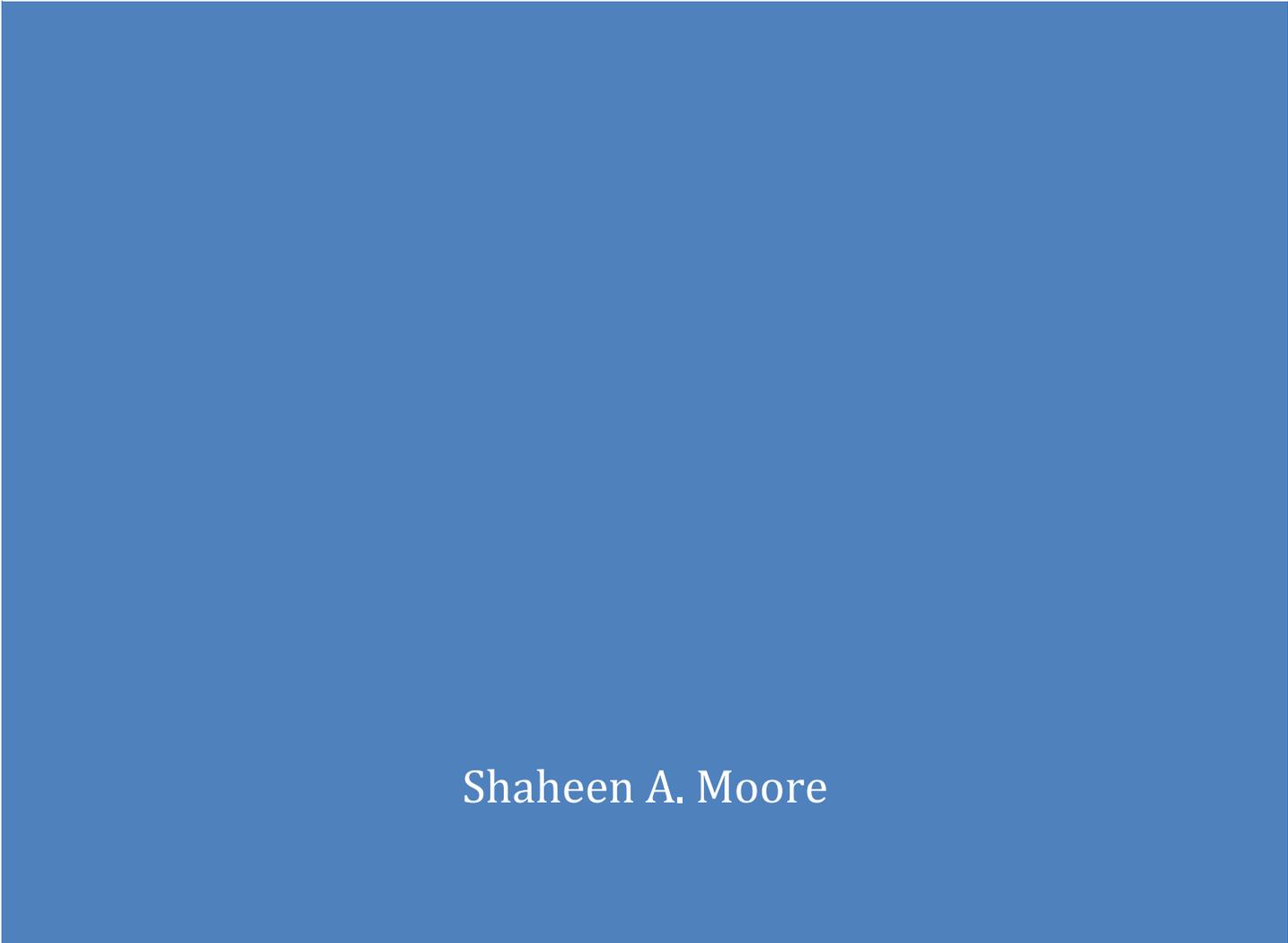




KHOMEINI'S POLITICS: RETURNING TO  
FUNDAMENTALISM BY CHANGING IT



Shaheen A. Moore

There is a paradox that restoring a tradition in practice leads to its transformation. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was a movement to return to religious traditionalism but in doing so it transformed Shia Islam. The revolutionary movement consisted of a diverse set of groups including the middle class, the *ulama* (clergy), women, students, and the lower class masses (Keddie 214-239). Each group became dissatisfied with the pro-Western, modernizing regime of Mohammad Reza Shah for political, economic, and social reasons. The varying reasons for protest found a common figurehead in the form of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini was an outspoken religious leader against the Shah who did not follow the norms of Shiite political quietism in Iran. He was seen as the de facto leader of Shia Islam during the revolution and the one who would lead the abdication of the Shah and restore Shia Islam's preeminence in Iran.

Although Grand Ayatollah Khomeini established an Islamic Government that was seen as a return to religious traditionalism, the basis of his government was founded on a radical and revolutionary interpretation of Shiism that can be found in his doctrine *Velayat-e faqih* (Islamic Government), his blueprint for an Islamic republic. Khomeini used Shia Islam in Iran as a political tool to gain power and establish his own government based on this doctrine. Khomeini radicalized the old Shia system by elevating the traditional role of a jurist to the special status of one who can lead Islam. He outright denied the basic fundamental ideology in Shia Islam of succession based on hereditary right in favor of his political beliefs. He then broke off with Shia tradition and instead used Sunni arguments to support his new claims in an Islamic Government. The current Islamic Republic of Iran, since its inception in 1979, is founded on Khomeini's restructuring of Shia Islam to achieve political power.

## **Background of Islam**

In order to understand Khomeini's religious justification for this type of government it is important to understand what Islam is. Islam is a monotheistic religion founded in the Arabian Peninsula by the Prophet Mohammed in 610 CE when he was given a revelation by the angel Gabriel. The three Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam share the same God and many of the same prophets including Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Enoch (The Qur'an, *Ash Shura* 42.13; *Al Ankabut* 29.46). The canonical text of Islam is the Qur'an, the direct word of *Allah* (Islamic name for God) communicated to Mohammed and written down by his followers. Islam also claims the Torah and the Gospel as part of its belief system (The Qur'an, *Ali'Imran* 3.84). The three Abrahamic faiths are similar in that they share parables, texts, the belief in salvation through good deeds and belief in the one true God.

Even though the three faiths share the figure of Abraham and other beliefs, Islam is distinct from the others on two key points. First, like Judaism, Islam denies that Jesus is the son of God. Islam believes that Jesus is a prophet who ascended to heaven, but he is not the last prophet (The Qur'an, *Al Baqara* 2.253; *Al Ahzab* 33.40). Instead, Islam holds the unique belief that Mohammad was chosen by Allah as the last prophet. Second, the Qur'an's authority in Islam stems from its claim to be the direct word of Allah. Judaism's authority comes from the Torah while Christianity uses the same book as well as the New Testament. The Qur'an is supposed to be the last revelations from Allah and is to be used for guidance in all aspects of life. However, its claim to be the clear message from Allah has failed to address situations of modern life, including politics.

Islam's engagement with politics began with the Prophet Mohammad who led his followers out of Mecca and came to rule Medina. His death in 632 CE began a crisis in Islam over who would lead the Muslim people (J. and T. Ismael 601). After his death, the Muslim

community began to question who his successor would be and in what form the leadership of Islam would take. At this time, and continuing today, Muslims have been in conflict over these choices as the Qur'an does not provide guidance on either issue (J. and T. Ismael 602). The question of succession caused a schism in Islam that created the Sunni and Shia branches. The schism has had implications since its inception that have politically divided the Middle East since the Prophet's death.

This division among Muslims stems from two important features that distinguish Shia Islam from Sunni Islam. The Shia branch believes that only God can select religious leaders. Therefore, the Muslim people should be led by the male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad as he was chosen by God. These descendants are known as imams and, according to Shia doctrine, they are chosen by God to guide people on the straight path (J. and T. Ismael 606). The Sunni branch believes that the leader of Islam should be elected by the Islamic community. The other distinguishing difference is the relationship between political and religious authority. Shia Islam believes political and religious authority must be separated and that the religious institution is autonomous from the state (Arjomand 147). Sunni tradition believes the leader of the Islamic community is both the religious and political authority. The Sunni tradition won out soon after the Prophet's death with Shia Islam becoming a minority. Today, ninety percent of all Muslims are Sunni and about ten percent are Shia (Pew 2).

The Sunni Umayyad Caliphate came to establish an Islamic Empire less than one hundred years after the Prophet's death. The Umayyad Caliphs began to dispose of the imams in order to keep their rule uncontested, killing eleven of the first twelve imams claimed by Shia Islam (Keddie 6-7). In 873 CE, the infant twelfth imam was put into hiding after the death of his father, the eleventh imam. The period of the twelfth imam, or Mahdi, in hiding is called the

Occultation and is split into two parts. The Lesser Occultation is the period when the Mahdi communicated with his followers via deputies who would convey messages between the Mahdi and his followers. During this time, there were four deputies who acted in succession for the Mahdi. The Greater Occultation began in 941 CE with the death of the fourth deputy who announced shortly before he died that the deputyship would end and the Greater Occultation would begin (Keddie 7). This phase of the occultation continues to the present. Today, Iran's Shia Muslims await the return of the Mahdi to rightfully lead the people of Islam.

### **Islam in Iran**

Iran has been an official Shia state since its inception in 1501. Ninety percent of the population is Shia Muslim (Pew 40) and this majority is specifically of the Twelver tradition. Twelver Shias believe there are twelve imams and that the Mahdi will return as the redeemer of Islam. According to Shia tradition, the Occultation presents a problem in that while they await the return of the Mahdi, there is no one to lead the people of Islam. In response, the Shia tradition developed the notion of separating religious and political beliefs (Arjomand 147). This notion has been used by Shias to accept existing governments until the Mahdi returns. Throughout its history of monarchs that have suppressed political opposition, the mosque in Iran is the only institution that has remained available for Iranians to gather religiously and politically. During the reign of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (the Shah), who banned opposition political parties, the mosque in Iran was a center of political expression and agitation (J. and T. Ismael 611). The mosque and its leaders would come to play a central role in deposing the Shah.

The religious ulama class has always been influential in Iran. The ulama have largely opposed Western influence in Iran because of its secular beliefs. During his rule from 1941-1979, the Shah continuously reduced the power of the ulama while simultaneously increasing

influence from the West. He instituted exams for qualifying to become an ulama, secularized the education and legal systems - which caused many ulama to lose their jobs - and unveiled women (Keddie 222). The ulama, including Khomeini, were prevented from politically opposing the Shah solely by Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi.

The Grand Ayatollah is the highest religious rank in the ulama. Borujerdi was the sole Grand Ayatollah during the reign of the Shah. Khomeini, at the time, was only an ayatollah. An ayatollah is the second highest rank in the ulama and refers to a specialist in Islamic law according to Twelver Shia Islam (Amjad 39-40). Borujerdi believed in political quietism – the Islamic belief of withdrawing from political affairs until the Mahdi returns. Only Borujerdi was able to keep Khomeini and the other ulama from playing an active role in politics against the Shah (Keddie 147). His death marked the beginning of Khomeini’s fusion of Shia Islam with the politics of Iran.

From Borujerdi’s death in 1963 onwards, Khomeini became an outspoken Shia leader who radicalized the traditional Shia belief system. The Shah’s 1963 White Revolution, a six-point rapid modernization program for Iran, was openly protested by Khomeini. Khomeini accused the Shah of attempting to place Iran in the hands of Jews, Christians, and the enemies of Islam (Esposito 154). After being released from jail for dissidence, Khomeini was exiled following a speech where he stated with fiery rhetoric that the Shah had sold Iran’s independence and that he reduced Iranians to “being lower than an American dog” (Amjad 45-46). While in exile, Ayatollah Khomeini lectured extensively against the Shah’s right to rule as well as writing his blueprint for an Islamic government (Keddie 190-194). In this doctrine, he elevates the traditional concept of the jurist.

### **Khomeini’s Shia Transformation**

According to Khomeini, the jurist is a leader that must have two qualifications on which all Muslims have agreed must be inherent in a leader of Islam: total knowledge of Islamic law and total justice in its execution. Khomeini argues that there must be a government led by a jurist that puts Islamic law into effect and applies all Islamic measures without compromise (Zubaida 152-153). Khomeini's version of the jurist is a result of there being a lack of specific texts on who should rule the Islamic community during the Greater Occultation (J. and T. Ismael 613). Due to the absence of a defined leader, Khomeini took the initiative and broke away from traditional Shia Islam and used his authority as an Ayatollah to create a new concept of leadership.

This leader, or jurist, is centered on Khomeini's statement that the Mahdi appointed a successor not to alter the law, but to enforce it. Traditional Shia doctrine states that an imam interprets revelation, is a source of divine knowledge, and not merely an enforcer of Islamic law. Khomeini believes that an imam must be all three (Bayat 35-36). Khomeini's divergence with traditional Shia Islam is furthered by his definition of the role of the imam. In his doctrine, Khomeini argues that in the absence of the Mahdi, the authority of the jurist is based on the ulama because there is no imam to lead. Due to a lack of an imam, the jurist must now take the role of the imam.

Khomeini's unprecedented interpretation of Shia doctrine allowed him to undermine the political balance of power during the Shah's reign. Khomeini changed the role of the imam in order to pass ultimate leadership to a jurist. In turn, the jurist now has an elevated status because of the Greater Occultation. Since Khomeini bases the authority of the jurist on the ulama, he renders all secular government illegitimate (Chehabi 72-73). This transition of the basis of power

from secular rule to sectarian has allowed Khomeini to undermine the Shah's regime by asserting the authority of the ulama in Iran.

At the same time that he elevated the concept of the jurist and altered the role of the imam, Khomeini was condemning the monarchical system of government in Iran (Bayat 36). Khomeini's denouncement of hereditary rule is at odds with the central Shia tradition of leadership which is essentially a monarchical rule of Islam because it is passed down from the male descendants of the Prophet. Khomeini was unable to legitimize his Islamic Government through Shia Islam because it would be hypocritical of his opposition to the Shah's rule of Iran.

This conundrum led him to declare that the dispute that created the schism following the death of the Prophet was over the identity of his successor and not over qualifications. He states that the Prophet didn't appoint Ali because he was his son-in-law, but because Ali was in obeisance with God's law (Bayat 37). This blatantly refutes the *raison d'être* of Shia Islam which argues that succession of the Prophet goes to his descendants. Khomeini's denial of the foundation of Shia Islam demonstrates that he chose politics over religion. Khomeini, one of the highest ranking Shia clerics of his time, chose to deny the foundation of his religion in favor of legitimizing his own political argument against the secular ruler of Iran.

By breaking away from Shia tradition, Khomeini had to theologially justify his Islamic Government. He did this by staying within Islam and embracing Sunni traditional beliefs. The first caliph after the death of the Prophet was chosen by the Muslim community in accordance with the Sunni tradition. In turn, the Umayyad Caliphate established itself as the Islamic Caliphate based on Sunni succession. In contrast, the Shia successors to the Prophet were never able to form a government. In order to legitimize his concept of an Islamic Government, Khomeini had no choice but to accept the Sunni Caliphate as evidence of an Islamic government

after the death of the Prophet (Bayat 36). There is a Sunni argument Khomeini embraced that states executive power was entrusted to leaders of the Caliphate because they were best suited to establish a just Islamic government. Furthermore, Sunnis claim that the function of government was not a privilege of the imams solely based on their spiritual status as descendants of the Prophet (Bayat 37). By deviating from Shia tradition and using Sunni arguments to support his new claim, Khomeini showed that he was willing to turn away from his core religious beliefs to justify the creation of a new government during a time where he was a favored leader opposing the Shah.

Khomeini's inception of the jurist caused the Shia notion of *taqiyah*, which long bound Shia Muslims to endure temporal government while waiting for the Greater Occultation to end. Khomeini chose not to wait for someone else to claim leadership of the revolution in Iran; he seized it through his ceaseless, revolutionary rhetoric. Khomeini refused terms by the Shah to reform and instead called for a full blown revolution to end the monarchy (Keddie 214-239). Tapes and recordings of his lectures speaking out against the Shah as well as calling for the establishment of an Islamic government were smuggled into Iran while he was in exile. These recordings were widely distributed and popularized among different classes in Iran, especially the lower class masses (Keddie 222-239).

## **Conclusion**

Khomeini was able to unite the growing opposition of a nation that existed in a highly stratified class system. Khomeini championed the economically depressed urban poor and rural masses. These groups outnumbered the secular middle class; any other opposition movement against the Shah was forced to join Khomeini due to the sheer number of his supporters (Keddie 225-226). At the height of the revolution in 1978, Khomeini purposefully toned down his

religious revolutionary rhetoric and instead focused on removing the Shah from power and Iran from Western influence in order to unite secular opposition with his religious supporters. With a united opposition, Khomeini was able to seize the reigns of the revolution and turn it Islamic.

Khomeini's seizure of the revolution to enact his radical brand of Shia Islam came at a masterful time. Khomeini was one of seven of the highest ranking ayatollahs at the time of the revolution (Chehabi 73). Khomeini was personally acquainted with all of them and was aware that they all practiced political quietism (Roy 206). Khomeini was therefore able to remain unchallenged in religious authority while he distributed his radical Shia Islam to the masses of the revolution.

Among Islamic scholars, there are two possible ways to act in accordance with the separation of religious institutions from the state that defines Shia Islam. The first way is through political quietism which historically the majority of the ulama in Iran have followed. The other route is the active endeavor to seize political power and subjugate the political sphere to sectarian rule (Arjomand 147). Khomeini chose the latter to carry out his political aspirations for an Islamic government led by himself as the jurist. This culminated in the Shah fleeing the country in 1979 with Khomeini triumphantly returning to Iran after decades in exile.

Khomeini's Islamic Republic was established weeks after the Shah fled. A new constitution accompanied the nascent theocracy. Central to the new constitution was making the jurist the most powerful figure in Iran by granting him veto power over all government decisions and law (Moslem 83). Two months before his death in 1989, Khomeini had the constitution amended to change the role of the jurist. Originally, the jurist had to be a source of emulation and therefore infallible in knowledge of Islamic law. This implied that the jurist had to be an ayatollah. The constitution demoted the jurist to a leader of the revolution and took away the

requirement to be an ayatollah. The new jurist thus became a political figure instead of a religious one, thereby completing Khomeini's use of religion for political reasons.

The legacy of Khomeini continues today. The Islamic Republic of Iran is led by Grand Ayatollah Khamenei who was handpicked by Khomeini to lead even though he was not an ayatollah. In his final act, Khomeini once more chose politics by again changing the definition of the jurist and appointing a religiously unqualified candidate. The Islamic Republic of Iran today is built upon Shia Islamic tradition. However, its foundation is weak because it rests on a radical deviation from Shia Islam. Khomeini was able to ensure a stable transition of power before his death while the early Islamic community became split over succession. Khomeini, unlike Mohammad, left clear instructions on who was to rule and how the Islamic Republic was to be continued. All Khomeini had to do was give up his own religious beliefs to ensure his political legacy.

## Works Cited

- Amjad, Mohammad. "Shi'ism and Revolution in Iran." *Journal of Church and State* 31/1 (1989): 35-53. Web. 17 November 2016.
- Arjomand, Said. "The State and Khomeini's Islamic Order." *Iranian Studies* 13/1 (1980): 147-164. Web. 15 November 2016.
- Bayat, Mangol. "The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79: Fundamentalist or Modern?" *Middle East Journal* 37/1 (1983): 30-42. Web. 15 November 2016.
- Chehabi, H. E. "Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic Is the Islamic Republic?" *Daedalus* 120/3 (1991): 69-91. Web. 16 November 2016.
- Esposito, John. "Four Levels of Understanding." *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, by Fischer M. Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 150-174.
- Ismael, J., and T. Ismael. "Social Change in Islamic Society: The Political Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini." *Social Problems* 27/5 (1980): 601-619. Web. 15 November 2016.
- Keddie, Nikki. *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press, 2003.
- Mapping the Global Muslim Population*. Pew Research Center, 2009.
- Moslem, Mehdi. "Ayatollah Khomeini's Role in the Rationalization of the Islamic Government." *Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 8/14 (1999): 75-92. Web. 15 November 2016.
- Roy, Olivier. "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran." *Middle East Journal* 53/2 (1999): 201-216. Web. 20 November 2016.
- The Qur'an*. Translated by M. Abdel Haleem, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Zubaida, Sami. "The Ideological Conditions for Khomeini's Doctrine of Government." *Economy and Society* 11/2 (1982): 138-172. Web. 15 November 2016.