

Some Impressions of Iranian Islam

by Denis Hickley

Iran is a large and important country which is too little known in Britain, and which is even the subject of grave misunderstandings—such as the idea that it is an ‘Arab’ country and that therefore its religion is the same as that of its Arab neighbours. I went there simply as a visitor, bent on listening and learning through personal contacts. My reading of Iranian history had informed me that Iran has produced many important religious movements, though none of them has survived as a major world religion, unless you count the Baha’i. The birthplace of several powerful religious personalities — Zoroaster and Mani for example—it has tended to influence rather than dominate. In some strange way it has always subtly altered, sometimes even confused the great religions of mankind. Lacking the intellectual rigour of the Greek tradition, and without the intensity of the Semitic outlook, the Iranians have evaded the clutches of these two powerful alien influences. They are a humane and moderate people, much attracted to the good things of life, with a liking for speculation, often expressed in vast and woolly ideas. In this they betray their affinity to the people of the Indian subcontinent.

Inevitably, I was drawn into religious discussion, because it became known that I was a Catholic priest, and Iran is still a religious society in the traditional sense, the type of society which has been described as ‘sacral’ and which disappeared from western Europe with the French Revolution and from Russia with Lenin. This is not to say that this religious structure is not being eroded. It is, and indeed rapidly, but it is being done from above, and modern, educated Iranians sometimes talk like old-fashioned French anti-clericals. Old people of all classes are traditionalist, as are the peasantry of all ages, except those who manage to get a university education, and they are beginning to ask questions that nobody can answer. It is important to realise that the religious situation of Iran is peculiar to that country and, since very little has been written about it in English, it will be necessary to make a short excursus by way of explanation.

The official religion of Iran is the form of Islam known as Ithna ‘Ashariya Shi’a, or ‘Twelver’ Shi’a, from its belief in the special importance of the Twelve Imams. It has its own special character and orientation which make it often strikingly different from the Islam of the Sunna, encountered by visitors throughout most of the Near East. The origin of Shi’a Islam was in a dispute within the immediate circle of Mohammed’s followers concerning the leadership of the new Islamic community, which led to the formation of a party or faction around the prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali, who was considered

to have been wrongfully dispossessed of his right to be Caliph (successor) and Imam (spiritual guide) of Islam. The dispute, as it was handed down through the centuries, became coloured by a number of influences. Initially the Shi'a grew up as a kind of underground church of protest, but there were occasions when they came to power themselves in certain regions of the Muslim world. One Shi'a group, the Fatimids—who were close to the modern Ismailis in their beliefs—established a brilliant dynasty in Egypt in the middle ages and acted for a time as a rival centre to the 'orthodox' Caliphs in Baghdad. The doctrinal ramifications of the Shi'a are too complex to be set out here, but the basic tenet which is common to all the Shi'a sects is their devotion to the house of Ali, the members of which have become a race of martyred princes, endowed with a special charisma—in fact a 'holy family'. There is an analogy with our own history which might be helpful, namely the devotion given by the Jacobite party to the dispossessed house of Stuart. The successive leaders of the house of Ali have borne the title of 'Imam'. Normally an Imam is simply a prayer leader, but for the Shi'a *the* Imam is the Alid who is recognized as the rightful leader of Islam. In the course of time a whole mystical doctrine has grown up round the Imams. They have come to be thought of as mediators—or even as divine incarnations. One sect of the Shi'a has taken the final step and proclaims that Ali actually is God. Though such a belief takes them right outside Islam, I heard nothing stronger than mild disapproval of such a blasphemous doctrine.

Ali being the first Imam, his descendants were the second, third and so on, until the twelfth, who lived towards the end of the ninth century at Samarra, near Baghdad. While still only a child he entered an underground room and mysteriously disappeared. According to the Twelver Shi'a he is still alive, but in concealment and for them he is as much a living being as the risen Christ is for Christians. Knowledge of the hidden Imam is a guarantee of salvation. Moreover all the Imams are both infallible and sinless. They are also martyrs, and it is part of their role as members of the persecuted holy family to suffer in this life and to meet a violent end at the hands of the Sunni establishment. It is, therefore, ironical that this movement, which started as an underground church, should now be the state religion of Iran.

Until the end of the fifteenth century Iran, like other Muslim countries was usually ruled by Sunni dynasties, but about 1500 the Shi'a came to power in Iran with the Safavid dynasty, who claimed descent from Ali and were already famous as leaders of a Shi'a dervish order. It was they who really created Iran as we know it today. They unified the Iranian plateau and bound it to the ruling house and the Shi'a faith by relentless religious propaganda. They also gained immense prestige by their successful resistance to the crusading zeal

of the Ottoman Turks who, as official leaders of the Sunna, had taken upon themselves the task of destroying Safavid Iran. For Iranians this period has something of the same glamour as the Elizabethan age has for us, and often for equally poor reasons, but it has captured the popular imagination. The memory of Shah Abbas the Great is held in the same veneration as is that of his contemporary, Good Queen Bess, with us. It was Shah Abbas who completed the work of making Iran into a unified state by bureaucratic centralization, by religious propaganda, and by the building of a great capital city of world importance at Isfahan. His personal exploit of leading a pilgrimage on foot all the way from Isfahan to Mashad, a distance of more than five hundred miles, had something of the same effect as chairman Mao's epic swim down the Yangtse.

One of the consequences of the veneration of Imams is the importance attached to their mortal remains, or to the places associated with events in their lives. In Shi'a Islam many of the most important and beautiful buildings are martyria. From the religious point of view the most important of all are the burial places of Ali and his sons in Iraq, but in the extreme north-east of Iran, at Mashad, there is a shrine of almost equal importance. This is the tomb of the Imam Reza, the eighth Imam, who died at the beginning of the ninth century. The tomb of his sister Fatima is at Qum in central Iran and this is also a great pilgrimage centre. Both these shrines play a large part in the country's life. Until recently they were among the greatest landowners in the empire, and their influence is still enormous. Having visited Mashad myself it seemed to me that—more than anywhere in modern Europe—it can give one an idea of what the great pilgrimage centres of the middle ages, such as Canterbury or Compostella, must have been like. This is due to a certain atmosphere of fanaticism which one no longer finds in the religious centres of the western world. It is less in evidence at Mashad than at Qum. This is because Mashad has other sides to its life. It is a large and prosperous city, the capital of the province of Khorasan, and the possessor of a flourishing modern university. Nevertheless it is true that without Imam Reza Mashad would be nothing, for the importance of the city is due to an accident.

In the ninth century there was nothing there except for an imperial villa belonging to the Baghdad Caliphs, but the Caliph Haroun al Rashid died there while campaigning in this frontier region and was buried in the villa grounds. A few years later his successor, the Caliph Mamun, passed that way bringing in his train the eighth Imam, whom he had brought from Arabia with the intention of handing on the empire to him and so healing the breach between the Shi'a and the Sunni, now two hundred years old. But the Imam Reza died almost immediately and was buried close by the tomb of Haroun al Rashid. In the course of time a vast assemblage of buildings grew up round the tomb of the Imam which eventually engulfed the tomb of

the persecutor of his house, and to this day the tomb of Haroun is in a room which adjoins the sacred shrine so that the pilgrims who come to adore the latter very often do not forget to spit on the former. Legend has been busy over the death of Imam Reza, about which almost nothing is known for certain, but it is usually believed that the Caliph Mamun was persuaded to change his mind and the saintly Imam was done to death. Pictures of the Imam Reza show him receiving a bunch of poisoned grapes from the hand of the deceitful Caliph.

Like all shrines which have accumulated a great wealth of gold and jewels Mashad has not escaped from sack and pillage, notably at the hands of the Uzbek tribesmen from central Asia. It has been damaged by earthquake and it was bombarded by the Russians at the beginning of this century. Each time it has been restored and, as it stands today, well deserves the title of 'The Glory of the Shi'a World'. The shrine chamber has a dome covered with gold plates and there are two gold-plated minarets. Adjoining the shrine is a mosque built by Gawhar Shad, the daughter-in-law of Tamerlane, which is an architectural masterpiece.

Over two million pilgrims go to Mashad every year. It is indicative of the importance of shrines and pilgrimages in Iran that the first railway built in the country covers the short distance from Tehran to the shrine of Shah 'Abdul' Azim at Rayy, and the longest railway is the one that takes the pilgrims to Mashad. At Mashad they throw jewels, money, watches and trinkets of all kinds into the shrine and periodically it is closed by a royal commission so that the valuables can be removed and offered for sale. Prayers and petitions which have been written on scraps of paper and attached to the shrine are taken away by the sackful. The shrine at Mashad is also responsible for the upkeep of a number of charitable institutions such as the Vaziri library and reading room at Yazd, while at Mashad itself it maintains a library and a museum as well as a refectory which dispenses free meals for the pilgrims.

The whole complex of buildings is contained within a circular area marked off by a wide street which forms the circumference of the circle. From this circumference a number of tunnel-like bazaars lead to the various entrances to the sacred enclosure—I was told that there are eight. These narrow streets are habitually thronged with people coming in and out of the shrine, or examining the goods on display, mostly 'objects of piety'. The Islamic prohibition on figurative art is not taken very seriously in Iran and does not prevent the making and sale of pictures of Mohammed, of the Imam Reza eating his poisoned grapes, or of Ali. Pictures of the latter—we can safely call them 'icons'—are found everywhere in Iran, in hotels, shops and buses and show an idealized portrait of a handsome, bearded Iranian in the prime of life with a halo round his head. Pictures of Christ and Our

Lady are also to be seen, though it was only in the bazaar at Tehran that I saw representations of the Last Supper in tapestry. At Mashad the most popular religious souvenirs are seals and signet rings, sometimes made of real precious stones, but more often of imitation ones manufactured in Hong Kong or Japan. They are engraved with verses from the Koran, or with the popular ejaculatory prayer 'Ya! Ali!', in honour of the first Imam. It is very common for males to wear this prayer on a gold medallion round the neck. However not all the shops at Mashad display religious souvenirs. One can buy ordinary household articles near the shrine as well as foodstuffs, and even ready-made sets of false teeth.

It is very difficult to get inside the shrine at Mashad, or into the adjoining mosques. I had hoped to slip in unobserved among the great concourse of people who were pouring in through the doors in readiness for the evening prayers, but I was spotted as an intruder and asked to leave by the mosque guards. This took place a few minutes before the prayers were due to begin and I had time to see that the whole surface of the courtyard was covered with male worshippers, seated cross-legged on the ground. The side halls were also filled with men, some seated on carpets, and some with the back supported against a pillar in an attitude which was relaxed and contemplative. There is something very wonderful and moving about these worshippers. The large amount of free space gives them a wide choice of posture and the absence of chairs and pews permits a sense of relaxation and freedom. I was left wondering if we have not, in the West, sacrificed something very important by being so functional about our worship. I would like as many people as possible to go to Mashad and make at least two visits to the shrine, one outside prayer time for the architecture, and one at the time of prayer to observe the people. Simply to stand in one of the great entrance courts—which was all that I was finally allowed to do—at the hour of evening prayer, with the golden minarets appearing over the roofs, when the call to prayer floats out into the gathering darkness is to undergo an intense religious experience which can never be forgotten.

Christian Laughter

by Peter W. Jones

The title that I have chosen for this article is far from being a gimmick designed to lure anyone with an eye for the unusual. Some years ago I tried to put together a paper entitled *Theology of Leisure*.¹ I should like to think that the present title is a more precise attempt