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THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1978–79: FUNDAMENTALIST OR MODERN?

Mangol Bayat

Until the turn of the present century intellectuals in the Muslim world were members of a loosely defined class of men who wore the turban as a sign of their learned status. Islam enforces the belief in the Qur'an as the source of all knowledge men need to know. Learned men were by definition men learned in religious sciences. Theology, jurisprudence, political philosophy, metaphysics, mysticism, Arabic language and grammar, history, among other disciplines, were all viewed as components of *'ilm*, or knowledge of the divine. In fact, in Islamic centers of learning no attempt was made to distinguish the sacred from profane knowledge.¹

When tensions arose as a result of the incompatibility of philosophical mystical or scientific views with basic tenets of the faith, censorship was effectively imposed by the specialists of the Islamic law, who emerged as a group of self-appointed protectors of the community from "religious deviation." Throughout the centuries, however, scientists, philosophers, mystics, and speculative thinkers in general, allowed themselves freedom from commonly enforced views and developed their respective disciplines in private. While outwardly abiding by the directives of the jurists, arguing that religion is a social necessity since popular morality is tied to religious beliefs, they safeguarded their knowledge by confining it to a restricted circle of disciples and adepts. A smooth and discreet transmission of ideas through generations of followers was thus ensured, and intellectual change was barely perceived by the society at large as Islamic speculative thought remained exclusive and esoteric. When the views of the

1. For greater details on some of the issues discussed in this paper see M. Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran*, Syracuse, 1982; A. K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An introduction to the study of Islamic political theory: the jurists*, Oxford, 1981; A. A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, op. cit.

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established religious leadership of a particular Muslim community were openly challenged, however, the dissenters were persecuted.

The establishment of Shia Islam as the official state religion in Iran in the sixteenth century and the arrival to social prominence of high ranking religious leaders who were specialists in Shia law sharpened intellectual differences that divided the ranks of the religious institutions. While the jurists forcefully imposed their religious policies and required strict adherence to the law, mystics and philosophers defended their right to expand their understanding of religion. Shia intellectuals continually offered alternative doctrinal views to those of the jurists, despite increasing harassment and threats.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the battle against official religion was taken over by a new type of intellectual who began to shift the premises for understanding man from the religious to the sociopolitical realm. Sociopolitical development resulting from contact with the West, in addition to their realization that religious reform was futile, given the power of the higher Shia hierarchy, caused some progressive-minded thinkers to change their intellectual interests and abandon the philosophical-theological outlook they had defended until then. For many it resulted in a loss of concern with religious issues. Thus, their effort to understand and diagnose the ills that plagued their society drew their attention away from the private, exclusive domain of theology, philosophy, and mysticism, to a more public political arena. With them the secularization of religious dissent effectively took place.

Although they were simultaneously combatting the despotism of the reigning dynasty and the encroachment of Western powers in internal affairs, the real alienation of the intellectuals was from the traditional sociocultural order dominated by the guardians of the Islamic law. The controversial issues they raised were not mere doctrinal disputes but underlay forceful social movements for change, aiming at curbing the jurists' influence and control over educational and judicial systems.* Ideas such as constitutionalism, sovereignty of the people, liberal democracy, secularism, threatened the socio-cultural order.

Having failed to meet the challenge of the religious dissidents in the nineteenth century, relentlessly forcing the confinement of innovative thought to small private circles of esotericists, the traditional centers of Islamic culture in Iran rapidly lost influence and prestige among progressive-minded thinkers. The change in intellectual outlook, traditionally initiated from within the ranks of the "turbaned" class of learned men, was undertaken by groups outside the religious

* The well-known crucial role of some high ranking religious leaders in revolutionary politics of the last decade in the nineteenth century, culminating in the establishment of the Constitution of 1906 which destroyed the absolute power of the monarch, is often mistaken as an indication of their rise to political power. In fact, their direct participation in these events provoked a social explosion with fatal consequences for the traditional order. It released the political energies of the dissidents against themselves rather than against the state.

institution. The secularization of social thought and institutions in the early twentieth century took place as a result of the failure on the part of the religious leadership to respond to the lay intellectuals and religious dissidents' call for reforms. Contemporary opponents of modernization tend to overlook this historical reality: the first generation of Muslim modernizers had perceived socio-cultural change as a moral necessity to meet the needs of their society and not so much as an attempt to copy the West. In their view the root of the socio-cultural problems was not the West, but prevailing religious and intellectual conditions which they deplored and which they, and their predecessors, were unable to change from within.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, lay intellectuals and politicians, and their clerical allies (the religious dissidents who then broke from their religious rank and file to join the secularists), laid the basis of secular nationalism. The modernizing policies they had initiated however, were fully implemented only with the advent to power of one modern element, the army. Seriously weakened by internal ideological strife, unable to resist the onslaught of conservative forces at home or the increasing encroachment of Western powers in internal affairs, incapable of establishing law and order in a country devastated by tribal raids and invading foreign armies in World War I, the short lived Constitutional government established by the revolutionaries in 1906 proved itself politically powerless. In 1925 the military regime of Reza Khan, who rose to power in 1921, was transformed into an absolute monarchy. The official nationalist culture that emerged then was urban-centered, officially monolingual, anti-clerical, cultivating the pre-Islamic cultural heritage, and Western-oriented. New generations of Iranian intellectuals educated in modern secular schools either at home or in the West became culturally more alienated from the traditional class of "learned men."

By the mid-twentieth century the modern class of lay intellectuals had come of age, taking for granted the social and cultural changes their counterparts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had so vigorously fought for, enjoying the fruit of the seeds planted by the latter, secular nationalism, which was still raw and unpalatable since as yet unfamiliar to the tradition bound-illiterate masses. Often these intellectuals were better versed in modern scientific disciplines and ideas than in traditional Islamic thought. Many were ignorant or poorly informed of the abuse of clerical power and religious intolerance that Iranian thinkers in pre-modern times had to encounter periodically.

THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

The emergence of Islamic revolutionary ideology from among the modern educated lay intellectuals is a social phenomenon that can best be understood when viewed as an important phase in, rather than reaction to, the process of

modernization. Secure in their lay profession and secular nationalist identity, Iranian professional middle class men and women were ready for active political life. A responsible role, which some had briefly enjoyed during the short interlude of political freedom that followed the abdication of Reza Shah and his son's accession in 1941, was repeatedly denied to them. The increasingly dictatorial regime which followed the 1953 coup against the nationalist government of Mossadegh led some politically conscious intellectuals and lay professional to transfer their commitment from the secular nationalist cause (by now closely identified with the Pahlavis), to an Islamic revolution. Shia Islam provided them with a useful means to two different ends: to assert an independent national ideology in opposition to Western, especially American, involvement in domestic affairs, and to reach the masses in order to mobilize their force for the revolution they wished to undertake.

Whereas at the turn of the century the dissidents were essentially aiming at socio-cultural changes, in 1978–79 middle class lay professionals and intellectuals were aiming at gaining political power. Both were anti-traditionalist and anti-clerical; both were envisioning a progressive, modern society where qualified secular educated professionals would reinterpret and adapt religion to the conditions of modern times. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the revolutionaries' target was the clerical establishment. Their contemporary counterparts, while combatting Western influence and Pahlavi absolutism, overlooked the fact that secular nationalism and modern socio-cultural reforms, barely three-quarters of a century old, were still precarious and vulnerable to attack by resurgent clerical socio-cultural conservatism. To accomplish the political tasks they set for themselves they sacrificed their predecessors' hard won achievements, and helped the clerics come to power.

In 1978, the Shah's liberalization measures, though meager, opened up possibilities for the old guard of Mossadegh's National Front and the more recently formed Liberation Movement parties. Its members, mostly lay professionals and intellectuals, seized the opportunity to organize at home and establish contact with human rights activists abroad. The modest gains they acquired in the spring and summer of 1978 encouraged them to push for significant political reforms. None of those prominent members of the secular nationalist parties were revolutionary. They were reformers.

The revolution, when it came in the late fall of 1978, was Khomeini's. But he did not make it single-handedly. He inherited and made use of the reformers' groundbreaking tools and ideas, which he supplemented with his own ideologized and politically assertive interpretation of Shia doctrines and traditions. It is important to note here that the lay reformers finally joined his ranks because of, and not despite, his rhetoric. In the early phase of the revolution Khomeini spoke their language, though more radically and less willing to compromise.

Khomeini can best be understood when studied as a man of his time, and his movement as a phase in, rather than reaction to, the modernization process,

paradoxical as it may sound. With the secularization of the judicial and educational systems at the turn of the century, the '*ulama*' had emerged as a more narrowly defined ecclesiastical class of spiritual leaders wearing the turban as a sign of their expertise in Islamic law and theology. What the '*ulama*' lost in prestige and influence was made up in increased cohesiveness and unity as a social group which, given the opportunity and the charismatic leadership of a man like Khomeini, could close ranks and engage in a fierce struggle for power. Their opponents were no longer the traditional religious dissidents, the mystics, philosophers and speculative theologians who challenged their supreme religious authority, but the secular order of the Pahlavis. Religious disputes and doctrinal controversies gave way to a deadly political fight against the tide that had so severely eroded their traditional role and influence in society. Thus in Khomeini's revolutionary works politics displaced theology, and political goals acquired priority over theological concerns.

His message appealed to all types of revolutionaries, and to men and women simply in revolt against the political oppression of the Shah, the abuses of Savak, and the disastrous consequences of foreign economic and military presence. He readily spoke of the right of the masses, the destitute, the workers, the oppressed at home and abroad. He incited the populace to rise for freedom and independence in the name of Islam, hailed the universities as the "strongholds of the self-sacrificing student struggles," and repeatedly denounced the attacks on campus as "barbaric and medieval." It was this message that attracted the lay Islamic ideologists and the secular dissidents in general.

In this respect Khomeini's rhetoric was almost identical to Shariati's. Ali Shariati (d. 1977), the Paris-trained sociologist, had denounced the traditional Shia political stand of passive acquiescence as contrary to the original revolutionary spirit of the Imams. Both Khomeini and Shariati held "conservative" theologians responsible for rendering Shia Islam a religion of apathy, corruption and abuse of power. Both strove to radicalize the concept of the Imamate in order to provide their potential constituency with a viable ideology to fight the Shah's regime and the Western powers' interference in domestic affairs. However, whereas Shariati based his arguments on modern sociology, Khomeini used the discursive reasoning of traditional Islamic theology. Moreover, whereas Shariati was essentially anticlerical, upholding an Islam that is reformed and reinterpreted to fit the needs of contemporary society, Khomeini aimed at restoring clerical hold over vital social institutions and firmly consolidating clerical power by assuming supreme political authority.

KHOMEINI'S REVOLUTIONARY THEORY OF THE "GOVERNANCE OF THE JURIST"

In its earliest formative phase the idea of the Imamate in Shia Islam came into being as a necessary consequence of, rather than cause for, social discontent and

political dissent. Various movements of revolt organized under the Shia banner against the nascent Sunni state were essentially politically oriented, aiming at achieving their respective leaders' political goals. Gradually, the quest for a just social order and the aspiration for a world free from oppression transformed the political opposition into a religious sectarian movement with serious doctrinal implications as to the qualifications and functions of the "rightful" leader of the community of believers. However, repeated defeats and relentless persecution encountered by the Shī'a dissidents, in addition to rival claims to succession, forced some moderate leaders to give up armed struggle. The *de facto* depoliticization of the Imāmi or Twelver Shia sect of Islam (to which the majority of the Iranians adhere) occurred as early as the mid-eighth century when the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, reportedly renounced, albeit temporarily, political rule, and the political functions of the Imam (declaring holy war against the enemies of religion; delivering sermons during the Friday mosque prayer; requiring allegiance and obedience from followers) were indefinitely postponed. Thus, the Imamate, defined as the exclusive authoritative source of knowledge of the divine, whose task was to teach and perfect the interpretation of the Prophet's Revelation, was divorced from political rule until such time as God would decide otherwise. With al-Sadiq, then, the central emphasis of Twelver Shia Islam was shifted from politics to theology. This trend was reinforced when in 873–74 the Twelfth Imam was declared in Occultation (alive, ever present but hidden from view).

The doctrine of the Imamate in classical Shia theology developed into an eschatological ideal, maintained and upheld in the works of Shia *'ulama'* throughout the centuries. The temporal state was accommodated, and, in Safavid and post-Safavid times, viewed as an integral part of the Islamic Shia social order. Both the state and the top hierarchy of the religious institution perceived political opposition and religious non-conformism as inseparable. In fact, through the centuries, serious challenge to the state came from extremist religious movements declared heretical by the Shia establishment. In the 1960s and 1970s political unrest and social tensions helped Khomeini reverse the official Shia attitude of acquiescence, and recapture the early Imams' spirit of revolt against the "unrighteous" government.

Central to Khomeini's argument is his strong belief in the necessity for an Islamic government in times of Occultation. Conceiving the Imam as the holder of executive power whose function was to implement divine laws revealed and promulgated by the Prophet, he insists that the latter appointed a successor for the execution of the law and *not* to expound it.² Here Khomeini's definition of the Imamate already differs drastically from the classical doctrine. In Sunni Islam the law itself acquired a central role in the formation of government, being a *raison*

2. Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini, *Hukumat-i Islami*, Najaf, 1971, p. 21.

d'être for the state that protects it and applies it. In contrast, the Shia, regarding the individual Imam as the source of divine knowledge, viewed him as the interpreter of the Revelation, and not merely an executor of the law. Early Shia theologians who were engaged in a polemical battle in defense of their views against the onslaught of the Sunnis insisted that knowledge of the interpretation of the Qur'an should not be based on deductive methods and human reasoning as in Sunni Islam. They claimed the Imam "informs the people about the purpose of God and explains it from God so that his explanation be the proof for the people."³ In times of Occultation, *'ijtihād* (the chief function of the *mujtahid*, the highest ranking Shia jurist), was defined as the endeavor, or the competence to exert oneself, to reach with certainty the correct opinion of the Imam on religious and legal matters.

Khomeini describes the Imams as "soldiers, commanders, and warriors," although he admits that the "later Imams" did not have the opportunity to go into battle.⁴ He leaves unsaid the historical fact that with the exception of Ali, whose reign was marred by civil strife, the Shi'a successors to the Prophet never formed a government. Anxious as he is to provide historical legitimacy to his concept of the "Governance of the Jurist," he finds himself forced to accept the Sunni Caliphate as evidence of continued existence of government after the death of the Prophet. Far from following the time-honored Shi'a practice of cursing the Sunni Caliphs, he praises the first two Caliphs for preserving the Prophet's personal example, mildly adding "in other matters they committed errors."⁵ He denounces the Umayyads and the Abbasids merely because of their monarchical government, which he declares anti-Islamic and reminiscent of the ancient Persian Kings, Byzantine Emperors and Egyptian Pharaohs.⁶ In fact, the early Sunni state provided Khomeini with a more acceptable, or at least less objectionable, historical frame of reference than the Safavid or Qajar states, which he dismisses as un-Islamic since dynastic and part of a Western imperialist plot to undermine Islam.⁷ When Khomeini first developed his theory of the "Governance of the Jurist" in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was already in exile in Iraq waging a relentless campaign against the Pahlavi regime. His earlier hostile denunciation of the "unconstitutionality" of the Shah's political oppression and modernization programs turned into a radical condemnation of the monarchical system of government and of the 1906 Constitution as contrary to Islam, which recognizes the sovereignty of God alone. Thus, Khomeini's repudiation of any claim to

3. Cited in A. A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messiahism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*, Albany, 1981, p. 103.

4. *Hukumat-i Islami*, pp. 18–19.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

succession based on hereditary right leads him to proclaim that the dispute that divided the ranks of the Prophet's companions following his death was over the identity of the person to succeed him and not over qualifications. Khomeini emphatically states that Mohammad appointed Ali "not because he was his son-in-law . . . but because he was acting in obedience to God's law."⁸ Once more Khomeini's interpretation runs counter to classical Shi'a views of the hereditary rights to succession of the Prophet's descendents through Ali and Fatima. Khomeini goes so far as to claim that Husayn, the second son of Ali and the third Imam, "revolted in repudiation of the hereditary succession of Yazid (the Umayyad Caliph), to refuse it his recognition."⁹

Again and again in his famous *Islamic Government* Khomeini stresses the executive role of the "successors of the Prophet," using more widely the Sunni term *khulafa'* (caliphs) rather than the preferred Shi'a term of Imams. Indeed, his argument that the function of government was not a privilege derived from the Imams' spiritual status, and that executive power was entrusted to them only because they were best able to establish a just government,¹⁰ is a Sunni argument. Traditional Shi'a theologians insist that the Imam alone has the right to succeed the Prophet because of his "special spiritual status," and that his authority to rule is based on his spiritual attributes. When Khomeini admits that "the spiritual status of the Imam is separate from his government function"¹¹ he does come close to the classical view, but from a reverse stand. Whereas traditional theologians have come to accept in practice the historical necessity of separation of religious authority from temporal power, and have emphasized the spiritual aspects of the Imamate, Khomeini feels the need to reassert its political role and function. Such an emphasis on the executive role of "the successor of the Prophet" is determined by his need to provide a doctrinal basis for his own political views and his desire to demonstrate that in times of Occultation an Islamic Government is still necessary and that the only legitimate "holder of authority" is the *faqih* (jurist).

From the time the Imam was declared in Occultation in 873–874, one of the most important issues that concerned Shi'a circles was related to the question of who holds religious authority in his prolonged absence. Traditions (sayings attributed to the Prophet and the Imams) were compiled and commented upon to prove the legitimacy of the claims of the traditionists (those theologians who compiled and tested the authenticity of the traditions). Through the centuries some key traditions were interpreted and, when deemed necessary, altered to substantiate the individual commentator's argument and confirm their respective

8. Ibid., p. 55.

9. Ibid., p. 13.

10. Ibid., p. 99.

11. Ibid., pp. 67–68.

points. The alteration and varying interpretation of such traditions by themselves constitute important indicators of socio-religious change.

One tradition Khomeini discusses is attributed to the Prophet saying: “O God! have mercy on my successors,” and when asked to identify his successors replying: “They are those who come after me, transmit my traditions and practice, and teach them to the people after me.”¹² Early Shi’a theologians have used this tradition as one evidence of the Imams’ legitimate claims to succession. Writing at a time when the Imams’ legitimacy is no longer an issue in Shi’a Iran, Khomeini argues that this tradition has been wrongly interpreted, identifying the Imams alone as the successors who “teach the people.” He claims that earlier commentators have erroneously assumed that “Islam must be without any leader to care for it,” in times of Occultation, and that the “religious scholars cannot act as successors, rulers, and governors.” In a long and elaborate commentary of his own he vehemently denies the fact that the *faqih’s* function is limited to jurisprudence and the application of the law, and emphatically concludes that the jurists are the successors of the Imams. Khomeini pushes his argument further by differentiating the mujtahid, the high ranking Shi’a jurist, from the specialist of the traditions, whom he declares subordinate to the mujtahid. The successors, he asserts, are not the transmitters of traditions, “Who are mere scribes.”¹³ Here then a traditional distinction in rank based on scholastic merit is transformed into a distinction of social functions.

In another interesting and equally significant commentary of a tradition Khomeini deduces the jurist’s right to rule by divine command.¹⁴ The tradition in question, which he refers to as “a signed decree of the Hidden Imam,” appears in the earliest collections. A Shi’a follower in the Lesser Occultation period (874–940 when the Hidden Imam was believed to be in direct communication with his “representative”) wrote a letter to the Hidden Imam asking guidance for certain issues that had arisen in his absence. The Imam allegedly wrote back a letter in his own hand saying: “As for the events which may occur, refer to the transmitters of our sayings who are my Proof to you and I am the Proof of God to you all.” This tradition seems to have played an important role in determining earlier theologians’ authority. In the ninth and tenth centuries it was used to identify the “transmitter” as the representative of the Imam for juridical matters. In the seventeenth century it was altered in such a fashion as to make the “transmitters” alone (and not every individual Shi’a believer) answerable to the Imam, thus establishing the supreme authority of the *‘ulama’* in religious matters. In the nineteenth century when opposition to the mujtahid’s power came from within the religious institution itself, the term “transmitters” was interpreted to mean the

12. Ibid., pp. 74–75.

13. Ibid., pp. 77–79.

14. Ibid., pp. 102–104.

mujtahids exclusively. Although both the seventeenth and nineteenth century interpretations of the text could imply a potential political power for the *mujtahids*, there is no evidence that the Safavid or Qajar theologians meant to acquire political power in addition to religious authority. In fact prior to Khomeini the *mujtahids* had fought to establish themselves as the custodians of religion alone.

Khomeini, acting at a time when the supreme authority of the high ranking *mujtahids* in religious matters had already been established and consolidated for more than a century, interprets the tradition in a fashion to suit his own political purpose. At stake is not the issue of who represents the Imam or who is answerable to the Imam, as was the case with the Safavid and Qajar theologians, but the implicit sociopolitical meaning of “events which may occur.” He attempts to deduce doctrinal justification for the political power he wishes to acquire. He writes:

“What is meant here by new occurrences is not legal cases and ordinances. The writer of the letter did not wish to ask what was to be done in the case of legal issues that were without precedent. For the answer to that question would have been self-evident according to Shi’i school, and unanimously accepted traditions specify that one should have recourse to the fuqaha’ in such cases. What is meant by new occurrences is rather the newly arising situations and the problems that affect the people and the Muslims. The question that the follower was implicitly posing was this: ‘Now that we no longer have access to you, what should we do with respect to social problems? What is our duty?’¹⁵

With this interpretation, Khomeini tries to refute the traditional conception of the jurists as mere experts of the religious law. He even interprets the term *Proof of God* (Hujjat Allah) to mean the holder of authority in political as well as religious affairs. A Proof of God, he argues, is one whom God has designated to “conduct all affairs.” Today the jurists of Islam are proofs to the people, proofs of the Imam.¹⁶ Total obedience is owed to them, since they are specially appointed by the Prophet to be his successors and to rule. The jurists’ authority in government affairs is equal to that of the Prophet and of the Imams, since they all share in common the burden of executive power to apply the divine law.¹⁷ Although Khomeini hastens to admit that the jurists do not possess the Prophet’s and the Imams’ special spiritual status, his definition of the jurist’s position and function in society constitutes a radical departure from traditional Shi’a views.

15. Ibid., pp. 103–104. English text from H. Algar trans., *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, Berkeley, 1981, pp. 84–85. It is important to note here that the terms “new occurrences” which in classical Shi’a texts refer to legal matters, is translated by Mr. Algar as “newly occurring social circumstances” in keeping with Khomeini’s innovative interpretation.

16. Ibid., p. 105.

17. Ibid., pp. 62–63.

In traditional Twelver Shi'a theology the Imam's title of Hujjat Allah stresses his religious and spiritual function. Khomeini's interpretation of this title is more reminiscent of the Ismaili use of the term. The Ismailis are the adherents of a Shi'a sect who, following Ja'far al-Sadiq's death in 750, refused to abide by his command to lay down arms, and maintained a militant opposition to the Sunni state. In Ismaili terminology the Hujja is the Imam himself and, in case of his Occultation, his sole deputy, a chosen individual amongst his followers who knows where he is and is in constant contact with him. Such a deputy or Hujja, through whom the faithful could know the Imam, held the highest ranking political office in the Ismaili state of Alamut (which ruled over small communities of believers clustered all over the Iranian highlands for a century and a half until the Mongol invasion put an end to it.)

Khomeini admires Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1273), the Twelver Shi'a theologian, philosopher and scientist who had lived with Alamut court officials for a long time and had written most of his important works of ethics and philosophy while enjoying Ismaili patronage. Tusi had developed the neo-Platonic concept of the Perfect Man as the Perfect Teacher who, in times of Occultation, acts as the supreme interpreter and guide of the community. Khomeini's conception of the *faqih* (jurist), in the last analysis, is neither the jurist of the Buyid or post-Buyid period, nor the *mujtahid* of the Safavid or even of the Qajar times, but the personified ideal of the neo-Platonic philosopher-king which for centuries had inspired the Muslim philosophers and mystics alike.

However, Nasir al-Din Tusi and other Muslim philosophers who developed their neo-Platonic concept of the Perfect Man as the Perfect Teacher were writing in an age when philosophy and mysticism were separate fields of knowledge not tolerated by law-minded jurists. Their scriptural interpretations allowed them to offer their contemporary Muslim intellectuals a legitimate but more progressive, more challenging and innovative view of knowledge as an alternative to the official teachings of the conservative theologians. Some of them even attempted to renew their understanding of the dogma from within the traditional centers of Shi'a theology. Khomeini is writing in the twentieth century from within a *madrasa* (religious school) system turned seminary where classical Islamic philosophy and mysticism had lost a great deal of its vitality and relevance since abandoned by new generations of modern educated Iranians who sought a more contemporary intellectual basis for their social views in modern disciplines and systems of thought.

Khomeini's challenging and innovative thought is political and is not concerned with intellectual and religious renewal. Nor is he concerned with doctrinal reforms. His perception of the law is indeed fundamentalist; so is his understanding of religious rituals and obligations pertaining to all aspects of the believers' life in this world. Moreover, as a leader of the Islamic struggle against the onslaught of the modernizing reforms of the Pahlavi state, he has to champion an Islam and an

Islamic law conceived as universal and immutable, and therefore in no need of reforms. This, despite his interest in and knowledge of Islamic philosophy (and in particular Tusi), despite his borrowing from the philosophers many terms and views which traditional Shi'a jurists in pre-Pahlavi times would have rejected as heretical.

Khomeini's "Governance of the Jurist" threatens the very foundation of Twelver Shi'a Islam as expounded by the sixth Imam. Ja'far al-Sadiq had provided the doctrinal basis for the depoliticization of the sect with the often quoted tradition: "*Taqiyya* (concealment of one's true beliefs in times of danger) is my religion and the religion of my forefathers." *Taqiyya* was widely practiced by the moderate Shi'a in pre-Safavid times when they were a minority. It accommodated the "unrighteous" government and ensured the survival of the sect as an important school of theology. It also allowed the Shi'a scholars and theologians to enter government services of the Abbasids. By the time the sect acquired official status when proclaimed the state religion in Iran in the early sixteenth century, the Imamate had become a spiritual ideal divorced from politics, and the de facto separation of state and religion remained in effect as a necessary consequence of the doctrine of the Occultation of the Imam.

Khomeini draws a mythical history of the Imams all fighting against the unrighteous government and calling for *jihad* against them. He goes so far as to claim that *taqiyya* was enforced only in matters of religious rituals but not with respect to principles of Islam,¹⁸ overlooking the fact that the Imam's right to rule constitutes the most important principle of the Shi'a sect. He emphatically states that the religious leaders cannot practice *taqiyya*, and must not work for the unrighteous government. By proclaiming *taqiyya* defunct he is in effect putting an end to Ja'fari Shi'ism, which had accommodated the temporal state, and introduces a new phase in the long history of the sect.

Despite the tensions that traditionally existed as a result of conflicting views, Shi'a centers of learning in pre-twentieth century Iran included most groups of thinkers: mystics, theosophers, speculative theologians. All were members in their own right of the broadly defined class of '*ulama*'. All contributed equally to the development of what is collectively known as Shi'a Islam, and which embodies a variety of schools of thought. The current repoliticization of the sect and the centralization of all power, political, social, cultural as well as religious, in the hands of the clerics is instituting in Iran a regime the nation has not experienced before. It combines the rule of a modern political dictatorship, ruthlessly suppressing opposition, with the socio-cultural dominance of a religious leadership which is establishing its hegemony firmly based on religious populism.

Khomeini attempts to break loose the nation's ties to the religio-political culture in which it has been reared, and to replace it with, not an old belief system,

18. Ibid., pp. 200-201.

but a radically reinterpreted, ideologized conception of the old system. Hence his regime, like any other political regime, has to provide itself doctrinal legitimacy in order to institutionalize its power. To do so effectively, the concept of the "Governance of the Jurist" must gain acceptance among the circle of respected and knowledgeable religious scholars. So far, the official reaction of Khomeini's colleagues has remained true to the Shi'a tradition: passive acquiescence or intimidated silence. The promulgation of the new constitution of the Islamic Republic which grants absolute power to the jurist was a political affair, based on a national referendum. Consequently, such acts as the recent demotion and public disgrace of Shariatmadari was accomplished on constitutional, and not doctrinal, ground, no matter how heretical his political dissent might appear to the eyes of the clerical ruling establishment. To confer doctrinal legitimacy to Khomeini's theory of government necessitates a thorough reformulation of the doctrine of the Imamate agreed upon by all the principal leaders of Shi'a Islam, and an official definition of the "righteous" government in the absence of the Imam. Will Khomeini succeed where centuries long Shi'a juridical tradition has failed? Centuries-long dominance of the socio-cultural scene by the conservative jurists had not succeeded in stifling dissent in pre-modern Iran. Will Khomeini succeed where his predecessors failed?