Impressions of Fundamentalist Islam: Iran Observed

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The western media portrayal of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran during the decade of the 1980s, following the revolution of 1979, was very rarely favourable. An occasional observer of post-revolutionary Iran could be forgiven for visualising a stereotype of a harsh regime which had as prime goals the clamping down on the local version of western pop sub-culture and the de-emancipation of women. Simply put, the Iranians have been portrayed for over a decade as the 'baddies' in several conflicts: the on-going tension with the United States; the surge in Islamic fundamentalism throughout the muslim world which went hand-in-hand with what appeared to be an active Iranian policy of exporting revolution; the Iran-Iraq conflict, during which the West saw Iraq as a buffer against Iranian fundamentalist expansion; and the dispute with Britain over Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

Not only did the image of Iran suffer, but the stereotype of Islam in general was badly affected by the various conflicts between Iran and the West. Iran was seen as the latter-day exponent of revivalist fundamentalist Islam, indeed the personification of the Islamic faith, and its actions which aroused so much hostility in the West led directly to a rapid eroding of the perception of Islam throughout the Western world (Von Der Mehden 1983).

Of considerable interest for our purposes is the Iranian perception of the post 1979 Islamic republic, and the claim that it is the first truly Islamic state to be established since the community assembled by the Prophet Muhammad in 7th century Arabia (Bakhash 1990:8). This paper [1] will focus on several significant features of contemporary Iran, placing them within an Islamic context, by reference to the Qur'ân and speeches and writings of leading Iranian Islamic revolutionaries.

Social Engineering

Post-revolution Iran is characterised by a single-minded, normative approach to restructuring society. There is little room in modern-day Iran for the pluralism of the West. The significant difference between the West and Iran in terms of the varying attitudes to pluralism, is that in Western societies there is a separation between Church and State, whereas in post-revolution Iran religious values underpin the entire philosophy and structure of the State. In Western societies, there is no single supreme guardian of absolute values. Rather, relativism has become the order of the day, and Western democracies place a high value on freedom of opinion, political persuasion and creed. In societies where religion is the formalised basis of the State, however, revealed scripture containing God's Word represents an absolute set of values, which overrides any human value systems (which are perceived as being inherently flawed). This makes for a strong, central moral code, which because of the acceptance of absolutes in terms of beliefs and behaviour, absolves the society of the need to allow for relativist pluralism to a considerable degree.

Thus, in an Islamic state, such as Iran, the ultimate point of reference for all matters, whether judicial, moral, ethical, or social, will be scripture: the Qur'ân, the Islamic Traditions of the Prophet, and the successive layers of Islamic literature built upon these two great sources. Any value system which is at variance with these sources is seen quite simply as being incompatible with God's Word, and thus wrong. There can be no room for the 'each to their own' syndrome of the West, as there is logically no alternative, equally valid system to that given to humanity by God. This belief in the divine origin of Islamic law is encapsulated in the teachings of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who said:

Islamic government is the government of divine right, and its laws cannot be changed, modified, or contested. (Hendra 1980:15)

It is important in this context to understand the impact that such pronouncements by Khomeini had on Iranians. He was accorded unquestioned authority as the *faqih* or supreme jurist. As his spiritual successor Ali Khamenei said in 1988, 'When the supreme jurist issues an order based on the interests of Islam and the society, that order is an order from God, a religious edict.' (Bakhash 1990:11)

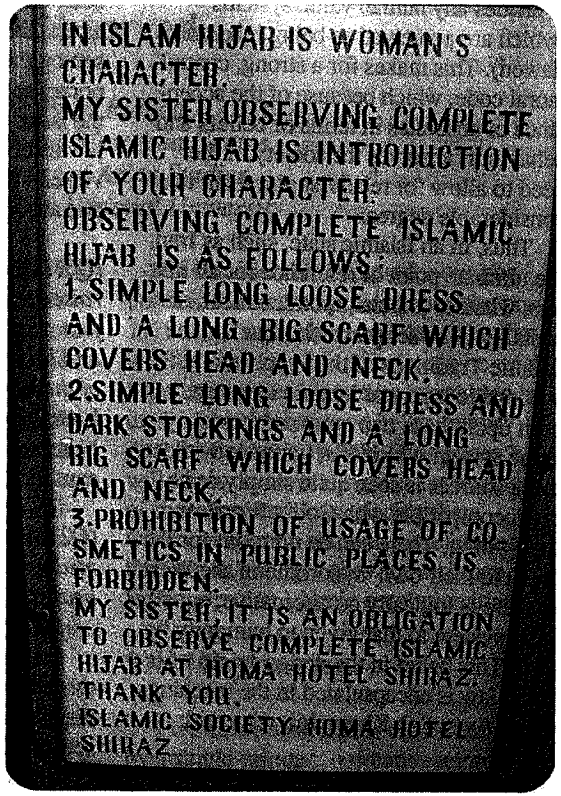
To reinforce the authority which he derived from his position, Khomeini regularly drew upon the authority of the Qur'ân. This is the essence of fundamentalist Islam: the recourse to revealed scripture as the primary point of reference in setting the goals and patterns of contemporary society. An example to illustrate the issue of the divine origin of Islamic law discussed above is found in Qur'anic verses which encapsulate the uniqueness and absoluteness of Islam, such as:

(Q3:109)You are the best of the nations raised up for (the benefit of) men; you enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and believe in Allah; and if the followers of the Book had believed it would have been better for them; of them (some) are believers and most of them are transgressors.

(Q2:143)And thus We have made you a medium (just) nation that you may be the bearers of witness to the people...

Education in Iran has been used as an essential tool for social engineering since the earliest stages of the revolution. It was seen by the revolutionaries as having been an agent of negative values during the Shah's period of rule, and for two years in the early post-revolutionary period, Iranian universities were closed down, to allow time to purge the institutions of anti-revolutionary influences. But after this initial purification process, the universities have come to be seen as providing fertile ground for consolidating the revolution. This has had various manifestations. Firstly, there is an ideological screening process which ensures that both academic and administrative staff in prominent positions are supporters of the Islamic government. Secondly, changes to school and university curricula have served to reinforce revolutionary ideals. For example, school curricula now in-

clude a subject called Morals. An Iranian acquaintance, who teaches Morals in schools, described it to me as one of the most important aims of the Iranian education system, which wants to change the behaviour of Iranian children, owing to what he termed 'a crisis in social behaviour'. He demonstrated a very fixed view of what is right and what is wrong, and a resolve to bring up a new breed of Iranians who will be attuned to absolute values, as are found in God's Law.



A sign in an Iranian hotel reminding foreign women of the compulsory dress code.

The Moral Crusade

One of the most striking features about contemporary Iran is the intense preoccupation of the authorities with establishing and maintaining a strict code of sexual morality. Once again, the reference point is the Qur'ân, which gives very clear instructions, both in relation to sexual conduct, and also in connection with dressing in an appropriately modest manner. The following verses demonstrate this:

(Q24:30)Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do.

(Q24:31)And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands...

(Q24:33)And let those who do not find the means to marry keep chaste until Allah makes them free from want out of his grace.

The cornerstone device for enforcing appropriate moral conduct is the *hijab*,

the female headcovering which is mandatory apparel for every woman outside her home [2]. It is the means to ensure that women do 'not display their ornaments' as referred to above. The role of the *hijab* in a nutshell is as follows:

The philosophy behind the hijab for women in Islam is that she should cover her body in her associations with men whom she is not related to according to the Divine Law and that she does not flaunt and display herself. (Mutahhari 1987:12)

To supplement the *hijab* covering, Iranian women are forbidden to shake hands with men other than those in their immediate family, and devout Iranian women are trained to defer their gaze when meeting men. The purpose is to prevent the temptation for men to leer at women with lustful looks, which is forbidden by Islam.

The existence of clear Qur'anic injunctions regarding moral behaviour, and the implementation of these injunctions in the Islamic legal code which predominates in Iran, raises the issue of the appropriate punishment for miscreants. Which of the nation's members are most guilty of actions which are contrary to the spirit of these injunctions, and how does the system deal with law-breakers?

These questions were put to a young member of academic staff, who was a specialist in criminology and who also wrote articles for youth magazines on subjects related to crime among the young. The interview went as follows:

Q: Is crime a big problem amongst young people in Iran?
A: Yes, it is very important in Iran.
Q: What are the main crimes that young people engage in in Tehran?
A: Crimes against property and sexual crimes. These two categories are most important.
Q: You mean rape?
A: Rape in foreign countries is important, but in Iran, unlawful intercourse is a crime. Rape refers to relations between a man and a woman by force. In Iran, this is a crime, as are unlawful relations between a man and a woman (without use of force).
Q: What is the punishment for an unlawful relationship between a man and a woman?
A: If the man or woman is married, the punishment is death. Of course, to prove this crime is very difficult. If you look in the newspaper, you will have difficulty finding cases of this punishment, because proving it is very difficult. For example, there must be four witnesses to the act. They must completely see the act.
If the man or woman who commits the crime is not married, they receive one hundred lashes. Proving this is also difficult. There must be witnesses or a confession.

The punishments referred to above have been codified in the post-revolutionary Iranian legal system of civil law, with the details being drawn from the Qur'ân (Q4:15-16) and the Islamic Traditions.

An example of this detail concerns the identity of the witnesses required in order to prove a charge of fornication:

Article 91: Fornication is proved with the testimony of four reputable men, or three reputable men and two reputable women, whether it involves the punishment of flogging or the punishment of stoning to death.

Article 92: In cases where fornication involves only the punishment of flogging, it

is also proved with the testimony of two reputable men or four reputable women.

NOTE: Testimony of women alone or jointly with that of one reputable man does not prove fornication; rather such witnesses shall be subject to the punishment for slander. (Da'wati 1984:150-151)

During the 1980s, the precondition of there being witnesses to fornication for a verdict of guilty to be handed down was not always enforced. However, it appears that since early 1990, there has been some tightening up of the conditions for carrying out punishment for moral crimes, and it is now increasingly necessary for the prescribed number of witnesses to be produced before the law can be carried out, as defined above.

Minorities - Misfits of the Islamic Revolution

What is the place of minorities in a society with such a clearly defined set of social norms and absolute values? The issue of minority rights is addressed in Iran within the context of the broader Islamic community. This is illustrated by the following comment by the Ayatollah Khomeini:

The person who governs the Moslem community must always have its interests at heart and not his own. This is why Islam has put so many people to death: to safeguard the interests of the Moslem community. Islam has obliterated many tribes because they were sources of corruption and harmful to the welfare of Moslems. (Hendra 1980:28)

The above statement illustrates a fundamental point about contemporary Iran; namely, that most minorities are able to function as distinct social and religious groups providing that they acknowledge the supremacy and authority of the Shiite Islamic government and do not threaten this authority in any way. To this end, various minority groups have representatives within the Iranian parliament, and non-Islamic groups are free to practise their own forms of worship within certain limits [3]. Nevertheless, such 'freedom within constraints' runs counter to the human spirit of independence, and there is evidence of varying degrees of dissatisfaction among minority groups, whether social, political, or religious, who are out of step with the policies and persuasions of the Iranian authorities.

A Kurdish informant expressed such disaffection in saying that although he was a Muslim, he was regarded with suspicion because he did not assume the outward trappings of being a good revolutionary, such as regular attendance at the mosque, or remaining unshaven. Kurds complain of being subjected to ongoing, and sometimes violent, forms of discrimination by fellow Iranians partly because of their being Sunni Muslims, whereas the majority of Iranians are Shiites. It should be added that Kurdish resistance groups, struggling for an independent Kurdish state, have greatly contributed to a continuing distrust of the Kurds by the Iranian government. Such an open challenge to the central Islamic authority usually precipitates a Government clamp-down on what it perceives as a dissident group.

A minority group to feel the full brunt of official disapproval is that of the Baha'is. Unlike the Kurds, who are accepted as muslims, the Baha'is are treated

with disdain, and regarded as being preachers of a false, infidel creed. Persecution of this group has included confiscation of property, denial of basic civil rights, physical abuse, and imprisonment and execution (Amnesty International Report 1985:310). The fact that the Baha'i faith developed as an offshoot of Islam, and that the three central figures in its establishment are buried in a shrine in Haifa, Israel, has not assisted their cause in the eyes of the Iranian Government. The main Baha'i temple in Tehran has been closed down, and many Baha'is have left Iran since 1979 to settle in western countries, including Australia.

Jews are considered by Islam as 'People of the Book', and are thus accorded recognition as one of the official state religions, and are allowed to practise their faith providing they don't proselytise. Nevertheless, the frequent references to Jews in the Qur'ân are often highly critical, as was seen previously in the reference to 'the followers of the Book' in Q3:109. Though not arousing the ire of the Iranian authorities to the same degree as the Baha'is, Jews have nevertheless experienced varying degrees of discrimination, including being denied opportunities for advancement in government service, denial of import/export licenses for Jewish businessmen, and the withholding of various standard civic services from Jewish neighbourhoods. There are also reports of specially heavy taxes being levied against Jews, as well as other measures, such as refusing to grant permission for an entire family to travel out of Iran, thus detaining one member to ensure the return of the others. Some Iranian Jews have managed to leave Iran via Turkey, continuing on to Israel, where they have been accepted as new immigrants, joining a substantial community of ex-Iranian Jews now resident in Israel.

Thus, the official attitude to and treatment of minorities is largely dependent on the degree to which those minorities show allegiance to the overall rule of Islam. They enjoy a freedom with constraints and without a complete degree of equality. This is labelled discrimination in the West, but supporters of the Iranian government argue that the standard is sanctioned by Islam, so variants diverging from this Islamic standard are not deserving of complete equality.

Heroes of the Islamic Revolution

Preceding discussion has focused upon issues and forces identified as potential or actual opponents of the Islamic state. However, the Islamic revolution has not been simply preoccupied with addressing negative factors in society. An essential agent of the fundamentalist revolution has been the depiction of goals of acceptable Islamic behaviour. The most striking device for doing this is in the identification of heroes of the Islamic revolution for the benefit of the masses.

The most frequently depicted personality is Imam Khomeini, the spiritual father of the revolution and leader until his death in June 1989. Representations of Khomeini are found on all manner of constructions, from small columns to large walls of multi-storey buildings. In addition, one will also see paintings of Imam Khomeini's successor as spiritual leader, Ali Khamenei, as well as representations of various heroes of the revolution and martyrs of the war against Iraq.

Since 1979, many streets have been renamed, and now carry the names of personalities held up as models of

revolutionary ideals. A notable example is Khaled Eslambouli Street, named after one of the assassins of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Eslambouli is regarded as a hero in Iran because, as a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, he was responsible for exacting revenge on Sadat for the latter's signing of the Camp David Peace accords with Israel in 1979. The post-revolution Iranian regime is implacably opposed to the existence of the State of Israel. It sees the establishment of the Jewish state on former Islamic-controlled land, and Israel's control over the Islamic holy site of Al-Aksa in Jerusalem, as running directly counter to the previously-discussed notion of Jewish communities being acceptable within *dâr al-Islâm.* only as long as they accept Islamic sovereignty.

Many institutions carry the names of martyrs of post-revolutionary Iran. An example is Shahid Chamran University, named after a famous Iranian who spent several years in Lebanon assisting Lebanese Shiite forces in their struggles in the Lebanese Civil War, and who was eventually killed in the Iran-Iraq War. Another is Shahid Beheshti University, named after a prominent leader of the revolution and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who was assassinated by Mojahedin rebels in June 1981.

Perhaps one of the most prominent impressions which strikes the visitor to Iran is the cult of martyrdom which has been developed and is reinforced in a myriad of ways. In addition to the numerous streets, buildings, and universities which carry the name of a *shahid*, or martyr, one cannot fail to constantly encounter slogans, exhorting young Iranians to taste the glory of dying for Islam. Slogans such as 'Faith, Jihad, Martyrdom: the Only Way to Salvation' adorn both city walls and billboards on country roads. Waiting rooms in government offices will often include a large picture poster of young Shiite revolutionary guards, with their characteristic red headbands [4], marching ceremoniously on parade prior to embarking for some distant conflict on the Iran-Iraq border or in Lebanon. The ultimate goal seems to be admission to the Behesht-e-Zahra, the martyrs cemetery in the southern suburbs of Tehran, where rows of martyrs' tombstones surround a large fountain which spews out bright red water, representing the blood of the martyred heroes.

The common characteristic in the depiction of heroes of the revolution and models of good revolutionary behaviour is their commitment to the struggle against what are perceived as anti- Islamic forces for evil. This struggle is depicted as a fundamental dichotomy between good, represented by Islamic values and teachings, and evil, represented by non-Islamic, secularist, materialist value systems.

Whither Iran?

The temptation is to look at recent developments in Iranian society through the eyes of a completely different, western culture, and to judge it negatively as a result. Indeed, the reverse could also apply, and a number of my Iranian acquaintances who are sympathetic to the revolution were highly critical of what they saw as the advanced state of decay of western society, manifested in the decline in marriage, fewer people wanting children, rampant drug problems, and a preoccupation with self-serving materialism. Just as this latter assessment of the West is raw and simplistic, it would not be appropriate to evaluate post-revolutionary Iran out of context. Rather, it is necessary to see it as a product of the Iran which went before, which was characterised by enormous social inequities and stark distinctions between the westernised elite and the less educated masses. In the revolution, the latter section of society finally found its voice, and the dramatic swing in the pendulum has been a function of political and social developments this century and the conditions existing at the time of the revolution.

So whither Iran? The initial fundamentalist scripture-driven fervour and zeal of the 1980s has been tempered somewhat during 1990 and 1991 by more pragmatic factors, brought about by considerable social and economic dislocation resulting from both the revolution itself and the eight year long Iran-Iraq War. There seems little doubt that the radical changes brought about by the revolution, in terms of social engineering based on Islamic values, will continue to be the predominant determining factor in society for some time to come. But we are also likely to witness a gradual breakdown of the simplistic portrayal of the Western 'bogey-man', which will coincide with a growing awareness on the part of Iran that it cannot quarantine itself from the West. Iran will continue to be the most dynamic force for change in the muslim world for some time to come, but its own increasing pragmatism will serve to add a degree of stability to current social and political trends throughout the muslim world.

Notes

1.The following pages describe impressions of Iran gathered during three visits which I made to Tehran between October 1990 and November 1991.

2.Very devout women will wear the hijab even within the home. Less committed muslim women wear it in public as is obligatory, but discard it as soon as they withdraw to the privacy of their own homes.

3. An example of such limits concerns the practice of Christian worship in Iran, where churches must avoid all references to Jesus as the 'Son of God' in their liturgy. Such a reference is expressly forbidden at several places in the Qur'ân, such as Q18:4-5 'And warn those who say: Allah has taken a son. They have no knowledge of it, nor had their fathers; a grievous word it is that comes out of their mouths, they speak nothing but a lie'.

4. These bandannas are emblazoned with the ubiquitous Islamic exhortations, most commonly in the form of dedications to the Twelfth Imam, whose coming will inaugurate the reign of Truth and Justice, according to Shiite belief.

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Jewish Fundamentalism

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At the end of World War II, an observer in either Israel (then Palestine) or the United States, would have been hard put to see Orthodox or fundamentalist Judaism as anything other than a living fossil, soon to be superseded by more progressive forms of Jewish observance. After all, Eastern Europe, the heartland of Orthodoxy had been almost totally annihilated by the twin assaults of Communism and the Nazi Holocaust. Orthodox Judaism had shown little talent to this point in surviving in the corrosive environment of North America, South Africa, or Australia, which unlike Eastern Europe, offered positive incentives for Jews who would moderate their observance in the interest of fitting in and getting ahead. Moreover, in Israel a new breed of nationalistic Jew, the sabra, was emerging, aggressive, proud of his or her Jewish heritage, but having little use for such restrictions as Sabbath, which appeared to be almost universally accepted as an outdated restriction having little value in modern industrial society.

That fundamentalist Judaism has shown not only incredible staying power, but the ability to grow appears astonishing, but only to one who is not aware of similar trends in most other religions. Fundamentalist Judaism appears to be following many of the same social and religious dynamics as fundamentalist Christianity, particularly in the United States and to a lesser extent, Australia.

This article shall focus on these similar factors and how they contribute to the rise of American fundamentalist Judaism.

Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, has identified fundamentalism as essentially a response to modernity. Rather than being an authentic return to premodern folk piety, fundamentalism is essentially an attempt to update a religious tradition and to adjust and conform to the forms of modernity without accepting the substance of modernism. Fundamentalism identifies the priorities of the religious tradition, the *fundamentals* which must be adhered to. Across religious traditions, these fundamentals appear to fall in roughly three categories, purity, pentecostalism, and prophecy.

Purity comprises the laws and norms of the religious society. In Christianity, these include sexual mores such as prohibitions on divorce and premarital and extramarital sex, as well as strictures against alcohol. In Islam most of these strictures are included in the *Sharia* or Muslim legal system. In Judaism, these strictures (with the exception of the Christian prohibition on divorce(not found in Islam either)) are included in the *Mitzvot* or commandments.

Pentecostalism, besides referring to a specific Christian group of denominations, refers to the acceptance and cultivation of states of religious euphoria or ecstasy. In Christianity, examples abound in the ecstatic singing and preaching associated with pentecostal churches. In Judaism, Chassidism has historically filled this role, as it does today. Ecstatic singing, dancing and often drinking at *fahrbrengenen* (the Lubavitch chassidic term for celebration) are quite common in Chassidic movements, and offer a major religious attraction.

Prophecy is an emphasis on the fulfilment of end times speculation. The need for fundamentalists to fit current events into an expected prophetic framework is an aspect that appears to cross religious lines. In Shiite Islam, speculation on the revelation of the hidden Imam centred on the Ayatollah Khomeinei. In fundamentalist Christianity, as is well known, speculation has centred on the Book of Revelations, with current events being interpreted in terms of them. In Judaism, various sources have been quoted in attempts to relate current events to the end times regarding the coming of Moshiach. Although the current Lubavitch speculation is the most obvious example of this, it is not the only current example, as we shall see.

This preoccupation with end times is both a manifestation of and a support for an attitude of *premillennialism*. Premillennialism can be defined as a belief that the world is in a relatively undesirable period in which evil is relatively triumphant. This period will be followed by a cataclysmic change which is the millennium, which will usher in a new and perfected world.

Premillennialism is relatively common in religions. Hindus believe that we are in the dark Age of Kali. Shiite and Ismaili muslims await the coming of the hidden Imam. Fundamentalist Christians await the Second Coming of Jesus. And fundamentalist Jews await the coming of Moshiach.

A premillennialist stance makes it possible for a fundamentalist group to be skeptical and critical of the world, and of secular authority. If the world is not perfectible without a major upheaval, than progress is illusory. This fits with an already existing dissatisfaction with the world among fundamentalists.

Postmillennialism on the other hand, is rare among fundamentalist movements. Postmillennialism postulates that the world is past the millennium and that we are living in the new age, or to paraphrase Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, 'the best of all possible worlds'. Postmillennialism thus,