

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236766028>

Shi'i Narratives of Karbala and Christian Rites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the Culture of the Iranian Revolution, 1978–1979

Article in *Radical History Review* · April 2003

DOI: 10.1215/01636545-2003-86-7

CITATIONS

10

READS

158

1 author:



Janet Afary

University of California, Santa Barbara

44 PUBLICATIONS 569 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The Politics of Sex, God and Love [View project](#)



Gender/ Sexuality in Middle East [View project](#)

**Shi'i Narratives of Karbalâ and Christian
Rites of Penance: Michel Foucault and the
Culture of the Iranian Revolution,
1978–1979**

Janet Afary

In 1978–79, in the course of a massive urban revolution with several million participants, the Iranian people toppled the government of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–79), who had pursued an authoritarian program of nationalism as well as economic and cultural modernization. By late 1978, the Islamist faction had come to dominate the antishah protests, in which secular nationalists and leftists also participated. The struggle against the shah was now cast as a reenactment of the historic battle between Hussain (grandson of the prophet Muhammad) and his opponent Yazid in the month of Muharram in 680 C.E. in the desert of Karbalâ (Iraq). Soon, in the name of national unity, the secular, nationalist, and leftist demands of the demonstrators were articulated in religious garb and through rituals commemorating the death of Hussain. The Islamists controlled the revolutionary slogans and demanded that the more secular women protesters don the veil as an expression of solidarity with the more traditional women. In February 1979, the exiled dissident cleric Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini took power, sponsoring a national referendum that by an overwhelming majority declared Iran an Islamic republic. Shortly, a new constitution gave Khomeini near absolute powers, and a reign of terror ensued.

Radical History Review

Issue 86 (spring 2003): 7–35

Copyright 2003 by MARHO: The Radical Historians' Organization, Inc.

Political observers and intellectuals around the world greeted the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent establishment of an Islamic republic with contentious reactions. In France, the noted Middle East scholar Maxime Rodinson showed little sympathy for an Islamist government, while the feminist and existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir strongly protested the loss of rights for Iranian women and sent a message of solidarity to Iranian women opposing Khomeini's initial directives for compulsory veiling in March 1979. In contrast, the poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault enthusiastically embraced the Islamist movement, including Khomeini himself, only to become a bit more critical and then lapse into silence on Iran after May 1979.¹ What appears to have appealed to Foucault was the Islamist movement's reappropriation of the story of the Karbalâ battle almost 1,300 years earlier as a religious-national mythology in confronting the Iranian monarchy. However, Foucault failed to grasp the Islamists' politically charged reconfiguration and deployment of this myth during the revolution.

Michel Foucault's critical discourse on modernity and technologies of power can shed much light on several dimensions of the Iranian Revolution, including the opposition against the shah. The Pahlavi dynasty had attempted to inculcate a sentiment of national identity based on reverence for the king and celebration of the pre-Islamic heritage of the Persian Empire. The authoritarian reforms of the Pahlavi era (1925–79) also aimed at creating modern Iranian citizens in appearance and in conduct, relying on many of the strategies that Foucault enumerated in his *Discipline and Punish*.² Foucault's writings also have a direct relationship to the Iranian Revolution. He traveled to Iran in 1978 and wrote copiously on the revolution, especially the Islamist wing of the movement, whose goal was to ground Iranian cultural identity on an exclusionary religious foundation of Shi'i Islamic beliefs and practices.³ Foucault's essays are his most extensive set of writings on any non-Western society, and they form one of the major political engagements of his life.⁴ These, and his subsequent writings on "practices of the self" in early Christian communities, provide us with a very useful way of understanding the revolutionary phenomenon in Iran, and the Islamist utilization of Shi'i narratives and ritual practices before, during, and after the revolution.

Foucault's first visit to Iran was on September 16, 1978, after the Black Friday massacre of September 8, when the army opened fire on several thousand protesters at Jaleh Square in Tehran. He returned to Europe on September 24 and was granted an audience with Khomeini at his residence outside Paris in October. Foucault visited Iran for a second time on November 9, when the mass movement against the shah was reaching its zenith, and left on November 15. These trips were part of an initiative he had undertaken with several younger intellectuals to do critical reporting on political and social issues. During his two trips to Iran, Foucault was commissioned as a special correspondent of the leading Italian newspaper *Corriere della*

Sera. His dispatches appeared on the front page of that paper, as well as in French newspapers.

Two questions come to mind: (1) What propelled Foucault, who had been predominantly occupied with issues of the modern Western world, to travel to Iran and write copiously on that revolution for the European press? (2) Why was he so interested in the Islamist tendency, rather than the more secular leftist, nationalist and/or liberal tendencies in the revolution? The answers to these questions might be found in Foucault's final writings, especially the unfinished volume 4 of *The History of Sexuality*, a manuscript he tentatively titled "Confessions of the Flesh." Though this monograph was never published, we have a number of lectures, interviews, and shorter essays by Foucault that outline the direction of his work in progress. At the time, Foucault was studying Christian monastic texts and exploring old rituals of penance. In volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault had explored diet, health, exercise, as well as the physical, mental, and spiritual teachings of Greek and Roman ancient Stoics. For him, these practices constituted a certain care of the self and an "art of existence." For the unfinished volume 4, Foucault was looking at many spiritual and bodily exercises adopted by the early Christians. Foucault seems to have believed that such "practices of the self" could be refashioned for our time and serve as the foundation for a new form of spirituality.⁵

In Iran, Foucault was fascinated by the dramatic public demonstrations he witnessed and, especially, by the Islamists' appropriation of Shi'i rituals for their political objectives. The motifs of pain and suffering from injustice, and rituals glorifying martyrdom, have been at the core of Iranian Shi'ism since the sixteenth century. But these rituals of penitence found a new political meaning in the course of the revolution when Ayatollah Khomeini masterfully reappropriated them for establishing an Islamist government. In the rhythmic chants of the protesters, the self-flagellation of the demonstrators, and the exuberance of death-defying crowds dressed in black shirts and veils (for women), Foucault apparently saw a reenactment of the rituals of the monastic orders in early Christianity. Indeed, Foucault's writings on these monastic rites resonate closely with some practices of Shi'i Islam. Foucault was also intrigued by Islamist calls for a new form of "political spirituality," and he shared the Islamists' criticism of the loss of such values in the Western world.

Despite his familiarity with the fascist right in Europe, Foucault never related the Islamists' selective reading of *modernity*, or equation of *modernity* with the loss of spirituality, to similar political invocations by the right in Europe four decades earlier. There are many examples of such political manipulations in Europe, and one can compare these with the Iranian experience in order to demystify the notion of the Islamist regime and its propaganda techniques as a distinctly "Oriental" phenomenon. Indeed, one is struck by the degree to which Foucault universal-

ized Islam and Shi'ism and never explored the fact that this was a particular reading of Shi'ism adopted by a group of opposition clerics and intellectuals in the course of the Iranian Revolution. Nor did he pay attention to the fact that Khomeini's "anti-modernist" stance involved innovations and inventions of tradition. What Foucault witnessed in Iran was the result of a carefully staged and crafted interpretation of Shi'ism, one developed in the 1960s and 1970s by a group of religious thinkers in response to the authoritarian modernization of Mohammad Reza Shah's government. This constituted a more militant and political reading of Shi'ism, which was also influenced by Western philosophic discourses. It provided a synthesis of orthodox Marxism, existentialism, and a militant form of traditional Shi'i Islam. In this hybrid discourse, the rituals of prayer and fasting, and even the care for fellow Muslims and orphans and widows, took back stage. "Authentic Islam" was defined as a person's willingness to face martyrdom in order to attain a better world for others.

This article explores the ways in which Foucault's interest in Christian rituals of penance resonated with the Iranian experience. I will discuss a central narrative of Shi'i Islam, the story of Karbalâ, which is remembered and reenacted every year in the month of Muharram. In a brief genealogy of Muharram rituals, I discuss the origins of the myth, the invention of the tradition in the sixteenth century, and its various reenactments in modern Iranian history. Then, I focus on the bodily practices of Muharram, the ways in which the rituals implicate the body of the believers/participants and, therefore, fit Foucault's definition of practices of the self. Next, I turn to Foucault's writings on the confessional practices of the Christian church, which help explain his affinity for the discourse of death and the rites of penance in Iran.

In the second part of this article, I develop a critique of Foucault's reading of Shi'i Islam and the Islamist revolution and suggest that he missed the opportunity to develop a more critical and nuanced approach to both. Shi'i and Christian passion plays, and the use to which the latter were put by the Nazis, were known in European intellectual circles, and Foucault should have been more attuned to the dangers of such political uses of national myths and religious rites by conservative clerics in Iran. Indeed, one can argue that Foucault's reading of Islam was "orientalist" because he failed to point out that Shi'i narratives, like other invented traditions and identities around which imagined national or religious communities are formed, lend themselves to multiple readings.⁶

The Karbalâ Paradigm

As opposed to the majority Sunni Muslims, Shi'i Muslims claim that after the death of the prophet Muhammad (632 C.E.), leadership of the Muslim *umma* (community of believers) should have been vested in the family of Muhammad and his descendants, beginning with Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali Ibn Abu Talib

(d. 661). Instead, after Muhammad's death, Abu Bakr, his closest friend and father-in-law, became the first caliph of the Muslim community. Abu Bakr's short rule (632–634) was followed by that of Umar (r. 634–644) and Uthman (r. 644–656). The tribal council eventually elected Ali as the fourth Muslim caliph (r. 656–661).

Both the second and third caliphs, Umar and Uthman, were assassinated. After five years as caliph, Ali was also assassinated, and the leadership of the community was transferred to the influential warrior Mu'awiyah, a member of the Umayyad family and the governor of Syria. The enmity between the Hashemite clan of Muhammad and the Umayyads ran deep. Mu'awiyah had opposed Muhammad's prophecy until nearly everyone else in Mecca had converted to the new faith. He had then reversed himself and joined Muhammad as his secretary. Mu'awiyah had also been a staunch enemy of Ali and blamed him for the assassination of Uthman. Ali's first son Hassan (d. 670) concluded a pact with Mu'awiyah, withdrew from politics, and was financially compensated by him. But Ali's second son, Hussain, chose to pursue his claim, and challenged Yazid (son of Mu'awiyah), who was poised to become the sixth caliph. Hussain counted on the support of the residents of the city of Kufah (southern Iraq). Ali had ruled as a caliph in Kufah, and the Arab armies sent east to conquer Iran were headquartered in that city.⁷

According to legend, Hussain, along with seventy-two male supporters and their families, moved in the direction of Kufah. But the more politically influential Yazid won over the Kufan leadership and forced Hussain and his entourage to camp outside the city in the desert of Karbalâ. The army of Yazid, led by Shemr Ibn Sa'd, encircled the camp, cutting off its access to the waters of the nearby Euphrates River. The siege lasted ten days. On the tenth of Muharram (October 10, 680 C.E.), commemorated by the Shi'is as the mournful Ashura Day, Shemr and his men massacred Hussain and his followers. The women and children were sold into captivity. Yazid then assumed power as the caliph in Damascus.⁸

Supporters of Hussain, known as Shi'i 'Ali (Party of Ali) refused to recognize the Umayyads as legitimate caliphs. In the centuries that followed, Karbalâ became a site of pilgrimage for Shi'is around the world and eventually also a center of theological learning. In Twelver Shi'ism, the official religion of Iran, the term *imam* is reserved for Ali, his two sons Hassan and Hussain, and the subsequent nine descendants of the clan of Ali, who became leaders of this Shi'i community. The Twelver Shi'is claim that enemies and rival groups assassinated the first eleven imams and that the twelfth imam went into occultation in 874 C.E. He will reappear at the end of the world as the *Mahdi* (i.e., the messiah/the promised one), declare God's judgment, and reinstate justice.⁹ A large number of holidays in the Shi'i calendar are devoted to the commemoration of the martyred imams, whose stories are (re)told in countless sermons. While not all Shi'is follow the Twelver line of the succession of imams, in Iran, Lebanon, southern Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Pakistan, and parts of

Afghanistan and India, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Hussain remains the most important ceremonial event of the year among various Shi'i denominations.

(Twelver) Shi'ism became Iran's official religion during the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722). Many bloody rituals of Muharram (wounds to the forehead with knives and swords or scorching of the body) were gradually introduced in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Under Shah Abbas I (1588–1629), Muharram rituals became elaborate civil and religious festivals. The festivals borrowed some traditions from older Persian *Now Rouz* (New Year) ceremonies that had originated in pre-Islamic Iran. The shah encouraged “gladiatorial displays,” or factional strife between rival gangs, as part of the festivities. In this way, sociopolitical discontent among corporate entities such as artisans, guild members, and ethnic groups was channeled into these controlled public spectacles.¹⁰ By the time of Shah Suleiman I (1666–94), spectacular features of Muharram ceremonies reached the point where the “festivals tended to shift from pure devotional assemblies to public entertainment in which displays of social influence were part of the show.”¹¹

A Genealogy of Muharram Rituals

The twin concepts of jihad (in its broad definition, ranging from striving for personal religious improvement to holy war in defending and/or expanding the faith) and *shahadat* (martyrdom) appear in the Qur'an (sura 5, verse 35 and sura 25, verse 52). There is also a large body of literature on the conditions and circumstances under which jihad (in its narrow definition of holy war) is required and martyrdom encouraged.¹² But in Shi'ism, because of the central narrative of Muharram, the themes of martyrdom and unjust usurpation of power by earthly rulers are even more pronounced than in Sunni Islam.

Many devout Iranian Shi'is remember and reenact the events of Karbalâ and the martyrdom of Ali in three ways. First, there is a dramatic narration of the life and the suffering of the saints, the *rowzeh khavani*. This is a social gathering of relatives, neighbors, and guild members at one's garden or house. A cleric (in the men's hall) or a female dirge singer (in the women's hall) recites the tragedy of Ali or mourns the events of Karbalâ, using passages from a sixteenth-century book, known as *Rowzat al-shohada* [The garden of the martyrs].¹³ The audience laments and grieves in memory of Ali and Hussain. Meanwhile, the host serves tea, coffee, and sometimes there are a few rounds of water pipes. Eventually, the guests are entertained with a lavish feast.

Second, the events of Karbalâ are remembered through a public *sinehzani*, a predominantly male ritual of self-flagellation and mourning.¹⁴ This is a funeral procession where participants, dressed in black, march through the streets and bazaars during the ten days of Muharram. At the head of the parade is a coffin or shrouded effigy representing the martyred imam. The men chant eulogies and beat their

chests and backs rhythmically, often with chains, sticks, or swords. These processions also include festive elements, which helps explain the enormous popularity and staying power of these rites.¹⁵

Third is the *ta'ziyeh* performance, which is similar to Christian passion plays and was influenced by the latter. *Ta'ziyeh* offers a theatrical representation of the Karbalā events. It is one of the oldest forms of theater in the region, and ordinary citizens eagerly anticipate the annual performances. This highly melodramatic enactment, a fusion of the first two traditions with European theatrical ones, is staged by local groups throughout the country before large audiences. The performances single out the suffering of Hussain's entourage, especially that of the women and the children, on Ashura Day. The narrator and the actors describe in great detail the thirst of the besieged community in the heat of the desert of Karbalā and the cruelty of Yazid, who chose Friday at noon, the time of Muslim communal prayer, to slaughter his rivals. The audience weeps bitterly during the last scenes of the play and is reminded of the treachery and guilt of the Kufan community, which did not side with its savior Hussain, thereby allowing the tyrant Yazid to commit his dastardly deed. These rituals of Muharram, much more than any single belief or dogma, define Shi'i communities.¹⁶

Most scholars believe that Muharram rituals have pre-Islamic origins. William Beeman argues that the rituals are similar to those marking the death of Dionysus in ancient Greek mythology, or Osiris in ancient Egyptian mythology, and symbolize cosmic renewal and rebirth. Muharram is also traced to ancient Mesopotamian rituals, which helped give birth to similar traditions in Manichaeism, Judaism, or Christianity.¹⁷ Ritual lamentation, wailing, and self-flagellation are practiced in all of these religions as a means of purifying the body and the whole community.¹⁸ Ehsan Yarshater supports pre-Islamic Iranian origins of these rituals, especially the story of Siyavosh, son of Key Kavus. This story is recounted in Abu al-Qasem Ferdousi's Persian epic *Shahnameh* [The book of kings], 1010 C.E., a lyrical masterpiece that forms the foundation for Iranian national literature. Like Hussain, Siyavosh had seventy-two companions. Afrasiyab, the king of Turan, murdered him, along with his entourage. In parts of Iran, the celebration of Ashura is still called *Suvashun*, after Siyavosh.¹⁹ Mahmoud Ayoub writes that Ashura might originally have been a day of celebration, one that commemorated the "day that God forgave Adam" or the day that "God accepted David's repentance," since there are references to traditions that regard it as a "day of joy and festivity." Ayoub also suggests a possible Jewish origin for the holiday in Yom Kippur.²⁰

In Iran, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the mourning rituals of Muharram had developed into a new form of theatrical performance. In the nineteenth century, numerous guilds of players and performers were organized with the support of the imperial court and the elite.²¹ European diplomats and scholars who

observed the performances often felt overwhelmed. The French diplomat Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816–82) traveled to Iran twice between the years 1855 and 1863. Gobineau, whose racist theories in *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* [Essay on the inequality of the human races] (1854) are well-known, found the *ta'ziyeh* a highly creative theatrical performance, one that was superior to both the “amateurish Roman theater, and the modern European one.” Gobineau was particularly moved because the *ta'ziyeh* reached a mass audience, whereas contemporary European theater only attracted a small elite group.²² The late-nineteenth-century British diplomat Sir Lewis Pelly was equally charmed by the public reception of the *ta'ziyeh*: “If the success of the drama is to be measured by the effects which it produces upon the people for whom it is composed, or upon the audiences before whom it is represented, no play has ever surpassed the tragedy known in the Musulman world as that of Hasan and Husain.”²³

In the late nineteenth century, Naser al-Din Shah built a large theater, known as *takyeh*, for *ta'ziyeh* performances. There were perhaps thirty other *takyehs* in Tehran, and each accommodated close to 3,000 people. Thus very large crowds, even by present-day standards, attended the annual *ta'ziyeh* performances.²⁴

Reza Shah (r. 1925–41), the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, embarked on a program to secularize and modernize the nation. He banned many rituals of Muharram, including the processions that included self-flagellation and self-mutilation. But the public never really abandoned the ceremonies, including *ta'ziyeh* performances. In 1941, when Britain and Russia forced the shah to abdicate, these rituals were revived, though in less elaborate forms. The publication of Bahram Bayza'i's *Theater in Iran* (1965) drew the academic and artistic communities of Iran to *ta'ziyeh* passion plays. In 1976, at the Shiraz festival of the arts, sponsored by the royal court, *ta'ziyeh* was developed into an elite theatrical experience and embraced by Iran's literary and artistic communities, even as the government continued to discourage local performances.²⁵

Muharram and the Practices of the Self

The events of Muharram, and the accompanying rituals in the month of Safar, as well as the mourning processions of the month of Ramazan on the anniversary of Ali's martyrdom, occupy about two months of the year. In this period, the subliminal messages of Muharram are chiseled into the hearts and minds of participants, helping to shape their worldview.²⁶

Much of the appeal of *ta'ziyeh* lies in the physical, spiritual, and emotional links forged between the actors and the audience, as well as among the members of the audience. Hussain Esma'ili writes about the ways in which all the senses are invoked and engaged, both in the mourning processions and in the performances at

the *takyeh* playhouses. The scent of rose water, wild rue (to avert the evil eye), and incense blends with the smoke of tobacco from water pipes and sweat from the huddled crowds. Food is an important part of the festivities, and sharing food is part of the ritual. The aroma of juicy kebabs prepared on hot charcoal mixes with the sweet smell of saffron rice pudding, sour cherry syrups, and cardamom tea that is served constantly. The sound of various musical instruments—drums, tambourines, trumpets, horns, and flutes—fills the air, alongside the chants and the singing of the performers.²⁷ The *ta'ziyeh* is based on material that is literary in origin and embellished by colloquialisms. The heroes sing while the villains speak, and the entire script of the *ta'ziyeh* is rhymed.²⁸

The festivities also engage the eyes. The crystal decorations, bright lights, ornate costumes, and props mesmerize young and old. The protagonists are dressed in green and black, the colors of Islam; the antagonists are dressed in red, the color of blood and passion. The angels of God wear wings on their backs, while demons hold spiked clubs. The imams carry prayer beads and wave copies of the *Qur'an*, while Yazid and his cohorts hold symbolic glasses of wine (forbidden by Islam) in their hands, suggesting their evil intentions. The performance is especially exciting to children. Some actors gallop around the platform on fast horses, others might dress up as animals (often a lion). There is also a lot of clowning and many *ta'ziyehs* include grotesque comedy and epic tales with little connection to the story of Karbalā.

The *ta'ziyeh* continuously breaks the boundaries of time and real and imagined worlds.²⁹ This dramatic device, known as *goriz* (diversion) allows the actors to perform a play within a play. Hussain can travel to India to aid a local king just before his death. And the ghosts of biblical prophets appear and give him the “good news that he will soon become a martyr.”³⁰ Peter Chelkowski, the foremost scholar of *ta'ziyeh*, writes that neither time nor place is real and definite. What happened in the year 61 of the Muslim era (680 A.D.) on the battlefield of Karbalā becomes a reality today. “Ta'ziyeh breaks the boundaries of time and space.” The past and the present meet, and the “audience is both here and in the desert of Karbalā.”³¹ According to the renowned dramaturge Peter Brook,

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have seen in theater: A group of four hundred villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under a tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they all knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw [Hussain] in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theater became a truth—there was no difference between past and present. An event that was told as remembered happening in history 1,300 years ago, actually became a reality in that moment.³²

Yann Richard turns our gaze to the crowd and the mourning processions on the streets. He speaks of the young, unshaven men, dressed in black, many wearing white shrouds in order to show their willingness to die. Some smear dirt on their foreheads, indicating their eagerness to be buried for Hussain. They beat their chests rhythmically, sometimes with a small chain, cut their scalps in moments of frenzy, and seem oblivious to any sense of pain. At the head of the procession, which slowly moves through the winding streets, is a large, heavy, and excessively decorated metal emblem. From time to time, the young men who carry the heavy symbol stop and perform daring, acrobatic stunts with it. They mount it on their foreheads, bounce it on their belly buttons, and attempt to impress the young women [and men] in the crowd who watch them with great excitement and admiration.³³

Many Muharram rituals routinely transgress gender boundaries. Muharram festivities provide a rare occasion for individuals of the opposite sex and even lovers to meet in public places. An unacknowledged and unspoken, but clearly palpable, sexual energy is released on the streets. Many young men, in anticipation of Muharram processions, attend traditional bodybuilding clubs in the weeks preceding the events. Young women sometimes send marriage proposals to handsome leaders of the processions.³⁴ In a society where the accusation of femininity is a great affront to men, male actors in *ta'ziyeh* performances, including many amateurs, willingly dress as women and perform the female roles.³⁵

The Shi'i rituals of mourning also play a crucial psychological role. In a culture where saving face and hiding one's failures constitute important social customs, communal grieving and lamentation provide important psychological relief. Participation in a *rowzeh khavani* gathering offers an acceptable form of expressing one's grief.³⁶ These rituals of penance thus address the believers' spiritual needs in a very concrete way. By appealing to Hussain and his family, one can hope for a swift resolution of one's problems. As Mary Hegland has similarly argued, the figure of Imam Hussain has served as "an intercessor between God and human beings."³⁷ Hussain's martyrdom earns him a special place in the heavenly panoply. He is gifted with the saintly power of forgiving sins and fulfilling believers' wishes, no matter how mundane.

Foucault on the Shi'i Discourse of Death and the Christian Rituals of Confession

Foucault, who personally witnessed the antishah demonstrations, compared the political reenactments of Shi'i rituals by the Islamists during the 1978–79 Iranian Revolution to European Christian rites of penitence:

On December 2, the month of Muharram begins. In this month people mourn the martyrdom of [Hussain]. This is the time for the great ritual of penitence (until a little while ago, groups of people took to the streets while performing

self-flagellation). But a feeling of guilt, which might remind one of Christianity, is tied into these events and has a lasting bond with the commemoration of the martyr. It is a time when people, in their spiritual renunciation, have no fear of facing death.³⁸

Foucault was nearly mesmerized by the new attitude of the unarmed masses on the streets toward death. For him, Shi'i Iranians had a different "regime of truth," an entirely different attitude toward life and death, one that set them apart from the logic of the contemporary Western world. Foucault was interested in both the festive manifestations of the rituals of mourning and their healing power. In a visit to the shrine of a saint he wrote:

All around the mausoleum there is stamping and jostling. The European is probably wrong to seek to discern what part is village fair and what part devotion. The present monarch [Mohammad Reza Shah] has tried indeed to harness some of this current. Very close to here, he erected the tomb of his own father. The father, Reza Shah, also laid out a large avenue and designed concrete platforms where there had been only vegetable gardens. He threw parties and received foreign delegations, all for naught, for in the rivalry between the dead, the [grand]son of the Imam wins, every Friday, over the father of the king.³⁹

Foucault was likewise intrigued by the relationship between the discourse of martyrdom and the new form of "political spirituality" to which the revolutionaries aspired. He held that the Western world had abandoned this form of spirituality ever since the French Revolution. But the political processions and mourning rituals on the streets of Iran had created the foundation for a political rebirth. In the Paradise of Zahra cemetery (Behesht-e Zahra), the largest Iranian cemetery near Tehran, political debates routinely followed mourning rituals. To Foucault, it seemed that Shi'ism had a different approach to death. It was not seen as the end, but simply one more stage in the drama of life. In an imaginary conversation with an Iranian sociologist, he summarized this worldview: "What preoccupies you, you Westerners, is *death*. You ask her to detach you from life and she teaches you how to give up. As for us, we care about the *dead*, because they attach us to life. We hold out our hands to them in order for them to link us to the permanent duty of justice. They speak to us of right and of the struggle that is needed for the right to triumph."⁴⁰

Foucault feared that future historians would reduce the Iranian Revolution to a class struggle, or a populist movement where many among the elite joined the masses to address social, economic, and political grievances. This would miss the point, he warned. The driving force of the revolution was the public nostalgia for the rituals and the discourses of Shi'ism, traditions that many Iranians had abandoned in their forced confrontation with modernity.

But Foucault also made the highly questionable assertion that the Shi'i discourse deployed in the course of the revolution was not an ideology, that it did not "mask contradictions." Nor was it a constructed "sacred union" of "divergent political interests." Moving from a discourse of cultural imperialism to a more universal discursive paradigm of the tyranny of modernity, Foucault argued that the Shi'i discourse was something more intrinsic and unmediated, "the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama into which one could fit the historical drama of a people that pitted its very existence against that of its sovereign."⁴¹

In subsequent years, Foucault developed similar themes, likely under the influence of his sojourn in Iran. There are a number of scattered statements in Foucault's writings, lectures, and interviews in the early 1980s that show his interest in early Christian practices of the self, practices that believing individuals adopted to mold their own thought in order to gain a "certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power."⁴²

Speaking in the fall of 1980, Foucault pointed out that in early Christianity, there were two types of confessions, two practices of punishing the self. First, there was the type of confession that moved Foucault. This was the practice of *exomologesis*, a public manifestation of penitence, which involved fasting, wearing tattered clothes, baring the chest, heaping ashes on one's head, and scarring the body. The penitents had to "prove their suffering and show their shame, make visible their humility, and exhibit their modesty." One told the truth, not by verbally confessing to a sin, but by fasting, self-mutilation, and various other ways of manifesting public grief. There was no verbal enunciation in this particular ritual and no analysis of the sin by a higher authority. Confession did not involve a graphic telling of what one had done or a focusing on the details of one's bodily, familial, or religious transgressions. Like a cleansing bath, this method of confession rubbed out the sin from one's skin and "reinstated the previous purity." The sinner had committed a type of spiritual death. Therefore, his repentance was "the theatrical representation of the sinner, willing his own death as a sinner." It was a most dramatic self-renunciation: "Exomologesis obeyed a law of dramatic emphasis and of maximum theatricality." The sinner expressed a sense of "martyrdom to which all would be witness and through this act [was] reinstated" (172–73).

In the week before Easter, certain days were set aside for this public and collective ritual. The sinners gathered and acted out their grief and shame. The church fathers justified this method of repentance by using medical language: The patient had to show his wounds to the physician if he wished to be healed. More important, however, they used the model of martyrdom as justification. The martyr preferred to face death rather than abandon his faith: "The sinner abandons the faith in order to keep the life of here below; he will be reinstated only if in his turn he exposes him-

self voluntarily to a sort of martyrdom to which all will be witness and which is penance, or penance as exomologesis" (173).

The second type of Christian confession, the one that Foucault disliked, was what he termed "an analytical and continuous verbalization of the thought" to the priest (179). A monk was required to control all of his thoughts, not just his actions and his deeds, so that his heart, his soul, and his eyes were pure to receive God. He accomplished this by confessing everything to a spiritual father. Again, he confessed not only his sinful deeds, but also his thoughts, dreams, and aspirations. This second form of confession, produced in the monastic orders, was called *exagoreusis*. Foucault believed that this second practice was also a model for our modern forms of disciplinary social control, where teachers and psychiatrists replaced the abbot.

In both rituals, one had to sacrifice oneself to learn the truth about oneself. Foucault pointed to the complex Christian theology of the self, the notion that "no truth about the self [was possible] without the sacrifice of the self" (180). This renunciation of the self was either in the flesh (which Foucault seems to have preferred and was perhaps tied to his interest in S&M as a form of discovery of the self through pain) or in words, which Foucault criticized alongside modern disciplinary techniques.

The criticism that Foucault leveled at modern Western culture was that it had attempted to establish a hermeneutics of the self, but not one that was based on the Christian (or, we could add, Muslim) principles of sacrifice of the self. The modern hermeneutics of the self was based on a theoretical and practical emergence of the self. Medical and psychiatric practices, political and philosophical theory, all went in this direction. Subjectivity was the root of a positive self. There was an attempt to substitute "the positive figure of man for the sacrifice which for Christianity was the condition for the opening of the self as a field of indefinite interpretation." Foucault believed this might have been a wrong course of action. "Do we need, really, this hermeneutics of self?" (181). He held that we should instead change the modern practices of the self. Foucault suggested a reenvisioning of the practice of *exomologesis*, of bodily repentance, not in its exact medieval form, but as a dramatic, public, (nonverbal) ritual of confession and a starting point from which one could refashion Western culture.

Foucault's reading of Christian rites of penance can also explain the endurance of, and affinity for, similar rituals of penance in Shi'i Islam.⁴³ Self-flagellation, self-mutilation, and the "baring of the flesh and the body" in Muharram are not individual, lonely acts of repentance. Rather, they take place as part of a collective, dramatic public festival of death. The entire community joins this drama of repentance and representation of death. Penitence, which is also a form of self-purification and a renunciation of guilt, is combined with a variety of ceremonies that engage the body

in the physical, emotional, and spiritual sense, leading to an enormously gratifying experience. The annual penance of Muharram is a time for the individual sinner to place under everyone's eyes the body and the flesh that has committed the sin, not just the historical sin of betraying Hussain, but also one's own individual sin, without the need for a public confession. In crying for Hussain, one also gains absolution from the Almighty for one's own guilt.

Participants in religious social gatherings, street processions, or *ta'ziyeh* performances are routinely encouraged to remember (but not articulate) their individual personal grief and sin. They are told to compare their own tragedies and losses in life to the suffering experienced by Hussain and his family and to conclude that the Kufan tragedy was much greater. The play is also meant to comfort the audience by reminding them that untimely death happens to even the best of us and therefore one should be prepared to accept the will of God. At the end of the *ta'ziyeh* performance, members of the audience confirm and renew their profound expressions of grief/guilt for the events they have witnessed. The annual performance thus creates a sense of community as the participants "ritually renew their commitment to a religion and ideological order of which they are already an integral part."⁴⁴ The individual is therefore involved in an act of public confession. Rather than a verbalization of personal sins and shortcomings, it is a public manifestation of penitence. The participants experience a sense of salvation and hope. They believe that the Almighty might now redeem them as a result of their appeals to the clan of Hussain.

However, these religious/transnational rites and performances assumed new, political-national dimensions during the Iranian Revolution when Muharram rituals became an expression of the ultimate act of resistance to injustice and tyranny. Foucault could not have found a better modern example for his public manifestations of repentance. His 1980 lecture on the subject of Christian methods of confession was likely influenced by what he saw on the streets of Iran.

The Politics of Shi'i and Christian Passion Plays

What many contemporary discussions of Muharram fail to mention is that the message of Karbalâ does not just involve adoration and veneration of the good. In the medieval passion plays of Europe, the purity, decency, and love of Jesus was contrasted with the fiendish, mischievous actions of the Jews, who supposedly caused his death. Likewise in the Iranian Shi'i passion plays, the saintly qualities of the Shi'i leaders are contrasted to the unethical and vile conduct of the early Sunni leaders, who supposedly snatched the mantle of leadership wrongly, taking it away from Hussain and showing no mercy toward his family, including the infants.

The rituals of Muharram condemn the founders of the Umayyad dynasty and, by implication, their followers (i.e., the majority Sunni Muslims). Straw effigies of the enemies of the clan of Muhammad, including that of Uthman, the highly respected

third caliph in the Sunni world, are spat on and set on fire. In parts of Iran, certain days are designated as “the killing of Umar” days, when people celebrate the assassination of the second Muslim caliph, Umar, who is also seen as a usurper. Often the *ta'ziyeh* includes a Christian character (the foreign ambassador) who witnesses the tragedy of Hussain and is so moved by the event that he converts to Islam. The implication is clear: non-Muslims will convert to Islam if they understand the true meaning of Karbalā. The play gives an exaggerated sense of importance to the ordinary Shi'i Muslim, who is told that all the angels (including the devil) and every dead or living person (including all the former biblical prophets) came to save Hussain before his predestined death. These ceremonies and processions remind non-Shi'i and non-Muslim Iranians of their marginal and precarious status in that society. The frenzied Muharram processions always have the potential of becoming violent. Often, when two rival factions (*dasteh*) performing the *sinhezani* (self-flagellation rituals) come face to face in a narrow alley, neither one gives the other the right-of-way. As a result, sometimes violent outbursts occur, leaving many injured or even killed, and terrifying the non-Shi'i communities.⁴⁵

Muharram is also about total obedience to higher religious authorities. This is not a script where the father sacrifices himself for the son, or where the son asserts his authority over the father. Rather, as in the story of Abraham and his son, it is the child who is asked to give his life willingly for the glory of the father and, unlike the story of Abraham, a child is always martyred in the play. The authority of the patriarch is continuously reasserted. Women are recognized for two attributes—they are the givers of martyrs (as sisters, wives, and mothers of the men who die), and the eventual victims of the play. The wives of Hussain never speak, but Zainab, the sister of Hussain, is glorified because she accepts the eventual destiny of her brother, helps prepare him for his last battle, and eventually lives to tell the story. The ethics and politics of Muharram, like the black shirts and the white shrouds of the mourners, are uncompromising. Hussain and the entire clan of Muhammad are good, decent, ethical, and pure, while the enemy is wicked, impure, unethical, and immoral. Only a sinner or an unbeliever would ask if the clan of Hussain was justified in its claim to the eternal leadership of the entire Muslim community by virtue of its birthright.

Foucault's omissions in his accounts of the rituals, both Christian and Muslim, are surprising and troubling. Foucault belonged to a generation well aware of the uses that fascist movements had made of Christian rituals of martyrdom and passion plays. Why was there no reference to this in his 1978–79 writings on Iran, or even in those on the hermeneutics of religion in the 1980s, which he wrote much later and far away from the frenzy of the revolutionary moment?

For Christians raised on the story of the crucifixion of Jesus and related passion plays, the story of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain sounds remarkably familiar.⁴⁶ Indeed, if we compare *ta'ziyeh* performances with the longest surviving pas-

sion play in Europe, the one that has been held in the village of Oberammergau (Bavarian Alps) since 1634, we can note numerous similarities. The Oberammergau passion play centers on Jesus and his supporters.⁴⁷ The *ta'ziyeh* centers on Hussain and his clan. Jesus is betrayed by those who are initially loyal to him, while Hussain is betrayed by the once-loyal Kufans. The Christian play is devoted to the “passion” of Jesus, meaning his suffering and gruesome death, just as the *ta'ziyeh* is devoted to the tragic suffering and death of Hussain and his family. A significant part of both stories deals with the grieving as well as the courage of women, whether of Mary who mourns the loss of her son, or of Zainab, who lives to tell the story of her brother’s martyrdom.⁴⁸ Both plays include flashbacks to Old Testament stories, such as the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, Moses leading the wandering tribe across the Red Sea, and the story of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son. As Gordon Mork points out in his discussion of the Oberammergau play, Jesus is not portrayed as a “powerful avenger.” Rather, he is seen as a “suffering servant” of God who allowed him to be sacrificed “to atone for the sins of all the world.”⁴⁹ Michael Fischer similarly suggests that Hussain “had to witness for Islam and thereby shock people back to the true path, to serve as an example throughout the ages that sometimes death can create a lasting testament that people will remember.”⁵⁰

The similarities between Christian and Shi’i Muslim passion plays extend to their appropriation for political aims as well. Roman Catholics have played an important role in a number of national liberation movements around the world, including the oppositional culture of the Poland’s Solidarnosc movement, the hunger strikes of Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoners in Northern Ireland and, of course, liberation theology in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Haiti, and elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America. But Christianity and its rituals, like those of Islam, lend themselves to multiple readings, including ones that demonize the “other.” The attempt to mold, shape, and manipulate passion plays has not been limited to twentieth-century Iran. European fascism was not, as it is often assumed to be, entirely anti-Christian or anticlerical. Hungarian, Slovakian, and Croatian fascist movements drew on Christian symbols and rituals as well as on Christian millenarian beliefs. The Iron Guard and the Legion of Archangel Michael in Romania showed some similarities to militant Shi’i movements of late-twentieth-century Iran. Romanian fascist organizations employed priests and churches in their appeals to the masses and drew their inspiration from religious icons. They were also characterized by “extraordinary cults of suffering, sacrifice, and martyrdom” and regarded their ultimate goal as the “resurrection in Christ.”⁵¹

Even the Nazis, who glorified pre-Christian Germanic traditions and were somewhat antireligious, realized that in the absence of a unifying cultural heritage, religious rituals could be reappropriated. Adolf Hitler was acutely aware of the political message of the Oberammergau passion play and encouraged his party to use the

play for disseminating anti-Semitism. He went twice to the Oberammergau play, in 1930 and in 1934, and declared it “a German national treasure.” He further argued that the play had to be kept alive because of its highly negative portrayal of the Jews: “One of the most important tasks will be to save future generations from a similar political fate and to maintain forever watchful in them knowledge of the menace of Jewry. For this reason alone it is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau.”⁵² In 1939, the Nazi Propaganda Ministry, which backed the performance, declared the event “important for the Reich,” while a leading member of the party announced that “the Passion Play is the most anti-Semitic play of which we are aware.”⁵³

Reinventing Traditions: Martyrdom As a Path to Authentic Living

The above comparison between European fascism and Iranian Shi'i Islamism, as well as their similar uses of religious rituals and passion plays, is not arbitrary. Much has been written about some European intellectuals of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries who in their rejection of individualism, rationalism, and democracy turned to a new Christian identity, one that borrowed some elements from socialism and nationalism and eventually contributed to the birth of European fascism.⁵⁴ A parallel process took place in Iran. In the decade before the Iranian Revolution, a generation of Iranian intellectuals with both leftist and religious leanings gradually carved a new and more militant discourse of Islam, one that borrowed from Western communism, existentialism, and fascism. This new discourse emerged in response to a government that tolerated no ideological or political criticisms of the regime. Agents of the dreaded SAVAK secret police infiltrated all colleges and universities and used many of the modern technologies of power that Foucault analyzed. Various branches of the secret police and the offices of propaganda formed a panopticon. A hierarchical method of observation was established in schools and colleges. The same control mechanism operated in work places, social clubs, and the military, making it possible for a “single gaze” of the director/principal/officer to monitor the actions of everyone. A normalizing judgment—a set of rules that required continuous observation—was put in place through government regulations, textbooks, radio and television programs, and various means of entertainment. Students were expected to refrain from expressing any negative views about the government and were required to participate in state-sponsored celebrations, such as the shah's or the crown prince's birthdays. Nationalism and patriotism meant complete loyalty to the king. The motto on the wall of every classroom and in every public space was “God, the Shah, and the Nation.” Thus, reverence for the king came before loyalty to the nation. In short, a normalization process was put in place, with the king at its center.

One of the new dissident intellectuals, Jalal Al-Ahmad (1923–69), author of

the now classic 1963 study, *Plagued by the West*, was a former communist sympathizer. He was the first to contribute to the new discourse of militant Islam. By the early 1960s, Al-Ahmad saw Islam as the only remaining barrier to Western capitalism and rampant consumerism. *Plagued by the West* provided a Nietzschean critique of modern technology, infused with a Marxian critique of alienated labor. It also formed a response to the cultural hegemony of the West.⁵⁵ Al-Ahmad was influenced by Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Franz Kafka, who had written on the contradictory impulses of modernity in philosophical treatises, novels, and plays. To Al-Ahmad, the plagues and demons in the works of these authors referred to a technocratic capitalism that had run amok in the modern world. It was a world that had abandoned all faith and all ideologies except for science and materialism. This scientific worldview had ushered in the atomic age, beginning with the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "I understand all of these fictional destinies to be omens, foreboding the Hour of Judgment, warning that the machine demon if not harnessed and put back into the bottle, will place a hydrogen bomb at the end of the road for mankind."⁵⁶

Al-Ahmad believed that modern technology could only be tamed through a return to the twin concepts of martyrdom and jihad, the latter in its combative meaning. For nearly two centuries, a variety of "nationalist" camps in Iran, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire had used Islam as a weapon to resist Western/European colonialism in the Middle East (33). But the Muslim world was weakened from the Shi'i/Sunni divide and especially by the institutionalization of Shi'ism in Iran under the Safavid dynasty. Shi'ism had lost its vitality and exuberance once the discourses of jihad and martyrdom had been abandoned. From "the day we gave up the possibility of martyrdom, and limited ourselves to paying homage to the martyrs, we were reduced to the role of the doormen of cemeteries" (68).

Ali Shariati (d. 1977), one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of his generation, was another Iranian intellectual who contributed to this type of thinking. Shariati, who held a doctorate in medieval philology from the Sorbonne, galvanized the youth and paved the way for Khomeini's eventual appropriation of the movement.⁵⁷ Shariati's reinterpretation of jihad and martyrdom was influenced by his philosophical studies in France, though he also claimed to present an "authentic Islam."

In mentioning Al-Ahmad and Shariati here, it should not be forgotten that a far larger number of Iranian intellectuals of the 1960s were fascinated by Western schools of thought, such as Marxism and existentialism, and were not interested in the traditional sermons of the clerics. Shariati gave the old religious narratives a new stamp of Western/modern acceptability by connecting to some of the themes of leftist thought, thus making them more palatable to college students. Soon after his return to Iran in 1964, Shariati gained a reputation as a powerful lecturer. When

Hussainiyeh Ershad, a somewhat modern theological seminary, opened in Tehran in 1969, Shariati lectured there and found a mass following. His lectures were recorded and distributed, and his controversial ideas were discussed widely, despite the jealousy and resentment of the traditional Shi'i clergy. The regime allowed limited space for oppositional discourse within the religious community, while cracking down much harder on the secular left. This formed part of the overall Cold War mindset, which saw communism as the main threat to the established power. Although Shariati was allowed to lecture for a few years, he left the country in 1977 after a series of confrontations with the regime. He died shortly afterward from a heart attack in London at the age of forty-four. Rumors implicating the regime in his death soon elevated his stature to that of a *shahid* (martyr). With the exception of Khomeini, it was Shariati whose writings and speeches galvanized a new generation and inspired the 1978–79 revolution.⁵⁸

Shariati introduced an existentialist reading of the tragedy of Karbalâ that was also informed by the work of Martin Heidegger. He elevated the concept of martyrdom above all else and called it the defining moment of Shi'ism.⁵⁹ He called for a revolutionary concept of Islam, one that could challenge the monarchy and bring a new generation of Muslim thinkers like him to power. In his search for an “authentic” interpretation of Islam, Shariati castigated all other influences on Islam, the result of over a thousand years of rich intellectual ferment and cross-fertilization, especially Greek philosophy, Indian and Iranian mysticism, as well as Christian and Jewish theology. He also rejected the more tolerant interpretations of Islam found in classical Persian poetry (e.g., Omar Khayyam), in Muslim philosophy (e.g., Farabi, 870–950; Avicenna, 980–1037), or even in Sufi mysticism.⁶⁰ The new “authentic Islam” of Shariati centered on a reinterpretation of the story of Karbalâ. The tragedy had taken place because Shi'i Muslims remained passive and ignorant of political and ideological issues. If Iranians could capture the original revolutionary meaning of Shi'i Islam and the concept of the “ideal” Muslim man and woman, they could overcome another Yazid (the shah) and bring about a society based on true Muslim values.⁶¹

Shariati delivered one of his most moving lectures in 1970, on the eve of Ashura, at a time when several of his students (members of the clandestine Islamist-leftist Mujahideen organization) had been killed by the shah's police. Shariati did not dwell on the themes commonly invoked in the sermons of the clerics, such as the murder and enslavement of women and children at Karbalâ, the cruelty of Yazid, the treachery of Hussain's allies, or the promise of paradise for the saintly clan of Muhammad and the true believers. Instead, Shariati placed almost exclusive stress on Hussain's willingness to embrace martyrdom. Conventional theologians had downplayed the significance of this type of jihad in Islam. They told their followers that there were eight gates to heaven, and jihad was only one of these doors, one that

could be avoided. Shariati ridiculed such notions along with some of the practices of Muharram. Paradise could not be bought so cheaply through prayer, fasting, and rituals! Only through a continuous reenactment of the tragedy of Karbalâ could one live the life of a genuine Muslim. This reenactment was not via *ta'ziyeh* performances or Muharram processions, nor was it an intellectual or “mental jihad.” It could only be achieved through embracing personal martyrdom in the present day.⁶²

For Shariati, the key point in the story of Karbalâ was Hussain's existential choice. Hussain could not fight and win over the more powerful Yazid, nor could he remain silent. Therefore, he chose a third option, death, which opened the possibility of an authentic Shi'i Islam for others. Martyrdom, as defined by Shariati, was a mystical experience, full of erotic charge, and beyond “science and logic.” The story of Hussain's martyrdom was “so exciting that it pulls the spirit toward the fire. It paralyzes logic. It weakens speech. It even makes thinking difficult.” Martyrdom was the combination of “a refined love and a deep, complex wisdom” (154). The martyr was a “model” and an “example” for other human beings (194); the efficacy and the resonance of martyrdom were “broader, deeper, more continuous than that of Jihad, even one that is victorious” (207). Martyrdom constituted a privilege because one opted for death at a time of one's choice. It was “a choice, whereby the warrior sacrifices himself on the threshold of the temple and the altar of love and is victorious” (193). Despite his claim to present an “authentic Islam,” Shariati's reading was heavily indebted to Western thought, including some of the most virulent forms of Christian anti-Semitism. For example, he referred to “money-worshipping Jews” or “deceitful Christ-killing rabbis” (208). Many leading clerics and even some secular Muslim intellectuals of this period shared Shariati's sentiments. But there also existed a stronger philosophical and hermeneutical appropriation. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger had reinterpreted the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to arrive at a new philosophical meaning. When faced with the possibility of one's own death, one adopted an attitude of being-toward-death, and thereby experienced authentic living.⁶³ This and similar hermeneutical readings of Christianity had influenced Shariati. But his notion of authenticity was aimed at the community rather than the individual. When Shi'is faced a formidable enemy of Islam, one who could not be defeated, they had two options: (1) to remain silent and allow the oppression to continue or (2) to choose death and at least create the possibility of authentic [Muslim] living for others. In a morbid appeal to the youth, both young men and women, Shariati argued that this type of death was as beautiful as a “necklace” around the neck of a young and beautiful girl, that such martyrdom was “an adornment for mankind.”⁶⁴

Shariati also parted company with Christian theologians who had argued that Jesus “sacrificed himself for humanity” (209). A similar reading of the story of Karbalâ could have suggested that the executioners of Hussain had also acted accord-

ing to the will of God and hence deserved some mercy. But Shariati's vitriolic discourse lacked mercy or forgiveness. The mission of Ashura was "revolt and Jihad for the devastation of the regime of Yazid" (209). Hussain knew that death at the hands of his enemies would mark them for life. They became "transgressors" who had murdered the grandson of Muhammad. Hussain realized that he could achieve more by facing martyrdom in the hands of his enemies (and tainting their reputation) than by living. This was not a death where God forgave the sins of humanity; it was a death that pointed toward revenge, a death that marked the other as a sinner. "It is in this way that the dying of a human being guarantees the life of a nation" (213). Martyrdom was "the only reason for existence" and a "goal itself." It was "an invitation to all generations, in all ages, if you cannot kill your oppressor, then die." Martyrdom was so noble in Islam that the corpse required no ritual bath. The martyr was also under no obligation "to give an account of himself on the day of Judgment" (214). According to Shariati, martyrdom was thus a free pass straight to heaven.⁶⁵

Reenacting the Karbalâ Paradigm: The Revolution

After Shariati's death in 1977, Khomeini, long respected for his opposition to the shah and his austere lifestyle in exile, quickly assumed the mantle of leadership within the Islamist opposition.⁶⁶ Soon after the election of Jimmy Carter in the United States, the shah came under severe criticism by the international community for his dismal record on human rights, including arrest and torture of political prisoners.

In the early stages of the revolution, vibrant secular nationalist and leftist movements were active alongside the Islamist one. Gradually, the Islamists, who took their cue from Khomeini, came to dominate the movement. Shariati's radical students, including many members and followers of the Islamist-leftist Mujahideen organization, flocked to Khomeini's side and bestowed on him the title of Imam. This was a veiled suggestion indicating that perhaps he was the twelfth imam who had returned (from occultation) to announce the Day of Judgment. As the opposition movement against the shah gained momentum inside Iran, the exiled Khomeini called on his close confidants, Ayatollah Motahhari and Ayatollah Beheshti, to instigate street demonstrations that borrowed many elements from Muharram processions.

What happened in Iran in 1978 was, therefore, the result of a twofold set of appropriations: the revival of some old and forbidden rituals of Muharram and, simultaneously, a new interpretation of Shi'i traditions, one that emphasized martyrdom. In his appropriation of Shi'i rituals, Khomeini removed the borders between the audience and the actors, turned the entire country into a stage for his casting, and imbued the old passion plays with a passionate hatred of the shah, Israel, and the West, as well as Iran's non-Muslims, especially Baha'is and Jews (the latter tracing their heritage in Iran back to 500 B.C.E.), and advocates of women's rights. Drawing on some long-held prejudices of Islamic theology with regard to gender concerns

and the rights of non-Muslims, and in language reminiscent of fascist propaganda of the 1930s, Khomeini and a group of theologians embarked on a militant and belligerent interpretation of the Karbalâ incident, one with overtly political dimensions. The emphasis no longer lay on the innocence of Hussain. It lay on Hussain's willingness to make the supreme sacrifice of giving his life for the sake of justice. Muslims were expected to follow the example of Hussain and give their lives for the cause of justice as defined by Khomeini. Khomeini had accused Mohammad Reza Shah of acting as a modern Yazid, the enemy of Shi'is. He thereby sanctioned a revolutionary insurrection against the shah's regime.

Khomeini encouraged women and children to march at the head of processions. "Our brave women, embrace their children and face the machine guns and tanks of the executioners of this regime. . . . Sisters and Brothers be resolute, do not show weakness and lack of courage. You are following the path of the Almighty and his prophets. Your blood is poured on the same road as that of the (martyred) prophets, Imams, and their followers. You join them. This is not an occasion to mourn but to rejoice."⁶⁷ Over and over, he resurrected the imagery of the Karbalâ. "My dears, do not fear giving martyrs, giving life and property for God, Islam, and the Muslim nation. This is the manner of our great prophet and his clan. Our blood is no more precious than the blood of the martyrs of Karbalâ. . . . You, who have stood up for Islam and devoted your life and property [to it], are now in the ranks of the martyrs of Karbalâ, for you follow this doctrine."⁶⁸

Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, fell on December 11, 1978. The traditional processions of Muharram were now transformed into a formidable political weapon. At the invitation of Ayatollah Taleqani, over a million people participated in the demonstrations throughout the country. Participants became actors in a massive reenactment of the *ta'ziyeh*: "Instead of inflicting wounds on their bodies in the traditional way, they stood ready to expose themselves to bayonets and bullets. Those in the vanguard, who were totally ready for martyrdom, would wear symbolic burial shrouds to show their willingness to sacrifice their lives."⁶⁹

Soon the mass processions combined with a series of general strikes in major cities, where millions participated. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi left the country in January 1979. Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1, 1979, and was greeted by 3 million supporters in the streets of Tehran. The rituals of Muharram traditionally end with a visit to the local cemetery, and this was exactly what Khomeini did when his plane landed in Tehran. He went straight to the Paradise of Zahra cemetery and visited the graves of the martyrs of the revolution, where he delivered a eulogy and presented his vision of a new Islamist society.⁷⁰

Conclusion

In the decade before the revolution, a generation of Iranian theologians and religious thinkers had developed a new hermeneutics of Shi'ism and reinterpreted the struggle against evil in more contemporary terms. Through this new and more politicized retelling of the old story of Karbalā, many ordinary Iranians were encouraged to join the movement against the modernist and autocratic government of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, even if it meant sacrificing their lives for this mission. Tens of thousands of people joined the antishah demonstrations on the streets of Tehran, wearing white shrouds as a sign of their willingness to face death. Demonstrators carried pictures of martyred political prisoners and chanted slogans calling for their deaths to be avenged. Even secular and leftist political organizations of this period drew their legitimacy from the number of martyrs they had given to the revolutionary cause.

Foucault recognized the Iranian public's fascination with the seemingly archaic rituals of Shi'i Islam. He was moved by the active participation of the clerics in the anti-shah movement and was intrigued by the use of religious processions and rituals for ostensibly political concerns. Every time government troops shot and killed protesters on the streets, their actions led to larger demonstrations. Foucault grasped the crowds' enormous fascination with death and the trust in the militant religious leadership this implied. He understood that the religious gatherings, processions, and theatrical performances of Shi'ism, like their counterparts in Christianity, were politically charged ceremonies that forged new communal solidarities. Foucault and the religious opposition in Iran shared more than a rejection of imperialist and colonialist policies of the West. They also shared a fascination with the discourse of death as a path to authenticity and salvation for the living, a discourse that included rites of penitence and that aimed at refashioning the self.

To be sure, Foucault's writings, including those on Iran, prove fascinating and can shed light on many contemporary issues, such as the emergence of a politics of martyrdom in the late twentieth century and politics of identity and identity formation. But the great theoretician of power/knowledge had missed something important. Shi'ism, as any other ideology or religion, is subject to multiple interpretations and readings. The late-twentieth-century discourse that brought the Iranian masses onto the streets constituted a particular reading of Shi'i Islam, one that privileged a militant reading of jihad and martyrdom over care for the community and tolerance for non-Muslims. It was a novel discourse which relied heavily on mass media, drew on a variety of Western discourses from nationalism and communism to Heideggerianism, and rekindled old gender and religious divisions into a new politics of hate. Foucault's wholesale rejection of modernity and democracy, without suggesting an alternative paradigm, led to sympathy with an Islamism that rejected aspects of

modernity and assailed Western democracy. Few have noted that by the late 1970s, Foucault's project had become more than a complete rejection of modernity; it was also a return to certain traditional discourses, rituals, practices of the self, and operations of power that have historically perpetuated racial, class, gender, ethnic, and religious hierarchies in both Eastern and Western societies. Social and cultural historians who have appropriated Foucault's highly seductive methodology, including this author, need to be more aware of these pitfalls and their political and social implications

Foucault, in the tradition of Nietzsche and Bataille, had embraced the artist who pushed the limits of rationality and explored near-death experiences. He wrote with great passion in defense of irrationalities that broke new boundaries. In 1978, he found such morbid transgressive powers in the revolutionary figure of Ayatollah Khomeini and the millions who followed him in the course of the revolution. He knew that such "limited" experiences could lead to new creativities, and he passionately threw in his support. Seemingly, it did not really matter to him in which direction the great avalanche of the revolution was heading; it was important to be part of the journey.

Notes

I am grateful to Kevin B. Anderson, Mansour Bonakdarian, Gordon Mork, Negar Mottahedeh, Mary Hegland, and the anonymous reviewers of *Radical History Review* for their many helpful comments. In July 2002, "Ta'ziyeh" was performed as part of Lincoln Center's summer festival in New York. In conjunction, on July 13, the Asia Society and Museum held a one-day symposium on "Ta'ziyeh: Performing Iran's Living Epic Tradition." This article has benefited from the performance and the symposium presentations. Translations of Foucault from French are by Karen De-Bruin and Kevin B. Anderson. Translations from Persian and Arabic are by the author.

1. In April 1979, Foucault wrote an open letter of protest to premier Mehdi Bazargan. Michel Foucault, "Open Letter to Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan," *Le nouvel observateur*, April 14, 1979.
2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979).
3. In France, the controversy over Foucault's writings on Iran, which played itself out in widely circulated publications such as *Le Monde* and *Le nouvel observateur*, is a well-known episode in his career, and a damaging one. Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) and Jeannette Colombel, *Michel Foucault: La clarté de la mort* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1994) have referred to these writings as "error" and "mistakes." James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) and David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (New York: Vintage, 1993) provide English readers with additional critical accounts of Foucault's Iranian episode. More positive evaluations appear in Georg Stauth, "Revolution in Spiritless Times: An Essay on Michel Foucault's Enquiries into the Iranian Revolution," *International Sociology* 6.3 (1991): 259–80; Lawrence Olivier and Sylvian Labbé, "Foucault et l'Iran: À propos du désir de révolution," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24.2 (1991): 219–35. These authors

- suggest that Foucault was not supporting the Islamists, but merely analyzing their movement. Jeremy Carrette, ed., *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1999), treats these writings as a “miscalculation” but highlights Foucault’s interest in the power of religious subjectivity.
4. The entirety of Foucault’s writings and interviews on Iran will be published as an appendix in the forthcoming monograph by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Seductions of Islamism: Foucault, Feminism, and Iran*.
 5. Carrette, *Religion and Culture*; Pierre Hadot, “Reflections on the Notion of ‘The Cultivation of the Self,’” in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, ed. Timothy Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1992), 225–32.
 6. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
 7. Yann Richard, *Shi'ite Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 28.
 8. The phrase “Karbalâ Paradigm” was first used by Michael Fischer in “Becoming Mollah: Reflections on Iranian Clerics in a Revolutionary Age,” *Iranian Studies* 13.1–4 (1980): 83–118. The term refers to the above related legend.
 9. Shi'is of Iran also refer to designated leaders of the Friday prayers as *imam jam'eh*. In Sunni Islam, the term *imam* is used more routinely and can refer to high clerics. Richard, *Shi'ite Islam*, 27–29.
 10. Jean Calmard, “Shi'i Rituals and Power II: The Consolidation of Safavid Shi'ism: Folklore and Popular Religion,” in *Safavid Persia*, ed. Charles Melville (London: Tauris/Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1996), 142–45.
 11. *Ibid.*, 158.
 12. See Mehdi 'Abedi and Gary Legenhausen, eds., *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam* (Houston, TX: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986).
 13. *Rowzat al-Shohada*, an emotional narrative of the battle of Karbalâ, was one of the first such accounts in the Persian language and was written by Va'ez Kashefi (a Sunni Muslim). Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 118–19.
 14. Self-flagellation in public, with chains and other sharp instruments to draw blood, is an exclusively male tradition. Women beat their chests rhythmically at indoor *rawzeh khavani* gatherings of Muharram, but their shedding of blood is abhorred. See also Mary Hegland, “Flagellation and Fundamentalism: (Trans)forming Meaning, Identity, and Gender through Pakistani Women’s rituals of Mourning,” *American Ethnologist* 25.2 (1998): 249.
 15. For the best discussion of these rituals, see Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press and Soroush, 1979). For a treatment of Muharram in India, see David Pinault, *The Shi'ites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992).
 16. Muhammad J. Mahjub, “The Effect of European Theater and Influence of Its Theatrical Methods upon Ta'ziyeh,” in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 142; Heinz Halm, *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner, 1997), 41; Momen, *An Introduction*, 240; Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).
 17. William Beeman, “Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian Ta'ziyeh,” in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 24–31.
 18. Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 41–85.

19. Ehsan Yarshater, "Ta'ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rites in Iran," in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 88–94; Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, *Persian Myths* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 74–75; Abedi and Legenhausen, *Jihad and Shahadat*, 228.
20. Mahmud Ayoub, "Diverse Religious Practices," in *Shi'ism: Doctrines, Thought, and Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, H. Dabashi, and V. R. Nasr, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 258–59. The first month of the Jewish calendar is called Tishri and the tenth day of this month is Yom Kippur, a day of observance and fasting. The tenth day of the first month of the Muslim calendar (Muharram) is Ashura, hence the suggestion that there is a Jewish origin for the Shi'i Muslim holiday.
21. Peter J. Chelkowski, "Hengami ke na Zaman Zaman ast va na Makan Makan: Ta'ziyeh-yi Imam Husain," *Iran nameh* 9.2 (1991): 214.
22. Arthur de Gobineau, "Teatre dar Iran," trans. Ali Reza Manafzadeh, *Iran nameh* 9.2 (1991): 317. The piece is a selection from de Gobineau's *Religions et philosophies dans l'Asie Central* (1915; reprint, Paris: Édition Gallimard, 1983).
23. Sir Lewis Pelly, *Ta'ziyeh: The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain* (1879; London: W. H. Allen, 1970), iii.
24. Reza Khaki, "Ta'ziyehha va Ta'ziyeh-namehha," *Iran Nameh* 9.2 (1991): 256; Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 6–7.
25. Farrokh Ghafari, "Ketab Shenasi-yi Mokhtasar-i Namayesh-i Irani," *Iran Nameh* 9.2 (1991): 328–33.
26. However, the *ta'ziyeh* might be performed all year round and is a common form of popular entertainment.
27. Hussain Esmā'ili, "Daramadi be Nemuneh Shenasi-yi Ta'ziyeh," *Iran Nameh* 9.2 (1991): 223–53.
28. L. P. Elwell-Sutton, "The Literary Sources of the Ta'ziyeh," in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 167–81.
29. William Beeman, "Ta'ziyeh As Performance" (paper presented at the Asia Society and Museum symposium, New York, July 13, 2002).
30. Esmā'ili, "Daramadi," 235–41.
31. Chelkowski, "Hengami ke na Zaman Zaman ast," 220.
32. Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 80.
33. Richard, *Shi'ite Islam*, 97–99.
34. See Calmard, "Shi'i Rituals," 170; Hegland, "Flagellation," 242, 252; Richard, *Shi'ite Islam*, 99–100. Thanks to Amad Sadri for the information on the activities of young men and women.
35. Chelkowski, "Hengami ke na Zaman Zaman ast," 212–18. In the Qajar period, young girls under the age of maturity were given certain minor roles in the play. The princess Qamar al-Saltaneh and other elite women of the harem sponsored *ta'ziyeh* performances in which women played the lead roles and male eunuchs played the musical instruments. Negar Mottahedeh, "Karbala Drag Kings and Queens" (paper presented at the Society for Iranian Studies biannual conference, Bethesda, Maryland, May 2002).
36. See Amy Waldman, "Iran Shi'ites Celebrate and Mourn Martyr," *New York Times*, December 15, 2001. For a more detailed account of similar rituals among Pakistani Shi'i women, see Hegland, "Flagellation."

37. Hegland also points out that in the course of the revolution, this interpretation of Hussain as "intercessor" lost ground to a new one that called for holding Hussain as "example" of courage, bravery, and defiance to death. Mary Hegland, "Two Images of Husain: Accommodation and Revolution in an Iranian Village," in *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikki Keddie (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 221.
38. Michel Foucault, "La rivolta dell'Iran corre sui nostri delli minicassette," *Corriere della Sera*, November 19, 1978.
39. Michel Foucault, "À quoi revent les Iraniens?" *Le nouvel observateur*, October 16–22, 1978, 48–49.
40. Ibid.
41. Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet, "Iran: The Spirit of a World without Spirit," in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988), 214.
42. Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," in Carrette, *Religion and Culture*, 162.
43. Many Shi'i religious leaders criticize overzealous acts of self-flagellation. For why the clergy have sanctioned such rituals, see Mahjub, "The Effect," 151.
44. Beeman, "Cultural Dimensions," 30.
45. The reaction of the Sunni community of Iran has not been well documented, but Michel Mazzoui notes a similar incident in Baghdad, Iraq. See Michel Mazzoui, "Shi'ism and Ashura in South Lebanon," in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 232.
46. Needless to say, there are also some differences since Christians regard Jesus as a divine being, while Shi'i Muslims consider Hussain a mortal designated by God as the leader of the community. See also the brief discussion of this issue in Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 172–94.
47. Gordon R. Mork, "Wicked Jews and 'Suffering Christians' in the Oberammergau Passion Play," in *Representations of Jews through the Ages*, ed. Leonard Jay Greenspoon and Bryan F. le Bau (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1996), 153–69.
48. On representations of women in the *ta'ziyeh*, see David Pinault, "Zaynab bint 'Ali and the Place of the Women of the Households of the First Imams in Shi'ite Devotional Literature," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin Hambly (New York: St. Martin's, 1998); Sadeq Humayuni, "An Analysis of a Ta'ziyeh of Qasem," in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 12–23.
49. Mork, "Wicked Jews," 154–55.
50. On the similarity of the cult of martyrdom in Islam and Christianity, see I. P. Petrushevsky, *Islam in Iran* (1966; London: Athlone, 1985), 225. See also Jean Calmard, "Le Patronage des ta'ziyeh: Éléments pour une étude globale," and Enrico Fulchignoni, "Quelques considérations comparatives entre les rituels du ta'ziyeh Iranien des 'spectacles de la passion' du moyen âge chrétien en occident," in Chelkowski, *Ta'ziyeh*, 121–30, 131–36; Fischer, "Becoming Mollah," 72.
51. Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 208–9.
52. Hitler, *Hitler's Secret Conversations, 1941–1944* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1953), 456–57.
53. Mork, "Wicked Jews," 157.
54. See, for example, Zeev Sternhell, ed., *The Intellectual Revolt against Liberal Democracy*.

- 1870–1945 (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1996), esp. Pierre Birnbaum, “Catholic Identity, Universal Suffrage, and ‘Doctrines of Hatred,’” 233–51.
55. Several English translations of this text exist, with the title also translated as *Westoxication*. See Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West (Gharbzadegi)*, trans. Paul Sprachman (New York: Carvan, 1982). “See also Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993). On the influence of Western philosophy, including Heidegger’s thought, in Iran in this period, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997); Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
56. Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued*, 111.
57. Shariati was a lay Muslim theologian and the son of a cleric. He received a government fellowship to study abroad. In Paris, he also became involved in the international movement for Algerian independence. Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, with a section by Yann Richard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 294.
58. Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 102–46.
59. Shariati, “Shahadat,” in ‘Abedi and Legenhausen, *Jihad and Shahadat*, 154.
60. *Ibid.*, 174.
61. Shariati called his revolutionary interpretation of Shi’ism “*Alid Shi’ism*” (“Shi’ism of Ali”) and distinguished it from the more conservative “Safavid Shi’ism,” the institutionalized Shi’ism in Iran dating back to the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722). For Shariati, Alid Shi’ism was the “true” Islam, one that did not build divisions “between intellectuals and the people.” Qtd. in Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 111–12. See also Shariati, *What Is to Be Done: The Enlightened Thinkers and an Islamic Renaissance*, ed. Farhang Rajaee (Houston, TX: Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986).
62. Shariati, “Shahadat,” 173, 183.
63. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1927; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962).
64. Shariati, “Shahadat,” 177.
65. Another writer who helped construct a new narrative about Muharram was Khomeini’s student Ne’matollah Salehi Najafabadi, whose *Shahid-i Javid* [Eternal martyr] created heated debates in Iran’s religious circles. Najafabadi, *Shahid-i Javid* (1971; Tehran: n.p., 1982), 361–66. The rhetoric of the lay theologian Shariati was much more vitriolic.
66. In 1970, his lectures appeared under the title “Islamic Government.” See Ruhollah Khomeini, “Islamic Government,” in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, ed. Hamid Algar (Berkeley, CA: Mizan, 1980), 27–168. Here he presented the outlines of an Islamic theocracy and his theory of *Velayat-i Faqih* (Rule of the Jurists).
67. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-yi Imam*, vol. 3 (Tehran: Mo’assesseh-yi Tanzim va Nashr-i Asar-i Imam Khomeini, 1999), 510–12.
68. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Sahifeh-yi Imam*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Mo’assesseh-yi Tanzim va Nashr-i Asar-i Imam Khomeini, 1999), 155.
69. Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 83.

70. The powerful symbolism of Muharram continued to color major events in the next several years. In spring 1979, citizens voted on the establishment of the Islamic Republic in multicolor ballots. Green (color of Hussain) was a vote for the Islamic Republic; red (color of Yazid) was a vote against it. In fall 1979, the constitution of the Islamic Republic was ratified through a similar procedure. When Americans were held hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran, their captors wore shrouds on which was written "we are ready for martyrdom." Effigies of the shah and Carter, at times resembling the caliph Umar as portrayed in *ta'ziyeh*, were burned in the streets. Similarly, during the Iran-Iraq war, graphic artists produced numerous posters, murals, paintings, stamps, and cartoons that called for self-sacrifice based on the model of Karbalâ. One of the stamps showed Fatimah, mother of Imam Hussain, sending soldiers to the front. Other images showed young boys departing for the front, wearing bandanas that read "Revenge for the blood of Hussain." These stamps were issued for commemorating occasions such as "Women's Day" or the "Universal Day of the Child." Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 83–163.

Copyright © 2003 EBSCO Publishing