

CHAPTER THREE

EMBODYING VIRTUE

Virtue is to avoid what my carnal soul desires
‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002

Through out my stay in Esfahān one of the strongest impressions has remained the thoroughness with which many of my informants have endeavoured to practice their religion. Throughout the days and the late nights that I have spent talking, travelling, eating, crying and laughing with Mohammad Mahdi, ‘Ali Bakhtiāri and the others, I have not once had the feeling that Islam was put aside. There have been jokes and playfulness, of course, and sometimes even hints of irony. But I have always had the feeling that their solemn, all-encompassing religion has been there as a framework enclosing every thought and each activity: there might be someone’s casual fiddling with a rosary, the background sound of a broadcast prayer meeting, or just the silent knowledge that certain topics cannot be laughed about. To me, the informants’ persistency in these matters has been a cause for admiration, fascination and annoyance. I have often been impressed by their ability to implement the notion of a coherent way of living in their own daily lives and I have been sincerely moved by the strength of faith that I have witnessed. But I have also occasionally been frustrated, not to say irritated, with the impenetrable situation as my fumbling requests for “some loosening up” have passed disturbingly unnoticed. Since this impression is so predominant, it has occurred to me that the thoroughness of my informants’ religious orientation may be crucial for the understanding of them, the form of Islam that they represent and what it means to them. This following chapter deals with these issues.

So far I have presented the context in which the ritual life of the informants takes place. The purpose of this chapter is to show how the message of virtue that is conveyed by the mosque authorities is construed and used by the informants. I want to show how they have reasoned about the Islamic ideals in our discussions and how these affect their everyday lives. By doing this, I want to show what

it means to *live* Islam in the individual cases of my informants. By *living* Islam I mean to practice the rituals and follow the rules of Islamic tradition but also to make it the guideline of one's thoughts and feelings.

Theoretically, I have chosen to connect the informants' practice of Islam to a discussion on culture and body. I will argue that being Muslim, as my informants understand it, is to embody the ideal state of virtue which is preached by the community authorities. From my outsider perspective I construe this practised Islam as originating not only from the official ideology but also from the bodily experiences of the informants themselves. In this way Islam, as experienced by the informants, is the conglomeration of a culturally conveyed interpretation of life with physical experiences that take place in the body of the individual. The informants' manner of living Islam originates both from their own experience and from the teachings of the lectures and lamentations.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first of these, I present the theoretical background which I see as the point of departure in my analysis. In the second, I present two of my informants, 'Ali Bakhtiāri and Mohammad Mahdi. I focus on their understanding and definition of Islam and virtue as expressed in our talks. In this section I will also make some general remarks concerning the informants' views concerning the opposite sex. Finally, in the third section I present of a few different aspects of the informants' life styles, which is intended to elucidate the way they practice Islam and protect their virtue.

THE BODY AND EMBODIMENT—A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Lately, much research has focused upon the body. Apart from the history of religions, theories on the body and embodiment have become increasingly prevalent since the mid-1980's within the fields of history, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, ritual studies and, in particular, gender studies.¹ Although these recent theories display a great variety of understanding and definitions of the

¹ Csordas 1994: 1; Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 49.

body, it may be said that they share the fundamental feature of viewing the body not as a fixed biological entity, but as something that is changeable and bound to its historical and cultural context.² The body, it is generally considered, is no longer “a constant amidst flux but an epitome of that flux itself”.³

The reasons for this focus upon the body are many. To begin with, it may be argued that the emergence of post-structuralism has brought a questioning of the long-established dichotomisation of mind and body. Tracing its roots back to the heritage of Descartes, such a dichotomy relates to a more universal dualism in which culture is seen as opposed to nature and where the first is seen as superior to the latter.⁴ The recent focus on body in academic circles is undoubtedly related to the explicit body-consciousness in the secular and materialist parts of western society.⁵ To begin with, the secular denial of transcendent reality has arguably led to a new perception of the body as the singular unit of a human being. Moreover, it has been argued that progress in medical technology, the fitness culture and other recent changes towards individualism in western society have brought about a relativisation of biology in which the body has been transformed from object to agent.⁶ In other words, the perception of body is changing in western society. From having been seen as an unchanging entity, it is now more and more understood as a means toward fulfilling the desires of the individual.⁷

Through his studies on the history of different social institutions, Michel Foucault initiated a wave of research in this field in the late 1970's and early 80's.⁸ Foucault presented the body as an outcome of different social processes and showed how it has been transformed through history in close interaction with societal structures related to authority. In Foucault's view, the power of society is inscribed on the body, which is completely dependent upon the cultural context of its surroundings.⁹ Norbert Elias was another pioneer of scholarly

² See, for instance, Feher 1989.

³ Frank 1991: 40.

⁴ Csordas 1994: 7–9; Leder 1990.

⁵ Martin 1992: 121.

⁶ Csordas 1994: 3.

⁷ Csordas 1994: 2.

⁸ Foucault 1979 and 1980a.

⁹ Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 49.

research on the body as a cultural construct. As Foucault's contemporary he discussed various attitudes towards bodily functions, such as sexuality, eating and spitting, to showing how bodies change because of the social processes they go through.¹⁰

In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*¹¹ and other works,¹² Pierre Bourdieu has made some theoretical contributions that have been much used in discussions on the body. Like Foucault, Bourdieu argues that the supraindividual structures of a society are lived in different ways in the individual experience of human beings. *Habitus* is the name he gives this internalised superstructure.¹³ This is not the place to elaborate on the terminology¹⁴ that Bourdieu introduces to designate the intricate processes through which this happens.¹⁵ What is significant for this presentation instead is the emphasis Bourdieu gives to the comprehensive character of habitus. This, he suggests, is not something that the individual *has*, but rather what the individual *is*. It is not an individual's conscious comprehension of reality but something which is learned by the body and that subconsciously and inexpressibly exists through the body.¹⁶ Since habitus is intimately connected to economic and social class in Bourdieu's thinking¹⁷ this means that the individual, on all levels, basically is that which she has been ascribed to be by her circumstances.

It is hard to overestimate the academic achievements of the mentioned scholars or to overestimate their importance for our understanding of humanity. Yet their theories have been criticised and further developed both by themselves and by others. Bourdieu's theory from the 1970's, for instance, has been criticised for being an expression of socio-economic determinism. It has been argued that there are examples of cultural contexts where social formations do not simply reflect socio-economic structures as Bourdieu claims.¹⁸

¹⁰ Elias 1978.

¹¹ Bourdieu 1977a.

¹² See, for instance, Bourdieu 1977b, 1980 and 1991.

¹³ Mahmood 2001a: 837.

¹⁴ Gregory Starrett, for instance, defines embodiment of ideology in habit (hexis) as "a set of processes through which individuals and groups consciously ascribe meaning to . . . bodily disposition, and establish, maintain, and contest publicly its political valence". Starrett 1995: 954.

¹⁵ Bourdieu 1977a, 1980.

¹⁶ Bourdieu 1980: 73.

¹⁷ Bourdieu 1977a: 83.

¹⁸ Foucault 1988a, 1988b; Rose 1997.

Furthermore, there are human beings who seem to break away from their socially determined destiny; and, what may be more significant, there is a reflection upon self among individuals and conscious discourses of understanding of self as well as explicit pedagogical strategies¹⁹ among religious and other groups.²⁰ All these things, it has been argued, indicate that Bourdieu's understanding of habitus, however important, needs adding to in order to correspond more thoroughly to the various aspects of human culture. When it comes to the perception of the body, Foucault, Elias and Bourdieu have been criticised for seeing the body too much as a passive receiver of social processes.²¹ The body, it has been argued, is more than just a object of external forces, and therefore, the theories need to be altered so that the body is seen as an agent as much as an object.

Other scholars have continued in the footsteps of Bourdieu and Foucault. Building on previous theories, they have brought about a development of body-theorising that is both a continuation of and an objection to post-structuralism. It is a continuation because it aims at deconstructing borders between culture and body, and an objection since it objects to seeing everything as language or text. The theorists ascertain that human beings experience things that are not language but body.²² Emotions, for instance, are held in the body and the body constantly interacts with the social and psychological circumstances of the individual. It feels, resists and reacts in ways that trigger action.²³ To see the body as a passive receiver of culture is therefore one-sided. To a certain extent the body is a recipient, but it is also an agent.²⁴ A premature understanding that studies of body by necessity bring the student further away from culture is therefore questionable.²⁵ Body is not some *tabula rasa* upon which culture is inscribed but an active part in the construction of culture. If one sees it the other way around: culture is linked to the individual even in his or her body.²⁶ However, it needs to be mentioned

¹⁹ Cantwell 1999.

²⁰ Starrett 1995: 963.

²¹ Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 50.

²² Jenkins and Valiante 1994: 176.

²³ Jenkins and Valiante 1994: 164.

²⁴ Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 62.

²⁵ Jenkins and Valiante 1994: 164.

²⁶ Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 62.

that there are certain scholars who have recently argued that the mind-body dualism, which so many other theorists have struggled to outgrow is present everywhere in the human understanding of self.²⁷ Such a notion somewhat challenges the understanding of the above presented scholars. It will not be further dealt with here.

Instead, the single term that stands out as the core concept of the understanding I have chosen is *embodiment*. The theorists I refer to here have a comprehensive definition of this concept. The body is defined as a biological and material entity,²⁸ whereas embodiment is understood as the manner in which human beings relate to reality. In other words it is the existential foundation of culture and self.²⁹ Embodiment is not a process of putting culture or mind into a body that is objectified and thing-like,³⁰ but rather, in the words of Thomas Csordas, “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world”.³¹

There have been several consequences of this view in the study of western and non-western cultures. To begin with, general discussions on questions such as whether there is a distinction between mind and body or how culture is embodied have been intensified. The emphasis on body has brought about a whole new set of questions and fields of interest to explore. To begin with, the function and interpretation of actual bodily practices, processes, parts and products in culture have been focused on.³² What does the body actually do in a ceremonial performance? How do people symbolically construe giving birth to a child or going through an abortion?³³ What is the role of blood or semen in ritual? Questions such as these have placed the understanding of how the body is seen, used and felt on the scholarly agenda. Furthermore, the body in relation to specific domains of culture, such as politics, religion or gender, has become a relevant field of study. Here, many scholars have chosen to deal with notions of multiple bodies. Following the pioneering works of Mary Douglas in the 1970's,³⁴ scholars have chosen to

²⁷ See, for instance, Lambek 1998: 105.

²⁸ Csordas 1994: 12.

²⁹ Csordas 1994: i and 6.

³⁰ Csordas 1994: 16; Ots 1994: 118.

³¹ Csordas 1994: 12.

³² Csordas 1994: 4–5.

³³ See, for instance, Svalastog 1998.

³⁴ As early as in the 1970's, Mary Douglas distinguished between social and physical body. Douglas 1973.

speak about an individual, a social and a political body, respectively.³⁵ It is important to note that all these scholars take embodiment for granted as a theoretical platform from which to approach culture.³⁶

In this and the following chapter, the concept of embodiment is central to the way I choose to approach and interpret the religious behaviour and experiences of my informants. I agree with Thomas Csordas that embodiment can be understood as an existential condition of human life and culture, and concur in the criticism of an extensive social-constructionist view of culture and body. I have chosen to apply this approach to my material for two reasons. Firstly, because the individual stories of my informants reveal incitements for religious activity that I can only perceive as caused by the body: experiences of puberty, disease and sexual desire are a few examples. Secondly, because relieving emotions constitutes such a great part of the informants' ritual life. Sorrow and other emotions may be the clearest evidence of the link between body and social world.³⁷ Tears, for instance, are products of the body; yet they express culture too. Apparently, an emotion that is experienced in the body and that causes the body to change cannot be understood without a theoretical approach which notes the existence of body as an agent.

As I define it then, embodiment is a significant process in the formation and interpretation of the human experience. As I see them, human experiences are not just internalised social structures but may also originate from the individual's independent self, i.e. from his or her body. Since cultural expressions both cause bodily reactions and may be caused by bodily experience, the individual has to be approached not only as an object but also as an agent in the construction of culture. In the following I will exemplify this understanding by presenting and analysing the religious practices of my informants.

THEORISING ISLAM IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The concept of virtue, *taqvā*, has a paramount position in lives and thoughts of the informants. I will now present the individual cases

³⁵ Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987.

³⁶ Csordas 1994: 6.

³⁷ Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 48.

of ‘Ali Bakhtiāri and Mohammad Mahdi. These two will serve as examples of how Islam may be understood and practiced as a way of life. I have chosen to use the noun *theorise* to denote their reflections in these matters since I consider their insider formulation, structuring and conceptualisation of what their religion is and does to be a parallel of the scholarly theorising which is carried out and spoken of elsewhere in this study.

There is a conscious and elaborate discourse on the role of religion in Islamic tradition. Throughout history theologians and jurists have developed theories and teachings which concern what it is to be Muslim and how Islam should be practiced in the life of the individual.³⁸ Although these theories are widespread and well known by most religiously active Muslims, even on grass-roots level, they have often been neglected in studies on contemporary popular Islamic culture.³⁹ In the material of the present study it is apparent that the official Islamic ideas which are taught in the mosque influence the views held by the informants in these matters. In the following I will present and analyse the informants’ understanding of Islam as a system and its role in their life. I will do so from certain premises. Firstly, it is my view that the informants should be seen as participants in the general Islamic discourse and not merely as receivers of it. The informants study and discuss religious matters among themselves and convey their thoughts to others. By doing this they actively participate in the discourse and cannot be excluded from it in an analysis. Secondly, I believe that religious behaviour can best be understood through an analysis of the religious person’s own understanding of it. The informants’ views of their own religiosity is therefore crucial for my analytical comprehension of it. This is not only because I want to approach religious experiences from the perspective of those who live it,⁴⁰ but also because I think it is faulty to only comprehend grass-roots religious activity as passive reception and religiously regulated conduct as socially inflicted behaviour, which

³⁸ See, for instance, Lapidus 1984.

³⁹ Saba Mahmood, for instance, points out that studies on the modern veiling-movement in Egypt have been surprisingly unoccupied with the Islamic discourse of virtue that the women themselves frame their veiling in. See Mahmood 2001b: 209.

⁴⁰ Here I am inspired by Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey White. See Lutz and White 1986.

restricts the individual. A religious way of life, I reckon, may also be the tool of personal development that it is claimed to be by the informants. To exclude such conclusions would be to impart ideas to the material that simply are not there.⁴¹ However, this does not mean that I believe I can present their version of things in some unspoiled way. My ambition is only to make their communicated understanding the base of my analysis.

The Case Of 'Ali Bakhtiāri

Among the informants, 'Ali Bakhtiāri may be the one who is most eager to let Islam imbue his life in every single respect. Every time I came to Esfahān and met him again after a year of separation, he spoke to me about the religious progress he had experienced since the last time we met. It has seemed to me that his life circles around a quest for religious and personal perfection. The years of his life that are portrayed in this study reveal only a small section of that struggle which had been going on for many years when I first met 'Ali in 1999 and which has continued since I drank the last glass of tea in the modest hovel that is his home just before finishing my final field trip in May 2002.

'Ali Bakhtiāri was born in the year of the Islamic revolution, and was thus in his early twenties when I made the interviews for this study. As his chosen name shows, he is a Bakhtiāri and he grew up in one of the small Bakhtiāri villages found in the mountains of western Iran. The Bakhtiāris traditionally keep sheep and 'Ali comes from a family of shepherds and farmers. He remembers his childhood as a time of great hardship. Being the oldest of eight children 'Ali worked at his father's side from a young age and helped provide for the family during the difficult years of the war. He went to elementary school in the neighbouring Bakhtiāri villages but later had to move further away from home in order to continue his education. Eventually he came to Esfahān where he finished his high school studies while surviving as a construction worker. When I first met him in 1999, a year had passed since he was demobbed from his military service. He had begun studying geography at one of the university colleges in the Esfahān area and still made a living as a

⁴¹ Here I am inspired by Saba Mahmood. Mahmood 2001a: 828–9.

construction worker and as an errand boy at a bank. He sent all the money he could spare to his parents and seven brothers and sisters in the village.

‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s life-story is a tale of distress, maltreatment and helplessness. He remembers his childhood as a period of constant sorrow and suffering with much grief. When we first became acquainted, he told me he was recovering from a long period of depression. From in the early years of high school he had developed what he himself describes as a sickness of the soul (*bimāri-e ruh*).⁴² For four years, ‘Ali suffered from severe anxiety. He remembers that during this time he could not function properly in society. He could not focus on his studies; he wanted to be alone all the time; he felt as if he had some problem with his heart and neck but doctors could not find anything.⁴³ Whatever the clinical diagnosis of his problem might have been, ‘Ali remembers this time as a period in his life when everything was falling apart. On several occasions he told me that he did not get any help in solving his problems. His parents were illiterate and did not understand what was going on and his teachers at school did not bother to help him either. ‘Ali cried in secret and did not reveal his suffering.⁴⁴

The turning point came during his military service. Although being a soldier for one and a half years was not an especially pleasant experience, it was during this period that ‘Ali became acquainted with the Islamic life style that has characterised his life so thoroughly. With solemnity ‘Ali has told me about the bewildering moment when things began to change:

When I begun my military service I was sick in my soul and I was like that throughout my time in the army . . . During the concluding part of the education, however, a *tāleb* from Qom came [to visit us]. He told us to read and contemplate twenty hadiths from the Prophet. I wanted to read them and did so very quickly. For that I got leave for five days and later also a promotion. One day there was a *mollā* who said that some soldier had to give a speech on religious matters. I, who never even opened my mouth in high school, volunteered to

⁴² This expression has connotations to classical Persian literature and is arguably inspired by these.

⁴³ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.

⁴⁴ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000 and May 5th, 2002.

do this and there I was, giving a speech to almost a thousand soldiers, or maybe five hundred. I spoke about Satan, about carnal desires, about prayer.⁴⁵

The speech marked the beginning of ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s new life. It made him feel self-confident and good in a way he had not previously experienced. Since then his interest in religious matters has become a predominant part of his life. He is a *basij*, a political activist and a zealous follower of Islamic regulations. Throughout the time of this study, ‘Ali remained strongly committed to his religious life style. When I last met him on the final field trip, he had recently returned from a *basij*-get-together in Tehrān, where he had led a group of Bakhtiāri-Islamists shouting slogans against Israel. He told me he still sometimes had feelings of anxiety but nevertheless that he felt things were improving day-by-day and that he was confident that he would soon overcome even what was left of his old sickness in the soul.⁴⁶

In 2002, when I asked ‘Ali to sum up the quintessence of Islam as he saw it, he pondered a while on my question before defining Islam as a threefold venture. Islam, he ascertained, is essentially “to know the facts, to know oneself and to go to the horizons”.⁴⁷ Although this concise definition is formulated at the very end of the period that is covered by this study, I believe it successfully summarises the comprehension of Islam that ‘Ali had tried to define for himself and for me during the last couple of years. Therefore I will use it as the basis for my presentation of his world view.

To ‘Ali Bakhtiāri and to most of his fellow-believers, Islam is a complete and comprehensive religion that covers all aspects of reality. There is nothing whatsoever in this world or in any other world, that Islam does not include in its system or have advice about.⁴⁸ To be aware of this and to comprehend the purpose and details of the Islamic religion is “to know the facts”.

As the perfect and complete religion ‘Ali believes that Islam also provides the correct understanding of the meaning and goal of human life and the proper methods to fulfil this goal. “The human soul”,

⁴⁵ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.

⁴⁶ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

⁴⁷ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

⁴⁸ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.

‘Ali tells me, “is really something strange, and to understand this soul is really important and difficult”.⁴⁹ Islam has the keys with which to approach this difficult task and thus enables the individual to know him- or herself. As ‘Ali sees it, human existence in this world is a trial. The trial needs to be there because without it there would be no reward in the life beyond. For this reason God has created human beings with the potential to either progress or regress, i.e. to go higher or lower. The high way, then, ‘Ali designates as peaceful and humane. It is the way of personal development that God has intended and wished for every human being and that can lead us to a closeness to God, which is even above the level of the angels. On the other hand a human being can also choose the other path which deviates from the humane and leads them to levels lower than that of the devil and of beasts.⁵⁰

The aspects of human nature that most acutely threatens to lead the individual away from the humane path are material desires (*meylhā-ye māddi*). Among these are a want for money, status, material wealth and sexual fulfilment. ‘Ali has experienced that these desires cannot be properly satisfied since human beings always want more whenever their wishes are fulfilled. Instead, material desires lead the individual further and further away from spiritual serenity which is truly desirable.⁵¹ However, this does not mean that materialist desires should be completely abandoned. On the contrary, ‘Ali ensures that one must try to satisfy them. But they need to be balanced by the much more important spiritual aspect of human life. “Both spirit and body need food”, ‘Ali tells me. “They must be like two parallel lines, and if they are not it is very bad”.⁵²

Islam, then, is essentially the way which enables humans to tread the humane path and avoid perdition by providing knowledge of the nature of reality and the tools to control it. In one of our discussions ‘Ali summarised his views as follows:

From the time of our creation, from our birth, our souls are white and pure. The time between birth and puberty is the most important in order for people to be happy and for their souls to develop. But,

⁴⁹ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

⁵⁰ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

⁵¹ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

⁵² ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

since this is also the time when our desires start to grow, it is important that a young person thinks freely. For a Muslim, the purpose of Islam is to provide this. Humans have to try, but humans are like animals and Islam is what controls them, like a bridle.⁵³

Even if the line of thought is not completely obvious in this quotations it pinpoints the core of ‘Ali’s world view and understanding of Islam to some degree. As he sees it, carnal and other materialistic desires threaten our freedom since they blur our thoughts and make us focus upon unimportant things. Islam restrains us. But it is a restraint that ultimately gives us true freedom and true humanity. This is what ‘Ali denotes in his definition of Islam as “going to the horizons”.

‘Ali Bakhtiāri definitely believes in an afterlife. He also believes that the choices humans make in their earthly lives will determine whether they will come to paradise or be punished.⁵⁴ It is my impression, however, that he does not consider the reward of the hereafter as the main incitement for a religious life in this world. Even if this life is primarily a trial in preparation for resurrection, the eschatological outcome should be seen a natural continuation of the life one has led here. A choice to tread the humane path towards higher levels in this world will, thus, find its ultimate conclusion in paradise, but it will also lead to peace of mind, spiritual power (*barakat*),⁵⁵ happiness, success, an awareness of self and a firm identity in this world. Deviation from this path, on the other hand, will bring about sorrow, mental problems, inability to focus on studies, societal instability, brutality and, eventually, punishment from God.⁵⁶

To stay on the humane path is a relentless challenge, ‘Ali says. It is the constant effort that is known as *jihad* in Islamic tradition.⁵⁷ As following chapters will show,⁵⁸ the core of this struggle lies in the concept of virtue, *taqvā*. To ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, virtue is the most important thing for anyone who wants to improve his or her life in both this world and the hereafter,⁵⁹ and in our discussions we have spoken

⁵³ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

⁵⁴ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

⁵⁵ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

⁵⁶ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

⁵⁷ The grand Ayatollāh has written a book on the subject. ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001.

⁵⁸ See mainly chapter 7.

⁵⁹ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.

a great deal about it. On one occasion, I asked ‘Ali to tell me exactly what *taqvā* is, as he saw it. The subsequent conversation followed:

Virtue is avoidance, it will be gained through praying and worship, we should perform the necessary recommended acts⁶⁰ and, most important, control our eyes. What is desired by our carnal soul⁶¹ must be avoided.

What do you mean by controlling our eyes?

What my carnal soul⁶² wants I must avoid. Virtue is to avoid what the carnal soul wants.

*Is it the most important thing in Akhlāq?*⁶³

For someone who wants to build himself morally, it is the most important thing.

Do you have it?

[Laughter]⁶⁴

Before continuing, it is important to say something here about the word *nafs*, above translated as carnal soul. *Nafs* does not mean soul, but there is no English word that immediately corresponds to its Persian connotation. It is sometimes translated as *the soul*, *the self* or *the essence* of an individual. However, as these translations may cause one to believe, it does not designate something that is opposed to the physical aspect of human nature, and it can also mean *blood*, *carnal desire*, *passion* or by extension, in popular chaste language, *penis*.⁶⁵ When I translate the word as *carnal soul*, I do not refer to a person’s torso and limbs, but rather to the carnal aspect of human experience of self.

In Islamic tradition the human self is commonly understood to be separated to different levels of purity. In Twelver Shi‘ite tradition,

⁶⁰ A category of Islamic regulations known as *vājebāt*. In Islamic law, acts and relationships are graded by a scale of moral evaluation consisting of five categories: *harām*, that which is forbidden; *makruh*, that which is reprehensible; *mobāh*, that which is indifferent; *mandub*, that which is recommended; *vājeb*, that which is obligatory. Coulson 1964: 83–84.

⁶¹ The Persian word here translated as carnal soul is *nafs-e ammāre*.

⁶² The Persian word here translated as carnal soul is *nafs*.

⁶³ *Akhlāq* is Islamic ethics.

⁶⁴ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

⁶⁵ Aryanpur-Kashani 1995.

and hence in the eyes of the informants,⁶⁶ three⁶⁷ such levels are distinguished. *Nafs-e ammāre*, which literally means the dictating soul, is the first of these. It is the aspect of the human self which inspires to sin, which usually means to satisfy carnal desires. Although it is not specified, this is the kind of *nafs* that ‘Ali speaks about in the quotation above where I have chosen to translate it to carnal soul.⁶⁸ *Nafs-e lavvāme*, the repenting soul, is a second level of the self. It is the human consciousness, the chastising and self-blaming soul which enables the individual to regret that which the carnal soul has caused him or her to commit. *Nafs-e motma’enne*, the peaceful soul, is the third, last and purest of the levels. It is the self-controlled, calm and truly humane soul. The virtuous ideal of spiritual refinement is exemplified particularly in the perfect personalities of the Prophet and the *Ahl-e beyt*. The struggle of virtue, then, is the struggle against the *nafs-e ammāre*, through the *nafs-e lavvāme* in order to get closer to a *nafs-e motma’enne*.

The origins of these distinctions are many. The terms themselves are Koranic,⁶⁹ but their categorisation falls back on the heritage of al-Ghazzālī who put forth the dichotomisation of these different wills in the human soul in his discussions on the concept and emphasised the necessity of disciplining the carnal soul through ethics.⁷⁰ The Ghazzālīan heritage has been kept and developed through Sufism. In Persian mystic poetry the struggle against the carnal soul has often been portrayed as a main part of the spiritual development of the Sufi.⁷¹ Not least through the mystic orientation of Khomeyni himself, this understanding has become a part of the Iranian revolutionary discourse and has, hence, been transmitted to the informants.⁷²

To ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, virtue is to restrict that which the carnal soul desires. It is significant that, in the quotation above, he defines a threefold method through which this avoidance can be carried out:

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, April 28th, 2002.

⁶⁷ There are six levels of *nafs* in the Shi’ite school of thought, but these are the three which are mentioned by the informants and which are most commonly referred to.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Naqavi 1992: 261.

⁶⁹ For instance, *nafs-e ammāre* is mentioned in the Sura an-Nāzi’āt (79): 40 and in Surat Yusof (12): 53; *nafs-e lavvāme* in Sura al-Qiāmat (75): 2; and *nafs-e motma’enne* in Sura al-Fajr (89): 27.

⁷⁰ Netton 1993: 56.

⁷¹ Schimmel 1975: 112–113.

⁷² Brumberg 1997: 24; Dabashi 1993: 459.

following the obligatory prescriptions of Islam; prayer and worship; and controlling one's eyes. In the following I will comment briefly on each of these three.

The obligatory prescriptions, *vājebāt*, constitute a category of Islamic regulations. The main religious acts such as fasting, going on pilgrimage and saying the daily prayers belong to this category. By ascertaining the necessity of following these prescriptions, 'Ali Bakhtiāri passes on an exhortation that is taught by Islamic scholars worldwide. Regulations constitute a central aspect of the Islamic tradition and it is not surprising that 'Ali also emphasises their general importance. The fact that he especially stresses the importance of daily prayers, however, is significant. Even if the other informants as well as the authorities in the mosque share his view in general terms, 'Ali is undoubtedly the one who most zealously asserts the importance of prayer. To him, this regular ritual activity is the solution to all kinds of problems:

The soul has its own food and that is worship, prayer (*namāz*)! . . . Let me summarise: All problems, spiritual (*ruhi*) or psychological (*ravāni*) or dangerous spiritual illnesses, especially within the family, find their medicine in prayer. If there is no prayer, there will be disintegration. Prayer feels like flying, it is the flight of the spirit. It is a great joy that can save a person.⁷³

In order to work, however, prayers need to be said with comprehension. 'Ali is full of stories about how he previously failed to get anything out of prayer. That was before he had started to study Islam seriously.⁷⁴ Then, as he remembers it, things changed. Prayer started to work. As he started to pray with understanding, the ritual became meaningful. It restrained his anxiety, gave him a sense of calm, helped him hold back anger and jealousy⁷⁵ and made him a more altruistic person.⁷⁶ In 'Ali Bakhtiāri's understanding there are many sins. Backbiting, thievery and betrayal are often mentioned as examples.⁷⁷ Prayer, 'Ali ensures, has helped him to stay away from all of them. The most dangerous sin is that which he hints at in the quotation above when he mentions the importance of controlling

⁷³ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

⁷⁴ See, for instance, 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

⁷⁵ 'Ali Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.

⁷⁶ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

⁷⁷ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001 and May 11th, 2001.

one's eyes. To look at non-family members of the opposite sex (*nāmahrām*), 'Ali considers to be the sin that is most difficult to avoid.⁷⁸ "Satan", he says, "is like blood in our veins. We want to look at girls."⁷⁹ Even in this case, however, prayer is one of the few things that can help. I will return to 'Ali's and the other's views on relationships with the opposite sex later in this chapter.

'Ali Bakhtiāri's comprehension of Islam is not only mere repetition of the official ideology taught in Iranian schools and mosques. On the contrary, it is firmly based in his own experience of material and spiritual problems. For 'Ali, Islam has become a method of dealing with his own anxiety. It is obvious that to a certain extent his ideas have their cause in his own background. He has experienced the distress that comes from unfulfilled wishes and material problems. The Islamic teaching he has assimilated has given him a comprehension of his own history, a language to express his problems and a method to work his way through them. 'Ali is troubled by the fact that he did not gain insight earlier in his life. "For me who has come to know myself late, it has been difficult", he has told me. "One reason was that my parents were illiterate. It caused me not to grow so well in terms of knowledge and culture. But little by little, because of the ups and downs in my life, I have improved and made progress."⁸⁰

The case of 'Ali Bakhtiāri is an elucidating example of how the Islamic system of belief and practice is construed to fit into the particular life situation of an individual. 'Ali's world view and ritual life are totally in line with the official teachings of his community, which clearly correspond to his personal needs and wishes. This reciprocal process, which seems to characterise the way Islam is put into practice in everyday life, will be further investigated and discussed below. Before that, however, I will introduce another of the informants.

The Case of Mohammad Mahdi

When I came to Esfahān in 2002, Mohammad Mahdi had started working at a newly founded Koran institute in the city. His duties in the new place were to teach children and young people to recite

⁷⁸ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001.

⁷⁹ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

⁸⁰ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

and understand the Koran as well as to provide character-building activities for them. At the time I went to see him at his new office the institute was performing a puppet theatre and the place was crowded with children. The theatre featured the Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, significantly represented by the collection's Pharaoh-puppet, and surrounded by all kinds of animals. The plot of the play was simple enough: Sharon had captured a young Koran-student and was now keeping him in chains. One by one the different animals were persuaded to rebel against Sharon's unjust rule and to rescue the innocent student. Eventually the animals followed the advice, overthrew Sharon, rescued the student and gave a happy ending to the performance that caused tremendous outbursts of approval from the attending children. Mohammad Mahdi also seemed unusually amused by the play as he proudly introduced me to the actors and showed me around the institute.

This took place during my last visit to Esfahān and at the end of the period covered by this study. During the years that had passed I had seen the gradual change in Mohammad Mahdi's life, from being a poor but promising Koran-student in the early process of building a family, he had become a respectable father of a family and a full-time Koran teacher. Mohammad Mahdi was in his mid-twenties when he participated in this study. He is the oldest son of a big family and he grew up with his eight brothers and four sisters in one of the poorer suburbs of Esfahān. His father provided for the family by keeping sheep and working with whatever employment he could find. When Mohammad Mahdi finished high school he started studying mechanics at a university college. But his major interest was not in technology and therefore he started to pursue a career in Koran studies. From the age of sixteen, he had studied the art of Koran recitation on a serious level, and as he had displayed great talent in this field from the beginning it now became his major occupation. During the time covered by this study Mohammad Mahdi made his living by teaching Koran classes arranged by the *sepāh*⁸¹ and *basij* organisations.⁸² He is married and lives with his wife and their son, who was born in the first year of this study, in a small flat in the outskirts of Esfahān. Mohammad is a deeply com-

⁸¹ *Sepāh* is the Iranian revolutionary force, which is closely related to the *basij*-organisation.

⁸² Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.

mitted conservative religious activist. Through his teaching, his involvement for the Islamisation of Iranian society has become the paramount goal of his professional and private life.

Among the informants, Mohammad Mahdi is definitely the most reputable in the community. As a Koran teacher he is an authority on Islamic matters. With regard to his behaviour in the informant role, it is my impression that this authority has created a certain confidence when it comes to answering questions concerning religion. It is also my impression that it makes him the most difficult informant to interview. Mohammad Mahdi and I have travelled a great deal around Esfahān. We have visited different shrines and met several of his friends. I have followed him in his daily work as a Koran teacher, participated in his classes and became acquainted with many of his relatives. Most of the interviews for this study have been made between all these other activities: in Mohammad Mahdi's rusty old Citroën, at tea breaks, while waiting for busses and so on. Often, Mohammad Mahdi's little son has been around and sometimes his wife and their friends have been too. It has been an interesting and sometimes frustrating experience which has, literally, been an encounter with Islam in the everyday life of a hard-working parent, far from the peaceful discussions carried out with Mosta'ār in his *madrese* or with 'Ali Bakhtiāri in his mountain village.

But, Mohammad Mahdi himself is a peaceful person. His voice is low and his eyes usually downcast. Before answering my questions on Islam he always ponders a while, as if making up his mind concerning what to say before opening his mouth. Mohammad is a gentle person—polite, friendly, very pious and, by all measures, very popular among his students. He also looks as one would expect a man of his reputation and profession to do: a well-kept beard, a neat haircut, a light-coloured shirt over dark loose-fitting trousers and a silver ring with a red stone shining on the right ring-finger.

Generally speaking, Mohammad Mahdi's definition and understanding of Islam does not differ from that of 'Ali Bakhtiāri's. They both hold views more or less in line with the religious interpretation taught at the mosque. The differences that do exist are mostly matters of emphasis. It is my impression that Mohammad's world view is not as rigorously structured and organised as 'Ali Bakhtiāri's is. Considering the former's profession this may seem a bit surprising. But unlike 'Ali, Mohammad has not been forced by his circumstances to develop a coherent understanding of the religious system which

he belongs to. For this reason it is not possible, nor meaningful, to try to give a coherent presentation of his views. Instead I will emphasise certain aspects, which I have found characteristic of his perspective.

First of all Mohammad Mahdi is much concerned with Islamic regulations. When I have asked him to define or summarise Islam he has always spoken about the religion as a comprehensive set of rules. Islam regulates every possible aspect of human experience and it is up to humans to obey the orders, usually without questioning.⁸³ "Islam", he says, "is to listen to the words of God and to obey them".⁸⁴ To be virtuous in Mohammad Mahdi's view, is to do exactly that, to follow the rules:

I should do the good deeds that satisfy God and shouldn't do things that God does not like. This is virtue. If I shout at my mother I am not virtuous (*bitaqvā*) because I do something God doesn't like. God says: respect your parents! [Another] example: God has given [my son] to me as a loan. I must try to make this child a good person. If I don't do my best I'll not be virtuous. If I am not good tempered, or if I lie at my job, or if I do less than I should and get paid without working, I am not virtuous.⁸⁵

In this respect, Mohammad Mahdi's understanding is clear enough. To be virtuous is to follow the rules of God. It is obvious that this is also something that Mohammad is wholeheartedly trying to do in his own life. In addition to these features, he is more apt than any of the other informants to express human dependency upon the mercy of God. This inclination finds its clearest expression in the improvised prayers that Mohammad sings to conclude his Koran classes. In these prayers, he often brings up the topic of human shortcomings and human beings' dependence upon God's forgiveness. The prayers clearly complement Mohammad's otherwise rigid adherence to religious regulations:

God! God! You ordered me and I didn't follow your order. . . . You prevented me from doing bad things but I still did them . . . God, how can I stand before you? What do I have? What obedience in the past gives me the right to ask you to help me now? Only one thing gives me the courage and that is your mercy, you, who even tell the worst of us to come to you.⁸⁶

⁸³ Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.

⁸⁴ Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.

⁸⁵ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

⁸⁶ Mohammad Mahdi, in *rowze*, May 20th, 2001.

I believe it is correct to assume that the need for forgiveness, which Mohammad Mahdi talks about in this and other prayers, to a certain extent reflects his own feelings of being incomplete. In May 2001 when I asked Mohammad about his biggest problems, he told me that they were of spiritual a nature. He said that in his prayers he always asked God to help him through the Prophet and the Imams, and that he constantly asked himself why he was estranged from God: "Why don't I think more about Imam Zamān? Why can't I see him? Why can't I become a better person? Why haven't I understood more in my 25 years?"⁸⁷ These were some of the issues that he felt were most important in his life. They bothered him, and his inability to make spiritual progress made him feel sad.

The last time I saw Mohammad Mahdi in the spring of 2002, these feelings had not been subdued. Although his life had clearly changed for the better in many respects, his spiritual struggle continued much like 'Ali Bakhtiāri's. But where 'Ali Bakhtiāri's spiritual struggle mostly circled around controlling distracting desires, Mohammad's primarily consisted of Koran studies. To him, the Koran is the foremost expression of God's mercy. It is through the Koran and the *Ahl-e beyt* that human beings can be saved. In one of his Koran class prayers, Mohammad expressed this idea as follows:

When the resurrection comes, the days of regretting are past. They will ask God: Get us out of here! Give us one more chance! We will be good servants! But it is over. Know the value of these crying moments, this crying and these tears! Let us hope our sins will not prevent us from remembering God. Now that you have the chance, ask him! Swear by his great Koran and his great people. Now that we have tasted the sweetness of praying to you, don't separate us from Koran and *Ahl-e beyt*. They are the only ones we have in this world!⁸⁸

Mohammad answers almost every question with a reference to the Koran followed by a brief personal comment or interpretation. He has told me that he sees it as an ideal model to be able to answer any question through a quotation from the Koran.⁸⁹ In the beginning

⁸⁷ Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.

⁸⁸ Mohammad Mahdi, May 17th, 2001.

⁸⁹ In this he is greatly inspired by the very young Iranian Koran expert Doctor Mohammad Hoseyn Tabātabā'i, who allegedly knows the Koran, *Osul ol-kāfi* and *Nahj ol-balāgh*e by heart and who is said to answer any question by quoting these scriptures.

of this research project I felt that this attitude was a problem. At that time I wanted to surpass the level of bookish Islam in order to reach personal feelings and understandings that I believed existed behind the surface of learned formulas. As I have come to know my informants better I have revised this understanding. The Koranic language, as I now perceive it, is the language by which Mohammad Mahdi and others express their experience, and there is not necessarily some other truer language behind it. For this reason I have chosen to try to understand Mohammad's manner of expression rather than to search for a way around it, and hence to take his Koranic statements at face value, not as superficially imposed doctrines, but as heart-felt expressions of his particular interpretation of reality.

The above quoted answers to my questions concerning happiness hint at the comprehensive content that Mohammad Mahdi sees in the Koranic message. As Mohammad sees it, the Koran is not just a divinely revealed book that is true. It is the very definition of truth. As such, its words are hierarchically placed above personal experiences or motives. The answer to a question such as "are you a happy person?" then is not, as I had expected, sought through a ransacking of personal emotions. Instead it is sought in the same source which holds answers to all other questions, namely in the Islamic revelation. It can thus be said that Mohammad Mahdi is inclined to construe his own situation from the point of view of the revealed message.

To sum up, the three distinctive features of Mohammad's ideas are his adherence to the Islamic rules, his emphasis on God's mercy and his Koranic focus. A final observation concerning Mohammad, which is most significant for this study, is that he seeks to feel in accordance with Islamic ideals. From what I can tell, he is not satisfied with following regulations only. He also wants them to be internalised in such a way that they come from within himself. Mohammad wants to feel Islam, not only to practice it. He also claims that this is something that he does. Let me clarify my point by quoting from one of our conversations. On one occasion I asked Mohammad Mahdi if he considered himself a happy or sad person. After a moment of consideration he answered:

There is a verse in the Koran that says . . . that those who remember God are happy. Whenever I feel that I have not committed sins I am

happy, when I feel that I have sinned I am sad. When we do not sin, we are happy; when we do sin we are sad because of our sinning. If someone has not sinned, he will become sad when he does.⁹⁰

Mohammad says that his own feelings of happiness and sadness depend on his and others' success in following the rules of Islam. It is not possible for me to ascertain whether the Islamic system to which he adheres is as thoroughly internalised as Mohammad claims. But whether or not it is, his answers show at least that this is the way he wants to present the situation.

During the last visit of my field work I met Mohammad Mahdi in the courtyard of the mosque as usual. That night he accompanied me on my walk home after the prayer and told me about the year that had passed since our last meeting. It had been a hard year. His wife had become sick. The doctors had found a benign tumour on her ovaries and the first diagnosis predicted that the ovaries would have to be removed. Such an operation would entail serious risk to her health and make it impossible for them to have more children. Devastated by the news, Mohammad Mahdi travelled to the shrines of Fāṭeme Ma'sume in Qom and Imam Rezā in Mashhad. He gave votive gifts at the sanctuaries and spent several days there praying for the recovery of his wife. On the first visit to the hospital after his return, Mohammad Mahdi told me, the doctors could ascertain that Mohammad's wife was cured and that there would be no need for an operation anymore. For Mohammad Mahdi what had happened was, obviously, a miracle. It was a proof of God's mercy and the help of the holy Imams for which he would always be thankful.

The case of Mohammad Mahdi is an example of how Islam can be lived and construed in the everyday life of a pious Iranian family man. His thorough involvement in Islamic activities and his emphasis on the necessity of both obedience and divine mercy show that he is in line with the Shi'ite tradition to which he belongs. For the following analysis however, it is his venture not only to follow but also to *feel* Islam that is most significant. I will return to this in the conclusions of this chapter. Now, however, I will go on to present the informants' views on the opposite sex in more detail.

⁹⁰ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

Sexuality, Women and Gender Roles

As has already become apparent, sexual temptation is a major problem in the lives of many informants. Of the two persons presented above, this is most apparent in the case of 'Ali. However, he does share this problem with Mosta'ār and Amir. Among all the sins, which these persons have to avoid, looking at or thinking about members of the opposite sex seems to be the one which is most frequently brought up in our discussions. For this reason I consider it motivated to dwell a while of the informants' views on the opposite sex and on their own sexual frustration.

Islamic law and traditional Iranian life style separates relationships between the sexes in *mahram* and *nāmahram*. *Mahram*, are very close relatives with whom marriage is prohibited whereas *nāmahram* are those relations in which marriage is possible and in which strict separation thus must be observed.⁹¹ Because of this differentiation it is hardly surprising that experience that has to do with women is varied among the informants of this study. Jamie and Mohammad Mahdi are both fathers and Mosta'ār got engaged and married during the last years covered by the study. 'Ali Bakhtiāri and Amir, on the other hand, have no experience of women outside their families whatsoever.

To talk about women is also something which has sometimes been difficult. With the exception of Jamie, the informants have been unwilling to talk about women. Hardly surprising, the matter has been experienced as embarrassing and my direct questions have usually been reacted to with elated laughter and surprise at my lack of prudence. If the matter is kept on a more abstract and less personal level, however, it has been possible to have lengthy discussions about it. In these conversations it has become obvious that preventing themselves from looking at *nāmahram* is felt to be one of the most difficult undertakings in the informants' struggle to remain virtuous.

To look at *nāmahram* is considered a sinful act which leads away from the virtuous path. It is clear, however, that the informants do not consider it to be an especially grave sin. On the contrary, they often classify it as a lesser offence if directly asked about it.⁹² Because

⁹¹ Naqavi 1992: 229.

⁹² See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002.

of the strong temptation, however, it is my impression that the informants consider sexual thoughts and behaviour to be the greatest obstacle in their endeavour to be virtuous. They claim it is the one sin that gives them most trouble.⁹³ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, who has the most well thought-out theory on this matter also considers it to be a major source of societal problems in Iran:

For the youth, the main source of social degeneration in the past, present and future is sexual desire. It takes a lion to stand against it because it is so strong that it harnesses its owner. It should not be let free, nor should it be completely ignored. It must exist but it should not be allowed to work without the mind overruling it.⁹⁴

In the cases of ‘Ali Bakhtiāri and Amir, who are the two informants who have remained unmarried throughout the period of the study, the interviews have revealed that they have developed methods to deal with this particular problem in rather physical ways. Amir claims fasting as an efficient method to quench sexual desire: “When you fast”, he has told me “your feelings of [sexual] hunger goes down, because another kind of hunger comes up”.⁹⁵ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri emphasises the usefulness of prayer when it comes to controlling carnal desires.⁹⁶ Implicit in the informants’ understanding of the dangers of sexual temptation lie their ideas of what men and women ideally should be like. Before going on, I will say something about these ideals.

When asked about how men and women should be, the answers of the informants clearly reflect the strongly patriarchal society to which they belong. ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s answer is representative. “The perfect woman”, he tells me,

must take care of her *hejāb* and be virtuous. She has to prevent *nāmahrām* men from seeing her. She must take care of herself in the street, not smile at anybody, and make herself up only for her husband. She has to observe morals and do the obligatory religious duties properly. There are many characteristics. She must take care of her spiritual side also and her aims must have Islamic origins.⁹⁷

⁹³ See, for instance, ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001.

⁹⁴ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

⁹⁵ Amir, April 4th, 2002.

⁹⁶ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

⁹⁷ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

It is characteristic that ‘Ali begins his answer with the question of the *hejāb*. This is the case with all informants: although they eventually reach the conclusion that morality and spiritual development are the most important features, the first matter which comes to their mind when discussing women is their external appearance. The *hejāb* is essential here. Good women must have good *hejāb* and, in the context of the informants, that means to wear a *chādor*. Less traditional Islamic outfits, such as a Mantua and a scarf, are tolerable but not good.⁹⁸ The reasons provided by the informants why women should be covered vary. Mohammad Mahdi, as usual, refers the Koran in his answer. According to the Koran, he claims, women must cover themselves in order not to be subjected to bad people’s intentions. “If she covers herself”, Mohammad tells me, “less people will come up to her. If she makes herself up, more people will look at her and come to her and bother her.”⁹⁹ To give another example, Amir has the same opinion but stresses that the aim of *hejāb* is not to limit women but to create a society in which men and women can work together without being bothered by sexual thoughts. In a more liberal society, women will be judged by their appearance only and that is bad. Without *hejāb*, he tells me, “women will be treated like goods”.¹⁰⁰

Now, men must have *hejāb* too. According to Mohammad Mahdi, they should not wear short sleeves or too tight fitting clothes since they then would risk tempting women.¹⁰¹ With regard to moral and spiritual matters men and women are equal, the informants claim. They both must have belief and virtue and avoid doing even small sins.¹⁰² But equality in the eyes of the informants does not mean uniformity and there are big differences in their views on the sexes. ‘Ali Bakhtiāri concisely summarises his ideas as follows:

Men have stronger spirituality. Women are more sensitive. Women need more kindness from their men. Men are the managers of the house. They should prepare money for food. The women in return must respect their husbands. They must help each other to improve.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ See, for instance: Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002; ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001; Amir April 30th, 2002.

⁹⁹ Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Amir, April 30th, 2002.

¹⁰¹ Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002.

¹⁰² See, for instance: Amir, April 30th, 2002; ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

¹⁰³ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

The informants have rather similar ideas in this matter and there can be no doubt that these, to a large extent, reflect traditional ideas of a patriarchal society.¹⁰⁴ ‘Ali and Mosta‘ār see no need to motivate their statements in these matters. To them, it seems, the societal roles of men and women are obvious. Mohammad finds his motivation in the Koran and Amir in scientific explanations. “Nowadays”, he tells me,

scientists have realised that men and women have different worlds . . . and that this is the reason that they, when they come together, . . . they will complete each other. . . . For example, a man wants to always be independent and to love somebody, but a woman wants to be loved. . . . They will complete each other, they will fit.¹⁰⁵

The emphasis on family values is another significant feature of the informants’ ideas of gender roles. All of them emphasise the benefits of traditional family structures when it comes to providing a good environment for children. It is generally considered that moral and virtuous parents are a prerequisite for a successful life. “If a man has relations with other women than his own wife”, Mosta‘ār tells me when we discuss social problems, “his children will become murderers. These effects are observable in today’s world. . . . The woman has the main role in the family. She must be pure and should only wear make up for her husband”.¹⁰⁶

As I have thus briefly illustrated, the informants have strict opinions concerning gender roles. Hardly surprising, Jamie is the only one who at all questions these roles. “I think it is a little unfair for women”, he told me when we were talking about women’s restriction to move around: “it is hard for them, but all religions say they can’t go, [so what can we do?]”.¹⁰⁷ As already stated, the importance or role of sexuality in the lives of the informants is different between fathers and bachelors. For instance, ‘Ali, who emphasises control of carnal desires, is unmarried whereas Mohammad, for whom these issues are less important, is a family provider. This is hardly surprising. It is also clear, however, that the ideas about how

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance: Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002; Amir, April 30th, 2002; Mosta‘ār, April 24th, 2002.

¹⁰⁵ Amir, April 30th, 2002.

¹⁰⁶ Mosta‘ār, April 24th, 2002.

¹⁰⁷ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

sexuality should be controlled and about how men and women should relate to one another are similar.

It must be emphasised here that Iranian society, despite of its Islamist government, is going through a process of women's emancipation. Iranian women are today better educated than their male compatriots and the responsibilities they get in the public and private sectors are increasing. In public space, women (more or less strictly in line with the Islamic dress code) are making themselves more visible and the divorce rate is steadily rising. Also in the religious sphere this change towards greater gender equality is noticeable. Theology colleges for women are, for instance, getting increasingly popular. These colleges primarily educate religious instructors for schools but they also open up for women to become high-ranking theologians. The informants of this study have not spoken explicitly about these developments, but their reaction to liberalisation in general could of course be construed as a reaction in defence of the male hierarchies to which they adhere. A reaction which has become necessary because of the threat that women's emancipation pose to these very hierarchies.¹⁰⁸

I have thus presented two different personal interpretations of the Islamic message and made some remarks upon the issue of sexuality. In everyday life the informants' different views result in different forms of Islamic practice. Where 'Ali needs to control his frustration and sorrow, Mohammad needs guidelines and meaning in his role as a teacher and father. It is my suggestion, then, that these differences may serve as examples of the flexibility of interpretation that the message and practices of the chosen community may have in the individual lives of its members. I will now go on to present the informants' methods for achieving the spiritual goals they so eagerly yearn for.

LIVING ISLAM IN EVERYDAY LIFE

So far, I have shown how two of the informants have reasoned about their religious views and activities in our discussions. Now I want to discuss the practical side of this theoretical reasoning by presenting

¹⁰⁸ For, further discussions on these issues see, for instance, Mir Hoseyni: 1993.

aspects of how they all lead their everyday lives. My aim is to complete the presentation of how the informants *think* Islam with a presentation of how they *live* it. The overall perspective in this presentation is to approach practised Islam in its relation to Iranian society as a whole and with special regard to the liberalisation process that the country experienced during the scope of this study. I will focus on three different aspects of ritualisation in the everyday practice of the informants. I have chosen to label these limited mobility, awareness of death and constant commemoration, respectively. These three aspects do not make up an all-encompassing description of the informants' religious practice, nor are they entirely comparable but together they show how the informants' lives are ritualised on many different levels. They should be seen as examples of practical experience which have become apparent to me as I have worked through my material. Before proceeding with this, however, something needs to be said about the informants' attitude to the changes occurring in Iranian society. The following discussion will include all five main informants.

Attitudes to Liberalisation

The informants of the present study live in the midst of a conflict between conservatives and reformists. This conflict leaves its clear mark on many aspects of Iranian society and the ideas and practices of the informants which are portrayed in this chapter cannot be thoroughly understood if the underlying influence of this conflict is not regarded. The informants live in a society which is going through a very apparent process of liberalisation. No one who travelled or lived in Iran regularly during the years of this study can have failed to notice the loosening up of restraints in terms of public behaviour. In this period, young men and women were able to socialise more freely in public, women could show more hair, and western popular music was less restricted than only some years before. Scarcely surprising, the informants did not approve of these changes. They positioned themselves in this conflict by participating in the activities of the mosque. Although some of them even deny the existence of a conflict among the political leaders¹⁰⁹ their position in the

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, Amir, April 27th, 2000.

conflict of life style that goes on among people in society is obvious and outspoken.

According to the informants, Iranian society is suffering from “a spiritual and psychological crisis” (*bohrān-e ravāni va maʿnavi*),¹¹⁰ the outcome of which is a nihilism, an oblivion of spiritual matters and a moral decline that threatens to ruin especially the lives of young people. The informants are devastated and sometimes dejected due to the situation. On several occasions I have heard them express their frustration and desperation over developments in society: the massive popular support for President Khātami and other reformists, the newspapers’ “insults” of Islamic values, the westernisation of youth culture and so forth.¹¹¹ In the eyes of the informants these post-war developments in Iranian society indicate that people are forgetting about God and that they are consequently leaving the only path that can lead to greater good for all. No doubt, God is on the side of the conservatives. The informants believe the conservatives represent the most profound understanding of Islam and argue in favour of that belief by referring to their intuition¹¹² and various miracles¹¹³ that have proven that this is the case. There is no doubt who is right; the problem instead is that the enemies of Iran and Islam fool young people to forget about their religion. According to Amir it is mostly girls who are fooled. “Girls”, he tells me, “think Europe is better, and America. They see films and feel strongly about it”.¹¹⁴ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri pinpoints secular philosophy as one of the major means by which the youth are fooled. He expresses this notion in the following words:

We have an effect caused by the enemies of humanity and honour of humans. They make an effort to destabilise the minds of our naive and good-hearted youth in order to empty their minds in anyway possible. And then especially with the seemingly scientific and philosophical discussions that they have.¹¹⁵

Hence, the informants concur in their comprehension of the situation in Iranian society. However, as the quotation above indicates they

¹¹⁰ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

¹¹¹ See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, May 26th, 2001.

¹¹² Amir, August 26th, 1999.

¹¹³ Such as divine intervention in the revolution of 1979 and the miraculous success of the Iranian side in the war with Iraq. Mohammad Mahdi, May 24th, 2001.

¹¹⁴ Amir, August 26th, 1999.

¹¹⁵ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri’s text, 2001.

are also eager to stress the belief that young Iranians are good-hearted and that they are fooled into moral degeneration. "They accept religion", Mohammad Mahdi tells me and continues:

But they are not committed. They show some hair but they don't care; boys are together with girls but they don't bother. In religion it is a sin and their relationship with religion has decreased, but they do the important things like saying prayers or fasting.¹¹⁶

When young people grow older, the informants ascertain, they will realise what is really important and return to a more religious way of life.¹¹⁷

Besides being a threat to Islam and society in general, societal changes are believed to pose a threat to the informants' own spiritual development. Virtue, as the previous presentation of 'Ali Bakhtiāri's and Mohammad Mahdi's world views has shown, is to restrain one's bodily desires and to follow the rules of Islam. In a society where temptations of different sorts are becoming more tolerated, such endeavours will be more difficult. Therefore, in order to cope with this challenge, the informants have developed what could be labelled as methods of defence. These can be seen as different forms of ritualisation, methods which the informants have developed in order to safeguard their virtue. I will now present these methods.

Limiting Mobility in the Public Sphere

The mosque is located close to one of the bazaars of central Esfahān. It is a part of the city where a traditional way of life is predominant. In the narrow alleys of the bazaar most women wear a black *chādor* and the men greet each other with religious blessings. In the eyes of the informants, this is thus morally safe territory. Around the bazaar-quarters, however, the liberal way of life makes itself known with unmistakable clarity. Not far from the bazaar on one side a big plaza has become the meeting place for tourists and young liberal-minded Iranians; and on another side young men let their car-stereos roar with pop music as they cruise along the shopping streets within a stone's throw of the tranquil gatherings of the community of our focus.

¹¹⁶ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹¹⁷ See, for instance, Amir, April 22nd, 2002, and Mosta'ār, April 23rd, 2002.

During my stay in Esfahān, it has often struck me that the situation in the public spaces of the city in many ways resembles a territorial war. There is a struggle going on in the city, as indeed there is in the whole of Iran. It is a struggle for public space. In this struggle many positions can be distinguished. Some obvious positions that could be discussed at length are wealth and poverty, male and female identity or youth and maturity. Here, however, I will focus on the struggle between liberalisation and Islamisation. This conflict is intimately connected to all the others ones as the Islamist movement mainly recruits poor young men. Yet it deserves to be treated as a category of its own since it also cuts across other positions and since it is the one struggle that fits best into the informants' understanding of self. The struggle between liberalisation and Islamisation in the public sphere is directly linked to the general conflict between reformists and conservatives which is fought in official politics and in many other spheres of society as well. In this section, however, I will concentrate on the conflict of the public sphere.

In the city of Esfahān this struggle becomes visible in many different ways. As I have already shown, different quarters belong to different sides. For instance, some parts of the bazaars belong to the conservative side and the shopping streets belong to the reformist side. A consequence of this is that individuals who consider that they belong to one side rarely venture to stay any longer periods in what is considered enemy territory. I have several liberal-minded Iranian friends who have strongly emphasised that they would never set their foot in the mosque of my focus. Likewise, the informants of this study would never linger any longer period of time in the parks or the shopping streets of the city. In the beginning of this study, I found their reluctance to this somewhat bewildering. At that time I could not understand why they behaved in certain ways. A short anecdote may explain my confusion. The hostel where I usually stay while I am in Esfahān is located on the shopping street not far from the mosque. The bazaar quarters begin in immediate proximity to this street and I usually walk the short distance to the mosque through these quarters. At night it has also become a habit that the informants, be it 'Ali Bakhtiāri, Mosta'ār or Mohammad Mahdi, accompany me home after we have finished our discussions. What is interesting with this is the fact that none of the informants ever accompany me all the way back. Just before reaching the shopping street, they always stop to bid me farewell as if, for some reason,

they were not allowed to set foot in the shopping street but needed to retreat into the safety of the traditional bazaar quarters. On some occasions I have explicitly asked them to go out and eat or to have an ice cream with me. On these occasions they have ever so reluctantly, agreed to follow me to a park or to a restaurant in the liberal areas. The situations which have ensued have often become rather complicated. My major impression has been that the informants have felt uncomfortable with the whole situation. They have often insisted that we should sit indoors in some discreet and hidden part of the restaurant and that we should leave as soon as possible after finishing our meals.

The reason for this behaviour, as I see it, was the informants' repugnance towards visiting the shopping streets and the liberal areas of the city. It was a way for them to resist temptation we have spoken openly about in our talks. In the eyes of the informants it is dangerous to stay in these areas. "Since we are not married we should not go there frequently because to some extent it is harmful for us",¹¹⁸ 'Ali Bakhtiāri tells me when I ask him about it. Mosta'ār is of the same opinion: "I don't like to go there", he says, "it is just business and women with bad *hejāb*".¹¹⁹ On another occasion he explains the dangers further: "A little accidental [looking at women] is no [sin], . . . if you see each other on the street and ignore it, it is no problem. But if you always look, little by little it will grow worse!"¹²⁰ Mohammad Mahdi agrees with the others about the dangers of the liberal areas: "It is difficult for us to go there", he says. But he also emphasises the benefits of being a good role model:

Virtue is to protect your faith. But this does not mean that one should go to a desert where there is nobody and be virtuous there. Islam says: go among people and be virtuous! If I can go to Chahār bāgh-street¹²¹ and protect myself, that is important!¹²²

Even if all informants probably agree with this ideal, they all do their best to avoid the areas of the city where a more liberal culture is nourished. For some of them it is striking how everyday life

¹¹⁸ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

¹¹⁹ Mosta'ār, April 23rd, 2002.

¹²⁰ Mosta'ār, April 24th, 2002.

¹²¹ Chahār bāgh is one of the main shopping streets in the city.

¹²² Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

is geographically limited to a very small area in immediate proximity to the mosque.

Geographical limitation corresponds to a limitation of social contacts. All the informants have underlined the importance of having the right friends for the sake of moral and spiritual development. Some of them have a history of abandoning bad friends who they now believe have had bad influence on them.¹²³ Mohammad Mahdi also stresses the importance of avoiding certain social occasions when people, however moral in everyday life, seem inclined to sin. Marriages is one such occasion and Mohammad rarely attend these ceremonies since he knows there may be bad *hejāb* and other sins going on there.¹²⁴

The reasons to restrict one's geographical and social sphere are many. There is no doubt that avoiding temptation to sin and spiritual deviation is the most frequently mentioned cause. But there are other causes as well. One, which is often mentioned, is the sadness that follows when confronting spiritual and moral degeneration. Mohammad Mahdi expresses this matter in the following words—as usual finding his examples in the Islamic tradition:

When the Prophet saw that the people were estranged from God he got so sad that he became sick. I am also a bit like that. When I am among people and see bad *hejāb*, how people forget about God, then I get sad. On the other hand, if I go to a Koran class and meet the people there I get happy. Why? Because God gets happy with me when I am there. Whenever God and the *Ahl-e beyt* are sad because of me I also get sad.¹²⁵

The risk of temptation and the sorrow that may follow from witnessing societal decline cause the informants to limit their geographic and social mobility by separating the various areas of the city into safe and unsafe zones. It may be said that this separation resembles a war in which public behaviour is at stake. The methods of struggle in this war consist of a number of more or less subtle provocation techniques. Protest marches are one technique. As I have shown, the informants rarely venture to cross the invisible borders into the unsafe areas. Sometimes, however, they do. There are times—I have seen it happen a few times during the years—when the conserva-

¹²³ Mosta'ār, April 22nd, 2000.

¹²⁴ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹²⁵ Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.

tive members of the community, usually under the leadership of the *basij* or *sepāh* organisations, gather to demonstrate along the main commercial streets of the zones which are usually perceived as unsafe. At these occasions they walk in tight groups, shout slogans and listen to amplified political speeches. The specific purposes of the demonstrations may differ in detail but usually consist of expressing support for the conservative side of national politics or propagating greater adherence to so-called revolutionary values.¹²⁶ Needless to say, demonstrations of the opposite kind i.e. in protest against the regime, are severely repressed.¹²⁷

Another method of struggle is graffiti. In Esfahān it is common that the walls of buildings are scrawled with more or less authentic popular expressions of support for conservative politics. “Death to bad *hejāb!*” is one common slogan and “Death to America!” is another. I have occasionally seen calls for the downfall of various reformist politicians scribbled on walls. On the wall of a toilet in the mosque someone had once written “Death to Khātami”. However, that scribble was quickly removed. According to the informants, these writings are genuine expressions of heartfelt opinions among the people.¹²⁸ There is graffiti that is definitely placed there by the authorities and there are, therefore, reasons to be sceptical about the truth in the informants’ claims in these matters. However, it is also clear that some young *basij* people scribble slogans on walls to express their opinions and to make themselves seen in the public sphere.

There are other examples of how graffiti is used to express opposition to the Islamic system. I have never seen direct calls for the downfall of the regime and any person caught writing something like that would surely suffer severe punishment in the Islamic Republic. Instead, dissident graffiti needs to be so subtle that it can be mistaken as non-provocative. For this reason it is also difficult to argue

¹²⁶ One such demonstration occurred in connection to the Berlin conference in 2001. At this conference, reformist politicians were discussing with a group of exiled Iranians who started to undress and dance in order to protest against the Islamic regime. The event was filmed, edited and broadcasted by the regime-controlled Iranian television and caused strong feelings of discontent among the Esfahāni public against the exiled Iranians’ immoral behaviour.

¹²⁷ The student demonstration of 1999, however, is one example that voices of protest can make themselves heard even in the form of public demonstrations. The price paid for this was a massive repression of the uprising and the death of some of its leaders.

¹²⁸ Mosta‘ār, May 14th, 2001.

with certainty about this question. There are some examples of graffiti that a cautious analysis could designate as dissident. For instance, the writing “USA” that appeared in Latin letters on a wall close to the mosque in 2000 or the increasing sight of soccer-graffiti that is beginning to appear even in the mosque itself. In this book it is not my ambition to portray the subtle protest techniques of Iranian dissidence but it could be argued that these writings express an ambition to make secular culture visible even in one of Esfahān’s most conservative neighbourhoods and thus serve as a means in the struggle for the public sphere. The main means of the dissident side, however, is neither demonstrations nor graffiti, but rather the everyday stretching of regulations on public behaviour, of wearing make-up, listening to pop music, roller skating or doing other things that signal a desire for liberalisation. What can be concluded from the latest years’ development is that this struggle is not progressing to the benefit of the informants.

I have thus shown how limiting one’s social and geographical mobility is one of the methods which the informants use in order to safeguard their own spiritual development. I have also shown how this method connects to a more general struggle concerning life style and the public sphere in Iranian society.

Awareness of Death

In this section my aim is to show that the focus on death in ritual activity and in the lives of the informants, functions as yet another method of protection against moral and spiritual deviation. The importance of death has been brought up by all the informants and is central to the understanding of their views and behaviour in this matter. I will begin by presenting some of their thoughts and beliefs about death. Then, I will discuss some crucial ritual activities and the functions which the informants claim they have in their lives.

It has struck me that all the informants have well thought-out perceptions of what death will be like. When I have asked them about it they have all had well formulated answers and metaphoric explanations of what it will be like. They all state that they believe in a day of resurrection and divine judgement sentencing humans to paradise, the damnation of hell or an in-between state of limbo.¹²⁹ The

¹²⁹ See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

informants generally do not believe that the rather precise eschatological descriptions that can be found in the Koran and in Islamic tradition are symbolic or metaphoric.¹³⁰ There are indeed rivers as white as milk awaiting them in paradise.¹³¹ At the same time they all stress that a full comprehension of the bliss in paradise can never be gained in this world and that they therefore need metaphors to express this thought. "This world is like a prison", says Mohammad Mahdi, "and death is sweeter than honey for the faithful".¹³² Amir says that: "death for a good man or a woman is like bringing a bird out of a cage . . . [or] like bringing a diamond out of a box . . . it is a relative dying [only]".¹³³ The younger Jamie, in turn, uses the highway as a metaphor: "This life is like a road", he says, "sometimes it is bumpy and sometimes it is a highway. Paradise is the city to which one is going. There it is a highway all the time but one has already reached one's destination. Everything is filled with the light of God."¹³⁴ Finally, Mosta'ar uses similar images to describe his notion of death:

[Death] is a transfer, we become complete, we grow. It is like a child in the womb that comes to this world. We are limited in this world but there we come to a larger world and we should be prepared, it is a long journey. We should bring the proper provisions (*tushe*), the food and the clothes which we need there; we should prepare for what comes after death. What do I mean by this? That we need to say prayers, to be virtuous, to have sincerity (*ekhlās*).¹³⁵

So, the informants are all strongly convinced that death is a possible improvement that we need to prepare for in this life. Some of them mention that feelings of trust and calmness towards one's own death indicate a positive outcome in the hereafter.¹³⁶ However, they admit that they are sometimes afraid and state that this may also be good since it makes them try harder in this world.¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Jamie, however, is an exception in this case.

¹³¹ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹³² Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹³³ Amir, April 30th, 2002.

¹³⁴ Jamie, April 4th, 2000.

¹³⁵ Mosta'ar, April 24th, 2002.

¹³⁶ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001; Amir, April 30th, 2002; Jamie, April 4th, 2000.

¹³⁷ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001; Amir, April 30th, 2002.

It is apparent that the informants are very much aware of death. This is a feature which unites their otherwise rather different personalities. Not only do they have well formulated ideas about death, they also think a great deal about it in their everyday lives and see it as ideal to do so. "The Imams have taught us to remember death a lot in order to improve our lives in this world", Mohammad Mahdi says: "This means that at every moment we must think that we are going to die."¹³⁸ Mohammad states that he thinks about death as often as he can, at least every time he prays.¹³⁹ 'Ali Bakhtiāri does the same:

I think of the day when they will put me in a coffin, how people will hold me in their hands and put me in the grave. I imagine that I am very worried about it. I say that I do not have the proper provisions (*tushē*) yet, that I haven't gathered anything for the next world.¹⁴⁰

There are certain rituals in Shi'ite tradition that are especially designed to help the individual remember death. Ceremonies for the remembrance of martyrs and prayer sessions at cemeteries or even in graves are examples of such rituals. On several occasions I have followed the informants to such activities and they all emphasise how beneficial they are for spiritual and moral development.¹⁴¹ In addition to these rather explicit death rituals, however, I have observed that the informants use the other, more ordinary, everyday rituals to serve the same purpose. This observation has led me to the conclusion that one of the major purposes of ritual in the lives of the informants is to help them resist temptation by reminding them about their eschatological destination and thus to strengthen their virtue. I will show this in the following.

The paramount ritual activity in the lives of the informants is the daily prayer, *namāz*. Not only do they pray at the three¹⁴² daily times when they are expected to do so by Islamic regulations, they also say extra prayers as often as possible. For instance, they say prayer immediately before retiring at night and sometimes they also get up

¹³⁸ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹³⁹ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹⁴⁰ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

¹⁴¹ See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, May 24th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.

¹⁴² In Shi'ite tradition prayers are said together so that the number of occasions when one actually prays is limited to three even though there are still five series of prayer.

in the middle of the night to pray. As the above presentation of 'Ali Bakhtiāri made clear, prayer is considered to be beneficial for all kinds of problems. I will now go on to argue that one central function of their ritual activity is to help them protect their virtue and avoid temptations.

Protection of virtue is not the only purpose of ritual. In fact, the informants would not speak of their ritual behaviour in terms of function at all. To them, it is an activity in its own right to remember God and to pay attention to religious commandments. Religiosity, as they see it, is not an effect of something else, but an essential aspect of existence as such. "God is something very great", Amir once told me while we were discussing this matter: "He has created us, everything we have we have from him, the fact that we pray is self-explanatory."¹⁴³ To speak of religion as function would therefore be faulty in the opinion of the informants. This, in turn, does not mean that they would deny that rituals help them to stay virtuous, but they would not see this as the primary purpose of ritual but rather as a positive side effect that proves the overall benefit of the Islamic system. It is not necessary for me to discuss whether the informants are right or not in this assumption. Metaphysical discussions of that sort do not belong to studies of this genre. It is sufficient to state that I do not exclude the possibility of other purposes of ritualised activities. However, in my material it is the function of the protection of virtue that stands out most clearly.

Ritualisation helps the informants to stay virtuous in many different ways. To begin with, the informants believe that the rituals bring divine protection resulting in good luck and miracles. Some of them use pieces of cloth, amulets, rings and similar things charged with spiritual power (*barakat*) from different shrines to get this protection. More important, however, is the help that the ritual gives by drawing the attention towards the divine. "Prayer", 'Ali Bakhtiāri ascertains, "draws our minds to God's good characteristics and to the hardships of resurrection . . . and [thus] prevents us from doing bad things".¹⁴⁴ Performing this ritual makes the spirit calm according to the informants.¹⁴⁵ "Every time I pray", 'Ali concludes, "the world

¹⁴³ Amir, August 26th, 1999.

¹⁴⁴ 'Ali Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.

¹⁴⁵ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

looses its value and I become calm".¹⁴⁶ It is as if the ritual functions as a constant reminder of what is really important and thus helps to direct the attention away from the material problems that the informants undoubtedly suffer from.

We can conclude that ritual is experienced to strengthen virtue and piety both by invoking direct divine intervention and by drawing attention to spiritual matters that make worldly matters less important and provide calmness. I have shown that there is an orientation towards death in both the informants' religious beliefs and in their ritual practice. This death orientation is connected to a more general experience of ritual as an activity that strengthens virtue. I have shown how ritual activity and its orientation towards death, constitutes a method in the informants' endeavour to be virtuous. It seems that the rituals are used to charge the informants with resistance and virtue. A quotation from 'Ali Bakhtiāri may serve as a final illustration of this point:

When I want to go out I have to study the Koran first. I do two genuflections of prayer and then I can go out in places where there are lot of poorly covered women (*bihejābi*) . . . we must be careful with our eyes and not follow our carnal soul.¹⁴⁷

Constant Commemoration

I have chosen to label a final form of ritualisation which the informants use to protect them from temptation and strengthen their virtue: constant commemoration. This method relates to both the previous ones but still deserves its own heading since it entails aspects of the informants' lives other than their geographical mobility and awareness of death. By constant commemoration, I want to denote the ever ongoing endeavour to ritualise everyday life by surrounding oneself with objects, images and sounds that are reminders of Islamic values.

It would be no exaggeration to say that in their everyday lives the informants never experience being away from religious reminders. Certainly, living in the Islamic Republic to a certain extent makes such a situation unavoidable. Public space is often designed to con-

¹⁴⁶ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.

¹⁴⁷ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

stantly remind people of the governing ideology and is full of Islamic symbols, sounds and images. Posters of martyrs, references at drinking fountains to the thirst of Imam Hoseyn, amplified religious singing and pictures of Khomeyni all remind of Islam. As I have shown the informants are careful to avoid areas where Islamic feeling is less prominent.

Apart from the public sphere, however, the informants are very scrupulous about maintaining their religious awareness even in private. Their homes are full of religious decorations. Pictures of the Imams and the Supreme leader Khāmene'i are most common. The informants who have televisions or radio-sets keep them on as often as possible, depicting shows of Koran recitation, religious poetry, political propaganda or prayer meetings of different sorts. Many of the interviews conducted for this study were carried out with the background noise of broadcast images from the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the Iranian television's Koran school for children or sugary depictions of various Shi'ite pilgrimage sites.

Where radio or television is not available, religious cassettes of different kinds are widely used. For instance, when travelling by car the informants always listen to recorded religious prayers, speeches or music if they have the opportunity. Several of them also seem to have made it their habit to bring a religious cassette along while travelling by bus. If the driver does not have a religious cassette of his own they will try to convince him to put theirs on. On a few occasions during my stay in Iran, 'Alī Bakhtiāri and Mohammad Mahdi failed to convince drivers to change cassette. This has then been the cause of much annoyance and frustration about moral degeneration among people. Usually, however, bus- and taxi-drivers have been complaisant towards the demands of the informants.¹⁴⁸

If there are no rituals going on, no televisions available and no religious cassettes to be played, the informants can use the *tasbeḥ*

¹⁴⁸ There is much research on the use of audio cassettes in Islamic propagation. Charles Hirschkind, for instance, has argued that sermon cassettes in Egypt help create a context for public discussions on Islamic virtue, contributes to the struggle between tradition and modernisation and has thus shown that they constitute an important part of the Egyptian *da'vat* movement. See Hirschkind 2001: 25. Philip Halldén is another scholar who has studied audio cassettes and analysed the Islamic rhetoric they preach and thus theorised the genre of recorded speech. See Halldén 2001.

(chaplet) to concentrate on their spiritual struggle. They also usually carry small pocket Korans, prayer books or miniature cards with prayers which they use whenever there is an opportunity. Mosta'ār and Mohammad Mahdi, who also make their living working with religious matters, seem to be very happy with the situation. "I work for the economy of this life and for the afterlife at the same time",¹⁴⁹ Mohammad Mahdi has told me happily.

The lives of the informants are lead in constant commemoration of Islamic values. Religious focus and remembrance is not limited to strongly ritualised activities only but is enhanced at all times and in all aspects of life. The informants, it can be said, do not wish to be in an attitude of worship during regulated prayers only. Instead, they want to live in a constant state of ritual in which their minds are focused upon God as in prayer. It is interesting to see how this desire is also fulfilled through extensive use of ritual ablutions.

Vožu is the ritualised washing that is carried out immediately before the prayers are said. It is regulated in detail and is usually carried out in the mosque's wash-basins, which are especially designed for the purpose. According to the Ja'fari school of law, a man who has correctly performed the *vožu* is ritually pure until he goes to the lavatory, sleeps or ejaculates.¹⁵⁰ After any of these acts the ablution needs to be renewed in order for prayer to be valid. What I have found interesting in the case of the informants is that they strive to live in a state of unceasing ritual purity. This means that they perform ritual ablutions as soon as possible after having rendered the previous one invalid.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, the informants often renew their *vožu* before going to sleep at night and some of them have even made it their habit to fall asleep with their bodies genuflected in prayer, dozing off with the head pressed to the prayer stone.

According to Mohammad Mahdi, sleeping in a state of ritual purity is necessary since we may die in our sleep. "Sleep is the equivalent of death", he tells me, "and therefore we need to fall asleep with awareness of death".¹⁵² Sleeping in ritual purity, furthermore, is said to "purify the soul",¹⁵³ to be the equivalent of "saying prayers until

¹⁴⁹ Mohammad Mahdi, April 29th, 2002.

¹⁵⁰ Bakhtiar 1996: 20–22.

¹⁵¹ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹⁵² Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.

¹⁵³ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

morning”,¹⁵⁴ or to make angels come down to let you sleep on their wings.¹⁵⁵

The informants all totally agree on the benefits of ritual ablutions. Besides the argument that this is what is prescribed in the divine law, however, they do not know the direct practical reasons for this. “Being clean”, Amir says, “is a part of being Muslim”,¹⁵⁶ and he cannot come up with more specific explanations. For me as an outsider, however, the constant ritual cleansing ties in well with the informants’ general inclination to lead their lives in a continuous struggle to be virtuous. As I see them, the ablutions are yet another brick in the wall they are building to promote spiritual development by keeping temptation away. The cleansing helps the individual to focus on God. ‘Ali Bakhtiāri has expressed this idea clearly: “To always be with *vozu* is being away from the devil, a person is in control of himself”.¹⁵⁷ The ablutions are felt to aid self-control. Mohammad Mahdi has told me that he feels that the ablution is most powerful when the dampness of the water can still be felt on his face and hands. “Then it has more liveliness”,¹⁵⁸ he once said. It is as if the physical sensation of moisture in this case helps Mohammad remember and focus on the religious matters that he associates with this feeling.

The third method to enhance virtue is the endeavour to stay in a state of constant commemoration. I have given examples of how this is done and shown how this endeavour is ritualised through extensive use of ritual ablutions. In the last interview with Mohammad Mahdi before leaving Iran in 2002, I asked him if there was something special that he thought I should put in my book in order to make my readers understand his religion and the essence of Shi‘ite Islam. His answer relates to what has been said above about always keeping an Islamic awareness: “[The most important thing] in Shi‘ism”, he told me, “is to be careful that you hear the voice of God for sure. Never quieten this voice! ‘Ali says that the worst torture after resurrection comes when God rejects his servants.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Mosta‘ār, April 24th, 2002.

¹⁵⁵ Amir, April 30th, 2002.

¹⁵⁶ Amir, April 30th, 2002.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

¹⁵⁸ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

¹⁵⁹ Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have shown that the informants of the present study by means of ritualisation attempt to lead their lives on a path of spiritual development and virtue. The cases of 'Ali Bakhtiāri and Mohammad Mahdi exemplify how the informants think about this endeavour. The greatest threats to this undertaking are different sorts of worldly temptations and particularly those caused by sexual desires. To stay on the right path and to prevent themselves from slipping, the informants have developed different forms of ritualisation and methods which remind them about God and keep them in a state of constant awareness of their religion. Limiting their own mobility in the public sphere is one such method, charging themselves with resistance and an awareness of death is another, and constantly commemorating God a final form.

The above presentation gives an idea of the conflict that goes on in the lives of the informants, a conflict that permeates their personal everyday lives as well as the life of the Iranian society to which they belong. It is a conflict which concerns political power but also a world view and an outlook on humankind. What is the goal of human existence in this world? Should the Islamic revelation be applied in the political administration? If so, in what way? These are questions that deeply divide contemporary Iranian society. In the individual experiences of my informants, however, the conflict is broader than this. It is a struggle of good and bad that seriously affects their lives, a struggle in which misguided carnal desires stand against spiritual and moral development, and worldly matters against the essentials of eternity. It is indeed experienced as a struggle that is of fundamental importance for life and death.

I believe it is reasonable to draw certain conclusions from the discussions in this chapter. They are essentially twofold. Firstly, I conclude that being Muslim in the experiences of my informants, is to embody the Islamic ideal of virtue, which happens through a process of cross-fertilisation of culture and body. Secondly, I conclude that the process of embodiment cannot only be understood as culture which is subconsciously superimposed on the individual. Rather, it should be seen as a joint venture of socialisation and a conscious forming of self. I will now comment briefly on each of the conclusions.

Being Muslim is to Embody Virtue

This chapter has shown that the project of being Muslim, as it is perceived and practised by the informants, is to realise the Islamic ideal of virtue in one's own life. To *live* Islam is essentially to be virtuous. The ideas presented by 'Ali Bakhtiāri and Mohammad Mahdi show that this is the way they construe their religion and the three methods, which I have sketched in order to describe their religious practice show that it is also the way they attempt to live it. Practising Islam can be defined as embodiment since the informants' stories display many examples of how religion affects and is effected by the body:

Firstly, it is clear from the stories of the informants that they experience that religious activities effect the body explicitly: religious ritual makes the eyes run with tears, Mohammad's wife and Amir's father were physically healed through prayer, Amir suppresses his inclination to sin by fasting,¹⁶⁰ and 'Ali Bakhtiāri gets a headache if he does not pray.¹⁶¹ There are several examples like these of connections between belief and physical experience, and the informants themselves claim to be totally convinced about the genuine character of these experiences.¹⁶²

Secondly, it is clear that the informants have incitements for religious activity that can only be perceived as caused by the body. The physically painful depression that caused 'Ali Bakhtiāri to begin his religious life style was, literally, experienced in the body. The sexual desires that the informants have felt obliged to control through ritual activity originate in the bodily changes of puberty and are experienced as coming from within the body.

Thirdly, the informants' stories reveal that physical sensations in the body can help to trigger a religious experience. Mohammad Mahdi's feeling that the ritual ablution is most powerful as long as the dampness of the water can still be felt upon his face and hands may serve as a good example of this.

Finally, the very ritual activity by which the informants strengthen their virtue is to a great extent a bodily practice. Islamic daily prayer

¹⁶⁰ Amir, April 22nd, 2002.

¹⁶¹ 'Ali Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.

¹⁶² 'Ali Bakhtiāri, for instance, states that "if the soul is dirty, the body also gets sick". 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

involves moving one's body—prostrating oneself, standing up, sitting down—and some of the other ritual activities, which the informants engage in, include exhausting physical components such as chest-beating.

Thus, I conclude that the informants' embodiment of Islamic virtue happens through a process of cross-fertilisation between culture and body.¹⁶³ Islam is both internalised in their bodies and used to express and construe experiences that originate from within their bodies. In other words it is created through a reciprocal process of conglomeration between a culturally conveyed interpretation of life and the bodily experiences of individuals.

Embodiment as a Conscious Forming of Self

It has been argued that conventional ritual is a mode of behaviour which individuals are socialised into. Ritual, it has been argued, is not intended to express the intentions or states of mind of individuals,¹⁶⁴ neither is it the expression of heart-felt experience or the result of conscious choice. The material presented in this chapter puts such understandings into question. The stories of my informants show how they use traditional Islamic ritual in what seems to be a conscious and purposeful struggle to uphold virtue.

I do not mean to claim that the religious beliefs and practices of the informants are not dependent on their social context. That is obviously not the case. However, I do want to stress that there is a clear element of deliberate conscious choice in their religious behaviour. The methods of ritualisation presented above bear witness to this. The limits of their mobility in the public sphere is definitely the result of a conscious choice, as is their zealous ritual activity and their inclination to surround themselves with things that remind them of Islam. The different methods are all inspired by Islamic regulations which are taught in the mosque and in other places, but they have been put into practice by the informants themselves in ways that fit their specific individual needs and circumstances.

¹⁶³ The notion that outward bodily behaviour shapes moral character is not new. In Islamic tradition, such ideas have been nourished since the early days of the Abbasid caliphate. Al-Ghazzālī, for instance, influenced by Aristotle, was of that opinion. See Sherif 1975.

¹⁶⁴ See, for instance, Tambiah 1985: 132.

Mohammad Mahdi's desire to *feel* in accordance with Islamic regulations may serve as a final clarifying example of this point. Ideas, moral values and emotions may often be the results of socialisation, but that does not mean that its subjects are deprived of their agent. The stories of my informants show how that which we are inclined to interpret as a socialisation process may sometimes be chosen, fuelled and even enforced by the objects of socialisation themselves.