Constructing Political Identity

Religious Radicalism and the Rhetoric of the Iranian Revolution

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1   In the ashen smoke of airliners crashing, glass shattering, and steel evaporating, visions of internationalism and safety become difficult to see. Bright images of progress and globalism yield to clouds of terror and trouble. Radical Muslims have declared war on America: this "fact," the pictures of Muslims cheering Osama Bin Laden, and the celebratory gestures of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein crowded out images of mourning Arabs. Photographs of Yassir Arafat giving blood to help the New York City victims got little play. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Samuel Huntington's oft-challenged claim of an inevitable *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) between a Muslim East and a Christian West swung back into fashion.

2   In pronouncing this rupture between East and West, media commentators often name the Iranian Revolution as the first full-blown demonstration of Islamist radicalism. Revolutionary discourse from the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1930s and from activist Sayyid Qutb in Egypt predated the Iran Revolution. Yet events in Iran involved a prophetic discourse that discounted Arab leaders as infidels and indicted Western society as corrupt. When Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda echoed these charges, the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian Revolution, and the seizure of American hostages emerged as the first figures of Islamic unrest recognized by most Americans. Together these form much of the background that popular media cite for the Attack on America.

3   The rhetorical fount of Islamist ideology in Iran was the Ayatollah Khomeini. Through Friday sermons and occasional writings, he discredited the U.S.-imposed monarchy of the Shah as illegitimate. Widely read in revolutionary Iran, his treatise on *Islamic Government* (*Velayat-e Faqih*) has become the foundation for the post-revolutionary society. Rose portrays Khomeini as the one figure responsible for "the restructuring of the personal and social consciousness of Muslims into an

ideologically Islamic identity" (1983, p. 167).

4   Khomeini's rhetoric attracted those who rebelled not only against the Shah but also against the westernization of Iran. The Shah's rapid modernization inundated Iranians with new values, resulting in the loss of *iraniyat*: the uniquely Iranian identity. Khomeini's Islamist identity became the replacement. Many alternatives such as *Tudeh*, the Marxist party, portrayed themselves as non-Islamic, using discourses and symbols exogenous to Iran. Khomeini claimed a distinctively Iranian inspiration in Shi'ite Islam. Most surviving Islamic groups became part of Khomeini's movement, and it channeled hostility to the Shah toward Shi'ite Islam and Khomeini as the supreme Iranian leader.

5   Current instability in Iran and Iraq, as well as the decisive role of the Iranian Revolution in popular constructions of radical Islam, should return us to this pivotal moment to consider its cultural, political, and religious exigencies along with the ideology that responds to them. Yet Khomeini's discourse has attracted little analysis in the area of rhetoric. Especially its grounds in Islamic jurisprudence deserve attention.[1] These are key aspects of his discourse and his conception of what constitutes a true Muslim. To show this, the essay analyzes the political identity formulated during Iran's revolution in relation to the anti-imperial discourse of the Ayatollah that made opposition to the Shah into a cause of Islam.

The Rhetorical Use of *Fard* to Foster a Discourse of Ritualistic Obligation

6   Shi'ite Islam teaches a variety of religious practices as being mandatory for its followers. These include the seven major obligations: prayer, fasting, the paying of alms, a religious tax, the pilgrimage to Mecca, religious wars or striving (*jihad*), while "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil" (*al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa'l-nahy an'l-munkar*) ('Ali 1990). Khomeini drew on the notion of obligation (*fard)* inherent within Shi'ite Islam. Both *jihad* and "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil" are *fard kifaya*: obligations that can be fulfilled by a designated group to satisfy their requirement of the community (Dabashi 1993). Deciding *who* should fulfill these requirements falls on the chief religious figure in the community, the *marja'-e taqlid*: the "source of exemplary conduct." As the supreme *marja-'e taqlid*, Khomeini was entrusted with the right to collect the religious tax, to order a

defensive *jihad*, and to require his followers to "enjoin the good and forbid evil."

7   The Shi'ite *marja'-e taqlid* also has the power to transform a *fard kifaya* (collective duty) into a *fard 'ayn* (individual duty), obliging *each person* in the community to act. As the highest ranking religious leader, Khomeini invoked these obligations. They became an early and pivotal part of his revolutionary discourse. In *Velayat-e Faqih*, for example, he argued that "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil" is a responsibility for the *whole* Islamic community:

8   The Lord of the Martyrs (upon whom be peace) speaks of "summoning men to Islam while at the same time remedying oppression and opposing the oppressors;" it is for the sake of these great aims that enjoining the good and forbidding the evil has been made a duty. . . . "Enjoining the good and forbidding the evil" is most imperative in such cases [where the government opposes Islam].

9   Now let me ask you: were the subjects mentioned by the Lord of the Martyrs in his sermon addressed only to the companions who were gathered around him listening to his words? Does not the phrase "O people, take heed" address us too? Are we not included in "people?" (1981, pp. 118-119).

10   Before Khomeini could transform performance of these religious practices into a revolutionary call for the entire nation, he needed to define what constitutes good and evil in a way compelling to a massive audience, and he needed to describe the evil forces in a manner that met doctrinal definitions inherent within *jihad*. Hence he created a *fard 'ayn* to impel Iranians to oppose the Shah. To define himself as good and the Shah as evil, Khomeini drew on symbolic and mythic dimensions of Shi'a Islam. He shaped these to oblige Iranians to enact a *jihad* against the Shah, and he strengthened their revolutionary spirit through the rhetorical use of ritualization.

Ideological and Historical Context

11   The Shah's rule was marked by rapid modernization coupled with a decided lean toward Western views and customs. The previously deposed Shah was indebted to the West after a 1953 coup, sponsored by the CIA, had returned him to power. The coup displaced a liberal-democratic movement headed by Mohammed

Mosaddeq (Green 1982). In 1964, the Shah symbolically demonstrated the heavy influence of the West by extending diplomatic immunity to all Americans living in Iran. This touched off the first conflict between Khomeini and the Shah, resulting in the Ayatollah's long exile.

12   As Khomeini shifted his homeland from Turkey to Iraq, the Shah continued with reforms, initiating what he labeled as the "White Revolution." During the early 1970s, the Shah strove to incorporate the *Ullama* (religious clergy) into the machinery of the governing body, pressuring clerics to become members of his "Religious Corps." At the same time, he tried to shift the nation's sense of identity toward its heritage from ancient Persia, diminishing the emphasis on Islam as a source of identification. The seventies brought with them other significant changes. Petro dollars accelerated the Westernization of the economy (Ramazani 1982). Yet the poor planning of the White Revolution caused impoverishment of the peasantry, resulting in urbanization, slums, and unemployment.

13   The Shah responded to these tumultuous transformations by strengthening the power of his military forces, installing an autocratic form of one-party rule, and increasing the oppressive force of SAVAK, his secret police (Khosrow 1982). Even before revolutionary protests began in the late seventies, the Pahlavi regime had estranged itself from the population. The regime was staunchly associated with Western values, failed economic policies, and violations of human and political rights.

14   Khomeini stood in clear contrast to the modernist, anti-Islamic leadership style of the Shah. He spoke to the nation from Iraq and France, delivering the weekly *Khutbah* or Friday sermon which would later be replayed in mosques throughout Iran (Ram 1994). The *Khutbah* is delivered by individuals of religious note and constitutes an obligatory service for Muslims ('Ali 1990). Through these speeches and his written essays, the Ayatollah defined himself not only as a representative of the religious establishment but also as the embodiment of an anti-Western, anti-imperialist ideology.

15   Khomeini's anti-imperialism is evident in *Velayat-e Faqih*: "In order to attain the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples, we must overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will be in the service of the people" (1981, p. 49). As

Dabashi observes, "Opposing the Iranian monarchy is negating 'The West.' Negating 'The West' is reclaiming the political cum theological veracity of Islam: the source of all Muslim identity" (1993, p. 509). As the supreme religious figure, Khomeini embodied the indigenous culture of the nation. At issue was not only an attack on the West, on what Dabashi labels the Islamic version of "'Other'-centricism," but the establishment of an Iranian form of "'Self'-consciousness" (1993, p. 510). Khomeini's focus on native customs strengthened the ideal of *iraniyat*, of what is uniquely Iranian (Lawrence 1990, p. 224). Thus Khomeini's discourse stood for something more than pan-Islamism or anti-modernization; it stood as anti-Western ideology with the goal of attaining cultural and religious *authenticity*.

Symbolism and Myth:
Evoking a Conception of Good and Evil

16 Khomeini's discourse drew on a powerful repository: the recollection of Islamic myths and symbols. Skocpol contends in this connection that "Shi'a Islam arguably has especially salient symbolic resources to justify resistance against unjust authority" (1982, p. 273). Dabashi avers that "the revolutionary function of the 'Islamic Ideology' received its impetus as well as its driving force from dormant common mythologies deeply rooted in the Iranian collective memory" (1993, p. 504). Even the secularized elements in Iran — such as the middle and upper classes — responded to the religious symbolism fostered by Khomeini and the *Ullama*. Beeman notes that non-believers reacted to Khomeini's appeals, because "religious doctrine often serves as a concretization of these core symbols, both making statements about the truth of the conceptual world in which society exists, and prescribing for society's members what they should and should not do" (1983, p. 193). With powerful symbolic associations, Khomeini's discourse redefined modern Iranian society by tapping old religious themes. It tied religious and historical symbols for good and evil to contemporary figures.

17 Khomeini's discourse drew on a Manichean conception of religion. The reality he depicted in speeches fused worldly powers in politics with the fundamental forces of good and evil. Iranian experience of such dualism originates in pre-Islamic times. Zoroastrian religion dominated the region, then called Persia. It dichotomized good and evil as powerful opposing forces. Evil is represented by the exterior world, *batin*; while good is the interior core, *zahir*. Zoroastrian dualism eventually was assimilated into the

monotheism of Islam, which substituted God (Allah) for "good" and the devil *(Shaitan)* for "evil." *Shaitan* is known as the Great Satan, the great tempter, stemming from his role in the fall of Adam. Because Islam associates the devil with the exterior of the body or the nation, this figure of Satan was ripe for exploitation in a discourse of anti-Imperialism (Bateson 1977, pp. 269-270).

18   The *batin*, or exterior, has strong negative implications rooted in the nation's past. Iranian history reveals a persistent pattern of foreign subjugation. From the classical period through the British and Russian occupations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to recent politics, Iran has been overwhelmed by a succession of worldly powers, each emanating from the *batin*. The repeated usurpations have fed Iranian fears of the exterior, which threatens the *zahir*, the inside world of the Iranian nation.

19   Khomeini's discourse depended on this dualism. He emphasized dual forces of good and evil, holy and satanic, foreign and indigenous influences. Khomeini depicted the Shah in devil terms. Constructing an image for the Shah with great saliency in Iran, Khomeini portrayed him as non-Muslim. Critical to subverting his symbolic power as King was exclusion of the Shah from all sacred images of Islam. Khomeini associated him instead with infidelity and evil. This construction linked the Shah to the forces of *batin*. Khomeini featured anti-Islamic changes that the Shah had imposed on the country. He associated the Shah's White Revolution to modernize Iran with ancient Persia (Heisey 1983, p. 160). Comparing the Shah to an evil, pre-Islamic king, Khomeini proclaimed, "The religious leaders will hoist the banner of Islam to exact vengeance on this *Zuhhak* of the age, and the nation of Islam, with their hearts in unison and obeying the life-giving teachings of the Qur'an, will expunge every trace of this anti-Islamic regime that wishes to revive Zoroastrianism" (1981, p. 230).

20   The Shah aided this interpretation, demonstrating a desire to return to the Persian culture that preceded the influence of Islam. His self-coronation ceremony and a 2,500-year anniversary celebration of the Iranian monarchy adopted pre-Islamic themes. He switched from the Islamic calendar to the one used by a pre-Islamic ruler, Cyrus the Great. Khomeini seized on this act as a sign of the Shah's determination to eradicate Islam. The Shah "is against the Islamic calendar. To be against the Islamic calendar is to be against Islam itself; in fact the worst thing that this man has done during his reign is to change the calendar. Changing the

calendar is even worse than the massacres; it is an affront to the Most Noble Messenger himself (peace and blessings be upon him)" (1981, pp. 217-218).

21 Khomeini also relied on specific personas that mobilized the audience sense of Iranian history and religion. He invested the political language of Iranian revolution with three compelling characters: Yazid, *Shaitan*, and the holy Imam. These figures proved especially effective.

22 The Shah became Yazid, a figure from Islamic faith. Historically Islam began with Mohammed, whose authority was passed to Abu Bakr and eventually to the Prophet's son-in-law, Ali. Ali was soon assassinated; and leadership was to pass to Ali's son, Hasan. In the general confusion, however, a military commander named Yazid came to power. Husain, Hasan's younger brother, refused to pay allegiance to Yazid, whom he saw as evil. Husain fled with his followers into the desert (Armajani 1979, pp. 17-18). Yazid pursued the group and executed them brutally. In the Shi'ite religion, Husain is the greatest political hero, and Yazid the most heinous of all rulers. Yazid becomes the despicable evil among Iranians, one that must be destroyed. Sometimes Khomeini directly called the Shah "Yazid." On other occasions, he evoked the persona by comparison. In the *Khutbah*, "In Commemoration of the First Martyrs of the Revolution," Khomeini declared that "The Messenger of God (peace and blessings be upon him) was indeed a true Shadow of God; but is this vile Shah a shadow of God? Yes, a few thoughtless people among us say so, but that would mean that Yazid was also a 'holder of authority' and anyone who rebelled against him deserved to be killed!" (1981, p. 226).

23 Khomeini constructed the United States as the *Shaitan*, the Great Satan, the evil enemy that threatens Iran from outside. For Iranians, the Great Satan is the lascivious and tempting devil, a corrupting force that becomes the ultimate menace to Islam (Beeman 1983). Like radical Islamists before and since, Khomeini condemned the United States as a secular wasteland where wanton sexuality and consumer goods lure people into forgetting genuine goodness. Of course, he capitalized on the mythic relationship between Yazid and the Great Satan. Yazid was a pawn of *Shaitan*; thus the Shah, by analogy, was as a pawn of the Great Satan of America. Khomeini emphasized the Shah's addictive and poisonous service to the West by talking of *Gharbzadegi* or "Westoxication" (Rose 1983, p. 182).

24 In contrast, the *Ullama* (the Iranian clergy) and various revolutionaries treated Khomeini as indigenous (*iraniyat*) and hallowed, centering him within the good *zahir* (interior). This was evident in posters disseminated throughout Iran in praise of the Ayatollah. One illuminated Khomeini with a divine aura and said, "When the devil goes, the angel arrives" (Merriam 1981, p. 396) In opposition to the evil Shah and the satanic Americans, Khomeini became the Imam: the religious epitome of goodness, wisdom, and instruction. As a title, "Imam" marks the respect of the religious community, much as "reverend," "rabbi," or "father" does in other religions. Yet elements of Khomeini's persona and discourse also linked the title to a more transcendent image. Through his choice of theological stories and his charismatic, mystical presentation of them, Khomeini adhered closely to a culturally established figure of religious authority larger by far than a local priest or minister.

25 The mythic dimensions of the Imam as a figure of authority reach deep into Shi'ite history. The Shi'ite sect of Islam is often called the "twelver" sect, because it believes in the evolution of twelve different Imams. Ali acquired the title as the first Imam, after the death of the Prophet Mohammed and his early successors. Each Imam is thought to personify a direct link between God and man. Only the Imam could rightfully rule the people and formulate Islamic law, functioning as liaison between this world and the one beyond. Siddiqui defines the power, sacred and secular, behind the idiomatic term: "Whatever version of Shi'ism one looks at, at whatever point it may have expressed itself in Islamic history, the crucial point has been the doctrine of the Imamate, the figure of the Imam, who is not merely the successor of the Prophet (on whom be peace) in a legislative, administrative and even military capacity, but is also in some sense an extension of the spiritual dimensions of the prophetic mission" (1980, p. 32).

26 Early in Shi'ite history, the twelfth Imam went into "occultation," disappearing from the sight of his followers. Shi'ites believe that he will reemerge at a future date to lead the faithful followers into the golden age, where the world will be tranquil and Islamic. Within the Shi'ite tradition, only the Imam has authority to rule the community. After the original occultation, however, secular rulers arose and created what the faithful viewed as legitimate political power. In *Velayat-e Faqih*, Khomeini successfully radicalized this tradition by denying authority to all secular powers and designating members of the religious community instead as the legitimate successors to the earlier Imam: "Today, the *fuqaha*

[jurists, plural of *faqih*] of Islam are proofs to the people. Just as the Most Noble Messenger (upon whom be peace and blessings) was the proof of God . . . so, too, the *fuqaha* are the proof of the Imam (upon whom be peace) to the people. All the affairs of the Muslims have been entrusted to them. God will advance a proof and argument against anyone who disobeys them in anything concerning government, the conduct of Muslim affairs, or the gathering and expenditure of public funds" (1981, p. 87). In this rendition of the Imam, Khomeini made secular authority illegitimate and legitimated the *fuqaha* — the religious clerics trained in Islamic jurisprudence — as authoritative successors to the hidden Imam. As the supreme religious leader , the *marja'-e talqid*, Khomeini himself became the ultimate successor to the hidden Imam: the only legitimate holder of authority.

27   During the revolution, Khomeini typically was identified by the religious title of Imam.[2]   Khomeini never insinuated that he was the actual Imam, returned from occultation; theological constraints would have rendered such a claim blasphemous. Yet as Merriam notes, "while Khomeini has made no claims that he is god, his extraordinary influence on millions of Iranian Shi'ites is inevitably linked to their belief in and expectation of the Holy Imam" (1981, p. 398). Fischer (1980, p. 177) describes a series of legends concerning Khomeini that began during the revolution, legends that prophesied his eventual return from exile to his native land. These supported the belief that he was the twelfth Imam, creating a mythic figure attractive to the Iranian people.

28   Max Weber (1968) long ago showed how leaders with charismatic qualities are often treated as if endowed with superhuman powers. Reinhard Bendix stresses the importance of circumstances: charismatic leaders frequently arise in times of crisis, when people "surrender themselves to a heroic figure" (1977, p. 300). Dimensions of Khomeini's ethos — his emphasis on mystical Islam, his ascetic behavior, even his physical distance from the nation as his words spread disembodied throughout the land — helped foster a comparison to the holy hidden Imam. Khomeini's persona, coupled with his unyielding adherence to religious principles, meshed with the culturally accepted image of a religious authority. All these theological and charismatic factors associated him with the omnipotent persona of the hidden Imam.

29   This role of the Imam enabled Khomeini to invoke the religious token of the "golden age." In Islamic teachings, the golden age is the transcendent epoch that occurs after the hidden Imam returns

to earth.   Historically the golden age has been viewed as a time when the world would be peaceful, prosperous, and wholly Islamized. Again Khomeini fostered this association through theoretical writings. He argued in *Velayat-e Faqih* that only through a truly Islamic government could peace and tranquility come to earth. In ridding Iran of the Shah, the evil and illegitimate holder of authority, the religious *fuqaha* — as the defenders of true justice — would be able to spread justice and happiness throughout the land. "The two qualities of knowledge of the [Islamic] law and justice are present in countless *fuqaha* of the present age. If they would come together, they could establish a government of universal justice in the world" (1981, p. 62).

30   For a country filled with broken, unhappy people, this vision provided strength and hope. If the inhabitants could be persuaded that Khomeini was the hidden Imam, they might believe that Khomeini could usher in a halcyonic golden age. That image, Halliday (1984, p. 201) maintains, infused supporters with energy, convincing them that their struggle was not futile and that revolutionary change could bring a better day.

31   The three personas, related figures, and doctrinal definitions in Khomeini's discourse seemed to persuade many Iranians that the Shah was more than a political oppressor: instead he was an evil influence that could lead to the downfall of Islam in Iran and on earth. Summoning the sense of duty for *al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa'lnahy an'-l-munkar* ("enjoining the good and forbidding the evil"), Khomeini established an exigency for action.

32   The pervasive power of Khomeini's discourse is apparent in an anecdote told by Jerrold Green. In a government copy center, Green attempted to reprint a revolutionary pamphlet. At first the man behind the desk, an employee of the Shah, refused. But later the man criticized the poor quality of the copy and produced another from a huge pile on his machine. Green viewed this incident as indicative of the allure of Khomeini's appeal. The copy machine employee, "in his own fashion, was a revolutionary. He was never recruited into a formal oppositional structure but rather responded to stimuli rampant in the Iran of 1978-79. He had two choices open to him, support for the Shah or for Khomeini. He chose the latter, as did most Iranians, giving into vague though irresistible instincts by supporting what most Iranians were led to believe was *good* over *evil*" (1984, p. 162).

Ritualistic Obligation:
Fard and Khomeini's Call for *Jihad*

33   The concept of *jihad* is an important component of Islamic religious faith, one frequently misconstrued in the West. The term has two main meanings. First, and most commonly, it refers to a form of striving exerted by each Muslim for the betterment of Islam.[3] Second, *jihad* can mean a "military action with the object of the expansion of Islam and, if need be, of its defense," although a religious leader may still encourage a more peaceful enactment of *jihad* ("Djihad" 1960, p. 538). The Qur'an says that *jihad* is "'an act of pure devotion'; it is 'one of the gates to Paradise;' rich heavenly rewards are guaranteed for those who devote themselves to it" (p. 539). *Jihad* as a military action is a collective duty (*fard kifaya*) and is obligatory for the individuals who reside nearest to the domain of need. Yet the sovereign authority may transform *jihad* from a *fard kifaya* into a *fard 'ayn*, an individual obligation (p. 539). Its ability to impose individual obligations made *jihad* a critical part of Khomeini's rhetoric for Iranian revolution.

34   Khomeini constructed *jihad* into a rhetorical strategy by conveying a two-part message: First, the Shah is an infidel, making him a target for impending *jihad*. And second, self-sacrifice and martyrdom are inevitable components of the impending *jihad*.

35   In calling for *jihad* against the Shah, Khomeini faced an daunting doctrinal barrier in Islam. Traditionally *jihad* was used against only the *dal al-harb*: the external infidels who threatened the security of the borders of Islamic countries and, by extension, the Islamic faith. This focus did not fit Khomeini's cause. The Shah, as a member of the long-standing Pahlavi regime, could not be portrayed as an external enemy who endangered the autonomy of Iran. Recognizing this, Khomeini shifted the figure to emphasize that the overarching rational for *jihad* is not to protect nations qua nations but rather the Islamic faith. In " *Muharram*: The Triumph of Blood over the Sword," a speech delivered in November of 1978, Khomeini decreed that the Shah "threatens the higher interests of the Muslims and the dictates of Islam with imminent destruction for the sake of his own satanic rule and his parasitic masters" (1981, p. 242). Consistent with figuring the Shah as Yazid, Khomeini's message was that threats to Islam can originate from inside as well as outside an Islamic nation. *Jihad* against internal forces that contravene the doctrines of Allah can be every bit as justified as holy war against external aggressors.

36   Khomeini also called for martyrs to give their lives in *jihad* against the Shah. During his reign, the Shah had often demonstrated a willingness to use any means necessary to quell protest — including heavily-armed troops, tanks, and deadly attacks with aircraft. For the *jihad* against the Pahlavi regime to succeed, Khomeini needed to strengthen the resolve of revolutionaries to the point where they would be willing to die for their cause if needed. Overwhelming logistical superiority of the Shah's army made the carnage of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, seem inevitable. How could Khomeini summon the anti-Shah forces to such a confrontation? His glorified image of martyrdom likened the struggle of Iranian masses to the earlier sacrifices of Islamic martyrs: "Your blood is being shed for the same cause as the blood of the prophets and the Imams and the righteous. You will join them and you have no cause to grieve therefore, but every reason for joy" (1981, p. 240). Khomeini emphasized that revolutionary acts would be rewarded in a glorious spiritual afterlife for all who stood true to Islam. This also minimized the value of earthly lives lost. No price, including death, would be too great to pay (Ayoub 1978, p. 46).

37   The trust engendered by Khomeini's rhetoric of martyrdom became visible in the actions of Iranians, with thousands martyring themselves. One woman expressed her interpretation of the revolutionary rhetoric: "Now the people are aware of the whole meaning of religion. . . . This year we know that his message is — death. If you can kill, kill. If you can't, die in the attempt. Either kill or get killed, but like Husain [the martyred prophet] fight against repression and tyranny" (Hegland 1983, pp. 229-230). Many cases of similar testimony suggest that Khomeini's discourse resonated throughout the nation to alter conceptions of sacrifice and martyrdom. When the religious leaders finally called for the armed struggle, many Iranians responded to undo the Shah.

The Husain Ritual

38   Khomeini's messages of revolution culminated in a holy Islamic ritual. Ritual can have great power to commit people to causes or values. Langer explained that a ritual is "primarily an *articulation* of feelings. The ultimate product of such articulation is not a simple emotion, but a complex, permanent *attitude* . . . [that] yields a strong sense of tribal or congregational unity, of rightness and security" (1957, p. 153). According to Hegland (1983, p. 235), the Husain ritual was the single most decisive factor in destroying

the spirit of the Shah's army, resulting in the government's demise. In a war of numbers and will power, this ritual generated marches and demonstrations that involved millions of people, inducing the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty.

39   The ritual originated in Husain's martyrdom at the hand of Yazid's army in a desert place called Karbala. Throughout each year, the Shi'ite calendar relates various stories tied to Karbala, with Ashura — the day of Husain's death — marking the climax. The ritual involves smiting the breast, chanting, and wailing (Pelly 1879); and the revolutionary performance altered little. Yet its meaning too was shaped by religious dissenters from the regime, especially by the Ayatollah, to serve the revolution. Hegland observes that "The success of the revolution followed a transformation in the understanding of the central message of Shi'i Islam among the Iranian masses. Leaders of the revolution from religious, educational, and bazaari groups were successful in their advocacy of revolution because they presented an ideology appealing to large numbers of both Shi'i Muslims and non-Shi'is" (1983, p. 219). She concludes that the Husain persona shifted from "Husain as Intercessor," with people praying to him for favors and a path to paradise, to "Husain as Example," with people treating him as a role model for protest against the tyranny of an evil government (pp. 225-230).

40   This shift proved crucial in mobilizing Iranian masses. It happened in three steps. The first was furnished by revolutionary leaders such as Dr. Ali Shari'ati, an Islamic scholar who preached resistance to unjust authority (Dabashi 1993, p. 102). Many of these leaders had died or left the country, indeed Shari'ati perished two years before the revolution. yet their words provided a basis for the formation of dissent. The second step came from Khomeini. As the most widely recognized resistance leader, he promulgated revolutionary arguments that relied at times on the newly reconstructed persona of Husain. Third, the *Ullama* disseminated these revolutionary messages, promoting the new meaning of the Husain ritual throughout the nation. By the time the revolution reached its climax, vast numbers of Iranians shared the reconstructed sense of the Husain ritual.

41   As revered interpreters of Islam, religious leaders facilitated revision of what they called the formerly "erroneous" conception of the Husain ritual. Yet the public may have been ready in any event for a new perspective on the ritual that could increase their emotional commitment to the revolution. The Khomeini discourse

of *jihad* and martyrdom transubstantiated the ritual into a vehicle for people to express their despair and enact a willingness to die for the destruction of the evil that they felt to pervade their country. Hegland cites a Persian phrase that exemplifies this feeling: *az khod gozashteh* refers to a person's willingness to sacrifice life itself in order to end an intolerable circumstance. As an Iranian woman told Hegland, "When I no longer care about my own life, when I've given up on my own life, I don't need you any more. . . . If I know I'm going to die, I will shoot at the person who is making me unhappy. It doesn't matter if he hits me back, because I am going to die anyway" (1983, p. 233).

42 Khomeini was able to address these feelings and infuse individuals with hope, even if it could be actualized only through death, through giving the expression of hostility a ritualized form. Muharram is the night before Ashura, the day of Husain's death. In his Friday *Khutbah* sermon on " *Muharram*: The Triumph of Blood Over the Sword," Khomeini instructed people to rebel: "There is no need to remind you that mourning assemblies must be fully independent, and not dependent on permission by the police or that subversive body called the security organization. Dear people, organize your gatherings . . . in public squares, in thoroughfares and streets, and proclaim the sufferings endured by Islam and the Muslims and the treacherous acts of the Shah's regime" (1981, p. 244). Given November 23, 1978, this speech marked a critical moment in the history of the revolution. Before the time of *Muharram*, Khomeini had not issued a specific call for people to revolt against the government. Now he was linking the performance of the Husain ritual, imbued with new meaning, to a final confrontation with the forces of the Shah. Khomeini had claimed the holiest day of the Islamic calendar for rousing people to reject the Shah.

43 From a rhetorical perspective, the use of this traditional religious ritual is striking. Bennett argues that the need for myth and ritual has deep roots as a "primary process [where] thinking is characterized by projection, fantasy, the incorporation of nonverbal imagery, a high emotional content . . . and the generation of multiple levels of meaning" (1983, p. 43). Rituals bind people through shared symbols that create common purpose. The group dynamic can carry people farther than any individual would have gone. Analyzing the Husain ritual, Kertzer says that "the most dramatic role of ritual in the political process is that of inspiring masses of people to take some action. . . . Ritual provides the symbolism which makes action legitimate, while providing the

social condition which makes taking action not only possible but often compelling and sometimes unreflective" (1983, p. 64). Ritual acts help participants experience "truths" that obviate the need for independent cognition by the individuals who perform them.

44   Rituals are consummatory devices that can provide in themselves the basis for action (Aronoff 1983, p. 9). In Iran, this non-discursive communication sidestepped many possible questions and uncertainties, enabling Khomeini to mobilize people successfully against the Shah. The seemingly sudden upheaval shocked the Shah's troops and overwhelmed his government. Kertzer concurs that the Husain ritual was a key to the Iranian revolution: "the fall of the Shah was directly precipitated by the performance of a mass ritual held as part of the commemoration of the anniversary of Hussein's [sic] martyrdom" (1983, p. 65).

The Rhetoric of Obligation and Ideology

45   Rather than rely on irrationalism and fanaticism, as critics of Islam maintain, Khomeini's discourse features theological obligation supported by the use of symbols, myths, and religious personas; the requirement of *jihad* redirected to target internal evils; and the rhetorical transmutation of an important Islamic ritual. These moves reflect several considerations specific to Iran at the time. (1) The oppressive character of the Shah's regime mandated the use of discursive and non-discursive symbols to avoid the direct criticism that produced imprisonment or disappearance of regime enemies. (2) Opponents of the regime could interpret religious and secular history to influence the beliefs and actions of the citizenry. And (3) a preexisting religious ritual was available for reinterpretation to change its communal meaning.

46   Based largely on Shi'ite conceptions of authority, legitimacy, and obligation, Khomeini's revolution of 1979 shaped itself to popular images of leadership and used the rhetorical apparatus available such leaders. As the only viable alternative to the Shah, Khomeini could invoke a strict and doctrinal conception of *fard* that grounded personal obligations in traditions of Shi'ite Islam. Once Khomeini framed the revolutionary confrontation as an issue of Islamic identity, centered on embracing indigenous culture and condemning Western imperialism, he had delegitimated the Shah and potentially competing opponents. Islamic tradition was the domain for Khomeini's rhetorical invention. Using the *topoi* of this tradition, he stressed the symbolic, mythical, and ritualistic

dimensions of Shi'ism.

47 Khomeini's radical reinterpretations of some elements of Shi'ite theology fortified his power. His ethos of mysticism conferred a sacred status through charismatic qualities that could oblige his followers in ways unavailable to other Ayatollahs. Combined with his charisma, the use of *fard* enabled Khomeini to attract the lion's share of followers, which his rhetoric helped shape into a devoted, potent movement.

48 Ultimately it was Khomeini's *rhetorical* victory that opened the religious and political doors for legal implementation of his Islamic form of government. As the religious and political head of the government, Khomeini could define scriptural forms of obligation for all citizens of Iran, not just the faithful. Khomeini's theology fed his rhetorical crusade by enhancing his authority, but his discourse transformed theological argument into constitutional law.

49 Iran still organizes itself according to the Khomeini's dictates, and *Velayat-e Faqih* is required reading for Iran's fifteen million school children (Arjomand 1980). The impact of pan-Islamic versions of his discourse is notable throughout the Middle East. Many of Tehran's current strategies stem from Khomeini's revolutionary devices (Ibrahim 1992, p. 2). To a world in the wake of 9/11, the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis of 1979 remain strong symbols of a clash of cultures that shadows in the possibility of Islamic revolutions elsewhere.

50 Despite the discourse of al Qaeda and other radical Islamists, however, the revolutionary pendulum in Iran appears to be swinging in an opposite direction. The student protests in 1999 and again in 2003 portend an ending or at least a softening of Khomeini's Islamic Revolution. Students who were not yet born during Khomeini's revolution protest the political, religious, and personal oppressions in Iran. Their criticisms seem ironically similar to dissent from the Shah's regime a quarter-century before. How these events might continue, how the recent war in Iraq might affect its neighbor, and how worries about nuclear weapons in Iran might influence grass-roots attitudes toward the current religious and political leadership remain to be seen. In many respects, though, the rhetoric of the Iranian Revolution and Khomeini's discourse of Islamic radicalism seem likely to remain dynamics important for the region and the world.

Notes

[1]   This analysis serves a different goal from the one addressed by Heisey and Trebing. In their analysis, they compared the "rhetorical visions" presented to the Iranian people by both the Shah and Khomeini. This work concentrates on the theological and ideological grounding of Khomeini's discourse and the impact it had on creating what has become an enduring Islamic identity.

[2]   Many revolutionary pamphlets used this title. Included are: *Imam Khomeini's Message* (Iran: n.p., 1981); *Imam Khomeini's Message for April 1st* (Iran: n.p. April 1981); *Imam Khomeini's Message for Black Friday* (Iran: n.p., 1981); *Imam Khomeini: The Revolutionary Line of Action* (Iran: n.p., n.d.); *Islamic Weekly Bulletin* (Iran: n.p., 1981).

[3]   Members of the Islamic Presentation Committee, discussion with author on the Western misinterpretation of *Jihad*, Safat, Kuwait, March, 1996.

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