

Irfani, Suroosh. 1983. *Revolutionary Islam in Iran: Popular Liberation or Religious Dictatorship?* London: Zed Books Ltd.

This presentation on the role of liberation theology in the Iranian revolution of 1979 draws on the work of Suroosh Irfani to illustrate the role of liberal interpretations of Islam in the revolution, as well as the interaction of these liberal Islamic interpretations with Marxism and other European ideas. The role of liberal intellectuals in the Iranian revolution was subsequently overshadowed by Khomeini's coup and the violent cultural revolution of the early 1980s. Because subsequent events and the theocratic nature of modern Iran serve to obscure the role of liberation theology early in the movement, Irfani's book is a vital corrective to the revolutionary narrative. He emphasizes the role of Ali Shariati and the liberal Islamist *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* as vital sources of revolutionary doctrine.

Suroosh Irfani is a Pakistani academic educated in Iran and the United Kingdom. He was a professor at Shiraz University during the 1970s during the events that culminated in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, but returned to Pakistan when the revolutionary government closed the universities in 1980 at the height of the Iranian Cultural Revolution. In this book, published abroad four years after the revolution, he tries to give context for the events of the revolution by telling the stories of prior reform movements. These include the anti-British Tobacco Protest of 1890, the parliamentary reforms of 1905 and 1911, Mirza Kuchak Khan's so-called Jungle Revolution of 1914-15, nationalist anti-Soviet guerilla campaigns in the 1930s, and Mohammed Mossadegh's National Movement which culminated in his deposition in a US-backed coup in 1953.

Irfani is at pains to show that prior Iranian revolutionary movements lacked the ideological basis for a genuinely popular movement because they were based on imported European ideas like Marxism which failed to find fertile soil among the Iranian people. By contrast, the groups responsible for the 1979 revolution were able to mobilize popular support through the use of explicitly Islamic concepts such as *touhid*, which is belief both in the unity of God and the moral imperative to "translate this belief into working principles of human organization" (3). Despite this distinction, Irfani is able to locate the influence of these earlier movements on the thought and action of the 1979 revolutionaries (16).

He begins by highlighting the enhanced role of the clergy in Shia Islam, asserting that the belief is in a sense hard-wired because of the circumstances surrounding the Sunni-Shia schism and the position taken by the Shia faction (support for dynastic succession). Emphasizing the difficulty of anti-authoritarian positions generally within Shia Islam, Irfani shows how high-ranking clerics were able to present themselves as *marja-e-taqlid*, or "sources of imitation" (16) against which no dissent could be tolerated.

Irfani credits early revolutionaries like Jamal-ud-Din Afghani, instigator of the Tobacco Protest, with the insight that Islam could be mobilized in support of the oppressed and who argued that the condition of a people "will not change unless they change themselves inwardly" (117). He contrasts this approach with the foundation of the communist Tudeh party in 1941 and Mossadegh's brief premiership in 1952-3, which he

argues were focused towards urban intellectuals and joined the Shah's government in embracing modernity, thus cutting themselves off from the mass of the Iranian people.

At the same time, Khomeini was making a decisive break from modernity at his seminary in Qom. The ayatollah framed his criticism of the Shah's government in Koranic terms, comparing him to Yazid I, who assassinated Muhammad's grandson Husayn ibn Ali and instigated the Second Fitna (82). However, Khomeini's exile in 1964 and the harsh crackdown by the SAVAK secret police on political dissent created space for a less directly confrontational interpretation of Islam's role in political change. Irfani credits the intellectual Ali Shariati, the cleric Ayatollah Taleqani, and the *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* movement as the driving forces behind a novel theological exegesis that motivated revolution. These forces were briefly unified in the Liberation Movement, a political party dedicated to a modern interpretation of Islam founded by Mehdi Bazargan in 1962. The Liberation Movement aimed to break the clergy's monopoly on Koranic exegesis and present Islam in a modern light acceptable to urban elites without cutting it off from popular interpretations (138). However, beginning in 1963 the party was outlawed and the SAVAK secret police murdered many members and drove the rest into exile.

Irfani's discussion of the conflict within revolutionary movements between Marxism and Islam is fascinating. The stifling conservatism and opposition to change of the Iranian clergy had turned much of the urban intelligentsia decidedly against Islam, and movements like the *Fedayeen-e-Khalq* were explicitly secular and Marxist in their origins. But as Shariati puts it, this reluctance was only because "the social backwardness and impoverished cultural perspective of the masses had been cleverly exploited by vested interests in the secular and religious domains" (90). As a result, "the cream of Iran's consciousness was being skimmed by Marxism," which, because its dogmas were impenetrable to the people, could never serve Iran as the substrate for revolutionary change (91). Irfani sees Shariati and intellectuals like him as engaged in a battle "to release Islam from the shackles of medieval thought".

Five university graduates from Teheran founded the *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* in 1965 in order to carry on the Liberation Movement's political struggle by violent, revolutionary means. Almost immediately it came into conflict with the SAVAK secret police, and within a decade an incredible 97% of its members had been rounded up and murdered (88). Its platform predicated revolutionary success on theoretical coherence. The *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* argued that the original version of Islam was not the version practiced by the Shah's government, but rather "was opposed to despotism, capitalism, colonialism and conservative clericalism" (96). Arguing that modern regimes had "used the Quran for tranquilizing and anesthetizing the masses" (96), *Mujahid* thinkers focused on the prophet's injunctions to strive for *qest* (equity) in earthly society, calling the Shah's Islam an "Islam of imperialism...made for the next world and having nothing to do with the life of this world" (100). They saw the admission of capitalist, Marxist or any other outside dogma into Iranian society as *shirk* (polytheism), and saw the world as "an archetypal battle between *touhid* and *shirk*, between belief in Allah the transcendent one and belief in man-made gods" (99). Far from the regime's admonishment that a true Muslim could not be a

revolutionary because *jihad* prohibited war against fellow believers, the *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* believed that “a true Muslim can be nothing but a revolutionary” (101).

Marxist members of the *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* conducted a coup against the “backward” Islamist members in 1975, killing many of them and driving others into exile. Although at the time allegations were made that the secret police were behind the internecine conflict, it later emerged that the Marxist members planned the massacre on their own (104). The Marxist *Fedayeen-e-Khalq* too denounced Islam as a “petty bourgeois ideology” (111). Despite the Marxist takeover, the SAVAK secret police were so effective that within a year most of the Marxist members of the *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* had been jailed or murdered, and gradually revolutionary Islamists regained control. It was in this context that the works of Ali Shariati came to prominence in the proto-revolutionary movement.

Ali Shariati was born in a rural village in Khorasan and was educated on a state scholarship in Paris under a prominent French scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon. His major contribution was to redefine Shia Islam as a revolutionary ideology. Shariati condemned the traditional clergy and the Marxist intellectuals alike for “severing their relations with society and the masses” (118). During this time, he propagated the works of the Liberation Movement more widely in Europe, and translated works by Franz Fanon and Umar Uzgan into Farsi.

Shariati rejects liberalism, conservatism *and* reformism (gradualism). He instead adverts to a method supposedly used by the Prophet of retaining the form of a practice but changing its content (122). Giving the example of the Hajj’s transformation from an idolatrous ritual, Shariati argues that this means alone retains contact with the people, and that it is impossible to inject new ideas without organic roots into a polity. Adopting the division of the world into *touhid* and *shirk*, Shariati argued that it was not possible to capture the essence of Islam through meditation or ratiocination but that it had to come through contact with the people (126). He emphasized right action no matter the cost, drawing on the tale of Hosein’s opposition to Yazid and his subsequent annihilation to underscore the need to act rightly even in the face of death. As he put it, “Just as the heart injects life into the body...so the *shaheed* [martyr] is the heart that transmits blood to the dried up body of society” (133). Arrested immediately on his return to Iran, Shariati was released into exile in 1977 and died under suspicious circumstances in London several weeks later.

The last figure that Irfani connects to the revolutionary struggle is Ayatollah Taleqani, the “nucleus of the revolution inside Iran” (141). Already an old man in 1979, Taleqani was a liberal cleric who had become acquainted with urban Marxist dissidents during several stints in prison in the 1950s and 1960s. He was impressed by what he called their “transpersonal ideological commitment,” (139), and argued that Islam and communism shared a communal way of living, though he disputed the focus on “historical materialism and the primacy of matter” (144).¹ Some of Taleqani’s pronouncements at the

¹ “We regard the Cuban Revolution as a magnificent revolution. In fact, any revolution in any part of the world which is against injustice, despotism and imperialism is, in our view, an Islamic revolution” (146-7).

time of the revolution take on a deeply tragic and ironic cast in light of subsequent developments, for instance: “Islam does not restrict freedom...any group who desires to restrict people’s freedom and their right to criticize, to express themselves, to discuss, and to argue, does not comprehend Islam” (145). In several speeches, he points out that the Koran equates Islamic prophets with those fighting for equity, and he clearly casts secular freedom fighters in the same holy light that in which he paints devout Muslims.

At the outbreak of the revolution, Taleqani was again serving a prison sentence for making speeches against the Shah’s regime. When international pressure forced the Shah to release hundreds of political prisoners, Taleqani immediately became the major leader of the revolution and his house became its headquarters (148). However, after the Shah’s deposition and Khomeini’s return from exile, clerics who had obsequiously supported the Shah began to obsequiously support Khomeini’s savage counter-revolutionary purges and establishment of a religious dictatorship. Taleqani initially opposed these moves, inspiring protests *against* Khomeini across Iran, but Khomeini quickly recalled him to Qom and placed him under house arrest. Taleqani was clear about how Khomeini’s putsch should be understood by history. “After every revolution, a group of opportunists stick themselves to the revolution. This causes the revolution to deviate from its path. However, this in itself is a factor in the evolution of the revolution, and revolution becomes a continuous affair” (143).

Discussion

This book goes to the heart of a question that we have discussed before: must modernization mean Westernization? Identification of another approach by groups like *Mujahideen-e-Khalq* and intellectuals like Shariati must have been a very exciting development, and the general intellectual tone of Irfani’s book is one of great ferment but great possibility. But these possibilities take on an increasingly tragic cast when viewed in the light of 50 years of hindsight on the 1979 revolution. On Teheran’s streets, Shariati’s poster was even more common than Khomeini’s in the early days of the revolution, and many political moderates were brought into the fold by his reinterpretation of Islam. But his ideas never penetrated Iran’s clergy, and the reactionary developments of the early 1980s would have horrified Shariati to the same extent as the SAVAK’s excesses. As in many revolutions, nuanced and moderate positions did not ultimately prevail. An embrace of Shariati’s liberation theology inspired millions, but also provided cover for a theological coup whose perpetrators continue to oppress the Iranian people. Far from empowering the people, Shariati’s writings have been used to justify their total disenfranchisement.