attraction. The combination of the utopia of the government of the Mahdi, and the glory of the Mahdistic revolution also attracted a large number of the supporters of the Islamic Revolution who would not have supported it had they had a clear idea of what it was to bring about.

All this became possible under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini mainly because of his two important assets. First his charisma, which was largely shaped through his uncompromising stance against the Shah since 1963, and which attracted admiration even from the leftist radicals. Khomeini’s charisma did not evince itself only as a result of his political activism; it also came, as I have already noted, from his being accepted as the deputy of the twelfth Imam by his religious supporters.

1. Ibid, p. 233
The second of Khomeini’s assets was his innovative ideological interpretation of the question of succession to the Prophet Muhammad, which had remained unresolved for centuries and ultimately had rendered the *Imami Shi‘is* apolitical. As I mentioned earlier, Khomeini, for the first time in the *Shi‘i* history, formulated the idea of an Islamic government in the absence of the *Mahdi*. The core of Khomeini’s ideological innovation was his theory of the Islamic government or *velayat-e faqih*.

From Revolutionary Discourse to Utopia

I have already hinted that Ayatollah Khomeini, in his struggle against the *Pahlavi* regime, developed a theory of Islamic government based on a political interpretation of the juridical concept of *velayat-e faqih* (authority of the jurist). He thus connected his discourse of revolution with a recipe of an ideal government that would come out of the revolution. With the growth of the revolutionary movement and the creation of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini’s political discourse gradually became more elaborate. During the 1970s and particularly in the years leading to the revolution, he issued numerous religious and political proclamations from exile in Iraq and later from France in response to the calls within Iran for an alternative political leadership and a different form of government. Khomeini’s revolutionary discourse took shape around the idea of offering this alternative political leadership initially in his treatise on Islamic government (*Hokumat-e Islami*) and later in his politico-religious proclamations. With the victory of the Islamic Revolution, he continued, in further proclamations, speeches and edicts, to make his project for an Islamic government more concrete.

Central to Khomeini’s discourse was the notion of the unjust victimisation of the true Islam in the hand of its historical enemies since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The ideal Islamic political authority was thus proposed to be the power, which was destined to redress this historical injustice. Khomeini offered various examples of the historical attempts perpetrated against true Islam from within and without. He enumerated the plots and attacks of the Meccan aristocracy against the Prophet in the early days of the rise of Islam, and the conspiracies and crimes of the *Umayyads* and *Abbasids* against the *Shi‘i* Imams. He also frequently referred to the present day attempts of the *Wahhabis* in the Saudi Arabia and other conservative leaders of the Islamic countries, whom he accused of distorting Islam in order to justify their subservience to the West. Khomeini also referred to the external attempts from the past till present to destroy or distort Islam, from the Christian Crusades against the Muslims in the Middle Ages through the cultural and military aggression of the Western colonialists and imperialists against the Muslim lands in the last two centuries. He interpreted these events as attempts in the interest of the corrupt power of evil, which was intent on destroying or, if not possible, distorting Islam by emptying it from its revolutionary content.

At its core, Khomeini’s revolutionary discourse was basically a call for a cultural resistance against the enemies of Islam in the modern world at the global level, particularly the alliance of the Western States and their “ unholy creation”, the State of Israel. Of course, he also considered the forces of atheism of the Communist States as enemies of Islam, but he believed that the West ultimately manipulated them as well. 

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2. Ibid, pp. 118-120
His political reading of the velayat-e faqih, backed by references to the Qur'an, the hadith and the earlier Shi'i jurists, enabled Khomeini to present Islam as a fundamentally political religion. This religion, he emphasised, would empower modern Muslim believers to stand against “the superpowers of the West and the East” and the “corrupt Zionist regime”.\(^1\) By frequent references to the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali as political figures, who ruled the Muslim community, he established a credible foreground for his further arguments for the claim of the ulama to political authority.

Toward the late 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini seemed to have become convinced that overthrowing the regime through a revolutionary movement was possible. He thus spoke of a “sacred Islamic movement that, God willing, would lead to cutting off the hands of the instruments of foreigners, those who advocated colonialism, and those who were Westoxicated.”\(^2\) As Dabashi has noted, Khomeini also wrote a letter to then Prime Minister Hoveyda calling his expulsion from Iran illegal and protesting against the coronation ceremony of the Shah at a time of increasing destitute of the population. He deplored the Shah’s extravagance at a time when the economy was bankrupt, foreigners dominated the political and economic matters, democracy and freedom were undermined, and the faith was under assault.\(^3\)

Khomeini also issued a warning to the Pahlavi State: “Fear the anger of God! Beware of the wrath of the people! Do not tamper with the commandments of God Almighty, calling it the progressive religion! Do not jeopardise the Islamic commandments in the name of the Qur'an! Do not behave so violently with the seminarians, the servants of the people and their culture, in the name of conscripting them as useless soldiers! And finally, do not force the ulama of this people to take a different course of action with you.”\(^4\) In the late 1960s, Khomeini continued writing letters and issuing proclamations to his followers instructing them against internal divisions, the spread of the Marxist and other Western ideologies among Muslims, and the necessity of taking advantage of the situation at hand to launch an Islamic political movement.\(^5\)

In developing his theory of velayat-e faqih, Khomeini offered new interpretations of the existing religious texts and traditions in order to lay the foundation of the argument that it was necessary for the preservation of the faith that the ulama directly interfered in politics. At various stages of the development of Khomeini’s political theory, one can see his constant move through these various interpretations. For example in reference to the Qur'anic verse (Nesa: 62), he invoked three main interpretations. This verse has been rendered as follows: “O you, who have faith, obey God, obey the Prophet, and obey the ul-al-amr (the holders of authority) among you.” The variation in the interpretations of this verse has mainly to do with clarification of the identity of the ul-al-amr.

In the 1940s, in his first major text Kashf-al-Asrar (Secrets Exposed), Khomeini by and large offered a variation of the Sunni interpretation of the ul-al-amr. According to this version, the ulama should broadly support the temporal rulers of the Muslim community, who happen to be in power, as something approximating the ul-al-amr, provided that they did not violate - and preferably upheld - the Shari'at.\(^6\) However, it must have been beyond question for Ayatollah Khomeini, as for other Shi'i ulama, that the ul-al-amr unequivocally refers to the twelve ma'soum (infallible)

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\(^{1}\) Ibid, p. 120

\(^{2}\) Ibid, p. 130

\(^{3}\) Khomeini, R. M. Shife-y-e Nur, 1982, pp. 132-133

\(^{4}\) Cited in Dabashi, H. Theology of Discontent, 1993, p. 432

\(^{5}\) Khomeini, R. M. Shife-y-e Nur, 1982, pp. 143-148

\(^{6}\) Khomeini, R. Kashf-al-Asrar, 1943: 187-189
Imams, who had descended from the House of the Prophet. He was perfectly aware that the only truly legitimate and just rule was yet to be established by the Concealed Imam, *Mahdi*, who would emerge from concealment to carry out the promise of instituting the government of absolute justice. Therefore in *Kashf-al-Asrar*, Khomeini qualified the support of the *ulama* for those in government by subjecting the authority of the rulers to the approval of the *ulama* as those, who could decide whether or not the government followed the Islamic Law. Recounting Khomeini’s text, Fischer has pointed to an apparent contradiction in his arguments. On the one hand, Khomeini denied that the *Pahlavi* regime under Reza Shah had legitimacy under the Islamic Law, and on the other, he said that “bad government is better than no government”, and that the *ulama* should not simply attack the government, “but if necessary help it as they did with semi-independent Iraq under the leadership of Mirza Mohammad-Taqhi Shirazi.” Khomeini also cited frequently from the *Qur’an* and *hadith* in order to undermine any attempt at recognising the sultans or kings as the *ul-al-amr*, referring to kings and particularly to Reza Shah as “evil-doers”.

This apparent contradiction reflects a degree of confusion in Khomeini’s thought. Fischer, for example, has pointed to Khomeini’s failure to do justice to the interpretation of the sultan as the *ul-al-amr* by some Shi‘i as well as Sunni *ulama*. Because according to such *ulama*, the caliph, sultan or king may be considered as the *ul-al-amr* only if they publicly obeyed Islam. Also Khomeini’s position in the 1940s has been viewed as a reminiscence of the position of the constitutionalist *ulama* of the early twentieth century who while criticising specific policies of the government, did not question kingship as the legitimate form of government. But one should also appreciate the a degree of harmony that underlies Khomeini’s apparently contradictory position in *Kashf-al-Asrar* according to which the legitimacy of kinship is denied but its overthrow is not proposed.

It makes sense in hindsight that the variation in Khomeini’s position in the 1940s was the inception of the formation of a new theory of State, which would be formulated more explicitly in the 1970s in terms of *velayat-e faqih* (the governance of the jurist). Khomeini’s position in *Kashf-al-Asrar* was, in certain of its aspects, far more advanced in political terms than the position of the constitutionalist *ulama* of the early twentieth century, who still implicitly recognised the legitimacy of the kingship. In *Kashf-al-Asrar*, Ayatollah Khomeini denied this legitimacy clearly, but stopped short of demanding the overthrow of the government due to the recognition that the time was not ripe for such a demand. Khomeini’s position in the 1940s already contained clear indications that he was set to change the Shi‘i apolitical practice that had become customary without any profound doctrinal foundation. This was clearly missing in the positions of the constitutionalist *ulama*.

By 1971, Khomeini was almost at the stage of formulating his final position with respect to the resolution of thus far apparently contradictory relationship of religion and politics in Iran. Fischer notes that Khomeini, in his *Hokumat-e Eslami* (Islamic Government), clearly called for non-co-operation with the government. But he did more than that by proposing the idea, if not the structural details, of a political-institutional alternative to kingship. Against kingship as the central institution of political rule, he offered the idea of Islamic government as the form of a new political regime. His blueprint for the new political order was the theory of *velayat-e faqih*,

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1 Cited from Khomeini’s *Kashf-al-Asrar* in *Sahifey-e Nur*, 1982, p.152
2 Ibid, p.151
3 Ibid, p. 153
which was neither clearly authoritarian nor constitutional in the Western sense, but conditioned by the Qur'an, the traditions of the Prophet and the twelve infallible Imams. Nonetheless, this theory made it clear that in the absence of the Concealed Imam, the just and knowledgeable faqih, who was pronounced to be best equipped to interpret and oversee the implementation of the religious law, could overtake the political leadership of the community.

In Khomeini’s theory, contrary to the past practices, even the implementation of the Shari'at was to be carried out by appointees of the ulama, and hence the government was considered to be Islamic rather than monarchic, democratic, or popular. The idea of velayat-e faqih, as mentioned earlier, is basically derived from the debates over the interpretation of ul-al-amr in the Qur'an (Nesa: 62). In this sense, the just faqih, although he does not partake from the infallibility of the innocent Imams and their intimate knowledge of the Divine Revelation, can and must assume their role as the ul-al-amr in order to provide political leadership for the Muslim community. The ultimate purpose of this political rule, however, is the implementation of the Islamic injunction amr-e be ma'rouf va nahiye az monkar (enjoin good and prohibit evil) in the absence of the Mahdi.

In the early 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini openly called for a political struggle to establish an Islamic government. This struggle would initially take the form of propaganda and agitation in order to attract the support of the public for the idea of an Islamic government; and only then would it proceed to put forward the demand for the overthrow of the monarchic regime.

The Political Success of the Cultural Opposition

The monarchic regime did fall to Khomeini’s struggle due to the material and physical superiority of the Khomeini camp. It was amazing that the victory of the Islamic Revolution over the Shah’s militaristic State, an Khomeini’s goal to establish an Islamic government in February 1979, was achieved mainly through words rather than military might. In fact, there was a real chance that if Khomeini had chosen the path of military confrontation with the Pahlavi monarchy, the Islamic revolutionary movement could have been smashed to pieces in no time at all.

It is true that under the Shah all avenues for peaceful opposition to the regime - even loyal opposition - were blocked; and thus any sort of meaningful political activity faced brutal intolerance via the secret police (SAVAK). As we have seen, this was the case particularly since the defeat of the national movement of the 1950s under Mussadeq and the revelation of the infiltration of the communist Tudeh Party into the highest ranks of the army during the 1940s. As a result, many of the opponents of the regime, particularly the younger and more radical Muslim and leftist intellectuals had turned to armed struggle. And what was left from the secular nationalists and socialists virtually became neutralised by the Shah and played a marginal political role in the periphery of the Islamic Revolutionary movement of the late 1970s.

However, the main religious figures of groups adopted a more sophisticated and, as it turned out, more successful forms of struggle, which was essentially cultural. The religious movement in opposition to the regime, as noted earlier, came out of the agitation of certain reform tendencies, which resulted in a series of schisms within the forces that had taken part in the defeated national movement against the Shah. The religious liberal members of Jebhey-e Melli (the National Front) formed Nehzat-e Azadi (the Liberation Movement), which adopted a mainly cultural and educational strategy to modernise Islam as a social force, and hence make it relevant
to the ordinary people. The Liberation movement, despite its modest beginning, that was mainly in the form of delivering intellectual lectures to young and educated Muslims, played a significant part in shaping the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. Within the context of the religious reform movement of the 1960s and 1970s, personalities like Shari'ati, Motahhari and Bazargan gained public attention and political credibility.

The clerical participation in the national movement had also gone through transformations. Some of the ulama had been radicalised by Ayatollah Kashani and the radical group Fadai'yan-e Eslam (the Devotees of Islam). Others had followed a pragmatic cultural approach to politics under the leadership of Ayatollah Borujerdi, who had devoted himself to reforming the organisation of the official religious establishment. The Shi'i clerical establishment, which was based in Qom and other centres of religious learning such as Esfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz and Shiraz, had long suffered from financial mismanagement and lack of national coherence. Ayatollah Borujerdi had solidified the national unity of the ulama as well as the educational and financial organisation of the religious establishment, and trained such students as Khomeini, who was a key figure in shaping the ideology of the Islamic Revolution and the theory of Islamic government.

The secular and more radical members of the National Front and the Tudeh Party formed the Cherikhay-e Fada'i-y-e Khalq (the Guerrillas Devoted to the People), and the radical Islamic elements of the National Front formed the Mojahedin-e Khalq (People’s Holy Warriors). These two guerrilla groups adopted armed struggle against the regime during the late 1960s and early 1970s, but became marginalised as the popular Islamic movement gained momentum. Their heroism in sacrificing their lives in the name of people seemed like a flash in the pan; neither did it raise a popular consciousness in support of their radical ideas, nor did it incite collective emotions to a degree necessary for joining the guerrilla’s suicidal struggle. The military approach had long since lost its effectiveness world-wide. This had been clearly experienced in the 1960s by the master guerrilla warrior Che Guevara himself in the jungles of Bolivia. The Iranian guerrillas experienced the same fate as that of the great Che, but this time, in Siahkal (a forest area in Alborz Mountains in northern Iran) in 1972.

Ayatollah Khomeini, while in exile in Najaf, had probably realised the ineffectiveness of guerrilla warfare in Iran; whereas, the inheritors of the Siahkal movement had not, and thus continued their irrelevant form of struggle, which gained them no significant position in the Revolution and its aftermath. Of course, their strategy to identify themselves with the “brave martyrs” of Siahkal, and their “heroic” attacks on the already surrendered military barracks, police stations and radio and television stations, gained them some flash credibility during the days of surrender of the monarchy to the mass Islamic movement. But for understandable reasons, this popularity could not be sustained by clinging to outmoded forms of political struggle. The fate of the Iranian guerrillas was like that of Che, because they too failed to arouse the masses against the “hated” ruling regime by heroically sacrificing themselves.

By contrast, the Islamic movement, which rapidly grew through the combination of the theological and jurisprudential discourse of the ulama and the discourse of the Islamic modernist intellectuals, used the power of words in a systematic ideological battle with the Shah’s regime. This battle was fought not in the military battlefield but in an ideological-cultural field over legitimacy in the eye of the

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1 The Iranian leftist guerrillas belatedly later realised that their method of struggle was outmoded. But the Muslim radicals like Mojahedin-e Khalq are yet to understand this.
people at the grass-root level, and was finally won by the ulama. The ideologues of
the Islamic Revolution, with Khomeini at their lead, successfully defeated the Shah’s
attempt to make the ancient pre-Islamic myths and religions into a meaningful
national symbolic structure. In its place, they effectively elevated an initially vague
version of the Shi’i Islam as the core of the identity structure of millions of Iranians.
While the Shah failed to provoke the sensitivity of Iranians to the imaginary of the
glory of the ancient empire, the Islamic ideologues gained popular recognition
through creative interpretation of Islamic symbols of sacrifice and hope, namely
Hussein and Mahdi. These symbols and the narratives associated with them, however
old, were still alive and well, not only in various texts, symbols, narratives and rituals,
but also in the day to day life of the people.

The Islamic Revolution was a clear testimony that no government could
ascend to and stay in power for any length of time by relying only on coercion. The
Shah’s regime, which had enjoyed a degree of legitimacy and popularity in the late
1950s and early 1960s, gradually lost its legitimacy through its ignorance of the
feelings, wishes, interests and values of the people. Ironically, the more the regime
strengthened its military might, the more it lost its legitimate authority in the eye of
the people. To the extent that it enjoyed legitimacy among the substantial sector of the
new middle class, the Shah’s regime kept itself in power by suppressing the radical
dissidents in the margins, such as the ill-fated leftist guerrillas. By the late 1979,
however, it had all but lost its legitimacy; and that was when the most advanced
military equipment and highly trained military commanders and experts were unable
to prop it up.

The Islamic movement, led by the ulama, had virtually no weapons to begin
with. It was scattered and had poor connections and networks. Its financial resources
were meagre and at any rate inadequate; and its means and skills in launching a
violent struggle by no means matched the means and skills at the disposal of the
regime. The Islamic movement thus relied initially almost entirely on a cultural
campaign to destroy the legitimacy of the monarchy as a political system.

The political success of the Islamic movement was in large part due to its
success in winning what Jurgen Habermas has called “the consent of the governed
mobilised for the sake of collective goals.” In his discussion of Hannah Arendt’s
concept of power, Habermas highlights an important aspect of the nature of political
power, namely that exercising power is not merely “instrumentalising another’s will
for one’s own purposes, but the formation of a common will in a communication
aimed at agreement.”1 The secret of the victory of the Islamic movement was in its
prowess to represent itself as the “general will” of the Iranian people. By contrast, the
Pahlavi regime was an example of a political system in decay, which, to follow
Arendt’s analysis of power in her On Violence, had lost “the living power of the
people” to uphold it.2 In other words, it had lost the support of the very people, who
were supposed to lend power to its institutions by consenting to its laws.

Extending the Aristotelian concept of “praxis” in her The Human Condition,
Arendt has held that the human inter-subjectivity built in the process of
communication is the “basic trait of culturally reproduced life.”3 Power is thus
conferred upon the political leadership via the medium of “communicative action”,
which builds upon the consent of the population to create a political community. What
destroys political community is, therefore, “loss of power” in the sense of the

1 Habermas, J. Philosophical-Political Profiles, trans. MIT Press, USA, 1983, P. 172
3 Cited in Habermas, J. trans. 1983, p. 174
collective consent, created in the "public realm", which leads to the breakdown of "communicative action". In such a state, words lose their authority and influence because they are used not to uphold the collective agreement but to destroy the established understandings.

In her study of revolution, Arendt gave attention to what Habermas has summarised as follows: "the power of common conviction, the withdrawal of obedience in relation to institutions that have lost their legitimacy, the confrontation of power generated by free coalition with the physically coercive means of a violent, yet impotent state apparatus, the originaative act of a new political power and the attempt to hold onto the revolutionary departure (in order) to prolong institutionally the communication engendering of power." Here Habermas extends Arendt's concept of power by giving it a "realistic twist", which would free it from the emotional significance that Arendt accords to an idealised version of public agreement on the form and content of the political power. He suggests that all power even the revolutionary power is predicated on the "structural violence" built into political institutions. He also asserts that in the case of legitimate power this violence in not absent but operates in "an unnoticed fashion" in restricting communications, which shapes and prolongs convictions by producing ideologies, which he defines as "illusions that are afforded the power of common convictions."2

A legitimate power is thus one which successfully restricts communication within certain boundaries of language use or using Searle’s terminology, “speech acts” to create convictions that are seen as non-coercive but are imaginary, or in Habermas’s term “illusory”. Using this conceptualisation, one may locate the weakness of the Pahlavi regime in its failure to produce an ideology, which could use the power of hidden structural violence to form a public conviction in its support. The Islamic movement certainly achieved this end in its ideology of the Islamic government based on the imaginary of the Government of Justice to be instituted by the Mahdi.

To be sure, as Habermas suggests, upon the institutionalisation of an ideology, the “illusory” nature of the convictions formed by ideology, more often than not, transforms the ideology from a power generated by “communicative action” to one bent on the suppression of the population. However, to conclude, as Habermas does, that such a process is a fait accompli is somewhat over-pessimistic. To invoke a more “realistic twist” to this conceptualisation, one may argue with Arendt that ultimately there is hope that power generated by the people, despite and perhaps because of its imaginary nature, will retain, or restore, the force of “mutual promise or contract”.3 A contract which would create an obligation among socially free individuals to trust or not to trust power to one or another polity.

A Formula for Clerical Leadership

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini’s theory of State became the centre of controversy over the issues arising about the nature, form and the extent of authority of the Islamic government. The drafting of the new Constitution was the first important battle between opposing visions of the future Islamic State. The main arguments over the nature of Islamic government were, from the very beginning, over the interpretation of the theory of velayat-e faqih. The

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1 Cited in Ibid, p. 177
2 Ibid, p. 184
3 Arendt, H. The Human Condition, Chicago, 1958, p. 244
disputes, as Fischer has suggested, were over the following questions: "Should it (the \textit{velayat-e faqih}) be interpreted as a call for theocracy? Was there a distinction between general moral guidance and daily administration? Would the Islamic form of moral principles not be unacceptably restrictive of human rights, especially those of non-Muslims and secular Muslims? Would the particular living \textit{faqih} of the moment meddle excessively in the affairs of government?"\footnote{Fischer, M. 1980, p. 154}

Khomeini’s arguments in 1979 followed his arguments in 1971, which were formulated in his \textit{Hokumat-e Eslami}. He also followed to a certain degree the arguments of his predecessors in the Constitutional Revolution such as Nuri. However, Khomeini surpassed these earlier traditions by introducing new political and religious ideas, which was not articulated in his 1971 treatise and in the views of his predecessors. With the victory of the revolution, Khomeini did not shift his emphasis on the \textit{velayat-e faqih} as the centrepiece of the Islamic government; but he almost obsessively became concerned with building new political, social, legal and military institutions, which would create a problematic situation. It created the potential for both, an authoritarian theocratic tendency and a tendency to prevent \textit{velayat-e faqih} from becoming an authoritarian position.

The gradual building of major institutions such as \textit{Majlis-e Khobregan} (the Assembly of Experts), \textit{Majlis Showra-ye Eslami} (the Islamic Consultative Assembly), \textit{Showray-e Negahban} (The Council of the Guardians), \textit{Divan-e Aliy-e Keshvar} (the Islamic Supreme Court), \textit{Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab} (the Corp of the Revolutionary Guards), \textit{Jahad-e Sazandegi} (the Construction Jihad), \textit{Showray-e Tashkhis-e Maslehat} (the Expediency Council), and various new ministries, created an intricate system of political, legal, social and military institutions.\footnote{None of Ayatollah Khomeini’s views on this institution building process, expressed since 1979 in various occasions, were articulated in his 1971 treatise.} This multi-layered system of institutions, would not allow the rise of one person or group to the position of supreme authority in the political arena. However, by encouraging saintly acclamations for himself and his insistence that the laws of the Islamic Republic were of sacred value, he created a cult of personality around which an atmosphere of political and religious intolerance flourished.

The requirement of popular election for the entry into positions in some of the new institutions, such as the legislative assembly and the presidency, provided for a clear constitutional avenue for people’s participation in politics. But the membership of many other institutions, such as the council, which had veto power over the legislative and had the authority to disapprove the eligibility of candidates, was gained not by election but by appointment. This situation clearly reduced the total freedom of elections and the power of the elected officials against the appointed officials. Also Khomeini’s revisions of the concept of \textit{velayat-e faqih} in his lifetime and his insistence on \textit{velayat-e motlaq-e faqih} (the absolute governance of jurists) opened avenues for absolutist interpretations of the original concept of \textit{velayat-e faqih}. As I have noted earlier, he also ordered the amendment of the Constitution to reflect this revision.

Even the standard references to the interpretations of the \textit{velayat-e faqih}, such as those put forward by Ayatollah Shariatmadari and Ayatollah Makarem as conforming to a “fully democratic form of government”, could not diffuse Khomeini’s zeal to combine democratic and traditional institutions to actualise his version of Islamic government. One reason for this failure was probably that the political movement formed with the blessing of Ayatollah Shariatmadari, known as
Hezb-e Khalq-e Musalman (the Muslim People’s Party), although it was joined by some liberals, was itself influenced by conservative ulama, hard-line nationalists and die-hard monarchists, who were not very enthusiastic about democracy. Yet, this movement was a strong advocate of the separation of the Church and State, and its demise was another blow to liberal interpretations of the political role of religion in the post-revolution power struggle.

Khomeini’s version of the velayat-e faqih was vehemently against the separation of the State and Church, a position, which seemed contradictory with his modern revolutionary rhetoric. Clerics such as Shariatmadari would probably consent to the separation of religion and politics in the sense of opposing the direct rule of the clergy. Shariatmadari’s political standing was basically conservative advocating the preservation of the traditional role of the ulama as the providers of legitimacy for the State from the sidelines. In fact, he initially had expressed his dismay with the fall of the monarchy. He probably preferred to see the institution of a reformed monarchy as a bulwark against republicanism and socialism.

Conversely, it was ironic that such politically radical figures as Ayatollah Khomeini had to be so obsessed with the fusion of politics and religion. In this sense, Khomeini’s interpretation of religious politics was to a large extent similar to that of Shari’ati, a fact that he probably did not like to appreciate, given the anti-clerical attitudes of Shari’ati. Like Shari’ati, Khomeini warned against the “Western arguments to give up religious fanaticism (ta’assub)”

Accordingly, the attempt of the West to promote the idea of division of politics and religion among Muslims was in order to render Muslims politically impotent.

Khomeini’s Theory of State

Ayatollah Khomeini once said: “Islam is the religion of militant individuals who are committed to truth and justice. It is the religion of those who desire freedom and independence. It is the school of those who struggle against imperialism. But, the servants of imperialism have presented Islam in a totally different light. They have created in men’s minds a false notion of Islam. The defective version of Islam, which they have presented in the religious teaching institutions is intended to deprive Islam of its vital revolutionary aspect.” This passage is, to a large extent, indicative of Khomeini’s political reading of Islam, one that decisively enhanced his popularity and resulted in the eclipse of the grand Ayatollahs who expressed reservation about revolutionary behaviour. As revolutionary anger, enthusiasm and activity grew, Khomeini’s refusal to make any compromise with the monarchy, his anti-imperialist stance and his insistence on the necessity of the Islamic government appealed to Muslim masses. The grand Ayatollahs who stressed rather a return to full implementation of the 1910 Constitution were bound to lose influence to the more uncompromising Khomeini.

Ayatollah Khomeini had begun to think seriously about an Islamic government as an alternative to the Shah’s regime since the 1960’s. As we have seen, in his 1941 publication, Kashf-al- Asrar (Secrets Exposed), Khomeini was still concerned with the threat to Islam as a religious tradition, and made an effort to defend Islam particularly against the threats to Islamic values. His mainly defensive political strategy at this time was based on forwarding demands for participation in politics as a political force. He also advocated the implementation of the 1910

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1 Ibid, p. 155
Constitution, which recognised the monarchical system, but placed religious checks and controls on the political power of the State. He had not yet made any suggestions as to the seizure of the whole of the State apparatus and the formation of an Islamic government. He wrote: “We do not say that government must be in the hands of the faqih, rather we say that government must be run in accordance with God’s law, for the welfare of the country. And the people demand this, and it is not feasible except with the supervision of the religious leaders. In fact, this principle has been approved and ratified in the Constitution, and in no way conflicts with public order, the stability of the government, or the interests of the country.”

Shahrrough Akhavi has described Kashf-al-Asrar as a mild defence of the monarchical system, purportedly essential to keep order. Akhavi claimed that the logic for the defence of the monarchy by the ulama was that a bad government was better than no government. However, as Algar has stressed, Khomeini’s uncompromising and radical position was evident even in Kashf-al-Asrar. For example, criticising Reza Shah in Kashf-al-Asrar, Khomeini wrote: “All the orders issued by the dictatorial regime of the bandit Reza Khan have no value at all. The laws passed by his (Reza Shah’s) parliament must be scrapped and burned. All the idiotic words that proceeded from the brain of that illiterate soldier are rotten; and it is only the law of God that will remain and resist the ravages of time”

Khomeini’s position in Kashf-al-Asrar, therefore, could not be interpreted simply as a defence of the Pahlavi regime. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that up until the 1960s, Khomeini’s political attitude, by and large, fitted into the traditionalist position. Even in the early 1960s, Ayatollah Khomeini did not yet see himself as engaged in all-out opposition to the regime; rather he still hoped to persuade the Shah and his advisors, albeit from an authoritative position, to adopt Islamic policies. A famous speech of Khomeini in 1962, nearly one year before the 1963 uprising, supports this claim. It also clearly exposes the traces of political radicalism in Khomeini’s thought at the time: “The independence of all the Islamic countries is owing to the ulama. It is they who have so far defended Islamic sovereignty; it has also been these invaluable men who have always calmed the rebellious masses. Otherwise, Islam makes insurrection and rebellion the imperative duties of the ulama ... Why don’t the government understand this? Why are they trying, by every means, to alienate and break the support of the ulama? ... Why do they not instead rely on the ulama? ... I advise the Shah not to lose this force!”

What brought about the change in Khomeini’s stance? Benard and Khalilzad attribute this change to “the combustible joining of new social forces with foreign interference” and the pressure of “the multiplied domestic and international conflicts.” This situation, they argue: “led some sections of traditionalists, including Khomeini, to the conclusion that the traditional balance was too threatened to be salvageable by the customary means, and that to fight only for restoration of their traditional position in the old pattern this time would be eventual defeat.” Therefore, the radical ulama came to the conclusion that the dynamics of the situation would in time sweep them away unless they took over the control of the State and radically transformed the cultural, social and political system. As Bayat has suggested Khomeini’s theocratic ideas flew mainly from his concern at threats to Shi‘i Islam in its entirety, caused by the penetration of modern

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1 Ibid, p. 170
2 Akhavi, S. 1980, p. 163
3 Algar, H. 1980/1981, p. 21
5 Benard, C. & Khalilzad, Z. 1984, p. 37
ideas into society. He envisaged the probability that an Islamic decline would consign the ulama to the margins of the modern society.

From a typically hostile position, Marvin Zonis and Daniel Brumberg have pointed out: "Khomeini capitalised on the widespread sense of alienation, frustration and rage brought about by rapid socio-economic change in Iran ... during the early and mid-1970’s ... in order to encourage, a narrow, violent and anti-western version of Islam." But in a more moderate argument, Gregory Rose has pointed to “Khomeini’s conviction that the Muslim world is confronted with a crisis of the fundamental identity," resulting in its “apparent political, military, scientific, economic and moral debilitation." In this sense, Khomeini’s concern with identity underlied his undertaking to generate “an institutional milieu” for the revolutionary transformation of the collective consciousness of Muslims into an ideologically shaped Islamic identity.

For Khomeini’s movement to be realised in an Islamic government, the doctrinal and practical orientations of Shi‘ism regarding the relationship between religion and politics had to be fundamentally restructured, and Ayatollah Khomeini was the man to do this. His programme, therefore, aimed at the formation of a State apparatus equipped with an Islamic ideology powerful enough to implement a perfectionist version of Shari‘at through a systematic change of social culture.

Ayatollah Khomeini viewed the Shari‘at as “an instrumentality for moulding consciousness through conditioning behaviour.” The State, in this context, was regarded as the executive branch of the will of the ulama, as the custodians of the faith, to carry out the task of making social behaviour conform to the edicts of the religious law. According to Khomeini: “It is obvious how much care Islam devotes to government and the political and economic relations of society, with the goal of creating conditions conducive to the production of morally upright and virtuous human beings.”

In 1970, Ayatollah Khomeini delivered a series of lectures on the velayat-e faqih (governance of the jurist), which later appeared in print under the same title. In this text Khomeini, referring among others to Mulla Ahmad Naraqi, a nineteenth century jurist, claimed that the ulama had the same political responsibilities as the Prophet and the Imams. His main arguments in his lectures on the velayat-e faqih were twofold. Firstly, that the best vehicle for the implementation of the Islamic laws was the Islamic government; and secondly, that the best people to lead this government were the “just jurists”, who were the successors of the Prophet and the Imams in holding political authority. Later in the same year, he also sent a letter to his followers in Iran in which he openly attacked the Pahlavi regime as responsible for all political, social and economic problems of Iran. Both in his letters and proclamations, and in his lectures on the velayat-e faqih, Khomeini coherently argued from a juridical standpoint that the divine laws of Islam were superior to man-made laws and must be implemented in a Muslim society.

Ayatollah Khomeini based his argument both on a common-sense reasoning and on doctrinal necessities. He argued that an Islamic government was doctrinally mandatory in order to uphold the sacred law; and it was more than logical that the operation of the sacred law would be most effective at the hands of those who were

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1 Bayat, M. 1983, pp. 30-42
2 Zonis M. & Brumberg, D. in Kramer, M. ed. 1987, p. 48
4 Ibid, p. 183
5 Khomeini, R. M. trans. 1981, pp. 43-44
7 Ibid, 1978, p. 28
According to Khomeini, the Islamic government was an urgent necessity at present lest the obligations placed on the believers by the faith would remain unfulfilled. He thus proclaimed that the assumption of political authority by the able and qualified jurists was a responsibility and the popular struggle to achieve this an obligation. Referring to a hadith from the sixth Shi'i Imam, Khomeini claimed that the jurists were the successors of the Prophet and the Imams, and although they could not claim to be possessing their divine purity (esmaf), they could take up their social, legal and political responsibilities. According to Khomeini, this was a common-sense argument, as the affairs of the Muslim community could not be left to negligence during the Occultation of the Concealed Imam.

The Institutional Basis of the Political Velayat-e Faqih

As I have noted, Khomeini’s reading of the concept of the velayat-e faqih was the theoretical basis for a State institution that would ensure the rigorous application of the Shari’at to the Muslim community. Wilfred Cantwell Smith is quoted as defining faith as “the personal making of what is cosmically true come true on earth - the actualisation of truth.” Khomeini believed in the possibility and necessity of a social uniformity, which would embody the actualisation of perfection. In this sense, there could be found in his arguments certain characteristics pertaining to Plato’s ideal model for political leadership, the philosopher-king.

Khomeini pursued the utopian mission of building an ideal State structure, based on individual and social stoicism and solemnity. He frequently envisaged Iran as a divine entity, insisting on the essential existence of a divine nation devoted to the cause of Allah. As such, Khomeini advocated the use of the Shari’at to enforce doctrinal uniformity. As Rose suggests: “while there is no question that the Shari’at is traditionally regarded as a means of educating man in his divinely decreed responsibilities, there has rarely been an attempt in Shi’i Islam to use the Shari’at to enforce private doctrinal uniformity.” Perhaps, this was the reason that for all its devotion to sublime divinity, Khomeini’s project, when implemented on earth, entailed a strong measure of violence. For some time, it sanctioned a virulent carnage in the name of divinity.

There are indications that the theory of velayat-e faqih was originated in a dispute between Khomeini’s students and those of Ayatollah Abol-Qasem Kho’i, another religious leader - an indication of the critical background of this theory. Ayatollah Kho’i, a learned marja-e taqlid in his own right, had told his students that political velayat (authority) of the jurist did not exist. Apparently, it was in responding to this pronouncement that Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly claimed that a learned and just jurist had the same political authority that the Prophet and the Imams had.

Of course, as I have noted earlier, Khomeini did not claim that the faqih enjoyed the intrinsic (zati) individual attributes of the Imams - their infallibility and their knowledge of the divine secrets. But he argued that the extrinsic (e’etebari) powers of the immaculate Imams - their social and political authority - could be delegated to the qualified faqih. As a precursor of Ayatollah Motahhari, Ayatollah

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1 Ibid., pp. 47-48
2 Ibid., p. 69
3 Ibid., 142-143
4 Ibid., p. 102
7 Ibid., p. 183
8 Ibid., p. 63
Khomeini criticised the conservative ulama for neglecting their political responsibilities, and for limiting themselves to the study of what he referred to as trivial questions - codes of cleanliness, sexuality, menstruation, etc.¹

While Ayatollah Khomeini argued that political velayat-e faqih could be supported by reason alone, he naturally referred to arguments from the Islamic traditions for analogies, which could verify his theological innovation. In the tradition of Fada’iyan-e Islam, he enthusiastically referred to the political militancy of the Prophet himself and that of the early Imams, notably Imam Ali and Imam Hussein. He drew on the myth of martyrdom (shahadat), as did the Islamic modernists like Shari’ati and Motahhari, and designated the Muharram flagellation processions as a potent vehicle to bring out the spirit of militancy. The paradigm of Ashura was a collective and potent source of revolutionary inspiration for these men. It was perceived as a symbol for active resistance against injustice indicating the necessity of being killed for the cause of justice.² Khomeini had only to reaffirm this symbolic paradigm and give it sharpness and clarity.

Some scholars have tied Khomeini’s praise of martyrdom to his tendency to legitimise suicidal behaviour.³ In fact, by encouraging his followers to relive the martyrdom of Hussein, he boosted their courage in the physical confrontation with those whom they believed were the enemies of Islam. In this sense, Khomeini fulfilled Shari’ati and Motahhari’s desire to move the concept of martyrdom from a mythical framework to an ideological one.

Ayatollah Khomeini revived the Shi’i imaginary that portrayed the Shi’i believers as “the very incarnation of suffering at the hands of an unjust and oppressive rule.”⁴ He thus filled the people with a nostalgic aspiration for struggle against oppression. At the same time, quite distinct from Shari’ati’s tendency to leaving out of discussion or categorically rejecting the abstentionist tradition of taqiyya (prudent dissimulation), Khomeini, in line with Motahhari, gave an innovative interpretation of this concept. After all, taqiyya was the practice of the later ma’soum (infallible) Imams who had urged their followers to adopt a similar attitude. Khomeini’s clerical background necessitated his adherence to the practised religious traditions. Otherwise his prestige as a learned faqih would have been endangered. His project thus involved a doctrinal innovation, which justified taqiyya in certain conditions, but suggested that the time was now appropriate for moving out of the state of taqiyya and transit from political abstentionism to political activism.

The Juridical Basis of the Political Velayat-e Faqih

Khomeini’s theory of velayat-e faqih was an audacious innovation in the history of Imami Shi’ism. It took shape through the radicalisation of the early Usuli arguments, which had established legal and religious authority of the Shi’i mujtahids, and as such had created a theoretical duality of religious and temporal powers. According to Khomeini’s version of the velayat-e faqih, this duality ought to be eliminated in favour of religion. Having firmly rejected the separation of religion and politics, Khomeini argued that the mandate of the jurist meant governing and administering the country and implementing the provisions of the sacred law.⁵ For

¹ Ibid, p. 38
² Shari’ati, A. Shahadat, 1977, p. 56
³ Zonis & Brumberg in Kramer, M. ed. 1987, p. 54
⁴ Ibid, p. 56
⁵ Khomeini, R. M. trans. 1981, p. 64
him, in the absence of the Concealed Imam, sovereignty lay with qualified jurists from the ranks of the Shi‘i ulama, who as the authoritative interpreters of the sacred law were entitled to rule.

Broadly speaking, Shi‘i fiqh (jurisprudence), developed in the lifetime of the last six Imams and thereafter, held that velayat derived from the universal authority of the twelve immaculate and infallible Imams. Since the occultation of the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, the right to exercise such authority was theoretically reserved for him until such time as he reappeared and took charge for himself. As we have seen, the Usuli tradition, which dominated the Shi‘i fiqh in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, delegated some of this authority to Shi‘i religious leaders, ulama, foqaha, and mujtahids. Accordingly, the Shi‘i jurists could exercise authority over certain areas of community life traditionally designated as the domain of the authority of the ulama. They could, for example, function as guardians of the property of the orphans, minors and widows, as well as the administrators of the charitable funds and endowments, and governors of mosques, religious colleges, sacred sites and shrines. And more importantly, as judges they could preside over the religious courts. There was also a Qur‘anic basis for the ulama to claim guardianship over the welfare of the Muslim community. This derived from a Qur‘anic verse which urged the Muslims to command good and forbid the reprehensible (amr-e be marouf and nahy-e az monkar). It is considered to be one of the important rulings of the Shi‘i fiqh.

This latter area of the ulama authority, especially with the intensification in antagonism between the State and religious authorities in modern times, led to instances of the ulama intervention on behalf of victims of injustice and oppression by petitioning the secular authority. The Tobacco protest movement of 1891-92, discussed earlier, is a good example of the ulama activity at redressing social grievances. These instances, most probably, facilitated Khomeini’s political reading of the Shi‘i fiqh. However, there existed no unanimity among the Shi‘i scholars with respect to the claim that jurists enjoyed a velayat empowering them to exercise direct political authority. This was most certainly the novel contribution of Ayatollah Khomeini to the Shi‘i fiqh.

To be sure, there was an understanding among the post-constitutional Shi‘i mujtahids over the right of the jurists to engage in political activities, aimed at redressing injustices or protecting the religious and moral standards of Islam. The last of such activities was Ayatollah Borujerdi’s rejection of the Land Bill of 1961, which resulted in the temporary withdrawal of the Bill. However, the extension of political activities to include actual administration of government, and institutional control over political processes, advocated by Khomeini, could be seen as violating the doctrine of Occultation, which saw any temporal authority as illegitimate in the absence of the Mahdi. To support his innovative reading of the Shi‘i fiqh, Khomeini cited a hadith, reported in Wasa‘il al-Shi‘i in which Imam Jafar al-Sadiq urged the Shi‘i believers to seek judgement in matters of disagreement not from the temporal rulers but from the Shi‘i jurists.

As Rose has suggested, Wasa‘il is a commonly used text for easy citation of the hadith, and is not as authoritative as, for example, Kulaini’s Usul al-Kafi. Accordingly, the version of the hadith that Ayatollah Khomeini cited from Wasa‘il, in the older and more authoritative Usul al-Kafi, specifically limits the ulama authority to matters of legal judgement, and does not extend their authority to political matters.

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1 The Qur’an, Chapter 9, verse 112
This criticism was also levelled at Ayatollah Khomeini by the contemporary conservative ulama, such as Ayatollah Shariatmadari and Sheikh Ali Tehrani, who both drew on the tradition of Shi'i fiqh to reject political velayat-e faqih as interpreted by Khomeini. This tradition was recognised by many of the early as well as recent prominent Shi'i theologians. Tusi in his Tibyan (11th century), Tabrisi in Majma' al-Bayan, (12th century), Ardabili in Zubdat al-Bayan (16th century) and even contemporary Tabatabai in Tafsir al Mizan (written in 1950's and 1960's), restricted the rightful political authority to the Prophet and the infallible Imams.

Ayatollah Khomeini probably recognised that his extending of the domain of the arguments of the early Usuli jurists from legal authority of the ulama to their political authority was radical, compared with dominant Shi'i views. Perhaps, his effort to cast his argument in terms of a revival of the glory of early Islam and his frequent references to the Prophet and the militant Imams in preference to later Shi'i traditions arose from this recognition. Rose has noticed the frequent citation of the sunnat (traditions) of the Prophet, Imam Ali and Imam Hussein in Khomeini's Hokumat-e Islami (The Islamic Government), and stressed the importance of these early Islamic leaders to Khomeini as “paradigms of revolutionary Islamic identity.”

Here it should be noted that although Khomeini's political thought was informed by multiple sources, his distinctly political reading of the velayat-e faqih is best understood in the context of the ideological contest between the Shi'i ulama and the State over the interpretation of the doctrine of Occultation (Gheybat), or concealment of the Mahdi. On the one hand, the conflict between the ulama and the State was attributed to a reading of the doctrine of Occultation, which denied legitimacy to the temporal ruler. On the other hand, the activation of the doctrine of Occultation from time to time inspired millenarian movements. The role of the ulama in containing such outbursts at the cost of recognition and accommodation of the religious authority by the State had created a de facto dual authority of the State and the ulama.

This dual authority had become somewhat obscure under the Safavids, but was reiterated afterwards with the dominance of the Usuli School, which established the legal authority of the mujtahids. Under the Qajar dynasty this duality was most conspicuous in the symbiosis of the Shari'at (religious) and the 'urf (civil) courts. The conflict intensified in modern times in response to rapid modernisation, and the refusal of the State to come to terms with the religious authority. With the activation of the doctrine of Occultation this time, the ulama made no attempt to contain revolutionary aspirations of the population. Far from it, Ayatollah Khomeini's innovative reading of Shi'ism, his stress on social justice and the activation of millenarianism, contributed to the formation of a revolutionary ideology which placed its bearers at the lead of the revolutionary forces.

Modern Sources of Khomeini’s Political Thought

Although Khomeini himself has not acknowledged the influence of Islamic modernism on his thought, there is ample evidence to demonstrate such an influence. As such, Khomeini’s political thought was not shaped only by the revolutionary archetypes of the early Islam. Modern Islamic thinkers and recent radical movements in the Muslim world also inspired his thought. No doubt, a conspicuous character of Ayatollah Khomeini was that he was a man of faith. His notion of faith, however,

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1 Ibid, p. 181

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departed from tradition in its modern political content. Several traces of modern thought can be recognised in Khomeini’s politico-religious faith.

First, there is the notion of revolution. The concept of revolution as cyclic movement of history is an ancient concept. But the concept of revolution as a means of fundamental social and political transformation of societies is a modern concept going back to the eighteenth century Europe. I have already noted the appropriation of the modern concept of revolution by the Islamic modernists in Iran such as Shari’ati and Motahhari to enhance the social and political position of Islam in the modern world. In the 1950’s the Egyptian Seyyed Qotb, also put forward the idea of revolution to elaborate his revolutionary Islamic ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ekhvan al Muslimeen). Seyyed Qotb was probably the first Islamic activist to put forward the idea of the creation of an Islamic government, by means of an Islamic revolution, in order to implement the Shari’at.¹

These reflections could not have gone unheeded by Ayatollah Khomeini and the militant Shii ulama who were avidly aware of such literature. In this sense, Khomeini was also concerned with an Islamic revival by revolutionary means. For him though, this revolutionary transformation would be most effective if it were accompanied by a collective behavioural transformation. According to Rose: “For Khomeini, faith (was) an attitude and behaviour that embodied in the world a revolutionary struggle for that state of well-being, which God intends for man. Faith for Khomeini entailed revolutionary activity... The activities of Muslim life were meaningless ritual without this revolutionary context.”² His attitude about the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) was indicative of his revolutionary reading of Muslim rituals. He repeatedly urged the Muslims to use the hajj ritual to protest against the “world arrogance” (estekbar-e jahani).³

Second, there is the concept of alienation. I have already noted the significance of the notion of alienation in the Islamic modernist thought. In Khomeini’s notion of the revolutionary struggle against zulm (oppression) and Shirk (polytheism), he like other Islamic modernists was very much concerned with the question of Islamic identity and what he saw as the attempt of the West to alienate Muslim societies from their origins. In his concept of alienation, traces of the writings of Islamic modernists like Shari’ati and Al-e Ahmad are recognisable. However, he differed from these two by incorporating the question of alienation into a complex of philosophical and jurisprudential concepts.

Ayatollah Khomeini’s interest in falsafa (philosophy) and irfan (mysticism) was also at odds with the orthodox views in jurisprudential Shii ism, which tended to repress philosophical and mystical themes as heterodoxy. Mystical arguments such as those of Sohrevardi, which interpreted the Qur’an at differentiated esoteric (bateni) and exoteric (zaheri) levels, or attributed intrinsic (zati) and extrinsic (e’etebari) characteristics to the prophet and the immaculate Imams, were considered neo-platonic and as such non-Islamic by some orthodox ulama. Khomeini was one of few modern Shii jurists who took a limited interest in speculative and non-scholastic thought, and on occasion, involved himself in mystical arguments. He even advocated the incorporation of irfan and falsafa into religious sciences at equal level with the fiqh.⁴ As Algar has pointed out, Khomeini gained a reputation in the Qom seminary “as an exponent of these two disciplines.”⁵ He used philosophical and mystical arguments

¹ For more information on Seyyed Qotb’s revolutionary interpretation of Islam, see Haddad, Y. “Qur’anic Justification of Revolution: The View of Seyyed Qotb”, The Middle Eastern Journal, Vol. 37, No. 1, 1983.
² Rose, G. in Keddie, N. R. 1983, p. 182
³ Khomeini categorised the United States, the Soviet union and Israel as estekbar-e jahani (the world arrogance)
⁴ Khomeini, R. M. trans. 1981, pp. 30-31
⁵ Algar, H. 1980, p. 20
to bring new views into the Shi‘i jurisprudence, which had become a mere collection of religious rulings on personal hygiene, regulation of sexual intercourse and small economic transactions. He wanted to make jurisprudence able to respond to modern social and political exigencies such as the question of identity crisis, cultural imperialism, etc.

Third, there is the notion of ideology. To Khomeini, faith was identified with ideology and ideological unity. His concept of ideology was in many respects comparable with Western ideologies like Marxism. Akhavi has indicated that Khomeini’s ideological interpretation of Islam has questioned Daniel Bell’s claim in the late 1950’s that our age had seen the end of ideology.¹ He has compared Khomeini’s ideological innovation in Shi‘i fiqh to that of Lenin in the context of Marxism.² Indeed, in formulating the Shi‘i Islam into a political ideology and advocating the urgency of a revolution, he played in Shi‘i terms the role that Lenin played in the context of Marxism.

Lenin offered an innovative interpretation of classical Marxism against Kautsky and other Marxist theorists, who had rejected the possibility of a socialist revolution in a relatively backward country such as Russia of the early twentieth century. He argued that the Communists could seize power in Russia relying on their vanguard party, and he proved to be right in that respect. Khomeini too had to offer a new interpretation of the Shi‘i fiqh, which according to its classical theorists had no hope of offering itself as a political ideology. He argued that the ulama could seize political power relying on the extension of their juridical authority to politics, and he was proved right in that respect.

Khomeini’s concern with ideology was characterised by belief and action aimed at objectifying the myth of a perfect Islamic society through revolutionary struggle; and as such, it has had serious repressive implications. But, his passion for building political institutions in order to free the State apparatus from dependence on individual personalities inhibited the concentration of power in the hands of one or two individuals or groups. His tendency to cast his arguments in philosophical and mystical terms has also made his ideological formulations open to speculation and interpretation by Muslim philosophers and modernist thinkers. However, as I mentioned earlier, Khomeini’s zeal for ideological uniformity has had absolutist connotations, characterised by belief and action aimed at objectifying the myth of a perfect Islamic community in a literal sense. As such, it has had serious repressive implications.

Fourth, Khomeini’s faith in the political implementation of the Shari’at has had totalitarian connotations. These totalitarian tendencies entailed the exercise of an all-encompassing control over the life of the community for several years after the revolution, and it is only recently that there have been signs of change in these tendencies. One reason for the growth of totalitarian tendencies under Ayatollah Khomeini was probably that his thought contained serious anti-liberal sentiments, so much so that his revolutionary concerns exposed strong regressive aspects in his lifetime. As such, he denounced the constitutional revolutionaries of the early twentieth century as Western oriented, and at times went as far as branding them a bunch of British agents.³ Khomeini repeatedly supported the views of Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, the anti-constitution mujtahid of the early twentieth century, who

¹ Akhavi, S. in Rosen, B. ed. P. xii
² Ibid, introduction
advocated a constitution conditioned by the *Shari'at*, rather than one based on the Western liberal ideology.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that Khomeini’s politics can be fitted into the narrow frame of reference of personalities such as Nuri. The references of Khomeini to Nuri were meticulously selective and almost entirely rested on the defence of Islam against the domination of Western liberalism as the only form of political life. He used Nuri to point out that the Constitutional Revolution failed because it did not remain true to the Islamic ideals, which were both revolutionary and tantamount to freedom and human dignity. Khomeini seriously differed from Nuri in his support for modern political institutions, and his campaign against religious traditionalism, political conservatism and vested interests.

Fifth, there is Khomeini’s radical internationalism. His internationalist concerns most probably arose from the establishment of a world economy with the Western countries at its centre and with the Third World countries in general, and the Muslim nations in particular, confined to a peripheral status.\(^1\) Within the context of the formation of a world economy, *Sunni* Islam had already begun to put forward the idea of a revolutionary restructuring of the world order in favour of Islam. This was remarkably expressed in the notion of the unity of State and religion advocated by the Islamic resurgence in Indo-Pakistan and Egypt. Lerman has noted the declaration in the 1920’s by the Indian Muslim Abdul-Ala Mawdudi that Islam as a revolutionary ideology could and must upset the world status quo by the means of *jihad* (holy war), and create a fresh social order based on Islam.\(^2\)

Sixth, there is Khomeini’s anti-imperialism. Although, the *ulama* were opposed to the Western encroachment since the nineteenth century, Khomeini’s concern with the modern concept of anti-imperialism was most probably informed indirectly by international Marxism and especially by the leftist propaganda within Iran. Yet, Khomeini’s anti-imperialism was distinguishable from that of the leftists in its religious articulation. As Afrashteh has pointed out: “Khomeini revived the Islamic concept of world bipolarism, thus dividing the world into two intrinsically antagonistic components; Islam and *Kufr* (infidelity).\(^3\)

Furthermore, with the increasing dependence of the Iranian economy on the United States it was not difficult to mainstream anti-imperialist sentiments against the U.S. As William Beeman has indicated, the United States stood out in the minds of Iranians because of its enormous presence, and because it shared “an historical legacy with Iran’s old nemesis, Great Britain.”\(^4\) Indeed, this view of the United States intensified popular hatred for the Shah on the basis of the perception that the Shah had sold out his people to American interests. Apart from the U.S. economic dominance in Iran, as noted earlier, the imposition of the right of extra-territoriality in 1964 for the American non-diplomats living in Iran was felt as a humiliating concession by the Iranian government to Americans and outraged many Iranians.\(^5\)

Khomeini’s rejection of the contemporary world order goes hand in hand with his anti-imperialism. In this sense, he rejected both “the decadent West and the atheist Communist States”. Zonis and Brumberg have pointed to the belief that *Shi’i*"
believers are “the righteous few dominated by an innately wrongful majority” to explain the anti-world order attitude of Khomeini. Accordingly, “the standards for conducting social and human affairs, as established by the leading powers of the world community, are false”. Gholam Afkhami has noted the appeal of such an attitude to enthusiastic Iranians and claims that it appeals to “the darker side of the human psyche as when one may admire Hitler for having almost succeeded in destroying the World.”

All the above-mentioned elements converged to form the share of modern thought in Khomeini’s worldview. These were, as we have seen, combined with the traditions of Shi'i fiqh, the militancy of early Islam, and the belief in the second coming of the Mahdi to shape Khomeini’s theory of velayat-e faqih as a theory of revolution and a theory of State. His theory of State was not elaborated before the 1978-79 revolution. It took its definite shape in the process of the actual formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nevertheless, the general idea of Islamic government was extensively utilised in the revolutionary slogans and pamphleteering to create a clear perception of a desirable alternative to the Pahlavi State in the public mind. This alternative imaginary of a would-be Islamic State was so powerful as a real motivational force that, it can be argued, without it the revolution could not have gathered enough momentum to topple the mighty Pahlavi regime.

From Imagination to Revolutionary Action

Khomeini’s total dedication to a revolutionary struggle marked the last stage of the construction of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution. It was at this final stage that the revolution was posed as the forerunner of the imaginary of a utopian Islamic State. In order to bring to power an Islamic government, Khomeini thus had to permit the extension of the passive resistance against the regime to a vocal expression of discontent and standing up to the violence of the regime with violence where necessary. To bring the struggle for the defence of the faith to fruition and secure the appropriate means for the defence of the Islamic culture, he thus sanctioned a limited armed struggle. But he did this only when he perceived the imminent downfall of the regime.

In order to promote the cause of the revolution, particularly in the late 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini appealed to the ordinary believers, particularly the youth to rise against the regime as part of their religious duty. He elevated them to the level of the warriors of the early Islam who fought with the Prophet and became martyrs. He also allocated part of the religious taxes (sahm-e emam) in his disposal to be spent on the families of those imprisoned or killed in struggle against the regime. In order to reach audiences beyond the professed Shi'i believers, he insisted on the unity of the Muslims world-wide, regardless of their sectarian differences, against the common enemies of Islam.

As I have mentioned earlier, Khomeini encouraged the political use of the religious occasions and rituals, such as the hajj pilgrimage, the Friday congregations for prayer, etc. in order to promote his Islamic cause. He also used the less religiously loaded vocabulary of the unity of the oppressed against what he saw as neo-colonialist and imperialist aggression in order to attract the non-Muslim revolutionaries. He also

1 Zonis & Brumberg in Kramer, M. ed. 1987, pp. 52-53
4 Dabashi, H. Theology of Discontent, 1993, p. 455
relied on mystical concepts in order to both create a sense of personal excitement and ecstasy in his followers preparing them for the ultimate sacrifice, and impose an inner conviction on these followers to uphold the principles of piety expected from the believers. In this context, he used the concepts of *jihad-e akbar* (the greater war) and *jihad-e asqar* (the lesser war) to denote the war against impious inner desires of man and the struggle against the external enemies emphasising the importance of the personal effort at purity of the soul and practice. He frequently used the concept of mystical love and aspiration for death to join with God in order to encourage the believers not to fear from life-threatening actions against the regime.

Ayatollah Khomeini also used the mystical concept of *ensan-e kamel* (perfect man) to encourage the believers to engage in ascetic and spiritual exercises that was required to make individuals perfect. His emphasis on individual qualities of a perfect man was to highlight his own exemplary qualities, which could be found only in the saintly figures, such as Imam Ali and Imam Hussein. Although, he always referred to these figures with total dedication and humility, and insisted that their qualities were unmatched by ordinary man, he enjoyed an underlying contentment that he was emulating their lifestyle. Therefore, in his discourse of revolution, these figures were used to undermine the earthly qualities of the Shah, his luxurious lifestyle, his indulging in worldly pleasure and his subservience to the stronger powers.

Khomeini compared himself to Imam Ali whom he used as a model for political leadership of the Muslim society, whereas he compared the Shah to Yazid, the debauched *Umayyad* Caliph, and “the murderer of Imam Hussein”. The five-year period of Ali’s Caliphate in the mid-seventh century was for Khomeini “an archetypal model for all legitimate modes of political order”, where justice reigned supreme due to the individual asceticism of Ali, who would never go to bed “with a full stomach when his subjects (were) awake hungry.” This degree of piety and asceticism was then compared with the extravagance of the Shah who would spend millions of dollars on parties and feasts organised for the foreign dignitaries and businessmen, while Iranian people were suffering from destitution. With a coherent and comprehensive approach to various issues concerning the revolution and the Islamic government, Ayatollah Khomeini successfully elevated himself to the position of a charismatic figure with ascetic qualities, Islamic conviction and modern revolutionary credentials. He thus created, as Dabashi has suggested: “a tangible and convincing reciprocity between the contemporary political exigencies and the doctrinal and symbolic repertoire of the Islamic collective consciousness.”

Khomeini did not approve of the kind of Islam advocated by Shari’ati, Taleqani and the *Mojahedin* because of the leaning of their interpretations of the faith toward socialist concepts. Nor did he support the Islam of the traditional *ulama* due to their lack of appreciation for political activism. Instead, he insisted that Islam was both religious and political. Khomeini’s politicisation of the faith though was to be carried out within the legitimate confines of the juridical discourse.

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1. Ibid, p. 466
2. Ibid, p. 476
3. Ibid, pp. 451-452
4. Ibid, p. 479
Is Khomeinism Tantamount to Fundamentalism?

Ervand Abrahamian is right to object to the fundamentalist label for Khomeinism. This objection may be supported on several grounds. Firstly, on the ground that Khomeini, unlike the Christian fundamentalists, did not argue for a direct reference to and a literal understanding of the Holy Scripture. On the contrary, he stressed the esoteric meaning of the Qur’an, and argued that it was to be understood by means of qualified exegesis and correct interpretation.

Secondly, despite the fundamentalist aspiration to return to the glory of a lost paradise or golden age, Ayatollah Khomeini proposed a new vision of the future of the Muslim community. His utopia was not to recreate the Prophetic State in Medina, or Imam Ali’s caliphate in Kufa, although he frequently used these as models of political rule. Rather, his vision of utopia was doctrinally and logically future-oriented and rationalistic. He envisioned the Islamic government under the faqih as a transitory government, which would rise to power on the basis of hard work, suffering and constant struggle. His model for this incessant state of vigilance, struggle, and preparedness for suffering and sacrifice, were figures such as Imam Hussein and Zeynab, his sister. According to this model, Shi’i believers today ought to continue Hussein’s mission to prepare the condition for a true global government of justice. Ayatollah Khomeini, therefore, did not give promises of immediate well being to his followers; on the contrary, he emphasised shahadat (martyrdom) and preparation for difficult days. He only promised that, if the people of the present generation upheld Islam, they would prepare the ground for the return of the Mahdi, who would institute the Government of Justice. As Abrahamian has noted, he even boasted that “the Islamic Republic of Iran had surpassed all previous Muslim societies.”

Thirdly, unlike conventional religious fundamentalism, which rejected modern concepts and institutions, such as republicanism, parliament, political parties and legal institutions, Khomeini approved of such concepts. He thus concentrated on building an intricate system of social and political institutions, all modelled after, but not identical to, modern institutions every where else. Abrahamian has even claimed: “the whole constitutional structure of the Islamic Republic was modelled less on the early caliphate than on de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic.” The former president of the Islamic Republic, Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, questioned by his hard-line opponents, retorted in one of his speeches: “Where in Islamic history do you find parliament, president, prime-minister, and cabinet ministers?” Khomeini also used vocabulary of revolutionary Marxists as well as Islamic rhetoric such as mostaz’feen (the disinherited) in order to convey modern concepts of proletariat and working class.

Fourthly, despite social fundamentalists, who oppose modernity for its push for industrial and technological expansion, and advocate a nostalgic return to the purity of village life, Khomeini pragmatically welcomed modern civilisation, and industrial and technological development. As Abrahamian notes, Khomeini’s students often mocked the traditionalists for being “old fashioned” and called for the modernisation of religion. They ridiculed the traditionalist obsession with “ritual purity”, the conservative objections to the public education of the young girls and the insistence on their veiling even when no men were present. They also criticised the conservative clerics for their denigration of intellectual pursuits such as “art, music,
and chess playing”, and their refusal to acknowledge the positive aspects of modern means of communication such as telephone, newspaper, radio and television.¹

Finally, unlike classical religious fundamentalists, Ayatollah Khomeini did not subscribe to the view that religion was solely an individual pursuit for purity of the soul. Rather, he insisted that religion was a source of law with which to change the society. Khomeini, while faithful to principle tenets of the faith, attended to socio-political and socio-economic issues.² In fact, as a political leader, he saw religion as a program of social and economic ethics that should be implemented by government. However, at no stage of his political career, did Khomeini engage in using his charismatic appeal for merely achieving pragmatic ends.

**Khomeini’s Charisma**

In addition and prior to being a political leader, Ayatollah Khomeini was a scholar, a moral philosopher and a teacher. It was in these latter capacities that he saw religion as an individual mission to save souls, a contemplative endeavour to rise above vanities of wealth and power, and a journey of spiritual transcendence and individual freedom. It was this understanding of religion, which made him charismatic. As such, his personal will and practice was used by the Islamic revolutionary government to set a social example through emphasis on high individual moral excellence, which proved to be too much for those not totally fascinated by Khomeini’s personal piety.

Like his political savvy in convincing people of the validity of his political interpretation of religion and society, the charisma of Khomeini and his individual qualities were appealing to the people. But the virulent campaign of his zealous supporters to press the Iranian people to obey a narrow set of interpretations of Islamic moral codes entailed a strong measure of violence that marred Khomeini’s moral qualities. His perseverance in the face of hardships of imprisonment and exile, his detachment from glories of office, his rejection of corruptive lure of power and wealth, and his abstention from pleasures of the flesh were well established among his supporters. But the violence and repression that was used under the banner of these qualities to eliminate alternative political and intellectual thinking in Iran left a dubious legacy.

Khomeini appealed to his disciples as an honest, just and virtuous leader because of his frequent references to the priority of public over personal interests, his insistence to live a personal life of modesty and commitment to family, and his engagement in contemplative and mystical philosophy and literature. But his adamant refusal to tolerate political, cultural and religious dissent also left a legacy of violence, intolerance and cruelty, which resulted in atrocities against secular intellectuals, modernist women, political dissidents and some religious and ethnic minorities. As a result, millions of Iranians left Iran and made home in other countries. Yet millions more remained committed to the super human and saintly qualities of Khomeini.³

Khomeini’s total authority over the State apparatus as the supreme politico-religious leader, and his absolute power to appoint and dismiss individuals and

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¹ Ibid, p. 16. Some traditionalist ulama disapproved of even modern technological advancements such as electricity, cars and aeroplanes because of their Western origin.

² Ibid, p. 17

³ Khomeini’s mausoleum in Tehran has been turned into a shrine, which attracts scores of people who come daily to pay tribute to his soul and gain spiritual fulfilment. Many more go to Khomeini’s shrine in the hope to benefit from the miraculous powers of his spirit, in the hope of finding solutions to their worldly problems, cure for their illnesses, or salvation for their souls.
allocate funds from the wealth of oil income and religious and civil taxes was beyond reproach. But he did not give up his modest lifestyle, never appointed a member of his family to an official government post, and used the means of communication, particularly the national television, to promote the virtues of modesty. During almost the entire length of his career as leader, he lived in the very modest environs of Husseiniyy-e Jamaran until his death in 1989.

Yet he used his authoritative influence to export the revolution, to demonise his opponents and to mercilessly punish those who betrayed what he considered to be the cardinal principles of the faith. He glorified death in “the path of Allah”, and incessantly fuelled the flame of war against Iraq in the hope of liberation of the Shi’i holy shrines from the “infidel” Iraqi regime. Although Iraq started the war by invading Iran, but Khomeini cherished this war and called it a “blessing”. He curiously turned this war into a holy war against the international enemies of Islam. He portrayed Iran and Islam as victims of the unholy alliance of the “corrupt powers of the East and West”, and the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein as a bandit, a thug and a mercenary of the United States and the Soviet Union. Even when he was persuaded by his fervent disciples to end the war for pragmatic reasons, he did not conceal his bitterness and compared his submission to the United Nations’ resolution for ending the war to drinking a “chalice of poison”.

Khomeini’s followers incessantly praised him for his modesty and commitment to family values. The media portrayed his relationship with his sons Mostafa and Ahmad as a Platonic love relationship. In the pre-mature death of his elder son, Mostafa, he appeared to be mourning the death of a student and a colleague, as well as a son. And Ahmad, his second son, seemed to be totally fascinated by Khomeini’s personal qualities. His share in Khomeini’s last will and testament was the confidence of his father to trust in him the interpretation of his prolific writings, proclamations, decrees and speeches.1

Yet Khomeini was indiscriminate and merciless in punishing those who turned against his vision of Iran and Islam. Even his former followers and close associates were not immune to harsh punishments if they deviated from “the path of Allah”.2 In this, he frequently compared himself to Imam Ali whom he praised both, for his commitment to justice, love of the poor and the downtrodden, modest lifestyle and mystical virtues, and for his courage as an Islamic warrior and his decisiveness against the enemies of Islam.3

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I discussed the thought of three Muslim ideologues, who contributed to the formation of the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, Shati’ati, Motahhari and Khomeini. But the legacy of the latter ideologue has undoubtedly been more impressive politically. For one, Ayatollah Khomeini lasted longer than any other contemporary figure in the arena of politics in Iran. For another, his interest in politics

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1 Ahmad did not survive for long after losing his father and died a few years later at a young age.
2 One of his former aides, Qotb Zadeh, was executed for plotting to overthrow the regime. A former Prime Minister, Bazargan, became the object of hate after Khomeini lost trust in him. And his once heir apparent, Ayatollah Montazeri was disqualified in utter disgrace when he opposed Khomeini’s harshness against political dissidents.
3 It is believed that Ali for all his love of justice and his compassion for the disinherited of the earth had no hesitation in killing the enemies of the faith. According to a hadith, on one occasion he killed 4000 of the enemies of Islam.
was so intense that he had become convinced that any meaningful survival of religion in the modern world was possible only through seizure of political power.

Khomeini’s plan for the superiority of religion over politics though was not one where religion was an attachment of an otherwise non-religious politics. He wanted a politics that was religious and a religion that was political. The Shi‘i religious experience was sufficiently rich in historical and mythical narratives and symbols to provide for a religion that was deeply imbued in politics. The sense of historical victimisation of the Shi‘i experience of faith was so intense that it could only be matched by the sense of being an eternal victim felt by the Jews. It provided a rich cultural symbolic structure for the Iranians who also felt they were historical victims of external aggression and internal oppression.

It would be simplistic to argue that Iranians immediately identified with Shi‘ism in the early Islamic period and used it as an expression of their anti-Arab sentiments. Moreover, it would be untenable to argue, as did Edward Browne, that Iranians developed Shi‘ism to preserve the main elements of their pantheistic religions in the guise of Islam due to Arab domination. Iranians did not convert to Shi‘ism on any massive scale until the Safavid period, and even then many of the conversions were forced. And Shi‘ism was already well developed doctrinally as a result of political disputes over the succession of the Prophet long before it found followers in Iran.

It would be more sensible to argue that ancient Iranians had had a complex and paradoxical relationship with the experience of the Islamic faith. They had been suffering under a corrupt and suppressive regime of monarchy, which was tightly linked with the official Zoroastrian religious establishment. In the caste-divided society of the Sassanian period, the Zoroastrian priests were placed at a par with the king in the pyramid of hierarchy, whereas the majority of the population was at the bottom of the pyramid. And yet, Iranians cherished the humanistic faith that was originated by the great Zoroaster on the basis of his eternal message in praise of the “good words”, “good thoughts” and “good deeds”. Even the pre-Islamic Mazdakite movement, which favoured the lower classes, was carried out in the name of revival of the original Zoroastrianism, which was corrupted by the official clergy.

Yet, in the lived experience of the Iranians under the last Sassanid King, Yazdegerd, there was no longer any hope for justice through a revival of their original faith. And the new faith, although it came through military victory of the faithful Arab warriors over the Persian army, carried a measure of hope for the Iranian public. As Ferdowsi noted in his Shahnameh about one thousand years ago, the Muslim army achieved victory over Persians not through the power of their military equipment, but through the power of their faith. The military power of the Arab armies was way outweighed by the Persian Empire’s military might, but their spiritual power and social message undermined the decrepit Iranian imperial tradition.

The early Muslims preached equality of all the believers, and it was this egalitarian message of Islam that appealed to Iranians in the first place. And it was the gradual transformation of the Islamic State into the repressive dynastic rule of the Umayyad and the Abbasid caliphates that made Iranians gradually feel closer and closer to the Shi‘i saints. Iranians thus identified themselves increasingly as the victims of the subversion of Islam by the enemies of the faith. And even then the majority of Iranians preserved their loyalty to the Sunni faith under the local Persian and Turkic rulers until the Safavids made Shi‘ism the State religion in Iran. Shi‘ism was thus constituted by a political dispute and continued to inform a political religious experience throughout Iranian history. And since the Safavid period, it received a
massive scale injection of narratives and rituals, which helped constitute the cornerstone of the Iranian collective identity.

Ayatollah Khomeini was well placed to spell out the political message of the Shi'i faith and to seek the salvage of the faith and its custodians from virtual disintegration in modern Iran. Not only did he construct a revolutionary discourse on the basis of the collective memories of the Islamic history and mythology; but also he constructed the theory and institutions of an Islamic government which was to come out of an Islamic revolution. His discourse of revolution was built upon an imposing and emotional symbolism and simple language free from academic and intellectual sophistication. It was appealing not because of its abstract conceptualisations or its eloquent verbosity, but because it was linked with collective action. So too was his discourse of the government, which was the praxis of building institutions, rather than the formulation of theoretical arguments of abstract nature.

From very early on after the fall of the Pahlavi regime, Khomeini began to engage himself closely in the construction of an elaborate system of political, social and legal institutions for the new Islamic Republic. In doing this, he was not afraid to use the modern technologies of State as long as they served his version of Islam. During the 1978-1979 revolutionary events, he instituted a revolutionary council, which was to play a decisive role in running the affairs of the State immediately after the fall of the Shah. In 1979, he settled the dispute over the form of the new revolutionary government through the institution of referendum, which gave his proposal for the form of government, namely the Islamic Republic, overwhelming support. He then organised the revolutionary youth in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp, and the Revolutionary Committees, which later on grew to the status of a well-disciplined army and police force. Also in 1979, he intervened in the debate over the drafting of the new Constitution by instituting the Assembly of the Experts (Majlis-e Khobragan), which was composed mainly of the politically active ulama. He followed this by forming executive, legislative and legal institutions, and most importantly the institution of the velayat-e faqih as the supreme politico-religious leadership structure.

In 1980, with the invasion of Iran by the Iraqi troops and the outbreak of an all-out war, he organised a public mobilisation campaign to defend the country. He thus built the institution of Basij, which went on to form the core of an organised force for public mobilisation for the show of popular support for government policies. In confrontation with the opposition forces that had incited riots and ethnic wars of cessation against the new regime in the early 1980s, he turned his followers in the public into a neighbourhood spying-network, which would make the operation of an underground opposition almost impossible.1

Throughout the 1980s until his death in 1989, he added new institutions or modified the previous institutions. For example, he initiated the institution of Jihad-e Sazandegi (the Construction Jihad) to rebuild the war-ravaged areas as well as to

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1 With the growth of terrorist activities against the Islamic Republic, which involved assassination of government officials and numerous bombings of public places, Khomeini encouraged the people to be vigilant in their neighbourhoods to identify and report suspicious activities to the authorities. This trend was particularly intensified in the early 1980s after the Mujahedin-e Khalq detonated a bomb in the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party, which killed almost all of the top officials of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini used this occasion to call on the people to form a 36-million-strong spying-network (referring to the population of Iran at that time). Despite a Qur'anic injunction that forbids spying on the private lives of the believers, Khomeini found religious justifications for the necessity of such a venture emphasising the threat that the opposition forces posed to the entirety of the Islamic faith, which he claimed was represented by the Islamic Republic. This political tactic proved extremely effective as it led to numerous arrests and made life difficult for underground activities of the radical opposition groups.
launch an infra-structure building campaign in the rural areas, many of which did not have roads, piped water and electricity. He also created institutions to supervise the post-revolution cultural and artistic developments, as well as institutions to mediate between the legislative and executive branches of polity over major disagreements.

Throughout his rule, he also issued numerous speeches, commands, decrees and proclamations to address emergent political, social and cultural problems. In all this, he acted rather prudently as a person beyond personal or factional interests. As such he performed as a figurehead to strike a balance between various tendencies within the polity as an arbiter, and always tried not to appear an authoritarian leader. For example, in the dispute between President Bani-Sadr and the Islamic Republican Party, which at the time controlled the parliament, he always was cautious to play the role of a mediator, despite his affinity with the Party. He played the same kind of mediatory role in the hostage crisis in the late 1979 between the various views of how the hostage drama was to be settled. In all this he achieved at the end the outcome that he desired.

As the commander-in-chief, he rejected the calls for liquidation of the imperial army and police immediately after the victory of the revolution. But he gradually built the Revolutionary Guards, the Revolutionary Committees and the mobilised civilian forces as forces with Islamic commitment, which would gradually take over the military establishment of the country. He proved right in not submitting to the radical demands for the liquidation of the imperial army, since if he had done so, there would be no defence against the Iraqi invasion of Iran, which occurred only one year after the revolution.

Khomeini also initiated a tradition of revising the government policies and religious rulings in order to adjust them to the exigencies of time. He revised the theory of the velayat-e faqih in his lifetime. He also revised his views on the war with Iraq, which resulted in the ending of this hostility. Even on matters such as the use of the caviar fish, which despite its being a unique Persian product, was previously forbidden due to a religious technicality, he issued a new religious ruling that permitted its use, with predictable economic benefits for the country. He also issued new rulings, which brought out artistic and sporting activities such as music and chess playing from total religious prohibition. And finally, he initiated the amendments to the original Constitution of the Islamic Republic just before his death.

In his creation of an intricate system of institutions, and his innovative audacity to initiate a tradition of revision of the traditions, Khomeini, consciously or unconsciously, left two important legacies. Firstly, he eliminated the possibility of the rise of one strong person or group capable of appropriating all instruments of power. This is evident in the rise of multiple sources of power in the post-revolution and particularly post-Khomeini era in the institutions such as the Presidency, the Islamic Parliament, the Supreme Leadership, and the Supreme Court. Secondly, he lent justification to the possibility of further innovations in religious and political institutions and doctrines. This is particularly evident in the rise of new political and religious discourses in Iran, which have posed a serious challenge to the absolutist tendencies of the Islamic Republic in the post-Khomeini era. In the next chapter, I shall discuss the contributions of some of the Iranian activists and intellectuals to post-revolutionary politico-religious discourses that have deviated from the official interpretations of the role of religion in politics.