

CHAPTER SIX

CRUMBLING AUTHORITY?

Now that Imam Zamān is absent we have the *‘olamā*. They behave like the Prophet and therefore people like them.

Mosta‘ār, May 14th, 2001

I have argued that authorisation is a part of the process through which the community is legitimised and recreated. In the previous chapter I discussed the role which the lectures and lamentations have in this process. In my discussions on the concept of authorisation I also expressed my support for the notion that all members of the community, i.e. not only those revered as authorities, contribute to the authorisation by displaying their reverence and respect for the group and its attributes. In this chapter I will elaborate somewhat further on this notion. In the previous chapter I distinguished four ways through which the lectures and lamentations contribute to authorisation. The following discussion will connect to two of these. The first way concerns explicit appeals for obedience in the lectures. This will be followed by a discussion concerning the extent to which the informants are prepared to heed these appeals and obey the authorities. The third way relates to the sense of communal continuity that the lectures and lamentations propose and encourage. I will address this way of authorisation by outlining the informants' ideas on the continuity of authority between the historical *Ahl-e beyt* and the present-day *‘olamā*.

My main concern focuses on the informants and their ideas on religious authority. The five major informants of this study play (or at least used to play) their given parts in the social drama which constitutes the authorisation of the chosen community. While at the mosque, they constantly manifest their reverence for the authorities through verbal affirmation, facial expressions and bodily movements. Some of the informants even shoulder the role of authority themselves at times. Mohammad Mahdi, for instance, teaches the Koran and Mosta‘ār is a *tāleb*.

It is now my intention to present and discuss the informants' views

on the authorities as they have presented them to me in our talks. It will soon become evident that by no means do they have identical ideas concerning the religious authorities that they constantly encounter in the mosque and in their everyday lives. However, religious authorities have frequently been mentioned in my structured and unstructured interviews with the informants, and thoughts on hierarchies of power and structures of authority are inevitably touched upon if one wishes to discuss religious matters in the Islamic Republic. Although I have occasionally asked the informants directly about their opinion on the authorities, their ideas about them have often been revealed in our discussions.

The following is a compilation of statements and comments regarding the matter in my field notebooks and interviews. As I have gone through the material I have found that the views on authority among the informants are somewhat divided. The most commonly expressed view is an overwhelmingly positive exaltation of the authorities. Behind this view, however, lingers a concern with the complexity of the situation and doubts about the trustworthiness of those in positions of authority. I have chosen to divide my presentation according to these two views. I will begin by presenting the most commonly expressed affirmative opinions on authority. I will exemplify these through the case of Mostaʿār. Thereafter, I will continue to present less common and socially less accepted ideas, moving on to the rather radical example of Jamie who underwent a dramatic change of attitude concerning these matters during the period of this study. I will conclude the presentation with some analytical remarks.

Here the word *authority* refers to persons and offices that are authorised in the present community according to the understanding of the process presented in the previous chapter. Although the authorities that are defined in this way are often the same as the persons who possess actual executive power, this is not necessarily the case. For instance, as has been discussed previously, the administrative council of the mosque is by no means socially authorised in the same way as the *ʿulamā* are. Despite this the members of this council are the ones who make final decisions concerning activities in the mosque. In the following presentation they will not be referred to as persons of *authority*. Hereafter this term will solely refer to the various *ʿulamā* as well as to the unseen Imam that these are thought to represent.

EXALTATION OF AUTHORITY—THE CASE OF MOSTA‘ĀR

Among my informants Mosta‘ār is perhaps the greatest supporter of the authorities. He is also the one who is most involved in religious activities. Being a *tāleb*, his everyday life takes place entirely in and around the religious institutions and he is on the threshold of becoming an *‘ālem*.

Mosta‘ār was in his mid-twenties when he was interviewed for this study. He was born a few years before the revolution in a small town in western Iran. His parents and his six siblings soon moved to Tehrān where Mosta‘ār grew up and went to school. He remembers the years in Tehrān with sorrow. His parents fought all the time and he developed concentration problems in school. He finished his studies as a young teenager because of this. After that there followed a time when he occasionally worked as a construction worker, but most of the time he was unemployed and roamed around the streets of Tehrān with, what he now calls, bad friends. At this time, fearing that he would become a criminal, Mosta‘ār tells me that he prayed for new friends. He remembers that his prayers were answered during his military service when he found new friends who were more religious. It was these new acquaintances who influenced Mosta‘ār to embark on his present career. He developed an interest in religious matters and became a member of the *basij* organisation. After his time in the army he applied to a number of religious schools with the ambition of completing his high school studies and studying theology. He applied to many *howze* schools in several parts of the country and was eventually admitted to one of the religious schools of Esfahān. He has been a *tāleb* since then.¹

During my three last visits to Esfahān I spent much time with Mosta‘ār and his fellow students at their *madrese* not far from the mosque. Usually I met Mosta‘ār at the evening prayers after which I returned with him to his school. To go there one needs to find one's way through the winding narrow alleys of the bazaar quarters. Mosta‘ār's *madrese*, like most *madreses* in the city, is a four-*eyvān* building with a large square gardenlike courtyard surrounded by turquoise decorated walls dotted with balcony-like niches. The study-chambers

¹ *Tāleb* is a religious student of a *madrese*.

of the *tollāb* are located behind these. Mosta‘ār and I usually had our talks until late at night in one of those niches, overlooking the fountains and trees of the courtyard. In these discussions we spoke a great deal about authority. What he told me will serve here as an example of an attitude towards authority that Mosta‘ār, to a large extent, shares with Amir, ‘Ali and Mohammad Mahdi.

Imam Mahdi

The hidden Imam, Imam Mahdi,² is ever present in Mosta‘ār’s discussions on religious matters. He expresses a resilient trust and belief in the existence of this character and, in accordance with Shi‘ite dogma, he considers him the supreme authority under God and the unquestionable leader of all humankind.³ Although all informants generally agree in this matter,⁴ Mosta‘ār represents the most defined understanding of the nature of Mahdi. When asked about Mahdi’s whereabouts, he answers that the hidden leader lives with his friends on a hidden green island in the ocean.⁵ This notion is in no way metaphysical or symbolic, he ascertains, but should be understood as a definite physical truth.⁶ Mahdi’s position in Mosta‘ār’s ritual life is also prominent. Mosta‘ār emphasises the necessity of prayer for his rapid return⁷ and there are special supplications dedicated to Mahdi,⁸ which Mosta‘ār recites regularly.⁹

Amir, ‘Ali and Mohammad Mahdi have beliefs regarding Mahdi which are very similar to Mosta‘ār’s. However, they are less definite in their opinion concerning how the level of the physical or meta-

² Although, for the sake of clarity, I refer to this character as Imam Mahdi, or simply “Mahdi”, this is not the epithet usually used by the informants. Among them Imam Zamān, meaning Imam of Time, is much more common.

³ Mosta‘ār, May 14th, 2001.

⁴ See, for instance, Jamie, April 15th, 2000; Mohammad Mahdi, May 25th, 2001; ‘Ali, May 11th, 2001; Amir, August 26th, 1999.

⁵ This green island, *Jazīre-ye khozrā*, is well known in Shi‘ite mythology.

⁶ Mosta‘ār, May 14th, 2001.

⁷ Similar ideas are also proclaimed by the other informants. See, for instance: Jamie, April 15th, 2000; Mosta‘ār, May 14th, 2001; ‘Ali, May 11th, 2001; Mohammad Mahdi, May 25th, 2001; Amir, August 26th, 1999.

⁸ The most common of these prayers is *Do‘ā-ye Komeyl*.

⁹ This is also true in the case of the other informants, especially Mohammad Mahdi who recites Mahdi-prayers on a daily basis. Mohammad Mahdi, May 25th, 2001.

physical nature of Mahdi should be understood.¹⁰ Jamie is the most cautious. When I asked him about the hidden Imam on the second field trip, his answer was dismissive, almost as if the matter was irrelevant or its details unimportant. “We hope, but we do not know how it will be when he comes”, he said. “We can only pray.”¹¹

Velāyat-e Faqih

The idea of *nāʿeb ol-ʿāmm*, authorised representation (of Imam Mahdi), has become an established doctrine in Shiʿite law. It is generally recognised by Iranian *ʿolamā* and it is the foundation of the constitution of the Islamic Republic based on the concept of *velāyat-e faqih*, governance of the jurisprudent. Mostaʿār trusts in this doctrine too.¹² He explicitly expresses his belief that the supreme leader of the Islamic revolution, today Ayatollāh ʿAli Khāmeneʿi, represents the hidden Imam:

There are two sorts of leaders: worldly, like the Shah and godly, like Imam Khomeyni . . . We should follow the second. Worldly leaders lead us astray but the godly ones lead us to paradise. . . . *velāyat* is the same as godly leadership, it is leadership confirmed by God. . . . First there was Mohammad, then ʿAli, then the Imams, and then? After Imam Zamān who is the successor? Khomeyni! . . . and in Iran [nowadays] Khāmeneʿi.¹³

Mostaʿār states that he trusts in the system of *velāyat-e faqih* as the best system because God has confirmed it. In this trust lies great reverence for the two jurisprudents who have hitherto lead the Islamic Republic: Ayatollāh Ruhollāh Khomeyni and Ayatollāh ʿAli Khāmeneʿi. Mostaʿār is unrestrained in his praise for these leaders. As far as Khomeyni is concerned, Mostaʿār praises him exceedingly. For instance, when I asked him what a perfect Shiʿite Muslim should be like, his immediate association was to Khomeyni, whose exemplary behaviour he chose to describe in the following words:

¹⁰ Mohammad Mahdi, May 25th, 2001; ʿAli, May 11th, 2001; Amir, August 26th, 1999.

¹¹ Jamie, April 15th, 2000.

¹² ʿAli, May 11th, 2001; Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001; Amir, August 26th, 1999.

¹³ Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

Today [a perfect Shīʿite should be] like Imam Khomeyni, . . . Look David, Imam [Khomeyni] cried for Hoseyn, his clothes were clean, he combed, he liked orphans, he was kind, he spoke about flowers, liked orphans, he was an enemy of America who did bad things and Israel who killed Palestinians. He was firm and not afraid of anything except God, he liked his family and people, people liked him. . . . He was kind. . . . Everything he did was for God, . . . not for money, not for power, only for God. He wanted nothing but God.¹⁴

Mostaʿār's understanding of the nature of human authority, which is exemplified in the quotations above, is characteristic of the community he represents. Being both an active *basij* and a *tāleb*, he is influenced by the authoritative and conservative ideology that characterises these groups. The *basij* organisation is authoritative in its structure and directly connected to the leadership of Khāmeneʿi. As Mostaʿār understands it, the godly leadership which Khāmeneʿi represents, is marked by God-fearing kindness and love. By ascertaining this on several occasions, he distinguishes the godly leadership of Khāmeneʿi from worldly royalty, which is implemented by force and, as he believes, historically represented by the Pahlavi kings, the United States and Israel.¹⁵

The other informants also express strong faith in the system of *velāyat-e faqih*. They have stated that they trust it because it is authorised by the Koran, because it “makes things better for people”,¹⁶ and because it has never been bad for them.¹⁷ One of them is Mohammad Mahdi, who usually agrees with Mostaʿār. According to him, the fact that the Islamic Revolution was successful and that it has lasted through several years of war and constant counteractions from powerful enemies is in itself a proof that its leadership is aided by God and Imam Mahdi, and that therefore it must be sinless. “If they sinned”, Mohammad Mahdi states, referring to Khāmeneʿi and the leadership, “Imam Zamān would take his hand away from them”.¹⁸ Amir expresses a similar idea. In order to reach the level of *marjaʿ*,¹⁹ he argues, a person needs to have God's favour and to have close

¹⁴ Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

¹⁵ Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

¹⁶ ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

¹⁷ Amir, April 27th, 2000.

¹⁸ Mohammad Mahdi, May 25th, 2001.

¹⁹ A *mojtahed* who is referred to by people for following in Islamic matters.

contact with him. Therefore the very position of a religious authority in itself is proof of his closeness to God.²⁰ Based partly on this argumentation, Amir trusts Khāmene’i entirely. He describes him as a perfect man²¹ in whom everything that is good will find its expression. In our first interview, Amir stated that he would willingly kill himself for Islam if Khāmene’i ordered him to.²² Mohammad Mahdi, whose respect for the supreme leader is also strong, believes that he has direct contact with the hidden Imam. Stories verifying such a notion are not uncommon in the community and Mohammad Mahdi refers to these stories in order to find arguments that strengthen his own position.²³

The ‘Olamā

Analogous with Mosta‘ār’s reverence for the supreme leaders is his respect for all *‘olamā*. As with Amir and ‘Ali, he thinks highly of religious authorities in general. Amir expresses a belief that the *‘olamā* are collectively guided by the hidden Imam as they stand behind the supreme leader;²⁴ and ‘Ali expresses admiration for *‘olamā* whom he defines as people with good knowledge about the human soul;²⁵ When asked to give his opinion, Mosta‘ār answered:

[*‘olamā*] should be respected, they are usually devoted [*mokhles*], usually without sin, they are generous and giving. They give rings.²⁶ *‘Olamā* do good things themselves and tell other people to do so as well, because *‘olamā* go the same way as the Prophet and the Imams. Now that Imam Zamān is absent we have the *‘olamā*. They behave like the Prophet and therefore people like them.²⁷

In the local context, the Ayatollāh is the most prominent representative of the *‘olamā*. He is also one of the most highly ranking *‘olamā*

²⁰ Amir, August 26th, 1999.

²¹ This term *ensān-e kāmel* has several connotations in Islamic mystic anthropology.

²² Amir, August 26th, 1999.

²³ One such story relates an incident when Khāmene’i was overheard talking to a mysterious stranger who supposedly was Imam Mahdi himself. Mohammad Mahdi, May 25th, 2001.

²⁴ Amir, August 26th, 1999.

²⁵ ‘Ali, May 11th, 2001.

²⁶ This notion is based on an experience Mosta‘ār had told me about earlier in which an *‘ālem* whom he respected gave his ring to a poor man.

²⁷ Mosta‘ār, May 14th, 2001.

in Esfahān. The informants appreciate the position of their community leader and for many of them it is one of the main reason why they come to this specific mosque.²⁸ The Ayatollāh is also especially revered because of his closeness to Khāmene'i,²⁹ his succinct style,³⁰ his *barakat*³¹ and the *akhlāq*-focus of his sermons.³² Besides Mosta'ār, it is especially 'Ali who praises the Ayatollāh. 'Ali describes him as one of the most important persons for their spiritual development.³³ 'Ali states "He is the most important [teacher], he is a great leader. He teaches about the lives of the young and thereby saves many young Iranians".³⁴

Focusing mainly on the case of Mosta'ār, I have exemplified the overwhelmingly positive attitude towards religious authority that many of the informants express. On an abstract level this view is founded in a firm trust in the authority of Imam Mahdi. If this trust is combined with the notion of *nā'eb ol-āmm*, it is by analogy transferred to the 'olamā in general and the especially prominent Ayatollāhs in particular. From the theoretical perspective proposed in this study, however, it can be seen as an expression of successful authorisation. The complete acceptance of the authorities and the system they represent I construe as an attitude towards authority which can only come to pass if the power structures are thoroughly internalised by the individual and the authorisation is successful.

Dealing with Diversity

The schisms in Shi'ite authority in contemporary Iran are a sensitive issue for the informants belonging to this group. Most informants deny that there is a conflict among the leaders in the Islamic Republic at all. The maintenance of unity among Iranian 'olamā seems to be an important issue for them. Since this notion may appear somewhat contradictory to the political situation in the Islamic

²⁸ Jamie, April 27th, 2000; 'Ali, May 11th, 2001; Mohammad Mahdi, September 12th, 1999; Mosta'ār, April 16th, 2000; Amir, August 26th, 1999.

²⁹ Mohammad Mahdi, September 12th, 1999.

³⁰ Jamie, September 2nd, 1999.

³¹ 'Ali, May 11th, 2001.

³² 'Ali, May 11th, 2001; Mohammad Mahdi, September 12th, 1999; Jamie, April 15th, 2000.

³³ 'Ali, May 11th, 2001.

³⁴ 'Ali, May 11th, 2001.

Republic, it is interesting to say something about the reasons for this opinion.

Before doing this, however, it is important to highlight the influence that the interview situation may have on the informants' thoughts in this matter. As has been previously discussed, the world view of which authority is a part does not necessarily have to be logically coherent. Notions like these are not merely intellectual but integrated into the individual's entire being and, in addition to logical coherence, involve emotions, aesthetics, physical experience and so on. Authority is not appreciated on an intellectual level primarily. When the informants have been asked about their views on authority and the reasons for these views, they have been forced to express experiences that perhaps have been previously unformulated by means of explanatory language. In other words, they have had to transform emotional, and socially defined experiences into issues of reason. Arguably, this alteration is likely to have caused a feeling that the issue at stake is somewhat reduced; that any explanation comprehensible to an outsider fails to convey what the experiences are actually about. In the conversations I have sensed that some of the informants have had such a feeling. This misdirection in the interview situation partly explains the inconsistency of the informants in this matter.

Still, there is a strong emphasis on unity among those who accept the authority without criticism. I would like to propose that this is so because unity among the authorities guarantees that the Islamic system is objectively true and functioning. If one were to accept that there are schisms among highly ranked *'olamā* in Iran, one would indirectly have admitted that the Islamic system is not entirely based on reason but is subject to some sort of interpretation. Such a conclusion goes against the understanding of the informants and the lecturers inspired by Mo'tazelism and therefore make the present conflict among the authorities all the more problematic. However, the conflict within society is too obvious to deny completely, not least since the informants themselves are a part of it.

I conclude that for Mosta'ār, Amir, 'Ali and Mohammad Mahdi one way of dealing with domestic divergences is to externalise their causes. The idea that is generally expressed is that there is complete unity among the high-ranking religious leaders of the Islamic Republic, but that it might appear as if this unity was threatened. Such notions, however, are not true but planted by the enemies of Islam in order

to destabilise the Islamic Republic.³⁵ Thus, any apparent disagreements among the religious leadership are nothing but delusions planted by the United States of America and other enemies as an aggressive act against Iran. By adopting such an understanding, while reasoning about their views on authority, the informants create a logically coherent explanation for their situation and thus manage to express their views on authority through means of explanatory language without violating their emotionally experienced understanding.

Doubts

Although the informants often voice an exaltation of the authorities, their thoughts in these matters are not as one-sided as this presentation hitherto may have depicted them. I would not suggest that the positive image which the informants give voice to is dishonest or modified. It is my impression that some of them, especially Mosta'ār, 'Ali and Mohammad Mahdi, sincerely have very high thoughts concerning Shi'ite authority in general. But, even if Iran's external enemies are blamed for many problems, the above-presented unlimited affirmation of authority is difficult to uphold without further modulation in the Islamic Republic of today. Schisms in the religious and political establishment are far too obvious to disregard totally, and the informants, as will be shown below, cannot completely do so either. During the fieldwork, as our relationships have become more trusting, I have come to know another side of the informants' views on the authorities that modify the above presented exaltation in different ways. I will now go on to present these.

I have discovered that the informants have made certain uncomfortable observations that modify their exalting attitude towards the authorities. The informants, mainly Amir, Mohammad Mahdi and 'Ali, have expressed their thoughts and annotations on these matters in our talks. For the sake of clarity, I have categorised their observations into three different categories. These regard the issues of unity, legitimacy and whether or not the authorities are up-to-date. I will now present and comment on these one by one.

³⁵ See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, September 12th, 1999, Amir August 26th, 1999.

Unity or Diversity

There has been a general eagerness among the informants to stress that there is complete unity among the religious authorities in Iran. On various occasions all of them (except Jamie) have stated that there are no conflicts within the group of *ʿolamā* and that the religio-political establishment of the Islamic Republic has never been shattered or divided.³⁶ The very eagerness to stress this point may in itself hint that the informants struggle somewhat with doubts concerning this matter and that there are reasons to believe that their experiences, are less uniform than they may depict them to be. As we shall see, this has also proven to be the case.

Unity is an Islamic ideal. It is expressed in the concept of *towhid*,³⁷ which denotes the monotheistic unicity of God but also the reflection of this unicity in the unanimity of the Muslim *omma*. The *nāʿeb ol-ʿāmm*-doctrine and the hierarchic structure of Shiʿite *ʿolamā* furthermore encourage homogeneity among Shiʿite Muslims in general and the *ʿolamā* community in particular. The societal situation in contemporary Iran stands in sharp contrast to this ideal. As has been discussed previously, post-war Iranian society is torn apart by a conflict that concerns the future of the Islamic Republic in general. Conservative forces, loyal to the ideals of the revolution and lead by the supreme leader, stand against reformists of varying radicalism, publicly lead by the massively supported President Khātami. The national conflict between conservatives and reformists is reflected in the city of Esfahān by the political tension between the conservative *ʿolamā*, like the Ayatollāh of the chosen mosque and reformist leaders, such as the Esfahāni Friday Imam, Ayatollāh Tāheri, who led the daily prayers in a mosque on the other side of the city.

The informants need to relate to these conflicts. The societal tension between various groups in general are ever present in media, at the universities, on the streets and in all public life. When I have specifically asked about the tension between leading *ʿolamā*, the informants have, as I have already mentioned, initially denied that such tensions exist. When I then have asked whether it is at all possible

³⁶ See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, September 12th, 1999.

³⁷ *Towhid* means unicity. It is the first of the five so-called Roots of religion, *osul od-dīn*.

that diverse opinions can exist among *‘olamā*, the answers, on the other hand, have been that such a thing is possible. ‘Ali, for instance, states that there are many ways to go and that the Supreme leader, at least in theory, can make mistakes even if he is guided by Imam Mahdi.³⁸ Amir and Mohammad Mahdi, in their turn, both answer that slight differences of political opinion may exist between leading *‘olamā* but that this does not mean that there is a conflict.³⁹ Mohammad Mahdi also stresses that the leaders make efforts to overcome differences and to stay united.⁴⁰ The informants, it seems, have somewhat contradictory opinions concerning the unity of the authorities. They accept the possibility of diversity and to some extent agree that it exists. At the same time they deny that such diversity implies that there is conflict among the leaders.

Although they deny its existence in part, the informants position themselves explicitly in the presented conflict. Their choice of this particular mosque as their daily place of prayer is in itself, to a certain extent, a positioning in the conflict. When I have asked about their reasons to choose one leader instead of another, the answers have often been vague and fumbling. I believe that the informants are uncomfortable with the question. They feel, or so I have understood it, that the question is aimed at aspects of the issue that are irrelevant or unsuitable to discuss. Amir, for example, answers the question why Khāmene’i is better than Tāheri in the following way:

I don’t know. God gives me a better feeling for one of them, or the other. But what they do also counts. Tāheri is good too, but some say he is not. I don’t go to the Friday prayers. He speaks about irrelevant stuff and says some bad things that are dangerous for society. He is good but not as good as he should be with his position.

What bad things does he say?

Bad things about Khāmene’i⁴¹

For Amir, as this quotation shows, the main critique of the leader he has not chosen is this leader’s critique of Amir’s favourite. This sheds further light on how problematic internal conflicts among *‘olamā* are for the informants.

³⁸ ‘Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

³⁹ Mohammad Mahdi, September 12th, 1999; Amir, August 26th, 1999.

⁴⁰ Mohammad Mahdi, September 12th, 1999.

⁴¹ Amir, August 26th, 1999.

Legitimate or Untruthful

The second observation that modifies the informants' exalting attitude towards the authorities concerns the honesty of their ambitions, teaching and life style. When I have asked questions relating to this issue the enthusiasm to answer has usually been limited. Iranian society is totalitarian and criticism of authorities is a highly sensitive matter. Therefore, I presume, most people would hesitate to talk about this in an interview. 'Ali, for example, has not been willing to answer any questions that concern possible negative sides of the authorities. When I have asked him, he has denied having an opinion and proposed that I ask the authorities themselves if I want to know.⁴² Mosta'ār and Mohammad Mahdi represent the opinion that most 'olamā are good but that there also are some bad ones.⁴³ Jamie, who, as we shall see, is the greatest sceptic, expresses his doubts about the trustworthiness of the religious leaders most dramatically: "I hope they are close to God", he says, "but I know in my heart that it may not be like that".⁴⁴ The informants have ventured to say something about what qualities they believe the "bad" 'olamā lack, however, the most common viewpoint is that some of them are corrupt and do not live as they teach.⁴⁵ To a certain extent, therefore, the informants can be said to experience that some 'olamā are not trustworthy, that they may be corrupt and that they may not fulfil their divine responsibilities as satisfactorily as they themselves and the Shi'ite system to which they belong propose.

This insight affects the informants' understanding of authority in such a way that they retain the overall acceptance of 'olamā's authority but define this group, not as all 'olamā, but as 'olamā with the correct belief and life style. It is worth noting that the definition of the authority is somewhat blurred. To wear a turban and to be educated in a *madrese*, it seems, is not enough to meet the criteria of being an authority. Instead, this status is related to one's teaching and behaviour. I believe this may serve as an illustration of the way in which authority is based on the trust of the hierarchically inferior.

⁴² 'Ali Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

⁴³ Mosta'ār, May 14th, 2001; Jamie, April 27th, 2000.

⁴⁴ Jamie, April 27th, 2000.

⁴⁵ Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.

The *‘olamā* whom the informants have discerned as bad can be said to be deauthorised by these informants. Their attributes, then, no longer become signs of authority but symbols of usurpation.

Eternal or Outdated

The third observation concerning the informants' relation to the authorities concerns whether these and the Islamic system that they represent are up-to-date. The revelation of the Koran is believed to be the final revelation, equally valid for all time. The notion of the living Imam guarantees the correct application and interpretation of this revelation through the varying circumstances of the Shi‘ite community. Although all the informants, as I have shown, approve of this understanding, two of them, Amir and Jamie, have expressed certain doubts. To them, much of what is taught by the *‘olamā* lacks significance in their own lives because they find it predictable and outdated. For instance, when I asked Amir about his *marja‘*, who is Ayatollāh Behjat of Qom, he answered almost mockingly:

I have his *resale*,⁴⁶ but I almost never read it. I will never read it again. I have read one page so I know what it is all about.⁴⁷

Amir likes the religious leaders, but he feels that their teaching does not apply to him.⁴⁸ He feels that the authorities are not up to date concerning what is going on in the world and that they are not modern enough to give useful advice in today's society.

I have given examples of some thoughts that modify the informants' image of the authorities. These thoughts disturb the authorisation process. By drawing the informants' attention to potential flaws in the Islamic system, they force them to reflect upon the state of affairs and thereby undermine the solidity of their social reality. For most of the informants, however, these thoughts are merely nuances in their overwhelmingly positive impression of what the authorities are like, modifying notions that do not seem to threaten their general impression or change their affirmative attitude. For

⁴⁶ *Resale*, or more correctly *ar-resālat ol-‘amaliye*, is the treatise on practical laws concerning Islamic duties that a *majtahed* or *marja‘* writes for his followers to follow.

⁴⁷ Amir, April 27th, 2000.

⁴⁸ Amir, April 27th, 2000.

Jamie, however, this is not the case. To him, the modifying observations have lead to a general questioning of Islam as such. I will now present his case.

REBUKING THE *MOLLĀS*—THE CASE OF JAMIE

Jamie is different from the other informants. When I first met him in 1999, I could not predict the changes that he would go through during the years that have passed since then. At the time he was a widower clothed in black, a sorrowful man who visited various sorrow-rituals on a daily basis and spoke constantly of the fragility of life and the necessity of proper religion. Although Jamie often hesitated to speak directly about politics, I had the impression that he was a true supporter of the *velāyat-e faqih*. I saw his presence in the mosque, his agitating concern for Shi'ite Islam, and the fact that he was sending his sons to religious schools as evidence of religious conservatism and support for the political leadership. I still believe, as does Jamie, that this is what it was at the time. But things have changed since then.

Jamie was born in Esfahān but grew up in many different cities since his father travelled around the country due to his work. In the mid-1970's he and his brother went to the United States and spent a few years studying engineering there. At the time of the revolution he returned to Iran. As he remembers it, Jamie strongly supported the revolution and the Khomeynist regime. Although his intention had been to go back to America, things changed and he decided to stay in Iran. When the war broke out he enlisted as a soldier in the army and joined the medical troops of the *basij* but he never went to the front. At this time he also married. His wife was a political activist engaged in the revolutionary struggle. Together they had six children. When I first met Jamie in August 1999, forty days had passed since she had passed away. She suffered from cancer and died young, leaving Jamie with the children. The youngest was only a few years old. Jamie provides for his big family through his work in a state-owned company.

When I came back to Esfahān in April 2000, Jamie was much the same as he used to be. A year later, on my third visit, however, everything had changed. To begin with, I could not find him in the mosque as usual. People said that he had ceased to come there a

while ago. Eventually I found one of his sons who told me that his father was out of town. The son was busy with Koran studies at a nearby *madrese* at the time. He promised to give a message to Jamie from me. There was nothing I could do but wait. The weeks passed and nothing happened until finally one late afternoon the phone rang in the little guest house where I usually stay while in Esfahān. It was Jamie. He said he now had some time and that he could come and meet me. Somewhat astounded by the sudden change in events, I grabbed my notebook and went out to see him.

When Jamie came, I immediately understood that he had undergone some radical changes. The car he was driving was a Buick from the early 1970's. He was wearing light green trousers, a yellow unbuttoned shirt and big sunglasses. As I entered the car, Jamie was sweet-talking to a girlfriend on the phone. He laughed and told her he was sorry that he had not called her for a while at the same time as he rid the passenger seat of music cassettes and, by means of sign language, told me to make myself comfortable. Once the phone conversation was over, the first thing he told me was that he wanted to be called *Jamie* in my book. He liked the American sound of that name and thought it would tally well with his new life style. He told me that he wanted "to be free and to meet women", that he was fed up with his old life style and that he needed to live. "Living is better than religion", he said. "People need to live, they need to breath".

I spent much time with Jamie during the week that followed this bewildering reunion. He did not want to go to the mosque. We usually had our talks and interviews while walking in parks or climbing the mountains in the outskirts of the city. In those sessions we talked a great deal about authority. Jamie was fed up with the authorities of the Islamic Republic. As he expressed it, he had reached a point where he could not accept the situation any longer. He believed many people shared this feeling. Once he brought me to a park not far from the university in southern Esfahān. The park was a meeting place for liberal-minded people, full of youngsters stretching the limits of tolerable public behaviour by wearing western-looking clothes and engaging in non-traditional amusements such as riding bicycles, going roller-skating or throwing frisbees. In many ways the park was the complete opposite of the mosque. "Can you see that?", Jamie asked me as a roller skating girl swooped by us, "why [do you think

they behave like this]?” Answering his own question, he said: “Because they had too many lies from the *mollās*!”⁴⁹

Jamie told me that he had heard too many lies from the religious authorities, that these lies had made him believe things which were wrong, that they had made him make mistakes and that he was fed up with all of it.⁵⁰ He argued that the system that the religious authorities propagate and uphold is outdated:

Maybe this religion doesn't have an answer for today's situation. Even the *mollās*! Most *mollās* in the mosque come with things from 1500 years ago. They tell us about Hazrat-e Zahrā, what she was wearing, but nobody tells us what we need today! Zahrā was good, but today's women, what should they be like? We have problems like these.⁵¹

The outdated style and the lies that Jamie had experienced caused him to abhor the political system of the Islamic Republic that he used to be so fond of. When I asked him about his opinion on *velāyat-e faqih* he did not restrain his critique:

[*Velāyat-e faqih*] means dictatorship of one person over another . . . I think the biggest problem in our society is *velāyat-e faqih*. Because it makes one person think and decide for everybody. You know, even government officials have to obey *velāyat-e faqih*. This is not fair! One person cannot decide for everybody. In industrial countries those who decide speak with other people first. One cannot think better than ten persons. *Velāyat-e faqih* is the biggest problem in our country: Someone in the government decides to do something but *velāyat-e faqih* says no, people want to do things, *velāyat-e faqih* says ‘this is wrong’ . . . It is stupid! Crazy!⁵²

Jamie's ideas about the Supreme leader himself were even more full of disdain. He told me that the leader has no support among the people, that he ought to resign and that his leadership is unjust and totalitarian.⁵³ Jamie was especially heated about the militant and aggressive attitude which he experienced that Khāmene'i expressed:

⁴⁹ Jamie, May 26th, 2001.

⁵⁰ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

⁵¹ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001. Jamie speaks good English but makes grammatical mistakes. I have corrected these in this and the following quotations from him.

⁵² Jamie, May 26th, 2001.

⁵³ Jamie, May 26th, 2001.

"He puts on a *basij*-scarf [to show that he is] ready to fight. With whom? The people? I hate him!"⁵⁴

Jamie's negative assessment of the political system and its present leader sometimes even caused him to question the general validity of Islam as a religion. As we spoke about these matters, I had the impression that such doubts were somewhat distressing for Jamie to deal with. Over and over again he stressed the importance of being rational and logical when making up one's mind in these matters. He seemed to experience a process that to him was both painful and confusing:

There was a time [when] I really believed it, but now I doubt it. I doubt many things in my country. I am confused. I want to be logical. Everybody, including my father, says: believe it! Even society says so, but I am confused.⁵⁵

Jamie's thoughts concerning the system of the Islamic Republic was clear. What confused and bothered him was whether there was another Islam that he had not yet encountered. "Most people say this Islam is bad", he told me, "[but] if you ask [them] which Islam is right, no one can answer you".⁵⁶ His considerations concerning the existence of a better Islam did not find their final solution during my visit in 2001. However, he did tell me that he was reaching a point where he suspected that the problem might lie within the religion itself.⁵⁷ Such a statement caused me to ask him about his opinion on the origin of Shi'ism, on the *Ahl-e beyt* and the hidden Imam. In his answer Jamie proclaimed that he still believed in the existence of the Imams. But he doubted that they were the kind of people that the authorities have portrayed. He found the image of the Imams that the authorities presented too exclusive:

I think the *Ahl-e beyt* was in this world but not as they say. See, in every nationality there are some champions, some good people, and they are good of course, close to God. But I don't think those *Ahl-e beyt* were like the *mollās* say they were . . . *Ahl-e beyt* didn't fight for, you know, some people only, they fought for all people, they were like most champions.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

⁵⁵ Jamie, May 26th, 2001.

⁵⁶ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

⁵⁷ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

⁵⁸ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

Jamie's assumption that the Islamic system of today's Iran is flawed caused him to reach a similar conclusion concerning other Islamic governments in history. When I asked him about it specifically, he agreed that this conclusion might apply also to the caliphate of 'Ali, which in Shi'ite historiography is generally much praised.

You have to be honest. When you read Islamic history, you see that when one Imam was leader, truth died and that is the problem. We shouldn't choose Islam as government, as politics, They [i.e. Islam and politics] should not relate, this is the big problem.⁵⁹

Jamie, it seems, believed that if political leadership is centred around one person of religious authority, the truthful core of the religion will disappear. Although he expressed this idea about a historical situation and in general terms, I believe it is reasonable to assume that he meant that this is what has happened also in the Islamic Republic. Jamie had not lost his belief in God when I met him in 2001. He was still a religious man, according to his own account. He still said his daily prayers and stated that he had not forgotten about God. "I know that he sees me", he told me on one occasion, "but I think he forgives me".⁶⁰

Causes of Change

I have shown that Jamie changed his attitude entirely during this study. As he sees it himself, his change came as the result of a long process of a logical scrutiny of the Islamic system. He had thought things through and reached a conclusion that caused him to change. There is no reason to question that Jamie has undergone such a process of scrutiny. On the contrary, my talks with him in the years that have passed clearly indicate that he really has. What is interesting for me to discuss is why this eagerness to scrutinise came at this time and what caused it. I think that there is more than one answer to this question. One can pinpoint some contextual changes that may have contributed as catalysts to Jamie's change.

To begin with, the liberation process in Iranian society and the schism within the leadership has made alternative political opinions, life styles and attitudes towards authority much more apparent. People

⁵⁹ Jamie, May 26th, 2001.

⁶⁰ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

who live in cities and perceive the changes there are arguably more or less forced to make up their minds. In such a situation reflection and scrutiny may be triggered. Since this has not occurred for the other informants, however, this explanation is not enough.

Jamie is very different from the others and in order to explain his particular development, it is necessary to look at his individual story. Firstly, Jamie is older than the other informants. He is the only one who has experienced pre-revolutionary Iran also. He lived in the United States for a few years during the 1970's. Therefore, he is the only one who has seen a political system which differs from Iran's contemporary system. He has experienced secularism, other religions and a Western youth culture and is consequently capable of comparing the Iranian situation with these.

Furthermore, Jamie's family situation underwent some dramatic changes during the time of this study. The death of his wife forty days before I first met him left him alone with six children. Two years after this event Jamie changed his attitude towards the Islamic authorities. Although Jamie himself disagrees, I believe it is reasonable to propose that this change was much connected to his grief. The involvement with new women that accompanied his change seems to strengthen such an assumption. The fact that his wife was strongly pro-revolutionary, and that Jamie himself believes that his political opinions were much influenced by the opinions of his wife,⁶¹ further supports it. In any case, Jamie's story shows how dramatic changes in attitude towards authority can be triggered by external circumstances.

In 2002, when I came to Esfahān for my final visit, Jamie was again difficult to find. People told me that he had moved from the city. When we eventually met, it immediately became clear to me that he had had to suffer the price for his change towards liberalisation. He had changed the Buick for a smaller car and was back to his old conservative Islamist look, wearing black clothes and a full beard now greying with age and worries. The passed year had meant many changes in his life. After revealing some of his new political opinions at his workplace he had become unemployed. His previous friends had told the manager that his opinions were not correct and

⁶¹ Jamie, May 28th, 2001.

they had subsequently fired him. Jamie could not disguise his hopelessness and frustration when we spoke about it. He had had to move to another city to work now and he did not see his children much any longer. "Their grandmother takes care of them",⁶² he told me. I felt that to some degree he had given up hope.

He lived a poorer life now and the new employment he had found was not as good as the previous one. He told me that he knows the authorities keep an eye on him, that he is cautious but not afraid. "I keep quiet and things go well",⁶³ he told me. The return of his old conservative Islamist look was part of staying out of trouble. It was clear that Jamie had been quietened.

DISCUSSION

It is significant that all informants have well-articulated opinions on the hierarchic structures of their community. This indicates that they all feel the need to relate to authority. This need says something about the solidity of the power structures in the community. To begin with, the informants' stories testify that, although authorisation is the main means of power implementation in the community, the adjoining means of persuasion and force are sometimes needed. I will elaborate somewhat more on this notion.

Persuasion

I have previously pointed out that classical *feqh* argumentation is used in the lectures to support the messages that the lecturers wish to convey. A prerequisite for this argumentation to be valid is that the Islamic revelation is accepted as objectively true and that the Koran and Sunna, where the *faqih* finds his arguments, are seen as authoritative sources. I do not consider such an understanding of the Islamic revelation to be defensible by means of reason only although most Shi'ite scholars would. Rather it is, at least partly, based on emotional and other experiences that have come to exist through socialisation. For this reason I do not consider the *feqh*-argumentation to be an expression of the analytic category that I have chosen to call

⁶² Jamie, May 2nd, 2002.

⁶³ Jamie, May 2nd, 2002.

persuasion. However, other kinds of arguments which are included in the lectures match this category. For instance, when the Ayatollāh argues that the power of the *‘olamā* promotes stability in society, or that it causes people to feel better, or that it improves their morality,⁶⁴ it is suitable to talk about persuasion. This kind of argument does not, like the *feqh* ones, presuppose that the audience accept the Islamic base of the system, but rather aims at convincing them to do so by means of reason. The fact that the lecturers have such an ambition at all shows that they do not entirely trust the authorisation.

Jamie's story tells us that their distrust in this matter is justified. For him, the religious authorities and the Islamic system that they represent can no longer be accepted without argumentation. During our talks in 2001 he repeatedly stressed that he wanted to be logical concerning these matters.⁶⁵ This means that he does not accept the religious argumentation of the authorities without arguments based on reason. In his own attempt to reach logical conclusions, Jamie has ended up in severe criticism of the religious leadership and doubts about the Islamic system. This exemplifies how leaving the community can generate a need for persuasion in an individual believer.

Force

As has already been stated, force is not apparent within the boundaries of the community. However, it does exist as a means to uphold the power structures of the Islamic Republic as a whole. Even though some of the informants may deny this,⁶⁶ I consider it to be apparent. The strict governmental control of media and the frequent imprisonment of critical publicists may serve as examples. The *basij* organisation, to which many informants belong, has as one of its undertakings to control the behaviour of people if necessary by means of force.

Jamie, who is the one informant for whom the authorisation no longer works, has had to experience force. The loss of his job is the paramount example of this. Before that he had also experienced the

⁶⁴ Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Jamie, May 26th, 2001.

⁶⁶ Mosta‘ār, May 15th, 2001.

punishment which comes from transgressing the limits in the Islamic Republic. On one occasion, he told me, he was stopped by patrolling *basij* while taking a girl-friend for a ride in his car. They had threatened him with incrimination, but he had managed to talk his way out of it. Jamie also had a good friend who was killed by the government in the early years of the revolution.⁶⁷ To Jamie, naturally, the possibility of becoming the subject of governmental violence is ever present. As long as he was an active member of the community, it seems, he did not think much about these issues. Now that he has left the community, however, they have been brought to the fore front again. This shows that leaving the community can entail, not just awareness of, but also the bitter experience of force.

Persuasion and force are means of power implementation which become apparent when the hierarchic structures of the community are not thoroughly approved of by its members. Power structures which are thoroughly supported need neither coercion nor arguments to be upheld but only the social confirmation which I have labelled authorisation. Jamie's story, then, exemplifies a failure of authorisation in the community.

A Crumbling Authority?

I have shown that the informants' attitudes towards authority can be categorised into various degrees of acceptance or denunciation, and I have exemplified how force and persuasion are implemented when authorisation fails or crumbles. What, then, can be concluded concerning the authority situation in the community?

To begin with, it is clear that all informants contribute to authorisation while visiting the mosque. This contribution happens automatically when the unwritten rules of social conduct in the mosque are followed. It is reasonable to conclude that the major means of power implementation in the community is authorisation. This is shown by the fact that most informants accept the authority of the *'olamā* as legitimate and the Shi'ite system of belief, in which this authority has its place, as true. If structural power is what defines people's thoughts and behaviour in matters that concern ethics, aesthetics and world-view, it is clear that power in the present

⁶⁷ Jamie, May 23rd, 2001.

community to a great extent is structural and bound to the Islamic system and the *‘olamā* who represent it.

The stories of Mosta‘ār, Jamie and the other informants, however, clearly show how changeable this process is. Attitudes towards authority, it seems, can be very varied in a seemingly homogeneous community. The attitude of one individual can change as time goes by and a person can hold several contradictory attitudes almost simultaneously. Jamie’s story, in particular, reveals the dynamics of this authority situation. It makes clear that the state of affairs cannot be understood as static but needs to be seen as an ongoing process in which the ideas of individuals as well as the constellation of the group can and constantly does change.

Another notion, which the stories of the informants provide, is that a person’s contribution to authorisation does not necessarily imply that this person approves of the authorities. The informants’ different views on the authorities do not shine through when they participate in mosque activities. Jamie, being the obvious example, participated in the mosque activities even after his doubts about the Islamic system had started to develop and, in the last stage of his story, he dressed and behaved as a loyal conservative although his opinions were the opposite. The same goes for Amir, who had strong doubts about the authorities during the last years covered by this study but still occasionally participated in the activities and through behaviour and speech contributed to the authorisation of its system.

The story of Jamie also shows that once one’s opinion about the authorities has developed into complete repudiation, it may be difficult to even set one’s foot in a place governed by these. When this happens, as it has in Jamie’s life, it is possible to leave the community and thus even terminate one’s passive contribution to its maintenance. Authorisation, then, appears to be a fluctuating phenomenon in the sense that the individuals who contribute to it come and go as they please. A general conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the authority situation in the chosen community is not wholly stable. To summarise, the line of argument to support this notion is the following: To begin with, all informants have well thought-out opinions about the legitimacy of the authorities. Even though their views and strategies differ from one another, the fact that their positions are well developed indicates that the authority question is something they have thought about, that it is conscious and immediately

topical in their lives. This, in turn, shows that authority is not obvious to them.

The fact that both persuasion and force exist as a means of power implementation in the community indicates the instability of the authority situation. The informants have experienced force and persuasion both directly and indirectly. Since these means are only needed when authorisation is not sufficient, the fact that they are present in the community shows that power is not always obviously perceived as legitimate but that it needs arguments and coercion to be maintained.

The weakness of authorisation is furthermore exemplified by the fact that all members of the *‘olamā* are not automatically seen as authorities. I have shown that all informants think that some members of the *‘olamā* are corrupt and illegitimate. This notion implies that the traditional attributes of Shi‘ite authority, such as the official dress and the *madrese* education, are not sufficient guarantees of authority in the eyes of the informants. In order to be considered a real authority by them an *‘ālem* needs to be scrutinised and pronounced just. This mistrust of the attributes of authorities is additional proof of the instability of the authority situation in the community.

Finally, the individual case of Jamie is a clear example of how authorisation fails in the community. The fact that his defection from the community is accompanied by an augmented need to be logical and an increased awareness of force through memories of past losses and injuries furthermore clarifies how persuasion and force function as adjoining means to authorisation.

Jamie’s story, moreover, indicates how views on authority can depend on contextual factors such as changes in life situations. I have shown how his defection from the community corresponded in time with his grief over the death of his wife. The community’s role as a place of mourning will be further discussed later on. Suffice it to mention here that events in one’s individual life may have a great influence on one’s views on authority. The religious community and the individual’s thoughts about it are interdependent in the private context of the individual.

The conclusion that authority is not entirely accepted in the Islamic Republic is not new. The entire modern political history of Iran testifies of power struggles based on exceedingly different opinions

concerning authority and the legitimacy of different groups' claims to power. What this chapter has shown, however, is that this power struggle is not only fought between groups, but also in the minds of individuals. Facing the increasingly polarised political and societal situation in Iran, conservative supporters of the regime choose different strategies to keep their situation coherent both intellectually and emotionally. The examples of this which I have shown proves that also Islamist religious authority in today's Iran needs both persuasion and force to be upheld, even among the very core group of its supporters.

This chapter, including the case of Jamie, has also shown that the social process of authorisation, which was presented in chapter 5 and exemplified in the present chapter, needs to be complemented. There is, no doubt, an official world view in the community, which is made to be embraced by the informants by means of authorisation, persuasion and force. Yet, the case of Jamie reveals that the informants can also relate independently to this world view. They can at least in their own minds, choose to take it or leave it, to reinterpret its meaning and to criticise its foundations. The authorisation process is not constant or entirely in end of itself. Instead, the independence of individuals appears to create a reversed process of, what we may call, de-authorisation. The individuals are not entirely in the hands of their social environment.