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IRAN—AN ISLAMIC EXAMPLE FOR RELIGIONS IN THE RE-MAKING

The main goal of Shah Reza Pahlavi's effort was to lead Iran from a medieval society to a super modern standard of living within a very short period of time. His attempts failed because huge demonstrations led by Ayatollahs and Mullahs made him leave the country in 1979¹ and they have established since, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The change itself is known as the Islamic Revolution, which in the eyes of many Iranians is claimed to be the first real revolution of the third world because it is neither western nor communist.

The surprising fact of that revolution was that nearly none of the specialists had expected it. The Shah and his advisers, as well as Western scholars saw the danger arising from the leftists and "the revolution of the pen"², i.e., the writings of the opposition groups during

1. Cf. Shahrough Akhavi : *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*, Albany 1980; Gilles Anquetil : *La terre a bouge en Iran*, Paris 1979; Werner Ende *Die Mullahs und die Macht. Zur Rolle der Schia in der Geschichte Irans*, in *Journal fuer Geschichte* 1/4 (1979), pp. 2-7; Michael K. J. Fischer : *Iran : from Religious Dispute to Revolution*, Cambridge/Mass. 1980; C. M. de Moor/W. M. Floor (Ed.) : *de iraanse revolutie. Achtergronden*, Nijmegen 1980; *Revolution in Iran und Afghanistan*, ed. by Berliner Institute fuer Vergleichende Sozialforschung, Frankfurt a.M. 1980.
2. Cf. Wolfgang Behn : *The Revolution of the Pen : Iranian underground publications, 1963 to 1978*, in *Middle Eastern Studies. A Felicitation Volume for Professor J. D. Pearson*, ed. by B. C. Bloomfield, Mansell 1980, pp. 13-22; more generally idem : *The Iranian Opposition in Exile. An annotated bibliography of publications from 1341/1962 to 1357/1979 with selective locations*, Wiesbaden 1979; idem : *Islamic Revolution or Revolutionary islam in Iran. A selected and annotated bibliography of political publications from the overthrow of the Shah until his death*, Berlin 1980 (in press).

the Shah's regime, and suggested a different kind of events from what really happened in 1978 and led to the Shah's departure from Iran. All the opposition groups agreed that the capitalist system adopted by the Shah did not bring happiness and welfare to the vast majority of the people but helped instead to enrich a very few people, among them in the first place the Shah and his own family. A great number of opponents, severely persecuted by the Shah's Intelligence Service SAVAK, came therefore to the conclusion that a socialistic system should replace the capitalistic one and in order to bring it into existence they tried to overthrow the political system of Iran. But all failed. Many of them had been sent to jail, tortured and even executed while others went abroad trying to work against the Shah while living in exile.

Obviously, the only really effective opposition was that of the Ayatollahs and the Mullahs. They were united with most of the other opposition groups in blaming the results of capitalism as seen in Iran. But unlike the left-wing groups, they rejected the Western life-style as a whole. In their view Western civilization has reached a very high standard in technology and natural science but it is characterised at the same time by a striking loss of moral values to such an extent that a new type of society should be created.

Western Civilization through Muslim Eyes

Analysing the "Physiognomy of the West", the Persian writer Lari enumerates a number of problems such as social drop-outs, alcohol, love of animals and sex. About sex he says: "In sexual conduct the West has stepped outside all moral bounds. In life's beginnings everyone knew in his heart that purity and continence in sex matters have a moral value of their own, and that transgression leads to moral degradation. But this truth has either been gradually forgotten, or else deliberately obliterated from men's consciences by subversives."³

The reason for all this — according to Lari — is that religion has lost its guiding function for society because it has been seen as a private matter only. The will of the Lord, he argues, has been replaced in modern political theory by "the general will". "Democratic government attempts to put that general will into practice by making

3. Sayad Mujtaba Rukni Musawi Lari: *Western Civilization through Muslim Eyes*, Guildford, 1977, p. 26.

law out of the policy voted for by 'the majority' (which need only be 51%) leaving null and void the will of the minority (which may be that of as many as 49% of voters). The minority is thus not 'free at all, even though in some cases its will may be sensible, and in the circumstances right. But 'Government by the Will of the People' will never voluntarily strip off the sanctity and splendour with which it has endowed 'the general will', giving that concept precedence over all other material and spiritual values."⁴ And this, Lari says, is true for the Western capitalist countries as well as for the Eastern communist ones. His conclusion therefore is: "Both Eastern and Western systems of government falsely appear in the guise of the public will, Parliamentary rule, representation of the masses: while capitalism and communism alike frame inequitable laws because they neglect the heavenly decrees which establish fast what is best for man."⁵

The Islamic State

The only way to settle the problem is to give up the alienation produced by the Western style of life and thinking⁶ in order to reestablish the state God himself has ordered to be: an Islamic state that is free, just and powerful at once.

Free

It seems to me that freedom, in this context, does not cover the Western concept of creating and then satisfying needs for individuals or society as a whole; it simply means to feel no further needs any more so that you will really be independent.⁷ Therefore, the main aim of Iran's economic politics is, as Bani-Sadr says⁸, to get rid of the United States economically without relying on the Soviet Union instead. The capital mistake and crime of the Shah's policy, consequently, was that he made Iran so inextricably linked with foreign interests that

4. Lari, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54.

5. Lari, *Op. Cit.*, p. 55.

6. For alienation through Westernization cf. Āl-i Ahmad Djalāl: *Gharb zadagi*, Teheran 1341/1962, esp. p. 36 and Arnold Hottinger: *Islamische Revolution? Die Muslims im Konflikt mit der westlichen Moderne*, in *Merkur* XXXIII (March 1979), pp. 203-216.

7. Cf. Rudolf Gelpke: *Drogen und Seelenerweiterung*, Muenchen, 4th ed. 1975, p. 16.

8. Cf. Abol-Hassan Banis-adr (President of the Islamic Republic of Iran): *Quelle revolution pour l'Iran?* Paris 1980 pp. 333-336.

the country is now unable to survive without food imports.⁹ Great effort is needed to return to the starting point of the Shah's attempts at modernisation. One solution, therefore, is to restore the traditional landlords by revoking the land reform which, indeed, did not help the poor and weakened Iran's agriculture as a whole.

Revolving seems to be the general theme in many areas. The model, the theologians supported by the masses are struggling to establish is the Islamic community as realized during the times of Muhammad (d. 632 A.D.) and Ali (d. 661 A.D.). Historians, however, know that a number of problems existed at the time of the beginnings of Islam, and Muhammad's teachings collected in the Koran and understood as God's own Word¹⁰ show that the formative period of Islamic thought¹¹ has not been monolithic or homogeneous. Abrogations happened in the Koranic period, and no coherent system of creed or of social and economic conduct for society can be found in the Koran. The system itself took shape in the first few centuries after Muhammad's death and it is well known that more than one system has been accepted as legitimate and orthodox. To a large extent, the Shi'ite theologians in Iran today rely on the scholastic system of Muṭahhar al-Hillī (d. 1325 A.D.) and others which are all, in fact very close to Mu'tazilite theology in general¹². Their retrospective interpretation of Muhammad's and Ali's Islamic community (*umma*) is therefore more concrete and precise than the source material would allow one to accept.

Just

According to Ayatollah Khomeiny that society must be labelled as just, justice being the most remarkable characteristic of Islamic society in the eyes of many contemporary Muslims. And Khomeiny wants to see his own as just as the one in the past. As he understands

9. Cf. for example, *Chapour Haghghat : Iran. La revolution inachevee et l'ordre americain*, Paris 1980, p. 203ss.

10. Cf. John Wansbrough : *Quranic Studies : Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, London 1977.

11. I am referring here to W. Montgomery Watt : *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, Edinburgh 1973.

12. Cf. Peter Antes : *Zur Theologie der schi'a*. Eine Untersuchung des Gami' al-astar wa-manba' al-anwar von Sayyid Haidar Amoli, Freiburg i.Br. 1971 p. 3ss and Wilferd Madelung : *Imāmism and Mu'tazilite Theology*, in *Le Shi'isme Imāmite. Colloque de Strasbourg* (6-9 mai 1968), Paris 1970, pp. 13-29.

it¹³ justice means that all men are treated equally. Thus it must not happen that the political leader satisfies more his own caprice and passion rather than the observance of the law. And Khomeiny¹⁴ regards as a just ruler some one who is ready to cut off the hands of his own son if convicted of stealing. The ideal justice makes the ruler execute even his brothers and sisters if they are found dealing in heroin.

Islamic law (*shari'a*) protects the innocent and punishes the wrongdoer. Unlike Western jurisdiction the *shari'a*, Khomeiny argues¹⁵, puts the delinquent on trial and brings the judgement immediately, whereas cleverness and tricky procedures in the West give him a chance of not being punished for a long time or, in some cases, not at all. On the other hand, the innocent should not be afraid of any investigation. He can expect that justice will be done to him. Unlike the dictatorial system of the Shah, an Islamic state based on the Muslim concept of justice provides security to one who abides by the law while persecuting the law-breaker without any chance of escape. Doubts are expressed whether justice as understood above is done to everyone charged with *shari's* breaking. In any case the distinguishing characteristic of Islamic courts is the testimony of the witnesses and little attention is paid to the deeds themselves. And this makes the legal procedure very different from the West.

Powerful

It was said that the ideal Islamic state is expected to be free, just and powerful. We now need to look at its powerful aspect more closely. The Muslims, in fact, when speaking of the very beginnings of Islam, invariably point out that the religious commitment of the Madina community was very successful politically. And similar observations and claims are made for the first decades after Muhammad's death. The political decline, they say, came when the original commitment was about to disappear and they, therefore, came to the conclusion that unconditional commitment and political success always go together so that most Islamic reformers of the past and at present require(d) the commitment, believing that its application alone breeds political success automatically. Unlike the Christians

13. Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeyni : Pour un gouvernement islamique Paris 1979, p. 117.

14. Ayatollah Khomeiny : Principes politiques, philosophiques, sociaux et religieux. Extraits de trois ouvrages majeurs de l'ayatollah, Paris 1979, p. 25s.

15. Khomeyni : Pour un gouvernement, p. 113ss.

who at no time have attempted to restore the very beginnings of Christianity, reminding themselves of persecutions and catacombs, the Muslims look — historically speaking — back with a feeling of nostalgia hoping to bring back the good old times as seen through retrospective glorification.

Ayatollah Khomeiny, for instance, thinks¹⁶ that no political system in the world (not only that of the Shah) can oppose religious commitment as existed during the times of Muhammad and Ali, and he therefore exhorted his students in Iran not to restrict themselves to secondary questions like observance of law but to take the lead in the political struggle for a better society. He was justified in doing this because his major contribution to modern Shi'ite theology is to teach that the Shi'ites are allowed, under certain circumstances even requested to act politically during the "great occultation" (*ghayba*), i.e., the absence of the hidden 12th Imam. This means that the Shi'ites, at least as far as the Twelver Shi'ites are concerned, can come back to their original impetus of political uprising if the system of the ruler in power appears to be Satan-like in their eyes.

The Shi'ite Vision of History

Dualistic concepts help to describe the political confrontation between the administration in office and the oppressed masses as the most visible focus of the cosmic fight between the forces of evil/darkness and those of good/light. Commemorating the death of Husayn (d. 680 A.D.), the Shi'ites use it to describe their consequent depression and discontent in terms of the struggle between Husayn and the Umayyad caliph¹⁷, making it thus clear that history as a whole must be seen as the result of the conflict between two rival forces of cosmic dimensions. It is obvious that legal language needs no change. It has always been the same with concrete meaning at any time. It is therefore less suitable for Intelligence Service accusations and at the same time most effective in dealing with the great majority of the people. It makes people fighting for the absolute victory of the good forces against the tricky machine which Satan has established to continue to retain his influential and dominant position. Commemorating

16. Cf. for example Ibrahim al-Haidari : Zur Soziologie des schiitischen Dhiliasmus Ein Beitrag des irakischen Passionsspiels, Freiburg i.Br. 1975, p. 189s.

17. Cf. Mohammed Serdani : Der verborgene Imam. Eine Untersuchung der chiliastischen Gedanken im schiitischen Islam nach Ibn Babuya (gest. 991) Kāmal al-din wa-tamam al-ni ma, phil. Diss. Bochum, 1979, p. 33ss.

processions — particularly those of the mourning month Muharram which culminate in the Ashura celebrations (Muharram 10th) — often tend to turn into mass demonstrations, with heavy street fightings. It is well known that the Muharram processions of 1978 turned out to become the most important step ultimately leading to the Shah's departure from Iran.

Unlike the Sunnis who want to re-establish Islam as under Muhammad and the first four caliphs without any particular perspective of future events, the Shi'ites acknowledge a general goal of history as a whole.¹⁸ They wait for the Mahdi, the parousia of the hidden 12th Imam¹⁹ who will bring justice by defeating the forces of evil that have hindered the Shi'i leaders from commanding the Islamic community as a whole for centuries. Shi'i theology harbours at its core innovative elements of eventual abrogations. But the Islamic Republic of Iran as established since 1979 has shown none of these elements as far as everyday life is concerned. It seems to me that an exact copy of Islamic society of the past has been re-introduced. Theological questioning has been given up to a very large extent, unfortunately, because peripheral problems such as the un-Islamic hostage holding problem have gained more importance than making it clear what an Islamic state should look like.

Unsettled Problems

As far as I can see there is no concrete theory of a Shi'ite just state. The Iranians like instead, to refer to the classical text of the *Nahdj al-Balagha*, but the text once read, does not clarify this at all. The same is true of economics. Neither Muhammad Bakir al-Sadr's *Iktisādumā* (*Our Economics*, in 2 vols. in its Arabic original version) nor Bani Sadr's *Iktisād-i tawhīdī* give the Western reader the chance to know how those economics would be functioning in practice. The very sad result is that nothing is clear on this point at the moment in Iran except the application of Islamic penal law with its severe punishments. These punishments are, sometimes, also given to those who want to discuss theological questions in a way different from that of the leading theological school of Ayatollahs and Mullahs.

18. For Shi'ite history and thinking cf. Yann Richard : *Le Shi'isme en Iran. Imam et Revolution*, Paris 1980 and E. A. Doroschenko : *Schiitskoe Duchoventsvo v Sovrennom Irane*, Moskva 1966.

19. Cf. Peter Antes : *Der Islam als politischer Faktor*, Hannover 1980,

It must be taken into consideration that various branches within Shi'ism, and even more exactly among the Twelver Shi'ites themselves, exist and many of these branches are struggling with each other, the most important two options being the scholastic orientated theological branch referred to above and the mystical ways that would not accept such a restricted understanding of the *shari'a*²⁰. For them true understanding of the Koran is not that of its outer aspect (*zāhir*) that the *ulama*, the theologians of the former branch, claim but that of its inner aspect (*bāṭin*) accessible through mystical experience only. Here again, no separation between religion and political reality²¹ is made with the result that some of these mystical movements are playing an important role in politics and as in the case of Afghanistan, are forming groups acting within the resistance ranks.

To conclude this very brief account of present-day Iran, one must say that religion has been used to give concrete expression for rejecting the Westernized life-style introduced under the Shāh. The aspirations of the masses, however, are for the golden age of Islamic welfare such as existed under Muhammad and Ali, while the leading Ayatollahs supported by the Mullahs and their followers proclaim that the solution for all the problems is to copy what they think the historical prototype of an Islamic state must have been. Re-Islamization therefore—as in most of the Islamic countries—is without any innovative theological impact. It does not take into consideration that in any case, our modern world—be it largely Westernized or not—is remarkably different from that of Muhammad and Ali. New aspirations have been developed such as those of emancipation, trade unions, human rights and so forth. If religion in its re-making does not take care of all these, it is certainly going to fail because its fundamental message is to fulfil man's longing for an answer to his vital questions. Admittedly, Iran is a problematic example for Religions in the re-making.

20. The distinction between Religion and State is a Western one which is unthinkable in Islam to many Muslims, cf. Fu'ad Muhammad Fakhr al-din : *Mustakbal al-muslimin*, Cairo 1976, p. 252.

21. Cf. for ex. Ary A. Roest Crolius : *Il risveglio dell' Islam in un mondo pluralista*, in *Civiltà Cattolica* 131 (1980) pp. 117-132 and Khalil Samir : *Khomeini e i "Fratelli musulmani"*. *Un ritorno integrale alle radici dell' Islam*, in *Civiltà Cattolica* 131 (1980), pp. 445-458.