Islam and Modernism

The Iranian Revolution of 1906

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To my family

man. Since a Sufi looks to the head of his order as the example to be emulated, possessed of the esoteric knowledge of the Imams, this represented a challenge to the authority of the *mujtahids*. According to Ma'sum 'Ali Shah, one of the masters of the Ni'matallahi in the late eighteenth century, the *shari'a* represented only the outward path of the Imams, while the inner divine truths were found in Sufism.[46] Ma'sum 'Ali Shah also questioned the validity of the *fatvas* of the *mujtahids* because of their frequent contradictions, and claimed that Islam, being perfect, stood in no need of the *'ulama*. Another master, Nur 'Ali Shah, considered that the power of the leader of the order was greater than that of any ruler.[47]

The influence of the Ni'matallahis seems to have reached the highest in the land. The *'ulama* of Gilan complained to the shah in the early nineteenth century that the governor there and his chief official had adopted the Ni'matallahi cause, and that the *shari'a* was being undermined.[48] Fath 'Ali Shah was not personally antipathetic to Sufism, but the *'ulama* nevertheless persuaded him to suppress the movement, as Malcolm explained:

> They have always succeeded in convincing his judgement that the established religion was necessary to the support of the state, and that nothing could be more dangerous than the progress of a spirit of infidelity, which, by unsettling men's minds, was calculated to throw them into a state of doubt and ferment.[49]

The persecution of the Ni'matallahis provides an interesting example of the collaboration of *'ulama* and the state and the manner in which they understood their interests to be intertwined. It also has implications for the position of the *'ulama* on the legitimacy of the shah to be discussed shortly.

A few of the Ni'matallahis found refuge in the court of the crown prince 'Abbas Mirza, and one of their disciples, Haji Mirza Aqasi, won ascendancy over the mind of Muhammad Shah (1834–48). Indeed the shah seems to have looked upon him as his *qutb* (i.e. master), considering him 'the pole of the firmament of *shari'at* and *tariqat*' and 'the source of revelation and excellence.'[50] This would be consonant with the view that the authority of the ruler is second to that of the master, but Haji Mirza Aqasi does not seem to have pressed the point. In a letter to the shah he refers to him as *padishah-i islam panah ki vali-yi amr allah ast* (padishah protector of Islam who is the guardian of the command of God)[51]

which, although not very clear, seems to be close to the idea of the shah as the Shadow of God, and does not seem to denote any particular Sufi idea of kingship. Algar has maintained that the shah's open profession of Sufism endangered the standing of the *'ulama*, but as he afterwards admits, the shah's beliefs were probably no more than a mild irritant to them.[52] This was probably because Sufism as a popular force had ceased to be a serious threat to their own authority. Moreover Muhammad Shah was a pious ruler who ordered his court to attend the mosque every Friday.[53] Haji Mirza Aqasi himself encouraged the *'ulama* of the provinces to come to Tehran so that it might develop into a centre of learning.[54] His chief enemies were not the *'ulama* but other politicians, and it was they who brought about his downfall.

In the early part of the nineteenth century a further challenge to the authority of the *mujtahids* emerged from Shaikhism. The founder of this sect, Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i (1753–1826) insisted that the source of all his knowledge was the Imams themselves.[55] He believed that knowledge was acquired through a visionary perception of the divine, which he held much superior to the *mujtahid's* use of discursive reasoning. He also rejected the *mujtahid's* judgement as humanly fallible and denounced *taqlid* (imitation of a *mujtahid* by an ordinary believer). Ahsa'i propounded the doctrine of the 'Perfect Shi'a': rare beings, specially guided by the Imam to act as authoritative examples for the faithful. Any necessary change in the Holy Law comes from the Imam through the perfect Shi'a. Indeed the Shaikhis accorded more authority to the Imams than the orthodox,[56] using direct inspiration from them to form a chain or authority that by-passed the *mujtahids*.

Three leading *'ulama* passed the *takfir* (excommunication) against Shaikh Ahsa'i, and the Shaikhis were forced to moderate their opinions, at least outwardly, particularly after the rise of Babism (see below). However they remained active and Muzaffar al-Din Shah (1896–1907) was said to have Shaikhi proclivities as a young man.[57] It is possible that some of those active in the cause of reform in 1905 in Tehran were Shaikhis. One of the members of a secret society organized by the reformist *'alim*, Nazim al-Islam Kirmani, cited Shaikh Ahsa'i and other Shaikhi writers as authorities in a speech at one of the meetings, which was accepted without comment by the others present.[58]

The most dangerous heterodoxy to emerge in the nineteenth century was Babism, which arose from the claim of Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad in 1843 to be the Bab, or Gateway to the Hidden

Imam.[59] The Bab issued laws and regulations like a prophet in a book called the *Bayan*, the decrees of which purported to explain the essence of the divine word. The Bab was regarded as the head of the faith and the temporal sovereign of the world. Certain Muslim tenets were no longer held obligatory, such as formal prayer, fasting in Ramazan, and the avoidance of certain foods. Babism appealed to all classes and seems to have meant different things in different regions. In Mazandaran in 1850 the downfall of the Qajar dynasty was decreed, and was linked to the number of Qajar princes and the money needed to support them. *'Ulama* and government combined to suppress Babism in a vigorous campaign. The followers of the Bab divided into two, Azalis and Baha'is, of which the former were to be very active in the agitation leading to the Constitutional Revolution.[60] One prominent preacher and member of the Qajar family, Shaikh al-Ra'is, was reportedly a Baha'i, but otherwise the Baha'is followed a quietist policy.[61]

The persecution of the Sufis and Babis highlights the interdependence of religion and state, for if right religion helped guarantee political stability, it also needed the coercive power of the state to enforce it.[62] A persistent complaint of the *'ulama* against the state in the latter part of the nineteenth century was that the government was not sufficiently diligent in suppressing heterodoxy, particularly Babism. The *'ulama* also did not have the means to protect the country and Shi'ism against foreign invasion, nor at this stage the inclination to assume such a responsibility. The practical alternatives to a Shi'ite ruler were possibly Sunni rule, more likely anarchy, or even worse, infidel domination.

In the nineteenth century the *'ulama* were not only stronger vis-a-vis the temporal power because of the reformulation of the role of the *mujtahid*, but also because, unlike the Safavids, the Qajar dynasty, which established itself in 1785, did not claim legitimacy by right of descent from the Imams. The true basis of Qajar rule was power, as illustrated by the coronation ceremonies of the Qajar shahs, in which the *'ulama* played little part. Aqa Muhammad Qajar (1785–1797), the founder of the dynasty, was considered eligible to assume the title of shah when he had conquered most of the lands ruled by previous shahs. At the ceremony, 'he put on the royal regalia at the request of his well-wishers, being the assembled princes (*umara'*) and learned men (*fuzala*).[63] According to another account he put on the sword of the conqueror and mounted the jewelled throne, and promised to rule 'in the manner of former kings and custom of past sultans'.[64]

Malcolm explains that the sword had a particular significance as it was 'consecrated at the tomb of the holy founder of the Suffavean family; and he became, by the act, pledged to employ the sacred weapon in defense and support of the Shi'ah faith.'[65] The shah's rule was thus based on power, but at the same time the coronation emphasized the Shi'ite character of the new dynasty, and the function of the shah as defender of the faith.

The coronation of subsequent Qajar shahs followed a similar pattern. Fath 'Ali Shah also donned the royal regalia, and in addition promised to rule justly.[66] Muhammad Shah (1834–48) and Nasir al-Din Shah (1848–96) were similarly confirmed in office by the recognition of the powerful.[67] Muzaffar al-Din Shah mounted the throne in the presence of all the dignitaries of the state. The role of the *'ulama* had grown a little more prominent as the Kayani crown, now recognised as the rightful crown of Iran, was placed upon the shah's head by the *imam jum'a*.[68] At Muhammad 'Ali Shah's coronation the *mujtahids* sat while everyone else stood. When the shah ascended the throne they rose, and in the name of God hailed him as shah. He, however, placed the crown on his head himself.[69]

The Qajar coronation ceremonies were therefore based on the crown as the symbol of power, and the recognition of the powerful, including the *'ulama* as notables. In 1908 Muhammad 'Ali Shah stated quite plainly that his ancestors had conquered Iran by the sword and he intended to keep it by the sword.[70] The ceremonial at court, at least in the early Qajar period, was also deliberately intended to enhance the power of the shah. As Malcolm commented:

> The nature of absolute power requires that it should be supported by a continued revival of the impression of its high and almost sacred character. Many of the usages of Persia are calculated to produce this object: Everything connected with the royal name or authority is treated with respect that is increased by the form which attends it.[71]

The later shahs also used descent to stress their right to rule in such titles as *al-sultan bin al-sultan*.

Nevertheless, the Qajars recognized the need for a legitimizing doctrine for their authority, and, like the Safavids before them, they claimed to be the Shadow of God upon earth, *zill allah*. In so doing they were asserting that they derived their authority directly from God, by-passing any intermediaries including the Imams. As

Fath 'Ali Shah (1797–1834) expressed it, God 'gave glory and adornment to our princely person of blessed attributes through the sultanate, and the caliphate and the rulership of the world.'[72] Nasir al-Din Shah claimed: 'We consider the *ru'aya* (subjects) to be a trust given on the part of the Almighty and the means by which we hold our sovereignty.'[73] Such a claim had no validity according to the fundamental Imami doctrine whereby all authority must derive from the Imams. The idea of an all-powerful shah, with his authority bestowed by God, was not acceptable to most of the *'ulama*. Probably for this reason the Qajars did not insist on the title *zill allah*.

If some *'ulama* viewed the shah from the fundamental *de jure* position that he was a usurper, and that the state was not legitimate, others appear to have had a more ambivalent attitude. Shaikh Murtaza Ansari, the leading Shi'ite jurist of the nineteenth century, showed a marked reluctance to comment on political affairs, even on such a matter as Babi doctrines on which he declared himself inadequately informed.[74] His method of deduction of principles from the sources of law was so stringent and meticulous that he would refrain from issuing injunctions in areas which required a latitude in interpretation.[75] Arjomand has pointed out that Ansari even questioned the vice-regency of the *'ulama* as jurists because it could not be firmly deduced from the sources. With regard to the *'ulama* in general, Calder has shown that the potential opposition in the idea of *na'ib-i 'amm* was rarely stressed.[76] He has indicated how, within the works of jurisprudence themselves, some kind of *modus vivendi* with the temporal power was recommended. Thus, for example, it was considered permissible to work for a usurper if he be relatively just, or to accept the proceeds of taxes collected by the officials of the 'unjust' ruler. Such notions continue to assume, however, that the ruler is fundamentally unjust.

While some *'ulama* no doubt adhered literally to the fundamental juristic theory, others recognized that in this imperfect world there must be a distinction between what is ideal and what is practical. For the nineteenth century certain treatises have come to light which suggest that many, if not most, of the *'ulama* did not carry the fundamental juristic theory into practice. Realizing the advantages of being ruled by a Shi'ite power, they sought, in different ways, accommodation with the state. But the *de facto* power of the shah, and the *de facto* recognition of it by the *'ulama*, was not enough. A need was evident for some theoretical recognition

of the shah's authority and the *'ulama*'s co-operation with him. The problem was how to give the shah such authority without weakening the fundamental juristic theory. There thus developed a number of what might be termed accommodatory theories which helped gain acceptance for the rule of the shah. Most of these attempted to take the problem out of the restraints imposed by the traditional context of *fiqh* and study it within new parameters.

One such theory is propounded in the *Irshadnama* addressed to Fath 'Ali Shah by Mirza Abu'l Qasim Qummi (d. 1815–16), one of the leading *'ulama* of his day. Mirza Qummi addresses the shah as Shadow of God but gives careful qualification to the term.[77] He avoids any implication of divine power and attributes, and discusses it instead in the sense of exemplary emulation. Thus the shah has a duty to be just and to set a high moral example, recalling the attributes of the creator. In enjoining the shah to protect his subjects and care for the needs of the weak, Mirza Qummi says this duty is incumbent on him because God has placed this duty upon him. He adds that God has created all men equal but made one his deputy (*janishin*) with special responsibilities. Thus according to Mirza Qummi the shah's authority derives from God: 'The principle (*asl*) of kingship is derived from the decree (*taqdir*) of God.' But it does not follow that every action committed by a king was made necessary by divine decree. Kings would be rewarded and punished in the next world for the manner in which they carried out their responsibilities.

Mirza Qummi's theory is interesting in that he sees rulers as having duties in the performance of which they also have God-given authority. They do not act as agents or intermediaries, even of the Prophet or the Imams. The argument seems to be that the possession of power itself confers certain God-given responsibilities. One of the king's primary purposes is to protect the world of men, while the purpose of the *'ulama*, according to Mirza Qummi, is to guard the religion from all forces that might weaken it. Qummi seems to see a division of authority between the ruler and the *'ulama*. Likewise, the carrying out of duties, particularly the function of protection, is an important part of kingship.

If Mirza Qummi found validity for the shah's rule outside the *shari'a* chain of authority, Shaikh Ja'far Najafi (d. 1821) found a place for him within it, albeit with a strictly limited and probably temporary role.[78] When the Russians threatened Iran in the early nineteenth century, 'Abbas Mirza approached the *'ulama* for *fatvas* (legal rulings) sanctioning a *jihad*. The *mujtahids* responded by