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***Becoming Mollah:  
Reflections on Iranian Clerics  
in a Revolutionary Age***

**Michael M. J. Fischer**

The role of religion and of clerics in the events leading to and during the Iranian revolution of 1977-79 provides an instructive exercise in formulating a theory of cultural influence. The institution of religious training (the madrasah system) has been in decay and under political pressure throughout this century. That the clergy should have emerged as central actors in the revolution, therefore, says something about their cultural, rather than institutional, centrality. The popular idioms of Islamic protest--deriving from the story of Karbala and from the modernist reformulations associated with Dr. Ali Shari'ati--are elaborated with reference to the learning of the madrasahs. That forms of open, secular, political discourse were suppressed under the Pahlavi monarchy helped ensure that Islamic rhetorics would become the idiom of political debate and helped give clerics (both preachers and teachers) extra leverage. The struggle over the role of the clerics continues, a struggle in which Ayatollah Khomeini himself has intervened by drawing ambiguous distinctions between obfuscatory clerics and revolutionary ones, and by chastising clerics for meddling beyond their competence.

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The following paper deals with the cultural position of the clerics by surveying (a) the moral ambiguities of their roles, (b) the changing historical context of Islamic rhetorics, and (c) the nature of Khomeini's charisma. It attempts to shift the level of discussion from questions of political commentary concerning which categories of actors exercise what kind of power, to questions of how rhetorics or pedagogies focus attention, create attitudes, structure issues, and channel debate as well as consequent action. Islam is not so much a determinate set of programs--as the popular media would have it--as an arena of debate. What needs attention is the relationship between ideologies or rhetorics or pedagogies and social cleavages, contradictions, and forces. The relationship is not transparent and needs careful exploration.

# I

Mullah shodan, cheh asan;  
Adam shodan, cheh moshkel.

[How easy to become a mullah (learned);  
How hard to become Adam (a Man, a Mensch).]<sup>1</sup>

In 1919, a mullah of northwestern Iran wrote an autobiography which has become well known among the Iranian clerics and is regarded with affection by them as a sympathetic account of the tribulations of the life of a religious student. This life history, *Siyahat-e Sharq* (Oriental Journey) by Aqa Najafi Quchani,<sup>2</sup> is all the more remarkable for its picaresque style, its use of traditional tropes, and its veritable uniqueness.<sup>3</sup> Although written with biting wit, and exposing a variety of charletans, scholastic know-nothings, ritual fanatics, literalist fundamentalists, and empty mystics, Aqa Najafi Quchani is able to present an Islam which is essentially rationalist, tolerant, pragmatic, and full of humor, gentle self-mockery, and humane wisdom.

The details of his life are traced from a village *maktab* (elementary school) near Quchan to the madrasahs

(seminaries) of Sabzevar, Mashad, Isfahan, and Najaf. But these details are fitted into a series of traditional tropes of journeys, debates, and education. Journeys are the master metaphors of spiritual development, of the relation between man and God, or of the relation between man and his own potential. Think of the *me'raj* of Mohammad, the various flights of inspiration of mystics, the exterior pilgrimages ideally providing interior inspiration, or the educational journeys in search of teachers (or manuscripts catalogued in the traditional Islamic biographies (*rejal*) used in the critical apparatus of scholarship to evaluate an author's reliability). Aqa Najafi Quchani engages in all these types of journey, ending with the journey from God back to men (*safar-e men allāh elal-khalq*), which is the goal of all ulama: that is, the guidance of others into the proper paths; and so he returns from Najaf to his home town.

The metaphor of education or schooling is used to deal with relations of authority (a man and his teacher), with inculcation of discipline, with learning proper, mature, and competent patterns of behavior. Marriage, as well as life in this world generally, are spoken of as arenas of schooling, whose rewards will be reaped in the next world. Education is not a pouring of knowledge into a vessel, but an active engagement; an important element is selecting teachers and role models. Out of passive and incomplete education can come only misguidance, ritualistic absurdity, and incompetence. Debating (*bahs*) is a major technique in the religious educational system, and a device of jousting among equals. Students study in pairs, one member defending the text under study, the other attempting to come up with all possible counterarguments to the original argument. Such dialectics sharpen the wit and eventually should develop pragmatism and an informed moral presence. If every argument has a series of counters, then when debate is not academic, but of practical concern, it must be subsumed under moral and pragmatic choices. Debates, education, and journeys are thus all interrelated.

Aqa Najafi Quchani was born to a peasant family around 1875. He describes the introduction of opium cul-

tivation, the atmosphere surrounding the agitations of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and World War I in Najaf, and the hopes among his fellow students that Emperor Wilhelm of Germany, whom they called "Haj Wilhelm, *Moayyed-e Islam*" (Helper of Islam), would wreak divine punishment on the Russians. But his text tells us less about politics, colonialism, and world affairs than about the immediate concerns of students: grinding poverty, marital entrapment, and theological puzzlement. His affectionate account of clerical foibles, hardships, and deficiencies come from a time when an alternative secular educational system and culture was just beginning to take root.

Sixty years later, an equally puzzled, pragmatic, and humane mojtahed<sup>4</sup> in Washington, D.C. attempted to explain the career of Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, the leader of the new Islamic Republic of Iran, in terms of similar traditional tropes. He spoke of Khomeini's interest in mysticism and philosophy; of the grounding of the notion of imam in Plato's philosopher-king through the reinterpretations of al-Farabi, Ibn Arabi, and Mullah Sadra; and particularly of Mullah Sadra's account of the spiritual development of a leader and his relation to the community, which Khomeini studied, taught, and then attempted to execute. This account involved four journeys: from man to God, from God to God (moving back and forth between considerations of God's attributes and His essence, until their unity is apperceived), from God back to man, and from man to man (instituting the divine law). This mojtahed and doctor of philosophy was puzzled because while the metaphors were still valid, he failed to see why Khomeini should insist on written constitutional provisions for guidance of the state by clerics (*velayat-e faqih*): de facto guidance was Khomeini's already, and such constitutional provisions would only complicate future developments.<sup>5</sup> Already there were practical dilemmas such as the ambiguous status of so-called "Islamic" revolutionary courts, more revolutionary than Islamic, presided over by such passionate mullahs as the infamous Sadeq Khalkhali, who proudly ran for election to the Assembly of Experts (which drew up the constitution) on the platform of having personally sentenced to death 200 enemies of God.<sup>6</sup>

Aqa Najafi Quchani's version of the proverb, "Mullah shodan . . .", ran: "We have a hadith: the people are dead except the ulama; the ulama are dead except those who practice their knowledge; all those who practice their knowledge are dead except the pious ones, and they are in great danger." Aqa Najafi Quchani was worried by a clerical world archaic and decayed in knowledge and understanding, rife with false piety and with action based on facile theology or on no moral reasoning whatsoever. These dangers continue to exist, compounded with those of the proverb--the dangers of Iblis's pride overcoming the higher senses.<sup>7</sup> The dilemmas of corrupting power are well known to Islamic theorists, both classical and contemporary. A distinction is often drawn between the true Islamic state as an ideal utopia and what is possible in historical reality.<sup>8</sup> Fundamentalist Islamic rhetorics of the modern era (after the eighteenth century) have tried to abandon this distinction, arguing that the time of the prophet was a true Islamic state and that it can be reproduced by introducing the shari'a or by other reforms. Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammad Kazem Shari'atmadari and Sayyed Mahmud Taleqani warned on simple pragmatic ground that if the clerics exercise political authority they will bear responsibility for the coerciveness and injustices inevitable in a real society, and their moral authority will thereby become corrupted. The argument is strengthened with the charge that the clerics have no competence in public policy, a result of the decayed educational system in which they have trained. Ayatollah Khomeini has not entirely dismissed these dangers<sup>9</sup> but sees them as a necessary risk in the duty of attempting to institute a moral society, and in an interesting fashion his persona itself, perhaps, functions to counter these risks.

Critical to understanding the current Iranian revolution is a recognition of the ambivalences toward the clerical establishment so vividly expressed by Aqa Najafi Quchani. That a picaresque strain still informs Islamic faith in Iran is illustrated in the caustic humor of the Iranian revolution. Irreverent titles such as "Ayatollah Ringo" for the son of Ayatollah Hosayn Ali Montazeri, and "Prince Ahmad" for the son of Khomeini, are urban witticisms paral-

leling the cynical expectations of proletarianized peasants that the clerics might well merely replicate the old imperial power structure with Khomeini as the new shah. Satirists and political cartoonists of the revolution have played to the traditional strain in Persian thought that acknowledges that a fair percentage of clerics are charlatans. Among the most caustic are the cartoons of graves marked "martyr" wearing hats (playing on the phrase *kolah zadan*, "to put a hat on someone, to deceive someone"; the cleric holding a flashlight which gives off darkness; the mock movie poster of "Hojatolislam Ringo" as a gun slinger, with an outsized turban looking like a sombrero, guns blazing, and people running for cover amid rows of high-rise apartment houses--the caption refers to the younger Montazeri's attempt to seize an airliner at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport and fly his followers to aid an unenthusiastic PLO against Israel; the family gathered around a silent TV over which a cloth screen has been affixed, upon which a home-movie projector shows an American Western; the mullah trying to blow out a light bulb ("Out, oh cursed West"); the sequence of sun's rays peeking over the horizon, followed by a second scene in which people run toward what they think is the rising sun, followed by a third scene in which they run away from the semicircle which has risen over the horizon to reveal itself as the turban of Sadeq Khalkhali, the hanging judge of the revolution.<sup>10</sup>

Such cautions against the overwhelming of reason by revolutionary passions are not necessarily either anti-revolutionary or anti-Islamic; they serve rather as critical checks to aid the moral purposes of the revolution, for which the clerics have been among the leading spokesmen. Among the more eloquent statements of concern for Iranian self-respect is, for instance, Ayatollah Khomeini's speech on September 8, 1979 in the Faiziyeh Madrasah of Qom, commemorating Black Friday 1978 (the massacre of 17 Shahrivar):<sup>11</sup>

...our problems and miseries are caused by losing ourselves. In Iran until something has a Western name, it is not accepted....The material woven in our factories must have something in the Latin

script in its sleeve edges....[Our writers and intellectuals] are also "Westoxicated" and so are we. ....We forget our own phrases and the word itself. Easterners have completely forgotten their honor.... As long as you do not put aside these imitations, you cannot be a human being and independent....

An enlightened heart cannot stand by silently and watch while traditions and honor are trampled upon. An enlightened heart cannot see its people being drawn towards baseness of spirit or watch in silence while individuals around Tehran live in slums.

The second commandment which God gave to Moses was to "remind people of the Days of God"...some days have a particularity. The day that the great Prophet of Islam migrated to Medina...the day that he conquered Mecca....The day of Khawarej...when Hazrat Ali unsheathed his sword and did away with these corrupt and cancerous tumors...the fifteenth of Khordad (June 5, 1963) when a people stood against a force and they did something which caused almost five months of martial law. But because the people had no power, they were not consolidated, they were not awake, they were defeated....The seventeenth of Shahrivar (September 8, 1978) was another one of the Days of God when a people, men, women, young people and older people, all stood up and, in order to get their rights, were martyred....A nation which had nothing, broke a force in such a way that nothing remained of it....Empty handed, a monarchical empire of 2500 years, 2500 years of criminals was done away with.

Note that a number of the themes are generally identified with other, nonclerical revolutionary spokesmen: the phrase "Westoxification" comes from a famous essay by Jalal Al-Ahmad; the theme of imitation/alienation was popularized in the 1970s by Shari'ati, drawing on Sartre and Fanon. The rhetorical device of iterated Days of God is a powerful cosmogenic image derived from both preaching skills and literary metaphorizations (which also provided such power and popularity to Shari'ati's formulations).



In sum, to strike a proper attitude toward the role of clerics requires both a recognition of competing interpretations or ideologies of Islam (scholastic, folk, modernist, sufi, elite-privatized), and a recognition of the clergy as a varied group of people, with ideals and failings, and with an institutional structure that has undergone a number of vicissitudes. Aqa Najafi Quchani, at the turn of the twentieth century, belonged to a generation of modernist reformers who insisted upon an openness to learning and science, whatever its origin, and who derided avoidance of learning because it might endanger faith or because it was tainted by non-Islamic transmission. Although there are many continuities, many things have changed between 1919 and 1979. Khomeini belongs to a generation reacting to increasing authoritarianism, to the failures of Third World socialisms, and to modernization theories based on tutelage dictatorships. The clerical institution surviving between these two generations needs to be seen in three contexts (1) the Iranian political context and the attempt to progressively exclude the clerics from power over the past century; (2) the international context and the cumulative generational changes in the political use of Islamic rhetorics; and (3) the internal context of the decay of learning within the madrasah system and the discontent this generated.

## II

The following chart provides a generalized five-generation analysis of the political uses of Islamic rhetorics of renewal.<sup>12</sup> Each generation made some enduring contributions, but also embodied defects leading to the decay of its initiatives. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was a puritanical reformism (the Wahhabis in Arabia, the Sanusi in Cyrenaica, the Fulani in Nigeria, the Mahdi in the Sudan, and the victory of the Usuli mujtaheds in Shi'ite Iran and Iraq) which stressed four themes: purifying Islam of centuries of superstitious accretions, insisting on a free use of *ijtihad* (a disciplined form of reasoning to provide religious answers to new problems),

## GENERATIONAL DIALECTIC OF ISLAMIC RENEWAL

Generation	Enduring Contributions	Failings
1. Puritanical religious reformism (premodern fundamentalism) (18th-19th centuries)	ijtihad sociopolitical engagement	loss of old scholarly historical & evalu- ative skills lack of new techno- cratic skills
2. Modernist reformism (Afghani, Abduh, Shaykh Ahmad, Ataturk, Iqbal) (early 20th century)	science & technology democracy	underestimation of the political econ- omy of dependency elitism vis-a-vis the lower classes
3. Neofundamentalists (Muslim Brotherhood, Maududi's Jama'at-e Islami) (1930s, 1940s)	political organization populism (a-democratic)	continued devaluation of historical skills totalitarian (antiplu- ralist) attitude toward nonmembers
4. Islamic socialism (Nasser, Destour Party, Ba'th, Bhutto) (post World War II)	economic reconstruction social welfare	need for dictatorial means: decay into cor- rupt authoritarianisms
5. Islamic renewal of the 1970s, 1980s	leverage against corrup- tion & authoritarianism search for moral identity search for a new interna- tional economic order	inability to live up to Islamic ideals of jus- tice (corruption by power) lack of clarity over fundamentalist vs. modernist programs

primacy of sociomoral issues over eschatological-metaphysical ones, and political militancy. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there followed a modernist reformism (the generation of Aqa Najafi Quchani) which stressed the compatibility of Islam with modern science and with democracy (e.g., the constitutional experiments in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran). The generation of the 1930s saw a peak in secularist, Westernizing, constitutionalist faith, but also a rise of anticolonial movements. The latter, incorporating conservative ("neo-fundamentalist") Islamic reactions to the failures of the modernist reformers, were bolstered domestically by the disorientation of the growing urban lower classes, and externally by the triumphs of Japan against Russia in 1905, the Nazis in Germany and the Bolsheviks in Russia. These successes, they felt, underlined the contention that Western European social and political forms were neither invincible nor inevitable. The building social pressures led in the 1950s to the overthrow of a number of governments (Egypt, Iraq, Syria, almost Iran) and very strong pressures for the ideology that governments be held responsible for social welfare and economic reconstruction. This was the beginning of serious a-democratic mass politics, inspired by socialist ideas and a growing perception that unequal trade relations within the world economy generated relative underdevelopment and vitiated earlier liberal hopes that education, democracy, and economic modernization would allow the Middle East to catch up with Europe. Finally, in recent years, the socialist drive in turn is being challenged--often in the language of Islamic social ethics--for its decay into military dictatorships, more state capitalist than democratic socialist.

Iran has been part of these historical tides. Although the prevailing image of the clergy is of steadfast opposition to government tyranny, grounded in alleged Shi'ite doctrines of the illegitimacy of all temporal governments, historical reality is, of course, much more complicated and interesting. Each generation contains its competing factions of clerics and its own contemporary issues of debate. The generational dialectic in Iran roughly corresponds to issues faced at the same time in the non-Shi'ite Islamic world, with modifications and some differences.

Shi'ism became the state religion of Iran in 1501 with the establishment of the Safavid dynasty. Previously, the religious situation in Iran was one of multiple Islamic groups, Shi'ites dominant here and there, the four Sunni schools dominant in most places, with cities factionalized between these several groups and loyalties shifting from time to time. When the Safavids established Shi'ism as the state religion, they invited Shi'ite clerics from what is now Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain to come to Iran. Large numbers of these clerics came, and Said Amir Arjomand makes the case that they became competitive with the already existing native Shi'ite clerics.<sup>13</sup> The native clerics were integrated in the regional and state administrations as judges (*qadi*) and administrators (*motavalli*) of religious endowments, under the royal ministry of the *sadr*. Many were landed, and they espoused a mandarin culture with catholic interests in philosophy and *irfan* ("high Sufism" or gnosticism). The immigrant clergy, for whom the Safavids built madrasahs, and some of whom were accommodated in the state administration as shaykhs ol-Islam of various cities, had to depend upon their religious scholarship to carve out a competitive position. Arjomand calls them dogmatic religious professionals who attacked all rivals, not only Sunnis, but Sufis, philosophers, and popular shaykhs or pirs. Mohammad Baqer Majlesi, the most prominent of this group, became Shaykh ol-Islam of the capital, Isfahan, in 1687. In his voluminous writings, says Arjomand, he not only formulated the tenets of Shi'ism in simple dogmas ordinary people could grasp, but he incorporated popular beliefs and practices so as to monopolize all forms of religious practice under the supervision of the clerics. Accommodation was made with the unorthodox claims of the Safavid kings to be representatives of the Imam.

It is out of Majlesi's formulation of Shi'ism, Arjomand suggests, that we get an exclusivist, dominance-seeking interpretation of the role of the clergy. The attraction of Arjomand's account is that it can accommodate three otherwise puzzling features (1) the decline of the office of *qadi* during the Safavid period, although the influence of the clergy increased; (2) the extreme ideological hostility of the clerics against what remains an enduring in-

terest of Iranians in philosophy, speculative mysticism, and the practices of sufism; (3) the ambiguity between insistence on scholastic rational argumentation and tolerance for scholastically suspect popular mythology and beliefs.

Vahid-e Behbehani (d. 1793), the founder of the now dominant Usuli school of Shi'ite scholarship, was a grandson of Majlesi. The fall of the Safavids caused hard times for the clergy, many of whom withdrew to Iraq. Behbehani re-energized their activist claims. During its early period, the Usuli school was engaged in establishing the legitimacy of mojtaheds to make decisions that ordinary believers might follow (without yet any assertion of obligation of obedience) and establishing the limits of mojtahed applications of reason ("reason" was formally admitted by the Usulis as the fourth basis for the validity of legal norms: *ketab*, *sunna*, *ijma*, and *aql*, or the Quran, the traditions of the Prophet and the imams, consensus of the learned, and reason<sup>14</sup>). Mohammad Baqer Shaf'ti, Behbehani's most militant student, attempted to introduce the *hudud* penalties (those enjoined by the Quran, e.g., for adultery and theft), and another cleric in this period under the Qajar dynasty, Mullah Ahmad Naraq'i, went so far as to propose a theocracy of the ulama. But Arjomand points out that the leading scholar of the later Qajar period, Shaykh Morteza Ansari (d. 1861), rejected this tradition of direct political activism. While Arjomand perhaps overstates Ansari's quietism, saying that he represented a stance of pious antipathy to all worldly activity and tried to refrain from even issuing opinions (*fatwa*) as far as possible--he wrote what is still the classic commercial code of Shi'ite law, the *Makaseb* and is known for many *fatwas*--there was indeed a contrast between the pious clerics and the political ones, many of whom acquired estates and fortunes. *Akhund-e siyasi* (political cleric) remained a term of abuse until followers of Khomeini turned it into a virtue by separating the corrupting features of participation in the world from the moral ones.

In a rough sense, then, the Usuli tradition founded by Behbehani and expressed most extremely by such mullahs

as Shaf'ti between 1801 and 1842 in Isfahan or the Najafi brothers at the turn of the century in Isfahan,<sup>15</sup> corresponds to the generation of puritan reform on the chart. The issues of that generation revolve around the proper use of *ijtihad* and political engagement. The latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the rise of Islamic modernist reformers, figures like Jamaled-din Al-Afghani; and Iran participated in his movement fully. Starting in 1851 with the Dar ol-Fonun, a polytechnic, modern secular educational institutions were introduced in Iran; by 1911 there were 123 elementary schools in Tehran as well as a number of professional schools and a functional Ministry of Education. The clergy did not take kindly to this invasion into a field they had largely dominated. They also were prominent among the leaders against the economic concessions and bondage to foreigners brought about by the financial difficulties of the Qajar governments. In 1872-73 a successful battle was waged against a concession to Baron Julius de Reuter which would have given away much of Iran's future communications, mining, agricultural, and other productive industries. In 1891-92 a successful agitation was waged against a proposed tobacco concession. And from 1905-11 the clergy participated in the Constitutional Revolution. The clergy in this period did not form a unified party, but were factionated into roughly three positions. There were the outright modernists, who fought for a constitution and for modern education. These included Sayyed Yahya Dowlatabadi and Mirza Hasan Roshdiyeh. There were the moderates who were constitutionalist, but not necessarily in favor of modern schools, who wanted to limit the power of the shah to give the country away to foreigners and generally to act irresponsibly and tyrannically. These included the great mojtaheds Khorasani, Mazandarani, Khalili Tehrani, Nai'ni, Tabataba'i, Behbehani, Modarres, and Ashtiyani. And there were royalists, such as the Imam Jome'eh of Tehran (Mirza Abol-Qasem) and, more importantly, conservatives led by Shaykh Fazlollah Nuri, who were anticonstitutionalist as well as antimodernist. It was Nuri's agitation which caused the provisions to be written into the constitution that there be a board of five mojtaheds who could veto any proposed legislation not in accord with Islam, that freedom of press and education

be limited to things not hostile to Islam, and that cabinet posts and judgeships be reserved to Twelver Shi'ite Muslims.

In the 1930s, Iran experienced a peak of secularizing and Westernizing effort under the dictatorship of Reza Shah, who modeled his programs upon the example of Ataturk in Turkey. Not only education, but the law and the judiciary, the offices of notaries, the administration of endowments, and the dress code were secularized and Westernized. After Reza Shah's abdication, both neo-fundamentalist and socialist pressures burst forth. Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq led a National Front coalition, including both the cleric Kashani and leftists, in an attempt to turn the country into a non-aligned republic and to gain a larger share of oil revenues. A royalist restoration followed, but one which was also forced to respond to the issues of social welfare and economic reorganization through a "White Revolution" from above. In the 1950s, the clerical leadership had been concerned with maintaining law and order and was willing to cooperate with the crown against perceived threats from leftists and general anarchism in the aftermath of the economic devastation of World War Two. In 1949, Ayatollah Borujerdi, the universally acknowledged leading cleric (or *marja' taqlid*), convened some two thousand clerics and urged a withdrawal from the political arena. He (and his then aide, Khomeini) was critical of the day-to-day involvement in politics of Kashani, arguing that the moral presence of the clergy would be more effective if not dragged into ordinary wheeling and dealing. In 1953, Ayatollah Behbehani praised the shah's efforts on behalf of peasant education, and Ayatollah Sharestani came from Iraq to convey his approval of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. In return, the shah's government inserted more religious content into the state school system, acquiesced in a hysterical campaign against Bahais, and rounded up suspected communists.

As the young shah consolidated control and began to rely increasingly on American guidance, both the clergy and lay Muslim reformers began to distance themselves from the government and construct a counterideology, stressing

the need for Iran to retain its sense of identity, not to simply imitate the West, and more importantly not to subordinate the direction of domestic development to the goals of supplying the West with a secure supply of oil. The problems of underdevelopment increasingly became recognized and were discussed in a largely Islamic idiom, since other, more open, political discourses were suppressed by the state. In 1960s, Ayatollah Borujerdi broke his truce with the state, signaling his opposition to land reform and other elements of the proposed White Revolution. In the period 1960-63 a group of reformers, including both clerics and laymen, formed a discussion group on how to reform the clergy and revitalize the religious institution; there was a journal of lectures, *Goftar-e Mah* (Monthly Speeches), and an important volume entitled "An Inquiry into the Principle of *Marja'iyat* (clerical leadership) and the Clergy." In 1963, there were major demonstrations against the White Revolution (as well as against the claims of extraterritoriality for American servicemen and government employees in Iran) during which Khomeini came to prominence; he was exiled the following year. From 1965 to 1973 the center of Islamic reformist thought was the Hosayniyeh Ershad in Tehran, and its leading light was the French-trained Dr. Ali Shari'ati, who galvanized the youth by proposing to fuse the latest in Western social theory with Islam, thereby making possible a renewal of understanding of Islam for the contemporary world, and a cleansing of Islam of decayed and corrupted scholasticism. In 1970, a cleric and a student were tortured to death for protesting American investments in Iran; Ayatollah Taleqani was jailed for attending their memorial services. Mohsen Hakim, the *marja' taqlid* in Iraq, died, and the shah, attempting to influence the choice of a successor, sent telegrams of condolence to ayatollahs Shari'atmadari and Khonsari, but pointedly not to Khomeini. Forty-eight ulama in Qom countered by sending their own telegram of condolence to Khomeini, and were exiled to scattered places in Iran for their pains. In 1971, Khomeini passed the word that Muslims should boycott the shah's celebration of 2,500 years of continuous monarchy. Guerrilla actions made the headlines; and in 1972 five Mojahedin guerrillas, former students of Taleqani, were executed.



In 1975, on the twelfth anniversary of the 1963 demonstrations, there were major demonstrations in Qom against the imposition of a single party, the Rastakhiz Party, which all Iranians had been ordered to join. By the time of the 1977-79 revolution which overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy, an Islamic protest idiom had been honed by preachers, writers, and lecturers which drew not only on traditional themes, but which could also serve to articulate the complaints of various sectors of the society in the dislocations experienced in the aftermath of the 1973 oil price increases.

Religious rhetoric continued to evolve through the course of the revolution. *Velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the clergy), for instance, the subtitle of Khomeini's 1971 book, *Islamic Government*, gradually came to mean more than moral guidance. In the book, Khomeini evaluated the admittedly weak basis for interpreting this phrase as rule by clerics. Defenders of inserting the phrase into the country's new constitution saw it (as well as other phrases such as *Maktabi*--approximately "orthodox"--in the preamble) as a means of strengthening and ensuring the role that the 1906 constitution had given to a board of five *mojtaheds*, but which had been simply ignored. This time such a role would be more carefully fixed. Another, equally controversial, change in usage of a traditional term is the title "imam." Khomeini, of course, does not claim to be the messiah, the returned twelfth imam, or a thirteenth imam. Indeed, his official portraits are carefully titled, "Nayeb-e Imam" (aide to the imam), a title used in the nineteenth century. He has not, however, objected to his followers applying the title to him. In Arabic usage, *imam* is used for *ayatollah*: Mohsen Hakim was called Imam Hakim in Iraq; but in prerevolutionary Persian usage, such use of the title sounded blasphemous, as *Ayatollah Shari'atmadari* noted just prior to Khomeini's triumphal return; and perhaps to underscore the point, *Shari'atmadari* insisted on his own precedence, having Khomeini pay him a visit first, not vice versa. For the revolutionary youth, the usage of *imam* comes from Ali *Shari'ati* rather than from the Arabic usage. Trying to infuse Islamic theological terms with contemporary sociological content, *Shari'ati*

suggested that an imam fit the Weberian category of "charismatic leader," in the sense of one who articulates the inchoate desires of a mass of people and thereby can lead them. Khomeini is clearly a charismatic leader in this sense.

The point, in both cases, is that traditional rhetoric is being used with quite contemporary meanings to deal with issues of constitutional reform and to find leverage for creating a new political system. To dismiss Khomeini as a medieval anachronism--as much of the press insists--is to refuse to pay attention to the delicate maneuvering of balancing factions and trying to provide for a parliamentary form that can survive his own death--the task of routinization, as Weber would say. Khomeini's rhetoric is not only traditional Islamic phraseology, but incorporates contemporary meanings and demands, domestically and internationally (populist concerns with the welfare of the lower classes; antidependency trade relations, nonalignment foreign policy). One of Khomeini's problems, as he acknowledges, is the clergy: articulators of Islamic ideologies, but not necessarily visionary, technically trained, or even competent.

### III

People make judgments of fanaticism by what they are themselves. To a lot of Protestants I know monks and nuns are fanatics....And to a lot of monks and nuns I know, my Protestant prophets are fanatics. For my part, I think the only difference between them is that if you are a Catholic and have this intensity of belief, you join the convent and are heard from no more; whereas if you are a Protestant and have it, there is no convent for you to join and you go into the world getting into all sorts of trouble and drawing the wrath of people who don't believe anything much at all down on your head. This is one reason why I can write about Protestant believers better than about Catholic believers--because they

express their belief in diverse kinds of dramatic action which is obvious enough for me to catch.  
-- Flannery O'Connor<sup>16</sup>

In this section,<sup>17</sup> I attempt to explore some of the tacit cultural understandings behind explicit political maneuverings. The tacit understandings are often acted out dramatically; the explicit maneuverings are expressed in the language of intention and strategy. Both have persuasive force. The attempt, in other words, is to puzzle out some of the relations between cultural forms, social processes, and individual psychology. It draws especially on Walter Benjamin's essays on the nature of language and culture and on the creation of psychological mood and ethics of behavior. The vehicle for this exploration is the question why Ayatollah Khomeini should have crystallized as the focal figure of the Iranian revolution in its second phase after the removal of the shah.

In many ways, Khomeini is quite atypical of the religious leaders of Iran, in style as well as in political strategy. A large portion of his prominence must be attributed, of course, to the fact that of the top-rank ulama of Iran, he was, since 1963, the only one to speak out consistently against the shah--against tyranny, against corruption, against the subordination of Iran's domestic development to the protection of oil supplies for the industrial world. His confrontational strategy, denigrated in the late 1960s and early 1970s as self-indulgence of personal anger and as irresponsible toward his followers left behind in Iran, became an untarnished virtue at the time of the revolution. By contrast, Ayatollah Shari'at-madari's strategy in the 1960s of playing the good shepherd within the country was attacked by Khomeini loyalists as tainted with compromise after the removal of the shah. Khomeini's uncompromising stance during the revolutionary months of 1977-79 was critical in ensuring the success of the initial stage of the revolution. In the following months, he showed tactical skill, a shrewd sense of timing, and an ability to gauge the popular mood.

It is clear that Khomeini was a master politician, but there is something unsatisfactory about saying merely this, and the unsatisfactoriness is not alleviated by references to a resolve strengthened by his putative anger over his treatment by the shah, his exile, the deaths of his father or his son. What is intriguing is not his personal motivations, but the reception and support he elicited from the Iranian people. What is at issue is something cultural, something about legitimacy, something about charisma in the sense of the ability to articulate the feelings of a mass of followers and thereby the ability to lead. That this is at issue may be underscored by the fact that there have been other religious leaders who have offered themselves as alternatives at crucial points in the revolutionary process, particularly Ayatollah Taleqani in the spring of 1979 and Ayatollah Shari'atmadari in the fall of 1979. Both of them may be contrasted with Khomeini in terms of ideology--Taleqani was regarded as a patron of the Islamic left, Shari'atmadari of the constitutionalist center--and also in terms of style. Khomeini's quiet monotone, eschewal of humor and positive affect, and his populist language often utilizing exaggerated language of almost comic-book proportions, are quite unusual for a top-rank *alem*.

This paper works on the assumption that what attracts people to political leaders in times of high drama is more than calculation of utilitarian programs and strategies; it is something more emotional. And insofar as it is social--that it does not attract only isolated individuals--it is composed of a configuration of cultural or symbolic forms, a "condensation of meanings into a symbolic figure" (as Sigmund Freud or Victor Turner would say) which tacitly resonates with deeply felt understandings about the world. It is this tacit background to the explicit political maneuverings which I would like to try to tease out in at least a preliminary fashion.

The exercise is stimulated by a reading of Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (somewhat inaccurately translated as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*). It is stimulated in part by his theoretical stance:

Benjamin is one of the ancestors of what is coming to be called "interpretive anthropology," an approach to cultural analysis drawing heavily on German philosophers, literary critics, and *Geisteswissenschaftlers* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it is primarily stimulated by the substance of Benjamin's description of seventeenth century baroque drama in Lutheran Germany, which generated in this writer a strong sense of *déjà vu*, that the passion plays of Iran and the religio-political drama of the revolution produce similar moods and ethics, albeit with different characters.

Before turning to these substantive parallels, three elements of Benjamin's theoretical stance are worth mention since they serve to underpin the parallels. First, he argued that historical and sociological context is crucial to understanding metaphors or speech and literature. The seventeenth century plays he reanalyzed had been dismissed by critics as merely poor efforts to imitate Greek tragedy. Benjamin rejected the idea that an entire genre or epoch of creative writing could be dismissed as merely decadent, and insisted that these plays reflected contemporary obsessions with the nature of political sovereignty, and with the relatively weak powers of men to find either personal or social salvation in a corrupt world. So too, this paper argues that it is obtuse to insist that Khomeini and his fellow clerics are merely medieval anachronisms thrown into prominence by chaos and irrationality, that nothing more can be learned about the relation between leader and follower in the Iranian revolution.

Second, Benjamin lays great stress on the historical layering and depth to the meaning of images, metaphors, ideas, and words. This is relevant here not only because it allows a connection between seventeenth century Germany and Iran through distant, but nonetheless common, roots in neo-Platonism via the mystical traditions of both Christianity and Islam. More centrally, the depth and "immanent" nature of imagery is what provides tacit cultural understandings and the grounding for more ephemeral and more rapidly shifting political maneuvers.

Finally, and basic to the above, is the notion that these tacit understandings, as well as much of language and culture in general, are metaphorical representations of experience. That is, their formulation and their validity resides not in verifiable science-like propositions but in their aptness for capturing or expressing experience. They therefore glory in multiple meanings and the use of controlled ambiguity to stimulate thought or to provide flexibility for maneuver.

The plays revolve around three stock characters in varying combinations or separation: a prince or tyrant, a martyr, and an intriguer. The tyrant's *raison d'être* was less as an executive head of state than as someone given absolute authority to restore order in a state of emergency or chaos. The problem of the plays is the conflict between alleged absolute power and actual limited human powers to affect the course of society. Absolute power was represented by the most powerful temporal figures one could imagine in the seventeenth century: a Persian shah, a Turkish sultan, or a Byzantine emperor invested with divine authority. The conflict for the prince between his alleged and actual power leads in the plays to madness or indecisiveness, as in Shakespeare's "How heavy lies the head that wears the crown" or the suffering of Hamlet. The only solution for these individuals is moral stoicism, a proving of the self through struggle, often ending in torture and death or martyrdom. The struggle is parallel on the political arena and within the soul: stoicism is the prescription for the rule of the state as for the emotional life. In fact, Benjamin calls these plays secularized passion plays. They portray the hopelessness of the worldly condition in which the only moral dignity possible is through stoicism. That the concern of the plays is with this moral struggle is underscored by the scant attention to the development of rationales for the characters of evil against which the protagonist struggles: tyrants, devils, Jews are presented without any redeeming explanation. The point of these plays (and here we come closer to Iran) is to elicit lamentation. Unlike classical tragedy, which was supposed to produce

a catharsis, but where the chorus provided a device for limiting emotional expression, these plays were intended to elicit lamentation, and even more, as Benjamin puts it, they are plays through which mournfulness finds satisfaction.

In Iran, the passion plays commemorating the martyrdom of the third imam, Hosayn, and preachments (*rowzehs*) which draw on the same stories, elicit tears, but the emotion is only superficially grief for the dead martyr. There is a popular belief that to cry for Hosayn will gain him as an intercessor at the Last Judgment. But preachers stress a deeper meaning for the lamentation: it is a penitential identification with the people of Kufa who first invited Hosayn to lead them in revolt against the archtyrant and usurper of the caliphate, Yazid, and then sold out to Yazid, leaving Hosayn to be martyred. The identification is intended to produce a rededication to the ideals of Hosayn and Islam, to the ideals of a just society, to forswear selling out to tyrants in the present as the Kufans did in the past. The feeling one is supposed to achieve through lamentation is a *hal-e khosh*, a "good feeling" of quiet determination and stoicism, a willingness to struggle against even overwhelming odds for moral ends.

The seventeenth-century *Trauerspielen* worked similarly. Lutheranism rejected the theological notions of gaining salvation through good works. One could not buy one's way into heaven. One could only gain salvation through faith, and one's fate was predestined. This theology set up an anxiety to demonstrate to oneself that one was among the *electi*. Max Weber, in his essays on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, showed how success in business was taken as a sign of God's favor and that being among the *electi* served as an anxiety-reducing mechanism which generated an ethic of industriousness. Benjamin acknowledges this inculcation of disciplined obedience and piety, but points out that it also produced a kind of melancholia, which the plays both mirrored and gave relief to. As in Iran, the plays were highly ornamental, allowing people to weep and gain relief from the pious austerity enjoined by theology. The melancholy stoicism which the

plays encouraged, moreover, was not merely a sufferance of a corrupt world, but it was a technique, a path to knowledge and to power. The Renaissance had rediscovered the enigmatic or ambiguous powers of stoicism and melancholy. Melancholia was a natural characterological condition influenced by both the stars and the balance of the humors. Extreme melancholia might be caused by an excess of black bile produced by the spleen. (It was suggested that the spleen was a particularly prominent organ in the dog, and hence dogs were susceptible to rabies.) Melancholia could also be generated by the influence of Saturn, the planet furthest from the earth, and thus emblematic of the longest journey from everyday life, the deepest contemplation, a losing of the self in thought. This loss of the self threatens those subject to such intense contemplation with either depression or manic ecstasy. The way of pursuing wisdom without falling into either form of madness was through stoicism, a technique of deadening the senses.

Concern with the humors and astrology is common to the traditional knowledge of pathology and psychology in Iran as well as in Europe. One need not quite suggest that Ayatollah Khomeini is the paradigm of the melancholy prince, but only that there is a play with some common elements, of which perhaps four may be of particular interest (1) a notion of tragedy and mourning/melancholia which produces stoicism and dedication; (2) a play with mystical knowledge which can be maddening or depressing, but which can also lead to wisdom and power; (3) a notion of worldly corruption and political anarchy in which the individual proves himself through struggle, in which the struggle often ends in torture and death, but in which the martyr can display magnanimity; (4) and (less clearly) perhaps the notion that laughter is emblematic of schemers or the devil, of seduction by worldly concerns.

In sum, so far I merely wish to posit the possibility of a similar symbolic complex of lamentation producing an ethic of stoical determination in Iran as in seventeenth-century Germany, in contrast to the images in the American press of manic madness. What I need to do next is establish Khomeini's uniqueness and the ways he draws on some



of these themes. First, however, one need keep in mind two general perspectives about the Iranian revolution which should also help establish Khomeini's unique position. The first has to do with the phases through which the revolutionary process evolves; the second has to do with the changing of generations.

The first phase of the revolution, which swept away the shah and the Pahlavi dynasty (roughly November 1977 to February 1979), was carried by a coalition of forces from all sectors of society with quite different goals. The coalition did not arise *ex nihilo*: on at least four previous occasions since 1873 an alliance of religious leaders and secular reformers had either forced a major change in government policy or a change in the government itself. In the previous efforts the secular reformers had gained the edge in leading the coalition; and again during the first phase of the current revolution the middle classes pursued the goal of a bourgeois revolution which had been left uncompleted by the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 and the Mosaddeq attempt to establish a nonaligned, nationalist, republic in 1952-53. That in the current revolution religious leaders should have gained the leadership edge is in part due to the success of the Pahlavi regime in suppressing open political discourse and political interest-group negotiating skills. Islam, therefore, became an umbrella language of moral protest. Within the Islamic idiom, however, at least three different strands are worth keeping separate: the idiom of popular religion, which provided much of the rhetorical and emotionally dramatic devices of mass mobilization; the idiom of the ulama, which provided a leadership framework and a vision of a moral society; and the idiom of lay modernizers, such as Shari'ati, which provided a competing leadership framework and a competing vision of a just society.

One key to the popular religion and the relation between the masses and the clergy is the form of preaching called *rowzeh*. The *rowzeh* begins with a verse of the Quran; a sermon follows; and at the end the subject of the sermon is connected to the story thirteen centuries ago of the martyrdom of Hosayn, the grandson and legitimate successor

to the Prophet, on the desert of Karbala at the hands of the Syrian army of the archtyrant and usurper of the caliphate, Yazid. Each year during the month of Moharram, the events of this story were re-enacted in passion plays and in floats. But during the rest of the year as well, the *rowzeh* kept the memory of these events alive, and served as an important device to keep consciousness of social injustice high. The identifications of Yazid with the shah and Hosayn with Khomeini (or other oppositional figures) was all but explicit. The first phase of the revolution drew not only on the symbolism of the battle of Karbala, and the effects of staging demonstrations on significant dates associated with the Karbala-related stories, but funerals became dramatic occasions for playing on the Karbala themes and emotions: they became forums for antishah chants, provoking soldiers to fire and thus providing new martyrs, new funerals, new emotional outrage.

Once the destructive phase of the revolution was completed, once the shah was removed, the Karbala imagery decayed in potency and needed to be supplemented with other portions of the Shi'ite symbolic canon. Interestingly, when newspaper reporters asked Khomeini or the soon-to-be appointed Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan what form the new state would take, their initial response was to invoke the example of the first imam, Ali, the father of Hosayn, and the only imam to have combined religious leadership with temporal power. Ali is the symbol of constructive, just government. But in the fragile second phase of the revolution, the invocation of Ali proved premature. One might suggest that in this period of political reorganization, fragmentation, and competition of the components of the revolutionary coalition, the figure of Khomeini himself became increasingly important as a temporary image and reference point to hold the coalition together.

The centrality of Khomeini is made all the more striking when one considers that the revolution is largely carried by a new generation, one which in the years immediately preceding the revolution drew its ideological idiom more from Shari'ati and other modernizers than from Khomeini. Roughly half the population of Iran is under the age of 15;

the revolution was largely carried by people in their teens and 20s, with a leadership drawn from a generation in their 70s and 80s who had been active in the Mosaddeq movement. The young generation is largely literate, has had modern education, is pro-technology, is antischolastic, and wishes to take its place as fully participant in the industrialized modern world. Insofar as Shari'ati serves as their inspiration, they stand for free-thinking Muslims, who wish to re-interpret Islam for modern technological times.

Both the coalition nature of the revolution and the generational factor suggest that it was not at all self-evident or preordained that Khomeini should continue to be the focal leader or should not have been forced to share leadership. The hypothesis, therefore, of this paper is that the uniqueness of Khomeini's persona (the image he projects rather than his personality per se)<sup>18</sup> exerts an enormous mass appeal to what might be called the Shi'ite sense of tragedy (in the broader sense than the Karbala story itself). This appeal played upon the tremendous fear that the revolution would fail, that it would be reversed as happened in 1953. The hypothesis is that there is more to Khomeini's mass appeal than just shrewdness, timing, uncompromising fundamentalist orthodoxy, or populist rhetoric. In an attempt to tease out some of the elements of this appeal, one might look to the five or six major features of Khomeini's persona which, in combination, make him strikingly different from the other top-rank ulama.

The first of these, and the least distinctive, is the aura of ethnic marginality that persists as a feature of his persona. His great grandfather moved from Khorasan to Kashmir; his grandfather returned to Iran, to the town of Khomein. This Kashmiri connection allows a persistent labeling that somehow Khomeini is Indian. An elder brother took the name "Hendi"; and Khomeini himself, as a young man, used that surname to sign his poetry. Like other nationalist leaders--the Corsican Napoleon, the Austrian Hitler, the Georgian Stalin--this hint of ethnic marginality resonates with a tension between a nationalist and a universalist ideology: Shi'ism as Iranian nationalism versus Islam as universalistic. Khomeini rejects Iranian nation-

alism, and the story is told that great efforts had to be made to persuade him, in Paris, to speak of Iran, a necessary component in the consciousness of most Iranians. The issue arose during the drafting of the constitution again, when a provision was insisted upon that the president be an Iranian national, not merely a true Muslim.

More important is that Khomeini's persona cultivates a legend of distress about his person, connecting his persona with the martyr of Karbala. There are several parts to this legend, beginning with the death of his father at the hands of--depending on the variant--a bandit, a mayor, a civil servant, or a landowner, but whichever, an agent of Reza Shah. This deprivation is said to have occurred early in Khomeini's childhood either when he was 6 months old or a year and a half. This would place the event around 1900, but Reza Shah did not come to power until the 1920s. The legend continues that his mother sought and obtained some revenge, either the execution of the murderer, or the removal of the governor, but in any case the theme is elaborated that obstinacy in pursuit of justice is part of the family tradition and is rewarded. The second important part of the legend of distress is Khomeini's banishment from Iran in 1964 after leading the mass demonstrations in 1963 against the White Revolution of the shah. This portion of the legend is made emotionally more compelling by the (apparently true) story that the shah ordered him executed, but was dissuaded after Ayatollah Shari'atmadari and others signed a statement that Khomeini was an ayatollah and the execution of an ayatollah would lead to serious consequences. Like the imams, in any case, Khomeini was denied his rightful position in Iran. Finally, the legend tells of the loss first of an infant daughter, which he endured stoically, and more importantly in the fall of 1977 the death of his elder son, an event believed by many Iranians to have been caused by SAVAK and which served as a contributing spark to the revolution. The themes of this persona of enduring distress and injustice are those of a father unjustly killed, a son deprived of rightful possessions (father, land, position, children), the need to pursue justice in the face of overwhelming odds. These are the themes of Ali and Hosayn and of the

imams. According to the Shi'ite account, all the imams were either slain or poisoned (except the last, who will return at the end of time as the messiah); the theme of poison--Westernization and colonialism as a poison--is one that Khomeini also plays upon. There is no question that these legends contributed to Khomeini's place as a symbol of resistance to the shah, beyond the fact that he was a consistent opponent of the shah. A secondary elaboration also contributed: it is said that before he moved to Qom in the 1920s he performed a divination and learned that he would die in Qom. This was taken by his followers as a sign throughout his long exile in Iraq that he would return to Iran.

More interesting yet, a distinctive feature of Khomeini's persona is that he dabbled in mysticism. To the orthodox ulama, speculative philosophy and mysticism is to be dealt with carefully as something that can easily destroy faith. Not only did Khomeini teach gnostic philosophy, but apparently he experimented with mystical exercises. At one point he abruptly stopped teaching mysticism for unknown reasons. In any case, this mystical interest contributes to the explanations by orthodox ulama of Khomeini's insistence on supreme and sole leadership, as well as his allowal of the title "imam" to be applied to him. These apologists refer the use of imam and *velayat-e faqih* (guidance by the learned) to Plato's philosopher-king, by way of Islamic philosophical reinterpretations as the fourfold trip to God.

Closely allied to the mystical component of Khomeini's persona is his asceticism, his eschewing of humor and positive affect, the studied monotone in which he speaks. Gnosticism as said above, and as noted by Benjamin in Europe, is dangerous, requiring a great deal of self-control. Islamic asceticism (*zohd*) is not a withdrawal from the world, but a refusal to be seduced by materialist concerns. Benjamin's stoic Lutherans used asceticism to avoid depression, manic ecstasy, or corruption in a corrupt world. It is intriguing that whereas many ayatollahs cultivate humor as a means of engaging followers, Khomeini does not, and one wonders if there is a resonance here with Benjamin's

observation that laughter was sometimes seen as emblematic of the devil's seduction into the corrupt world. Khomeini's asceticism serves two related functions. It is a mark of extreme courage in a world of seduction. One of the words in Persian for saturnine is *sangin* (from *sang*, stone, emblem of concentration of thought). Someone who is *sangin* is reserved, does not talk much, and what he says is weighty. Khomeini at times may be said to be *sangin*; Shari'atmadari, however, is more so. The difference is that Shari'atmadari is also seen as concerned with comfort, with running an establishment or court full of do-nothing retainers, whereas Khomeini is also ascetic in the sense of not being concerned with courtiers. He stands alone, courageously, without fear (*bi-mahaba*). Secondly, Khomeini's asceticism serves to ward off the suspicion that whoever exercises power is self-seeking. In a corrupt world, to get ahead one must use deceit and corruption. Persians often invoke a dual morality: a public one which requires a corrupt mask; a private one of honesty, duty, and purity. The corruption of the public political world, with which leaders must deal, almost inevitably delegitimizes leaders. Khomeini has already responded to this directly, saying, "I am an old man, what good can material rewards do me?" and by living a demonstrably frugal life.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, unlike the other top-rank ulama, Khomeini cultivates a populist language of confrontation and a propaganda style of comic-book like hyperbole. Shari'atmadari or Taleqani spoke in scholarly and measured style, but Khomeini speaks the language of the ordinary man, attacking intellectuals and eggheads, the rich and the elite. He plays a politics of trusting the masses, plus trying to balance the factions of the revolution to keep it from splitting apart. Thus, when Banisadr was elected president, Khomeini appointed a cleric, Mohammad Beheshti as head of the Supreme Court; he appointed members of the Council of Guardians, attempting to balance conservatives and modernists. When the Iran-Iraq war broke out, rather than turning to the army, Khomeini called for arms to be given to the people: if the young men cannot save the country, it is not worth saving; we have not fought a revolution just for security and economic well-being, but for Islam, for

a just society, for nonalignment, for a society responsive to the common man.

In sum, Khomeini's persona draws on a series of traditional images in a forceful way none of the other top ulama can match. Like Hosayn, he represents perseverance for justice against all odds, with an ability to endure injustice and suffering. Like Ali, Khomeini represents combining political and religious leadership and utilizing all means at hand, including force and cunning on behalf of Islam, the Muslim community, and the just society. Like the imams, Khomeini represents access to wisdom and ability to control the dangers to ordinary men of dabbling in esoteric knowledge or in power. If one may revert to levels of allegory, Khomeini's persona appeals on three levels: to the senses as a forceful, uncompromising, handsome, suffering man of justice; to the reason as a shrewd tactician, with a sense of timing, with a populist appeal, and as the man who kept the revolution from failing; and to the spirit as providing a sense of tragedy and a sense of what is worth dying for, drawn from an anger at a traditional way of life which must be transformed to survive. The imagery and vocabulary on which Khomeini draws in many ways is similar to what Benjamin found in seventeenth-century Germany, an imagery and vocabulary which for us is almost lost and which in order to be recaptured, must be historically unravelled. The cultural transformation of contemporary Iran is similar to what Benjamin tried to describe for the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in Europe. Benjamin was concerned in his debates about whether artistic images and cultural configurations can hold together a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented in terms of common experiences at the same time in which culture and experience is being leveled by modern mass media. Without engaging this debate deeply here, one might see Khomeini's persona as a complex image which can serve to hold a fragmenting reality together, but only temporarily. The beginnings of the attack on Khomeini's invulnerability to criticism have already occurred in street demonstrations, and in any case his mortality will force the revolutionaries to find new coordinating images.

What this analysis has attempted can be stated two ways. Substantively, it attempts to provide a richer understanding of Khomeini's appeal than is usually attempted in political commentary, by looking to the cultural grounding of Khomeini's appeal. Theoretically, it attempts to account for some of the tacit understandings and skills that provide the background to explicit cultural beliefs (the relation between "the said and the unsaid") and to see them within a historical tradition. Perhaps Flannery O'Connor can help again to express the sense of connection, dialogue, engagement, and understanding, which is the essence of interpretive ethnography:

The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic. It's full of unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically. If this were merely comic to me, it would be no good, but I accept the same fundamental doctrines of sin and redemption and judgment that they do.<sup>21</sup>

#### NOTES

1. The proverb refers to the story of Satan, dismissed from heaven by God because he refused to bow to Adam. Satan's sin was pride in his own reason. (Compare Ecclesiastes: "Do not be overly righteous.") God ordered the angels to bow to Adam, but Satan refused because God previously had ordered monotheism: one should bow to no one but God. The relative perfections of angels and men is the subject of much theological and moral banter: angels have no passion, hence their virtues are not achievements, not the result of moral struggle. Mohammad Iqbal elaborated on the struggle: Iblis (Satan) lures Adam/man out of paradise, but when man finally achieves victory over Satan, Satan performs the prostration before the Perfect Man (*ensan-e kame1*) which he had refused to per-



form before the unexperienced, morally innocent, Adam. The Perfect Man (who has fulfilled the potentials of the human self and approached God) then can proclaim with the Prophet, "*Aslama shaytani*" (my Satan has surrendered to me, he has become Muslim): the *jihad-e akbar* (the greater holy war) has been won. See A. Schimmel, "Iqbal and Goethe" in *Iqbal, Essays and Studies*, ed. A. Ansari (New Delhi, 1978), pp. 279-80.

2. Edited by Shakeri in 1971 and published in Mashad by Tus Publishers; an abridged English translation was prepared in 1977 by Mehdi Abedi and myself with financial support from the Center for Middle East Studies at Harvard. A detailed summary and analysis is in press: "Portrait of a Mulla: the Autobiography and Bildungsroman of Aqa Najafi-Quchani (1875-1943)," *Persica* (forthcoming).
3. The only other reasonably full autobiographies roughly comparable are the briefer and less humorous seventeenth-century account of Sayyed Ni'matu'llah al-Jaza'iri, summarized by E. G. Browne (1928: IV: 361-67); and the polemical autobiography of Ahmad Kasravi, who was trained as a cleric and then became one of their most powerful opponents. See also the biographical account of Siyuti: E. M. Sartain, *Jalal-al-Din al-Siyuti: Biography and Background* (New York, 1975).
4. Aqa Najafi Quchani declared himself a mojtaheh when he discovered that Sayyed Kazem Yazdi, one of the great mojtahehs in Najaf, made simple mistakes in geography, knew little outside the religious disciplines, and took the know-nothing attitude that one ought not to study philosophy lest it damage faith.
5. On *velayat-e faqih*, see M. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 151-55; and S. Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran* (Albany, 1980), pp. 64-66.
6. On the problem of revolutionary and Islamic justice, see M. Fischer, "Iran and Islamic Justice," *Middle*

*East Executive Reports* (January 1980) and "Legal Postulates in Flux: Justice, Wit and Hierarchy in Iran," in *The Politics of Law in the Middle East*, ed. D. Dwyer, forthcoming.

7. See Fazlur Rahman's exasperated sketch of how the puritan reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in their attack on scholasticism in favor of *ijtihad* and political engagement, threw out the scholarly knowledge of history and evaluative skills along with the archaisms, ritualisms, and legalisms, resulting in simplistic sloganeering. F. Rahman, "Islam: Legacy and Contemporary Challenge" in *Islam: in the Contemporary World*, ed. C. K. Pullapilly (Notre Dame, 1980). Similar charges are made by Laroui. See A. Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual* (Berkeley, 1976).
8. Laroui argues that just as the distinction was drawn in the days of the prophet between true believers (*muminin*), converts to Islam of unsure belief (*muslimin*), hypocrites (*munafiqun*), and unbelievers (*kafirun* and *dhimmi*), so too classical writers distinguished between the realities of the patrimonial sultanates which they could only urge to be more just and an ideal community of believers in which each individual was so inspired by Islam that there need be little state apparatus at all. Such an ideal state did not even exist under the prophet. A. Laroui, "Islamic Theories of State." Lecture given at Harvard Center for Middle East Studies on February 24, 1981. Modern activists counter that the implication that Islam has little contribution to make to actual politics is manifestly not the case.
9. In his speech on the second anniversary of the revolution (February 11, 1981), he had his son read twice a sentence enjoining mullahs from interfering in affairs beyond their competence.
10. These appeared in issues 12 and 13 of *Ahangar*. I am indebted to Ervand Abrahamian for passing them on to me.

11. See the excerpts translated in *Tell the American People: Perspectives on the Iranian Revolution*, ed. D. Albert (Philadelphia, 1980).
12. The chart and the following comments are explored more fully in M. Fischer, "Representing Islam and Politics," *Daedalus*, forthcoming 1981.
13. S. A. Arjomand, "The Shi'ite Hierarchy and the State in Iran under the Early Qajars 1785-1848," unpublished M.S., 1978, "The Office of Mulla-Bashi in Shi'ite Iran," unpublished M.S., n.d.
14. Analogy (*qiyas*), considered the fourth basis by Sunnis, is rejected by Shi'ites, who cite the example of Satan as following false analogy.
15. Aqa Najafi Quchani (no relation) dismisses these brothers, although formally the leaders of the madrasah system in Isfahan, as intriguers who are not particularly learned. He directs our attention instead to the teachers whose renown is maintained by their students to this day: Jahangir Khan Qashqa'i, Sayyed Mohammad Baqer Dorchehi, and Shaykh Abdol-Karim Gazi. The Najafi brothers are known to anyone who has read through the British political reports of the period or through the archives of the London-based Church Missionary Society, as having led demonstrations and agitations against the missionaries, against Bahais and Babis, and against British imperialism.
16. Cited in Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* (Louisiana, 1980), p. 99.
17. This section, originally entitled, "The Ayatullah as Allegory: A Walter Benjaminite Interpretation of Khomeyni's Mesmerism," has been presented to anthropology colloquia at the University of Chicago and Rice University. I am grateful for reactions and suggestions by both audiences.

18. See Bruce Mazlish, "The Hidden Khomeini," *New York*, December 24, 1979, for an attempt to draw a psychological profile out of the same body of facts.
19. See also M. Bateson, "This Figure of Tinsel: A Study of Themes of Hypocrisy and Pessimism in Iranian Culture," *Daedalus* (1979), pp. 125-36.
20. See Steven Tyler, *The Said and the Unsaid* (New York, 1978).
21. Cited in Coles, *op. cit.*, p. 59.