



Roy Mottahedeh

The Mantle of the Prophet

Religion and Politics in Iran

“A remarkable treasure.” – Wall Street Journal

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O N E W O R L D

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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

Some reviewers, and many readers, have asked me to provide for the new edition of this book an assessment of the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. I can give no better answer than to refer to some sentences written by the great Macaulay in 1835. Macaulay, torn between his sympathies with the progressive aspirations of the French Revolution of 1789 and his horror at its periods of unhesitating bloody sacrifice, wrote of the difficulty for a fair observer to give judgment on an event so complex and still, at his time, so unsettled:

A traveler falls in with a berry which he has never before seen. He tastes it, and finds it sweet and refreshing. He praises it, and resolves to introduce it into his country. But in a few minutes he is taken violently sick; he is convulsed; he is at the point of death. He of course changes his opinion, pronounces this delicious fruit a poison, blames his own folly in tasting it, and cautions his friends against it. After a long and violent struggle he recovers, and finds himself much exhausted by his suffering, but free from some chronic complaints which have been the torments of his life. He then changes his opinion again, and pronounces this fruit a very powerful remedy, which ought to be employed only in extreme cases and with great caution, but which ought not to be absolutely excluded from the Pharmacopoeia.¹

In 1989 a spate of re-evaluations of the French Revolution by French historians showed a continuing disagreement after two centuries as to whether that archetypal revolution belonged in the list of medicines that had done the French body politic more good than harm. Yet such a question was precisely what I was trying to avoid when I wrote this book, which aimed to show the variety and complexity of Iranian culture, which made more than one sort of response likely even in the same participants at different periods of their lives or at the same period in different arenas of life. Iranian society not only looked to an historical tradition of over two millennia to find the roots for its present opinions, but it also found in its present life a growing variety of centers that gave legitimacy to different interpretations of Iranian national destiny.

The original subtitle of the book was “Knowledge and Power in Iran”; and the book aimed to show that traditions of monocratic, parliamentary and other systems of knowledge and authority had been and were continuing to project themselves as the leading forces of Iranian public life. The present is a moment of confrontation. Those who feel that the knowledge of certain religious specialists is the determinant and those who feel that the knowledge of the electorate has precedence are engaged in an open struggle. Nevertheless, at least for the near future, the majority of Iranians want evolution from within, not a violent revolution, which many either feel too exhausted to carry out, or fear would bring another “hero on horseback” with no long-term institutional solution for their country. (It should be remembered that Iran has lived through an eight-year war with casualties comparable to some of the major European countries in the Second World War.) One prominent Iranian cleric believes—and has tried to prove in elaborate written argument—that the voice of the people is indeed the voice of God. One possible constitutional resolution of the confrontation which has obvious echoes in other traditions.

In any case, this book was not intended to predict but to inform. It was intended to give some idea of the intellectual traditions of this very ancient culture and some idea of what it felt like to be a

Iranian. It also attempted to suggest that the particular mix of ideas and people in Iran had caused it to take a different course from its neighbors.

In 1922 Jamalzadeh, one of the greatest Iranian short story writers of the past century, introduced his best-loved short story with the sentence: “No where else in the world do they make the good suffer along with the bad the way they do in Iran.” In Persian, the metaphor is expressed as making “the dry burn with the wet”; and it seldom fails to bring a smile to the face of a speaker of Persian. Jamalzadeh was the son of a religious preacher who supported the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the first popular constitutional revolution in Asia. This popular religious preacher was killed in prison for his beliefs. Jamalzadeh himself was never satisfied with any particular regime in Iran. Perhaps in his heart of hearts he felt that the revolution his father helped to start would never be completed. Many probably most Iranians, today feel that they have lived and died as “wet and dry” tinder for a revolution that will without any question be completed someday with a clear and widely accepted outcome. As one who has studied their beautiful and complex culture for a lifetime I can only say that the Iranians deserve an honorable outcome to their uncompleted revolution of nearly a century, and wish them well with all my heart.

Roy P. Mottahedeh
May 20

¹ Lord Macaulay, [Thomas Babington], *Miscellaneous Works*, edited by Lady Trevelyan, Vol. II, New York and London [1880], p. 275, in “Sir James Mackintosh.”

NOTE TO THE READER

FROM THE beginning of 1978, when I became aware of the riots and protests which would eventually lead to the Iranian revolution, I knew, as someone who had devoted a good part of his life to the study of premodern Iran, that I was witnessing something both familiar and new in Iranian history. It was familiar because the ethos that motivated its leaders, the now-famous ayatollahs of the Shiah Muslim world, was not dissimilar to the ethos that had motivated comparable specialists in Muslim law a thousand years ago. It was new because, during the last two centuries, this religious ethos had undergone an internal intellectual revolution that had passed unnoticed by all except a handful of legal specialists within the Shiah Muslim tradition itself.

During the late spring of 1978 a professor at the University of Tehran came to visit me at Princeton, New Jersey, where I teach. He had studied for many years at the seminaries in the shrine city of Qom at which traditional Shiah learning is taught; after that he had become interested in gaining a secular education and had parted (with a certain relief) from the company of mullahs and ayatollahs. Traditionally-educated religious leaders were much on our minds at that time because they were directing the movement of protest that had swollen in a few months from the provincial outskirts by some seminarians in Qom to a clamor heard throughout the Iranian nation and even then heard from time to time by the world beyond Iran.

As we walked through the hybrid Gothic architecture of the university, I asked my friend about his early education: How did one study to become a mullah? He told me that in the Shiah seminaries such as those in Qom a student began by studying grammar, rhetoric, and logic. From that moment I knew I wanted to write this book.

Grammar, rhetoric, and logic comprise the *trivium*, the first three of the seven liberal arts as they were defined in the late classical world, after which they continued to constitute the foundation of the scholastic curriculum as it was taught in many parts of medieval and Renaissance Europe. So basic were the subjects of the *trivium* that people who had passed on to more advanced levels of learning considered an elementary knowledge of all three commonplace and therefore of little importance, hence our word “trivial.” I realized (and subsequent study confirmed) that my friend and a handful of similarly educated people were the last true scholastics alive on earth, people who had experienced the education to which Princeton’s patrons and planners felt they should pay tribute through the strangely assorted but congenial architectural reminiscences of the medieval and Tudor buildings of Oxford and Cambridge. Here was a living version of the kind of education (with its traditional classroom disputation and of commentaries and super-commentaries on long-established “set texts” that had produced in the West men such as the saintly and brilliant theologian Thomas Aquinas and the intolerant and bloodthirsty grand inquisitor, Torquemada, and in the East thinkers such as Averroës among the Muslims and Maimonides among the Jews.

I spent the next two years reading the curriculum mullahs read and interviewing Iranians (and one or two Iraqis) who had studied this curriculum in the traditional seminaries. The “Ali Hashemi” in the

book is a real person whose wish to remain anonymous I have scrupulously respected. All the events in the narrative of Ali Hashemi and his friends are based on the lives of Iranians as described to me by Iranians. I believe in the good faith of my informants, and have often found evidence external to the accounts that confirms what they said.

The passages between the accounts of Ali Hashemi's life, which try to present an extended reading of the history of Iranian culture insofar as it applies to the lives of the principal characters, are based on a reading of the primary sources for Iranian history that is as accurate as my time and abilities allow. The reader may notice a difference in tone between these analytic passages and those that narrate the life of Ali and his friends. Naturally the characters of the narrative tell of their own lives with an inward-looking voice that I neither can nor wish to imitate in the historical sections of the book, where events are told in my own voice and from my own perspective.

The non-Iranian reader should be aware that no presentation of the history of Iranian culture, and in particular, no presentation of its religious tradition, can please all Iranians. In the past five years, Iran has moved through a political and cultural revolution with dramatic and often violent aftermaths and entered a long and bitter war with its neighbor Iraq, many thousands of Iranians have been executed, tens of thousands have died in battle, and hundreds of thousands have chosen to live in exile. Any consensus on the meaning of the Iranian past has been torn up by the deeply felt disagreements among Iranians over the meaning of the Iranian present.

As a result of this disagreement, some Iranians will feel that the account of the mullah who stands at the center of this book's personal narrative is not reverential enough; he has experienced doubts and shifts of attitude that they will think atypical of Shiah men of religion. Others will think the portrait altogether too reverential; they will protest that a mullah who has attended a secular university and who is so broad in his interests and so liberal in his views is no typical mullah. To some degree both parties will be right. But I am not giving an account of an archetypal mullah, and as a historian I could not do so in good conscience. In preparing this book I talked with real Iranians, not archetypes, and the book reflects what they said. Nevertheless a number of significant details and episodes have been transferred from the lives of some informants to the lives of others in order to preserve their anonymity; attempts to identify any character with a specific living Iranian are almost sure to fail. All these changes have been checked and corrected by Iranian friends with a view toward preserving the book's faithfulness to the characters of the individuals it portrays. The reader may also notice how little is told of the adult family life of the figures prominent in the personal narrative. My Iranian friends were reluctant to speak about such matters, and I have respected their reticence. Ali Hashemi's silences reflect his character as much as does his own narrative of his life.

This book is, in some sense, the story of all of us in the last part of the twentieth century—a time in which we have seen a revival of religious enthusiasm and a reassertion in so many societies of the demand that religion play a role in politics. In another sense it is the story of most of the Third World where disappointment at the yield of a generation or more of nationalism, Westernization and socialism has fostered a return to older and more deeply rooted values. But it is most particularly the story of Iran, a land with over two millennia of consciousness of itself. Love for its heritage informs everything I have written here.

PROLOGUE

ALI HASHEMI only half listened to the radio after lunch on February 11, 1979. He knew that however the fighting came out in Tehran, he would feel better if he could plant something in his garden. In other parts of Iran a man like Ali, who was wealthy, in his late thirties, and a learned mullah, would never be seen, even by his family, bent over a plot of seedlings with a spade. But in Qom it was different; the ancient families of the town, especially in the ancient families of sayyeds, or descendants of Mohammed, the men, regardless of their callings or wealth, took pride in at least occasional working the land with their own hands. Besides, there seemed to be no point in listening to the radio carefully. After briefly reporting on the two o'clock news that the central police station was on fire, the army had withdrawn to barracks after heavy fighting during the morning, and a crowd of revolutionaries was moving up Kakh Avenue to seize the office of the Shah's prime minister, the radio dissolved for about two and a half hours into musical selections, none of them introduced or identified. Then suddenly it was silent for three or four minutes.

Ali had put down his portable radio on one of the brick paths in the courtyard garden where he was working. When it became silent he stuck his spade in the earth, stood up, and listened. He noticed that Hamid, who came at this season to prune the trees in the gardens of the house, had stopped sawing. Ali's older brother, who had been reading an accounting ledger in a room that opened onto the courtyard, walked up to the radio and stared at it. Ali decided to walk closer too, and at this point Hamid let himself down from the lower branches of the pine tree he had been pruning and, still carrying his saw, approached the brothers very slowly, almost tiptoeing, as if he expected the radio to explode.

Suddenly Ali heard the words of a deep-voiced man, undoubtedly a mullah from his intonation and his pronunciation of Persian words of Arabic origin. The mullah, a little breathless but dignified nonetheless, said: "This is the true voice of the Iranian nation. The ill-omened regime of the Pahlavis is finished, and an Islamic government has been established under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini." At this point the speaker, obviously at a loss for what to say next, cleared his throat and hemmed a few times, then said abruptly: "We ask the Imam to send instructions to the radio station. Then there was a burst of whispering. Finally he announced excitedly: "We hope to receive messages from Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Taleqani. Please keep listening; they will be broadcast as soon as possible."

The telephone rang. Ali turned off the radio while his brother ran to answer the phone in a nearby room. A few seconds later he reappeared, calling to Ali: "My God, the head of the Manzariyeh army base has just come into town and surrendered to Ayatollah Montazeri. In a minute people will be pouring into the streets. I'm going down to check the warehouse."

Ali wanted to go as soon as possible to the shrine and the Faiziyeh, the theological college where he had taught until it had been closed by the government in 1975; he wanted to see the faces of his students, and he knew they would have questions for him. He asked Hamid to water the plants

seedlings and to put the unplanted ones in the shade; then, since he was going out into the streets, he grabbed his mullah turban and put on his long black aba.

For the rest of that day Ali's greatest problem was to walk in a dignified manner. He would start to skip, to jump, to run, then stop himself. He was almost airborne, like the fast-moving winter clouds that flew high over Qom, and his responsibility to his students and his fellow mullahs only barely managed to keep him on the ground. His fellow Qomis, usually divided in their feelings toward mullahs, Shiah men of religion (mullahs ran the theological colleges, the town's biggest industry, but they also imported some of the town's biggest nuisances—their students), on this day were showering every passing mullah with compliments. On the way to the shrine people shouted at Ali, "Through your blessing we are saved." As he went past them they called out a variation on a standard Persian farewell, "May God never let the shadows of the mullahs grow less for us." The throngs of people, their excitement to speak to—and often embrace—their fellow Qomis, even those they hardly knew, were moving so slowly that Ali had to hide his impatience.

As he approached the larger streets near the shrine and the *madresehs*, the theological colleges, he sensed the relief of the town, its consciousness of release. Since January 1978, when several theological students had been killed in a demonstration over an article denouncing Ayatollah Khomeini, the bazaar of Qom, in a show of sympathy with the protesters, had been shut for all except a scattered forty days. For nearly fourteen months only the bakers, butchers, and men who sold produce off barrows in the streets had operated on a normal schedule. Qomis had been dependent on the distribution of food and clothing through local mosques, and the town had been filled with a certain sense of duress.

Today the sense of release was total. On the previous day the Qomis themselves had occupied the headquarters of SAVAK, the secret police, and the chief of the municipal police had gone to Ayatollah Montazeri, the representative and former student of Khomeini, to say that he would obey Montazeri's orders. Even the signs of the fourteen months of duress spoke the language of victory. As Ali passed the cavelike bombed-out building that until a year ago had housed the Qom branch of the shah's Resurrection party, he remembered the passage in the Koran that described the Prophet Mohammed's words of comfort to a companion when the two of them were hidden in a cave, hunted by enemies determined to kill them: "He said to his companion: 'Have no fear, for God is with us'; then God sent down upon him His divine tranquillity, and strengthened him with his hosts which you did not see, and humbled to the depths the word of the unbelievers. But the word of God is exalted to the heights; for God is all-powerful, all-seeing."

In fact, everywhere the word of God seemed exalted to the heights. The very words of the posters on the buildings he passed, words that by their anger showed how vulnerable the opposition had been throughout the struggle against the government, now looked like triumphant proclamations: "Those who follow the slain Imam Hosain will gain victory over the tyrant Yazid who slew him"; and "The blood of martyrs has prevailed over the sword."

Ali reached the crossroads, about two hundred meters from the shrine, where a police station stood, not far from two hospitals. Even though Ali had heard that Ayatollah Montazeri had sent his representatives to supervise the police, he wasn't prepared for what he saw now: a knot of policemen in their nattiest dark-blue uniforms, with military-style caps, bowing slightly to a middle-aged mullah who looked at them with cautious approval as he stood outside the police station.

It was then that Ali felt he could dare to believe it had really happened. How many times had he seen the police bowing in the same way to a bureaucrat, "Engineer" so-and-so, just down from Tehran in his spanking new European suit, getting out of his spanking new car for a day's business in Qom.

under police escort. But the police bowing to an ordinary mullah in his turban and robe?

It was like the departure of the Shah one month earlier; nobody had believed it could happen, and even if they had seen it on television, deep down nobody fully believed that it had happened. The disappearance of even the caretaker regime left by the Shah had been like the final collapse of Solomon, who had been obeyed after his death as long as his body stood. Solomon—according to the Koran—had set the genies, the occult spirits of the world, to work for him; and after his death they worked on, still believing he was alive: “Thus, when We decreed death for [Solomon], nothing gave any sign of his death to them; yet a small worm of the earth was gnawing at his staff. So when [finally] he fell, the genies saw plainly that if they had known the unseen, they would not have tarried in the humiliating torment [of their subjugation].” In front of the police station Ali suddenly knew that for weeks, maybe even months, while he (and so many others) had feared the stroke of Solomon’s cane, the cane was rotting and Solomon was already dead. But of course the Shah’s dead regime could not be compared even to the dead body of a prophet such as Solomon; if it were comparable to anything mentioned in the Koran, it would be the body of Pharaoh, the enemy of God’s prophet Moses.

As Ali approached the area near the shrine he saw that the floodlights illuminating its golden dome and other prominent features had been turned on as usual before sunset. But that was almost the only thing that was usual about what he saw and heard in the next few minutes. Students training to be mullahs, who usually labored so hard to seem dignified, were actually jumping in the air and waving their hands almost as if they were dancing, an activity so repugnant to mullahs and their students that the students would have fled in terror if their teachers had suggested the possible resemblance.

Neither Ali nor any other mullah teacher had any desire to spoil the joy of their students. They felt that an age of Iranian history, the age of worldly “Engineers” in their European suits, had been rolled up and a new age was theirs to unroll. Some of the students were shouting such slogans as “In the springtime of freedom we deeply miss our martyrs.” But the noise they made was overwhelmed by the loudspeaker system of the shrine, which was—surely for the first time in history—merely broadcasting what came over the radio from Tehran. Message after message of local support by police brigades and army units, from such towns as Beidokht and Andimeshk, which Ali could place only vaguely on the map, were broadcast, together with new slogans for listeners to chant.

Some of Ali’s students began to approach him, each bowing slightly and waiting to ask a question: “Haji Agha, Khomeini has made Islam live again. You studied with him in Iraq; what sort of teacher was he?”

Questions of this sort were comparatively easy to deal with or to postpone for less public discussion. So were the questions from certain naïve students (not great favorites of Ali) who were preoccupied with temptations to moral corruption: “How long will it take to remove all the filth put on people’s heads by magazines like *Today’s Woman*?” and the like. But the difficult questions were the ones he himself was undecided about after months of thinking. One student, practically in tears with emotion, said, “Haji Agha, do you think that if we bring the Koran to the people, if we fill them with the spirit of Hosain and tell the young people the true history of Islam in their schoolbooks, we can bring about the ‘return’ very soon after our beloved revolution?” Ali told him, “Removing Pharaoh was only the first step; we may have to wander for a time until God’s promise is fulfilled.”

Ali, of course, like most mullahs in Qom, had read the book his student was referring to, *The Return to Ourselves* by Ali Shariati and, like most mullahs, he had longed for the masses to accept the book’s message—that with a return to true Shiah Islam, Iran would be free from the shackles of political and psychological subjugation to the West. But he knew that the Qom of his early youth,

small town of walled gardens where a tradition of learning was maintained by his mullah father and his father's friends in a spirit of quiet heroism, had already disappeared and could never return. He rejoiced to see the two black flags of mourning for the martyrs of the revolution removed from the two minarets and a green banner tied to the top of the golden dome to signal the victory of Islam. But as he knew for certain the past could not return, he felt surprisingly uneasy about what this banner might mean for the future and, more especially, for him, for his responsibility as a learned mullah and as a descendant of the Prophet, a man entitled to wear the Prophet's color green.

Eventually the crowd became so thick that, as one says in Persian, "a dog wouldn't recognize its master," and Ali felt that he was not doing his students or fellow townsmen any good by participating in the crush. Besides, he felt hungry; he had forgotten lunch because he had worked so hard, distracting himself from the radio with gardening.

As he reentered the inner garden courtyard at home he could still hear shouting in the large avenue two blocks away and the indistinct words of someone preaching on the loud-speaker system in the great mosque that sat a kilometer away, face-to-face with the shrine. There was a smell of rain in the air, always welcome in the dry climate of Qom.

His brother had come back and was laughing with an excitement that seemed almost as strange for an important textile merchant of the bazaar as dancing seemed for the student mullahs. "All the desert between Qom and Tehran will be covered with crops by this summer. Just imagine it! It's going to be a terrific year for business. I'd better go out and pay some calls on some friends."

The sun had not yet set but was low enough so that the shadow of one wall of the courtyard had covered all except a thin strip of the garden. Ali noticed that the shadow was reaching out to touch the spade he had stuck in the ground next to the seedlings, and he went over and picked it up. Then he noticed the gardener Hamid, standing in the shaded part of the courtyard just under the tree he had just finished pruning. Hamid was holding the saw in his hand and dividing his attention between Ali and the tree. Not the least remarkable thing about the day was that Hamid had apparently continued pruning throughout the vast celebration of the late afternoon. Hamid finally decided to give Ali his entire attention.

"God be blessed, sir, Islam is victorious. Of course, I'm sure ten years from now I'll still have the saw in my hand. But it's a great day, sir, a blessed day. You have studied with Khomeini, and you are a respected teacher in the Faiziyeh. I expect they'll need you in Tehran. With all due respect, sir, you and I are too old to become Tehranis. You and your family have been working the soil of Qom for generations, sir; you'll always be happiest when you return to Qom. I hope you have a chance to finish planting the seedlings soon; they won't survive long in that flat."

CHAPTER ONE

THREE THINGS had inclined Ali Hashemi to become a mullah: his father was a mullah, Ali was clever in religious studies, and he was born and raised in Qom. For thousands of students who arrive there each year, Qom is the highest seat of religious learning in Iran. For the tens of thousands of pilgrims who come in all seasons it is a town dominated by the great religious shrine that lies at its center. Ali Hashemi, who in 1979, in the year of the Revolution, became thirty-six, studied at Qom and has always revered the shrine. But for him Qom has always been something simpler and bigger: it was the first place he knew and almost all he would know until he was nineteen.

Ali did, of course, visit other places as a child. He remembers, for example, that when he was six he made the two-hour car trip north from Qom to Tehran for the first time. But except for a vague impression that the capital city was far bigger and noisier than Qom, the one scene he clearly remembers from this visit could easily have taken place at home. He recalls sharing his father's pleasure when they caught sight of his father's friend, a venerable mullah, seated in a chair near some cypress trees in a hospital garden.

Ali has a far earlier memory. The trees in his very first memory are the small fruit trees that are grown with such solicitous care in the difficult soil and hot climate of Qom. Ali, who was then about three, was at one of the smaller shrines, one called in Persian "the Gate of Paradise," with his mother. It was afternoon. A flock of green finches had landed on the trees of the orchard that surrounded the small brick building of the shrine. Ali remembers that a woman bent with age was bringing a pich of water and people were saying, "The birds are pilgrims too."

There can be no doubt of the season of his next memory because he can still see in the background the red and white flowers that grow on pomegranate trees, flowers whose fragrance in spring somehow resembles the taste of the fruit that is picked in the fall. He and his brother were being led to a corner of the garden behind his father's house, where his mother sat in front of a short leafy bush and held a newborn baby in her arms. He suddenly understood something he had been told on other occasions. He, his older brother, his father, and his newly born brother were all wearing green sashes; and Ali knew that they were all sayyeds, descendants of the Prophet. It didn't matter that the baby kept its eyes shut; Ali liked his younger brother and felt sure his younger brother liked him.

• • •

Perhaps it is an accident that the Prophet's color, green, is the same as the color of vegetation, but in the painfully cultivated oasis of Qom it seems altogether appropriate. Just as Mediterranean Christians have for centuries marveled that their bare hillsides can produce bloodred grapes for use as a sacrament, Iranians have for centuries loved the enclosed green gardens that their labor has won from the dry soil of their country. The ancient world knew that Iranians loved such walled-in green spaces, and the Greeks adopted the word *paradeisos*, borrowed from *pairidaeza*, an ancient Persian term for an enclosed garden. The authors of the Greek New Testament adopted the same word for "the abode of the blessed." How fitting that green should be the color of the descendants of Mohammed.

who, through the Koran, brought true Muslims the promise of a heavenly garden “underneath which rivers flow.”

From its foundation the history of Qom has revolved around attentive concern for gardens and respectful care for people such as Ali who are descendants of Mohammed. When the Muslim Arabs conquered Iran in the seventh century, they seem to have found no important town on or near the present site of Qom, only scattered villages along an unpredictable and often brackish river. It was the new beliefs and new power of the Arabs that would eventually create the wealth that made a substantial town possible.

At first, however, the Arab conquerors were too few to govern their vast empire. In the Qom valley, as in many other communities in western and central Iran, as long as the local landlords forwarded taxes to the barrack towns of the Muslim Arabs in southern Iraq, the region was left to govern itself. But it was not as easy for the Arabs of southern Iraq to find a *modus vivendi* with the fellow Arabs of neighboring Syria. Through the quarrel between these two groups of Muslim Arabs, reverence for the descendants of Mohammed found a permanent emotional home in southern Iraq, and, indirectly, the quarrel was the cause of the foundation of Qom.

The quarrel had begun just about the time when Iraq became the capital of the Arab Muslim empire. Twenty-four years after Mohammed’s death, Ali, his son-in-law and first cousin, had moved the capital there. The Arabs of southern Iraq had conquered most of Iran in the preceding generation and they felt their pride of place was justified when this new leader of the Muslims moved the center of government from the holy cities of Arabia to the barrack towns of Iraq. But the Syrian Arabs disputed Ali’s leadership, and when Ali was assassinated a few years later, the Iraqis grudgingly acquiesced to the transfer of the capital to Syria. In their hearts, however, many Iraqis continued to mourn for Ali and the time of his rule, and eventually they became known as “the partisans of Ali,” *shiah Ali*, or simply the Shiah.

With the death of Ali these Iraqi Arabs transferred their allegiance to Ali’s sons, the only grandchildren of Mohammed and the ancestors of all the sayyeds now alive, including Ayatollah Khomeini, King Hassan of Morocco, King Hussein of Jordan, and Ali Hashemi. After a generation of Syrian rule, one of these grandsons, Hosain, was encouraged by the partisans of his family to challenge the Syrians and raise the banner of revolt in southern Iraq. Hosain advanced from Arabia to southern Iraq, where “the partisans of Ali” might be expected to help him; but few of them did. In the deserts of that province Hosain, surrounded by troops loyal to the Syrians, watched some of his family and followers die of thirst, fought a series of desperate engagements, and was killed.

The Iraqi “partisans of Ali” grieved bitterly that Ali’s son and the last surviving grandson of the Prophet should be killed in such misery and that they themselves should have done so little to save him. The death of Hosain became for the Shiah a focus of religious emotion comparable to the “passion” of Jesus in Christianity. The drama of his martyrdom is still reenacted yearly in processions and passion plays in Shiah communities from Lebanon to the Malabar coast of southern India. If many Iraqi Shiah of the seventh century grieved and plotted further rebellions, some few left and took refuge in the Qom valley of Iran.

To men from the burning heat of Arabian deserts the parched valley of the Qom River did not seem forbidding. Besides, the dryness and comparative insignificance of the Qom valley kept away more important administrators obedient to the Syrians. But these Iraqi Arabs were far from retiring in their treatment of the Zoroastrian Iranians then living in the Qom region. From central Asia to Provence the Arabs of Islam’s first century were feared for their military virtues. At first the Iranian landlords helped the Arabs settle in the valley, but the landlords soon found that they were unable to

prevent them from seizing water rights and even the land itself. The Arabs, however, gave something in return: their concentration of military and economic power allowed them to extend irrigation, grow cash crops, and thereby establish the town of Qom, the first sizable settlement in the region. Gradually most Iranians accepted not only the economic but also the spiritual domination of the Arabs and became Muslims. Again there was exchange: the Arabs, while preserving their genealogies, gave up their native language and became speakers of Persian like the people around them.

At the beginning of the ninth century the great-great-great-grandson of Hosain, who was recognized by most of the Shiah as their leader, died in eastern Iran in a place that was subsequently called Mashhad in his honor—literally, “the martyr’s tomb.” At about the same time his sister Fatemeh died in Qom. Ordinarily the tomb of a sister of even the most important descendants of Hosain would have been a place of only local pilgrimage. But as the people of Qom were Shiah, they treasured their shrine and treated Shiah visitors to the shrine with respect; and the town gradually expanded from the Arab settlement toward the shrine.



As a small child Ali was usually pleased when the visit of a relative or a friend of the family provided an excuse for a visit to the shrine because its inner room was always redolent of the fragrance of the huge sandalwood box that enclosed Fatemeh’s tomb. He would walk with his mother near the river, past the religious colleges and the Great Mosque, to the imposing gateway through the high wall of the shrine. Inside the gate was a vast courtyard, in the center of which was a large round pool of clear greenish water, full at all seasons, unlike the Qom river, which seemed to live in states of feast or famine.

Once inside the courtyard, Ali’s mother would slow down. Ali was glad not to have to rush across the courtyard, which was paved with large cobblestones and many gravestones, all aligned to face toward the central building of the shrine. Occasionally a *rowzeh-khan*, a preacher and teller of edifying stories, would approach Ali’s mother. She was indistinguishable from all other women in the courtyard because all wore the chador, the black smocklike outer garment that covered them entirely except for a part of their faces. But as his mother was a native of Qom and the wife of a mullah, she did not want to pay a fee like a tourist to have the *rowzeh-khan* lead her in prayer.

Ali was less interested in the enormous gold dome and the four flanking minarets of the central building than he was in the intricate pattern made by the pieces of mirror cut to fit the honeycomb surface inside the three great arches on the front of the building. Just as interesting was the very thin and very ancient candle seller, with his perpetual ten-day growth of white beard, who stood in his skullcap, grayish collarless shirt, wrinkled brown jacket, and baggy gray trousers just inside the entrance to the central building. After Ali and his mother had bought a few candles and handed the money to another old man for safekeeping, they came to a door that divided the world of sunlight from a darker interior. His mother would say, “Hold onto my chador,” and together they would kiss the doorposts.

Immediately the leisurely pace of the courtyard ceased. As they walked through an anteroom they could hear the sound of weeping and praying from the next room, which was built around the tomb. At the door of the tomb chamber they would kiss the right-hand doorpost and, if the rush of exiting pilgrims did not prevent them, the left-hand doorpost as well. Once inside the tomb chamber his mother bowed toward the sarcophagus, then lit her candles from candles already burning in a special room to the side.

Sometimes the crowd of pilgrims made it hard to catch a glimpse of the tomb itself through the

high and massive silver grating around the sarcophagus, but Ali could always smell the sandalwood of the coffin-shaped box that covered the tomb. The determined pace set by the pilgrims at the door of the antechamber grew faster as they joined the outer circles of pilgrims moving counterclockwise around the tomb, and the inner circles whirled so rapidly that some people seemed trapped near the grating by the press and the speed of the movement. The noise was most intense nearest the grating. Some cried, "O holy sinless one," others threw coins through the grating and tried to kiss it in passing, and many wept.

Often Ali's mother would stay in the outer circle because she had not made a vow and had no reason to get close to the tomb, but she too almost invariably wept. Ali wanted to weep as well and find it was strange that he could not weep easily, but usually after circling the tomb a few times his throat became choked and he began to cry. Eventually they pulled away from the crowd, backed out of the room facing the sarcophagus, and kissed the doorposts as they came to them. When they had recovered their shoes and gone outside Ali was always pleased to see new pilgrims strolling across the courtyard under a sky that had hardly changed since they had left it. He always felt it would be a better outing if he convinced his mother to walk home a different way. And if she was not in a hurry she would say, "You little devil," and indulge him.



To secularized Iranian intellectuals Qom is something very alien and very familiar. It is familiar because as children they were taken there by grandmothers and pious aunts to visit the shrine and, in many cases, to visit family burial places. It is familiar because at home the same grandmothers and pious aunts would pay *rowzeh-khans*, just like those who approach pilgrims at Qom, to visit the family home and deliver a sermon that was really a lament, for his talk would be quickly drawn to the sufferings of Hosain, and the *rowzeh-khan* would dwell on such suffering while his entirely female audience would weep without restraint. It is familiar because the secularized intellectuals had seen turbaned mullahs like those around the shrines and seminaries of Qom at weddings, had listened to them preach at funerals, and had probably even had them as teachers in courses of religious instruction at state schools.

Yet Qom is alien as only something familiar but unacceptable can be. It is not only that Qom is a tourist trap, complete with photographers who take pictures of you and your wife with your heads poking through a painted backdrop that shows you both in dress of the most traditional piety. It is also a tourist trap in which piety is used to milk you at all levels, from the *rowzeh-khans* to the beggars. The latter, knowing the high religious merit of giving alms, pop up near the graves of your ancestors crying pious phrases at you and sticking out their hands. In the view of the secularized intellectuals of Qom not only milks the living, in the persons of over a million pilgrims a year, it also milks the estates of the deceased, for, in spite of the rising cost of burial at Qom, thousands of cadavers arrive each year from all over Iran to join the hundreds of thousands already buried there. Since it contains the tombs of so many of the privileged, even many rulers of the Shiah dynasties of Iran, one might expect parts of graveyard Qom to be well kept up, but, in fact, outside the shrine much of graveyard Qom is a shambling ruin. The fields of graves, set close together in the ground facing in the same direction, are littered with cracked fragments of the stone and brick grave markers. The mausoleums more often than not have lost their roofs and become nesting places for storks (called by Iranians *Ha Lak-lak*—"the pilgrim who cries *lak-lak*").

To the secularized intellectual it seems altogether appropriate that traditional Shiah learning should have taken as its home a vast necropolis. To him the six thousand or so students are devoted

a form of learning as antiquated as the mullah clothes they wear, a learning as arid as the climate of Qom itself. For Qom is dry even by the standards of Iranian towns, and outsiders usually have been less struck by the success of the Qomis in creating green and fertile islands than they have by the ocean of dust and desert that surround these islands. A contemporary poet, Naderpour, sees Qom as:

*Many thousand women
Many thousand men
Women, scarves on their heads
Men, cloaks on their shoulders
A golden dome
With old storks
An unpleasant garden
With a few isolated trees
Empty of laughter
Silent of speech
With a half-filled pool
With green water
Many old crows
On piles of stone
Crowds of beggars
At every step in the road
White turbans
Black faces.*



It never occurred to Ali on his way home from the shrine that one could accept or reject the tombs and turbans of Qom. The tombs were facts of life like the seasons or the sun; and as for the turbans, his father wore one, and so, he hoped, would he in time. Home, nevertheless, was very different from the street, which belonged to no one (not even the municipality, to judge from the way it was maintained). Like the shrine, Ali's home was completely enclosed in a wall; and, like the shrine, was a world in itself. But while the shrine had several huge courtyards to introduce you to its purpose, his home offered a small but precise introduction, an octagonal gatehouse, one of whose doors opened on the street. Although the gatehouse was neither street nor home, it was cooler than the street and foretold the fresher air inside.

The first door on the right inside the gatehouse led to a gatekeeper's room, which was not used by Ali's time. Since Ali and his brothers had decided that a dangerous snake lived in a hole in its wall, for some months they would dare each other to enter and would take turns racing in and out. In contrast, the second door on the right was a familiar friend. It led to a stable that in his father's youth had housed the kind of white donkey usually owned by mullahs of his father's and grandfather's station. The stable consisted of two stalls, and Ali sometimes followed the servant who went to fetch the firewood stored there and pretended to support the back end of the bundles of branches that the servant carried back to the house.

The rest of the doors led to the two principal sections of the house, called in Persian the *andaruni* "the inside," and the *biruni*, "the outside." As a small child Ali seldom visited the *biruni*, which was exclusively for his father and his father's male guests, but when he did, he was always struck by its resemblance to the "inside." Not only was the house divided into two but everything inside the *andaruni* and *biruni* was divided into twos. Each of the two sections was built around a garden, and each garden was clearly divided in two. As you entered there was a right-hand side and a left-hand side, each mirroring the other: if there was a cypress planted near the end of the right-hand side, the

was sure to be a cypress at the end of the left-hand side as well. There were two long rooms on each side of the *biruni*, and at the end were two small rooms, all of them two steps above the level of the garden. Ali came to admire his grandmother's apparent rebellion against the rule of two; shortly after her husband's death she had prevailed on Ali's father to have three plaster arches built at the end of the garden in the *biruni* in front of the two small rooms, with openings that bore no relation to the two French doors that opened into these rooms.

The total isolation of the more public "outside" from the "inside" part of the house was one rule of division in two that no one dared violate. There was no opening, not even a window, that joined the *andaruni* and the *biruni*. Ali was surprised that his grandmother never insisted on knocking a hole through the wall to save the servant from carrying tea, food, charcoal, and whatever from the kitchen in the *andaruni* all the way out to the gatehouse and then in again to the kitchenless *biruni*.

The "inside" or *andaruni* had a right- and left-hand garden with a square pool in the center, like the *biruni*, and Ali knew this pool intimately. It was Ali's ambition to see all of the goldfish in the pool at once—which might happen if they all came to the surface when he threw crumbs in a space between the water lily leaves or if they formed a school and all came to one edge of the pool together. Ali cannot remember his father fabricating any kind of story except to frighten his son from leaning over the pool. If he saw Ali put his hand in the water he would run over, pull Ali back, and in an angry and embarrassed tone say, "Vay, vay, don't you know that the pool monster feasts on hands, you little devil?"

Occasionally there would be enough water to turn on the fountain, which was just a metal knob on a marble square slightly above water level at the center of the *andaruni* pool. The water would burble from a small pierced metal ball and the pool would overflow along grooves in the middle of each of its four sides into the four channels that ran the length of the garden and divided it into four parts. Ali remembers his grandmother's great pleasure on these occasions. She would place melons to cool in one channel of the pool and direct the servant as to where and for how long to release water from the channels into the four garden plots they separated. Finally she would sit down with Ali by the side of one of the channels and they would bathe their feet in the water.

In the *biruni* the trees and flowers were set out neatly in pairs with a strict sense of symmetry. In the *andaruni* the jasmine bushes, the cypresses, and the flower beds were also in pairs or sometimes fours, but the quince and pomegranate trees stood without matching companions, and in Ali's view made the *andaruni* even more private. When he and his grandmother sat with their feet in the water, Ali would look at the tops of the cypresses bending slightly in the wind, and even the portion of sky enclosed by the buildings and wall seemed private and familiar.

Sometimes, when it was very hot and dry, Ali went with his mother, father, grandmother, and brothers to a basement room that also had a pool; but unlike the garden pool, it was very long and narrow and was lined with blue tiles. There were no windows in this basement, only narrow openings filled with a latticework of small ceramic tiles of the most intense blue, which allowed air but little light to enter. To Ali even the murmur of the thin jet of water at the center of the room seemed blue. As the family sat there without talking, only occasionally coughing and putting their hands or feet in or out of the water, Ali knew they all respected the blueness and silence as much as he did.

Hot weather was also the occasion for sleeping on the roof. Mattresses and mosquito netting were carried to the roof shortly after the last light of day, and Ali envied his elder brother, who was allowed to keep a flit-gun and a swatter inside his netting. After a little stirring the night would be remarkably silent, especially considering the large number of people sleeping on nearby roofs, all of which were about the same height. In the dry, clear air the stars were amazingly distinct, and the more Ali looked

at them, the brighter they seemed. But unlike the private and familiar garden sky of the *andaruni* daytime, the night sky seemed immense and disinterested, and the stars extraordinarily distant.

When they slept on the roof they usually woke with the call to prayer, but the two servants, Kaze and his wife, always woke up earlier, and Ali watched them on their accompanying roof fanning the samovar they had already lit in order to prepare tea. After his father prayed they would move into the proper sleeping rooms of the *andaruni* to try and sleep an hour or two longer. If Ali woke inside before the others, he would study the two semicircular stained-glass windows that were above the curtained French doors and seemed for ten minutes or so to be on fire when the morning sun struck them. At regular intervals there were yellow hexagons separated by squares or, viewed differently, blue and green triangles that fitted together to form squares. If you followed the blue or green, each color formed a series of straps, one color disappearing under the other and reappearing at regular intervals. When he began to learn to draw the letters of the alphabet, Ali told his older brother he wanted to draw the design and then try to design something similar. His brother smiled and said such designs were craftsmen's work.

Ali remembers that if his grandmother slept late, his mother would wake her by shuffling her feet on the carpet next to her or by coughing or clearing her throat. In fact, it was amazing how often the only protection for privacy was foot-shuffling and the clearing of throats. In particular, Ali remembers that no one approached the outhouse, which had no lock on its door, without coughing and dragging his feet to give any occupant a chance to clear his throat or cough in reply. Actually, as Ali realized when he left home, for those permitted into the *andaruni* everything was to some degree public, and you had privacy only insofar as you were able to feel private in your mind. In winter they would all sit around a charcoal brazier placed under a low table, which in turn would be covered by an enormous quilt. You could pull the quilt up to your neck or just keep it over your legs; you could read or talk; you could drink tea or sleep. At some time or other all these things would be done simultaneously around the brazier, and it was clear that those who read or slept considered themselves and were considered by everyone else to have the right to follow a private line of conduct different from that of the half dozen or dozen people a few feet away from them.

Very early in life Ali learned that, unlike his brothers, he needed more than privacy in company—he needed seclusion. Later he would walk to one of the small disused shrines on the outskirts of Qom but as a child he found that when his mother and grandmother were busy, no one minded if he went under a bush and, as he very much liked to do, watched others closely from his seclusion or just tried to understand things that people had said. Once under such a bush he saw the war of the ants. He instantly knew the cause of the war and the nature of the parties. The red ants, whose bite (he had been told) was slightly poisonous, were Sunnis, the party among Muslims that rejected the claim of the descendants of Ali, and they were attacking the black ants, who were obviously Shiah, since black as well as green was a color worn by people like Ali Hashemi's father who claimed descent from Ali. He remembers admiring the black ants for the justness of their cause and their individual heroism; but as the battle continued, he began to admire the orderliness and steadiness of the slower-moving red ants. As far as he could tell, neither side won.

Around his sixth birthday Ali stopped going to the bathhouse with his mother and started to go with his father. It wasn't the only important change at that time in his life; learning to pray, learning to write, and learning to sit quietly with his father's friends were just as new and took more hours each week than a visit to the bath. But somehow he remembers the change at the bathhouse best: one week he was with a lot of talkative, sweating, half-naked women, the next week he was sitting with a lot of solemn, half-naked men while his father explained to him that in this bathhouse, as in so many other

in Iran, a painter had put a picture of the devil on the ceiling. He had done so because the devil was supposed to torture men in a place of fire and steam like the bathhouse. The real devil, his father added, was Satan, the enemy of God. Ali asked why God hadn't destroyed Satan if he was God's enemy. His father smiled, wiped his face with a towel, and said he was a very clever boy, a real little devil himself.

It wasn't that his mother had less time for him, it was that his father seemed to have so much more. He had often watched his father pray and had tried in private to raise and lower his hands, bend forward, kneel, and touch his forehead to the ground in the same way that his father did. It was hopeless. Besides, his father spoke the prayer in Arabic, and Ali couldn't remember more than a word or two of what his father said. Some months after he stopped going to the bath with his mother, his father noticed Ali imitating his movements while he prayed. When he finished his prayer he took Ali's two hands in his own hands and said, "God likes us to begin our prayers by saying in our heart or out loud, 'I intend to pray.' 'I intend to pray' means 'I want to pray.'"

Ali said, "But I do want to pray—I want to be like you."

His father smiled and rubbed Ali's chin. "All right, I know you want to be like me. Learn part of the prayer in Arabic and you'll be ready to do it like me when you are old enough to know what it means to say 'I intend.'"

Looking back, Ali thinks it incredible that he should have had his first taste of Arabic—the true language of revelation and religious learning—devouring whole sentences then and there in front of his father, without any fanfare or ceremonious introduction. His father's translation of the Arabic sentences word for word from Arabic into Persian helped hardly at all, but the words of each sentence linked themselves to each other in a chain that never broke. The trouble was that sometimes Ali got the sentences themselves in the wrong order, and sometimes he developed new ways of saying Arabic words which amused his father very much. Twice in a prayer he had to repeat the shortest chapter of the Koran:

*In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent;
Say: He is God the One,
God the Eternal.
He does not beget and is not begotten;
And there is none like unto him.*

These twenty or so words in Arabic seemed to enter Ali almost at one swallow, but when he recited them back to his father two days later, for the Arabic word *samad*, "Eternal," he said *shamad*, the Persian word for "mosquito netting." "Dear son, if you have to speak Persian instead of Arabic in your prayers, at least compare God to something more substantial like *namad* [felt], which is a little stronger and more solid than mosquito netting."

Ali felt it suited his new importance as a member of the world of men to take more interest in shopping expeditions and to insist on carrying things home. Most days of the week his father went to the store, either to buy something his mother had forgotten or something his father suddenly yearned for, like cucumbers, which are for Iranians the archetypal fruit, as apples are for Americans. On instruction the greengrocer would pull things from the jumble of open crates on the ground. Ali's father would then place his purchases in an enormous handkerchief he had brought along, tie it at the four corners, and hand it to Ali.

Ali, to his disappointment, was not allowed to accompany the maid when she went on her daily trips to the large open-air market for fruits and vegetables because, his mother said, "It's dirty, it

noisy, and anyway you can't understand the way farmers talk." Apparently the farmers themselves were not dirty, even if their market was, because two or three times a year they came to the house with donkey loads of fruits and vegetables such as onions, pomegranates, and melons, which would then be piled in the cellar, usually with straw between the layers.

Shopping with his mother in the central bazaar, however, more than made up for missing the open air market. The bazaar seemed immense. And because it was covered and somewhat dark, expedition to the bazaar had a solemnity that other forms of shopping lacked. From the outside the bazaar, with its great gates, which were opened in the morning and closed at night, seemed bounded and defined. From the inside it appeared boundless and inexhaustible. It was a place of manufacture as well as sale, and it seemed more like a labyrinth because of its endless turnings, its abrupt changes from retailer to workshop and from alley to avenue. For example, the quiet street where cloth merchants sat among their bolts of material opened onto an avenue where the clatter from the coppersmiths sometimes made it impossible to talk.

To enter the bazaar was to enter a world of slow formalities and quick wits. It was also a world of old, even ancestral, loyalties. In general it was loyalty that directed his mother's steps. Whether it was in the small lane of the jewelers or the spacious barrel-vaulted central avenue of the cloth dealers, his mother always went to the same merchant in any section, a reliable friend of the family.

She did not just march up to the shop of the "reliable friend" and ask for what she wanted. She always walked around a bit so that the merchant should know that she gave her custom with some thought. But no woman could really have made up her mind what to buy just by examining the entrances to the shops. Merchants in those days paid little attention to arranging any sort of display at the front of the shop. In any case, at such shops as the draper's, if display had told the customers what was available, it would have destroyed the occasion for that gradual disclosure of merchandise and those leisurely demonstrations of politeness that made shopping worthwhile. The draper would offer Ali's mother a four-legged stool, set slightly inside the front of his narrow, deep shop, and ask first about her health and then, with his hand on his heart, about her husband's health. He would then easily persuade her to have tea, which an apprentice brought in small glasses on a round copper tray. Finally there was the excitement of discovery as she spotted bolts of cloth or as they were produced for her from the deep interior of the shop at the orders of the owner.

For Ali, shopping in the bazaar lost its genteel and ruminative character when he was six. He was about to enter the state elementary school. Ali, who had up to that time usually worn the lounging pajamas beloved by very young boys and older men in Iran, now went with his father to the tailor to have two pairs of shorts made in a dull gray color that the Ministry of Education decreed appropriate for small children. Ali and his father walked through the bazaar just as the apprentices were sprinkling the passages from improvised watering cans to lay the afternoon dust. They climbed a dark staircase to a second-story shop overlooking the barrel-vaulted central avenue of the bazaar. The tailor, who sat behind a massive sewing machine on an elevated area to one side of his shop, had just partially unwound himself from his cross-legged position to rise a foot or so for a customer who had entered immediately before Ali and his father. When he saw that a prominent mullah had come into his shop, he unwound himself completely and, with his hand on his chest, made a slight bow. Ali wondered whether the needles and straight pins stuck into his vest accounted for the slightly pained look in the tailor's large birdlike eyes.

An older apprentice was bringing a pair of scissors almost half as tall as Ali from a flat table in the center of the room. Another apprentice, hardly a year older than Ali himself, entered with a tray of tea for the tailor and his customers. He tripped on a stool that had been moved near the door and fell

sideways, dropping the tray, which tumbled forward and scattered the glasses onto the brick floor. With a hoarse cry the tailor started toward the boy from across the room and roared, "Fatherless godless child, dirt be on your head!" and struck his ear with the flat of his palm. The apprentice had been crying from the minute he tripped, but after he was struck he gave one yell and just lay gulping for air, emitting a thin, high whine. Ali noticed the purplish mangle on the child's scalp under his very short hair and saw the scabs on his legs through his torn pajamas. Everyone tried to go about his business without looking at the boy except for the tailor, who was shouting at his older apprentice to clean up and announcing to no one in particular, "Boys are little devils. They play the devil even during waking hour."

When Ali and his father left the room after a few measurements and explanations, the boy had stopped whining but was still breathing hard. Ali was never sure why his father did not take him back to the tailor with the birdlike eyes. For years afterward whenever he was in the bazaar Ali would feel certain that ahead of him he had spotted the apprentice who was close to his own age. Then, as he drew near, he became uncertain that he really knew what the boy looked like, and he would turn away.



The bazaar and the mosque are the two lungs of public life in Iran. Bazaars, like mosques, shrines, and private houses, look inward, psychologically and architecturally, and more often than not the present blank and unexplaining walls to the streets outside. Bazaars and mosques have a public character that is the antithesis of the privacy of houses; but, as the shared spaces of people who enter them, like houses they look inward. Two men meeting on the street meet merely as two men, but for over a thousand years the bazaar has been recognized by Islamic law as a special arena of human life, and in law as well as in common understanding two men meet there as "two men in the bazaar." As such they share certain moral and even legal obligations—for example, to buy and sell with a shared knowledge of the current market price. Information about prices is, in fact, the quickening breath that sustains the life of the bazaar, and the mechanism by which these prices adjust to new information of supply and demand is so refined as to seem almost divine. "God sets prices," according to a saying ascribed to the Prophet Mohammed, and most medieval Islamic jurists agreed that an unseen hand that operated with such efficiency must be the hand of God.

Not only prices but men's reputations are set, reset, and continually adjusted in the bazaar. Information flows through networks of reliable friends. All society is a catchment area for the information to which the unofficial brokerage of the mosque and the bazaar will ultimately give the common "market price." In this sense the bazaar is not just an economic arena, it is a region of the human spirit. As such it is the lineal descendant of the Greek agora and the Roman forum. The Greeks and Romans went to their markets not only to buy and sell but also to conduct their public political life and even to hold their public festivals. The bazaar was seldom the guardian of political life that the forum or agora had been, but the bazaar was and often still is the assessor that sets the valuation that politicians must use when they trade.

When political life comes to a boil, the bazaar is not just the public assessor of values—it becomes a direct arena for political expression. At such times, in the classic Persian expression, the bazaar is "in disorder," which means that people come and go in an agitated way and seem close to violence and riot. When the bazaar boils over, it simply shuts. Streets of shop fronts barred by heavy shutters testify to the determination of merchants not to let normal life continue until the common concern is dealt with.

Moments at which the Tehran bazaar closed punctuate the last two centuries of Iranian history. I

December 1905 the governor of Tehran punished two sugar merchants by the bastinado—caning of the soft soles of the feet—which is a repellent and persistent feature of Iranian penal practice. The sugar merchants were punished for not lowering their prices as ordered, although they insisted that high import prices gave them no choice. The bazaar closed. In fact the whole capital closed down following the lead of the bazaar; unrest and dissatisfaction with the Qajar government that had been growing for years now came into the open. Many merchants and mullahs took sanctuary in nearby shrines and refused to return until the shah met their demands for some voice in the government. The first Iranian revolution had begun.

In the summer of 1960 the government announced the results of elections to the parliament, still—in theory—elected according to the constitution established in 1906 during the first Iranian revolution. A completely honest election to the parliament was a fond dream, never yet experienced by any generation of Iranians. But the elections of 1960 were so blatantly rigged that even some of the winners were embarrassed, and an unusual season of limited freedom of expression allowed a few elder statesmen to say that the government had insulted the electorate. The bazaar closed. The elections were canceled.

If the bazaar was the precinct of public discourse, the mosque was virtually the only precinct in which personal opinion could be publicly proclaimed. The market appraised ideas through thousands of informal discussions; in the mosque, at least once a week, opinion formed a part of the formal service of prayer. Not that informal discussion was a stranger to the vast courtyards of mosques. When the bazaar shut, mosques filled as people sought the public space where exchanges of rumor and report could continue after the alleys and avenues of the bazaar were deserted.

People gather in the mosque every day for the five obligatory prayers, but they are free to pray instead in their homes or shops or anyplace not considered defiled or inappropriate from the point of view of Islamic law. Attendance at the mosque for Friday noon prayer and certain religious festivals, however, is a religious obligation, and bazaars have always shut for the Friday prayer and for at least half a century have shut for all of Friday. The service begins with a sermon in which the preacher prays for the community of Muslims and sometimes for the ruler. Sermons are also given at funerals, at dedications, and whenever preachers find an opening, and in this sense in the world of Islam the orator moved out of the market and into the place of prayer.

Sermons are sometimes the occasion on which the congregation becomes “disorderly,” like the agitated throngs of the bazaar, and sometimes this disorder ends in riot. The disorder may arise from anger at what the preacher says as a spokesman for the government; it may arise from sympathy for his criticism of the government; and it may arise simply because the solidarity expressed by praying in unison gives the congregation a sense that it can act together, although its members had been previously unwilling to act alone.

In the first Iranian revolution the preacher and the mosque played their roles along with the market. When the sugar merchants were bastinadoed on December 11, 1905, and the mullahs and merchants withdrew the next day to a nearby shrine and subsequently to the shrine of Shah Abdol-Azim, the shah gave in after a month of stalemate and promised to meet their principal demands. The protestors returned to Tehran in triumph. Half a year later the shah had not fulfilled most of his promises. A popular local preacher denounced the government: “Iranians! Brethren of my beloved country! How long will this treacherous intoxication keep you slumbering? ... Lift up your heads. Open your eyes ... Behold your neighbors [the Russians] who two hundred years ago were in much worse condition than we. Behold how they now possess everything ... Now we are reduced to such a condition that our neighbors to the south and north already believe us to be their property.... In the

whole of Iran we have not one factory of our own, because our government is a parasite... All the backwardness is due to autocracy, injustice, and want of laws ...”

On July 11, 1906, the government arrested the preacher. A crowd of theological students descended on the police station of Tehran, and a shot from a policeman killed a student who was sayyed, a descendant of the Prophet. The next morning thousands of theological students and people from the bazaar accompanied the sayyed's body in a cortege from the principal bazaar to the central mosque. The shah sent his crack troops, the corps of Iranians with Russian officers called the "Cossack" Brigade, to prevent the cortege from joining the mullahs who had already gathered in the mosque. They fired on the cortege near the mosque and killed twenty-two as well as injuring many more. The first blood of the Iranian revolution of 1906 had been drawn.

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