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The Relationship of Religion and Politics in Islam

Unlike Christianity and other “Western” religions, Islam allows little to no distinction between the role of church and state. Ever since Muhammad shared his divine revelations with his early followers, Muslims, especially those of the ulama, or religious class, have believed that a government not ruled by religious law (Shari’ah) can only lead to ungodliness.

Although historically the struggle to establish a legitimate tawhidi (divine law) government permeates through several centuries and most of the entire land of Islam, Roy Mottahedeh’s The Mantle of the Prophet discusses the tawhidi/ taghuti (Satanic) government conflict as it relates to the nation of Iran, culminating in the 1978-79 revolution.

Mottahedeh does a masterful job of intertwining the history of Iranian Shi’ism with the story of Ali Hashemi, and his quest to become one of the religious class. Mottahedeh is able to connect each step of Hashemi’s journey with the stories of outstanding historical figures and/or events in not only Shi’ia or Iranian history, but in overall Islamic history as well. For the reader this intertwining is especially helpful because not only does Mottahedeh provide essential background knowledge, but he is able to cast Hashemi, a descendant of Muhammad, as a part of the living tradition of both Islam and Iran.

One the most important points Mottahedeh emphasizes throughout the book is the relationship between two of the most important elements in Iranian communities, the

mosque and the bazaar, and their influence on each other and their political environment. According to Mottahedeh, “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” (36). Evidence of the close relationship between the bazaar and the mosque is seen in the closing of the market in 1905, in protest of the punishment of two sugar merchants; 1960, in protest of “rigged” elections; and in 1963, in response to the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Khomeini would continue to be a lightning rod of controversy throughout the 1960s and 70s. Despite the Shah’s attempt at removing the influence of the ulama in Iranian government, it was Khomeini who would seize the attention of the masses with his open criticism of the Shah and his “Westernization” policies. Not only was Khomeini able to raise the ire of the public against the Shah, he also motivated his fellow mullahs. After one particular lesson, for example, according to Mottahedeh, “it was Khomeini’s open attack on the shah that made Ali and hundreds of others who had gathered for Khomeini’s class that day feel that at last the mullahs had their political leader” (189).

Mottahedeh cites several examples of other instances throughout Iranian history in which religious leaders were able to sway the decisions of the government. In one example, Mottahedeh discusses the story of Jamal ad-Din, “a tireless and fearless adopter of roles and philosophies,” who was able to sway the decision of the then-Shah away from conceding the rights to sell tobacco to a British firm. Like Khomeini after him, Jamal ad-Din was exiled to Iraq and from there was able to rally the Iranian public and the mullahs in his support. Eventually the Shah gave in to Jamal ad-Din’s ideas after he

called for a boycott of tobacco until the concession was cancelled. According to Mottahedeh, “Almost all the major movements of intellectual and political reform in the Islamic Middle East count Jamal ad-Din as their ancestor” (184).

Another prominent example of the use of the Iranian Shi’ite public for religious ends occurred during an apparent era of religious disinterest. During the reign of the Shah in 1955, Ayatollah Borujerdi, a “model” of piety, kindled the fire of public dissent and preached to his followers the evils of the Baha’i sect. Because Borujerdi “was reported to favor the destruction of the Baha’i religion,” his followers were guilty of crimes such as attacking, raping, and even murdering Baha’is. After embarrassing the Shah and displaying his power over the people, Borujerdi resumed his silence (240).

Religious protest did not always involve the masses, however. Although initially intent on a life outside of politics, even Ali Hashemi himself was called to action by the news of a massacre of Algerian Muslims at the hands of French soldiers. According to Mottahedeh, “No time in this education was more filled with emotion than the evening Ali heard that hundreds of Muslim freedom fighters had been burned alive in a cave in the Algerian desert” (113). Hashemi would continue his political protest by studying with Khomeini and eventually getting arrested for writing an article for a religious magazine that discussed Islam and notions of liberation. According to Mottahedeh, “the heart of the article was an appreciation of those ideas of Che Guevara that ‘agreed’ with Islam” (255). Hashemi would spend three weeks in jail for his article.

Of course, Hashemi’s ideas would become partly prophetic as Khomeini, like ad-Din before him, excited the masses from his exiled location in Iraq at such a level they protested for most of 1978. Upon his learning that the Shah had left Iran on January 16,

1979, Khomeini returned to Iran, seized power, and established a “Council of Guardians,” a “body of jurists appointed in accordance with the constitution to judge in terms of Islamic law the legality of acts of parliament” (382). Although far from perfect, the government of Ayatollah Khomeini was, in the eyes of many Shi’ites, an acceptable ruling body as they await the return of the Twelfth Imam.