

Some Historical and Religious Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution

Annemarie Schimmel Festschrift

By

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haec claritatae gemina, o gloriosa femina

To honor Annemarie Schimmel in an article one should seek to write about Sufism or poetry in Turkish, Persian, or even in Pashto, as I remember from our class in that language. But since our friendship goes back almost half a century, perhaps it would be appropriate to reminisce a bit, and at least discuss a topic relating to religion. Our mutual friend and colleague, long departed Arthur Darby Nock, used to examine would-be ministers before their ordination. One question he put to them was the following: "if you believe you have absolute truth, and you must so believe if you are to preach your faith to others, then what right have you not to persecute others who do not accept your message?" In recent years the spirit of intolerance appears to have grown in many parts of the world, but to justify this in the name of religion is perverse and should be unacceptable to those followers of a religion who are not fanatics. The latter are those who say "if all the world were just like me, ah what a wonderful world it would be." What I am presenting in this brief paper is the essence of a lecture I delivered at the University of Minnesota in 1982 but which was never published. I apologize for not having an appropriate text with translation which is still the essence of Islamic Studies, but I hope these general remarks, composed long before the plethora of writings about the revolution, still will not be amiss in a tribute to a remarkable scholar.

In few other parts of the world can rival philosophies of history, either those which emphasize determination or others which proclaim free will and choice, find such

a fertile field as in Iran. For of all the countries of western Asia Iran is the only one which continuously over time has preserved the pre-Islamic and pre-Christian traditions of the ancient Near East. Although more ancient in history than Iran, the peoples of both Egypt and Iraq forgot their pharaohs and their Sumerian and Babylonian rulers long ago, but not the Iranians. Since history usually begins with the founder of a religion for the followers of a faith, in Egypt, for example, Christianity was the first erasing of the past and Islam completed the task. What happened before the religion was the age of ignorance and not worthy of remembrance. Like China, however, Iran's past weighed heavily on her children, but unlike China which absorbed her invaders with seeming ease, Iran was more influenced by its conquerors, yet always transmitting to them basic features of Iranian culture without thereby completely absorbing the outsiders. As in the past, so today Christians and Jews exist in the country, and Turkish and Arabic speaking minorities in Iran still consider themselves Iranians. Many still believe in the dictum expressed by Ibn Khaldun and others that in the Islamic world, *daulah 'ind al-turk, din 'ind al-'arab wa adab 'ind al-furs*, perhaps a calque on the medieval European belief that imperium belonged to the Germans, sacerdotium to the Italians and magisterium to the French. In reading the history of Iran one is struck by the almost eerie sensation of *deja vu*, but the question arises whether actors in the drama of history behave as they do because of fate and the circularity of history, a karma like destiny, or whether they are so conditioned and influenced by the heavy burden of the past that they automatically act in predictable ways. Illusion has been a prominent feature of Iranian arts, literature and history. I have many times said to students that Leopold von Ranke a century and a half ago wrote that history is the record of what actually happened (*was eigentlich geschehen ist*). Comte and his followers in France somewhat later, said that history really was the report of what one thought had happened. In Iran one wonders whether history is not the report of what should have happened. A fascinating aspect of the recent revolution in Iran is its pattern-like adherence to Western scholarly models about revolutions, in particular Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution*. However, one should not ignore the suggestion that the revolution also followed the course of Iranian internal patterns, in a sense a double faced series of events. In the internal patterns one frequently can distinguish between Islamic and old Iranian influences, both of which should be taken into account in any discussion of the recent revolution.

To begin with the Western conceptions of revolution, Brinton's analysis of the French and Russian, as well as other, revolutions extracted a common scenario of decadence and incompetence of the old regime to which the intellectuals of the society strongly objected, and in frustration turned to soldiers and common folk whom they organized and led to a revolution. The aftermath of all revolutions followed the French example of the children of the revolution eating themselves followed by Thermidor, until the people in despair turned to a strong man, such as Napoleon and Stalin, to restore order and discipline. Brinton further wrote that "there is not in all history a single instance of a successful revolution which began as a spontaneous rising of the lower classes. Revolutions are led by men with leisure, talent, and money to engage in political activity. This description, however, does not apply completely to Iran, for Brinton was thinking of the secular West and neglected the role of religion in the Orient, which was and is a vital factor in any change, especially in Iran.

In the Iranian revolution we can see at least two explicit factors at work which either did not function, or if so only on a greatly sublimated plane, in revolutions elsewhere. The first is a negative reaction, what one might call 'organized dislike or hate' for the outsider, while the second is the ancient Iranian propensity for messianism. The first naturally is not as complicated as the second, but nonetheless is a recurring phenomenon in the history of Iran. To mention only modern times, the role of 'great Satan', which the United States has assumed in the eyes of the Iranian establishment since the revolution, is a mantle once borne by the Russians until 1918 and bestowed on the British from 1919 to 1954, while the USA gradually took the place of Britain after the last date. Just as the stark countryside of Iran shows vivid contrasts, so the ancient concept of good versus evil, a dichotomy of white and black, left little room for gray colors or intermediate positions.

At the same time espousal of extremes always was tempered by a realization that Iranians had to play a role in promoting or espousing the notion of extremes of good and evil, and in reality things were not as stark as they seemed. The role playing might lead to ridiculous postures, and one wonders how much was sham or even ridiculous. Bound up with the pattern of right and wrong and the duty to hate evil, is the concept of the messiah in the history of Iran. Although this can be

traced back to ancient times, it is only during the Islamic period of Iran's history to the present that we can see more clearly the powerful role of messianism in Iran. Unlike the Mahdi in the Sudan and others, Iranians who have aspired to such a role have been aware that it is better to presage or prepare the way for the messiah than to claim to be one. For once the messiah has appeared, obviously paradise is just around the corner. Then one is responsible for the fulfillment of all the hopes of the followers of the messiah. How much better to prepare the way by fighting and dying to establish the kind of a world in which the messiah then can come to reward those martyrs who prepared his way! The Shiism which developed in Iran since the 16th century functioned in this manner to prepare the way for the messiah, and to provide a sense of historical responsibility to establish true Islamic rule. While 'Twelver Shiism', the state religion of Iran, is much more than just messianism, the latter is the Leitmotif of the religion. At the same time this does help to understand and possibly even predict the actions and conduct of the religious leaders of Iran today. It has been said that when Iranians follow patterns or copy outside models it is more the letter than the spirit, or rather a caricature of the model, which is the result. But this is a rather common, and in my opinion unwarranted, condemnation by Westerners of Oriental colleagues which would apply to Iran as well. Among other things, it was loss of firm commitment by the Iranians to their faith and a turning to permissive Western laissez faire which aroused the religious leaders of Iran against the rule of the shah. Such slogans as 'morality is subordinate to legality' and 'freedom means freedom to sin,' possibly concocted by the religious leaders, justified the intense hatred against all exponents of Western secularism as the guide to Iranian life.

Some students of Iran believe that the history of the country is a series of long cycles of quiet followed by upheavals, repeating a pattern throughout the ages. This deterministic viewpoint suggests that if a government grows unjust or tyrannical in its power, a champion will arise from the people to right the wrongs inflicted on them. In recent times the revolution of 1906, which led to a constitution and a parliament majles did not prevent the cycle from following its course. The abdication of Reza Shah in 1942 was a great change, as was the fall of the prime minister Dr. Mossadegh in 1953, which ushered in the tough regime of the late Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Also throughout the centuries, church and state have competed for power or balanced each other in the allegiances of the

people. In the hierarchical Shiite church religious leaders have exercised great influence over the masses. Sometimes, however, even they lost control over fanatic crowds in the streets. Many religious leaders disapproved of the self flagellation of zealots during the month of Moharram, when fanaticism held sway. But the religious establishment's approval or disapproval was always primarily directed at the prevailing government, of which it considered itself the conscience.

For a number of years the Pahlavi government in Iran had openly followed a policy of secularization and modernization. The end result would have been a great reduction in the influence of the religious leaders on the life of the country. The enormous expansion of communications, including radio and television, and the rapid growth of schools and universities, brought hordes of peasant boys and girls into the cities where they felt estranged from the life around them. Even when they succumbed to the attractions of urban activities, they did not have money to participate in them. Their expectations were raised but they could not be fulfilled at short notice. Dissatisfaction and unrest grew while the government could not or would not move to counter them. It seemed to the young as though the rich grew richer and the poor did not share in the nation's sudden oil wealth. Also the gap between the classes became one of quality rather than quantity. For, a century ago the shah had a thousand carpets and a thousand donkeys where the peasant had one of each. In modern times the shah had jet planes and limousines while the peasant had lost his donkey. Thus envy and unhappiness grew daily and the shah seemed deaf to the clamor and the signs of unrest, shielded from reality by his sycophant courtiers.

In 1977 the shah lost his right arm in the death of court minister Asadollah Alam. Shortly before this, his left arm, Manuchehr Iqbal, head of the National Oil Company, had died, so the ruler was left alone. Not that the two had done a good job in running Iran, but they had kept the lid on the already boiling pot. An appropriate epitaph for the two might be "the good that men do is oft interred with their bones, but the evil lives on." Corruption, mismanagement, inflation and the anger of religious leaders at the seizure of religious endowment properties by the government, united many in opposition to the shah's rule. Ayatollah Khomeini, a leading religious figure who had been exiled by the shah, became the symbol of opposition. The bitterness of some fanatic Muslims turned against minorities,

who had flourished under the shah's regime. Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Bahais began leaving the country in fear, and the last especially suffered attacks on person as well as property. I jokingly have said to Japanese friends that they were the real instigators of the Iranian revolution, which might be termed a new style of revolution— a 'media revolution.' It was the widespread availability of transistors and television sets which showed the masses the difference between their way of life and that of the parasites around the throne of the shah. This heightened gap between haves and have-nots only exacerbated the divisions within Iranian society. The only island of security, or base of operations, for the masses was Islam, so opposition groups united under the banner of religion to overthrow the government. In the face of this the old regime was abandoned by its closest supporters. The course of the revolution is well-known, and at first one saw euphoria under the new order of freedom. Khomeini seemed to be the precursor of the messiah. Social, economic and political wrongs would be righted by the imam, and just as one could say no negative word against mother and motherhood, so Islam and its leader were above reproach.

What surprised many was the resolve of the clergy never again to take a back seat in the running of the state. They would no longer be advisors or the 'conscience' of the state; they would now run it. Furthermore, the political acumen of such leaders as Ayatollah Beheshti, surprised everyone. Ayatollah Beheshti was the imam of the local mosque in Hamburg in 1969 when I made his acquaintance there. At that time, although paid by the Iranian government for his services in the mosque, he was on good terms with leftist students in Germany. From students from east Germany he learned the communist technique of organizing cells in towns and villages, such that when he returned to Iran he began to organize the Islamic party with religio-political cells and a 'politbureau', the supreme revolutionary council, and just as in Russia in 1917, two 'governments' came to exist in the country, and just as in Russia, the party and its organization became the real power.

The next step I call the Afghan pattern, which was the emasculation of the secular political parties by the religious revolutionary council, just as in Afghanistan from 1973 to 1978 the prime minister, Daud Khan, eliminated virtually all political parties save the Moscow-oriented communist party with two factions, Parcham and Khalq. So far the Iranian revolution has followed the

normal pattern of revolution with its violence, the foreign invaders, with Iraq in the same role as the monarchies of Europe in the days of the French revolution, or the landing of Allied troops in Russia during its revolution.

But the model may have lost its efficacy by this time. Some new factors are at work in the Iranian revolution and its aftermath such as the raised consciousness of the ethnic minorities, especially the Kurds and Baluchis, but also incipient feelings of separateness among Azeri Turks and Turkomens. These sentiments had been suppressed for a long time but now were rising. The road to identity for all of them lay through history. The first group to embark on extensive study into their origins and identity were the Afghans, who had an advantage over most other Iranian peoples by having an independent state which they dominated. The Afghans, or Pathans, had other problems, such as their political division between Afghanistan and India, later Pakistan, but the main cultural problem which the Afghans faced was to overcome the dominance of the Persian language and Persian customs and usages in both central and local centers of the Afghan nobility. It was difficult to exalt Mahmud of Ghazna as the greatest Afghan leader of the past since he was a Turk. So a glorification of the pre-Islamic Kushans made sense, and in the standard History of Afghanistan by Ahmad Ali Kohzad, the Kushans receive special treatment as the glorious ancestors of the Afghans. The Russians encouraged the Afghans in this endeavor and an international center of Kishan Studies was created in Kabul.

The Kurds were the next Iranian people to seriously evoke the past in their drive toward identity. For them the fall of Nineveh to the Medes, assumed ancestors of the Kurds, in 612 B.C. provided a date for the beginning of Kurdish history. For several decades Kurdish books printed in Sulaimanya and elsewhere in Iraq, have carried dates such as 2573/1961. Although the Kurds do not have a state and are divided by a number of boundaries, active Kurdish associations abroad carry Kurdish hopes for autonomy to a world audience.

Finally the Baluchis have begun to organize and discuss Baluchi aspirations, mostly in Pakistan, but also beginning in Iran. The Baluchis have even less of a recorded past than Afghans and Kurds, but more than the other two, Baluchis concentrate on folk themes of heroism in a warlike past to bolster feelings of pride in being Baluch. The absence of a recorded history is a great disadvantage

for Baluchis trying to form a Baluch identity.

Two other Iranian groups, the Tajiks, together with Pamiris, and the Ossetes in the north Caucasus, are in a different category than the others. But they have preserved and cultivated their native languages, customs and literatures even more than others under the aegis of the Soviet government. In so doing they have discovered their place in a greater Iranian cultural milieu with its glorious past. This interesting phenomenon, the realization that all Iranian peoples in the past participated in the culture and civilization of the Achaemenids, and to a lesser extent the Sasanians, has evoked a kind of nostalgia in many intellectuals of all Iranian groups for closer contacts with each other. At the same time the various Iranian peoples are proud of their individuality as Kurds, Baluchis, etc. and this is much stronger among the common people, if they think about such matters at all. It is as though they are comfortable in the knowledge that the general Iranian past was glorious and shared by all Iranian peoples, yet their own individuality needs to be emphasized far more than previously. This rise of self-consciousness and identity has not been faced by the religious leaders of Iran who, according to many outside observers, have created a medieval theocracy in the country. Yet it is not obscurantist for they believe it is better to fly from Shiraz to Teheran than to go by donkey or car. Islam encourages scientific investigation and material progress and in this respect Iran is by no means retreating to the past. The Western pattern of revolution may have run its course in Iran and the old traditions, both of Iran and Islam, may yet forge something new. Only the future will tell.