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The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 2011 637: 53

DOI: 10.1177/0002716211404362

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Iran's French Revolution: Religion, Philosophy, and Crowds

By
ROXANNE VARZI

It is difficult for many to grasp how and why Islam would remain a powerful form of protest against Islamic governments. Going back to the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to explore the work and lives of two important pre-Iranian Revolution thinkers, I will show how Shi'ite Islam came into play with postcolonial and postmodern theories to bring about the Islamic Revolution—which explains why 30 years later, Islam continues to provide a framework for protest among those disillusioned by the Islamic Republic.

Keywords: Islam; philosophy; revolution; Iran; Western philosophy; postcolonialism; French theory

In July 2009, for the first time since the Iranian Revolution, masses of Iranians took to the streets to protest what they saw as the fraudulent reelection of a president they no longer wanted. While the protests themselves came as a surprise to many outside the country, what was even more of a surprise for those not familiar with the philosophical history of the revolution was the use of Islam to stand up to an Islamic regime.

My first response as an anthropologist¹ was: why should it be so surprising that Islam would once again be used as a shield against the state? Looking deeper, however, we see that this is not just a battle of surfaces, a polemical ploy, or merely a necessary shield. The reason that the rhetoric and discourse from the revolution is used again is not simply to throw it back in the face of the oppressors, but because it has deep roots in postcolonial and mystical philosophy that, even after a revolution gone awry; a 10-year bloody war; and 30 years of economic, social,

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DOI: 10.1177/0002716211404362

and physical hardships, has not yet been made obsolete. Philosophy moves in all directions, and Iran has never been a hermetically sealed Islamic nation, especially when it comes to its revolutionary discourse. Postcolonial theory, and its antihegemonic, anti-imperialist, and antiracist discourse, is incredibly relevant today and perhaps even more so in the Middle East. And mysticism, because of its slippery relationship to authority and its contemporary appropriation by Western self-help and New Age authors who consistently revalue and represent its use and authority in an alternative frame, will always remain a balm in times of hardship.²

To truly understand why Islam remains a powerful call to action, and how it is that mysticism and Western philosophy came together to form a powerful revolutionary discourse for Iran, it is important to go back to the early 1960s, when postcolonial theory and Western philosophy, mysticism, Marxism, capitalism, and a new kind of cosmopolitanism were coming together to define a post-oil-rich Iran. What I am interested in here is how religion came into play with postcolonial and postmodern theories in the early 1960s and 1970s and mixed with mysticism to bring about the Islamic Revolution and to explain why and how, 30 years later, Islam continues to provide a framework for protest among those disillusioned by the Islamic Republic.

In this article, I will concentrate on two important prerevolutionary thinkers: Henry Corbin, a French philosopher, translator (German and Persian), and professor of Islam; and Jalal Al Ahmad, an Iranian sociologist, Marxist thinker, translator (of French), and writer, both of whom directly or indirectly radicalized the generation of Iranians who participated in the revolution.

Henry Corbin

We will begin our story in Paris, for many reasons. To begin with, French was the court language of the Qajar monarchy, and Paris, through the Pahlavi regime, continued to function as Iran's cultural capital for the elite, students, artists, Marxists, and, even later, the clergy. While Paris first provided the Iranian elite with the French Enlightenment (beginning only in the late nineteenth century), it most usefully gave would-be Iranian revolutionaries a new radical framework for their own religious tradition through postmodern and postcolonial theories.

This can be traced back to World War II Paris, where young professors were either sent off to the front lines or purged from the university, leaving a xenophobic and nationalist institution (that rarely allowed a nonnative speaker of French to lecture in the academy) with a shortage of lecturers in philosophy. This shortage of French professors allowed Russian immigrant Alexander Kojève to lecture at the Sorbonne on the teachings of Hegel (some Iranians have called Hegel the Rumi of the West). In his lectures sat some of the foremost creative thinkers and philosophers who would come out of postwar Paris: Georges Bataille; Jean-Paul Sartre; Jacques Lacan; and Henry Corbin, who, shortly after the war, traveled to Iran and found his spiritual home. Not only was Tehran Corbin's spiritual home,

it was also where he lived half his life, teaching Islamic philosophy at Tehran University. He was one of the first and only Western philosophers to teach Islamic philosophy in Iran, and this had a major effect on an Iranian generation's interpretation of key mystical texts. His deep engagement and debates with some of Iran's foremost religious thinkers and clerics when many young revolutionaries and religious thinkers were coming of age suggests that he gave Iranians a new reading of their own Islamic tradition, updated and made socially relevant. To this end, genealogy is incredibly important. What is important is that Corbin read Hegel through Kojève (1980), who had a very particular interpretation of death. The absolute master became significant later when martyrdom became a key subject of Iranian revolutionary Islam, and this concept becomes especially apropos when Khomeini's Islamic Republic begins to look a lot like Hegel's Christian state. Here, a prototypical Christian thinker splinters Islam's political framework (Varzi 2006). It is through Corbin that we can most likely trace the influence of Hegel, Heidegger, and Kojève in Iranian revolutionary notions of martyrdom and religious state-formation (Varzi 2006). According to Tom Cheetham, another "defining encounter in Corbin's spiritual odyssey was his reading of Martin Heidegger's foundational work of phenomenology, *Being and Time*. It gives us some sense of the unique perspective of this truly Catholic philosopher to note that his copy of the notoriously difficult and very German work was marked throughout by glosses in Arabic" (Cheetham 2003, 5). Contemporary Islam repays Heidegger the favor by glossing over its revolutionary call to arms with his theories, as I experienced not in only reading various cultural architects of the revolution, but firsthand while doing fieldwork among Iranian government cultural producers who asked me to engage in a discussion about Heidegger and Islam. As a consolation prize for a long evening of debate, I was given a contemporary Persian translation of *Being and Time*.

Philosophy moved both ways; Corbin was also a major translator of Persian—especially Shii theosophy—and published more than two hundred critical editions, translations, books, and articles. In 1954, he succeeded Louis Massignon as the chair of Islam and the Religions of Arabia at the Sorbonne, where he taught half of each year. Around the time that Corbin was translating Ibn Arabi's philosophy about the imaginal realm and the world of archetypes, he attended the annual Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, where he was to become a major figure along with Carl Jung, who was just then "inventing" his notion of the collective unconscious and world of archetypes. It is also no small coincidence that Corbin was teaching between Tehran and Paris in May 1968—a defining moment for young revolutionary intellectuals and students around the world. Corbin died, 10 years later, in France in June 1978, on the eve of the Islamic Revolution.

Jalal Al Ahmad

In April 1964, Iranian writer, sociologist, Marxist, and postcolonial thinker Jalal Al Ahmad undertook a journey to fulfill his duty as a Muslim, going on the

Hajj to Mecca. The account of his Hajj, *Lost in the Crowd* (1965/1985), a *Safarnameh*, what might today be called a travel blog, both illustrated and influenced the political currents of that time. This was a time when the Iranian Left began to look to an Iranian Islamic past as a site of its political and social national identity, just as that past returned like a dream or a phantasm to haunt the workings of a modern political society in the throes of social unrest. Al Ahmad was one of the main thinkers questioning the possibility and impossibility of Islam as a social force for change. His book, *Occidentosis* (*Westoxification*; 1962/1984), published two years before he took his Hajj, offered a seething critique of the West's cultural hegemony in the Middle East. Like many Iranian liberals of his time, Al Ahmad was opposed to the 1953 American CIA coup, which undermined Mohammed Mossadegh's nationalization of oil. For Al Ahmad and his peers, the oil cartel and the United States, which backed it, were at the core of a rotting Iranian/Shiite society.

I speak of being afflicted with "Westitis" the way I would speak of being afflicted with cholera. If this is not palpable let us say it is akin to being stricken by heat or cold. But it is not that either. It is something more on the order of being attacked by tongue worm. Have you ever seen how wheat rots? From within. In any case we are dealing with an illness, a disease imported from abroad, and developed in an environment receptive to it. (Al Ahmad 1962/1984)³

Westoxification is the seminal political text from this period in Iranian history, a primer to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which is a seething critique of Western cultural hegemony that engages Franz Fanon's treatise on colonialism of the mind.⁴ *Lost in the Crowd* is not only a fine-tuning of *Westoxification* but takes that important step from a critique of Western imperialism to a rendezvous with religion. Channeling familiar ghosts of Iran's Islamic past, he blamed the corruption and the large social and economic discrepancies in rich and poor in his oil-wealthy nation on a non-Muslim presence—the West. Here Islam is a symbol of what Iran lost by being informally colonized by the West. But he is not sure if recapturing a lost national religion will necessarily emancipate Iran from Western cultural hegemony. On his Hajj he puts on his ethnographer's hat and interrogates his own, perhaps quick and naive, turn in *Westoxification* to suggest religion as a cure-all for Western imperialism. He hopes to discover whether Islam might provide more than a symbolic function both politically and personally—whether it could ever be a viable political possibility even for an atheist.

Al Ahmad's account of his Hajj is more than a mere descriptive or prescriptive tale of neon American shops and fiery oil wells; it is a search, through face-to-face meetings with people, lonely moments in a crowd, an awareness, and a rendezvous with oneself, to find spiritually at the core of the individual what might save the collective. What he finds in Saudi Arabia is the "rotted core of the Islamic world, and the real center of American infiltration."⁵ He says that Arabia is "just a keeper of pipes. Nothing else" (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 91). It is a place where prophets have been exchanged for profits. "The contagion of irreligion is everywhere," he declares, telling us in the same breath that he barely remembers how to pray

(something he has not done in 20 years), and “I feel like a hypocrite. It just isn’t right. If it isn’t hypocrisy, neither is it faith. You just do it to blend in with the crowd” (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 6).⁶ Prayer is participant observation, a means to an end—a mechanized act inherent in the ritual of cultural identity.

The ambivalence and liminal sense of his political and religious identity is strongly felt in his writing. As a participant observer, Al Ahmad is participating in an age-old Muslim tradition of *Takiya* (imitation). Muslims practiced *Takiya* when they felt that their Muslim identity put them at risk. In these situations, they were allowed to mimic an area’s dominant religion and its culture to fit in and minimize risk to their lives—an odd kind of passing. Throughout history, Shiites practiced *Takiya* on the Meccan Hajj, pretending to be Sunnis. Al Ahmad, a Muslim-born atheist, pretended to be a practicing Shiite Muslim to explore his own Muslim identity from the point of view of his Marxist political project.

Ritual itself somehow protects him from hypocrisy because at the end of the day it is about crowds of people following rules blindly, about being lost not in a cultural community but in a crowd that is ultimately an alienating force. The physical proximity of fellow pilgrims takes the focus off of personal faith and places it onto religious dictate as the crowd is policed for moral blunders and kept under control by judging eyes, where “an important concern on such a journey is the enjoinder and prohibition of others, of good and evil” (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 61). This could not be a more apropos foreshadowing of the Islamic Republic, in which even seemingly profane public space is identified as sacred, or at the very least a place where citizens are expected to always be dressed as if they were entering a mosque. In such an environment, “you are thus integrated, not released. Most importantly there are no encounters. You’re shoulder to shoulder with the others, not face to face. You see selflessness only in the rapid movement of the bodies of people, or in what they are saying. . . . There’s no aim to what is being done” (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 62).

And with all the policing, there is the danger, the potential in a crowd, of attracting and being “saved” by a dogmatic leader. The moments of foreshadowing of the Islamic Republic are again both deafening and unutterable. If there were an antagonist in this story of Mecca, it would be the incarnation of dogmatism—a character referred to as the “panegyrist.” The panegyrist sits on the roof preaching to the submissive subcrowd he forms around himself. “Worse than him is the hired mourner in our group, who’s evidently deranged. He is in the habit of asking: ‘Why don’t you beat yourself about the head and shoulders?’ That’s like saying ‘why don’t you jump off the roof?’” (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 35). (Twenty years after Al Ahmad’s Hajj, hundreds of thousands of young boys would martyr themselves for the Islamic Republic, ostensibly to avenge a centuries-old battle between Sunnis and Shiites.) Al Ahmad feels so much disdain for the panegyrist that he chooses to pray behind the Sunnis.

The ritual of the Hajj can never just be an individual spiritual journey. The Hajj is always already about society, the Islamic crowd, and movement around and toward a specific place, even if Al Ahmad believed that place, the *miqat*, could be displaced within each Muslim, or within each Muslim nation.⁷ His writing

is both a Sufi move to find God everywhere and a nationalist call to identity. His own spiritual awakening came in fleeting moments, such as the remorse he had for killing a beetle or returning a lost watch, which he had anticipated keeping. The sparks of a spiritual awakening are both existential and Islamic—Islamic in the sense that he begins to feel part of a larger Muslim community that gives him his national and political identity, but existential in the sense that he is alone within that community. He says, “I saw that I was only a piece of straw that had come to the *miqat*, not a person coming to a ‘rendezvous.’ I saw that . . . the *miqat* exists always and everywhere, and with the self, alone. A rendezvous is a place where you meet someone, but the *miqat* of time is just such a meeting with the self.” What Al Ahmad finds in his journey is not merely decay; he finds himself, a modern, alienated intellectual who in the end stands alone in the crowd.⁸

Eventually, the crowd, ritual, and prayer are powerful enough to transform our Marxist guide, who Pascal would say succumbed to the power of repetition: “I didn’t feel like a hypocrite when I prayed, nor was I doing my ablutions out of imitation. Yesterday and the day before I still couldn’t believe this was me performing a religious rite just like everyone else. I remember all the prayers and short and long verses I memorized from the Quran as a child.” The seed was present of course all the while, as Al Ahmad might argue it would be for any Iranian who, like him, was raised in a religious household (his father was a trained cleric). Of course, all of that religious training faded when he attended, of his own volition, Dar al Fanoon, Tehran’s premier modern, secular institute of learning.

In the end he says, “The way I see it, I’ve come on this trip mostly out of curiosity, to look without expectations.” He saw his experiences on the Hajj as “simple and uneventful,” and yet still the impetus for a possible awakening—or at the very least, skepticism. He says,

In this way I am smashing the steps of the world of certainty one by one with the pressure of experience, beneath my feet. And what is the result of a lifetime? That you come to doubt the truth, solidity, and reality of the primary axioms that bring certainty, give cause for reflection, or incite action, give them up one by one and change each of them to a question mark. (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 123)

His fellow intellectuals were surprised and a little put off by his choice to go on the Hajj: “*The Hajj*?” They say, *don’t you have anywhere else to go?*” Al Ahmad found it necessary to explore the Hajj process for himself. He says, “Whether it be a confession, a protest, heresy or whatever I mainly came on this trip looking for my brother and all those other brothers rather than to search for God. And God is everywhere for those who believe in him” (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 124).

Al Ahmad’s writing is a powerful foreshadowing of the eventual rendezvous Iran will have with political Islam and with revolution. His colloquial prose and secular distance from Islamic practice endeared the book to the literati, the middle class, Marxists, students, and anyone who felt the double alienation of being intellectually Western and Muslim.⁹ His book was not only an invaluable document of a very important moment in Iranian and modern Islamic society, when the notions of an existential modern individual and a spiritually centered world came

together to revolutionize the political and spiritual identity of a time and place. More importantly, and unbeknownst to him, it would provide Khomeini with an unwavering revolutionary discourse, steeped in strong existential, postcolonial, and Marxist philosophy.¹⁰

Neither Al Ahmad nor Corbin lived to see the Islamic Revolution or to experience, at the height of the Shah's modernization project, the intensity of a crowd that came together to oust an all-powerful, American-backed ruler under the banner of Islam.

The Revolution

At the same time that Al Ahmad was making his Hajj and Corbin was debating the practice of Islamic mysticism and the relevance of eighth-century texts in contemporary Iran, a renegade Iranian religious leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, campaigned from the seminaries to Mecca and eventually from exile in Iraq and Paris to illuminate the evils of the Shah's regime. Khomeini's greatest achievement was not only his ability to elicit a feeling of equality among members of a nation consisting of seventeen different ethnic groups and six different religions and a highly stratified class system, but it was his ability especially to use/abuse unorthodox Sufi mysticism, popularized for the French literati and Iranian intellectuals and radicals by Corbin, the work of Foucault, and that of Al Ahmad to articulate eloquently what so many were afraid to voice (Varzi 2006).

It is with Khomeini that we return to Paris in the late 1970s, to which the Shah had exiled him. There, he was surrounded by politically ignited Iranian students, who were studying political science, philosophy, and engineering and who had heard his sermons on cassette tape. Ayatollah Khomeini attracted not only Iranian students to his orbit but also French theorists and philosophers, of whom the most famous was Michel Foucault. Foucault, the French theorist who spelled out for us the ways in which power circulates discursively, sometimes quite powerfully, sought a meeting with the Ayatollah Khomeini. Foucault completely misunderstood, misinterpreted, misheard, or was not privy to Khomeini's intentions to deploy an Islamic Republic. Khomeini, on the other hand, seems to have understood quite clearly Foucault's theory about the power of discourse. Khomeini seemed to enjoy French theory—it seeped into all of his speeches. His favorite was Franz Fanon, who, by critiquing France's racist policies in its colonies and its war in Algeria, provided an extremely powerful and important concept for Iranian intellectuals who recognized Western cultural hegemony in their own country as an equally oppressive force. Fanon's most famous phrase, "the disinherited," became Khomeini's favorite: *mostazefin* (meaning the disinherited, downtrodden).

Every class, ethnic group, and religion came together under Khomeini to fight for social justice (and not necessarily for an Islamic state). Even Foucault took a megaphone to the streets of Tehran. He, like everyone else, was mesmerized by the new leader who quickly led a disparate group of Marxists, feminists, socialists, radical Islamists, secular students, and everyday citizens into one cry: "*Allah-o Akbar*," "God is great."

Revolutionary terror, according to Hegel, is what causes citizens to manifest their freedom by being guillotined (Varzi 2006). Once Khomeini took power, Al Ahmad's reservations about Islam as a political vehicle became a reality as a complete Islamic cultural revolution took place. This included the de-secularization of the education system by purging any and all instances of Westoxification; the wiping out of a "Persian" monarchical past by burning and banning any and all books related to monarchy, including those by William Shakespeare; and the complete Islamization of the public sphere with rules for appropriate Islamic behavior, such as a dress code that physically identified Islamic citizens. Conduct between the sexes was enforced according to strict religious criteria—men and women were kept apart to protect them from the temptation of carnal passion—which only heightened the desire for union. The only acceptable union was that with God.

The Green Movement

In 2005 Iran elected its first noncleric president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who immediately reclaimed the revolutionary mantle by ostensibly returning the country to its original religious intentions with a strong clampdown on social life.¹¹ In July 2009, when the economy was at its absolute worst; relations with the West were completely destroyed; and any freedom in the streets, in the press, and in the university was taken away, Ahmadinejad was reelected in what many believed could only be a fraudulent election. His reelection coincided with the 10-year anniversary of a violent crackdown on student demonstrators at Tehran University.¹² The election results and the anniversary of the student demonstrations caused a massive outpouring of diverse antigovernment demonstrators not seen since the Islamic Revolution—who were ironically critiquing the state for not upholding the true principles of Islam and claiming that a meld of politics and Islam is an aberration of true religious practice. The battle was for the legacy of the revolution and *not* (as many in the West interpreted) a call to return to prerevolution Iran. Nor, however, was it about creating a second Islamic state. This is evident in all of the performative ways that the movement played out.

Like Khomeini, whose revolution used cutting-edge audio-visual technology (cassette tapes, fliers, and photographs), this movement was broadcast and streamed through Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Instead of black, the color of mourning, the movement chose the vibrant undeniable green of Islam; and like in 1979, people took to the roofs and the streets, shouting "God is Great, Allah-o Akbar." They made other Islamic revolutionary discursive moves, such as using slogans similar to those used in 1979, but with a twist. During the Islamic Revolution, crowds chanted "Down with the Shah"; during the Green Movement, the chant became, "Down with the dictator." This is no simple double entendre but a very clear pronouncement that the Iranian demonstrators were not advocating a return to monarchical Iran, nor were they accepting the current presidency.¹³

This was an important move, given the support that came from the diaspora in the United States, some of whom took the opportunity to demonstrate “alongside” Iranians in Iran, while subtly promoting their own desires to return to a monarchical past. What the Iranian diaspora and the Western press did not understand is that Iranians in Iran had no intention of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. If anything, they were looking for a way to salvage their religion rather than allow it to sink with a failing state. Despite the disillusionment with an Islamic government, most Iranians, especially the youth who were born after the revolution, still find comfort and a need for a sense of some kind of spirituality in the face of a failing economy, a poor education system, and rampant depression. They have also tried very hard to separate their religious beliefs from the post-Khomeini government’s interpretations of Islam (Varzi 2006). There are other reasons for this discursive and performative, philosophical return to 1979 (rather than to a pre-Islamic Revolution Iran): Khomeini’s brilliant incorporation of postcolonial theories (theories of cultural hegemony, and of American imperialism, have yet to become irrelevant in the world today), alongside mysticism and a strong sense of national belonging. The postcolonial theory that gave political Islam its legs is still strong, as is the move toward mysticism that we see in New Age and self-help, bolstered by a global revolutionary discourse from the anti-World Trade Organization demonstrations to anti-American sentiment around the world after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. This has resulted not in a rejection of Islam but a reclaiming of it.

The strongest and most stunning evidence of this performative moment is in the proliferation of visual images of a young woman who died during the demonstrations. I have written extensively about the various visual moves that happened during and after the Iran-Iraq war (the longest, deadliest conventional war of the past century, which solidified the power of the revolutionary regime) in Iran to produce a martyr culture that created and maintained a strong Islamic public sphere and nation-state (Varzi 2006). This religious paradigm came in to play in the Green Movement when a young woman, Neda, died at the hands of the state during a protest. Her death was caught on camera. In 2009, as in the war years, as I have written about before, without the footage, she would not have become a symbol, a martyr. In short, there would have been no political function to her death. Only after the video of her death was disseminated did she become a symbol of a strong national identity that is both democratic and Islamic, but one where religion and the state are not mixed, where there are open relations with the West, there is freedom of the press, and there is a better education system. The Green Movement’s use of Islam made it hard for the government to condemn the movement rhetorically or even legally. Instead, it used violent and massive force in the face of peaceful protests—an unexpected response that made further protests more difficult, but one that also severely delegitimized the religious state that began with a postcolonial, feminist, antiracist, spiritual stance, all of which it lost in one televised moment when Neda Soltani became a martyr of a new, greener call for change.

Notes

1. I have for the past 20 years followed Iran's postrevolution society, especially the youths who were born in 1979 and who came of age during and never left the Islamic Republic. These youths are incredibly adept at protesting small everyday injustices with their knowledge of Islam and in using it as a protective shield, as a means to an end. This occurs on a daily basis between an individual and an Islamic police officer or vigilante (e.g., a woman is told to fix her veil, and she tells the officer that he is wrong to look at her).

2. Famous New Age writer Paolo Coelho made an annual trip to Iran, where he has in the past lectured on the Sufi, Persian poet Rumi.

3. This is the famous first paragraph of *Westoxification* (1962/1984).

4. Al Ahmad studied in Paris and was fluent in French. In Tehran, upon meeting Ali Shariati, who had been a student of Fanon's in Paris, he began with him a French translation project of Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. See Rahnama (2000, 190–92).

5. The tie to Aramco is explicitly American. At this time the United States was visibly marking public space in Tehran through bowling alleys, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Coca-Cola, and other forms of cultural hegemony. Since the 1953 CIA coup that reinstated the Shah, the United States has symbolically represented the evil Western, colonial presence in the Muslim world, a presence that was both pointed to and ejected through the seizure of the American Embassy at the beginning of the revolution. In an interesting twist, Al Ahmad's wife, novelist Simin Daneshvar, was a Fulbright Scholar at Stanford University, under Wallace Stegner, who was commissioned at one time to write a history of Aramco. She and Jalal spent a year in California with Stegner, who was unable to complete his Aramco history. Robert Vitalis (2006) writes an important and interesting history of Aramco in his book *America's Kingdom*.

6. Contemporary Islamic thinkers such as Tariq Ramadan believe that Islam is a spiritual and religious identity and should not be used as a site of resistance.

7. In the English translation of *Lost in the Crowd*, the *miqat* is defined as a term that designates the area containing the Muslim shrines in Mecca, or the station surrounding the shrine area where the purification rites are performed to enter into the required state of *ihram* before entering the mosque (Al Ahmad 1965/1985, 130).

8. His return to self is not unlike that of his contemporary Ali Shariati, an Islamic Marxist, who studied in Paris and whose Hajj journal is as politically interesting and influential. Ali Shariati's idea of a "return to self" espoused the importance that an individual gain self-knowledge and especially knowledge of one's national identity (Islamic identity in particular) before embarking on a journey toward self-annihilation and ultimately toward martyrdom. Shariati's work was very much influenced by and in conversation with his teacher, Franz Fanon, who, as a psychologist, focused on cultural identity and self-knowledge—in short, the importance of keeping one's cultural and national identity and self-awareness in the face of racist colonial policies that aimed at assimilating "natives." Shariati is best known for founding an Islamic center in Tehran (Hosseinieh Ershad) in the late 1960s and for his critique of Marxism, coupled with a radical reworking of traditional Islam that encourages young intellectuals to think about concepts like martyrdom within the context of modernism. Shariati had the privilege of being a student of and in correspondence with Fanon, and took it upon himself to introduce Fanon's work to Iran. See Shariati (1980). Shariati also studied under Louis Massignon, Corbin's mentor and predecessor. For more on Shariati, see Rahnama (2000).

9. He was a respected translator of French and translated works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Andre Gide, Eugène Ionesco, and Albert Camus.

10. In the preface to *Westoxification* (1962/1984), Hamid Algar quotes Khomeini as saying, "I once saw Jalal Al Ahmad for a quarter of an hour. It was in the early part of our movement. I saw someone sitting opposite me, the book *Westoxification* was lying near me. He asked, 'How did you come by this nonsense?' And I realized that it was Al Ahmad. Unfortunately I never saw him again. May he enjoy the mercy of God."

11. Before him, in 1997—in an unprecedented moment since the Islamic Revolution of 1979—a landslide victory was won by a reformist presidential candidate, cleric Mohamed Khatami. Khatami's election was the first sign that people in Iran were voicing a political opinion and their opinion was being heard. The landslide victory is attributable to the 60 percent of the voting population that was under the age of 25 (in 2007 the voting age minimum changed from 15 to 18). After 1997, Khatami enjoyed great popularity among his public and strived to make major changes in public and political policy that led to more freedoms in the press, in everyday life outside the house, and in the universities. Khatami, however, was met with resistance, especially from the supreme leader of the country, Ayatollah Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

12. In July 1999, just after receiving news that I had been awarded a Fulbright Hayes Research fellowship to do ethnographic research on youth in Tehran, Iranian youth, in a quiet and peaceful move in front of the student dormitories in Amir Abad, near Tehran University, protested the closing down of a reformist newspaper, *Saalam* (which had been openly critical of various government decrees and opinions, and especially a new press law passed by the Majles). For some this protest was their first, for others, the first since the 1979 revolution (after which a majority of them had been born). They were bolstered by the taste of freedom they were getting from Khatami's presidency, the openness and attention from the West, and a stronger sense of empowerment. That night, July 8, 1999, (18th of Tir) plain-clothed vigilantes working on the government's behalf raided a student dormitory, attacked students, and set fire to rooms. Several students were thrown off of balconies while uniformed police stood by unresponsively. Eventually the riot police were brought in. The incident, which came to be known as *Kuye Daneshgah* (named after the dormitories in Amir Abad), led to six days of demonstrations and rioting throughout the country. On July 11, four students died at Tabriz University. Many were killed, injured, and disappeared; thousands were detained and imprisoned. Several detained students died of a hunger strike in jail. Before *Kuye Daneshgah*, and to this day, most student protests were aimed at social grievances: a lack of educational resources, teachers (such as the sit-in by female students at the medical university in Ghom in 2000), affordable and nicer student housing, better cafeteria food, preparation for marriage classes (sexual education), and updated textbooks (some predated the revolution).

13. In 1979 another popular slogan was "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic," which became with the Green Movement, "Independence, Freedom, a People's Republic."

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