Preface

The purpose of this study is to open a window onto the mindset of the class of Muslim legal scholars in charge of the Iranian state since the Islamic Revolution of 1979: their frames of reference, underlying assumptions, intellectual perspectives and sources of inspiration; their affinities and antipathies, motivations and aspirations, and ancient (and more contemporary) role models; and their outlooks on the divine, morality, history, modernity, their country, their enemies, and the world at large. It seeks to delineate, in a word – a word that betrays the somewhat disparaging attitude of the contemporary West to the notion of heritage – their "baggage." Needless to say, such an ambitious (some might say: presumptuous, even quixotic) undertaking can succeed, if at all, only by offering a series of glimpses, vignettes, morsels and samples by way of meager introduction – an introduction that, it is hoped, will stimulate others to probe more deeply into various aspects of this almost unimaginably complex and amplitudinous subject.[1] Of course, a necessary premise of such research is that one can indeed speak of a collection of sentiments shared by most or all Iranian Islamist clerics – what we take the considerable risk of calling their common "worldview" or "mindset" – and since this is no longer an uncontroversial assumption, we will spend some time further on attempting to demonstrate its legitimacy.

We shall not, for the most part, proceed chronologically. Rather, like Theseus and Hercules seeking paths of ingress to the underworld, we will descend from a variety of embarkation points – for the most part comprising significant issues that have arisen in our time along the fault-line between the Muslim world and the secular Occident – as far down into the depths of Iranian-Shiʿite clerical consciousness as we are able to go, given the limits of the writer, who is not an Iranian Shiʿite but an Israeli Jew, and the reader, who may well be an educated "layperson" rather than a Middle East or Iran specialist. While this topical, "*au courant*" approach recommended itself as more effective and interesting, nevertheless, the study does not ignore the historic procession of persons and events and the evolution of ideas and doctrines that together forged the faith community of today and the worldview of its professional custodians. On the contrary: it lays heavy stress on the contributions of the past to the present, appealing throughout to the veridical and legendary narratives that, so we shall maintain, inform the *Weltan-*

1 Of course, the ground for probing the writings and speeches of contemporary Iranian-Shiʿite politically oriented clerics has been prepared, directly and indirectly, by hundreds of scholars researching in a wide variety of relevant fields over many decades. Their work is acknowledged and built upon in the text, notes and bibliography of this volume.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111026183-002

schauung of the governing clerics of the Islamic Republic more profoundly than any other factor.

This latter claim is no longer the statement-of-the-obvious-bordering-on-tautology that it once was in intellectual circles: an ever-widening gamut of "post-modern" ideologies and methodologies have in recent decades not only problematized, but in a plethora of fields and disciplines actually anathematized, the common sense notion that a community's shared historical experiences play a central role in forging the present-day perspectives held in common by members of that community – whether its cultural and political elite or its rank and file. This regrettable trend forces a great many first-rate researchers to preemptively apologize for their straightforward approach to historical scholarship and to the value of such scholarship for assessing events and phenomena in the here and now. To cite one instance among an endless array, in the preface to Yann Richard's seminal *Shi'ite Islam* (Cambridge, 1995), the editor of the series and "founding father of twentieth century Sociology," Charles Tilly, felt the need to devote an entire paragraph to justifying historical analysis that

> examin[es] the ways that social action at a given point in time lays down residues that limit the possibilities of subsequent social action...Social analysts have trouble seeing that history matters precisely because social interaction takes place in well-defined times and places, and occurs within constraints offered by those times and places, producing social relations and artifacts that are themselves located in space-time and whose existence and distribution constrain subsequent social interaction...[2]

This is longwinded acadamese for "the past influences the present." The "anti-Orientalist" or "anti-essentialist" approach that forced Tilly to engage in such apologia, though long since enshrined as a virtual catechism in many branches of the academy, is – to the present author's mind – profoundly detrimental to any attempt to comprehend the mentalit(ies) of the seminary-educated jurists who play the central role in steering the post-revolutionary Iranian regime and supervise the education/indoctrination of its society.

Among its many other disadvantages, this mode of analysis – heavy on political and social theory and light on textual citations and historical references – flies flagrantly in the face of these clergymen's own fiercely held self-perception. Arguably more than the exponents of any other religious culture, Shi'ite clerics see themselves as the inheritors of an ancient tradition that they are duty bound to maintain alive, render relevant and even superimpose upon the quotidian reality of their flocks. It would be difficult to envision a more condescending, patronizing

2 Yann Richard, *Shi'ite Islam* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), p. vii.

and (worst of all) thoroughly misleading method of investigation than that which would dismiss or neglect this most central component of collective Shiʿite identity as, at the very least, one of several crucial tools for the elucidation of the worldview harbored by the torchbearers of Khomeinism. Indeed, such blatant disregard for the emphatic self-definition of the Muslim divines – the smug assumption that we know better than they what drives them and what informs their outlooks on existence – represents nothing less than the height of…Orientalism. Since the ruling Shiʿite ecclesiastics draw unceasingly upon the vast reservoir that is their religious tradition (far more so, for instance, than do American, European or even Israeli leaders), readers desirous of understanding "where the ayatollahs are coming from" – as well, indeed, as where they may be going – cannot afford to remain ignorant of the contents of that tradition. These newly empowered religious doctors are, of course, also Iranians, and Iranians, "because of the magnificence of their past, are overloaded by history."[3] The protracted careers of both creed and country, of both Shiʿism and Iran, are then the keys to the consciousness of Islamic Republican leaders. As Najam Haider reminds his readership in the simplest of terms: "memories matter."[4]

None of this is to suggest that the Muslim scholar-jurists of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Iran act as mere avatars of classical paragons, incarnations of eternal principles, servile administrators of time-worn precepts or passive receptacles of cumulative historical experience. *Au contraire!* Few attitudes are more distinctly characteristic of contemporary Shiʿism than the emphatically "activist" stance of the *ulama* (clerics) – and especially the high-ranking legal scholars among them known as *mujtahidūn* – *vis a vis* the sacred corpus of their religious

3 Yann Richard, *Iran: A Social and Political History since the Qajars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), loc. 8363–4. (Or, as Nietzsche would have it: "saturated with history"). This statement must be qualified: whereas the wearers of turban and 'aba have more or less consistently accessed their classical *religious* sources, their recourse to Iranian *national* lore has been more uneven. On top of their fundamental reticence to deal in or publicize what is quintessential *jāhilī* (pagan barbaric) material – a sentiment exacerbated by the secularizing use to which nationalist themes were put under the Pahlavis – it must also be remembered that the clerics, together with their lay constituents (indeed, all Iranians), were largely ignorant of the lion's share of pre-Islamic history until the turn of the twentieth century (as we shall see below). Moreover, like latter-day Islamist activists everywhere – Sunni no less than Shiʿi – Iran's post-revolutionary clerics look back even on the purportedly *Islamic* dynasties that ruled their country with a jaundiced eye, and rarely hold them up as positive exempla. Still, in the face of all these ideological obstacles, the Persian speaking *ulama* are profoundly Iranian, and quite consciously so. More on this important subject later.

4 Najam Haider, *Shiʿite Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 51.

tradition.[5] This creative and aggressive, even individualistic and progressive, approach, sometimes styled *feqh-e puya* or "the searching jurisprudence," conceives of the present-day specialist in the law as the initiating intellectual force that *acts upon* the manifold classical sources, deploying, sifting, marshaling and manipulating them toward a given desideratum.[6] But, of course, those classical sources are, for that very reason, an indispensable component of the overall equation. And far from some amorphous, passive and utterly malleable substratum upon which any

5 This approach, generally known as *ijtihād,* is considered by most of its present-day Shiʿi practitioners – with or without justification – as a unique hallmark of their sect. "Many Shiʿis have come to view *ijtihād* as *the* distinctive doctrine of Shiʿism, as that which sets it apart from Sunnism and renders it more dynamic and suited to the modern world" (L. Clarke [ed.], *Shiʿite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions* [Birmingham: Global Publications, 2001], p. 201). Sunni jurisprudential sources make use of the term, but since it is generally connected in their eyes with the more latitudinous *ijtihād al-raʾy* of the Ḥanafite school, it has come in for major criticism by Sunnis themselves and has to a considerable extent been neutered (even among Ḥanafite scholars). The method of *qiyās* or "analogy" continued to play a role in the deliberations of Sunni jurists, but has been largely rejected by their Shiʿite counterparts, who have characterized it at one and the same time as religiously reckless and as an escape from the intellectual adventure known as *istinbāṭ* or "derivation." The criticism by Shiʿi scholars of additional Sunni sub-methodologies of *ijtihād* such as *istiḥsān* (choosing the closest ruling to truth and justice), *istiṣlāḥ* (giving one interest precedence over others) and *taʾawwul* (allowing independent reasoning to trump explicit precepts), allows Shiʿite jurists to present themselves as simultaneously the more conservative and the more intellectually liberated camp. It should be remembered that Shiʿism can claim the mantle of *ijtihād* only during those periods of its history when the Uṣūlī, as opposed to the Akhbārī, brand of jurisprudence prevailed (as we shall see below). It should also be noted that (a) Sunnism never really "closed the door" on *ijtihād,* and (b) the first half of the twentieth and, after a "fundamentalist" backlash, the first two decades of the twenty-first century, have seen a revival of aspects of *ijtihād* in Sunni religio-legal circles. Finally, it should not be forgotten that even in the medieval period, Sunni exponents took advantage of the phenomenon of the absolute authority of the Shiʿite imams in the eyes of their followers to tar specifically Shiʿism with the brush of *taqlīd,* the antithesis of *ijtihād.*

6 The concept of *feqh-e puya* is not a stranger to controversy in the world of the *howzeh* or Shiʿite seminary: some have cautioned against the potential for abuse inherent in such a "flexible" or "open ended" method that might even be used to "Islamize" various modern secular institutions. In general, however, this "activist" approach to jurisprudence is condoned and even encouraged today by Shiʿism's legal luminaries, and assigned (not without justification) an ancient vintage. Ayatollah Khomeini himself expressed his approval of *feqh-e puya* on many occasions, with the caveat that it must arise from sincere and pious motivations and remain within proper bounds. The more fundamental technique of *ijtihād* (exertion of independent powers of judgment) – of which *feqh-e puya* is in some ways a mere re-statement – is accepted across the board by Iranian Shiʿite clerics, and is considered by many of them, with some exaggeration, as one of the unique characteristics of their sect of Islam. The term *feqh-e sonnati* or "traditional jurisprudence" is sometimes employed to offset *feqh-e puya* and is portrayed as the preferred method of the "hardline," "conservative" or "principlist" clerics of the Islamic Republic. But the breakdown is by no means so neat.

quality or set of qualities may be imposed at will, the ancient tradition is highly developed and therefore considerably resistant: its content and contours place limits on the enterprise of future interpreters, providing an intricate, if sometimes flexible, framework for their efforts. Indeed, we might (and in ensuing chapters we will) go further than this and assert that the classical sources of Shiʿism – like those of many another religious tradition – are possessed of a "transitive" potency, that is, that they exert a strong and often decisive influence over the intellectual and political enterprises of their latter-day legatees.

It could be argued, in short, that the interaction between two such equally compelling forces – the early tradition and its later exponents – has made for nothing less than an epic struggle throughout Shiʿite history, in which during certain periods, or according to the outlooks of certain legal or philosophical schools, one element or the other has had the upper hand.[7] But for now, let us be satisfied with a more moderate characterization of the two-way relationship between the faith's foundational narratives (on the one hand) and the contemporary exponents thereof (on the other), perhaps best illustrated by paraphrasing a metaphor once employed by a medieval Muslim savant for a different purpose: the leading Shiʿite sages of our time, we might say, are *the physicians*, while the faith's literary-legal-historical canon is *the pharmacy*.[8] Neither can do its work without the other. Given such a "symbiotic" relationship, it should be stating the obvious to claim that familiarity with the inventory of this "pharmacy" constitutes an indispensable prerequisite for any examination of the thought of post-revolutionary Iran's political and intellectual leadership. Without such a familiarity, not only the erudite references and abstruse allusions of this class of thinkers, but the fundamental purport of almost anything they say and write (or do) will be largely unintelligible to the

7 We cannot really pinpoint the end of Mircea Eliade's "sacred time" or the beginning of the era of the *mutaʾakhkhirūn* ("later ones," used here in a more general – and not purely jurisprudential – sense), among other reasons because an ever-evolving continuum connects the two periods. But there is a canonized Shiʿite golden age, concluding with the occultation of the twelfth imam or soon thereafter, and at the other pole, we are focused on the religious leaders and thinkers that founded and now preside over the Khomeinist regime. In this sense we can instructively speak of a dichotomy between "the ancient tradition" and "its latter-day exponents."

8 In its original context this comparison – *antumu l-aṭibbāʾ wa naḥnu l-ṣayādila* ("You are the doctors and we are the pharmacists") – was adduced to describe the relationship between the practitioners of *fiqh* or jurisprudence, on the one hand, and the transmitters of *hadith* or reports concerning the deeds and statements of the Prophet Muḥammad and his followers/descendants, on the other – a relationship which is itself highly significant for the subject of this study and which we will discuss at some length further on (cited in Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, *Elhami az Shaykh al-Taʾefe* in *Majmuʿe-ye athar-e Ostad Shahid Motahhari* [Qom: Entesharat-e Sadra, 1387], vol. 20, p. 132).

Western reader. Unlike Karl Marx, who famously complained that "the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living;"[9] and unlike Isa Sadeq, Education Minister and President of Tehran University under the first Pahlavi Shah, who lamented that "the Iranian nation limps under the unnecessary burdens of the past;"[10] in contradistinction to all such "atomistic" sentiments, the ayatollahs and hojjatoleslams of today's Islamic Republic are profoundly, inextricably and happily engaged with the history and literature of their creed (and – though to a lesser extent – of their country). They communicate with one another, and with their millions of followers (and detractors), from deep inside that history and literature.'

This crucial relevance of the national and especially religious past is compounded by another, related phenomenon. There would have been no Islamic Revolution in Iran had there not first occurred a revolution in Iranian Islam. Shi'ism had to be transformed: from a force for quietism, fatalism, conservatism and insularity, in which the main focus was on ritual, remembrance and (in the case of the upper echelons of its clerical class) legal casuistry, to a force for activism, militancy, engagement and change, in which the main focus was on grander and more current moral, social and political issues. That this transformation did in fact take place – at least on certain levels and within particular circles for a short amount of time during the modern period – was the result of internal and external developments. Internally, major shifts in *madraseh/fiqh* methodology championed by influential scholar-jurists from Vahed-e Behbehani (d. 1791) to Hosayn-e Borujerdi (d. 1962), helped orient the faith in a more *engagé* direction.[11] Externally, and of more immediate relevance, the impact of modern Western worldviews and movements on twentieth century Iranian intellectuals such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Ali-ye Shari'a-ti, Mahmud-e Taleqani, Abo l-Hasan Bani Sadr and (many would claim) Ayatollah

9 Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," originally published in *Die Revolution* (New York: 1852), p. 1.

10 Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 63.

11 As we shall see below, the re-orientations effected by these and other luminaries at different points in Shi'ite intellectual history are far from easy to characterize and involve not a few paradoxes. Vahed-e Bebehani's decisive contribution to the victory of the Uṣūlī school of *fiqh*, for instance, inaugurated two mutually contradictory trends: one that increased the relevance of Islamic law to life, and another that decreased it. Similarly, Ayatollah Borujerdi was a force for both quietism and activism (we shall elaborate on both of these points in Part Two). It should also be remembered that intellectual developments within the walls of the *howzeh* represent only one of many internal or domestic social, cultural, economic and political processes that together contributed to the general transformation under scrutiny here, but a fuller discussion of these processes and their interrelationships is beyond the scope of this (and probably any) volume.

Khomeini himself, generated eclectic ideologies that combined Islamic heritage with European innovation, or clothed the latter in the garb of the former.[12] The newness of such hybrids, and the inner tension they embodied – to say nothing of the panaceas they promised – generated much energy and enthusiasm among the educated portions of the populace throughout the 1960s and 70s. Many educated Iranians saw in these acts of cultural amalgamation a praiseworthy mixture of rebelliousness and loyalty, boldness and balance, reason and revelation. The excitement produced, and ideas introduced, by these East-meets-West solutions – including the very notion of revolution itself, and the exhilaration accompanying it – were indispensable elements in the mass uprising that dethroned Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and established the Islamic Republic (the very name of which screams "dialectic"). The decade of the nineteen-sixties with its youthful, liberationist ferment fused with the century of the six-hundreds with its antique, evergreen religious ardor, to engender an upheaval unprecedented in modern times in terms of its scope and results.

Ideological compounds, however, are highly unstable and extremely difficult to maintain. In the years and decades since 1979 the various syntheses of tradition and modernity that helped bring about the Khomeinist revolution have for the most part broken down, or been broken down, into their component parts. What had been a mounting revolution *in* Shiʿism rapidly retreated in favor of what looked more and more like a revolution *for* Shiʿism. The "old time religion" has increasingly re-asserted itself in both popular and official discourse. The regime's new-fangled, post-revolutionary holidays have gradually lost their luster, while the ancient commemorations that crowd the Shiʿite calendar are arguably better attended now than ever. The anti-clericalism of the likes of Ali Shariʿati and the Freedom Movement has been supplanted by a full-fledged cleritocracy, not so much in the sense that Muslim religious scholars occupy most political offices – their presence in government bodies has actually decreased in recent decades – as in the sense that hundreds of televised turban-wearers treat the country as if it were their personal classroom.[13] In the *actual* classrooms – those of the *ma-*

12 "For us Islam does not mean performing the rituals," explained "religious-democratic" activist Mehdi-ye Bazargan. "For us Islam is a progressive ideology of struggle to satisfy the material and spiritual needs of society" (Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007], p. 142). Of course, the impact of Western ideas on Iranian intellectuals, politicians and even clerics precedes all of these figures and goes back at least to the nineteenth century. We will cover aspects of this impact later in the book.

13 Spewing vitriol on clerics has always been a national pastime in Iran, a pastime which survived the Khomeinist revolution and in some senses was exacerbated by it. Nevertheless, such vituperation lives side by side with a profound, traditional veneration for the clergy, one of many para-

*drasehs/howzeh*s – a reversion of sorts (or at least a stubborn continuity) is visible: tens of thousands of seminary students in Qom and elsewhere currently follow much the same curriculum, listen to much the same lectures, and tackle many of the same texts with the help of many of the same methods that their predecessors did over a century ago, almost as if the revolution had never taken place.[14] Khomeinist pan-Islamic ecumenism has, to a considerable extent (and especially since the "Arab Spring" of 2011), relapsed into parochial Shiʿite retrenchment.[15] The economic and political radicalism of the early years has been systematically toned down, not to say uprooted, since the arrival on the scene of the more pragmatically-oriented and capitalistically-minded Rafsanjani and Khameneʾi, as president and Supreme Leader respectively. Fāṭima, the Prophet Muḥammad's daughter, "no longer stands for protest, defiance and justice," as she did with such powerful effect during the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary years, "but for chastity, piety and submission."[16] Ḥusayn as Che Guevara, the guerilla activist, has certainly not disappeared from view, but Ḥusayn as Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, is making a major comeback. The sublimated chiliasm of Islamist radicalism, utopian socialism and exportation of the revolution has given way to manifestations of the traditional Shiʿite messianism of *mahdī* and miracle. Nearly three decades ago Yann Richard could already write:

> More than fifteen years after the advent of the Iranian Islamic Republic, which explicitly claimed Shiʿite Islam as its principle, one may be surprised by the absence of any original thought aroused by that new type of revolution. An event claims to introduce the divine world into history, but Shiʿite thinkers have not put forward any new theology to give it sense: the clerics continue to repeat, comment on and expand the texts of the past, refute the errors and justify the choices of the present. With Khomeyni gone, any innovatory discourse would doubtless be badly received in a Community henceforward more concerned

doxes of Iranian Muslim life that we will attempt to elucidate further on in this volume. Although there are fewer and fewer clerics running for office in recent times, post-revolutionary Iran is still a "cleritocracy" in the political sense, as the most important and influential governmental posts remain firmly in clerical hands.

14 The Supreme leader's own attempts to insert the works of no less a revolutionary luminary than Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari into the *howzeh* curriculum have met with considerable resistance.

15 This, of course, has as much to do with the massive increase in regional inter-sectarian strife since the Arab Spring – upon which more later – as it does with internal Iranian Shiʿite developments.

16 Ziba Mir Hosseini, "Islam, Women and Civil Rights: The Religious Debate in Iran of the 1990s," in Sarah Ansari and Vanessa Martin (eds.), *Women, Religion and Culture in Iran* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 172.

> with orthodoxy than with revolution…This stark return of the religious has inspired more invective and sarcasm than calm reflection among westerners.[17]

Nothing illustrates this "failure of the liberal Islamist narrative"[18] more than the fate of the many "lay" individuals and organizations who purveyed that narrative: The Freedom Movement, The People's Mujahedin, Ali-ye Shariʿati, Abo l-Hasan Bani Sadr, Mehdi-ye Bazargan, Ebrahim-e Yazdi, Sadeq-e Qotbzadeh and a host of others, who were rapidly marginalized and/or actively persecuted by a post-revolutionary inquisition that early on turned the word "eclectic" (*elteqati*) into a synonym for "heretical."[19] Instead of the spearhead of a creative, "progressive," open-ended

---

17 Richard, *Shiʿite Islam*, p. 212. Ervand Abrahamian noticed that as the years wore on, more and more speakers at official Islamic Republican events would sprinkle their rhetoric with the terms *enshallah* (*in shāʾa llāh*) meaning "if God wills" (Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], p. 86).

18 Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 793.

19 The Iranian Freedom Movement (*nehzat-e azadi-ye Iran*) was a more religiously oriented offshoot of Mohammad Mosaddeq's largely secularist National Front (*jebhe-ye melli*). The People's Mojahedin (*mojahedin-e khalq*) was and is an Islamic-Socialist guerilla organization. Ali-ye Shariʿati (d. 1977) was the most famous and influential theorist of revolutionary Shiʿism. Mehdi-ye Bazargan (d. 1995) was a scholar and activist who co-founded the above-mentioned Freedom Movement and became the first post-revolutionary prime minister, but resigned over the hostage crisis and was shunted aside by the regime. Abu l-Hasan Bani Sadr was the first president of the Islamic Republic who, in the wake of a falling out with the Khomeinists, was forced to flee to Paris, where he still resides. Ebrahim-e Yazdi, a surgeon practicing in Texas, served in various posts hard on the heels of the 1979 revolution but (like Bazargan and Bani Sadr) objected to the hostage taking at the American embassy and left his position to become the chairman of the (decreasingly influential) Freedom Movement until his death in 2017. Sadeq-e Qotbzadeh was a close aide to Khomeini who soured on Islamic Republican Party policies and was executed in 1982 on (probably trumped up) charges of conspiring with foreign intelligence agencies to carry out a coup. Some of these figures and groups will be discussed at greater length below. Many clerics may be added to the list of "eclectic" thinkers who sought a "progressive" or more democratic form of Islam and as a result became objects of delegitimization campaigns and even incarceration: Ayatollah Shariʿatmadari, Ayatollah Montazeri, Mohammad Mojtahed-e Shabestari, Ayatollah Karroubi, Hojjatoleslam Khatami, even Ayatollah Rafsanjani near the end of his life. Not a few lay reformists of later years (e.g., Abd al-Karim Soroush, Akbar-e Ganji, Mir Hosayn-e Musavi, Saʿid-e Hajjarian) suffered a similar fate. All of these thinkers and leaders at one point or another fell afoul of an official regime line that was becoming more cautious and traditional in the religious sphere as it waxed increasingly dictatorial in the political sphere. Somewhat ironically, the pre-revolutionary predecessors of these men – the Shariʿatis, Yazdis, Bani Sadrs and Bazargans – implacable foes of the monarchy though they were, may be said to have unwittingly participated in the Pahlavi project of reforming, modernizing, diluting, de-clericalizing and redirecting Shiʿism. One might argue that this "cooperation" was one of the factors that tainted the (to some extent Khomeinist) notion of a progressive and etatist Islam, and led to the present situation in the Islamic Republic which is characterized by

brand of Shiʿism that these ill-starred activists had envisioned, the present-day Iranian regime has become more of a protector and cultivator of the conventional, "orthodox" (and folk) Shiʿism of yesteryear – souped up though it may be by the latest technology.[20]

This "regression" from revolutionary to traditional religion has profoundly disappointed many, both inside and outside of Iran, including not a few dyed-in-the-wool Khomeinists.[21] But it is a fact nevertheless (and may well have been inevita-

---

a certain reversion to the separation of church and state (so despised by Khomeini). One might further assert that the Islamic Republican regime has become, as a result, somewhat more of a caretaker than a purveyor of the church. However, the fact that clerics still run the show, and preside over a nationwide education-indoctrination project, undeniably mitigates this thesis.

20 One might almost say that what was once a religious vehicle for secular content – the Islamic modernism of the ante-revolutionary period – has increasingly been replaced, since 1979, by a secular vehicle for religious content – a sort of creeping "Qajarization" of post-revolutionary Iran. But this would be going too far, given the fact that clerics (still) administer the country, and play a central and largely unmediated role in advancing religious agendas at home and abroad. As we shall argue elsewhere in this volume, including in its conclusion, in today's official Islamic Republic the relationship between tradition and modernity is less characterized by attempts to blend or integrate these two opposites than by attempts to create a division of labor and a system of checks and balances between them. Note also that while "orthodox" and "folk" religion do not always see eye-to-eye (though they generally manage to find *modi Vivendi*), here we are offsetting both strains to the spectrum of innovative ideologies that seek to infuse Shiʿism with modern Western philosophies and institutions.

21 Some see in this phenomenon a retreat from what Morteza Motahhari had styled "enlightened" (*rowshanfekri*) Islam to what he had decried as the "obscurantist" (*tarik andishi*) version (Morteza Motahhari, *Qiyam va enqelab-e mahdi az didga-he falsafe-ye tarikh,* in *Majmuʿe-ye athar-e Ostad Shahid Motahhari* [Tehran: Entesharat-e Sadra, n.d.], vol. 24, p. 419). In truth, we cannot know how Ayatollah Motahhari, who was assassinated in 1979, would react to the developments we have been describing. He certainly supported the trend that he saw as *rowshanfekri,* but on the other hand, he had little tolerance for the extreme liberties taken with Islamic tradition by members of the "progressive" camp – for whom (Motahhari argued) Islam was often more of a means than an end – and he famously disassociated from Ali-ye Shariʿati for that reason. One of those disappointed by this post-revolutionary de-sophistication is Columbia University's Hamid Dabashi, who had been highly pleased to see the Iranian Shiʿite intelligentsia, having adopted anti-colonial nationalism and third world socialism, "leave its endogamous clericalism behind and meet the challenges of its contemporary history face to face" – only to watch it relapse into a situation in which once again "Shiʿi clerics presided over a dead and deadening Shiʿi scholasticism" (Hamid Dabashi, *Shiʿism: A Religion of Protest* [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011], pp. 298–299). Another mourner of the dying modern Islamic love-affair, or at least engagement, with Western liberalism is Khaled Abou al-Fadl: "Puritans and moderates are opposite poles that are both products of modernity and that also respond to modernity. Both orientations react to modernity, the one by rejecting it and the other by embracing it. There are some orientations in Islam that do not seem to be touched by modernity and do not respond to it, such as the conservatives or traditionalists, but I do not believe that they are significant in shaping the future of Islam. I believe that the future of Islam

ble), and as such demands to an even greater extent of those who would penetrate the mindset of Iran's present-day religio-political elite a thoroughgoing familiarity with the hoary heritage that is this class's bread and butter. The present study will, therefore, take the long view, arguing – against the prevailing outlook in contemporary academia – that events and ideas from the distant past continue to play a powerful role in the present-day attitudes and decision-making of Iran's leaders, indeed, influence them today more than ever before. Thus, the ensuing pages (especially in Part Two) will involve quite a few forays into the medieval annals of Iran and of Shiʿism – the country's official religion for the last five hundred years – not in the form of superficial, "executive summaries" but in the form of relatively detailed and occasionally even anecdotal chronicles of major milestones in the historical careers of both.

Why the warning about "anecdotal" material? Because good stories are, at one and the same time, most likely to be remembered and most likely to be invalidated. Nothing sticks in the minds of the masses (and the elite) down the many generations like a piquant tale or dramatic plot, and nothing attracts the critical, not to say lethal, attention of scholars like the same. Historians have cast serious doubt on the traditional account of (for instance) Sassanian monarch Khosroe Anushirvan's many achievements, and have called into question much that comprises the standard biographies of figures such as the Prophet Muḥammad and the Imam ʿAlī. But almost everyone in Iran knows the time-honored versions of these biographies, and virtually no-one is aware of their more critically-based replacements. The staying power of the former may be attributed not just to the ignorance, inertia or piety of the public, nor even primarily to the veteran status of a narrative that has been for ages inextricably embedded in the foundations of communal myth, but perhaps first and foremost to the simple fact that *the original tale is better.* As Jalal Al-e Ahmad, one of Iran's most celebrated twentieth-century authors, put it when comparing the theory of evolution to the story of creation: "Be-

---

will be shaped either by the puritans or the moderates" (Khaled Abou al-Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, cited in Richard Bulliet, "Islamic Reformation or 'Big Crunch'? A Review Essay, *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 8 [2009], p. 15). Richard Bulliet comments that "Abou al-Fadl almost casually dismisses the conservative and traditionalist approaches that engage probably most of the world's Muslims at the present moment" (Bulliet, *Islamic Reformation*, p. 15). These approaches certainly engage, *mutatis mutandis*, a considerable number of clerical and lay Iranians today. Finally, it is possible to see in the post-revolutionary reversion to tradition yet another swing in the ever-oscillating pendulum between Uṣūlism and Akhbārism, this time in the direction of the latter. This is an important but highly complex question, aspects of which will be touched upon below at appropriate junctures.

tween the two, I like the story. Why? Because it is poetry. And the basis for poetry…"[22]

For the same reason, a yarn describing fifteen minutes in the life of the Iranian champion Rostam, the Safavid sovereign Abbas the Great, or the eighth Shiʿite imam's sister Fāṭima the Immaculate will almost invariably take up more space in the memories of the vast majority of the Persian-speaking populace than the entire, centuries-long reign of the Parthian dynasty, or the more recent Hundred Years' War between the alternately ruling "Black Sheep" and "White Sheep" tribes.[23] As Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameneʾi put it, referring to the third Shiʿite imam Ḥusayn's martyrdom on the plain of Karbala in 680 CE: "In our entire fourteen hundred year-long history, it was this half-day that influenced us the most…Between our eight years' war [against Iraq] and Imam Ḥusayn's eight hour struggle [against the Umayyad army], we all know which was the more resplendent."[24]

Similarly, although Western historical research has long since shifted its emphasis away from the age-old preoccupation with the "trumpets and drums" exploits of heroes and aristocrats and toward the social and economic history of more "ordinary" folk, those same ordinary folk – as well as their more educated compatriots or co-religionists – stubbornly persist in celebrating and transmitting onward the former, while remaining for the most part blissfully unaware of the latter. And while learned, Ladurie-esque explications of the administrative apparatus, bureaucratic machinery or peasant economy of a particular pre-modern regime may tell us much, the overwhelming majority of subjects or citizens of that regime's successor states simply couldn't care less about such questions.[25]

Anecdotal material concerning real or legendary paragons is even more relevant when seeking to penetrate the worldview of Muslim religious doctors and lay believers, because for these – to generalize grossly in what we hope is nevertheless an informative fashion – the cumulative, unidirectional, chronological procession of history is of less importance than individual, seminal incidents that loom large enough to be perceived as virtually anachronic. As with the Qurʿan itself – a docu-

22 Cited in Mottahedeh, *Mantle of the Prophet,* p. 301.

23 These historical events and dynasties will be surveyed below.

24 ʿAli Hosayni-ye Khameneʾi, *Jehad-e farhangi: Dar Bayan-e Rahbar-e Moʿazzam-e Enqelab* (Tehran: Daneshgah-e Emam Sadeq, 1391), p. 146. Note the Supreme Leader's reference to "our entire 1400 year-long history": "our" history is Islamic, not Iranian, history.

25 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *The Peasants of Languedoc,* first published in 1966, was a seminal classic of this new genre of "total" social-economic-administrative history. Coincidentally, Ladurie was an early critic of Khomeinism. A handful of academic specialists may be excepted from the blanket stipulation to which this note is appended.

ment with few temporal markers the traditional exegesis of which often rejects the necessity of diachronicity[26] – Islamic time is often, as it were, flattened out into horizontal space, and this space, for its part, is overshadowed by outstanding incidents and personalities that ascend and expand to dominate its landscape. The very notion of linear history, for that matter, has never fully established itself in Islamic consciousness (or in that of many other traditional societies), counterbalanced as it has always been by more cyclical, static or essentialist conceptions of existence that do not entail a potent sense of increasing distance from formative events or prominent figures. The proximity of those events or figures is, rather, maintained at all costs.[27] Among Muslim jurists, for instance, the particular location of feted predecessors along an historical timeline is often immaterial: such prominent scholastics hailing from diverse periods are treated in many ways as contemporaries of one another, as if they were sitting around the same "heterotopic" mosque pillar engaged in discussion and argumentation.[28] The political, social or economic circumstances prevailing in a given era or at a given location (or the personal circumstances of individual biography) are all but ignored in the context of the vigorous, trans-temporal "conversation" in which these diverse intellectual virtuosos are envisioned to partake. Here, too, then, the *realities* of history – political, social, economic or otherwise – are not particularly relevant.

For all the above reasons, the scientific accuracy and proportional presentation of historical material is often inversely related to the extent of its presence in the collective consciousness of society, and the foci of academic investigations into the centuries-long career of a national or religious community are generally unreflective of the interests or concerns of that community's latter-day members, which are far more focused on folklore and hagiography. This does not mean that scholarship devoted to unearthing *wie es eigentlich gewesen* ("what really happened") is unnecessary for, or even inimical to, our ability to understand the mental-emotional make-up of communities or their leaders in the present. Far from it. The components that go into forging the mature mindset of individuals and collectives are perhaps – so many have come to believe, at least since Freud and Jung – more often those that are forgotten than those that are remembered. The events

26 This denial of diachronicity in *tafsīr* may be seen, *inter alia,* in the option of performing *taqdīm wa ta'khīr,* that is, the reversal of the order of verses in a given passage so as to make more sense out of the plot.

27 Even on the daily level, Mohammad Reza Shah could remark that before his father became king "we Iranians never really bothered about time" (Milani, *The Shah,* p. 31). All top officials under Reza Shah reportedly fixed their watches ten minutes ahead of time to match that of their sovereign.

28 Following Michel Foucault's usage of "heterotopia" as a place, as it were, out of space and time.

and processes that transpired in our past have all contributed to forging our personalities, whether we are consciously aware of them or not.[29] In *Adam Bede* George Eliot muses:

> So much of our early gladness vanishes utterly from our memory: we can never recall the joy with which we laid our heads on our mother's bosom or rode on our father's back in childhood. Doubtless that joy is wrought up into our nature, as the sunlight of long past mornings is wrought up in the soft mellowness of the apricot, but it is gone forever from our imagination.[30]

In this sense rigorous historical research that debunks long-established myths and presents a more veracious account of that which occurred in by-gone eras functions as a sort of psychoanalysis that probes even deeper into what has formed the pre-conceptions and predilections of a given human association. If so, a compromise is in order: a delineation of the history/tradition of a people or religion that includes both (a) pithy and even sensationalist narratives that may be partly or wholly apocryphal, and (b) interwoven through these, a tolerably accurate portrayal of the actual procession of events, based on the findings of critical research.

A final caveat is in order regarding those findings. The history of Iranian civilization is almost inconceivably long, multifarious, vicissitudinous and elusive, and all but the first adjective may be applied, without undue exaggeration, to the career and doctrines of Shi'ism. That which is concealed often exceeds that which is revealed in the archives of each subject, and political, ideological and theological controversy, past and present, serves to cloud our perception of countless phenomena that might otherwise be (relatively) clear. As Roy Mottahedeh puts it: "Any consensus on the meaning of the Iranian past has been torn up by the deeply felt disagreement among Iranians over the meaning of the Iranian present."[31]

---

29 This is how I understand, for instance, Rahim Shayegan's reference to "those intellectual structures and cultural practices that might have been carried down from the Achaemenid to the Sassanian periods, without us having to assume the Sassanians were cognizant of them, or even applied themselves in emulating the ways of their historical predecessors" (Rahim Shayegan, "Persianism: Or Achaemenid Reminiscences in the Iranian and Iranicate World(s) of Antiquity," in Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys [eds.], *Persianism in Antiquity* [Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017], p. 402).

30 George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: Penguin Books, n.d.), p. 215.

31 Mottahedeh, *Mantle of the Prophet*, p. 9. This is a straightforward and therefore efficacious expression of the "problem of representation" so central to the (by contrast) painfully convoluted discussions of post-modern academia. Abbas Milani, speaking of an event that took place not in some distant past but only decades ago, writes: "There are completely conflicting reports on what actually happened on August 19 [1953, when prime minister Mohammad-e Mosaddeq was overthrown in a coup]. Each narrative is shaped either by the real or perceived interests of the narrator or by the

The sheer breadth of diverse sub-specialisms cooperating (or not cooperating) to produce even an opaque picture of the realities of any given period in Iranian history is so daunting that one respected author has called the entire field "a mirage."[32] Scholarship on both subjects – Iran and Shiʿism – has ever been contentious and is, of course, constantly moving forward. Although the present writer does not subscribe to the increasingly widespread academic credo (applied even to the liberal arts) that might be formulated "latest is best" – that is, the notion that the theories proffered by earlier luminaries of the field have necessarily been superseded and rendered obsolete by more recent, "cutting edge" research – there is no question that new discoveries and re-conceptualizations tendered by up-and-coming students of the discipline regularly enhance our knowledge. It is therefore important to note that in our various discussions of aspects of Iranian and Shiʿite history – especially given their relative brevity and specific purpose, *viz.,* to provide background for this volume's particular focus on the worldview of the post-revolutionary clerical leaders – we make no pretense at taking account of the many polemics, or keeping abreast of the never-ending flood of novel contributions, that make this field (like many others) so challenging and unwieldy. Today's scholarship tends to contest, to deconstruct, even to autopsy: arguably healthier for our knowledge of the genuine unfolding of events, it is often deadly to a flowing, coherent retelling. The necessity to maintain readability means that we will be unable to acknowledge, let alone engage with, all the relevant research that regularly calls into question elements of the overarching account. We have tried to cut a path down the middle of the competing theses that analyze – literally, "pull apart" – that account in a plethora of directions. When possible, we have addressed ourselves to dissenting positions and other complicating factors in the notes.[33]

There is one more factor that contributes, perhaps more than all the others combined, to the urgent necessity of plunging down into the historical and philosophical core of Iranian Shi'ism (as opposed to making do with what has become the par-for-the-course "executive summary" format). What the Islamic Republic helped the Assad regime do successfully in Syria – suppress a country-wide uprising through mass slaughter on a national scale – will not work in Iran. If frustra-

historically and linguistically determined prism through which they perceive and articulate the event" (*The Shah,* p. 185).

32 Khodadad Rezakhani, *Reorienting the Sassanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), loc. 203.

33 There are, of course, many excellent histories of Iran and studies of Shiʿism focusing on different dimensions and periods, many of which we have relied upon in what follows. Suggestions for further reading will be provided in the bibliography.

tion with the denial of freedoms, the influence of modern individualism, the encroachment of neo-Westernization, economic frustration and the progress of technology all combine in order to ignite Persian youth, change will become inevitable. At that point, Iranian state law enforcement, wherever one locates it on the spectrum between the legitimate preservation of law and order and out-and-out, brutal repression, will stand at a crossroads between two paths, both of them ultimately leading to the same destination. One path involves an easing up of restrictions and the facilitation of more freedom in Iranian society. The other involves a series of increasingly bloody crackdowns, crackdowns that will fail and indeed boomerang in the short or long run, and thereby set the stage for…an easing up of restrictions and the facilitation of more freedom in Iranian society. When *that* happens, willy-nilly, and the glue holding the post-revolutionary polity together becomes perforce less "official" and more *cultural*, the role of religion in furnishing an enduring *raison* d'et*re* for the Iranian state will be enhanced by an order of magnitude. Indeed, of all the other ideological elements informing the character and trajectory of Iranian society in our time, including nationalism, only religion – specifically Shi'ite Islam – has a chance of fending off the onslaught of Americanized globalization that is rapidly replacing the multicolored and variegated Persian carpet that our world once was with a shiny, monochromatic mat. Thus, now more than ever, the virtually fathomless spiritual, theological, cultural and historical wellspring that irrigated and propagated Khomeinism – no less, and in some ways even more, than the ideology of Khomeinism itself – deserves our utmost attention. The subject matter of this book will thus include a heavy concentration, in what some would characterize (and castigate) as fine "essentialist" and "Orientalist" fashion, on the medieval and modern antecedents of revolutionary Shi'ism.

It is difficult to write objectively about the worldview informing a regime that openly advocates, and relentlessly strives for, the annihilation of the writer's own country. It is even more difficult to bring out the positive and powerful sides of an ideology the purveyors of which brook little if any dissent at home, increasingly pulverizing manifestations thereof with an iron fist. Like socialism and communism in its day, Khomeinism, for all its interest and (to this author's mind) compelling aspects, must be judged in the end by the results it produces in reality. That is the ultimate litmus test. Any doctrine that fails to conquer the hearts of the human beings whose lives it presumes to order and direct – even after having initially succeeded in doing so – and can therefore maintain its authoritative position only by means of brute, lethal force, is a doctrine that both should not, and *will* not, survive and remain relevant in the long run. Even in such a case, however, said doctrine deserves to be studied, whether as a positive example or a cautionary tale or both. The Islamic Republic was, is and may well continue to be (in one form or an-

other) a sui generis and fascinating phenomenon, worthy of our intellectual attention.

Ze'ev Maghen
Bar-Ilan University
Erev Rosh HaShanah, 5783