Living Shi'ism

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Living Shi'ism

Instances of Ritualisation Among Islamist Men in Contemporary Iran

by

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Uppsala, May 11th 2006
David Thurfjell

CHAPTER ONE

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Iran is going through a period of rapid societal change. The generation that was born in the baby boom following Khomeyni's revolution has now grown up. People belonging to this generation are leaving the universities and are trying to make their way in a society burdened by inflation, unemployment and political repression. A growing majority of young people channel their frustration through calls for change. Those who were born and raised under the rule of the jurisprudents now abandon the path of their leaders—or so it seems. But there are exceptions. Among certain layers of the population the ideals of the revolution are still highly esteemed. Here the dream of a just and prosperous society, governed by the principles of Islamic law, is still vivid and the loyalty to the present conservative leader is strong. Here, attempts at reform and liberalisation are looked upon with distress as symptoms of deceit and ignorance, as signs of a growing public oblivion of God. This is a study of this pro-regime movement at a grass-roots level. It is a story of a group of men belonging to a mosque-community with a conservative profile in Esfahān, about their lives and thoughts during a period of four years.

In 1996 I spent a semester in Esfahān studying the Persian language at the city's state university. At that time I learned to appreciate Iran strongly—the beauty of its landscapes, the friends I made there, the generosity and passion of its people. It was an experience of wonder and excitement to study there but also, I must admit, an experience associated with certain anxiety. Back then, in 1996, the Islamic Republic was different. The liberalization movement of the last years had not yet begun and the feared life-style policemen of the *komite* were still patrolling the streets harassing anyone who dared to challenge the officially sanctioned rules of conduct and clothing. I was often afraid in those days, as were many Iranians, and my presence was often regarded with suspicion by official authorities.

During my stay I experienced, for the first time, the sorrow rituals of Iranian Shi'ism. Through the university, I was introduced to

different forms of commemoration rituals in which the martyrs of the Iraqi war were honoured. Those of my friends who were religiously active also brought me along to the weekly mourning gatherings in the mosques of the city. I clearly remember the first time I was able to participate in one of these meetings. It was one of those warm central-Iranian summer nights and the city was still busy with traffic and street life as my friend brought me into the open courtyard of a mosque in the old bazaar quarters. I remember being deeply impressed by the tranquillity that surrounded us as we sat down on one of the carpets spread out for those who had come there to listen. Then the lights went out and we sat quietly under the open sky as the prayer leader begun his reading, a slow and melodious recitation of an Arabic supplication blended with passionate comments in Persian. The men who sat around me started to weep mournfully, joining in the blissful atmosphere of religious grief as the voice of the prayer leader started to tremble with emotion. It was a new experience for me. These men's attachment and closeness to their own emotions fascinated me. It seemed healthy and spiritual in some strange way. At the time I could not find any tears to shed, but still I highly appreciated the gathering for its beauty, serenity and emotional power. A majority of the people who gather at these meetings, I soon realised, were religious conservatives. Their religious bliss and the passionate emotions were imbued with political statement at the same time as the whole thing was heartfelt and personal. This thrilled me. I guess it was then that I decided to make the ritual life of these grass-roots conservative Islamists the object of my doctoral thesis project. I shall never forget that night.

In the summer of 1999, when I returned to Iran to start the first fieldwork for this study, I was not sure about how things would turn out. My plan was to find a conservative-oriented mosque with a substantial schedule of rituals, to participate in these rituals to as great an extent as possible and, thereby, to be able to analyse the meaning of these rituals for those who take part in them. In the first entry of my field notebook from that trip I pretentiously declare that "my intention is to be a bridge of communication". At that time I was full of theoretical and methodological ideas, which I have now abandoned. I wanted to find *the* essential meaning of Shi'ite sorrow rituals and somehow discern some hidden grammar of the emotional gatherings. I believed such a grammar existed and I wanted to con-

vey it to the western readers of my study. Now, several years later, it has become clear that this ambition was bound to fail. The stories of the five men, which have been my major informants in this study, show, with great clarity, that there is no *one* meaning to these rituals and that all quests for essence, therefore, are in vain. In the face of my informants and the complexity of their experience, hence, my initial intention has proven misdirected. Still, however, I hold true to the idea of looking for meaning. The present study, then, deals with the meaning of sorrow rituals. But it does not do so, as I initially intended, with the purpose of finding one general meaning. Instead I have tried to pinpoint some of the varying, changing and incoherent meanings, which the rituals have had for the different informants at different times in the ongoing flux of experience, which is their lives.

The Beginning

Beforehand I had chosen Esfahān to be the Iranian city where this study would take place. I knew the city from my previous stay there, and being well-renowned for its religious conservatism, it also seemed a good place for anyone who wishes to study Shi'ite religious activity. When I came there in 1999, I spent a few days visiting several different mosques in the city. I introduced myself to the people I met in these mosques, told them about the study I was planning to do and asked if it would be possible to focus on their particular community. Wherever I went I was welcomed with open arms. It was a pleasant experience. Eventually I chose a mosque community suitable for my purposes in one of the central parts of the city. I got permission from some important leaders in the mosque to conduct my study there and then it begun.

I started to spend as much time as possible in the mosque. I became acquainted with many people who came there regularly and took part in, or at least were present at, the ritual and social activities that were going on. I recorded lectures and prayer meetings and spoke with as many as I could about their meaning and purpose. During a period of four years I annually visited the mosque community.

The Informants

As time passed I got to know a number of people in the community. Among them I chose five to be my major informants and, thus, to be the people that I would get to know in depth during these years. Since then, I have followed them through the changes in their lives and, as the reader will notice, some of them have changed dramatically. Still, however, in this study their stories will be my way to portray and discuss how religion can be experienced and construed among a group of grass-roots, conservative Islamists in contemporary Iran. These five men, then, are different in many ways. They come from different background in terms of social class, education and ethnicity. What unites them is the fact that, at the time when I began this study, they were active members of the community focused on here. At that time they visited the mosque on a daily basis and were zealous participants in the various forms of ritual activities, which were offered there.

In 1999, when I came to the mosque for the first time at the time of evening prayer I knew no one. It was that very first evening that I met ʿAli Bakhtiāri, who eventually became one of my closest friends and informants during my visits to Iran. He was in his early twenties at that time, a young man with a full beard, constantly fingering a *tasbih*.[1] When I entered the mosque, ʿAli was sitting alone waiting for the prayer to begin. He invited me to sit beside him at the rear end of the crowd gathered to pray. I accepted his invitation, told him about the causes of my visit and he immediately offered to help me gather material for this study.

At that time ʿAli himself was rather new in the community. My first impression was that of a cheerful, friendly and very pious young man. Soon I was invited to visit his home and he introduced me to some of his relatives who, like himself, work in Esfahān to provide for their families in the villages. Although I spent much time with ʿAli during my first fieldwork, I never really got to know him then. He remained a merry person who told me stories of the mountains and the traditional way of life in his village. It was only later that I would get to know the sorrowful sides of his personality.

[1] *Tasbih* is an Islamic rosary.

Throughout the scope of this study, ʿAli Bakhtiāri studied geography at one of the colleges in Esfahān but had to make his living by taking small jobs here and there. He comes from a very poor family and, as his chosen pseudonym shows, he is a Bakhtiāri.[2] As his story will reveal, he is the most zealous political activist among the informants. He takes much interest in religious matters and is an active participant in pro-regime demonstrations.

On my first field trip I spent as much time as I could in the mosque trying, as I did, to establish a somewhat natural place in its community. Of course, this never fully succeeded. It did, however, give me the opportunity to meet and get to know many people. One of these was Amir, the youngest of my five major informants. He approached me at a *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* meeting because he wanted to talk and to practice his English. He was still a young teenager at that time but was already as good as fluent in this language. I enjoyed talking to him. Speaking a language more familiar to me than Persian was in itself somewhat relieving for me and we soon became involved in discussions concerning the subject matter of this book. I believe Amir appreciated our conversations too. Somehow I became a "neutral" person with whom he could talk about his personal problems with. At that time he was worried about several matters in his life. He felt that he was not successful enough in his schoolwork and was ashamed and frustrated about sexual thoughts, which, as he expressed it, stole too much of his attention. Amir's father suffered from cancer and at that time Amir was also worried that he would inherit this disease from his father. He is the only child of a relatively wealthy family where the father works as a clerk at a public institution, and the mother is a high school teacher.[3] Throughout the scope of this study my impression of Amir as an intelligent and determined juvenile lasted. He had managed to buy his way out of military service and remained an ambitious student nourishing dreams of a successful career as a physicist in the academic world. As long as I had the opportunity to meet him, he spent all his time trying to achieve this goal.

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[2] The Bakhtiāri are an Iranian people who live in central Iran, mainly in the province of Chahārmahal-e Bakhtiāri and Khuzestān. Traditionally the Bakhtiāris are semi-nomadic.

[3] High school here refers to what in Persian is called *dabirestān*.

Another informant, who approached me on my first field trip, was Jamie. At first I felt he was annoying. He was a solemn man in his early forties. With full beard, black clothes and a chaplet in his right hand, he displayed all the attributes of a conservative Iranian Islamist. He approached me in the mosque wanting to discuss logical inconsistencies in Christianity. I was neither particularly entertained by such argumentations, nor very successful in them. I did, however, give them a chance this time and that is how I first got to know Jamie: sitting face to face in the courtyard of the mosque, surrounded by a minor crowd of spectators, discussing Christ's divine nature in Christian theology.

When I first met Jamie, his wife had recently died. She had suffered from cancer and died young, leaving Jamie with six children among whom the youngest was only a few years old. On the second day of our friendship, he brought me along to his wife's grave when the family was to read the prayers that Iranian Islamic tradition bids believers to do forty days after the death of a close relative. Our first conversations were much imbued with the tragedies of his life. Jamie spoke much about death and repeatedly emphasised the temporality of this life and that the life in the hereafter is the only thing that matters. During my visits to Iran I have met Jamie regularly. We have spent much time visiting parks or walking in the mountains together. I have got to know his sons and we have become good friends. During the scope of this study Jamie lived a hectic life in Esfahān, providing for his big family through hard work as an engineer at a stated-owned company. His religious engagement was at the beginning of this study very intense. In this respect, as this book will show, he has, however, changed dramatically.

There is an elderly Koran teacher who regularly gives public classes in the mosque. On my first field trip I attended his classes and was offered to take private classes in Koran recitation, an offer that I gladly accepted. It was Mohammad Mahdi who became my private teacher. He was a man in his early twenties at the time, a man of typical *basij*-appearance, as I had come to know it, with a full well-kept beard, a light-coloured shirt, dark trousers and a small *kefie*-scarf around his neck. Being in the midst of pursuing a successful career as a Koran teacher, Mohammad, unlike the other informants, was in a somewhat high hierarchical position in the community. During my first fieldwork we met regularly in the mosque to have Koran classes and later, when we had made good friends,

I asked Mohammad Mahdi to participate in this study as my informant. At that time he was newly married and a man facing the first hardships of being a family provider. He worked hard teaching to afford the small apartment he had recently arranged for himself and his wife on the outskirts of the city. As we spoke of the financial and existential hardships of life I was impressed by the perseverance with which Mohammad Mahdi faced his adversities. Since then I have come to know him as a solemn, hardworking and devout man.

Many of the visitors in the mosque are *tollāb*, that is, students from some neighbouring *madrese*. On my first field trip I spoke a great deal with these students. Preferably we discussed religious matters, mainly every conceivable reason for me to convert to Islam, but I never got to know any of them more thoroughly. On my second field trip, however, some of those I had initially argued about theology with withheld their suspicion and became my friends. One of them was Mostaʿār.[4] The first time I met him he wore the outfit of an *ʿālem* and invited me to a formalised discussion on Islamic education. After that our relationship became more relaxed although it is remained centred on discussion and sometimes has become polemic. Besides meeting in the mosque I have often visited Mostaʿār in his study chamber at the *madrese*. I know him as a cheerful, generous and politically zealous activist. Mostaʿār was in his mid-twenties during the years of this study. Throughout this time he has remained strongly committed to his religious life style.

Such are the profiles of my five informants as I have come to know them: a sorrowful Bakhtiāri from the mountains, an ambitious young student, a widowed engineer, a pious Koran teacher and a future *mollā*. They are all men belonging to the same community, but they do not know each other particularly well. This study will reveal, that as the years have passed, their stories have come to develop in different directions.

It has been my ambition to safeguard their anonymity as far as possible. Some details in their stories have, therefore, been changed and their names are fictive. The names were chosen by themselves at a late stage of this study and they somewhat reflect their different perceptions of self at that stage. All of the informants were of the

[4] *Mostaʿār* (or more correctly *nām-e Mostaʿār*) means simply pseudonym in Persian.

opinion that being anonymous was not necessary. Some of them even explicitly asked that their identities should be revealed. When I insisted in this matter, however, these were the names they chose to be their pseudonyms.

My Position in the Community

To come as a non-Muslim researcher to a conservative Islamist mosque, in the heart of the Islamic Republic, is a problematic challenge. The role of the scholar is ambivalent and awkward. One faces a situation in which one seeks to become close and personal with people at the same time as one is supposed to maintain a critical and analytical attitude towards the personal experiences they are generous enough to share. This also applies to the religious activities one is welcomed to participate in. One strives to be accepted by the community at the same time as one wishes to be discrete, and one seeks to be sociable and friendly at the same time as one wishes to remain observant. It is a Herculean task to balance on the sharp edge of scholarly stringency and one's own social instincts.

In the beginning of my stay in the mosque, I was regarded with certain suspicion. I was always treated with great generosity, but some of my friends have revealed to me that in the beginning they suspected that I was some kind of spy from the United States. Given the political situation and the ideological orientation of my informants, that suspicion is hardly surprising. However, as time passed and I became more and more known to the community, the suspicion diminished. The great turning point came at one of the weekly gatherings when the grand Ayatollāh and prayer leader of the mosque himself, to my own surprise, welcomed me to the community. At that time I was asked to come and sit by the Ayatollāh and to read a Sura from the Koran to the people gathered around him. There were hundreds of people assembled there that night and it was, incomparably, the most nerve-wracking thing I have ever done in my life. My voice literally trembled with agony as I stumbled through the verses constantly excusing myself for the flaws of my Arabic pronunciation. But the Ayatollāh comforted me. He told me my reading was alright, bid me good luck with my studies and asked everyone to pray that I would soon take the step and become a Muslim. It was a heavy ordeal, but it earned me credibility in the community, which would last throughout all my visits.

The position in the community, that I finally earned, still remained rather awkward. It is my experience that my role has been somewhat divided into several different positions. The three most obvious roles that I have played, then, are the role of the researcher, the Christian and the potential Muslim. Whenever I have introduced myself to members of the community, I have tried to emphasise my role as a scholar, presenting myself as a student of the History of religions who is interested in writing a book about the meanings of Shi'ite rituals in everyday life. I have made efforts to give as truthful a presentation as possible of the intentions of my stay. However, no matter how straightforward I have tried to be it is my experience that many of my informants do not always comprehend the reasons for my stay as I have presented them. This is not particularly surprising. The western academic study of religion is certainly different from the Islamic confessional academic tradition which my informants, to a certain extent at least, are familiar with. A consequence of this lack of familiarity is that the purpose of my stay has remained unknown to a majority of the people that I have met in the mosque.

My role as a researcher may have explained the constant scribbling in my notebook or justified the questions I have asked. But it did not, as I had planned, become the most dominant of my roles in the mosque. Instead it was my ascribed identity as a Christian that gained most attention. This had several reasons. To a certain extent, it was due to a change in my personal outlook that a longer stay in Iran seemed to bring about. During my fieldwork, I have noticed that my own inclination to describe myself as a Christian, as well as my readiness to participate in Christian religious activity, was strengthened significantly. I found myself actively searching for Christian communities, regularly taking part in their services, wearing black clothes on Good Friday and keeping a cross by my bedside. My general religiosity has also been strongly revived during the years that I have been working on this study. Although I come from a Christian background, this would probably never have happened if it had not been for the contact with the informants. The reasons for this increase in personal piety are manifold.

To a certain extent, I believe that an increased appraisal of symbols that connect to one's home and background is natural to anyone who stays alone in a foreign environment for a longer period of time. It is part of the emblematic compensation that humans need

to uphold their identity in an environment where it is not otherwise confirmed. However, I also believe that my increased religiosity can be understood as an emotional response to the melancholy I usually experienced during my fieldwork. Although I consider my stay in Iran to have been truly rewarding, they were not usually very happy. Because of my loneliness, the suffering of my informants and the gravity of the subject, my field trips were usually sorrowful and my increased religiosity could be understood as an emotional compensation for this. Moreover, my own Christian revival can be seen as a response to the very thorough religiosity of my informants. I think it is reasonable to argue that my very intense social intercourse with them and my daily contact with their beliefs and religiously organised lives, created a sensation of what could be defined as religious envy within me and, consequently, a desire to compensate for this by emphasising my own religion. This sensation was not least triggered by the very frequent religious discussions that I became involved in with my informants and other people that I encountered in the mosque. It is not an exaggeration to say that almost every new acquaintance that I made during my fieldwork began with a religious discussion about the pros and cons of Islam and Christianity. Sometimes these discussions attracted an unfortunately large amount of listeners who, crowding around me and my new acquaintance, cheered and booed at the arguments of our pseudo-scholarly discussions. These discussions, more than anything, established my role as the Christian in the mosque of my focus.[5] It is also significant that the form of Christianity which I started to practice, revolves around symbols and outer markers such as clothes and crosses. Arguably, this is influenced by the Islamic practices of my informants.

My presence as a non-Muslim in explicitly Muslim activities of the mosque also raised questions about my actual religious belonging and it created an interest among the members of the community. These questions were not always satisfied by the proposed

[5] Although it has not been the choice in this case, intercultural dialogue can be used as a research method. Diana Eck points out that such a method "means taking seriously that there are people on both sides, all sides, of the process of understanding." She proposes it as a beneficial method for the scholar who wishes to clarify the way he or she is situated in relation to the field of the study. Eck 2000: 140.

scholarly legitimisation of my behaviour. Most of my informants, on the contrary, interpreted my presence, in accordance with their belief, as proof of the truth of Islam. They believed that it was God that had guided me, via my academic studies at Uppsala University and my thesis project, to their mosque and the truth of Shi'ite Islam. It is neither possible nor is it the task here to discuss whether this religious interpretation of my informants was true or not. However, it is obvious that it had certain consequences for the way I was approached in the mosque. One consequence was a firm conviction among my informants, at least during the first three stages of fieldwork, that I sooner or later would convert to Islam and become a proper Muslim.[6] Some were very eager to declare this viewpoint and to encourage me to take the step as soon as possible, whereas others were more withdrawn as they respectfully observed the process. Initially, they all shared the belief that I would finally convert. Another consequence was that I somehow became an example of what can be understood as an Islamic convert-ideal. And as such I was frequently ascribed characteristics which I felt I did not have. It is not an exaggeration to say that I was sometimes almost idolised among certain layers of the community. Among these layers I was seen as the foreigner who leaves his land far away to travel the world in search of the truth and eventually finds it in Islam. In my role as a would-be Muslim, I thus became an object of a projection of Islamic propagation and, as such, a proof of the righteousness of the community.

A good illustration of how I sometimes was ascribed characteristics that I did not have is an episode from my second field trip when I was asked to say or ask something in connection with a Koran-session. I expressed my gratitude for being given the opportunity to be there and, trying to express myself poetically, as is the fashion among my informants, said that the reading which I had just heard shone with the "light of the lord" (*nur-e khodā*). I did not intend this expression to be anything else than a metaphor for the sublimity and beauty of the Koran that I truly appreciate. Some of my

[6] Many informants, I believe, would consider me a proper Muslim already. Not because they do not know that I do not consider myself as one, but because they define a Muslim, not by his or her doctrinal confession, but as someone that honours God and is friendly in general.

informants, however, interpreted it differently. One of them associated my expression with a legendary story in which an illiterate, but exceptionally pious, man could distinguish written Koran verses from other Arabic texts by a light that he saw radiating from the letters of the Koran. My informant interpreted my expression as being the proof that I had the same ability and spread this idea to other people in the mosque. When I tried to explain what I had actually meant and deny that I ever had such an ability, my denial was seen as a sign of my humility and interpreted as yet another proof of divine intervention in my life.

Now, this and other similar episodes have different sides. Firstly, not all members of the community approved of this interpretation of my person. Especially some of the informants that I have got to know well would never approve of it. Secondly, it is likely that flattering stories like this, at least to a certain extent, are expressions of the very elaborate Iranian use of compliments. All the same, it is significant that my being in the mosque was sometimes interpreted in a way that incorporated my presence into the predominant Islamic world view, so that my difference verified internal systems of belief instead of, as one could have expected, became a threat to them.

It is also important to point out that in no way did I remain unaffected by events such as the one just presented. During my visits in the community I have always been treated with great generosity and friendliness. It has also been common that my informants have been appreciative and socially affirmative in ways that, for a person of my cultural background, have appeared to be rather spectacular. Thus, for example, on several occasions informants have been so moved by something I have said that they have started to cry. From an Iranian point of view, this might not seem very impressive, but from a Swedish point of view it certainly is. As I have got to know some of the community members better, I have been very moved by the warmth and appreciation they have shown me. Especially in combination with very intense social intercourse and almost complete isolation from people representing the world I normally live in, this appreciation becomes very affecting. On several occasions, especially after periods of concentrated interaction with the members of the community, I have felt inclined to accept their conviction about the actual reasons behind my presence in the mosque. Thus, the informants' view of me as a would-be Muslim, which arguably is

one of the reasons for their affirmative attitude, has at times seemed to turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is impossible to be entirely neutral when talking about the world of culture. We speak from within culture and cannot transcend it. A study like this one is therefore bound to be biased.

One bias that I sometimes tend to have is a Christian one. Although I have tried to remove certain Christian interpretations from my final analysis, it is clear that occasionally I have interpreted the religious feelings and thoughts of my informants in a somewhat Protestant way. For example, in some notes I have described the informant's feelings at the sorrow meetings as experiences of grace. In retrospect it is clear that in this case I project a Christian comprehension and terminology upon the informants. The very choice of subject, moreover, may be influenced by the religious background of my family. I come from a family imbued with traditions of so-called low-church Swedish piety. In the traditions of my parents and grandparents, hence, there are currents of emotion and self-denial, which strongly resemble the religious life of contemporary Shi'ism. It could be argued that my choice of subject, somehow, reflects a desire to approach this personal background from an outsider's perspective.

Another bias that colours my interpretation of the material is my status as an outsider. For me my visits to Iran are associated with the feeling of being away from home. It is connected to memories from earlier visits, isolation from family and friends and a sense of melancholy. Thus what my informants associate with familiarity, closeness to family and normal life, I associate with diametrically opposite things. At worst these differences may lead to an exaggerated emphasis on the sorrowful aspects of the material.

My gender, finally, entails a natural bias. This study is written by a man and focuses exclusively on male religiosity. The gender roles in the community made it impossible for me to include women informants in any way in this study. I deal with this limitation by clearly declaring the limits of my explanations in this regard.

Purpose and Disposition

The overall aim of this study is to discuss the purpose and meaning of ritualisation in the lives and experiences of my informants. The

central question, then, is: what experienced or embodied meanings do the ritualised activities of the chosen group have for these conservative Shi'ite men in Esfahān? I do not claim that I have been able to answer this question completely. As a matter of fact, I hold that it is impossible to do so. Reality is far too complex to be grasped in definitive or comprehensive answers. Instead what I have done is to tackle the question from some different points of view and thereby tried to exemplify how different aspects of life may be ritualised in the context of my informants. To begin with, then, I have endeavoured to portray and describe the most obviously ritualised activities that go on in their community. What rituals, I have asked myself, do these conservative Islamist men engage in? The answers I have found to these questions are discussed in chapter 2. In this chapter, then, the community in focus is introduced ethnographically. Its ritual activity is discussed and its position in the Iranian society as a whole is presented.

In chapters 3 and 4 I go on and approach the ritual life of my informants with focus on how they make use of these ideas and ritual activities for their own personal ends. In this section I want to depict the culturally contextualised and bodily experienced meanings, which my informants find in their religious thoughts and activities. In chapter 3 I discuss the concept of embodiment, and through the cases of 'Ali Bakhtiāri and Mohammad Mahdi, I show how the informants find different methods to ritualise their lives and to be virtuous. In chapter 4 I continue this discussion and focus especially on the rituals of sorrow. Making the case of Amir my foremost example, I show how the rituals of sorrow are used and thought about by the informants and draw conclusions concerning what this says about their individual agency and culture.

Having done this, I go on to discuss the issue of authority in the community of the informants. This community, connected to a mosque, essentially circles around a set of institutionalised rituals and it constitutes the framework of the informants' most central ritual activities. How, I have asked myself, is this community kept together in the midst of the alternative world views that flourish in contemporary Iran? Is it at all held together in the first place? The informants belong to a community, which is defined by its loyalty to the supreme authorities. How do they themselves consider that position? Is it important to them? Are they aware of it? What happens if they change their minds? These questions will be discussed in chapters 5

and 6. These chapters focus on how the canonical values, ideas and modes of conduct, which are shared by the community as a whole, become the thoughts and ways of the individuals. It can be said to be a discussion about the socialisation of the informants into this particular Islamist community. In chapter 5 I discuss the concept of authorisation and propose a way to construe the lectures and lamentations of the mosque as means of such a process. In chapter 6 I shift the focus to the experience of the informants. I present the cases of Mostaʿār and Jamie and let them serve as examples of how the members of the community relate to the authorities. Having done this, I also discuss whether the authority situation in the community can be regarded as stable or not.

In chapter 7 this presentation is followed by a descriptive presentation of the theological content of the lectures and sorrow meetings, which are held in the mosque. In the final chapter, i.e. chapter 8, I summarise my discussions and let them continue in a general theoretical discussion on ritual and meaning.

At the very end of the book, a short summary in Persian is given. These few pages are included as a token of appreciation to those of my informants who do not speak or read English.

As a whole I have made an effort to convey the formulated as well as to verbalise the unformulated meanings of the ritual life of my informants. Theoretically, this becomes a contribution to our understanding of their culture and religion. As such, then, I want the study to pose some questions concerning the discussion whether studies on human culture should emphasise social structure or individual agency when discussing individuals and societies. Are individuals formed by their social and cultural environment or are they agents who independently make the choices that form their lives? When it comes to the cases of my informants, there seems to be a paradox here: at the same time as they are governed by their social and cultural context, they also appear to be able to use the means provided in that very context to actively change their relation to it. In my own Swedish academic context, the theories of post-structural scholarship, to which this study somehow belongs, may serve as a good illustration of the same paradox: theories of social construction, for instance, tell us that our thoughts cannot be independent. Still, other parts of the same theoretical paradigm provide the analytical tools through which we are enabled to deconstruct and thereby, as independent agents, change the context of which we are a part.

When applied to Western scholarship, this line of thought may seem obvious. Indeed, if we do not at least partly agree with it, our scholarly effort would somehow loose its raison d'être. Something which I want to show with this study, however, is that the same train of thought may fruitfully be applied to the chosen conservative Islamist community in Iran.

Examples from the individual informants will reoccur throughout the study, but, for the sake of clarity, I have chosen to present their individual cases also in a more comprehensive form. These presentations are placed in connection to chapters that bring up notions to which the case of the particular informant may be especially relevant. Thus, for instance, the case of Mostaʿār, who expresses strong loyalty to the authorities, is brought up in chapter 6 where such issues are discussed.

History of Religions and Iranian Studies

This study aims to be a contribution to the fields of History of Religions and Iranian studies. Throughout the history of orientalism, Persia has attracted the attention of scholars who, fascinated by the artistic wealth and cultural variety of the region, have written prolifically in books and articles on its history and culture. Similarly, Shiʿism and its dramatic passion plays have aroused the interest of researchers. However, it was not until the Islamic revolution of 1979 that Shiʿism and its dominant role in Iranian society became thoroughly focused on among Western scholars. Suddenly, as the austere face of Imam Khomeyni looked out at the world from every TV-screen, the word Shiʿism became a reality in the minds of Westerners. Simultaneously, there was a significant upswing in Shiʿite studies among scholars of religion and an abundance of articles and books on the topic of political Shiʿism were written. The present study links up with scholarly works in this field which have been produced since the 1970's and it aims at further completing the understanding and knowledge of contemporary Iran.

It is not my ambition to give a thorough bibliographical presentation of the extensive amount of literature that has been written about Iranian Shiʿism since the revolution. Such presentations can be found elsewhere.[7] Suffice it to mention some influential scholars

[7] See, for instance, the bibliographies of Momen 1985 or Richard 1995.

to whom I am indebted and to point out in what way this study completes what they have accomplished.

A majority of the books and articles published on the Islamic revolution and republic deal with the historical and political developments in the region focusing on official authorities and institutions. Hamid Dabashi has written a thoroughgoing presentation on revolutionary authorities[8] and Ervand Abrahamian has contributed with one of the most comprehensive studies on modern Iranian history.[9] With scholars such as Nikki Keddie[10] and Michael Fischer,[11] they have contributed to a very thorough analytical and descriptive scholarly coverage of modern political developments and societal changes in the public life of the Islamic Republic. Interesting here is also the American historian Roy Mottahedeh who's book *The Mantle of the Prophet*, is a vivid account and analysis of Shi'ism and Iranian politics using the life and thoughts of a *mollā* as its point of departure.[12]

Concerning ritual aspects of Shi'ism, as already mentioned, it is mainly the spectacular sorrow rituals of *'Āshurā* that have attracted the attention of scholars. Here Peter Chelkowski's and Jean Calmard's studies of the *Ta'zie*-ritual[13] and Haggay Ram's scrupulous study of the use of the *khotbe* constitute major sources of inspiration for me.[14] The French ethnologist Christian Bromberger is also important to mention in this circumstance. Not least his article *Martyre, deuil et remords* from 1979 is a very interesting semantic analysis of the myth of Hoseyn and the ritual attitudes of Shi'ism.[15]

However, unlike the above mentioned scholars, my ambition is not primarily to discuss the Shi'ism of the Islamic Republic on the

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[8] Dabashi 1993. When it comes to the ideologies and thoughts of influential thinkers, Daniel Brumberg's interesting analysis of Khomeyni's heritage and enduring legacy is also worth mentioning, as is Ashk Dahléns thorough work on the philosophical positions of some influential scholars in contemporary Shi'ite thought. See Brumberg 1997 and Dahlén 2001.

[9] Abrahamian 1982. Concerning a more far-reaching historical perspective, Heinz Halm's contribution to our understanding of the historical development of Shi'ite authority and ideology is worth mentioning. As is Gudmar Aneer's convincing analysis of religious and political continuity in Iran. See Halm 1997, Aneer 1985a and Aneer 1985b.

[10] See, for instance, Keddie 1981, 1986a, 1986b and 1995.

[11] See, for instance, Fischer 1980, 1983, 1987, 1990 and 1993.

[12] Mottahede 1985.

[13] Chelkowski 1979, Calmard 1972, 1974, 1976–1977, 1979, 1983 and 1996.

[14] Ram 1994.

[15] Bromberger 1979.

level of religious authorities or collective public rituals.[16] Instead, as already stated, it is the everyday life experiences of ritual participants on a grass-roots level that has caught my interest. Much of what has been written on this private sphere of Iranian Shi'ism deals with the ritual thoughts and practices of women. Scholars have rightly sought to complete the often male and authority-oriented picture of Iranian Shi'ism by addressing the life experiences of previously overlooked female religiosity. The contributions of scholars like Erika Friedl,[17] Zahra Kamalkhani,[18] Anne Betteridge[19] and Mary Eleine Hegland[20] in this field can hardly be overestimated. Through their works they have both provided vivid life presentations of the inaccessible private sphere of everyday Iranian life, and discussed the meanings and practices of Shi'ite rituals carried out within this sphere. Studies of the same type that deal with male religiosity are, however, more rare. There are, however, a few scholars that need to be mentioned.

The French sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar is definitely one of them. His extensive work provides one of the most thorough sociological presentations of the Iranian revolutionary movement.[21] Arguing that much of what has been written on Iranian Islamism focuses the elite, Khosrokhavar has endeavoured to bring forth the popular aspects of the movement.[22] Hence, he was the first to publish interviews with people from more economically marginalised strata of Iranian society after the revolution, and to discuss the Islamist movement from their point of view. Khosrokhavar has also discussed the role of martyrdom and mourning in the version of Islam that the revolutionary movement brought about, a version that he labels "Shi'isme mortifère".[23] Khosrokhavar understands the Islamist notion of martyrdom to be a modern construction sprung from experiences

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[16] Scholarly work that narrowly focuses on the discourses of the elite only has been criticised by Farhad Khosrokhavar. See, for instance, Khosrokhavar and Vieille 1990.

[17] See, for instance, Friedl 1980, 1989 and 1994.

[18] See, for instance, Kamalkhani 1993, 1998.

[19] See, for instance, Betteridge 1993.

[20] See, for instance, Hooglund 1982 or Hegland 1983 and 1986.

[21] Khosrokhavar 1993b. See also Khosrokhavar 1990, 1993a, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 1999, 2001 and 2002.

[22] See, for instance, Khosrokhavar and Vieille 1990.

[23] Khosrokhavar 1993a.

of denied sovereignty, alienation and frustration and inforced by institutions such as the *basij*.[24] The present study links up with the work of Khosrokhavar in its empirical focus but diverges slightly from it through the emphasis given to the agency of the studied individuals. The *basij* youths presented in this book, hence, are primarily portrayed as independent persons who make use of their Islamist institution to the extent they want.

This emphasis, in its turn, falls back on the work of the American anthropologist Reinhold Loeffler who is another scholar to whom I am indebted. His book *Islam in Practice* is a study on religious ideas among village men in southwestern Iran.[25] Although the rural environment focused by Loeffler is quite different from the urban focus in this study, his book has been a source of inspiration insofar as it clearly shows how Islam is the object of a variety of individual interpretations. One of the main points of Loeffler's book is the notion that religion develops through a dialectic process in which the religious system is constantly filtered through the worldview of the individual. I share Loeffler's view on this point and have tried to attach to it in the present study. Unlike Loeffler, however, I have deemed it necessary to also present the social and ideological environment in connection to which the informants formulate their religiosity. In this book, therefore, the mosque community, and the lectures that my informants attend there, is brought to the fore. Religion, I will argue in this book, takes place in the interface between canonical, self-referential and embodied levels of meaning. It is therefore important that the canonical level, which is represented by theologians and official institutions, is not entirely disregarded.

Important to mention here is also the American anthropologist Gustav Thaiss. His article *Religious Symbolism and Social Change* from 1972 and his doctoral thesis from 1973, were the first anthropological portrayals of modern Iranian Shi'ism which primarily focused upon the religiosity of ordinary people on a near-life level. In his writings, Thaiss analyses the structure and organisation of different religious gatherings with special focus on their role in bringing about social change. His material is gathered from fieldwork in the bazaars of Tehran.[26]

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[24] Khosrokhavar 2002.
[25] Loeffler 1988.
[26] Thaiss 1972 and 1973.

The present study aims to be a part of the scholarly tradition that Gustav Thaiss instigated in the early 1970's. Besides the valuable contributions of the mentioned scholars, accounts of the everyday life of Iranian male religiosity are still hard to find. My ambition with this study, hence, is to contribute to this field of Iranian studies. I want to connect to the works of Khosrokhavar, Loeffler and Thaiss and to their focus on the grass-roots levels of Shi'ism. By presenting ritual life as ordinary religiously active urban men experience it, I hope to join these scholars in their ambition to portray an often-overlooked side of Iranian society.

CHAPTER TWO

SETTING THE SCENE

The present study took place in Iran at the very beginning of the 21st century, when the political stability of the Islamic Republic seemed to be threatened in a previously unseen way; when voices of discontent and protest against the totalitarian Islamist regime began to be heard in public; and when tensions between different layers of the population became more apparent than ever before. In the following chapter, I will present the setting of the informants and their community. I will begin by briefly mentioning the recent political history of Iran and then go on to present the immediate environs of the chosen community.

The Macroscene

In May 1997 Mohammad Khātami won a landslide victory in Iran's presidential elections. With promises of liberalisation and reform the *seyyed*[1] *ʿālem* managed to raise massive support from the country's young voters and women and was elected with about 70 per cent of the votes. In many ways the election of Khātami became the starting point of a more open public discussion on the future of the Islamic Republic. It also led to an intensifying of the conflict between reformists and conservatives[2] in the country. On the political scene

[1] *Seyyed* is an honorary title for the descendants of the prophet Mohammad.

[2] If one ventures to discuss the contemporary political situation in Iran, one has to decide what terms to use for the two sides of the conflict that has dominated domestic politics in the country during the latest years. Scholars and journalists have shown great ingenuity in their effort to do this, which has resulted in an abundance of different designations such as hard-liners and soft-liners, Khomeynists and reformists, liberals and non-liberals or orthodox and liberals. The informants themselves use different words to denote the positions. Most commonly, the words *rāst* (right) or *enqelābi* (revolutionist) denote the own position whereas *chap* (left) or *zedd-e enqelāb* (anti-revolutionist) denote the opponents. Because of the misleading connotations of these and other denotations I have chosen to utilise the terms "conservatives" and "reformist" here. I reckon these to be among the least problematic among the terms used. The term "conservative", however, is not entirely unproblematic. Islamism is

President Khātami and his political allies represented the reformist faction of this conflict whereas the supreme leader Khāmene'i, and his supporters in the parliament, the high court, the councils of guardians and experts and other institutions of authority, represented the conservatives. To a large extent, however, this conflict took place in the public sphere, among people on the streets, in the universities and in media.

The broadcasting media are politically controlled by conservatives in Iran, and the press has therefore played an important role as the public voice of reformist opinion. During the time period covered by this study a vast number of independent reformist papers were closed down by conservative authorities. Journalists and publishers were accused and sentenced for publishing what was labelled anti-Islamic, agitating or insulting articles against the conservative establishment and the Islamic authorities. In July 1999, one month before the first fieldwork of this study was carried out, a new law concerning the press was declared. This new law made individual journalists, instead of publishers, responsible for their texts. The law was seen as a means to further limit journalists' freedom of speech and was one of the igniting sparks, which caused student demonstrations in the summer of 1999. For three days students in several bigger Iranian cities demonstrated for reform and liberalisation. Security forces and independent Islamist groups quenched the riots and a few people were killed. There had been smaller reformist demonstrations before the summer of 1999, but the student manifestation that summer displayed, with previously unseen clarity, the deep cleft within Iranian society. The demonstrations were met by counter-demonstrations supporting the regime a few days later.[3] During the years covered by this study there were many demonstrations for various political camps. There were annual demonstrations commemorating

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a rather modern interpretation of Islam. Especially in its Sunnite versions, it has developed in opposition to the more traditional establishment Islam of the *ʿolamā*. To speak of an Islamist movement as conservative is therefore problematic. Furthermore, it is somewhat awkward to label a group as conservative, which calls itself revolutionary and which endeavours to preserve a political construction as recent as the Islamic Republic. However, for lack of a better term I have chosen to disregard these obstacles and to utilise the term "conservative" for the political position of my informants.

[3] Hjärpe 1999a: 58–60.

the anniversaries of the student riots of 1999,[4] Islamist marches against the mocking of authority,[5] manifestations for and against the commemoration of the Islamic revolution[6] and so on. It is important to remember that, although there have been many demonstrations in favour of the conservative regime, this cannot be taken as a sign of great public support for this political camp. As this study and the development in Iranian politics after 2002 has shown, there are people who sincerely support the conservative Islamist policy, but there is no equality in demonstration rights in Iran. To demonstrate against the regime, therefore, is combined with a significant risk of repression, whereas pro-regime demonstrations are favoured, encouraged and often staged by public authorities.

The pro-reformist demonstrations often led to clashes. Groups of more or less independent revolutionary guards,[7] *hezbollāhis* or *basij* frequently tried to stop demonstrations and other activities, which they found provoking. For example, this took place during the celebration of the Christian new-year among young people in Tehrān in 2000.[8] More or less independent conservatives also tried to obstruct the liberalisation process through other forms of political violence. To mention just a few examples: the reformist minister of culture, Ayatollāh Mohājerāni was assaulted in the fall of 1998; Khātami's controversial vice-president, Abdullāh Nuri, was attacked at the same time; and, the Friday Imam of Esfahān, Ayatollāh Tāheri, was stopped from giving a sermon by people throwing stones in January 1999. During the duration of this study, there were also several political assassinations of reformists and cultural personalities. Dāriush Foruhar, Mohammad Mokhtāri, Mohammad Ja'far Puryande and Javād Sharif are but a few examples of intellectuals who had to pay for their criticism of the conservative regime with their life.[9]

Now, political murder is nothing new in the Islamic Republic. During the period following the election of Khātami, however, the conflict which resulted in these assaults was highlighted in a new way. The conservatives did their best to hinder reformist progress

[4] Hjärpe 2001: 74.
[5] Hjärpe 2000a: 62–65.
[6] Hjärpe 2000c: 83–85.
[7] These are called *pāsdārān* in Persian.
[8] Hjärpe 2000b: 36–38.
[9] Hjärpe 1998b: 62–65.

during this period and, the Iranian system being what it is, they were often successful in their struggle. Newspapers were closed down, publishers were jailed and new restrictive laws were passed. On a symbolic level, however, it was difficult to hinder the changes of attitudes that president Khātami and the reformist movement brought about. In his role as president, Khātami eased Iran's relations with Europe and the United Stated. In September 1998, he declared the Rushdie affair to be a thing of the past. By defusing the polemic style of the Iranian revolutionary rhetoric and instead speaking of a dialogue of civilisations and of Islamic democracy, Khātami became a symbol of hope for reformist Iranians and Western leaders alike. Although he was not able to fulfil his promises of liberalisation on the legislative level, his type of politics initially gained massive support from the population. In the parliament elections of the spring of 2000 the reformist side won a convincing victory, which was confirmed the following year when Khātami was re-elected as president with an incredible 77 per cent of the votes.[10]

On a popular level, as this study will show, the conflict became most apparent in how people behaved in the public sphere. Throughout the duration of this study there was a slow but steady change concerning how daring, especially young people, risked being while walking the streets. Most obvious in this regard was women's use of *hejāb*. Every year, it seemed, it was tolerated that another inch of hair was exposed under the headscarf. Women's clothes, their make-up and attitudes in the public sphere may be the best indicator of the liberalisation of public life. But there were other signs as well. In male youth culture the role of soccer, for instance, should not be underestimated. Iran's success in the Football World Championships of 1998, particularly the 2–1 victory against the United States, caused a flood of nationalist soccer-enthusiasm among Iranian youth. Paradoxically, there was a strong pro-western strain in this enthusiasm. The public euphoria that followed the 2–1 victory against the United States, for instance, became a public display of friendliness to that country and of reformism as Western music was played in public and some women let their head-scarfs fall.[11]

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[10] Hjärpe 2000a: 62–65.

[11] Hjärpe 1998a: 75–77. For further discussions about the role of football as a touchstone for social change, see Bromberger 1998.

As mentioned above, this study covers the period between August 1999 and May 2002. After that, the struggle between reformists and conservatives has continued. Bursts of reformist demonstrations reappear from time to time and the repression of critical publishers continues. In July 2002, the reformist Friday Imam of Esfahān, Ayatollāh Tāheri, resigned from his post in protest against poverty, inequality, unemployment, corruption and the failure of the political system[12] and in the summer of 2003 crowds of reformists demonstrated for weeks on the streets of Tehrān and other cities. The reformist tendencies that seemed so strong in the first five years of this century came to an abrupt ending in 2005 when the highly conservative Mahmud Ahmadinajād was elected president. Nobody knows what the future holds, but it is clear that the period covered by this study was a time when political conflict among the Iranian population surfaced in a more apparent way than ever before in the twenty-year-old history of the Islamic Republic.

Thus Iran is a country which is deeply divided when it comes to politics. In Iran, furthermore, half the population is below twenty years of age, wages are low and inflation and unemployment rates dangerously high.[13] Frustration is growing among the population. Especially young people, born and bred in the Islamist state, find that the Islamic system, which they have been fostered to belong to, does not fulfil its ideals of independence and freedom. Most of the informants of this study belong to this generation of young people. But unlike the vast majority, who channel their frustration through reformist opinions or indifference, my informants, at least for a while, have chosen the opposite way. They are *basij*, anti-reformists, convinced supporters of Khāmene'i and the conservative camp. They demonstrate against liberalisation and reform. They dislike Khātami and are offended by press critical of the regime. I will now go on to present the local religious community to which they belong.

The Microscene

In the following the history, congregation, activities and administration of the chosen Esfahāni mosque will be presented. The city of Esfahān

[12] Hjärpe 2002: 84.
[13] Hjärpe 1999a: 58–60.

was chosen because of its historical importance for Iranian Shi'ism and its significant role as a revolutionary centre during the revolutionary years of 1978 and 1979.

The Mosque

The choice of this particular mosque as the main object of my study was based on several criteria. I was looking for a mosque that was big enough to provide the necessary amount of various data for my analysis. In other words, its level of activity needed to be high and its congregation big but not so large that the character of its worshippers would be anonymous. Furthermore, I wanted the congregation to welcome me to do non-confessional research. These criteria left me with a few Esfahāni mosques to choose from. Among these I chose one that met my criteria and was well known for its conservative profile. The prayers in the mosque are led by an *'ālem* who is known for his conservatism and his support of Khāmene'i. The central location of the mosque is also of, at least symbolic, significance. The mosque is situated in the very middle of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in one of its most central major cities, Esfahān, which was also the capital of the Safavid Empire that made Shi'ism the state religion of the country.

The mosque can be reached through the narrow lanes of one of Esfahān's numerous bazaars. Consequently, the areas surrounding it consist of shops of different sorts; workshops for various kinds of handicraft and private homes. The social status of the area is lower middle class and *bāzāri*. Architecturally, the mosque is built in a classical four-*eyvān* scheme with an open square bordered by four richly decorated walls with central porches.

As a gathering place for revolutionists and conservatives, the mosque played a major role during the time of the Islamic revolution. Then, it functioned as a meeting place for the demonstrating crowds of Esfahān and as a distribution centre for revolutionary propaganda. Hence, it is clear that it has a significant connection to the contemporary history of political Shi'ism in Iran.

The Congregation

As at most mosques of the world, there is no record kept in the mosque of those who come there. Anyone is free to come and the group of people saying their evening prayers vary from day to day.

Consequently, there is not a closely integrated congregation that is focused in this study. There is, however, a substantial group of people who come to the mosque on a very regular basis. Among these, there are several smaller social groupings of people of similar background, age, occupation and religious interests.

People who choose to come to this particular mosque, it seems, do so mainly for two reasons. Either they live or work in the neighbourhood, preferably in the bazaar, or they are supporters or articulate followers of the conservative Ayatollāh who prays there. The visitors may be classified into three main categories. The bazaar group is the first of these. It consists of the group of bazaar merchants and their families who visit the mosque on several occasions every day. They say their prayers in special places and have most of their friends in the mosque. Members of this group are generally people who work or live in the immediate neighbourhood. A vast majority of the female visitors to the mosque belong to this category, as do the workers and voluntary helpers of the congregation. Believers belonging to this group make up the vast majority of the midday prayers. The second category consists of *tollāb* (sing. *tāleb*) who study at some of the nearby Islamic schools and who visit the mosque to say their prayers. The young men who constitute this group, are a prominent part of the congregation at the evening prayers. They are usually young conservatives who have moved to the city in order to study. The third group may be called the weekend group. It consists of believers who come especially to attend the Thursday and Friday programs of the community. These people come from all over Esfahān because of their articulated support for the Ayatollāh or their special esteem of other *ʿolamā*, who have sessions during the weekends. Members of this group are often more educated than the others. University employees and civil servants are not uncommon among them. Because of this, and because of their deliberate support of the Ayatollāh, their status in the mosque is often apparent. Since they have chosen it especially because of its leader, their participation in the activities is considered a political statement to a much larger extent than that of others. Beside these three groups, however, there are representatives of many other strata of the population and professions: university students, construction workers, bankers and house wives are, for example, all found among the everyday visitors.

Because of its unfixed structure, the size of the congregation is impossible to determine. An estimated number of visitors at an

average evening prayer would, however, be several hundred persons. Yet this figure multiplies every time a special celebration or remembrance is held. On Thursday evenings, for example, which are the time of the week when the mosque attracts most visitors, there are usually more than a thousand people gathered. The proportion according to gender of the active members of the congregation is approximately 20 per cent women and 80 per cent men at all times except on occasions especially focused on women.[14] There are usually some children accompanying their parents to the mosque for evening prayers, although their numbers are generally small.

The Informants' Roles

Among those who come to the mosque, the level of involvement in its community is much varied. Some people more or less live under its domes, spending all their free time drinking tea, talking and praying there, while others just go there occasionally. Among the five major informants of this study this variety is reflected. ʿAli and Mostaʿār are the most frequent visitors. They pray all of their noon and evening prayers in the mosque and participate in most of its activities. Since ʿAli's home lacks some basic facilities and is located close to the mosque, he also uses its bathroom and washing amenities daily. Moreover, he comes to all free meals that the mosque community offers. In spite of this he does not, as one would think, belong to the social core of the community. He knows only a few other people in the mosque and never participates in the discussions or the informal social intercourse that usually precede the regular activities. ʿAli himself does not have an answer as to why this is the case and although, to a certain extent, it may depend on his own somewhat introvert personality, the fact that he is an outsider, from my point of view, is also a clear indication of the unofficial social hierarchies that are predominant in the social structures of the community. He belongs to several subgroups that are hierarchically subordinated. To begin with, he is neither *bāzāri* nor *tāleb* and is thus excluded from the two major professional groups. Furthermore, he

[14] Such as the service of remembrance of the martyrdom of Fāteme Zahrā when at times women were about 60 per cent of the participants.

is poorer than most other regular visitors and thus lacks economic status. He is also from the countryside and as such his ways of talking, thinking and behaving differ from the majority of urban Esfahānis. Last, but not at least, ʿAli is a Bakhtiāri and thus ethnically different from the majority in the community. Now, these subgroups that ʿAli represents are interrelated and most of the Bakhtiāris who visit the mosque are in the same situation. They are poorer than the average person and have left their villages to find low-paid jobs in the city. This is also shown by the fact that all cleaners and maintenance personnel that work in the mosque are Bakhtiāris and friends of ʿAli's.

Mostaʿār, on the contrary, represents one of the core groups of the community. Being a *tāleb* he belongs to a big group of young men who regularly gather in the mosque and who know each other from the *howze-ye ʿelmiye*.[15] The *tollāb*-group has an active role in the life of the community. They frequently participate in various activities. They recite prayers, read the Koran and sometimes even preach. Although they are not in uniform, they are easily distinguishable by their strict black and white clothing and the social unity of their group.

Mohammad Mahdi's role in the community is somewhat special. Even though he comes to the mosque only a few times a week, he is well known and respected because of his Koran teaching and his renowned skill of recitation. His close relation to the major Koran teacher of the community has also earned him a special status and he is treated with special respect, even by those belonging to the core group of the community.

Jamie and Amir are rather anonymous visitors in the mosque. They go there with decreasing frequency and make efforts not to draw too much attention to themselves. Jamie, who is a very sociable person, was however an active mosque visitor in the beginning of the study. At that time he came there on a daily basis and had quickly earned a rather prestigious position in the community. This was expressed by the fact that he usually sat by the side of the administration assembly at the prayers. As the years have passed, Jamie has, as will be elaborated later, distanced himself more and

[15] *Howze-ye ʿelmi* is a religious school.

more from the community and during my final fieldwork he did not visit the mosque at all any longer.

Similarly, Amir's participation has decreased during the period of this study. His social background—he comes from a well-educated upper middleclass family—is different from that of the *bāzāri* and the *tollāb* and his involvement in the mosque activities has, even though it once was intense, turned to nothing but passive participation in the emotional rituals, such as *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* meetings. His friends, future and major interests lie elsewhere.

Namāz

The most central of the activities of the mosque is naturally the daily prayers, *namāz*.[16] In Shiʿite tradition, these are said on three occasions of which the first is *namāz-e fajr* (morning prayers), which is said after dawn but before sunrise. There are rarely more than five or six people of those who live very close to the mosque who gather in one of the rear vaults of the mosque to pray in the morning. The morning prayers are led by a neighbourhood *ʿālem* who is highly esteemed by the bazaar workers. The same man also leads the *namāz-e zohr* and *namāz-e ʿasr*,[17] which are performed under the main arch at the very front of the building. These two prayers are performed with a break of fifteen minutes in between and are usually attended by a group of about fifty persons (almost exclusively men). Between the prayers, the neighbourhood *ʿālem* usually gives a short sermon about ethics and the rules of Islam.

The evening prayers, known as *namāz-e maghreb* and *namāz-e ʿashā*, usually gather a far greater amount of believers and are thus the main event in the daily schedule of the mosque. The prominent Ayatollāh reads these prayers and since they are of such great significance for the analysis of the present study it is essential to give some further details about their characteristics. The prayers are commonly performed including a break of about ten minutes. During this break the participants perform *zekr*,[18] pray spiritually beneficial

[16] Because of the Persian, contemporary and every-day focus of this study, the religious terms used by my informants will be used instead of their Arabic equivalents. Thus daily prayers will be referred to as *namāz* instead of *salāt*.

[17] Midday prayers.

[18] Remembrance, repetitive invocation.

extra prayers known as *navāfel-e maghreb* and jointly sing melodious supplications.[19]

An element of Shiʿite piety in general, and Shiʿite prayers in particular, which deserves a special comment, is the *salavāt*.[20] This is an invocation of God's blessing upon Mohammad, used by Muslims of various denominations all over the world. In the Iranian Shiʿite context it is utilised on various occasions. Generally it is said every time the name of the Prophet is mentioned, which means that it also works as an immediate response to the call to prayer, *azān*. *Salavāt*, however, is also used as an invocation of God's blessing upon other prominent people. Thus, in the present mosque, *salavāt* is frequently said for the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollāh Khāmeneʾi, as well as for the Ayatollāh of the community or for any other person who has distinguished him- or herself in the mosque. It is, furthermore, believed by many of the informants of this study that any prayer, which begins and ends with a prayer for the prophet and *Ahl-e beyt* will be answered by God. Thus *salavāt* is frequently said at the beginning and end of all religious activity including personal prayers, *namāz* and recitation of the Koran. The *salavāt* in the Shiʿite Iranian version that is used in the present mosque reads:

> *Allāhum salli ʿalā Mohammad wa āl Mohammad wa ʿajjal farajahu*
>
> God bless Mohammad and the progeny of Mohammad and hasten the redemption.[21]

Even more significant in everyday piety is the frequently repeated prayer rhyme known as *takbir*. The *takbir* referred to by the members

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[19] *Doʿā*s sung at this occasion are so called supererogatory supplications, *doʿā-ye nafl*, such as doʿā-ye mostahabbat or recitations of Sura Naml or the end of Sura Baqare.

[20] *Salavāt* is the plural form of *salāt*, meaning literally prayer.

[21] In this context redemption refers to the return of Imam Mahdi. It is noteworthy that this final phrase, *wa ʿajjal farajahu* (and hasten the redemption), is added to the *salavāt* in the present mosque. Yann Richard has suggested to me that this may indicate that some *Hojjatiye* tendencies have subsisted in the community. The *Hojjatiye* was originally a society established in order to get rid of the Bahāʾi-movement. Members of the *Hojjatiye* were not entirely pleased with the Islamic Republic at the beginning but did not want to directly oppose Khomeyni. By adding phrases such as "*Mahdi biā!*" (Mahdi come!) to their slogans they would stress their impatience for the return of the Mahdi and in a way ridicule Khomeynist slogans such as "*tā enqelāb-e Mahdi Khomeyni-rā negahdār!*" (until the Mahdi's revolution, keep Khomeyni alive).

of the congregation of this and other contemporary Iranian mosques is, however, an amply extended version of the formula usually associated with the term.[22] The rhyme is a mix of traditional Islamic exclamations, revolutionary slogans and more recent statements of political endorsement not least a series of *death to*-shouts cursing the United States, Israel and the United Kingdom.[23] According to some of the people in the mosque, the present version of the rhyme was first used at the time of Khomeyni's last days of illness, and then as a manifestation of popular support for him. Today the words of the rhyme vary from mosque to mosque and from time to time. In most mosques, because of the rhyme's political character, it is unlikely to be utilised in everyday prayer meetings as it is used in the mosque of the present study. In the majority of mosques, "death to America"-shouts and other obvious political slogans are only likely to be heard in connection with explicitly political meetings, such as anniversaries of revolutionary events and some Friday prayers.

The *marg bar* (death to) shout has, however, become classic in Iranian revolutionary discourse. Since before the revolution, it has been the number one mantra of demonstrations, riots and manifestations of political support for whatever side or organisation. The "death to England"-phrase of the present *takbir* was, allegedly, added to the rhyme in connection with the conflict between Iran and Great Britain caused by the Salman Rushdie-affair at the beginning of the 1990's. The phrase then superseded the shout of "Death to the USSR!", which was withdrawn because of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. When asked, both *ʿolamā* and laymen are eager to stress that the "death to . . ."-shouts are only to be understood metaphorically and as applying to the governments and not the peoples of the countries thus being condemned. Some of the community members, however, doubted whether this was really the case with Israel and drew the conclusion that in the case of the Zionist state the shouts probably also concern the population.

Although propagation authorities certainly have made much effort to support and create slogans of this sort, no author in particular can be distinguished as having composed the *takbir*. Rather it is, as

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[22] *Takbir* (from the Arabic root *k-b-r* as in *akbar*) means glorification of God by pronouncing *Allāho akbar* (God is greater).

[23] A transliteration of rhyme and further discussed about it is included in chapter 5.

already mentioned, a medley of different slogans and exclamations. In the case of a particular mosque, there are social, hierarchic and political structures, which regulate what phrases are possible to exclaim. This becomes especially obvious as the words of the rhyme vary in accordance with the political profile of the different mosques using it. Thus reformist congregations in Esfahān may, if they are at all using the rhyme, include a phrase calling upon God to bless Khātami, whereas the rhyme of the present mosque does not mention the president at all but clearly stresses support for the supreme leader.

Other Activities

A major source for the analysis of this study as well as an important aspect of the everyday life in the mosque are the weekly lectures given by the Ayatollāh on Thursday nights and on some other special occasions. These lectures concern matters of ethics, society, politics and theology and, as mentioned above, occasionally gather about a thousand listeners.

Classes for Koran reading are given in the mosque on Friday nights. The classes are open to anyone and regularly attract around fifty active and one hundred passive participants of which approximately 20 per cent are women. The teacher is a distinguished Esfahāni Koran reciter. The grand Ayatollāh usually stays a while to attend the first minutes of the class. Tea and biscuits are served as the teacher's anecdotes elucidating the greatness of the Koran are interspersed with spontaneous reading by the girls, boys and men of the congregation.[24]

The piety of Twelver Shi'ism comprises a rich tradition of various forms of prayer.[25] These can be divided into several categories, which are all represented in the weekly program of the mosque. Recitation of the Koran is one of the most highly esteemed religious services in all forms of Islam, including the Twelver Shi'ism of Iran. To be able to recite the Koran beautifully or to know much or all of it by heart is considered very prestigious for various reasons that

[24] Women, despite their presence, never recite in the class.

[25] For a thorough presentation of these various forms see, Thaiss 1973: 192–212, for a concise presentation see, Thaiss 1972: 352–358.

will not be discussed further here. In the mosque the Koran is often recited before or between other forms of prayer activities. Usually the reciters are especially gifted Koran readers from the congregation, frequently young boys.

Maybe the most characteristic prayer genre of Shiʿite piety is the affectionate rendering of tragic events known as *mosibat* (tragedy). The events spoken about are exclusively sorrowful occasions in the lives of the *Ahl-e beyt*[26] of which Imam Hoseyn's martyrdom at Karbalā, by far, is the most commonly retold. The rendering of mosibat is an advanced proficiency mastered by *ʿolamā* and laymen. The stories, well known to all listeners, must be expressed in a mournful and emotionally arousing manner. Verses of poetry are often mixed with the exposition of the stories and the voice of the speaker is preferably trembling with grief as it both speaks and sings its words of tragedy. The rendering is usually mixed with exclamations of prayer and devotion and on certain occasions also with comments, which refer to the current political or social situation of the listeners. It is common that the people who listen hide their heads in their hands, cry, groan or beat their chests and foreheads as signs of lamentation. Tragedies are retold in religious meetings especially designed for this purpose, the *rowze*, in connection to recitation of other supplications, after sermons or in reading sessions. At the mosque, small-scale performances of the prayer genre can be experienced every night and on a large scale every Thursday night and on special holidays.

Thursday night, or *shab-e jomʿe* (Friday eve) as it is referred to in Persian, is of particular religious importance in the beliefs of Iranian Shiʿites. It is, alongside with Fridays, considered especially beneficial for all sorts of religious activity and is, for example, chosen for many Iranian weddings. Thursday nights are also the time for the recitation of the vastly popular litany *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* (Komeyl's supplication), which is an Arabic prayer, allegedly composed by ʿAli ebn Abi Tāleb on the advice of Khezr.[27] The supplication is a prayer for the

[26] *Ahl-e beyt* (Arabic: *Ahl al-beyt*) "The people of the household" denotes the family members and descendants of the Prophet, in the Twelver context mainly Fāteme and the twelve Imams.

[27] *Khezr* is a prophet, allegedly contemporary to *Musā* (Moses), believed to be kept alive by God until the day of resurrection. *Khezr* is also of some importance in the historiography of many Sufi *tariqe*s.

forgiving of sins and can be found today in a massive Shiʿite collection of supplications called *Mafātih ol-jenān*. Many other important supplications are included in this collection as well. Of these, only two are especially important and frequently recited by the believers focused on in this study: *Doʿā-ye Nodbe* (The supplication of lamentation), which is recited on Friday mornings, and *Doʿā-ye Tavassol* (The supplication of resort), which is recited on Tuesday nights.[28] Both of these are usually extended with rendering of tragedy and, even though the place of their recitation is always announced, neither of them are regularly recited in the mosque itself.

The program on Thursday nights is the one weekly occasion that attracts most people to the mosque. After the evening prayer, which is said in the usual manner as has been described above, there is usually about half an hour of Koran recitation before the lecture—the main attraction of the night—starts. The lecture (*sokhanrān*) is given by the grand Ayatollāh and always ends with the rendering of some tragedy. After this, the whole session is ended with a common prayer for the leaders and authorities of the Islamic Republic and the local community, before most of the worshippers who have attended the session leave the mosque. Those who stay after this gather in the front of the courtyard (*meydān*), the lights are dimmed and the recitation of *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* begins. Who the reciters are, varies from time to time. On special occasions some highly esteemed *ʿālem* may be invited, but usually it is one of the community's young *tollāb*. If the reciter is skilled, the reading and the retelling of *mosibat* often manage to engender a feeling of sorrow and religious bliss. The recitation usually goes on for about an hour.

On special holidays the ordinary program of the mosque is changed.[29] There are several memorial holidays in the Shiʿite calendar and on these occasions the mosque is cleaned and decorated with religious pictures and quotations from the Koran stitched upon specially made cloth. Sometimes the location of the everyday prayer is also moved to a different place in the mosque on these occasions.

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[28] These supplications are included in the famous Shiʿite prayer-collection known as Mafātih ol-jenān. See, Mafātih ol-jenān (no date).

[29] The field trips for this study once coincided with the *ʿāshurā* and once *Shahādat-e Hazrat-e Fāteme Zahrā*. That is the holiday in remembrance of the martyrdom of Fāteme Zahrā.

During bigger holidays, like the months of Moharram and Ramazān, there is a special program in the mosque every night. After the evening prayers then, parts of the congregation stay and listen to sermons and renderings of *mosibat*, which are delivered by some specially invited *ʿolamā*. Sometimes food is also served after the final prayer.

Besides the ritual activities, the mosque runs a small business of cassette and book distribution. There is a small bookshop in the mosque itself that is open on Thursday nights where members of the congregation, as well as more irregular visitors, can buy religious books, cassettes and posters. The books offered for sale are mostly modern Iranian writings on Islam. Distribution of religious cassettes is a veritable industry in Iran. Every neighbourhood has its own cassette shop where recordings of sermons, lectures, prayer recitations and Koran reading can be bought at a cheap price. Since cassettes are sold in accordance with the demand of the customers, only speeches and recitations of famous religious leaders are generally available.

Authorities

The mosque is administered by a group of volunteers referred to as *hey'at-e modire* (assembly of administration). Among other things, this group is responsible for managing the economy, making arrangements with volunteers and employed workers, organising food distribution, inviting external *ʿolamā* and decorating the mosque with placards. They have an office in the mosque that is manned every night during evening prayers. There are also some retired bazaar merchants who help run the community

Regarding the financing of the mosque, the members of the community frequently say that the economic resources have come as a miraculous gift from God. However, there is also a system of voluntary donation from the members of the community. Special boxes for contributions can be found in the mosque. There is also a custom of putting small notes on top of a saintly grave, which is located nearby. *Bāzāri*s are exempt from ordinary taxes in Iran. Instead some of them pay the religious tax of *khoms* to religious institutions and authorities. In Shiʿite law, the *khoms*, meaning "a fifth" of saved extra money, is meant to be spent on the Prophet, his family, orphans, needy and travellers. Half the *khoms* is supposed to be the share of

the Imam. In the absence of an Imam the individuals pay this to their *marjaʿ-e taqlid* instead. These donations also provide financing for part of the activities in the mosque.

The chosen congregation, like all Iranian congregations, is loosely structured and not officially organised in accordance with any pronounced hierarchy. Hence there is no explicit leader or group that controls or regulates the activities of the mosque.[30] Nevertheless, there is an apparent hierarchy based on subtle social structures and the traditional Twelver Shiʿite organisation of society. The foremost authority in all senses is the grand Ayatollāh (hereafter referred to as "the Ayatollāh"). His authority is symbolically attested through the fact that he leads the evening prayer every night[31] and it is also tangibly consolidated through the *khoms* paid to his office by his followers. The popularity of the Ayatollāh is probably due to several reasons. His distinguished scholarly ranking and palpable charisma combined with the simplicity of his life style has earned him a reputation of being a man with great *barakat* (blessing, power of sanctity). By his followers he is, moreover, treated as a man possessing extraordinary powers. Wherever he moves, a group of eager young men will gather around him, kiss his hand, protect him and ask for his blessings. Through the Ayatollāh, the mosque also gains its political profile. Although the mosque, through its bazaar character and central role in the revolution, had a clear conservative reputation before the Ayatollāh came there, his explicit political position has made its conservative profile all the more undeniable.

Unlike the Ayatollāh, the taciturn neighbourhood *ʿālem* who leads the morning and midday prayers obtains his authority from his kinship to a local saint buried adjoining the mosque. His significant role in the activities of the sanctuary is thus an example of belief in inheritable *barakat* and ought to be seen as a more popular form of Shiʿite attribution of authority. Remarkably enough, this form does

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[30] This lack of pronounced authority is elucidated by the inability of the members of the congregation to answer the question whom I should ask whether the fieldwork of the present study was allowed to be carried out in the mosque or not. The answers to that question was usually that "there is no one authority here to ask! You will have to ask everyone or no one at all, for me it is perfectly alright though".

[31] In Shiʿite tradition a Muslim is not supposed to say his or her prayer standing behind someone whose authority she or he does not affirm.

not seem to clash with the official one (that is attributed to the Ayatollāh) in the setting of the present study. The neighbourhood *ʿālem* began studying theology as an adult at one of the numerous *madreses* in the city. His *marjaʿ-e taqlid* was Ayatollāh Khu'i and later Khu'i's successor Ayatollāh Sistāni in Najaf. Before and during his studies he worked in different factories and only after his retirement some years before the period of this study was he able to commit himself to work in the mosque.

Other *ʿolamā* who preach or recite are invited from different places by the mosque administration. When I have asked them they say they work free of charge and that they see their work as an act of religious merit. The *mo'azzen* of the mosque, whose *azān*[32] is heard from the loudspeakers before every prayer, enjoys special respect in the congregation and is also a regular performer of *mosibat.*

While discussing the different positions of authority in an Iranian mosque, it is of great importance to mention the vaguely defined group of people referred to as *basij* (mobilisers).[33] In the Islamic Republic the term refers mainly to members of an organisation called *niru-ye moqāvemat-e basij* (the mobilising force of resistance), which is a military and cultural association of Islamist volunteers headed directly by the supreme leader of the revolution. The organisation was of special importance during the Iran-Iraq war as an administrator of volunteers for the front and it has kept its prestigious role in society as a cultural and semi-military home guard movement. Today the members of the organisation function as helpers in educational and health care campaigns and work as occasional vigilantes of Islamic morality. The *Basij* are believed by the community members to be honourable, pious and loyal to the Islamic revolution and its leaders. They are recruited from mosques, schools and universities and are usually young men between 15 and 25 years of age. To become a *basij* is beneficial in the Islamic Republic. The *basij* organisation has its separate sports grounds and meeting places and its members are favoured by the authorities and constantly praised in media as well as in sermons by religious and political leaders.

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[32] *Azān* means call to prayer.

[33] *Basijidan*, to mobilise, is originally a Persian verb. Significantly, however, some of the informants are unaware of this and claim that the name of their organisation is a loan from the English word *besiege.*

The organisation is, furthermore, intimately connected to the revolutionary army-guard known as *sepāh*, which administrates the distribution of *basij* identity cards and through the *sepāh*, *basij* may be given access to weapons.[34]

Among active, conservative Muslims in the present community, however, the meaning of the term *basij* has shifted so that the word has also become a general term for an actively pious and good Muslim. Thus some of the members in the community answered, if asked, that they were *basij* even if they did not take part in any activities of the organisation with this name. Because of the vague definition of the word and the secluded character of the official organisation, it is very difficult to estimate the number of proper *basij* found in the mosque. The people I have asked have tended to answer vaguely that there are many of them. Specific figures are not available, but a prudent estimation would be that about 20 per cent of the regular male visitors in the mosque are associated with the official *basij* organisation. There are frequent informal *basij* gatherings in the mosque.

Although the levels of authority, as has been mentioned above, are not always officially established, they are easily distinguishable among the members of the congregation. For instance, by observing the clothes and the physical appearance of various authorities one can get a picture of this. The official dress of Shiʿite *ʿolamā*, with its characteristic robe, slippers and turban, is an attire of authority. Laymen *seyyed*s sometimes wear green attire that mark their connection to the family of the prophet whereas *seyyed ʿolamā* always mark their status by wearing a black turban instead of the usual white. Among the lay members of the congregation, religious and political ambition is, furthermore, communicated by the choice of clothes and hairstyles. Young men who see themselves as *basij* are likely to have the stereotypical Iranian conservative Islamist-look. This is characterised by a decent haircut, a well-trimmed beard, a white, tightly buttoned, shirt worn over a pair of dark, clean trousers, a silver ring and a casually held *tasbih* (rosary). Most *basij* in the community are dressed more or less like this. A beard is generally considered to be one of the main signs of piety and cleanly shaved

[34] For further discussion on the *basij*, see khosrokhavar 1995.

men are a very rare sight in the mosque. Among all social layers, furthermore, a darker spot on the forehead, caused by the regular pressing of it against the *mohr* (prayer stone) during *namāz*, is considered prestigious.

Political Tension

The political tensions between conservatives and reformist groups among people as well as in the establishment became more apparent in Iran after the election of President Khātami in May 1997. In everyday life people were constantly reminded of it. The changing habits of young people, such as wearing a less strict Islamic dress or playing pop music on car stereos, were seen as positive signs of liberation for those practising them and as disrespectful provocations by more traditionally minded. On a more official level the closing down of liberal newspapers[35] and student demonstrations in favour of Khātami's reforms were signs of the political tensions.

The mosques of Iran, like many other institutions, are divided according to the political camps. The political profile of a mosque is generally distinguishable through its main leader's line of policy. Thus the varying ideologies of the Ayatollāh at the chosen mosque and the prominent leaders of neighbouring mosques contribute to a clear political tension between the different Islamic authorities of the city. For instance, this tension prevents many believers belonging to the present community, as well as the Ayatollāh himself, from going to the Friday prayers. Ayatollāh Tāheri, who was the Friday Imam of Esfahān during the scope of this study, had a clear reformist profile. This was enough to keep the followers of the mosque's Ayatollāh from saying Friday prayers in a public mosque, as is the usual custom.

Another manifestation of the differences between the different mosques was the use of the *takbir* that has been mentioned above. In the Friday mosque of Masjed-e Emām, where Tāheri gives his sermons, the rhyme was rarely used at all, but if it was used the "death to"-shouts would be omitted and the name "*Khātami delāvar*" (Khātami the brave) would be added to the name of Khāmene'i in request for God's mercy, which was clearly a political statement.

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[35] Such as the liberal Teherani newspaper *Salām* which was closed down in July 1999.

Ayatollāh Tāheri did also explicitly defy the recitation of the more violent *takbir*.[36]

The conflict in contemporary Iran, then, was and is a conflict which penetrates both the society in general and the religious Islamic community in particular. It is important to bear in mind that there is a certain double standard in the informants' and the community's position in this conflict. On the one hand, they are loyal supporters of the supreme leader, who represents the central political power in the country. On the other hand, however, they are socially and economically marginalised. The ideals of the revolution are publicly questioned more and more and in everyday life the views and practices of the informants appear increasingly obsolete. Therefore, the stories of the informants and their community will not only, as one could have expected, be the tale of a group boosted by its own authority. It will also, as the reader will notice, be the story of a community where power is threatened and of a group of economically weak individuals who constantly struggle against the risk of poverty and marginalisation at the fringe of society.

Material

The material upon which the analysis and the conclusions of the present study are based was gathered during four field trips between August 1999 and May 2002.[37] The choice of material is thought to reflect a complex and varied range of experience, which the informants have expressed during this period. Basically there are two categories of data: the official material, which reflects official and canonical understanding in the mosque, for example recorded sermons; and the informant material, which reflects self-referential interpretations and the experiences of the informants, mainly interviews.

The limitations of my material are set by the temporal boundaries of my field trips and, as far as the official material is concerned, also the spatial boundaries of the mosque.[38] Generally, the

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[36] Ayatollāh Tāheri, August 19th, 1999.

[37] The four field trips were carried out on the following occasions: August–September 1999; April–May 2000; May–June 2001 and April–May 2002.

[38] To certain extent, however, I have also been able to acquire recordings of lectures that have been delivered at times when I have not been present. These have been included in the material.

ambition has been to include all recordable activities that took place in the mosque during my stay in the material. For various reasons it has not been possible to live up to this ambition completely, but it has remained my aim throughout the study.

Official Material

The official material can be divided into three main categories. The first is the lectures. Every Thursday night, after the evening prayers, the grand Ayatollāh of the mosque gives a lecture (*sokhanrān*) to the people gathered there. Using examples from Islamic literature, he gives advice concerning matters of family life, religious activity, financial problems et cetera. Usually the lectures end with the rendering of a tragic story. In connection to holidays other *ʿolamā* are sometimes invited to lecture in the mosque. In this study the lectures constitute the main source of the official viewpoint of the community, its theology, ideology and ethics. There are in total 31 lectures in the material.

The second category is the lamentations. With this term I refer to the various forms of sorrow gatherings in the mosque, usually special prayer recitations or so-called *rowze* gatherings. Altogether 46 lamentations are included in the material. 28 of these were held in connection with lectures. The rest are *rowze* or *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* meetings. *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* is an Arabic prayer, which is recited every Thursday night and usually mixed with Persian comments and the telling of tragedies (*mosibat*).

Visual material constitutes the third category of the official material. Photographs of pictures, placards, posters and graffiti found in and around the mosque make up this material. They serve both as an additional source to the official viewpoint of the community. The graffiti is mainly used as one of the few sources of dissident opinions within the neighbourhood and the religious community.

Informant Material

The informant material consists mainly of interviews. I have made both structured interviews, which have been recorded, transcribed and translated, and unstructured interviews, which have been carried out as casual conversations and written down as soon as possible afterwards. Mainly due to the sensitive character of the subject, the latter form has been predominant. In the late stages of the study

it became possible to make structured interviews more frequently, but in the beginning the presence of the tape recorder and the formality of the situation often influenced the conversation and made it become more of a formal discussion on the dogmas of Islam than a personal conversation.

Another source of great importance is my field notebook. Much of what is said about the informants has initially been formulated here. It consists of a chaotic variety of notes about my thoughts, observations, spontaneous ideas, fragments of analysis and daily journal entries that were continuously written down during the fieldworks. The notebook has also been an important tool for keeping track of my own changing attitudes towards the informants and the community and is a primary source of the introspective part of the research process.

The informants were chosen because of their connection to the mosque. When the first fieldwork of this study was carried out, they were all active and zealous members of the mosque community. As the years have passed, however, this has changed but I have chosen to follow them anyway and thus to transgress the spatial boundaries stipulated for the official material of the study. The informants are exclusively men. To get in touch with women participating in the activities of the mosque was impossible due to the gender roles in the religious Iranian society. For complimentary information regarding women, I can only refer to similar studies made by female researchers.[39]

During my visits at the mosque, many people voluntarily contacted me and expressed a willingness to be interviewed. The number of people who approached me in this way constantly increased. From an attitude of friendly abstinence that dominated at the beginning of my stay a confidence and interest gradually took over until an almost joyful willingness to be interviewed and written about in my notebook became predominant.

I estimate that there are about a hundred persons connected to the mosque whom I have met regularly during my fieldwork. Among these there are a few *ʿolamā* and a few dozen bazaar-merchants who make up the core-group of the mosque. Several dozen *tollāb*[40] at

[39] See, for instance: Kamalkhani 1996, Friedl 1989 and Friedl and Afkhami 1994.
[40] Sing. *tāleb*, student at a *madrese*.

nearby religious schools, a handful of people who do not belong to any of these categories, people who come to the mosque to pray but usually live their lives outside the religiously dominated world of the bazaar and the religious schools are also included. The community members are of different ages and backgrounds.

My choice of informants was brought about through the so-called snowball effect, i.e. a gradual extension of my social network within the mosque. Among the extensive group of people, whom I got to know during my first weeks in the community, the five major informants were chosen. These five have been interviewed in greater depth than the others and during my visits to Iran I spent as much time with them as possible. They are also the ones I consider to be my closest friends among the informants. Although I have had the ambition to find persons who represent different groups in the mosque, I primarily chose individuals whom I found it easy to talk to and be with. This method is reflected in the selection of my main informants, who are all approximately of my age and civil status. Four of them are also students, either at university colleges or at religious schools.

There is much to say about the process of finding a place within a community. I have noted that a correct understanding of the social structures within a community can be very helpful in finding the social gatekeepers who, through their status, are socially capable of making an outsider welcome within a community. In the case of this mosque, young men of religious knowledge and prestige were often such gatekeepers. Luckily, such men were also often the ones who sought contact with me and, after being convinced about my good intentions, enabled me to get a reasonably natural place in the everyday life of the mosque.

My experience is that there is no problem to get in touch with people or even to start a serious conversation on religious matters. There is, however, a common procedure through which the establishment of new social contacts takes place. During my fieldwork almost all acquaintances have begun with a conversation in which the informant describes the benefits and beauties of Islam and invites me to become a Muslim. Frequently the acquaintance also ends at this stage, but, if more time is given and friendship is allowed to develop, the notion of propagation usually fades away and gives place to more sincere and personal topics of conversation. Because of its frequency, I have come to see the initial propagation of new acquain-

tances as an inevitable phase, which I will have to go through as I get to know every new informant. To try to get in touch with Westerners is a sensitive and sometimes risky thing to do in the Islamic Republic. It is seen as an expression of interest in western culture and is not approved of by some authorities. If it is done for the sake of propagating Islam, however, it is likely to be seen as less controversial. For this reason, the informants' inclination to initiate conversation through Islamic propagation could also be understood as one of the few safe ways for them to approach foreigners and thus possibly also as an expression of their political anxiety.

CHAPTER THREE

EMBODYING VIRTUE

Virtue is to avoid what my carnal soul desires
ʿAli 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, ʿAli 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, ʻAli 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

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[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 terminology[14] 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 thinking[17] 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]

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[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 strategies[19] 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

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[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 ʻAli 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 jurisprudents 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 ʿAli Bakhtiāri

Among the informants, ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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.

ʿAli 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 ʿAli comes from a family of shepherds and farmers. He remembers his childhood as a time of great hardship. Being the oldest of eight children ʿAli 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.

ʿAli 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, ʿAli 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, ʿAli 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. ʿAli 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 ʿAli became acquainted with the Islamic life style that has characterised his life so thoroughly. With solemnity ʿAli 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] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.
[44] ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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, ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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",

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[45] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.
[46] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[47] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[48] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.

ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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, ʿAli 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. ʿAli 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, ʿAli 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", ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[50] ʿAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[51] ʿAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[52] ʿAli 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 ʻAli'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 ʻAli denotes in his definition of Islam as "going to the horizons".

ʻAli 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, ʻAli 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 ʻAli 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

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[53] ʻAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[54] ʻAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[55] ʻAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[56] ʻAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[57] The grand Ayatollāh has written a book on the subject. ʻAli Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001.
[58] See mainly chapter 7.
[59] ʻAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.

a great deal about it. On one occasion, I asked ʻAli 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 acts[60] and, most important, control our eyes. What is desired by our carnal soul[61] must be avoided.
>
> *What do you mean by controlling our eyes?*
>
> What my carnal soul[62] 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 Shiʻite tradition,

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[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] ʻAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

[65] Aryanpur-Kashani 1995.

and hence in the eyes of the informants,[66] three[67] 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 ʿAli 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-Ghazzāli 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 Ghazzālian 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 ʿAli 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:

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

[67] There are six levels of *nafs* in the Shiʿite 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-Nāziʾāt (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, ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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, ʿAli 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. ʿAli 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 jealousy[75] and made him a more altruistic person.[76] In ʿAli Bakhtiāri's understanding there are many sins. Backbiting, thievery and betrayal are often mentioned as examples.[77] Prayer, ʿAli 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

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[73] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[74] See, for instance, ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[75] ʿAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[76] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[77] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001 and May 11th, 2001.

one's eyes. To look at non-family members of the opposite sex (*nāmahram*), ʿAli 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 ʿAli's and the other's views on relationships with the opposite sex later in this chapter.

ʿAli 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 ʿAli, 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. ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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. ʿAli'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] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001.
[79] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[80] ʿAli 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 Mostaʿār in his *madrese* or with ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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 ʿAli Bakhtiāri's is. Considering the former's profession this may seem a bit surprising. But unlike ʿAli, 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]

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[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 ʿAli Bakhtiāri's. But where ʿAli 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

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[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-balāghe 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 Fāteme Maʿsume 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 Shiʿite 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.

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[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 ʻAli. However, he does share this problem with Mostaʻār 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 Mostaʻār got engaged and married during the last years covered by the study. ʻAli 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] ʿAli 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 its 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 ʿAli 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] ʿAli 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. ʿAli Bakhtiāri's answer is representative. "The perfect woman", he tells me,

> must take care of her *hejāb* and be virtuous. She has to prevent *nāmahram* 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]

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[93] See, for instance, ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 21st, 2001.
[94] ʿAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[95] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[96] ʿAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[97] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

It is characteristic that ʿAli 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. ʿAli 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]

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[98] See, for instance: Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002; ʿAli 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; ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[103] ʿAli 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] ʿAli and Mostaʿār 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", Mostaʿār 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, ʿAli, 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

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[104] See, for instance: Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002; Amir, April 30th, 2002; Mostaʿār, April 24th, 2002.
[105] Amir, April 30th, 2002.
[106] Mostaʿār, 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 leaders[109] 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 intuition[112] and various miracles[113] 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] ʿAli 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

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[110] ʿAli 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] ʿAli 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.

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[116] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.
[117] See, for instance, Amir, April 22nd, 2002, and Mostaʿār, 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 ʿAli Bakhtiāri, Mostaʿār 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] ʿAli Bakhtiāri tells me when I ask him about it. Mostaʿār 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-street[121] 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

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[118] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[119] Mostaʿār, April 23rd, 2002.
[120] Mostaʿār, 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-

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[123] Mostaʿār, 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

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[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] Mostaʿār, 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, Mostaʿār 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]

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[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] Mostaʿār, 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] ʿAli 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 (*tushe*) yet, that I haven't gathered anything for the next world.[140]

There are certain rituals in Shiʿite 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 three[142] 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

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[138] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.
[139] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.
[140] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[141] See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, May 24th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.
[142] In Shiʿite 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 ʿAli 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", ʿAli 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", ʿAli concludes, "the world

[143] Amir, August 26th, 1999.
[144] ʿAli Bakhtiāri's text, 2001.
[145] ʿAli 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 ʿAli 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-

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[146] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.
[147] ʿAli 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, 'Ali 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 *tasbih*

[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. Mostaʿār 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.

Vozu 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 Jaʿfari school of law, a man who has correctly performed the *vozu* 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 *vozu* 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

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[149] Mohammad Mahdi, April 29th, 2002.
[150] Bakhtiar 1996: 20–22.
[151] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.
[152] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.
[153] ʿAli 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 continuos 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. ʿAli 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 Shiʿite Islam. His answer relates to what has been said above about always keeping an Islamic awareness: "[The most important thing] in Shiʿism", he told me, "is to be careful that you hear the voice of God for sure. Never quieten this voice! ʿAli says that the worst torture after resurrection comes when God rejects his servants."[159]

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[154] Mostaʿār, April 24th, 2002.
[155] Amir, April 30th, 2002.
[156] Amir, April 30th, 2002.
[157] ʿAli 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 ʻAli 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 ʻAli 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 ʻAli 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 ʻAli 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

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[160] Amir, April 22nd, 2002.

[161] ʻAli Bakhtiāri, April 24th, 2000.

[162] ʻAli Bakhtiāri, for instance, states that "if the soul is dirty, the body also gets sick". ʻAli 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.

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[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-Ghazzāli, 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.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE POETICS OF EMOTION

> When I cry for the *Ahl-e beyt* it is as if two wings grow out of my back and I fly away. I get so happy.
>
> *Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002*

Dysphoria is certainly a predominant feature of Iranian culture. Shedding tears or expressing grief is not merely an individual demonstration of sadness or discomfort but also, arguably, the manifestation of a culturally inherent attitude towards human life and experience. It is always risky to talk about cultural features in general terms. But, although the exceptions to what is described here as Iranian are certainly manifold and varied, it is nevertheless clear that Persian poets and other contributors to culture have nourished the idea of dysphoria as a key quality of what it is to be human. Hence, a person who recognizes suffering as an essential aspect of life and who is capable of experiencing and expressing feelings of misery, sorrow and longing is considered, not primarily a depressed person in need of therapy or medical treatment, but someone who is profoundly wise.[1] Whether this emphasis is historically is a heritage from pre-Islamic Persian beliefs,[2] a loan from Christian tradition,[3] or an invention by Persian mystical poets,[4] it is clear that sorrow constitutes the central emotion of the contemporary Shi'ite rituals which the informants of this study so eagerly participate in. The following discussion aims to present and analyse the meaning of sorrow and sorrow-rituals in their lives.

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[1] For further discussion on this topic, see, for instance, Good and Good 1988: 46.

[2] Yarshater 1979: 90.

[3] Aneer 1996: 170–71.

[4] Within Sufism, there is a tradition of weeping. Early ascetic Islamic mystics where sometimes even known as 'those who always weep'. For further discussions on this matter see, for instance, Geels 1999: 244. For further discussions on the influence of Persian mystical poetry, see, for instance, Aneer 1996: 171.

In chapter 3 I showed that in their everyday lives the informants have developed different methods to keep themselves on the path of virtue that is encouraged by Islam and preached in the mosque. From my analytical point of view, these methods are understood as examples of how the informants' culture is formed through a process of embodiment. By this I mean that their cultural expressions both cause and are caused by bodily experience and that the body can be approached not only as an object but also as an agent in the construction of their culture. The informants' methods show how Islamic teachings impact their physical expressions, that is, how ideals are experienced in their bodies as feelings, movements, desires, physical restrictions and so on. The process through which this happens is partly controlled by the informants themselves. I will now direct attention to the human phenomenon that may be the most striking example of the connection between shared cultural ideas and individual body, namely that of emotion.[5]

Emotions—such as grief, anguish or joy—are often culturally defined in so far as they are triggered by reasons specific to culture and reacted upon by culturally defined modes of conduct. Yet, individuals experience them in the body and they cause the body to change: to shed tears, to writhe in pain, to laugh and so on. The religious practice of the informants is, as I have shown, very emotional in character. In this chapter I will discuss this emotional religiosity and its meaning in the lives and experiences of the informants. I will show how they themselves discuss the sorrow rituals and propose some ideas for how they can be construed. The chapter begins with some remarks on the development of the theory of emotion in order to give a scholarly background to my own position and analysis. A presentation of the informants' attitudes towards emotion and their ritual practice in this regard follows. Special attention is then given to the case of Amir, who has not been thoroughly presented before.

Emotion and Ritual—Some Theoretical Remarks

A human being, it has been said, is a crying animal.[6] The ability to shed tears has often been seen as a sign of humanity's uniqueness

[5] Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 48.

[6] Ebersole mentions a few examples of where this is claimed. See, for instance, Frey and Langseth 1985: 4; Gilhus 1997: 2 or Ebersole 2000: 211.

in relation to the animal world. But although this notion of weeping has persisted remarkably well in our perception of ourselves, shedding tears has received little attention from historians of religion and other scholars of the humanities until the latest decades.[7] Since the late 1970's, however, an interest in the emotional aspects of human experience has arisen within the fields of anthropology,[8] psychology,[9] sociology,[10] philosophy,[11] history,[12] and gender studies.[13]

The reasons for this interest are manifold. To begin with, poststructuralist thought has brought about an interest to describe and analyse human experience from the perspective of those who live it,[14] and in doing so it has become impossible to regard emotional experience as an unimportant side effect. Instead, emotions are being approached as phenomena which are crucial for our understanding of humankind. Moreover, the wave of studies on emotion can be seen as a reaction against a materialist view of emotion that previously was (and to a certain extent still is) prevalent not only in the natural sciences but also in the social sciences. According to such a materialist view, emotions are material things caused by neurochemical and hormonal processes.[15] Individuals and societies have to *cope* with them whether they want it or not.[16] The new interest in emotion is a reaction against such a mechanical understanding of human experiences and feelings.[17]

The recent interest in emotion is related to the development of embodiment theory, which was presented in the previous chapter. Similar to the development of theories on the body, the theory of emotion has appeared as a response to a previously prevalent lack of concern for that which humans experience in themselves. To be human, these theorists argue, is to be a physical and emotional entity, and theories that concern human life need to integrate these essential

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[7] Ebersole 2000: 211–12.

[8] See, for instance, Bloch 1975; Evans-Pritchard 1965; Obeyesekere 1981; Radcliffe-Brown 1933; Rosaldo 1980, Tambiah 1985 or Turner 1969.

[9] See, for instance, Averill 1982; Izard 1977 and Mandler 1984.

[10] See, for instance, Hochschild 1983 and Kemper 1978.

[11] See, for instance, Rorty 1980 and Solomon 1976.

[12] See, for instance, Stone 1977.

[13] See, for instance, Smith-Rosenberg 1975 and Lutz and White 1986: 405.

[14] Lutz and White 1986: 405.

[15] See, for instance, Ekman 1980a and Lindholm 1982.

[16] Lutz and White 1986: 407.

[17] Lutz and White 1986: 405.

aspects of human experience. The connection between body and emotion should not, as has been the case before, be ignored or treated only as a metaphorical connection.[18]

Obviously, there is no single perception of emotion in theories presented in the latest decades. Among scholars who have dealt with the issue one can discern a great variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to the matter. There are strains of materialism, idealism, positivism, interpretivism, romanticism and rationalism,[19] which all contribute to the rich and vivid character of emotional theory as it has developed in recent decades. It is not necessary to go through all the theoretical divergences and disputes that these different approaches have brought about in this study. However, I will touch upon some aspects which I find crucial to my own position in this theoretical debate.

Universal or Cultural?

The first question, then, is whether the emotions which humans experience should be approached as universal and unchangeable phenomena which are independent of culture, or as experiences which are socially constructed and thus bound to the specific cultural environment of the individual. Following in the footsteps of Charles Darwin,[20] ethologists and evolutionary theorists have placed themselves in the farthest universalist position in this discussion. Scholars of these fields have argued that emotion is a biological system that is shaped through evolution. It is a chemical system which deposits patterns for distinct emotions that are shared by all human beings and is, therefore, only superficially culturally defined.[21]

Although biologists may be the most enthusiastic endorsers of the universalist position, it is necessary to mention that the idea of some sort of unity in the human psyche regarding emotion can also be found in psychiatric and psychodynamic studies[22] as well as in anthropological studies dealing with culture and personality.[23] Although

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[18] See, for instance, Strathern 1975 and Lutz and White 1986: 407.
[19] Lutz and White 1986: 406–409.
[20] Darwin 1872.
[21] See, for instance, Bowlby 1969, Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1980b and Ekman 1980.
[22] See, for instance, Boucher and Brandt 1981.
[23] Lutz and White 1986: 412.

scholars of these fields may base their claims on suppositions that are different both from each other and from those of the biologists, to some extent they all share the assumption that there is a unanimity in human emotional experience, that this is psycho-biologically defined and that this is something which humans have to cope with regardless of culture.

Social constructionists, on the contrary, have questioned the understanding of emotions as universal and psychobiological phenomena which humans have to cope with. Instead they have begun seeing these as culturally constituted experiences, which are specific to situation and to the social reality of the individual.[24] "Not only ideas", says Clifford Geertz, "but emotions too, are cultural artefacts".[25] Norbert Elias agrees, as he (unlike, for instance, Michel Foucault) argues that emotion plays an important part in the socialisation process of the individual. He claims that especially feelings of shame function as an indicator of the individual's conformity with social standards.[26]

Some influential ritual theorists hold a position between the universalist and constructionist approach in this debate.[27] Radcliffe-Brown and Turner,[28] for example, are scholars who have concluded, in their studies of ritual activity, that universally shared human emotions to a certain extent can explain the forms and processes of rituals.[29] They and others have argued that a function of ritual is to allow expression of emotions under culturally controlled circumstances.[30] The understanding of emotion which such a conclusion entails is that there is a universally shared underlying layer of emotion in humans, but that this is expressed and experienced in ways which are formed and filtered by culture. It is therefore necessary to speak of two emotional strata: one which is universal, psycho-biological and independent of culture, and another which is socially defined. An effect of such a distinction is that studies often become focused on the discrepancies between the emotional life of the individual and the demands of culture.

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[24] Jenkins and Valiente 1994: 163 and Lutz 1988.
[25] Geertz 1973: 81.
[26] Elias 1978: 138.
[27] Lutz and White 1986: 413.
[28] See, for instance, Radcliffe-Brown 1933 and Turner 1967.
[29] Lutz and White 1986: 413.
[30] See, for instance, Scheff 1977 or Kracke 1981.

In this study, I want to position myself in an in-between position in this matter. Like Radcliffe-Brown and Turner, I consider it reasonable to assume that humans have an emotional disposition which is independent of culture. How we experience, react to and deal with this disposition, however, is influenced by culture. Our analysis of emotion, therefore, by necessity has to be approached not only as a universal phenomenon but also as something which is culturally contextualised. The possible existence of a biologically defined emotional disposition, therefore, does not make much difference for our analysis.

Quest for Meaning?

Let me now continue by briefly remarking on another important aspect within the study of emotion, namely the question of the emotional meaning. It is important to ask whether it is meaningful to pay heed to the content of the emotional experience of the individual and to look for the cultural meaning of such experience in a scholarly analysis of emotion. It is my opinion that it is both relevant and necessary to study the emotional experience of individuals if one wants to understand the impact of emotion in culture. From certain points of view and for certain analyses, however, it is surely reasonable to disregard the individuals' experience of their emotions. Studies that concern the universal underlying layer of emotion, for instance, have no need for analyses of meaning since they are not concerned with the experience of the subject. Even if they are based on an assumption that there is no substantial meaning at all, psychological or biological studies of emotion do not necessarily have to contradict studies that deal with experienced meaning since the aim of such studies is to investigate something different.

Historically speaking scholarly emphasis on the relevance of emotional experience has developed as a reaction to the view that emotion is irrational and that the emotional experiences of individuals are irrelevant. Other scholars of emotion have argued that such views fall back on a dichotomisation of reason and emotion that is simplified and faulty.[31] Emotion, it has been claimed, is not only uncontrolled outbursts of affect, but also something which to a certain degree is

[31] Lutz and White 1986: 417.

consciously formed by humans in society. For this reason, it may be considered rational under the given circumstances of a specific culture and loaded with cultural meaning.

This view of emotion, which I adhere to, is intimately connected to a certain comprehension of culture and self, namely that the individual has partly a culturally defined understanding of reality[32] and that emotional experience is a significant part of this. In the previous chapter, I have discussed how this understanding develops through a process of embodiment. I have already pointed out that the existence of emotions, which both emerge from and take place within the body, is clear evidence of the link between the body and the social world, which the concept of embodiment intends to pinpoint.

However, besides being an illustration of embodiment emotions are a means of expression. Through emotion an individual expresses experience, intention, judgment and relation to his or her social world.[33] It is one of the many ways by which an individual makes him- or herself known to others and to him- or herself. In other words, emotion is a language of the self. To analyse emotion, then, is a way to know culture.

When we try to understand the emotional experience of individuals it is necessary to study the cultural poetics[34] of emotion in the society where the emotions are felt and expressed. By the concept *poetics of emotion* I want to denote the implicit rules of emotional conduct and expression, which are found in the given community. What are the aesthetics and values of affective display? What kind of emotional behaviour is encouraged or is taboo? How is emotion associated to religion and politics?[35] If we try to find answers to questions such as these, we may be able to comprehend what emotion is to those who live it. With this approach a study of emotion[36] is not a search for the underlying layer of universal emotion, nor is it an analysis of its function or an endeavour to deconstruct its meaning. The study of emotion, as I want to pursue it, is a venture to interpret

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[32] Some examples of studies that discuss this are Heelas and Lock 1981; Lee 1982; Shweder 1985; and Levy 1978.

[33] For a further discussion, see Levy 1978.

[34] I have borrowed the term *cultural poetics* from Gary Ebersole. Ebersole 2000: 213.

[35] Ebersole 2000: 213; Hochschild 1979 and Hochschild 1983.

[36] Shweder 1985; Spiro 1984; and Crapanzano 1980.

meaning in emotion as it is experienced by the culturally situated individuals who feel them.[37]

Ritual Function or Meaning?

As I have already mentioned, special attention has been directed to emotion within the scholarly field of ritual studies. Within this field, the discussion about meaning has become especially important since emphasis on meaning, in a way, has become a counterbalance to a previously predominant emphasis on function. The crucial discussion concerns whether ritual should be understood as a type of conventional behaviour with certain functions within a community or whether it should be approached as an act of communication, which expresses meaning. Scholars like Clifford Geertz, Edmond Leach and Stanley Tambiah have been important advocates of the latter approach and have proposed that the role of the scholar is to decipher and interpret cultural meaning in ritual rather than to find underlying functions.

Concerning the functionalist comprehension of ritual conduct, however, scholars have provided different answers as to what the central function of such behaviour may be. This is not the place to explore these theories in depth. However, I will briefly mention some analyses that have been presented in order to explain the function of sorrow rituals. One classic understanding in this field is that the function of such rituals is to channel anti-social qualities within a community. Radcliffe-Brown, for instance, presents this analysis and argues that sorrow rituals provide emotional relief for practitioners allowing them to express otherwise forbidden feelings.[38] Victor Turner follows the same line of argument. He refers to depth psychology and proposes that the societal order in which religious performances take place is legitimated and vitalised with the energy of previously forbidden, powerful and repressed emotions when these are channelled in rituals.[39]

Another answer to the question of ritual function is social protest. Through ritual weeping, according to this understanding, disadvantaged groups have been able to express their dissatisfaction and

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[37] Lutz and White 1986: 412.
[38] Radcliffe-Brown 1933: 240–41.
[39] Turner 1969: 52–53 and Scheff 1977.

thereby strengthened their identity towards other groups. Not least Shi'ite Moharram processions and other sorrow rituals have been analysed in this way,[40] but also women's ritualised weeping in different cultures have been interpreted as a way of expressing social protest against discrimination,[41] or as a way to buy status in patriarchal societies.[42]

Although I find these and other functionalist ideas elucidating, in this study I do not intend to discuss ritual function in the way they propose. Instead, my ambition, as I have previously stated, is to search for the cultural meanings of the rituals performed by my informants. In making that choice, I also position myself in another discussion among ritual theorists and discuss whether ritualised sorrow has to do with *true* emotion or not.

True or False Tears?

A classic understanding among scholars of religion has been that ritualised sorrow among so-called primitives lack real emotion. James Frazer, who commented very briefly on the matter[43] considered ritual weeping a simple formality that had nothing to do with true sorrow or grief.[44] Emile Durkheim drew similar conclusions concerning the ritual weeping of Australian aboriginals whom he studied about. "If the relations weep, lament, mutilate themselves", Durkheim concluded, "it is not because they feel themselves personally affected by the death of their kinsman . . . it is a duty imposed by the group".[45] Although Durkheim acknowledged the existence of an individual ontology of emotion besides the social one,[46] he was entirely uninterested in individual persons and narratives since these did not contribute to his sociological understanding of human society.[47] A similar view is expressed by Radcliffe-Brown in his famous work on the Andaman islanders[48] as well as by Stanley Tambiah who holds that

[40] See, for instance, Schubel 1993.
[41] See Egnor 1986: 297.
[42] See, for instance, Auerbach 1987: 28.
[43] Ebersole 2000: 212.
[44] Frazer 1923: 238.
[45] Durkheim 1965: 442–443.
[46] Durkheim 1965.
[47] Ebersole 2000: 235.
[48] Radcliffe-Brown 1933: 239–40.

ritual as conventionalised behaviour is not intended to express emotion in a spontaneous or natural manner since that would threaten the order which he sees as a central aspect of ritual.[49] Tambiah argues that unlike ordinary acts, which express attitudes and feelings directly the stereotyped behaviour of ritual expresses attitudes and feelings which are congenial to an ongoing institutionalised intercourse.[50] Therefore it should not be understood as a "free expression of emotions, but a disciplined rehearsal of 'right attitudes'".[51]

The distinction which the above-mentioned scholars make between *true* and *false* emotions definitely clarifies some important points regarding ritual behaviour. There are, however, some problems that arise from such a distinction. To begin with, it has been pointed out that the very distinction between real and false tears is western and by no means universal.[52] Gary Ebersole, among others, has argued that the very idea that tears need to be spontaneous in order to be true or valid is a result of enlightenment universalism and bourgeois individualism and that it is faulty to apply it to other cultures.[53] Moreover, the above-mentioned scholars can be criticized for not paying enough attention to individual variations within the framework of conventional rituals of sorrow. Durkheim and others have been criticized for having a stereotypic understanding of "primitive" peoples in this regard.[54] For instance they treat all Australian aboriginals as a homogeneous group.[55] This is not only ignorant but also analytically faulty. It has rightly been argued that individuals can manipulate and take advantage of the social expectations for their own intents and purposes. Shedding tears, for instance, can be an act of individual communication, a sign of a moral relationship, an expression of sympathy and so forth, even if it is carried out within the framework of institutionalised religion. The lack of interest in individual variations and narratives has caused scholars to disregard such aspects and to overlook them.

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[49] Tambiah 1985: 132.
[50] Mahmood 2001a: 833, Tambiah 1985: 132.
[51] Tambiah 1985: 134.
[52] Ebersole 2000: 213.
[53] Ebersole 2000: 214.
[54] See, for instance, Ebersole 2000: 236.
[55] Durkheim thought, for instance, that all mourning rituals were the same in Australia. Durkheim 1965: 437–38.

My Position

I have touched upon some issues which I find relevant for the following discussion on emotion and ritual. With regard to the question of universality I join the in-between position which does not deny the existence of an underlying layer of emotion common to all humans but which emphasises the importance of the societal context in the shaping of individual experience and expression of this layer. Emotion as we know it is a product and expression of culture.

The notion that emotional experience can be studied in order to learn about culture follows from this viewpoint. Culture, as I define it, is essentially systems of meaning and emotional experience is one mode of communication through which cultural meaning can be conveyed to the self and to others. For this reason I have chosen to focus my study on the cultural meaning of emotional experience rather than on its possible hidden functions.

In my approach to the above-discussed genuineness of sorrow rituals, I follow the American anthropologist Saba Mahmood. Similarly to Ebersole, she has criticised the distinction between true and false emotion. Based on experiences from field work in an Egyptian mosque she argues that the border between what one feels and what one is expected to feel is vague.[56] She points out that both Tambiah's notion that ritual is not an expression of true emotion[57] and Turner's idea that it functions as a means of emotional relief are simplified. She bases her arguments on the conscious discussions on the matter which take place among the ritual participants themselves. The group she has studied consciously choose to take part in rituals in order to shape their character or have an outlet for their emotions. At the same time, however, Mahmood points out that there is an understanding within the group that rituals should not be used as a means of emotional discharge.[58] In fact, if tears are shed for other reasons than the religious ones defined by the authorities, the ritual is rendered invalid (*bātel*) according to Islamic law.[59] For this reason both

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[56] Mahmood 2001a: 844–5.

[57] See Tambiah 1985. Similar understandings have been put forth by others. See, for instance, Bloch 1975.

[58] Mahmood 2001a: 833.

[59] Mahmood 2001a: 843. For further discussions on this issue, see Bowen 1997: 157–181.

the perspectives of Tambiah or Turner fail to describe the ritual experience of these particular women.

Methodologically Mahmood has shown how paying attention to an insider comprehensions of ritual activity can contribute to our understanding of how it works. If one intends to understand cultural meaning it is important to investigate how culturally situated individuals experience emotion. This has to be done with consideration for the assumption that the relation between conventional behaviour and individual emotion is not fixed,[60] but rather something that fluctuates in individuals and in time. In the following discussion I intend to use the approach defined by Mahmood and, therefore, the first thing I need to do is to present the informants' comprehension of the sorrow rituals in which they take part. By doing this, I hope to elucidate some aspect of cultural meaning which my informants appreciate in their emotional experience, namely the aspects which they have been able to verbalise and communicate to me in our conversations—their emotional poetics.

The Bliss of Sorrow

Although there may be many individual exceptions, it is true that Iranian culture has nourished the idea that the emotional state of sadness is an expression of personal depth (*ʿomq*).[61] With Hoseyn's suffering at Karbalā as the foremost example,[62] the ideal personality is characterised by sensibility to the tragic aspects of life,[63] receptivity for the existential uncertainty that is part of being human,[64] and internal calm (*safā-ye bāten*) in facing the harshness of this world.[65]

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[60] In this I am inspired by Gary Ebersole and Saba Mahmood. See Ebersole 2000: 214, and Mahmood 2001a: 844.

[61] Good and Good 1988: 52.

[62] For a thorough semantic and narrative analysis of this myth, see Bromberger 1979.

[63] Some have argued that this focus on sorrow is a result of the cultural duality in Persian tradition in which that which is internal, private and pure is seen as opposed and hierarchically superior to that which is external, public and conventional. It is the core that houses true feelings and constitutes the true personality. See, for instance, Bateson *et al.* 1977; Beeman 1982 or Good, Good and Moradi 1985.

[64] Good and Good 1988: 52.

[65] Bateson *et al.* 1977.

It has been argued that the humorous complements to this focus on sorrow in Iranian culture were suppressed by the Islamic revolution.[66] The cultural climate in post-revolutionary Iran, it has been argued, is exceedingly sorrow-oriented in comparison to other periods of Iranian history.

It is necessary to keep this cultural heritage in mind while trying to understand the attitudes towards emotion which are held by the informants, for they too are parts of Persian culture and keepers of its heritage. For instance, they all read and enjoy classical Persian poetry. It has not been uncommon in our discussions that my questions have been answered with quotations from the works of Saʿdi, Hāfez or Rumi[67] and some of them also write their own poetry using the metaphoric language of Persian mystical lyrics. In these poems, as well as in their ordinary speech, the informants elevate calmness and sorrow as the prime features of an ideal character. In their understanding sorrow, in accordance with Persian tradition, is not mere grief or distress. Rather, it is the expression of personal depth that comes from true wisdom and a closeness to God. Paradoxically, in a way it is a form of bliss. The perfect human being is calm, sad and blissful. When speaking about Imam Khomeyni, for instance, his seriousness and emotional calm is often brought up as examples of his perfection. Mostaʿār once told me about the day when Khomeyni received the news of his son's death. What Mostaʿār said on this occasion may serve as an initial example of the informants' understanding of the ideal of religious sadness, which I will discuss in the following:

> If someone understands and performs Islam . . . that person is always calm and happy even when s/he cries. Imam had a son, Hājji āqā Mostafa, who was very knowledgeable, I have read his book and he was a great scholar. Imam did not get so sad when he was killed. He was teaching when he was informed about it, he simply said 'ok', then he finished the class and went to the mourning ceremony. But he cried for God and he enjoyed.[68]

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[66] Previously some have argued that the tragedies of the *taʿzie* were counteracted by the cynical humour of the traditional comedy. See, for instance, Good and Good 1988: 59 or Beeman 1982, chapters 6 and 8.

[67] See, for instance, ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

[68] Mostaʿār, April 23rd, 2002.

Islam, Suffering and Sorrow

The views of the informants regarding religious sorrow have to be understood with regard to their religious and cultural environment. The authorities of their mosque strongly encourage religious emotions. Since the revolution it has been propagated that to weep, to pretend to weep and to make others weep for religious causes will give a reward in heaven.[69] When I have asked the informants whether they consider Islam to be an especially sorrowful religion, however, the answer has always been that Islam includes both joy and sorrow and that no general labelling of its mood can be imposed.[70] This statement must be taken into consideration and I shall return to the view of Islam as a balanced middle-way later on. However, before that I will present what the informants do say about the religious weeping that preoccupies their religious lives on a weekly, and during some periods on a daily, basis.

To begin with, the informants are eager to emphasise that there are essentially two kinds of crying: crying that is caused by personal sorrow and crying that is for God. At best, the informants argue,[71] the tears, which are shed at the ritual lamentations at the mosque have nothing to do with the personal problems of those who cry but are rather triggered by the joy of reaching out to God and the *Ahl-e beyt*.[72] "Crying has two purposes", says Mohammad Mahdi, "one is for your problems and sorrows, but be sure that the minute we are crying for Zahrā there is no sorrow in our heart, we are happy . . . It is true that they read rowze but we become happy because of it and not sad".[73]

Provided, then, that the crying is of the latter type—that is: that it is for God[74] or the *Ahl-e beyt*[75] and not for personal sorrow;[76] that it is carried out with true feeling and with a pure heart[77] and that

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[69] For further discussion on the encouragement to weep see, for instance, Good and Good 1988: 52.
[70] See, for instance, Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001 and ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[71] In this discussion, as in the previous chapter, the older Jamie is excluded.
[72] Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2001.
[73] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.
[74] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.
[75] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.
[76] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002.
[77] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.

it is done with an attitude of subservience to the will of God[78]—it is considered to be beneficial in a number of ways.

When discussing these matters, the opinions of the informants remarkably conform with one another. Although their emphases may vary, their ideas about what religious weeping should be are very similar. The main purpose of the weeping, they hold, is to purify the soul.[79] The informants believe that God forgives the sins of those who approach him in tears[80] and, from knowing and feeling this, the soul is at peace and becomes calm.[81] The informants describe ritual weeping as a form of spiritual enjoyment.[82] It is striking that they all describe this enjoyment with the metaphor of flying. "When I cry for *Ahl-e beyt*", Mohammad Mahdi says, "it is as if two wings grow out of my back and I fly away".[83] The other informants use similar expressions: "crying is like flying", Mostaʿār ascertains,[84] and "weeping for Hoseyn is the flight of the soul", according to ʿAli Bakhtiāri.[85] The informants suggest that the tears they shed in the sorrow rituals are not caused by sorrow. On the contrary, they are tears of joy,[86] which bring sorrow out of the body[87] and create happiness and relief[88] in a way that restores human beings. "*Doʿā-ye Komeyl*", ʿAli says, "is something which pulls a person upwards, it makes me happy".[89]

Besides causing peace and happiness, the informants think that the ritual weeping makes them work harder and become more loving towards other people.[90] It is also believed to create benefits in this world and in the hereafter. "One tear", Amir has been told, "is equal to a thousand years of praying".[91] It will cause worldly wishes

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[78] Mostaʿār, May 18th, 2001.
[79] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001; ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002; Mostaʿār, May 18th, 2001.
[80] Mostaʿār, April 23rd, 2002; Mostaʿār, May 18th, 2001.
[81] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001; Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[82] Mostaʿār, April 23rd, 2002.
[83] Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002.
[84] Mostaʿār, April 23rd, 2002.
[85] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001; ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 12th, 2001.
[86] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.
[87] Mostaʿār, May 18th, 2001.
[88] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001 and May 5th, 2002; ʿAli Bakhtiāri May 11th, 2001.
[89] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[90] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001; Mostaʿār, May 18th, 2001.
[91] Amir, April 4th, 2002.

to be fulfilled[92] and will make God solve one's problems and create a brighter future in this life.[93] It will also hasten the return of Imam Mahdi[94] and bring reward for the faithful in the other world.[95]

In the informants' lucid descriptions of their ritual weeping, an understanding of God and a theodicy can be perceived. The informants believe that their tears will create some different kinds of material and eschatological reimbursement. My impression is that these benefits are seen as positive bonus effects of their activity. However, as the informants see it the central purpose of the ritual weeping, and indeed of religious life in general is to communicate with God and the holy family of the *Ahl-e beyt*. "We go to the *rowze* for a relationship", Mohammad Mahdi puts it.[96] In his view, the purpose of going to sorrow rituals is to build a relationship with God. He told me once that the most important thing is that one must be careful to hear the voice of God and that one must not quieten this voice in one's life.[97] I think this notion is also what he had in mind when he defined the prime purpose of the sorrow rituals as building a relationship. To cry for God, Mohammad feels, is to let God live in one's life. Therefore, it has often been repeated by the informants that it is not really the believers themselves who cry, but God who cries through them.[98] To weep for the *Ahl-e beyt* in any of the numerous prayer meetings at the mosque is believed to be a way of submitting to God, to listen to God's voice and to let God do his work in one's life.

This understanding, arguably, entails an outlook on the meaning of suffering in human experience, a theodicy. It is true that the informants state that their sorrow rituals provide a form of enjoyment. Still it is obvious that somehow they also connect to suffering. For example, the stories which are told are about death, pain and injustice and the prime activity of the participants in the rituals is to beat their chests and sob. We can conclude that the informants believe that the relationship with God which they have experienced and

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[92] Amir, August 8th, 1999.
[93] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[94] Mostaʿār, May 18th, 2001.
[95] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[96] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002; Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[97] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.
[98] See, for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.

heard about, can best be established in a state of sorrow. This is true especially if the sorrow is caused by remembrance of and lamenting for the sufferings of *Ahl-e beyt*.

It is my impression that this view of sorrow as meaningful is experienced by the informants as central to a Shiʿite outlook on life. When we have spoken about it this is also what they have told me. "Theologically speaking", Jamie said before he abandoned his religion, "we are most true when we are in sorrow".[99] Mohammad Mahdi concluded that suffering is a necessity in human life, and ʿAli Bakhtiāri once said that suffering is the most important thing in his life.[100] "Human life is hard and tragic", he felt, "but we can defeat it and be victorious if we succumb . . . but we need suffering to grow". Suffering, in ʿAli's and the other's view, is necessary and constructive. It is an unavoidable part of the human experience in this world to which we should succumb. Referring to the Koran, ʿAli once explained his understanding by likening the human spirit to an ocean: "The human spirit is like an ocean that can never be filled and therefore humans always hunger for more".[101] This view of suffering which is held by the informants can be summarised thus: Because of their insatiable hunger humans can never be satisfied in this world and therefore have to suffer. But, by succumbing to this emotion and by directing it towards God and the *Ahl-e beyt* in the sorrow rituals, they can defeat it and find peace.

The informants' view of suffering and sorrow corresponds, as I have shown, to their views on life style and ritual activity. The informants think that life should not be easy-going or good-humoured but should instead be led seriously in constant awareness of God. For this reason laughter, for instance, is something they feel very sceptical about. Certainly kindness and happiness are highly valued characteristics in a person, but to roar with laughter is considered inappropriate and sometimes even devilish. "It is not good for the soul to laugh a lot", ʿAli tells me, "the soul becomes black and sick from the laughter, it looses its power".[102] Mostaʿār says that "laughter makes you think less of God"[103] and Mohammad refers to the

[99] Jamie, September 2nd, 1999.
[100] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[101] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[102] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[103] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

example of the Prophet who laughed only gently "so that his teeth did not show".[104] The ideal is to be emotionally controlled, especially when expressing joy. There is an obvious focus on sorrowful emotions in the informants' practice, but the ideal they emphasise is one of calmness and moderation. Imam ʻAli, Jamie points out, once said: "if you are happy or depressed, go to the graveyard and you will become calm and moderate".[105] In the eyes of the informants this is one of the main objectives of the focus on sorrow in their religion.

Having said something about what the informants think about sorrow and suffering, it is necessary to add something about their ideas concerning the holy family of the Shiʻites before continuing the discussion.

The Ahl-e beyt

As has been pointed out by many, the *Ahl-e beyt* constitute the foremost example of virtue in Twelver Shiʻism.[106] This is also true in the lives of the informants. Their ideas about the historical *Ahl-e beyt* are aligned with the historiography which is taught in the mosque and shared by most Twelver Shiʻites today. This is not the place to give further details about these ideas. Suffice it to say that the informants believe that the fourteen infallibles[107] were and are perfect humans, chosen by God to be the leaders of humanity until the day of resurrection.[108] Through these leaders, and particularly through the martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn in Karbalā, Islam has been kept intact through history.[109] However, it is more important for this discussion is to deal with the role which the informants feel that the *Ahl-e beyt* has in their lives today. It is the *Ahl-e beyt* who make up the cause and object of the informants' tears when they cry at the sorrow rituals.

The informants use different metaphors to explain the role of *Ahl-e beyt* in their lives. Amir, for instance, says that they are like a

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[104] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.
[105] Jamie, September 2nd, 1999.
[106] See, for instance, Good and Good 1988: 51.
[107] That is, the Prophet Mohammad, his daughter Fāteme and the twelve Imams.
[108] See, for instance, ʻAli Bakhtiāri, May 12th, 2001.
[109] See, for instance, Mostaʻār, May 14th, 2001.

strong rope between him and God, which can make him prosperous and fortunate and prevent him from doing bad things provided that he maintains a strong relationship to it. He also uses the expression *moving Koran* to explain how the *Ahl-e beyt* complete the revelation available in the Koran through their teaching.[110] ʿAli Bakhtiāri likens *Ahl-e beyt* to a vessel. "*Ahl-e beyt* is like a ship", he tells me, "and if one is on that ship one will never die".[111] Mostaʿār emphasises the greatness of the holy family: "Everything is in their hands", he states, "our life and our religion . . . they are everywhere, they see everything in this world and the other worlds. They are not limited to our world, not just to our galaxy and stars. They also see other far away places, very far away."[112]

The informants believe that the *Ahl-e beyt*, except Imam Mahdi who is still alive, are now in paradise.[113] From there they intercede in the informants' lives and help them in different ways. Medical problems are healed through their intercession and with the angels they watch over those who remember them.[114] They help strengthening spiritual powers in human' hearts[115] and give them a feeling of peace.[116] For this reason it is important and necessary to keep one's mind in constant remembrance of them and of the tragedies which they had to suffer in this world.

I have presented some notions which are central in the informants' own understanding of what the sorrow rituals mean in their lives and why they are important. I have shown that they emphasise that tears shed in sorrow rituals are tears of joy rather than sorrow. They are the tears that come from building a relationship with God, and to do this is the main purpose of ritual weeping according to the informants. I have also discussed how this view implies an acceptance of suffering as something constructive and necessary in human life, and an understanding that if we yield to this truth humans can become spiritually calm and peaceful just as the informants' ideal role models. The way to do this is by remembering the lives and

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[110] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[111] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[112] Mostaʿār, April 23rd, 2002.
[113] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[114] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.
[115] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001; Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.
[116] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 12th, 2001.

sufferings of the *Ahl-e beyt* and to obtain their aid. Having summarised the informants' verbalised ideas in these matters, it is time to move on to the aspects of cultural meaning, which have not been verbalised—that is, the meaning which is expressed and experienced in their practice.

Ritualised Practice

I have asked myself, what do the informants do when they let themselves be overwhelmed by emotion in the rituals of sorrow? I have shown that, when reasoning about these rituals, they clearly emphasise their benefits and express a desire to let themselves be emotionally involved. But so far I have said nothing about the self-suggestive methods, which they use in order to make this happen. In the following, I will present some components which enable the informants to relieve their emotions and to cry at the lamentation gatherings in the mosque. I will pinpoint four components which I have found in my material. I have labelled these: Sorrowful context, bodily sensation, personal thoughts and remembrance and identification with the *Ahl-e beyt*. I will now discuss each of them.

Context of Sorrow

The religious authorities in the mosque encourage and promote weeping among visitors. Indeed, the prayer leaders' words sometimes indicate that the very purpose of the prayer meetings is to make people cry. Shedding tears at these meetings, hence, is what is expected and encouraged. The fact that people who do not cry at these gatherings tend to hide their faces in their hands as if they cry is significant in this regard. There is a certain mode of behaviour, which is expected at these gatherings, and shedding tears is the most central feature of this behaviour. Arguably, such expectations facilitate crying for the participants.

In addition to the expectation to shed tears, there is a notion of the ideal personality, which I have discussed above. The informants consider the ideal person to be calm, sad and blissful. There is certain a aesthetics in such a personality which is extensively reproduced through posters, postcards, stickers and other printed matter showing pictures of *Ahl-e beyt*. These pictures—often kitsch-like in style and design—are very popular. They are sold on the streets and

in the mosque and can be found in the homes of all the informants. I mention these pictures here because they often portray the ideal heroes of *Ahl-e beyt* crying and thus encourage the shedding of tears. For example, the pictures may show Imam ʻAli comforting his crying children with tears rolling down his own cheeks or Hoseyn's sister, the Lady Zeynab, lamenting her brother's death with other women and children at Karbalā.

The sorrow gatherings at the mosque are designed and framed in such a way that the feelings of sadness and religious bliss, which are promoted by the authorities and portrayed in the pictures, are made present. The sounds of the lamenting prayers vibrate with religious and sorrowful connotations, the lights are dimmed and the air is often sprayed with rosewater so that a scent of flowers spreads among those who have gathered to cry. In Iranian tradition rosewater is used to clean graves at cemeteries and is associated by many Iranians with the gardens of paradise. In these ways the ritual context of the sorrow gatherings is designed, deliberately, to facilitate religious emotion and weeping.

Bodily Sensations

The ritual context is social. It creates conditions which all participants at the mosque have to deal with. But there are also components in the sorrow rituals which are individual, that is, components which in themselves facilitate emotional relief independent of the social context. An important category of such components is physical sensations in the body. In the previous chapter I have shown that the informants feel that bodily sensations can help trigger religious experiences, and I now intend to follow up on that discussion by giving a few examples of how this happens in the rituals of sorrow.

The *vozu* is a good example. When the water of ritual ablution is felt on the face the informants say they feel that it is more powerful.[117] Arguably, the cooling dampness of the water is associated with religious feelings and along with other components helps to trigger the desired emotions of sorrow and bliss. The body posture of the participants in the rituals is another example. For instance, at *Doʻā-ye Komeyl* it is customary that the listeners sit in a huddled up position

[117] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2002.

with bent necks and their eyes facing downwards. One could argue that it is the crouching position of someone in pain or agony, a position which signals a desire to belittle oneself which can be seen as yet another component to help trigger sorrowful emotion. Body movements may serve as a final example of bodily sensations with emotional effects. In the sorrow rituals certain regulated movements are included. The participants are sometimes expected to stand up, hold their hands on their heads, bow forward, et cetera. Besides being movements known from ordinary prayer, some of these gestures are known as expressions of desperation and grief in Iranian culture. To hold a hand on one's head, for instance, clearly has such a connotation. However, the most obvious gesture is chest beating. The rhythmic beating of one's chest or forehead is a major component in some sorrow gatherings and a minor one in most of them. It can be done individually or collectively under the leadership of the prayer leader. Besides bringing one's attention to sorrow, these chest beatings may work as suggestive techniques which help to weaken psychological defences and to facilitate strong outbursts of emotion.[118] They constitute an important component in the rituals of sorrow.[119]

Personal Thoughts

Let me now leave the external and physical components in order to continue to those which take place in the minds of the informants when they are attending sorrow rituals. All informants state that they think about sorrowful things. They know that these have a strong emotional bearing on them when they cry at the rituals. This is yet another technique they use to reach the sorrowful state towards which they strive. What they think of varies from person to person. Mostaʿār, for instance, says that he may think of a little persecuted Palestinian girl and cry for her,[120] while ʿAli Bakhtiāri thinks about the soldiers who were lost in the war with Iraq.[121] It is also common, however,

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[118] See, for instance, Geels 1999: 247.

[119] This is not the place to explore the historical development of such techniques in Islamic tradition, but it is worth mentioning that *zekr* and other suggestive methods have developed through a long history, not least within Sufism.

[120] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

[121] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

that they think about their own situation, their needs in life, their problems, how they can become better people and, not least, about their own deaths.[122]

There can be no doubt that the informants' lives are full of problems. When I have asked them about it, they have often emphasised that their spiritual problems (*moshkelāt-e maʿnavi*) are the most important. "The fact that I am a sinner", Mostaʿār answers when I ask him to define his biggest problem.[123] "That I have got to know myself spiritually at such a late stage" is ʿAli Bakhtiāri's answer to the same question,[124] and Mohammad Mahdi says that the fact that he is "alienated from God" is his main problem.[125] Besides these religiously oriented problems, however, there is an abundance of worldly difficulties in the everyday lives of the informants. Previous presentations may have given a hint of these and here I will only mention them in brief. To begin with, ʿAli Bakhtiāri, Mostaʿār and Mohammad suffer severe economic problems,[126] especially ʿAli, who lives almost below subsistence level. The stress, which comes from not having the financial resources to provide even the most basic necessities for one's family, is ever present in their lives. On top of this overwhelming problem are the individual sorrows which the informants have had to suffer: ʿAli's depression and psychological problems; Jamie's loss of his wife and father; Mohammad Mahdi's loss of a child and his wife's disease; Mostaʿār's difficult relationship to his parents and Amir's problems of youth.

It is plausible that the tensions which these problems cause in the lives of the informants are somewhat relieved when they cry at the sorrow ceremonies. The informants also ascertain that this is the case. Mostaʿār expresses his view on the matter with the following words:

> When life is hard and people are under pressure they understand that they need to go to God. But when they have everything they forget. Like children: when they have snacks and chocolate, they eat and don't care about their parents. But the reality is that they need their

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[122] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[123] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.
[124] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.
[125] Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.
[126] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001; ʿAli Bakhtiāri, April 15th, 2000; Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.

> parents and when they are lost or alone they will not want snacks anymore, but their parents. 'Where is our father?' They will shout, 'We want our mother!'[127]

According to Mostaʿār, problems make people focus on their real need for God and it is clear that these personal thoughts help the informants reach the desired emotional state and therefore rightly can be seen as components which enable them to cry. However, it would be faulty if I were to claim without further discussion that they cry at these ceremonies only because they think about their own personal sorrows. This would be a flawed conclusion because all of them emphasise that the tears of the sorrow rituals must and should be shed for God or the *Ahl-e beyt*. They have to be tears of the second category distinguished above, i.e. not tears of sorrow but tears or religious bliss and joy. If they are not, the informants claim that they are spiritually worthless and bring no benefit or improvement in their relationship with God. However, this does not mean that the thoughts cannot relate to the personal lives of the ritual participants. On the contrary, the informants consider it good if they do so. However, they should do it in a way which connects their own situation to God or the *Ahl-e beyt*. Hence, when ʿAli Bakhtiāri thinks of his own death, he pictures his soul when it rises from the grave and imagines how the *Ahl-e beyt* saves it, like a ship which saves a castaway. When he thinks about his problems, he also thinks that the only solution to these is to seek refuge in the holy family and to "tread their path".[128]

The kind of thoughts which no doubt are most common, and which the informants have stressed most forcefully in our conversations, are the thoughts which consist of remembering and identifying with the tragedies of the *Ahl-e beyt*. I will now go on to say something about these.

Remembrance and Identification with the Ahl-e beyt

Earlier I have shown that the major purpose of the lamentations is to cause the listeners to identify with the holy family of *Ahl-e beyt* and thereby to give them the opportunity for emotional relief and spiritual development.

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[127] Mostaʿār, April 23rd, 2002.
[128] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.

When I have asked the informants what they think when they cry at the sorrow meetings, they usually say that they think about the tragedies of their Imams and their families: about Hoseyn at Karbalā, how lonely he was;[129] about Fāteme Zahrā, how she suffered;[130] about Imam Mahdi. They pray for God to help him.[131] They think about their own insignificance and sinfulness in comparison to the infallible *Ahl-e beyt* and yearn to become more virtuous so that they can come closer to them. The informants claim that the tears they shed at these meetings are caused by the feeling of inferiority and yearning, which arises naturally when one listens to the tragic stories of the *Ahl-e beyt*.[132]

Although it is crucial that the informants' claims in this matter are taken into consideration when we try to understand the cultural meaning of their sorrow rituals the above discussion has shown that they are not sufficient. When it comes to their thoughts about the *Ahl-e beyt* I have tried to investigate whether the different legendary tragedies correspond to the personal sorrows and problems of the individual informants.

It is clear that the extensive assortment of tragedies correspond to many different problems which the ritual participants may have to deal with in their own lives. The tragedies depict most kinds of family relationships and bring up sorrowful events which can occur in them. Thus, the story of Imam ʿAli and Fāteme Zahrā and their tragic destiny describes the sorrows of loosing one's wife; just as the story about Lady Zeynab's struggle after her brother's death at Karbalā portrays the loss of a close relative in war; or the tragedy of Hoseyn's infant son ʿAli Asghar, who was killed while dying of thirst, is an example of what it is like to loose a child. The different tragedies mirror examples of stories about the loss of a wife, a husband, a father, a mother, a child, a grandchild and unborn children and also portray experiences of harassment, fear of death, childbirth and loneliness. It is reasonable to assume that people who listen to these stories and cry to some degree relate their content to their own situation and identify with the characters in the tragedies. The

[129] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[130] Amir, August 26th, 1999.
[131] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.
[132] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

eight-year-long war with Iraq caused numerous casualties on the Iranian side, and most of the people in the mosque have at least some relative who was killed in it. Likewise, most human beings experience the loss of a parent and, from time to time, feel lonely and forsaken. The tragedies of the *Ahl-e beyt* connect to all these aspects of human experience and hence relate, directly, to the situation of the informants.

When I have asked them about this, however, some of them have denied that there could be any such thing as identification. ʻAli Bakhtiāri, for example, says that he identifies with all Muslims throughout history and that the *Ahl-e beyt* are not different in that regard.[133] Similarly, Amir says that he does not recognize his own problems in the stories of the *Ahl-e beyt* at all.[134]

A somewhat contrary picture appears, however, when I have asked the informants which tragedies they find most touching. Their answers to this question indicate that there is a correlation between the content of the tragedies and the individual destinies of the informants. Mohammad Mahdi, for instance, who is the father of a small child, does not hesitate to single out the story about Hoseyn's infant son ʻAli Asghar as the one which moves him most deeply. "To me the story of . . . ʻAli Asghar [is the best]", he concludes:

> He was only six months old. He was thirsty but his mother had no milk left for him. She tried to sooth him with a stone and to put him in a dried riverbed, but nothing helped. They showed him to the enemy and they shot him. After he was buried, they also took his head.[135]

The story of the inconsolable and suffering infant is the one which moves Mohammad Mahdi most deeply. Mohammad agrees that it is easier to cry for *Ahl-e beyt* for someone who has himself lost a dear one[136] as he himself also has. When I first met him in 1999, he and his wife had recently lost a child through a miscarriage and it is my impression that this experience, along with the later experience of being the father of a small child, is significant for his choice of favourite tragedy. A similar connection between a life situation and

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[133] ʻAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[134] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[135] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.
[136] Mohammad Mahdi, May 5th, 2001.

a favourite tragedy can be found in the case of ʿAli Bakhtiāri, who mentions the suffering of the young as especially touching for him,[137] or with Jamie, whose most zealous ritual activity after he had lost his wife in 1999 consisted of attending lamentation ceremonies with his children where the tragedy Fāteme Zahrā was brought to attention. She was the daughter of the prophet and the wife of Imam ʿAli, who died in her youth leaving her husband alone with their children in a hostile world. The connection to Jamie's own tragedy is here all too striking to be disregarded.[138]

I have argued that my material show how the informants' emotional relief in the sorrow rituals is triggered by several different components. Through ritual context, bodily sensations, sorrowful personal thoughts as well as remembrance and identification with the *Ahl-e beyt* the informants place themselves in an emotional state of sadness, calm and bliss, which they so eagerly desire. Before going on to a final discussion on the role and meaning of these rituals in the informants' lives, I will linger for a while to address their role in the life of one particular informant, namely Amir.

The Case of Amir

I first met Amir at a *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* gathering at the mosque during my first fieldwork trip in 1999.[139] He was a sixteen-year-old adolescent at the time who regularly visited the sorrow meetings in the mosque. Since then I have met him every year and seen how he has changed and grown. Unlike the other informants, Amir is not an active and well-known member of the community. Of all the activities, which are provided in the mosque he only goes to the sorrow gatherings, particularly to *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* meetings on Thursday nights. I have met him every year at these meetings, but as time has passed his ritual involvement has cooled off to some extent and the last time I met him in 2002, he said that he only visited the

[137] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 12th, 2001.

[138] There are other scholars who have discussed how Iranian mourners identify with the holy family, not least in burial rituals where those who have passed away have been likened to the persons of *Ahl-e Beyt* in order to comfort the family. See, for instance, Good and Good 1988: 53.

[139] Amir, August 26th, 1999.

ceremony once in every three months or so.[140] Besides his diminishing religious activity, Amir, has gradually become more and more self-confident and cheerful. Most of his problems, as I will show, have also been solved during the period in which I have traced his progress.

Amir was born in the early 1980's and is the youngest of the informants of this study. He grew up during the war and because his father was wounded by shrapnel on the battlefield the family earned some economic and social privileges in society. Amir is the only child in his family and is trying to live up to the expectations of his parents. He has always been a hard-working and successful student. Unlike the other informants, he speaks English and his future plans are to leave Iran and try to make a living in the United States or Canada, where he has some relatives.[141]

There is one event in Amir's childhood which he has often returned to in our conversations and which seems to be of great importance to him. It is the story of when Imam Rezā healed his father from cancer. According to Amir, his father suffered from malignant testicle cancer when Amir was a child. The doctors at the hospital where he stayed at the time were very pessimistic and said that he would soon die. Amir's father then travelled to Mashhad and prayed for a month at the sanctuary of Imam Rezā. When he returned, the doctors could certify that the tumours had disappeared and that he had been healed. Amir says that from that moment they realised how hard life would be if it was not for the aid and support of the Imams.[142]

Maybe it is this experience that has taught Amir to turn to the *Ahl-e beyt* when he needs help with his problems. Throughout the period of this study, my conversations with Amir have been greatly focused on problems and I think it is safe to say that his ritual activity has been directly triggered by the different problems he has had to deal with. This is the way he sees it himself. I will comment on the two problems which we have touched upon most frequently in our discussions.

To begin with, Amir has a problematic relationship with his father. This has been an issue in our discussions since the first day I met

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[140] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[141] Amir, April 27th, 2000.
[142] Amir, April 27th, 2000.

him, even though his definition of what the problem is about varies from time to time. Despite the miraculous healing of his fathers disease, the cancer made him sterile and therefore Amir does not have any siblings. On several occasions, and especially in the beginning of this study, Amir told me that he is angry and disappointed with his father because of this. Although he understands that his parents could not have done anything about it, he feels that his loneliness has caused him to become different and somewhat unsociable with other people. This saddens him and it has become a matter of dispute between him and his parents.[143] He has also been afraid that he will get the same disease that his father has had. The first time I met him in 1999, he told me that he had come to *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* to pray about this, that he was worried about it and wanted Imam Hoseyn to help him.[144]

When I have met Amir on later field trips he has distanced himself from his previous statements about his father. "I try not to be angry", he told me when I asked him about his relationship with his father on my last visit, "that had a little bit to do with my age I think. All boys at that age are like that, they are not satisfied with their lives".[145] Still he spoke a great deal about his father. Earlier, the reason for him to come to some of the sorrow meetings, for instance, had been that he had had arguments with his father and was angry with him. He had been angry with him for not having more children or because he beat him when he was a child.[146] Now, in 2002, he felt less angry about these things; he only felt distanced from his father. "Our thoughts do not relate", he told me: "I think my thoughts are higher than my father's".[147]

The second theme, which has often recurred in our discussions and which Amir has considered to be one of his major problems, is the issue of sexuality. During the time of this study, Amir has been in his late teens. These years have run parallel to his adolescence and, expectedly, sexual thoughts and feelings have begun to become prevalent in his life. The strain that the experience of puberty

[143] Amir, April 27th, 2000 and April 4th, 2002.
[144] Amir, August 26th, 1999.
[145] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[146] Amir, May 11th, 2001.
[147] Amir, April 4th, 2002.

has meant in his life has been a frequent topic in our discussions. Once Amir described the change which he has experienced with the following words:

> Children have their habits, which are innocent. They like to play and laugh and jump, but they do not understand anything. When you get older you understand more and things start to get difficult. You get bad experiences. For instance, you start to look at girls, get bad habits . . . I was religious when I was a kid, until I was fourteen, then what happened? There is something within all of us, something which wants to break free: to look at girls, to tease them. I even have friends who talk to girls.[148]

Amir feels that his own inclination to look at girls estranges him from the religion and that it therefore is problematic. To certain extent his ritual activity is a direct response to this experience. "I want to talk to God", he said when I first met him crying in the mosque, "But he will not listen, because I am not clean, I look at women, I have done bad things. God helps those who are pure, I have to improve, have to get closer to God, have to live right!"[149]

In the beginning of this study, Amir's ideas about Islam were similar to the ideas of the other informants', who have been presented in this chapter. In 1999, he told me that the main purpose of the sorrow rituals was to make the world more spiritual, more loving and forgiving. By attending sorrow rituals, he told me, one's boundaries are dissolved and one can understand spiritual mysteries and thereby also solve one's worldly problems. At that time, Amir had also recently seen Imam Hoseyn in a dream and he believed that by attending the sorrow rituals he would attract the attention of the Imam so that he would help him with his problems.[150]

At the end of this study, Amir's understanding about Islam and the sorrow rituals had changed drastically. When we spoke in 2002, his ideal of a perfect Muslim had fused with his ideal of a perfect intellectual. Throughout the study Amir has hailed intellectual perfection and academic success as his ideal in life. However, it was only on my last visit that this ideal merged completely with his view of Islam. In 2002, Amir defines the purpose of his religion in the following way:

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[148] Amir, April 27th, 2000.
[149] Amir, August 26th, 1999.
[150] Amir, August 26th, 1999.

> The use of Islam as I have understood it recently . . . is to have a straight mind, straight thoughts, not to be nervous about everything, not to be very nervous for one thing and then become very happy for some other thing, or very sad. Islam keeps you in the middle. That is, it keeps you from not going too much to the right or too much to the left. It keeps you going in the middle.[151]

In Amir's new understanding Islam is essentially to stay sharp and balanced. It is important to be satisfied and secure in one's present position in life and not to dream about being somewhere else all the time.[152] Amir's ideas tally well with the previously presented Iranian ideal of interior calm, which can also be found among the other informants. The emphasis on intellectual sharpness, however, is somewhat unique for Amir.

Regarding the sorrow rituals, Amir's new understanding of Islam brings about a change in his attitude. Previously he claimed that zealous ritual activity could bring the help of the Imams and he therefore attended sorrow rituals as often as possible. Now, however, his position has become the opposite and he says that it is enough to cry at the ten first days of Moharram and that it is better to do other, more "useful" things the rest of the year—to study hard or to be perfect in one's professional life is what is important, crying is not necessary. Although this has been his attitude, he admits it is more of an ideal than a successfully implemented life style in his own life. I did, after all, still meet him at *Do'ā-ye Komeyl* meetings in 2002 and his own academic success at that time was not as focused as his ideal would have it.[153]

After Amir's religious involvement had diminished somewhat towards the end of this study, his idea of the meaning and function of the sorrow rituals also changed. In 2002, when I asked him to look back at his previous religious habits, he said that to a great extent his attendance at sorrow meetings was an excuse to cry for his worldly sorrows:

> Because I am not a real Muslim my aim is different [from what it should be]. When I go to *Do'ā-ye Komeyl* I am full of problems and I want to cry a little bit because I am ashamed to cry by myself. . . . I

[151] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[152] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[153] Amir, April 4th, 2002.

> am ashamed to do it alone, but when I find a cause, and that is what *Doʿā-ye Komeyl* is, I try to cry as much as I can and it works. Crying gives you energy to continue. It is a way of putting your feelings out. You shouldn't keep your feelings inside yourself. You should put them out![154]

Amir distances himself from the sorrow rituals. He sees that in his life they have a therapeutic function and he does not feel a need to dismiss that completely, although he ascertains that a "real Muslim" would do otherwise. This distanced attitude, however, does not entail that Amir devalues the *Ahl-e beyt*. The proper purpose of the crying rituals, he also concludes in 2002, is to strengthen one's relationship with the holy family. Looking back at his life, he sees the *Ahl-e beyt* as a wall towards which he can lean back and feel relaxed. "Really", he tells me towards the end of one of our last interviews, "they have solved most of my problems". Amir thinks that it was the *Ahl-e beyt* who helped him through the hard time he experienced when I first met him; it was they who helped him come to terms with his father and his sexual feelings. "I have become so much better", he told me: "I have become better but I think I did not do anything [myself]. I asked them for their help, I asked them to help me and they have helped me." Amir experiences that his life is dependent on the help of the *Ahl-e beyt*. Yet he does not hesitate to answer my question affirmatively when I asked him whether he thought his problems would have been solved even without the help of the Imams. "You know, I think they would have", he said. "It is natural, all the people of my age [are like that]." Still: "if you don't have something to [lean back on], if you don't have [*Ahl-e beyt*], you will fall down."[155]

There is an ambiguity in what Amir says here. The problems he had when I first met him are solved and he has ceased to attend the sorrow rituals regularly. He believes this has happened because he has grown up and because, like all young men, he had some problems during puberty which he has now outgrown. Still, however, he believes that he must thank *Ahl-e beyt* for his improvement. Because of this ambiguity, I think Amir's story well illustrates the duality which characterises the informants' view of their religion and

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[154] Amir, April 4th, 2002.
[155] Amir, April 4th, 2002.

its sorrow rituals. It is not primarily experienced as a matter of an instrumental exchange of services when the informants cry and are relieved at these rituals. Rather, the purpose is to place oneself in a position where one can experience that one's relationship with God will improve.

Conclusions

The ritual practice of the informants and the story of Amir show that the emotional state which the informants experience in the rituals of sorrow is triggered by the lamentations, the informants' thoughts and their physical context. It is an expression of spiritual longing and prayer, which creates a feeling of peace and religious bliss in the informants, but which also channels frustration and gives opportunity for emotional relief. There are certain conclusions that follow from the above discussions, which I will now bring to our attention.

Firstly, the above-discussed rituals of sorrow and the informants' ideas about these contribute to the previous discussion on embodiment. The emotional experience, as I have shown, is a bodily and physical experience. Physical tears are shed as the informants lament their illustrious leaders and they sense a feeling of relief in their bodies. This means that the culturally rendered sorrowful narratives and the informants' personal associative thoughts create real bodily responses, which are the emotions and their symptoms. Bodily movements and postures, such as chest beating, however, also trigger the emotions. This exchange between cultural narratives and physical experience, which the rituals of emotion so clearly manifest, is precisely that process of cultural formation which the concept of embodiment pinpoints. The informants' emotional religious practice is hence a clear illustration of the usefulness of this concept.

Secondly, the above discussion has shown that in the sorrow rituals the informants focus their emotional attention on the tragedies of the *Ahl-e beyt*. They listen to the stories and cry for the *Ahl-e beyt* and for God, and they believe and experience that this crying brings about an improved relationship with God as well as various other benefits. One of these benefits is the relief of personal sorrows. This means that the informants believe and experience that, by crying for God, they are freed of the sadness which comes from being poor or from having lost a loved one. At the same time, however, they

state that the tears they shed at the sorrow meetings are useless and spiritually invalid if they are shed for personal sorrows and not for God or the *Ahl-e beyt*. This causes a somewhat awkward situation: the informants believe they will be relieved of their sorrows by attending sorrow rituals, but only if they attend them without the intent of gaining personal emotional relief. To solve this dilemma, they formulate the way their own sorrows are brought into the rites in such a way that it is the personal sorrows which help the individual to cry for *Ahl-e beyt* and not vice versa. A father who has lost a son can better understand the suffering of Imam Hoseyn who lost his sons in Karbalā, and this is the reason why personal sorrows may be brought into the rituals. But it is not religiously correct if one says that the story of Hoseyn enables fathers who have lost their children to mourn these.

It is interesting to see that after his religious involvement had cooled somewhat, Amir changed his idea on the meaning and function of the sorrow rituals. When he had ceased to strongly identify with the form of Islamic practice which is common in the mosque, he no longer claimed that his ritual crying was focused on *Ahl-e beyt* but instead argued that it was just a way for him to relieve his worldly sorrows. The discussion in this chapter has shown that ritual crying is attached to the personal sorrows of the informants but that it does so in a somewhat indirect and fluctuating way.

Thirdly, the above presentation has shown that the informants are active agents in the construction of their own ritual lives. There are two reasons why this is the case: one is the fact that there is a conscious reasoning about the meaning and function of the sorrow rituals among the informants themselves. They are all well informed about the Islamic ideology of ritual, which is taught in the mosque and they have reflected upon their own ritual activity: how successful it is, how it could improve, what its purpose is and so forth. The other reason why the informants must be seen as agents is the fact that they deliberately strive to reach the desired emotional state of sorrow and bliss. By attending the rituals, moving their bodies and by thinking about issues which move them emotionally, they actively create the suggestive atmosphere which enables them to cry for *Ahl-e beyt* and improve their relationship with God. In this way the rituals of sorrow and my analysis of these constitute an illustration of how emotional culture, to a certain extent, also is created by conscious agents.

Fourthly, the aim of this chapter has been to present, discuss and interpret cultural meaning. I have tried to say something about what the rituals of sorrow mean to those who experience and practice them. In doing so it has been important to present the self-referential understanding of the informants themselves. The verbalised meaning, which they have formulated and communicated to me in our discussions is, of course, crucial. But there is also a cultural meaning which is not easily formulated. A meaning which, for instance, concerns shameful or socially stigmatised matters one may choose not to formulate or may even be unaware of. Likewise, aesthetic, moral or ontological values which are culturally inherent may be impossible to express since they are felt or thought of as obvious and unquestionable and therefore never brought to attention. Cultural meaning, furthermore, is often embodied and almost by definition impossible to verbalise. The present chapter has dealt mostly with the conscious and formulated cultural meaning of sorrow rituals. It has shown that one of their meanings, in the lives of the informants, is to keep up a state of religious bliss, which is believed to enrich one's relationship with God. The informants have formulated this meaning in the interviews. However, they have also felt it physically at the sorrow meetings as tears have rolled down their cheeks and their bodies have trembled with emotion.

The informants' stories reveal that their ritual crying connects to their personal sorrows and there can be no doubt that their lives are difficult in many ways. It is my impression, and a conclusion of this chapter, that one central embodied and self-referential, but also canonical, meaning of the rituals of sorrow, in which they so eagerly participate, is to provide a feeling of meaningfulness to their distressful situations. Through the rituals the attention of the informants is turned away from their worldly problems and is focused on that which they see as most important, namely their own spiritual development and relationship with God. In this way their experiences of poverty, marginalisation and loss are diminished for the benefit of closeness to what is believed to be the truth. Naturally, the positive effects on self-esteem and feelings of fulfilment are great.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOOLS OF AUTHORISATION

In this chapter I will discuss how ritualised activities in the mosque contribute to sustain authority in the community of my focus. I will argue that the ritual program in general and the official lectures and lamentations in particular contribute to the maintenance of unity and sense of continuity in the community in focus. By doing this I will show how ritual contributes to the construction of authority. The central concept of this chapter, then, is authorisation, i.e. a process through which authority is established and maintained.

Before going on to a more precise definition of what I mean by this concept, it may be appropriate to say something introductory concerning the specific characteristics of Shi'ite religious authority. It can be argued that its hierarchical structure is one of the main distinctive features that differentiate the religious practice of Twelvers' from that of other Muslim denominations. It could be argued, then, that Shi'ism is more hierarchical in structure than orthodox Sunni Islam.[1] Because of its belief in intercession between human beings and God through the Imams, and the occultation of the present Imam, a significant hierarchy has arisen within Twelver Shi'ism. Stretching from the ordinary believer on one end, through the various stages of religious learning, to the absent Imam on the other, this hierarchy constitutes a significant feature of the tradition. According to present-day Twelver historiography, the twelfth Imam appointed a number of representatives, known as *novāb* (deputies, sing. *nāyeb*), through which he communicated with his followers. After the death

[1] The various and widespread Sufi orders of Sunni Islam, within which similar ideas of intercession are not uncommon, are an exception to this. Besides being an expression of emphasis on scholarly learning, the hierarchal structure of Shi'ism can be seen as an expression of the central position that mysticism always has had in this religious tradition. The clearly defined hierarchies within the Sufi orders are, arguably, possible consequences of a neo-Platonic cosmology where the task of humans is to return to their divine origin through a long journey of gradual spiritual refinement. If such gradual refinement of human beings is accepted, a hierarchy in accordance to the various levels of refinement is an inevitable consequence.

of the last of these representatives, the religious leadership of the Shiʿite community was taken over by the most learned jurisprudents of the community whose duty it now became to interpret the religious documents and to function as spiritual guides for the community until the return of the Imam.[2] The authority of the Imam's teaching, *taʿlim*, and hence that of the jurisprudents, derives from the Imam's divine knowledge, *ʿelm ol-ladonni* which is believed to be given to the Imam directly from God.

There are several titles that mark the different levels in the hierarchy of religious scholars. Some of these have appeared as late as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and seem to be examples of a constant desire to invent new titles of authority as old ones loose their originality. In the contemporary context of the present study, the religious leaders are generally known as *ʿolamā* (sing. *ʿālem*) meaning learned. A common honorary title for ordinary *ʿolamā* is *hojjat ol-eslām*, proof of Islam. This title was originally adopted to mark *mojtahed*s of special importance or following but is not used in that way in the community in focus here. *Ayatollāh*, sign of God, was invented as an honorary epithet in the beginning of the twentieth century and was at that time associated with a handful of religious scholars.[3] Since then, however, the number of Ayatollāhs has grown and today there are hundreds of them in Iran only. Colloquially the term now denotes any scholar who has reached the level of *mojtahed*. The title *marjaʿ-e taqlid*, reference of emulation, is currently used to denote the highest level of authority and refers to a person whose *ejtehād* any Shiʿite can trust and follow with confidence. Since before the revolution, Khomeyni was considered the most highly ranked of all, and was referred to as *Imam*. Lately some groups have also started referring to the present supreme leader, usually known as Ayatollāh Khāmene'i, by this title as well. This might be the beginning of a more widespread new use of the term in the Iranian Shiʿite community.

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[2] What character and how much influence the jurisprudents ought to have upon society is and has been a highly disputed question among Twelver Shiʿites. The Iranian situation, that is discussed in this book, is an expression of a rather extreme policy that has become dominant due to various historical reasons, such as the heritage of a strong priestly class in pre-Islamic Iran, the conflict between the two theological schools *Akhbāri* and *Osuli* in the 18th century and the activist interpretation of Shiʿism put forth by Khomeyni and others at the time of the revolution. These historical reasons will, however, not be further dealt with here.

[3] Glassé 1989: 59.

During my field work I have often been struck by the duplicity that characterises authority structures in the mosque. There is a clear-cut, well-defined and often declared religious hierarchy among confessors in the community. The most substantial example of how this classification is expressed is the fact that any assertion concerning *feqh* that is given by an *ʿālem* can always be overridden by any other *ʿālem* who is hierarchically superior. The whole *mojtahed-moqalled* system[4] is, furthermore, based on this well-defined ranking of authority. At the same time there are aspects of this system, which blur the image of a direct chain of command. Therefore, it seems that a more nuanced understanding of Shiʿite authority structure is needed in order to give a just picture of the community. To begin with, the mentioned titles are not exclusively given to a person by those superior to him in the religious hierarchy. Certainly, there is such a side to it. A student, *tāleb*, who is considered to have reached the appropriate level of knowledge will be given permission by his superior, *ejāze*, which certifies his ability to exercise *ejtehād*. However, this official distinction is not enough. To get the title of *Ayatollāh*, for instance, an *ʿālem* with *ejāze* also needs to gain the respect and popularity of ordinary people. In this sense, the hierarchy which appears so obvious is to some extent built from below.[5]

Authority structures in the mosque shed light upon the duplicity of Shiʿite hierarchy. Although the Ayatollāh and other *ʿolamā* who lecture, relate lamentations or lead prayers are highly revered and respected, they do not have the final executive power in the community. Instead, the final word on issues that concern administration, activities and even choice of lecturer is always given by the administration assembly, *hey'at-e modire*, which consists of a few wealthy bazaar merchants. During my stay at the mosque a few minor disputes occurred between the Ayatollāh and the administration. On these occasions the Ayatollāh had to yield to the opinion of the administrators.[6] It is significant that these are the same administrators

[4] A *moqalled* is a follower of a *mojtahed*. The organisation of religious authority in these roles came about in the early 19th century as a result of the triumph of the *Osuli* school of thought over the *Akbāri*. Momen 1985: 204.

[5] Momen 1985: 202.

[6] One such dispute concerned whether the mosque was to be lent to the *basij* organisation for their *ʿāshurā* ceremonies or not. The politically oriented Ayatollāh, in contradiction to the administrators, thought it should, but eventually it did not.

who, at the time of the evening prayer, stand up to manifest their respect and subordination to the elderly Ayatollāh.

Thus it has become clear to me that the authority structures of the chosen mosque cannot be understood as a one-way chain of command in which the religious authorities exercise their power by controlling those hierarchically inferior. Instead, I have concluded that authority needs to be approached, in all its complexity, as a project in which all community members take part in varying degrees according to the status and influence of each individual member, not only those who, at first glance, appear to be the authorities. This conclusion is compatible with the understanding of authority and power that has been presented by certain poststructuralist scholars during recent decades. My own interpretation of this particular community is partly indebted to these scholars, and in my analysis I have found much guidance in their writings.

In this chapter, I will begin with some general notions concerning the concept of authorisation. Having done this, I will go on to show how the lectures and lamentations are parts of an authorisation process in the chosen community.

Authorisation

Power is a social reality in all societies. Relations between members of a social group, it seems, always turn out to be somewhat unequal in the sense that some people have (or assume) the right to decide for others. Whether we construe this inequality as just (as we might with the power-disparity between a mother and her child) or unjust (as we may consider the unequal relation between a harassed boy and the mob that bullies him), the inequality is a prerequisite for what will here be referred to as authorisation. This inequality can be described as a social asymmetry that exists in relations between people in any given society.[7]

Power, Authority and Authorisation

A phenomenon which often appears in societies where social asymmetry is prominent is that the hierarchically inferior heed, respect,

[7] This understanding has been developed in sociological exchange theory. See, for instance, Cook 1987.

trust and obey their superiors.[8] People often approve of their political leaders; school children frequently respect their teachers and so on. This phenomenon is authority. Max Weber has described it as a quality that is attributed to hierarchically superior persons or institutions whose superiority is experienced as legitimate by those hierarchically inferior. As I have seen it, authority in the present community is created through a process which, following Bruce Lincoln, I have chosen to call *authorisation*. In this section I will present some scholars whose understanding of this concept have been useful to me and I will introduce the way in which I have chosen to apply the concept in relation to the material of the present study.

Scholars have used the concepts of power and authority in different ways. Sometimes the concepts overlap so that a clear distinction between the two is difficult to perceive. Some scholars have chosen to utilise only one of the concepts or to use them as synonyms.[9] I have chosen to keep both concepts, although my focus remains primarily on authorisation. I see this as a process in a much wider drama, which the concept of power denotes. If power is a broad notion concerning social asymmetries in general and the various forms and effects these may have, authorisation is one of the processes that maintain these effects specifically.

Authorisation, Force and Persuasion

There are many forms of power: fathers have power over their sons; torturers have power over their victims; politicians over those who have elected them; religious leaders over those who respect them; and institutions over those who belong to them. If we define it as hierarchy, power indeed seems to be an inescapable component of all human relations. Authority, however, as I use the term, is more specific. It is the form of structural power which s/he wields who is perceived and treated as hierarchically superior by others without having had to prove this position through argument or force. Authorisation is the social process that creates such power. Hence I define authorisation as a form of power implementation which needs neither persuasion nor force to uphold hierarchy. Instead, authorisation

[8] Lincoln 1994: 4.
[9] Repstad 2002: 35.

is a part of the socialisation processes through which human beings receive many of their views, values and manner of conduct in a society. It is preferably a subconscious social process in which certain thoughts and actions are affirmed whereas others are rejected.

Arguably, authorisation is a very efficient way through which power may be exercised. But it is not the only one. It borders on other means such as force and persuasion. Even if these two may function as complimentary to authorisation, they are different from authorisation because of how they relate to the subject of power. Force is implementation of the will of a hierarchically superior agent by means of coercion. Whether it is social pressure, physical or psychological violence or more or less subtle threats, it is an act that goes against the will of its object. Because of this it is not authorisation although it clearly borders on it and may sometimes be confused with it.[10]

Persuasion, is not authorisation either. If one follows Max Weber's categorisations, persuasion could be considered an aspect of what he calls rational and legal authority.[11] However, as I have chosen to use the concept it is essential that authorisation does not need arguments to maintain the position of those in power. In this understanding I follow Bruce Lincoln, who stresses that there is often a discrepancy between what really maintains authority and what the subjects of such a situation believe upholds it. Lincoln argues that subjects of authorisation often believe that the reasons for their subordination are logical and based on reason and that if they only took the time to find out they would find that this is the case.[12] This belief, however, is not necessarily true. On the contrary, the fact that the subjects believe their inferiority is based on reason but never

[10] Lincoln 1994: 4.

[11] Max Weber distinguishes between traditional, charismatic and rational/legal authority. Traditional authority is based on convention, charismatic on the charisma of the leader, and rational authority on expertise, democracy or officialism. Weber 1972: 130–147.

[12] It is important to make clear that I consider *reason* to differ significantly from *rationality*. Reason denotes the certain category of thought that in a western academic context may be categorised as logic. Rationality, on the other hand, is connected to the specific cultural context. To behave rationally, then, is to behave in accordance with one's cultural situation in which emotions and other things may exist as integrated parts. For a philosophical discussion on this matter see Stenmark 1995: 1–17.

bother to find out indicates that authority is constructed through much more subtle processes of socialisation rather than through logical argumentation.[13]

Perhaps this notion can be illustrated by my own, and presumably many others', relation to medical doctors who can be seen as holding positions of authority in my cultural context. If I go to see a medical doctor, provided nothing particularly spectacular happens, I will trust entirely in the advice s/he will give me. I will be certain that the advice is based on thoroughly tested clinical experience and that I would find out that this is the case if I only had the strength to investigate the matter. However, I will never do this because I trust that my confidence is well founded. It is reasonable to argue that the trust I experience in this matter is not based on logic and reason, but rather on the socialisation through which I have acquired feelings of reliance towards western health care. Further and particularly significant evidence for this notion is the fact that my trust is not primarily triggered by the content of the remedies which the doctors recommend (remedies that I in the first place am unable to assess) but rather on the attributes that surround these remedies, such as the white coats, the scent of disinfectants and the assuring tone of the doctor's voice. Whether the remedies are based on reason or not is not relevant for this discussion. It is enough to say that my conviction that they are does not have such a basis. In my case this shows that they are accepted through a means of authorisation.

It is significant that all community members whom I have had the opportunity to discuss religious matters with, claim to be convinced that the superiority of Twelver Shi'ism over all other religious traditions can be proved through arguments which any logical person can be convinced by if s/he took the time to think them through. A necessary prerequisite for such an opinion is that reason is hailed as a preferable means by which to reach knowledge. The Shi'ite school of thought has nourished such an idea, as has Western sciences. Not least because of their Mo'tazelite heritage, Shi'ite scholars have often presupposed that humans have a universal ability to reach knowledge through reason.[14] The vitality of this tradition

[13] Lincoln 1994: 5.
[14] Martin, Woodward and Atmaja 1997: 10.

becomes apparent in the lectures of the community, which involve a great deal of logical argumentation. Here it is especially interesting to note that the notion of the *ʿolamā*'s authority is supported by arguments based on reason. The lecturers apply classical *feqh* argumentation when discussing this matter. Such argumentation consists of finding and comparing evidence (or counter-evidence) for a given opinion in the Koran or Sunna. However, there are arguments that refer to more definite everyday life situations that lack reference to the classical sources or Islamic jurisprudence. Claims that the *ʿolamā*'s authority promotes political stability, that it creates psychological well-being and that it enhances moral behaviour are examples of these.[15]

Force, persuasion and authorisation are three means of power implementation which may exist parallel and supplementary to one another in an asymmetric social situation. In the Iranian community focused on here it is clear that all three exist. Persuasion exists in the reasoning that has already been mentioned. And force, although it may not be observed in the limited context of the chosen mosque, becomes, as I will show in the next chapter, apparent as soon as anyone ventures to raise a critical opinion or in other way display doubt concerning the authorities. Force is also obviously important as a means of maintaining the political system in the Islamic Republic as a whole.

It is important to clarify that authorisation, being a part of socialisation, is the most cost-efficient way for a society to maintain its power structures. Ideally, a community whose world view and power structures are totally internalised will never need neither coercion nor persuasive arguments to be maintained. A methodological consequence of such a conclusion is that a society can be said to lack authority to the same extent that the means of power implementation are prominent. Hence, the success of the authorisation process in a given society can be measured by looking at the extent of perceivable repression and force.

For me the reason to treat these categories separately is that such a distinction may clarify the lines of thought in my analysis. My main focus, as will become apparent, is on authorisation. The informants have strong incitements for their religious activity and belief

[15] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.

that are not based on reason or force. And it is my supposition that the concept of authorisation, as I have defined it here, is the most suitable in an analysis on this matter, not least because it focuses less upon those in authority and more upon those hierarchically inferior, like my informants. Before moving on to the analysis of their particular situation it is necessary to make a few more thorough remarks concerning my view of authorisation.

Discursive Authorisation

When people like my informants obey an authority because they deem it legitimate and trustworthy, the authority can be said to fit into a shared perception of reality. It belongs to a shared field of reference in the given social community. In other words, it is a part of a discourse.[16] Authorisation, therefore, can be labelled as discursive.[17]

In the 1960's and 70's, scholars who were concerned with power studies usually defined power as the ability of a person (or an institution) to work his/her (or its) will in a social relation even against the consent of the other.[18] According to the understanding of Max Weber, society was perceived as being permeated with more or less subtle struggles between persons and institutions. Power, could be upheld by means of economy, coercion, knowledge, control over the means of production and so forth.[19] Yet, no matter how it was upheld, it was generally seen as carried out by one agent against another. Studies on power, hence, were greatly concerned with locating these agents and thereby revealing structures of power in society.[20]

Later scholars have broadened this notion of power and completed the understanding discussed during the 1970's. Power, they have argued, is not necessarily the result of identifiable intentions of clearly definable agents. Instead, they have proposed, it may be built into the very structure of society. This notion is not entirely new. Both Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim discussed structural power as early

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[16] For further discussion on this concept, see, for instance, Jan Assman 1984: 192; 2001: 163–168.

[17] A variety of terms have been used to denote this structural power, or certain aspects of it. Normative power, legitimating power, symbolic power and discursive power are some examples. Repstad 2002: 18. Here I will call it discursive.

[18] Repstad 2002: 12.

[19] Coser 1976.

[20] Repstad 2002: 17.

as in the 19th century. But post-modern scholars from the 1980's and onwards can be said to have developed this notion further.

The concept of power that these scholars have defined is more inclusive than the previously presented one. Here, power becomes invisible to a certain extent. Structures of power define peoples' thoughts, their perception of reality, their morality and aesthetic preferences, even their own identity. The person or institution which can control others' thoughts in these fields wields power. But personal agents do not necessarily have to exist for the power structures to remain and this is crucial. Normality, as understood by Michel Foucault,[21] or patriarchy, as comprehended by certain feminist scholars,[22] may serve as good examples of societal power structures which to a certain extent may lack definable agents.[23] Foucault, for instance, argues that human beings in modern society have internalised a way of behaving and thinking that can be labelled normal. Previously this needed to be enforced by law or coercion. However, in modernity, Foucault argues, people discipline themselves and, more importantly, they themselves choose to do so.

I have chosen to follow this perspective in my understanding of authorisation. I find the notion of internalised power structures to be very elucidating when it comes to describing my informants' relation to their superiors. Authorisation, then, is a discursive implementation of power.

Authorisation concerns the legitimisation and preservation of the community. It is a process through which the social reality of the community is constructed and maintained. It is necessary to emphasise that although authorisation serves to maintain the specific mosque community, the same religious authorities contribute to the breaking up or at least to the changing of the religious Islamic community on a national level.[24]

Attribution

As may already have become apparent, I do not consider authorisation to be static. Rather, I see it as an ongoing process of power

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[21] Sandmo 1999: 86.
[22] See, for instance, Walby 1990: 19–21.
[23] Repstad 2002: 24–25.
[24] For further discussion on the fluctuating societal roles of religion, see Lincoln 1989: 3–11.

implementation. In this understanding I am inspired by Foucault and Lincoln who both emphasise the dynamics of the authorisation.[25] Michel Foucault argues that authority is constantly produced and reproduced in social interaction. He argues that authority cannot be detached from the society to which it belongs and that it cannot be studied as a separate entity or institution. Since it is not a quality or a characteristic which particular individuals may possess, it is best seen as a continuous and mutual process within the community.[26] This is also the reason why *authorisation* is a more appropriate term than authority.[27]

The term authorisation refers to a general process through which the community is recreated and legitimised. Most social actions contribute more or less to this process. By behaving towards or speaking about persons or institutions in certain ways it is possible to authorise these. In other words, it can be said that different parts of life in and about the mosque may be attributed with authority. Through verbal and bodily actions that communicate reverence and respect places, occasions and societal roles and offices can be authorised.[28]

Since these attributions do not last forever authorisation needs to be repeated continuously. Because the attributes are not permanent, and positions of authority can change, a constant effort to uphold and confirm the prevalent structures is needed. Consequently, authorities continuously need to be socially reminded of their dominion by the community and those lacking authority of their impotence. At the same time, however, authorisation within the community is maintained by itself to a certain degree. Once something is authorised and therefore associated with power and treated with due respect, this attitude will in itself call for further authorisation. The respectful attitude towards the Ayatollāh, for instance, socially forces newcomers like myself to treat him in a similar way and thus to continue to authorise his person. In this way, I suggest, authority is partly upheld by its own authority.

I have defined authorisation as a form of power implementation that makes the members of the community accept the given situation

[25] Lincoln 1994: 11.
[26] Foucault 1980b: 93.
[27] Lincoln 1994: 7.
[28] Lincoln 1994: 7.

as legitimate and good without investigating the reasons for it. It is part of the social process of defining reality that the community goes through in order to be recreated. It is a continuous and joint venture, which takes place among all members of the community through acts of speech and body, which communicate reverence and respect for persons, places, occasions and offices of significant symbolic importance to the community. It can be described as discursive.

Because it takes place on all social levels in the community and, as a last resort, is dependant on the trust and opinion of the hierarchically inferior,[29] knowledge of authorisation need not be sought primarily among those in power but rather among ordinary people and in everyday life.[30] Hence this theoretical approach is particularly suitable for a study like this.

Tools of Authorisation in the Rituals of the Mosque

Before going on to the actual argumentation about the tools of authorisation in the chosen community, I deem it necessary to make a few statements concerning the applicability of my explanatory model and the theoretical concept I have chosen. I want to emphasise that my ambitions concerning the exhaustiveness of my analysis are modest. By proposing that the lectures and lamentations function as tools of authorisation, I do not propose that this is the only function that they have. I have chosen to focus on this aspect of the material because I am interested in authority. I believe that an analysis of authority can be helpful when it comes to describing, analysing and understanding the ritual situations and development of my informants. This appears to be the case because the society, in which the lectures and lamentations take place is characterised by a conflict of authority in which the position of the conservative flank and the *ʿolamā* is threatened. Activities at the mosque are especially connected to this conflict because of the explicitly conservative profile of the community. To visit this mosque is, in itself, a political act and standpoint on the domestic conflict between reformists and conservatives.

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[29] Lincoln 1994: 8.

[30] Pierre Bourdieu has discussed the importance of everyday language for the maintenance of power structures. See, for instance, Bourdieu 1991: 46–49.

Therefore, the activities in the mosque can be seen as tools of an authorisation process in the conservative community that challenge other currents in Iranian society.

In the following, I suggest that ritualised activities in general and the lectures and lamentations in particular contribute to the construction of authority in the chosen community. They can be seen as important tools of authorisation. It is my ambition to clarify how this is done by pinpointing four different aspects of this process. The aspects are: (1) the explicit verbal attribution of authority to different parts of the community found in the lectures and lamentations; (2) the emotional identification with *Ahl-e beyt* creates among the community members through lectures; (3) the sensation of continuity which they propose and encourage; and (4) the ritualised context in which the lectures and lamentations are presented.

Explicit Attribution of Authority

The most obvious example of the authorisation aspect of the lectures and lamentations is their frequent and explicit praise of religious authorities and their call for obedience to these. Authority is, no doubt, a central theme in both the lectures and the lamentations. This is expressed in many different ways. The *ʿolamā* and their followers: the *basij*, *tollāb* and the martyrs, are presented as defenders of Islamic virtue under the absent leadership of the Imam. It is stated that the position of late *ʿolamā* in heaven is high, and that people are requested to say *salavāt* for the benefit of *marjaʿs*, *ʿolamā*, *basij* and martyrs. In a lecture the Ayatollāh claims that:

> [If] these theological schools (*howze-ye ʿelmiye*) didn't exist . . . then religion wouldn't exist, the Koran wouldn't exist, the progeny wouldn't exist. If the progeny are still alive it is because of *ʿolamā*. If the Koran is alive among people it is due to *ʿolamā*'s effort and the theological schools.[31]

The repeated praise of these groups and the importance ascribed to their activity can be understood as a rather explicit part of authorisation in the present community. When the listeners are urged to respect the authorities, they are simultaneously driven to respect and thereby recreate the community, which these authorities represent.

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[31] Lecture, August 26th, 1999.

In that sense the praise of authorities constitutes an evident part of the authorisation process, as I have chosen to define it.

Besides the frequent praise and the ascription of importance, there is another repeated exhortation in the lectures which is worth bringing up in this context, namely the request that people obey the *ʿolamā* and the Islamic regulations conveyed without questioning. On several occasions, the lecturers beseech the listeners not to challenge the revealed law just because they do not understand its meaning. On one occasion, the Ayatollāh spoke about this in the following words:

> Every rule in Islam has its reason and its documents, but we are not supposed to evaluate its reason /. . ./ and sometimes there is no way to find reason. The Morning Prayer has two *rakʿat*,[32] nobody knows why. We are supposed to read it aloud. Why? Nobody knows! The noon and evening prayers have eight *rakʿat*. Why? These are the rules! It is possible to say them together but in that case one should read *hamd* and sura *towhid* silently just as the 3rd and 4th *'sobhān Allāh!'* should be said slowly and silently. Other parts can be said either silently or loudly but not this one. Why? We do not know! The *marjaʿ* himself doesn't know either! But the *marjaʿ* knows that there is a reason because it has been given by divine inspiration.[33]

Here the alleged unquestionable authority of Islamic law, consequently, strengthens the authority of the *ʿolamā* since they are the ones who declare what the law says. Both the lectures and the informants sometimes compare the expertise of the *ʿolamā* to that of medical doctors. The Ayatollāh compares the questioning of their decrees with attempts to argue about a medical diagnosis:

> You go to a doctor and he prescribes a drug for you. You are asked to take a pill every six hours, a spoon of syrup every twelve hours and an injection every other day. All of these doses have a reason but would you ask why? He would laugh at you and ask you to look for documents instead of reasons. If you accept me as a doctor I tell you to do this and you just obey because you know I will tell you the right thing, it is scientific. It is not random. When it comes to following Islamic decrees it must be like that, like with a doctor. Worshipping is like this.[34]

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[32] *Rakʿat* is a series of genuflections.
[33] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.
[34] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.

It is interesting to note that the polemics in the lectures which are directed at those who question the authority of the *ʿolamā* does not deal with their critique as such but with the very fact that they are questioning the present authorities.

Identification with Ahl-e beyt

Explicit appeals for obedience to the religious authorities are one way through which the lectures and lamentations function as tools of authorisation. Their call and support for the listeners' identification with *Ahl-e beyt* is another. It is likely that if people identify emotionally with the progeny of the Prophet and their legendary followers, then such identification will create an emotional bond with these characters. This bond will increase loyalty to these people and an eagerness to maintain the life style and the regulations which they have founded. In this manner emotional identification legitimises the present community, i.e. becomes a tool of authorisation. My hypothesis is that this is what happens at the mosque. I now intend to show how.

To begin with, I define identity as the reflexive venture through which an individual or a group strive to uphold a sensation of unity and continuity. Social identification denoting human recognition of others as belonging to the same group as themselves constitutes an important part of that process. Hence, it can be said that a person identifies with another living person, a historical or a mythological figure when s/he explicitly claims to belong to the same group as that person or when s/he shares the feelings and the emotional state of that person. For instance, s/he is happy when the other person is happy, feels sad when the other person suffers et cetera. Another criterion which shows if a person identifies with another would be if s/he structures everyday life in accordance with a social identity defined by the relation to that person. This would be the case if, for instance, a person's daily ritual routines consist of practices directly ordained by the object of his or her identification.

In the lectures and lamentations, people are called to identify with the *Ahl-e beyt* and their legendary followers. There are several statements in the lectures and lamentations which substantiate this assumption. Firstly, the listeners are called to identify with *Ahl-e beyt* by being semantically identified with them. The lecturers and prayer leaders use the same terminology to denote the illustrious offspring

of the Prophet and their followers as to describe the community members of the present mosque. Thus, for instance, the word *Shiʿe* or *Tashayyoʿ*, which is used in the lectures as an epithet for the listeners, refers to the group following Imam Hoseyn into martyrdom at Karbalā in the lamentations.[35] Likewise, on other occasions the term *velāyat* (leadership), which sometimes denotes Imam ʿAli or some other Imam, refers to the contemporary Supreme leader of the Islamic Republic or today's conservative *ʿolamā* in general.[36] It is also common that the lecturers refer to members of *Ahl-e beyt* as mothers, aunts or fathers, and thereby additionally stress their immediate connection to the gathered assembly.[37] In this manner the listeners are called to identify with *Ahl-e beyt* by being semantically identified with these.

Secondly, it can be said that the general exhortation that the listeners should organise their lives in accordance with Islamic regulations, which are transmitted and taught by the *Ahl-e beyt*, in itself calls for an identification with these. The whole legal aspect of Islamic tradition as it is lived in the chosen community strengthens the believers' identification with their absent leaders.

A third and final way through which the listeners are called to identify with *Ahl-e beyt* is the overriding emphasis which is put on their tragic destinies in the lamentations. The continuous and repeated rendering of these tragedies and the strong focus on the suffering of the holy family, obviously gives rise to feelings of empathy towards these renowned leaders. Arguably, this also reinforces identification with them, especially since the stories—often in a very tangible way—deal with sorrows that frequently resemble the personal sufferings of the listeners. Many people who attend the gatherings in the mosque, including the informants of the present study, can relate on a personal level to stories about lost parents, children killed in battle, loneliness, being childless, fear of death and other themes that are

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[35] Compare, for instance, *Doʿā-ye Komeyl*, August 26th, 1999, with the lecture of April 26th, 2000.

[36] See, for instance, the lecture of August 5th, 1999, where the term is used in both ways.

[37] When asked about this, the informants have emphasised that these epithets primarily concern the Seyyeds among the listeners. However, there are rarely indications of such specifications when they are used in the lectures and lamentations. See, for instance, the lecture of April 20th, 2000.

prominent in the tragedies of the *Ahl-e beyt*. When the listeners are assured of the value of their tears and urged to cry for the suffering of the *Ahl-e beyt*, they are given opportunity to establish emotional bonds with the *Ahl-e beyt* that connect to their personal situations in life and help them to deal with these. Since it is more difficult to question or change a belief system in which one is emotionally and personally involved, or in which one finds consolation, it can be argued that identification with *Ahl-e beyt* constitutes a crucial part of the authorisation process in the community.

Perceived Continuity

Identification is closely connected to a perceived continuity, that is, the perception among members of the group that their community is essentially the same as some historical group with which they identify. The idea that members of the community constitute the legitimate followers of the hidden Imam, which is conveyed through lectures and lamentations, may create such a sense of continuity. It is my argument that this sense of continuity is a tool of authorisation in the chosen community since it associates the community and its leadership with the *Ahl-e beyt* and thus strengthens its members' eagerness to respect and preserve the community in its present form. In other words, if the loyalty which the identification creates for the *Ahl-e beyt* is transferred to the contemporary leadership and the values cherished in the community, this is a tool of authorisation. I propose that, to a certain extent, this is what happens in the chosen community.

The lecturers and prayer leaders reinforce the continuity between historical and contemporary leadership when they mix allusions to the historical Imams or Imam Mahdi with references to the Supreme leader of the revolution, ʿAli Khāmene'i. This happens regularly but is perhaps most apparent in the invocations that usually conclude the prayer sessions:

> God! Let us have a life and death like him [Hoseyn]. Make Imam Zamān appear soon. Make him satisfied with us. Let us be his followers and friends. God! Protect the leader [ʿAli Khāmene'i], who is the son of Fāteme and ʿAli. Until the appearance of Mahdi, let us be the best followers of Seyyed ʿAli [Khāmene'i]. O God! Remove the leader's enemies![38]

[38] *Doʿā-ye Komeyl*, April 20th, 2000.

It appears that the sense of continuity is established mainly in the lectures and lamentations through the identification that I have discussed so far. However, there are other means as well. One of these is the Twelver Shiʿite historiography and the analogy it proposes between canonised leaders of the past and present authority. This historiography, which is expressed in the material, clearly connects the *Ahl-e beyt* and their historical followers to present-day Shiʿites in Iran and to the constitution of *velāyat-e faqih*. I have already mentioned that it is believed that Imam al-Mahdi transferred his *velāyat* to the jurisprudents before his greater occultation and thereby ordained these to rule as his representatives until his return.[39] Since the present community is characterised by its emphasised loyalty to this belief, and since its loyalty is encouraged in the lectures and lamentations, this historiography, arguably, contributes to the sense of continuity among the members of the present community. This also includes the *ʿolamā* who are supposedly strengthened to see themselves as representatives of the absent leadership of the Imams.

Through such analogy a story about Imam Hoseyn's call for unconditional obedience from his followers[40] can become a request for the listeners' complete acceptance of *velāyat-e faqih*. In this manner the lectures and lamentations are tools of authorisation through the sense of continuity which they propose and encourage.

Ritualised Context

The words of the lectures and lamentations authorise by calling for obedience, identification and continuity. They are acts of speech which communicate reverence and respect for objects of significant symbolic importance to the community. However, there is a physical side of the authorisation process as well. Verbal authorisation is dependent on the fact that the persons who speak, as well as the place and time in which they speak, are themselves highly ritualised and thus charged with the status that follows from ritual otherness. That is, if the *manbar* was not recognised by the community as the

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[39] This idea, known as *nā'eb ol-ʿāmm*, has roots in the 16th century but got its present formulation through Ayatollāh Khomeyni in the late 20th century. It is postulated in the constitution of the Islamic Republic. For more thorough information, see, for instance, Momen 1985: 195–196 or Arjomand 1988: 371–382.

[40] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.

chair of truth speakers, if the turban was not seen as an attribute of authority, or if Thursday nights were not believed to be religiously especially favourable, the lectures and lamentations would not have the status they now have. By mentioning this, I want to emphasise that the ritualised context in which the lectures and lamentations are performed need to be examined if one wants to comprehend the spoken words and the way they contribute to the authorisation of the community.

The over all context, then, is ritualised. The lectures and lamentations are tools of authorisation also because of the ritualised framework in which they are presented. As has previously been discussed, ritual may be defined as a mode of activity which is different from other kinds of human practice because of the way in which it is carried out. It is primarily expressive and not necessarily instrumental[41] and it can be described as essentially focused upon supernatural matters, or as addressed to the sacred.[42] In the Islamic context, ritual activities are seen as based on revelation, which is the core of Muslim belief. They are seen as representations of a divine enactment with eternal validity. Such a position creates a strong connection between orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the Islamic tradition[43] and this is particularly important for the understanding of how a ritualised context contributes to authorisation. Since the ritualised activities are experienced as unchangeable and absolute, they are difficult to criticise and therefore prevent change. This is also the reason why it can be said that the ritualised framework authorises the community. However, rituals also get their authorising capacity through the multitude of self-referential meanings which they may have. Ritualised acts may have several meanings at the same time and may be construed differently by different persons. Because of this flexibility, rituals may be perceived as uniting and authorising even if the individuals who are united have different understandings of what it is that unites them.[44]

As I have mentioned earlier, authorisation can be described as acts of speech and body which communicate reverence and respect

[41] The definition is borrowed from Catherine Bell. Bell 1992: 70–71.
[42] Bell 1992: 91.
[43] Bell 1997: 196.
[44] Hylland Eriksen 2000: 240.

to objects of significant symbolic importance in the community. In other words, one could say that the authorisation (and for that matter the ritualisation) happens through talking and moving: through the way people speak to each other; through the pitch of their voices; the words they choose to say and when; through the way people move; the hastiness of their movement; their facial expressions; special series of movement such as *namāz* and so forth. For instance, there is a general wish, sometimes strengthened by a religious decree, at all Islamic congregational prayers that the believers should pray side by side and go through the movements of the prayer simultaneously. In order to fulfil this desire it is common that believers who arrive late for the prayers try to catch up with the others and pray separately before they join the group of people saying their prayers simultaneously, thus being able to participate in the peace greeting that ends every prayer session. Acts such as these further elucidate the aspects of community construction in the ritual context.

Through acts of speech and of the body, the environment in which the lectures and lamentations take place is authorised. To begin with, the time in which they take place is sanctified. The lectures are given after the evening prayer. They take place after the setting of the sun, which is clearly recognised by anyone sitting under the sky in the open mosque. They are also given on Thursday night, which is the most spiritually beneficial evening of the week in the Shi'ite tradition, or in connection with especially revered months of the Islamic calendar such as Moharram, Safar or Ramazān. Thus, the time on which the lectures are given is special and it is obvious to anyone brought up in an Iranian Islamic environment that this is the case. Moreover, the locality of the lectures and lamentations, that is the mosque in general and the *manbar* or the *mehrāb* in particular, are authorised. Their orientation towards *qeble*, for one thing, connects with a global Islamic geography. Their calligraphic ornamentation with quotations from the Koran connects to the revelation according to which it is believed that human beings and the universe is, or ultimately will be ruled.

Visitors to the mosque contribute to the authorisation by acting in a way which is different from the way one acts in more profane circumstances. While entering the mosque it is customary to say *Yā Allāh*![45] in order to mark one's presence. When people move around

[45] This expression, meaning "O God!", is in itself common also in other circumstances.

in the mosque, they do so with a certain composure. It is common to greet each other with an Arabic-sounding *salām ʿaleykom* and the atmosphere is appreciably friendly. However, it is the ritual ablutions that most noticeably mark the special status of the mosque. The *vozu*, which precedes the prayer and constitutes the first thing all visitors do, marks the place one has now entered as something significantly other than that which is outside.

A tangible example of authorisation could be the way the Ayatollāh is treated in this community. Whenever he enters the mosque all conversations stop entirely or are subdued. Those who first notice his arrival will whisper to their friends that *Hājji āqā*[46] has arrived and many will stand up solemnly to manifest their reverence for the *Sheykh*. Some people, usually young *tollāb* and *basij*, will also solemnly touch or kiss his cloak in order to show their reverence and get some of his *barakat*.

Through all its components (temporal and local position, voices, words and the bodily movements) the ritualised framework in which the lectures and lamentations take place contribute to the authorisation of the chosen community, because these components attribute status and communicate reverence to the framework of the lectures and lamentations.

The Takbir

An elucidating example of authorisation through the ritualisation in the community could be the prayer slogan known as *takbir*. In the mosque, *takbir* is a one-minute prayer slogan that defines the enemies and heroes of the Islamic Republic and calls upon God's curse and blessing respectively. At the end of every evening prayer all the members of the community recite it jointly. The rhyme can vaguely be divided into two separate parts of which the former is more politically charged and the latter is more prayer-like and pronounced with hands raised as in prayer. In full, the *takbir* reads as follows:

> *Allāho akbar, Allāho akbar, Allāho akbar, Khāmeneʾi rahbar,*
> *marg bar zedd-e velāyat-e faqih, dorud bar razmandegān-e eslām, salām bar shahidān,*
> *marg bar Āmrikā, bar Englis, bar monāfeqin-o Saddām, marg bar Esrāʾil.*

[46] *Hājji āqā* is a respectful epithet used for *ʿolamā* in general.

Khodāyā, khodāyā, tā enqelāb-e Mahdi az nahzat-e Khomeyni mohāfezat befarmā. Khāmene'i rahbar, be lotf-e khod negahdār, be āberu-ye Mahdi, āmin, yâ Rabb ol-ʿālamin.

God is greater! God is greater! God is greater! Khāmene'i is the leader
Death to the enemies of the government of the jurisprudent!
Greetings to the fighters of Islam! Peace upon the martyrs!
Death to America! Death to England!
Death to the hypocrites[47] and Saddām! Death to Israel!

O God! O God! Until the revolution of Mahdi, protect the movement of Khomeyni. Khāmene'i is the leader, keep him in your mercy.
For the sake of the honour of Mahdi.
Amen, O God of the worlds.

The *takbir* becomes a tool of authorisation according to the above stipulated means: it hails the community's heroes and leaders, it connects these to the *Ahl-e beyt*, and it is said in a ritual context. A fruitful way to approach the *takbir* is to see it as an addition to the Islamic creed, which adds the canonical religious and political viewpoints of the Khomeynist republic. This definition becomes possible since the rhyme fulfils several criteria of a creed.[48] I will now elaborate somewhat on this approach.

To begin with, a creed is a concise definition and confession of faith that does not explain the reasons for the given dogmas. Through the *takbir* the members of the congregation confess, without explaining, the basic dogmas of the Khomeynist ideology in addition to the definition of the most fundamental Shiʿite doctrines given in the *Shahādat*[49] and recited in the prayers. The central and supreme position of God and the constitutionally stipulated Mahdi expectation are established. The principle of governance by the jurisprudent is established and the leadership of Khomeyni and Khāmene'i is confirmed, the institution of martyrdom is emphasised and the enemies of the Islamic Republic are defined.

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[47] In the present context "the hypocrites" refer to those persons and groups that sided with Khomeyni in the revolution but later dissociated themselves from him and his political construction, the Islamic Republic. Ex-president Bani Sadr and the political organisation Mojāhedin-e Khalq are examples of a person and an organisation, respectively, considered to belong to this group.

[48] The criteria are vaguely based upon argument put forth by Martin Speight. Speight 1987.

[49] I confess that there is no other god than God, I confess that Mohammad is God's messenger, I confess that ʿAli is God's friend.

Creeds can be said to describe the viewpoint of a certain group in polemical relation to that of other groups. Thus, for example, the "We believe in . . . One Lord Jesus Christ . . . God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the father . . ."[50] of the Nicean creed, is obviously formulated in opposition to Arian theology, just as the "*lam yalid wa lam yûlad wa lam yakun lahu kufuan ahadun*" (he [i.e. God] begetteth not, nor is he begotten and there is none like unto him)[51] of Sura Ekhlās (No 112), which is constantly repeated in *namāz*, uses polemics against the Christian contemporaries of Mohammad. The *takbir* is somewhat more obvious in its polemics as it defines the community in contrast to international enemies as well as the Iranian dissidents referred to as the hypocrites. Furthermore, the *takbir* vaguely states its support for the conservative line of policy in the domestic political conflict, through the omission of Khātami's name and the repeated mentioning of Khāmene'i's.

Furthermore, a creed is socially uniting since it is regularly repeated under ritual circumstances as a sign of the homogeneity of the community. Christian creeds are always recited in services, as is the Jewish declaration of monotheism—the *shemaʿ*, and the Islamic *shahādat*, which is repeated in daily calls to prayer. The ritual repetition of *takbir* thus works as a united confession of the faith of the community, marking the unity of its members and manifesting their loyalty to the proclaimed ideology.

Dogmas confessed in creeds tend to be considered unquestionable. This unquestionable character is strengthened by the fact that the creeds are pronounced in ritual circumstances that charge them with the authority of religious truth. For the same reason, creeds rarely or never include any motives for the confessed doctrines. In the context of *namāz*, no questioning statements are uttered. The prayers recited are divinely revealed or authorised through the approbation of the Prophet or the Imams. *Namāz* is no forum for discussion or analysis but a secluded institution of emotion, surrender and worship where decrees given by God are attested.[52] For this reason the

[50] Quoted translation from Tanner 1990.
[51] Quoted translation from Yousuf ʿAli 1975.
[52] In his lecture on August 6th, 1999, the grand Ayatollāh also emphasised the importance of not questioning the words or the ritual performances of the *namāz*.

inclusion of the seemingly politically controversial *takbir* is especially remarkable and can be seen as way of manifesting conceived unquestionable character of the canonical viewpoints of the congregation. The Friday sermon is different since it is explicitly defined as a discussion of religious and political matters, given by religious leaders whose authority anyone is free to accept or defy. Thus, political slogans shouted in connection with Friday prayers cannot be understood as sanctified political manifestos in the same way as the ones constantly pronounced at evening prayers.

Finally, a creed is often in some way an expression of anxiety and of a feeling that it is necessary to definitely decide what the viewpoints of a religious movement are. Such a feeling is very unlikely to appear as long as the founder of the movement is still alive since he or she is always there to assist or restructure the dogmas in times of doubt or conflict. Rather, a creed is what followers construct to secure the survival of a movement and uphold its unity once the founding authority is gone. Thus it is finally worth noticing that the present *takbir*, viewed as the religious and political creed of modern Iran, would also fit with this criterion since it in this version allegedly came into existence after the death of Khomeyni.

By approaching the *takbir* as the creed of conservative ideology embraced in the mosque it becomes clear that it contributes to creating ideological borders around the community. Thus it can be seen as a tool of authorisation.

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed how the ritualised activities of the community contribute to the creation of authority. I have done so by utilising the concept of authorisation. I have defined this as the continuous social process through which the community is recreated and legitimised. It is a process which is generated through acts of speech and body that communicate reverence and respect to persons, times and places of significant symbolic importance to the community. I have suggested that the lectures and lamentations contribute to the authorisation in four ways. (1) Explicit appeals for obedience and respect of the religious authorities are the first. By ascribing importance to the religious leadership and by advising people not to question their decrees, such appeals contribute to the authorisation of the community. (2) The lectures and lamentations create and

encourage emotional identification with *Ahl-e beyt* among the community members. By being semantically identified with these, by being called to organise their lives in accordance with their rules and by being offered opportunity for emotional relief in listening to their tragedies, the listeners are called to develop emotional bonds to the *Ahl-e beyt*, which strengthens their loyalty. (3) The lectures and lamentations propose and encourage a sense of continuity. By identification with *Ahl-e beyt* and a Shi'ite historiography in which contemporary *'olamā* are perceived as legitimate heirs of the Imam's authority, a feeling of being essentially the same as revered Shi'ites in history arises. This perception of self promotes loyalty to the heritage that springs from these historical Shi'ites. (4) The lectures and lamentations are presented in a ritualised framework. Because the persons who deliver the lectures and lamentations as well as the time and place in which they are delivered are ritualised, greater respect will be paid to their decrees.

I ended the discussion with an analysis of how the prayer slogan known as *takbir* can be seen as an expression of the rituals' contribution to the authorisation process in the community. Thus, I have argued that the speeches the informants' listen to when going to the mosque, in many ways urge them to preserve the rules and manners of their community. By doing this, they contribute to the authorisation process as I have come to understand and define it. In the following chapter I will discuss how the informants adhere to this call and thereby elucidate the efficiency of the ongoing authorisation in their community.

CHAPTER SIX

CRUMBLING AUTHORITY?

> Now that Imam Zamān is absent we have the *ʿolamā*. They behave like the Prophet and therefore people like them.
>
> *Mostaʿār, 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 *ʿolamā*.

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 Mostaʿār 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 *ʿolamā* 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 *ʿolamā* as well as to the unseen Imam that these are thought to represent.

Exaltation of Authority—The Case of Mostaʿār

Among my informants Mostaʿār 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 *ʿālem*.

Mostaʿār 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 Mostaʿār 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, Mostaʿār 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 Mostaʿār 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 Mostaʿār and his fellow students at their *madrese* not far from the mosque. Usually I met Mostaʿār 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. Mostaʿār'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. Mostaʿār 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 Mostaʿār, to a large extent, shares with Amir, ʿAli and Mohammad Mahdi.

Imam Mahdi

The hidden Imam, Imam Mahdi,[2] is ever present in Mostaʿār's discussions on religious matters. He expresses a resilient trust and belief in the existence of this character and, in accordance with Shiʿite 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] Mostaʿār 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 Mostaʿār's ritual life is also prominent. Mostaʿār emphasises the necessity of prayer for his rapid return[7] and there are special supplications dedicated to Mahdi,[8] which Mostaʿār recites regularly.[9]

Amir, ʿAli and Mohammad Mahdi have beliefs regarding Mahdi which are very similar to Mostaʿār's. However, they are less definite in their opinion concerning how the level of the physical or meta-

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[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] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

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

[5] This green island, *Jazire-ye khozrā*, is well known in Shiʿite mythology.

[6] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001.

[7] Similar ideas are also proclaimed by the other informants. See, for instance: Jamie, April 15th, 2000; Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001; ʿAli, 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 *nā'eb 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 Khāmene'i, 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] Khāmene'i.[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 Khāmene'i. 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:

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[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 Shi'ite 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]

Mosta'ār'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 Khāmene'i. As Mosta'ār understands it, the godly leadership which Khāmene'i represents, is marked by God-fearing kindness and love. By ascertaining this on several occasions, he distinguishes the godly leadership of Khāmene'i 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 Mosta'ār. 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 Khāmene'i 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 *marja'*,[19] he argues, a person needs to have God's favour and to have close

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[14] Mosta'ār, May 14th, 2001.
[15] Mosta'ār, May 14th, 2001.
[16] 'Ali 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 man[21] 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 ʿOlamā

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

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

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

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[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] ʿAli, May 11th, 2001.
[26] This notion is based on an experience Mostaʿār had told me about earlier in which an *ʿālem* whom he respected gave his ring to a poor man.
[27] Mostaʿār, 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

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[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 *ʿolamā* 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 Moʿtazelism 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 Mostaʿār, Amir, ʿAli 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 though 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 Mostaʿār, ʿAli and Mohammad Mahdi, sincerely have very high thoughts concerning Shiʿite 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 ʿAli, 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.

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[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 se, 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 *nā'eb 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

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[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-din*.

that diverse opinions can exist among *ʿolamā*, the answers, on the other hand, have been that such a thing is possible. ʿAli, 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 *ʿolamā* 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'i[41]

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 *ʿolamā* are for the informants.

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[38] ʿAli 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. ʿAli, 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] Mostaʿār and Mohammad Mahdi represent the opinion that most *ʿolamā* 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" *ʿolamā* 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 *ʿolamā* are not trustworthy, that they may be corrupt and that they may not fulfil their divine responsibilities as satisfactorily as they themselves and the Shiʿite 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 *ʿolamā*'s authority but define this group, not as all *ʿolamā*, but as *ʿolamā* 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.

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[42] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 11th, 2001.
[43] Mostaʿār, May 14th, 2001; Jamie, April 27th, 2000.
[44] Jamie, April 27th, 2000.
[45] Mohammad Mahdi, May 31st, 2001.

The *ʿolamā* 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 Shiʿite 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 *ʿolamā* lacks significance in their own lives because they find it predictable and outdated. For instance, when I asked Amir about his *marjaʿ*, 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

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[46] *Resale*, or more correctly *ar-resālat ol-ʿamaliye*, is the treatise on practical laws concerning Islamic duties that a *mojtahed* or *marjaʿ* 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 *mollā*s 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:

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[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 *mollā*s 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]

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[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 ʿAli, which in Shiʿite 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

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[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-revolutionionary, 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 defendable 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 *ʿolamā* 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 *fèqh* 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

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[64] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[65] See, for instance, Jamie, May 26th, 2001.
[66] Mostaʿār, 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 *ʿolamā* as legitimate and the Shiʿite 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 *ʿolamā* who represent it.

The stories of Mostaʿār, 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 *ʿolamā* are not automatically seen as authorities. I have shown that all informants think that some members of the *ʿolamā* are corrupt and illegitimate. This notion implies that the traditional attributes of Shiʿite 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 *ʿālem* 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.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LECTURES AND LAMENTATIONS

> People! These four things are very important: the Zionist problem, the criminal America, bad friends and sexual desires. Who can withstand them?
>
> *The Ayatollāh, February 23rd, 2001*

I will now, for a while, leave the individual situations of the informants and focus on the mosque community as a whole. With this chapter, then, my intention is to present the content and message of the lectures and lamentations. The aim is to supply an idea of the ethical, theological, ideological and historiographical messages which the informants listen to when they participate in the institutionalised ritual activities of the mosque. During their periods of active participation, the informants have considered these canonical views to be expressions of the divine revelation they consider Islam to be. For this reason the messages preached in the mosque also play a most significant part in my analysis of their personal self-referential beliefs. It is the informants' beliefs and practices that constitute the main focus of this study. This chapter presents the input they get from the official authorities. It is not within the scope of the present study to deeply analyse the stylistic, rhetoric or homiletic aspects of Shi'ite preaching techniques. For such analyses the reader will have to look elsewhere.[1]

Although I have made every effort to present the content of the lectures as neutrally as possible, there should be no doubt that this is my interpretation of the lectures and lamentations. I would therefore designate the method I have used in this chapter as interpretative. This designation implies an awareness that my interpretation is coloured by my own background. The informants and their understanding of what is said in the mosque, however, also tint my

[1] See, for instance, Thurfjell 1997, Richard 1989, or Thaiss 1972: 352–358 and 1973: 341–410.

interpretation. Although this is the case, I think it is relevant to include a coherent presentation of the content of the official material in this study. The material is interesting and valuable in itself and therefore relevant to present in a coherent and structured way to the reader, not least since information about what is said in a conservative mosque in contemporary Iran is not easily available for English-speaking academia. All summaries, moreover, by necessity include an element of choice, and thereby also interpretation. The reader should be aware of this.

I make no point of highlighting differences between the various lecturers when I will present the content of their speeches in the following. The reason for this is that neither I, nor my informants, consider there to be any great differences in terms of message. Naturally, there are some differences in preaching style and minor variations in ideological and theological interpretation. Some of the preachers, for instance, have a more political apologetic profile whereas others are more philosophically oriented. Differences like these are obvious to my informants, who all have their personal favourites among the preachers and prayer leaders, but they do not change the general conservative profile, which is sustained by all preachers. The informants, then, are strongly convinced that the Islamic system, which the lectures and prayer meetings in all their variety aim to present, as such is coherent and homogeneous.[2] The hierarchic structure of Shi'ite *'olamā* also accounts for possible contradictions between religious authorities in such a way that any religious claim can be overridden if contradicted by a more revered religious scholar. Because of this, and because the informants, if asked, ascertain that they are not affected by differences between the various lecturers, I will not focus upon such differences either. Furthermore, the lecture material will be treated synchronically. Since the material has been gathered from a four-year period there may be longitudinal differences in it, but these will not be treated here since they are neither apparent to me nor observed by the informants.

The official material consists of 31 lectures and 46 lamentations from the various field trips. Among these, 18 lectures and 27 lamentations have been chosen for a more thorough analysis. In order to

[2] See for instance, Mohammad Mahdi, May 25th, 2001.

get a completely representative sample of the official material in the chosen mosque, a more extensive material would have been needed. The material used in this study, however, does give examples of the official material, which ought to be sufficient for the present analysis.

The lectures and lamentations referred to in the following have been given at different occasions. Some of them have occurred in connection with special holidays, and others are from more intimate occasions than the public ceremonies of the mosque. Some lamentations are from separate prayer meetings, while others were given in connection with a lecture. Most of the material, however, comes from the ordinary weekly Thursday-night sessions. The structure of the lectures on these occasions is always the same: After the evening prayer, the lecturer, usually the Ayatollāh, climbs the *manbar* and starts talking. The beginning is routine: a brief supplication in Arabic followed by repeated blessings of the Prophet and his progeny (*salavāt*) in which the listeners join in. Thereafter follows a lengthy discussion upon the chosen subject matter of the evening. This discussion is usually built up in such a way that the point the lecturer aims to make is supported with references to passages in the Koran, Hadith material (*revāyat*), anecdotes about famous *ʿolamā* and quotations from Persian classical poetry. The discussion, which usually goes on for about 45 minutes, concludes in an emotional lamentation in which one of the well-known tragedies (*mosibat*) from the lives of the *Ahl-e beyt* is described. Hearing this, most of the listeners hide their heads in their hands, beat their chests and sob mournfully. The whole session is ended with an Arabic supplication followed by a standardised call for God's blessing and help:

> Help Muslims and Islam! Make Vali-e ʿasr[3] appear sooner! Let our eyes behold him! Give us light and understanding, ability to be your servants, to be virtuous, to develop ourselves spiritually, to purify ourselves! Make Islam successful in the whole world as soon as possible! Answer all our prayers, especially those of the ones present here! Heal the pains of our society and people! Those who are lame! Solve the problems of all people, especially the poor and weak! Please elevate the position of those who served this country and were martyred, especially the Imam,[4] the *marjaʿ*s, *ʿolamā* and *basij*! Please stop those who

[3] *Vali-e ʿasr*, The Guardian of Age, is an epithet for the hidden Imam Mahdi.
[4] Imam in this circumstance denotes the late Imam Ruhollāh Khomeyni.

> weaken our society! Make the *basij* get rid of them! Let us be helped by the Koran and the *Ahl-e beyt* in this world and the other![5]

In the following I will present the lectures and the lamentations separately. Although they are often intermingled in the ceremonies, I consider it best to treat them separately. The reason for this is that they represent what could rightly be called different genres of religious speech. Genres can be differentiated from each other due to literary or linguistic style or content. Therefore, lectures and lamentations can be separated since the first category mostly consists of more or less abstract expositions whereas the latter mainly includes stories and prayers. Such a distinction is, however, too vague to be entirely satisfactory. Since the present material is taken from spoken discourse, I consider it more fruitful to distinguish its genres according to the social conventions which surround their telling. This way, the differences between the lectures and the lamentations will be far more obvious. When lectures are held, the listeners sit straight, face the lecturer and listen in concentration. Some take notes. When lamentations are given, on the other hand, people hide their heads in their hands and sob. Thus, it can be said that a genre signals that a certain kind of bodily response is expected. This response, in its turn, signals what kind of interpretation is appropriate. Thus, in order to understand a text one needs to know its genre,[6] and an appropriate categorisation of a material like mine, in order to make justice to the text, needs to be categorised, not according to the content or semantic characteristics of the material, but based on the social behaviour that surrounds its presentation.

Lectures

As mentioned above, the presentation technique of lectures consists of finding proof for a given viewpoint by referring to renowned Islamic texts and persons. This is not the place for an extensive presentation of the homiletic methods of Shiʿite *ʿolamā*. If I would venture to do that, the discussion would surely digress far from the field that this study aims to focus on. I will therefore confine myself to

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[5] Lecture, August 12th, 1999.
[6] Tonkin 1992: 2.

saying that there is a developed preaching technique, which is taught at Islamic seminars and highly revered by those who study there.[7] Instead, here I will concentrate upon the content of the lectures.

The following presentation is based on a categorisation of the lectures according to their various types of subject matter. Methodologically, I began by distinguishing the types of subject matter which repeatedly occur in the material. Altogether these were 32 different subject-categories,[8] which I organised in order of frequency and extension in the lectures. The following presentation is based on this organisation in the sense that I have primarily chosen to present the types of subject matter, that occur frequently and which the speakers dwell on at length. It has been my ambition to let my presentation be as close to the actual content as possible.

A majority of all the lectures concern ethics and morality. In the Islamic discourse this field is referred to as *akhlāq*. This can be defined as knowledge about how humans should behave in their ordinary life, towards family members and in society if they wish to live in accordance with Islamic revelation. In the Shi'ite school of thought, as in many other Islamic traditions, the well-being of the individual cannot be separated from the well being of society as a whole. Moral degeneration among individuals is therefore, besides the fact that it destroys the individual, considered to constitute a threat to society as a whole, just as political and cultural threats to a whole nation may beguile its individual citizens.[9] In the lecture material, the issue of personal morality is therefore intertwined with discussions on politics that concern society as a whole.

In the following I will present the content of the lecture material, as I have understood it. I will start by describing the lecturers' idea about the concept of virtue since I have found this to be the most

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[7] For a more extensive presentation of this, see, for instance, Fathi 1979, 1981, 1984 and 1987.

[8] The categories were: introduction; martyrs/*basij*; facts in connection to the discussion; obedience without questioning; ritual instructions; eschatology; prayer; politics and society; *mosibat*; concluding prayer; supernatural powers; *'erfān*; benefits of *salavāt*; innocence as opposed to sinfulness; *'olamā; akhlāq*; women and family; Imam Mahdi; identification; forgiveness and intercession; definitions of Shi'ism; the revolution; *tollāb* and *howze*; homage to individual persons; mourning; side issues; separation from God and the *Ahl-e Beyt*; Ayatollāhs; The mosque Ayatollāh; *rowze*; poetry and Thursday nights.

[9] See, for instance, Mutaharri, 1997: 41–42.

central and oft repeated issue in the message of the lectures. Thereafter, I will give examples of how the lecturers' describe this goal, the effects it will have, and their advice on how to achieve this. Finally, I will describe the political aspects of this idea as I have understood it.

Virtue—The Central Theme

Sincerity (*ekhlās*), humility (*khoshuʿ*) and awe (*khashiat*) are desirable characteristics in a religious personality in Islamic tradition.[10] Also in contemporary Iranian Shiʿism, and not least in Khomeyni's teachings, these qualities are stressed. Khomeyni strongly emphasised the importance of personal piety and development towards these qualities.[11] In the lectures of the present study, these desirable qualities are generally referred to as the concept of *taqvā*, virtue. When I present the content of the lectures I will do so by focusing on this concept. I do so for several reasons. To begin with, virtue is one of the most repeated subjects of the lectures. It is the concept and also the fundamental principle to which everything that is preached relates to. The lectures may be about prayer, eschatology, politics and many other topics. But all of these, as I have understood it, fall back on the issue of virtue. Therefore, it can rightly be singled out as the most central topic in the material. Furthermore, as I will show, the informants strongly emphasise the importance of this concept when they formulate and practice religion in their everyday lives.

From the lectures, then, a certain outlook on humanity can be distinguished. By this I mean that they clearly express an understanding of what the ideal purpose and goal of human life is and how this goal can be achieved. Central to this understanding is the concept of *taqvā*, which in English roughly corresponds to the terms virtue and piety but also to notions of abstinence and fortification.[12] *Taqvā* is explained to be a state of human development in which one is completely surrendered to God. In one lecture, the Ayatollāh describes this state in the following words:

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[10] Mahmood 2001a: 830.
[11] Brumberg 1997: 22–23.
[12] Aryanpour-Kashani 1995.

> This [*taqvā*] is when someone gets to a point where s/he subconsciously and automatically values the necessities. At this stage one will avoid committing sins subconsciously and will always consider oneself to be blamed before God. Subconsciously one always asks for God's forgiveness. Before God such a person considers her/himself and what s/he does as trivial, as nothing. And finally, subconsciously s/he knows her/himself to be guilty before God and is therefore ashamed. This is the meaning of *taqvā*.[13]

The virtuous person has surrendered to God and become satisfied with his or her situation to such an extent that s/he would willingly die following God's and his representatives' leadership, *velāyat*.[14] Such persons will be favoured and protected by God and cleansed from sin.[15] Sometimes, lectures ascertain that they will even be blessed with supernatural powers or that they will emit a sweet fragrance.

Significant terms that are connected to the concept of *taqvā* are those that denote purity in the sense of sinlessness. *Khāles* (pure) is such a word, as is the more general *pāk* (clean) or *maʿsum* (innocent or infallible), which is used exclusively about the fourteen infallibles, *chahārdah maʿsum*.[16] These terms are all connected to the ideal of virtuous purity that is upheld over and over again in the lecture material. *Taqvā* is considered to be the goal of human existence and a state of being that every human should try to reach. Furthermore, the lecturers are convinced that this can never be achieved without the help of God:

> God is the friend of the virtuous, a friend of believers, and because of this he takes her/him away from darkness to light. That is: from the darkness of bad characteristics to the light of *taqvā*; from the darkness of carnal desires[17] to the light of virtues; from the darkness of bad desires to the light of virtue. Instead of liking the world, s/he will like God. And from the darkness of bad friends, from all kinds of devils, s/he is dragged to a good friend.[18]

In this quotation lies the ambiguity towards the issue of free will that is predominant in the Twelver Shiʿite school of thought.[19] Humans

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[13] Lecture, August 12th, 1999.
[14] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[15] Lecture, August 12th, 1999.
[16] This term refers to the Prophet, his daughter Fāteme and the twelve Imams.
[17] The Persian word here translated as carnal desires is *Nafs-e ammāre*.
[18] Lecture, August 12th, 1999.
[19] See, for instance, Momen 1985: 178.

are considered to possess a free will (*ekhtiār*). This idea is linked to the notion of God's justice (*'adl*). At the same time, God, in his mercy (*lotf*), assists humans to fulfil the desires they have independently chosen. For this reason, the listeners at the lectures in the chosen mosque are both called to make an effort to strive towards *taqvā* and declared to be dependent upon the mercy of God in this striving.

Materialism and Cruelty

The lectures at the mosque are full of descriptions of the life style and attitude which a person striving towards virtue should try to adopt. Materialism, greed and disproportionate wealth are strongly dissuaded.[20] To become rich at the expense of others, to abuse other people's misery and not to pay back loans are strongly condemned,[21] and the listeners are frequently warned about becoming too wealthy when others are poor. The ideal of generous simplicity is given its great prototype in the lives of the Imams:

> Did our Imams have rich lives? Tell me when! Imam Sādeq met one of his Shi'ites and noticed that he needed two rooms but had six. He said: What is going on? Do something about these rooms so that you save them. We and our Shi'ites do not like luxury! You need a 200 square meter house, what is the use of 500? If you have too much money, buy two houses! You do not have to give it to the poor, give it to your brother or some relative that has no house! Your house needs two carpets, why do you have four on top of each other? Do you want to pose? For whom? For God?[22]

Other advice concern the way one treats other people. The listeners are advised to be kind,[23] to avoid cruelty and to respect the rights of people, *haqq on-nās*.[24] A virtuous person is said to be characterised by gentle kindness.[25] Gossip and backbiting are especially mentioned as they are considered to be particularly unfavourable sins.[26]

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[20] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[21] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.
[22] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[23] Lecture, April 21st, 2000.
[24] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.
[25] Lecture, April 21st, 2000.
[26] Lectures, April 21st, 2000 and April 26th, 2000.

> The system of Imam Hoseyn is against cruelty. If I hit my wife, is this Imam Hoseyn's or Shemr's[27] action? I ask you. If I hit my own child or an orphan or if I abolish students' rights[28] or if I have taken someone's property by force, is this Hoseyn's way or the way of 'Omar,[29] Yazid[30] and Shemr? Just think a while and your soul will tell you. Cruelty is not in Hoseyn's system, cruelty is anti-Imam Hoseyn. It is the enemy. Make sure the damnation we declare upon the enemy does not include ourselves.[31]

In this quotation the lecturer again finds the prototype of good behaviour in the lives of the Imams. He also connects to the issue of relations within the family, which is a frequent topic of the lectures. A virtuous person should respect his or her spouse, children and parents.[32] Special focus is that men should treat their wives and children without cruelty. According to one of the lecturers, "the Prophet is quoted saying: God will not be angry for anything more than when children or women are subjects of cruelty".[33] It is also emphasised that a part of taking care of one's children is to prevent them from yielding to the sinful deprivation of westernised youth culture. In one lecture this issue is spoken about in the following words:

> Look! Have you ever seen a person with a pair of scissors taking care of worthless thorn bushes? What wise person would do such a thing? It has no value. But roses are taken care of, apple trees and small gardens. If you like your children, take care of them. Do not just say: they are young. What kind of situation do we have here?[34]

Obsessive and Meaningless Behaviour

Connected to the importance of proper life style, there is—for me a surprisingly accentuated—stress on the dangers of obsessive neurotic

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[27] Shemr is the Ummayad soldier who killed Hoseyn according to Shi'ite tradition.

[28] This is likely to refer to the clashes between police and revolutionary forces that occurred in Tehrān and other Iranian cities in summer 1999. To express support for the students in this clash is very unusual in the chosen mosque, which generally keeps a more conservative profile. The lecturer who gave this sermon was, however, invited for a special occasion and not one of the usual *'olamā*.

[29] 'Omar is the second Sunni Caliph, in Shi'ite tradition accused of the murder of Fāteme Zahrā.

[30] Yazid is the Ummayad Caliph who ordered the slaying of Hoseyn.

[31] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.

[32] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.

[33] Lecture, April 27th, 2000.

[34] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.

behaviour, *vasvās*. In the time span covered by this study, the Ayatollāh held a series of five lectures solely concerning this problem in the mosque and the issue is brought up on several other occasions as well. Obsessive behaviour is explained to be a subtle way through which Satan destroys religious people by becoming a part of their own thoughts. Since he cannot fool them to commit more obvious sins, he tricks them into a neurotic attitude towards the rituals of Islam so that the ethical and theological essence of the religion disappears while its cursory aspects are overemphasised:

> This is *vasvās*. To do *ghosl*[35] for one hour, it is *harām*! It should take five minutes. *Vozu*[36] for half an hour, it is wrong! *Vozu* should be half a minute, one minute. Rubbing the eyes or arms and between fingers. This is against Islam. No *marjaʿ-e taqlid* says we should do it like this. /. . ./ The *vasvāsi* thinks the whole world is *najas*.[37]

Neurotic obsessive behaviour is, furthermore, described as a disease worse than cancer since it inevitably leads to hell, and extensive advice about how one can come to terms with it are given.[38] The strong condemnation of obsessive behaviour is partly motivated by the idea that humans have a potential to develop their spiritual capacity towards the state of *taqvā*, and that our lives, for this reason, should not be wasted on nonsensical actions or sin. In the lectures this exhortation is also extended to involve meaningless activity in general. In one of the lectures the Ayatollāh addresses this issue in the following words:

> Young people, make use of your life and your youth! In resurrection, before what you have done is dealt with and rewards or punishment are given, there is a session for asking questions, and if someone fails in this session, s/he will go to hell. The session is about two things. Firstly, they ask about your youth, how did you spend it? And secondly, how did you spend your life? They say: you could have spent your youth building the world for others! You could have spent it to come to know God! But what did you do? They tell some old man: seventy years and what did you do? You repeated the same things: eat, go to work, go to the office, return, eat again, watch television, sleep, wake up, breakfast again, work again and so on. This is very

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[35] *Ghosl* is the big ritual ablution.
[36] *Vozu* is the small ritual ablution.
[37] Lecture, February 23rd, 2001. *Najas* means impure.
[38] Lectures, April 26th, 2000 and February 23rd, 2001.

> bad! /. . ./ You people with obsessive behaviour! Isn't it unworthy that you, who should reach the level when angels come down to talk to you, let Satan come in to your hearts?[39]

It may be important to point out that one distinguishing feature of the Shi'ite tradition is its special focus on cleanliness and purity. Not only do Shi'ites venerate the supreme purity of their fourteen infallibles in ways which differ from Sunni Muslim tradition, Shi'ite jurisprudence is also often more strict in its regulations of what can be considered pure. This is especially noticeable in the position of *Ahl-e ketāb*. In Ja'fari tradition these are more often considered impure than is the case in the four Sunnite schools of jurisprudence.[40] This fact may help shed some light on the background to the lecturers' focus on obsessive observation of purity.

Men and Women

Among the important issues of personal behaviour is the idea of gender roles. Although these roles are rarely spoken about explicitly, the stories about Ahl-e beyt and other prominent characters constitute role models and images of the perfect men and women, and it is clear that the way to *taqvā* is slightly different for men and women. It is everybody's duty to live in accordance with the laws and regulations set forth by Islam. Being a patriarchal tradition, this implies that, when it comes to relations between the sexes, it falls on the lot of women to safeguard their chastity through proper clothing and behaviour, whereas it falls on the lot of men to control their sexual desires. Although these rules, from a confessional point of view, call for equal but different codes of conduct, women are often described as more inclined to "slip" than men. This is especially true when it comes to *hejāb*, the Islamic dress code. On several occasions women are described as fooled by the devil to ignore the Islamic dress code and thereby be destroyed:

> He [Satan] tells the women their fringe should be uncovered and says that *chādor* is outdated and narrow-minded, that one should be innovative. In this way he fools them.[41]

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[39] Lecture, May 3rd, 2001.
[40] For a detailed presentation of these differences, see for instance Bakhtiar 1996.
[41] Lecture, February 23rd, 2001.

In these discussions there is a notion that there is potential sin within all humans. This sinfulness is encouraged by Satan but controlled by the Islamic regulations. If this sinfulness were to be let loose, it would ruin both society and its individuals, whose potential spiritual fulfilment would be hindered. Women are warned not to slip, and thereby both ruin their own salvation and tempt men so that they are ruined as well. Men are asked to dissuade or warn these women, a task which in the rhetoric of the chosen mosque is felt to be needed because of the general decline of revolutionary ideals in Iranian society as a whole:

> I see a war cripple without legs having difficulties! Men in wheelchairs who are not being paid attention to! We see this, but a woman with cosmetics and make up makes the shopkeepers want to perform summersaults of joy and do anything for her? And when a war cripple [*jānbāz*] says he is a war cripple, they answer that he didn't have to go to war. You fake Muslims without conscience! Do you think Saddām would be nice to our women?[42]

Virtue—Why, Who and How?

According to the lectures the state of *taqvā* in itself is the most favourable and complete way for a human being to lead his or her life. In addition to that the characteristics of good human conduct which are presented in the mosque are motivated by their positive effects on society as a whole and by the punishment which God will bring down on those who ignore the revealed laws. God, it is emphasised, sees everything and will punish those who do not regret their sins and amend their ways.[43] The lecturers repeatedly stress that this is not a joke but something to be taken very seriously:

> The sins [of those we have maltreated] will come on our own report cards! We will suffer for them! We are going to God! Really! /. . ./ Our prophet says that God has sworn on his greatness that before the resurrection he will take revenge [on those who have sinned].[44]

The lecturers address the congregation of the mosque. In their speeches this becomes apparent since many issues which are brought

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[42] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[43] Lecture, August 12th and 23rd, 1999.
[44] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.

up directly concern the everyday life of bazaar-people. It is also frequently stated that education is not necessary to become virtuous. Strong determination, intense ritual activity and devotion are enough.[45] This is a statement which probably is comforting for the majority of people with limited education who come to the mosque. Furthermore, the lecturers often turn directly to the younger listeners in the mosque. Young people are, it seems, believed to be more likely to submit to the temptations of sin and therefore more in need of encouragement and guidance.[46]

To reach the state of *taqvā* is, believed to be something very difficult especially for the young. This is stated clearly in the lectures,[47] and the lecturers therefore give the listeners practical advice of what they can do to become virtuous. One such piece of advice is to try to lead one's life in such a way that one does not even come close to sin. The sins themselves should, of course, be avoided. However, even tolerated behaviour that could lead to sin is advised to be shunned.[48] One such risky thing is to have bad friends. The concept of bad friends appears to refer to non-religious people in general, and by seeing such people one risks being attracted by their life style and thereby risk slipping.[49] Furthermore, the listeners are recommended to simply tolerate their difficulties. Life is often full of suffering, but by accepting this, one can be strengthened.[50] In addition people are advised to find strength in the lives of *Ahl-e beyt*, whose deeds are seen as perfect role models of behaviour. The most crucial thing which humans should do in order to become virtuous is, however, to seek refuge and help from God.[51] This is the only way if one wishes to get to the root of the problem.[52] If God accepts our prayers, he will make our lives and desires virtuous.[53] The Ayatollāh expresses this thought in the following words:

> God says in the Koran: I am the teacher of *akhlāq* and nobody can be self-made, no one else can be a teacher of *akhlāq*, I am the one.

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[45] Lecture, August 12th, 1999.
[46] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.
[47] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[48] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.
[49] Lectures, April 26th, 2000 and February 23rd, 2001.
[50] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[51] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.
[52] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[53] Lecture, April 19th, 2000.

> My blessings are necessary for a person who wants to improve and uproot bad characteristics. The Koran says: If God's forgiveness didn't exist no one would be [virtuous]. The Koran says: for the person who cannot do anything by him/herself, God is the one. God uproots the tree of bad things and replaces it with the tree of positive growth.[54]

Ritual Instructions

The best way to gain the help of God is to follow his commandments. An important way of doing this is by fulfilling religious duties. In the lecture material the importance of ritual activity is constantly emphasised. Instruction concerning ritual ablution (*vozu*), congregational participation and regular prayer (*namāz*) constitute a substantial part of the lectures' content. The listeners are called to follow these instructions without asking too many questions. Islamic ritual law is of divine origin and is not to be questioned.[55] The lecturers assure the congregation that there is always a reason for the commandments, even if we do not always know what it is:

> Who can say the reason for what God has done? Nobody! But we should know that there always is a reason. All this wisdom, all these instructions in the prophetic message have their reasons, but not even the *marja*ʿs themselves need to look for them.[56]

Among all the ritual duties of Muslims, the congregational *namāz* is the one most emphasised. Finding support in the example of the Prophet,[57] the lecturers deem it extraordinarily beneficial to pray regularly. Especially if one has a pure heart,[58] one prays in a mosque[59] or behind an *ʿālem*.[60] The prayers are beneficial, not only for the individual who prays but for society as a whole. Sometimes, it seems, the very existence of humanity is described as being upheld by the prayers of the faithful:

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[54] Lecture, April 12th, 2001.
[55] Lectures, August 5th, 1999 and September 2nd, 1999.
[56] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.
[57] Lecture, August 26th, 1999.
[58] Lecture, April 20th, 2000.
[59] Lamentation, August 12th, 1999.
[60] Lecture, April 19th, 2000.

> God removes bad things from you because of those who say prayers. [God does this] to those who do not say prayers as well, and if nobody said prayers, all people would be destroyed. /. . ./ Because of the flowers the thorns also get their water.[61]

Prayer, furthermore, must not be superficial or exaggerated. It must be done with sincere ambition and without either rushing or being extravagant.[62] One should also avoid being too focused on worldly matters when praying. For those who are really virtuous the sole desire expressed in prayer is to reach the state of *taqvā*. The Ayatollāh illustrates this point with the following story:

> A great person told me /. . ./ that he had visited Imam Zamān at Hoseyn's tomb. Imam Zamān asked him to listen to people's prayers and gave him the ability to hear these. He heard: 'I don't have a wife, give me a wife!', 'Give my daughter a good husband!', 'I owe some money, help me!'. Others were slightly better: 'Give me heaven!', 'Let us be with Hoseyn!', things like this. Then the Imam sighed and said: 'Look! nobody prays via me, they all think about themselves.' /. . ./ Do you ever ask God to give you the status of satisfaction? /. . ./ Our prayers are low level. They do not have the right status. We say what God should do. This is wrong towards the *Ahl-e beyt*. We tell God what to do and when it is not answered we say: 'We asked for a wife but no one comes!' We complain! This is our situation. It is not surrendering. For those who are really pure it is blasphemy![63]

From this quotation it also becomes apparent that ritual activity, besides being beneficial for the individual and the whole of humanity, is a matter of respect for *Ahl-e beyt*. This respect is furthermore emphasised in the calls for *salavāt* that are constantly given by the lecturers. *Salavāt* is described as being very beneficial for those who say it.[64]

Political Historiography

The question of politics is, as may already have become obvious, intertwined with the discussions of morality. The political message is indistinguishable from the ethical. There is, however, a political

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[61] Lecture, April 20th, 2000.
[62] Lecture, April 26th, 2000.
[63] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[64] Lectures, August 23rd, 1999, April 22nd, 2000 and April 27th, 2000.

historiography that frequently becomes noticeable in the material. This historiography describes the situation in the present Iranian society in relation to the country's political events during the latest thirty years. It can be summarised as follows: During the Pahlavi-era, forces that aimed at destroying Islam brought harm to the Iranian society. With the Islamic revolution, these forces were driven out and an Islamic society was established. This society was built to facilitate an individual and a societal striving towards *taqvā* and to implement the ideology sent to humankind through Islamic revelation. The Ayatollāh describes the impact of the revolution in the following words:

> Remember that if it hadn't been for the revolution there would not have been any Islam in Iran today! /. . ./ They had decided to destroy Islam. They had decided to remove Shi'ism from Islam. They wanted to make Iran a secular republic, but little by little signs of disapproval appeared, signs that would not let this happen. Imam Khomeyni didn't let it happen: this regime, this revolution, the victory of the revolution is the victory of Islam![65]

Since the very beginning of the new system enemies have tried to destroy the Islamic system and reclaim Iran in different ways. The Iraqi invasion and the eight years of war that followed was a severe threat to this system. The help of God and the sacrifices of the martyrs defeated the invasion. Now, having survived the war, the Islamic system is threatened again. But, although the enemy is the same, the threat comes in a different form this time. Facing this, it is the duty of the virtuous to defend the Islamic regime and the values that it represents.

External and Internal Enemies

Both political enemies in the international arena and domestic cultural and political problems compound the new threat to the Islamic system in Iran, according to the lecture material. In accordance with Shi'ite tradition, no clear distinction is made between the general political predicament and the problems of the individual; they are intermingled and treated holistically as interdependent of each other.

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[65] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.

If, in spite of this, a distinction could be made for the sake of clarity in this presentation, I find it suitable to categorise the threats as internal (*dākhel*) and external (*khārej*) since this formulation is sometimes used in general prayers that refer to the enemy.

The internal enemy is the situation in Iranian society and the people who uphold it. To a certain extent this concerns economic problems, social injustice and an increasing gap between rich and poor people.[66] Most predominant, however, is the phenomenon which some of the lecturers, using the terminology of the Supreme leader ʿAli Khāmene'i, designate as cultural insecurity.[67] This term refers to the general moral decline they claim to find among Iranian people, especially the young.[68] The so-called cultural insecurity manifests itself in many ways. One is a lack of respect towards Islam and Islamic authority. The press, it is stated on several occasions, continuously insult Islam. Religiously uneducated people, disrespectful of *ʿolamā* and *marjaʿ*s, make dilettante statements about what Islam stands for and what a Muslim society should be like.[69] Ordinary people tolerate these insults and tacitly watch as their society is destroyed.[70] A most emphasised aspect of the "cultural insecurity" is increasing openness which marks relations between young men and women in Iranian society. Although this aspect is rarely spoken about explicitly, it is implicit in many lectures and constantly referred to in a roundabout way. In one of the more outspoken discussions on the issue, the lecturer eloquently summarises his idea of the situation in the following words:

> Those who are married will be tempted to sin, let alone those who are not yet married. What is the fault of a young person. Should s/he stay in a cage? Should s/he not go to university? Why? Because the universities are centres of corruption! /. . ./ Like the university in Esfahān, where girls were caught using opium. It is clear what kind of university this is! So, don't go to universities! Parks? No way! The parks are centres of hashish and opium and other devilish tricks and they are apparently taking hashish there, even the girls! Don't go to

[66] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[67] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[68] Lectures, August 12th, 1999 and August 23rd, 1999.
[69] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[70] Lecture, May 3rd, 2001.

> parks! Sports? Stadiums are the centres of corruption! Forget about sports! The bazaar? What! Even if there are some good things there too, the bazaar is the centre of tricking and making illegal benefit. Do not go to the bazaar either! Marriage? Don't marry! You need a car, a house, ceremonies, you will have a hard time. This young person can die as well![71]

In this case the lecturer continues his discussion, referring back to the revolution and the war:

> Did we have our revolution, so many martyrs, so many paralysed and prisoners of war, so that we could return to the Shah era? Then why did we do it? Why did we have this revolution? Why are all these martyrs in the Golestān-e Shahidān?[72] So that the rich will be even richer? So that the son of a rich man can pay his way out of military service, have private teachers and go abroad, whereas the son of a poor family has to go to military service, feel inferior and not be able to go to the university? Is this why we had our revolution? The same old story! The martyrs will blame us![73]

Internal problems are related to the external enemy. They are believed to be the result of negative cultural influences and a secular ideology that comes from abroad.[74] Sometimes this influence is referred to as a cultural invasion, *tahājom-e farhangi*, which is believed to be controlled by the prime enemies of the Islamic Republic, namely the United States and Israel. In the lecture material used in this study these states are, however, not explicitly spoken about very often. The *akhlāq*-oriented lectures are not the proper forum for discussions about international politics. Such discussions are paid attention to especially in Friday-sermons, which are held in another mosque. This does not mean that there are no anti-American or anti-Zionist sentiments in the mosque. On the contrary, such feelings are very strong. They are also continuously revealed in hints and implicit references to the United States and Israel, and clearly expressed in the political slogan (*takbir*) that concludes each prayer-session.

It is significant that outer and inner enemies are seen as interdependent and intermingled categories. It is not always clear whether

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[71] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[72] "Garden of Martyrs", a special cemetery for those killed in the Iran-Iraqi war.
[73] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[74] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.

it is global politics or the individual's inclination to sin that is spoken of in the lectures. This ambiguity is not unknown in Persian literary traditions. On the contrary, it is a central characteristic in the country's literature. Persian prose and poetry alike, not least the rich heritage of mystic poetry, is imbued with metaphoric speech of an ambiguous kind. For instance, it is common that what may seem to be a panegyric poem can be interpreted as an expression of physical love or religious piety alike, and vice versa.

Defenders of Virtue

The religious authorities and their followers stand against the internal and external enemies. The lecturers frequently comment upon the praiseworthiness of these groups, to which they themselves belong. In the description of the defenders there is a clearly distinguishable line of command. At the top of this line is Imam Mahdi,[75] although this cosmic leader is mostly absent from everyday struggles, he is believed to be the ultimate source of power and the ultimate supervisor of the struggle that Muslims go through. The Ayatollāh describes the hidden Imam's illustrious role in the following words:

> Mahdi is the pillar of the universe, around him the world pivots, he is the mediator between that world and this world. If you are sitting here now, if you are wise, if you have logic and understanding, if you are healthy, if you can hear, all of this is because of Imam Zamān.[76]

The Persian word used to denote the leadership of Mahdi and the Imams before him is *velāyat*. It is not insignificant that this is also the word used to designate the leadership of the Islamic Republic, both officially in the constitution, which is called *velāyat-e faqih* (leadership of the jurisprudent), and when the leadership is referred to in a more general way in the lectures. The Supreme leader, *rahbar*, of the Islamic Republic and the jurisprudents who support his authority are, in the view of the lecturers, the representatives of *velāyat* in

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[75] Imam Mahdi is the hidden 12th Imam in Twelver Shi'ite tradition. In the material many names are used for him. Among these the most common, besides Imam Mahdi, are Imam Zamān (Imam of Time), Vali-e 'asr (Guardian of Age), Sāheb-e zamān (Lord of Time), or Ebn-e al-Hasan (Son of Hasan, i.e. Hasan Askari, the 11th Imam). For a presentation of this character and his role in Twelver Shi'ite theology, see, for instance, Momen 1985: 161–171.

[76] Lecture, August 26th, 1999.

today's Iran.[77] This notion attaches much importance to the *ʿolamā*. In addition to this importance, *ʿolamā* are repeatedly praised in the lectures. It is said that Islam would perish if it was not for the *ʿolamā*,[78] that someone who has not met an *ʿālem* for a long time will become cruel, that someone who often sees *ʿolamā* will stay young, that the position of *ʿolamā* in paradise is especially high and so forth.[79] The authority of *ʿolamā* is further emphasised by the *ʿolamā* lecturing in the mosque. Likewise, attempts to question this authority, as can be found among critical journalists and others in contemporary Iran, are strongly rejected. On one occasion the Ayatollāh comments on the tendency among lay people to make statements about religious matters in this way:

> This is very unwise and such stupidity causes problems for us, the rudeness in the universities towards Islam, these newspapers insulting the Prophet, insulting the Koran. This is disastrous and worse than any kind of bomb for the earth, for our society and for our children. All this nonsense they talk! As the Imam[80] said: 'intervention in such matters is like the *hammām*-workers[81] intervention in a minister's affairs.' You little boys! You should study your lessons; this has nothing to do with you![82]

Behind *ʿolamā* stand *basij*, the mobilisation forces. This group is habitually mentioned in connection with the *ʿolamā* and, since they are seen as purified and especially favoured by God, their virtue and societal importance is constantly declared and praised.[83]

The basij of today are also, naturally, connected to the martyrs of the war. It could be argued that their high position is due to their situation as "potential martyrs". There is no doubt, however, that the role of the basij-organisation during the war earned them the status they carry in conservative circles today. The martyrs, who are those who were killed in the revolution or in the war with Iraq, are much revered by the lecturers. Iranian society is indebted to the martyrs. This is an often-repeated argument for the political viewpoint

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[77] Lectures, August 23rd, 1999 and September 2nd, 1999.
[78] Lecture, August 26th, 1999.
[79] Lecture, April 20th, 2000.
[80] Imam here refers to Imam Khomeyni.
[81] *Hammām* is a bathhouse.
[82] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.
[83] Lecture, September 2nd, 1999.

held by the lecturers. All those who were killed in the war are considered to have sacrificed their lives for the Islamic system, which the conservative *ʿolamā* of the mosque stand for. These martyrs are thus, to a certain extent, used as a pretext for implementing that view of Islam on society as a whole. People must not forget the war and its martyrs. This is an exhortation which is frequent in the lectures, and which springs from this idea. In one lecture this is expressed as follows:

> We must not forget the war, forgetting would not be honest and the worst characteristic a person can have is to be disloyal. /. . ./ We should be loyal. If it weren't for the martyrs and the prisoners of war, Saddām would rule here now![84]

Although the lecturers constantly emphasise the importance of struggling against moral and political deterioration in society, their general attitude about the future must be described as optimistic. Even if there may be problems now, Islam will one day be the prosperous: "The flag of Islam will surely fly higher in the world, if not today, tomorrow, if not tomorrow, the day after tomorrow. What God has said will surely come true. At last The Prophet will be successful."[85]

The enemies of Islam are doomed to fail. In one lecture the secular Turkish army and their determination to fight Islamist groups in their country is mocked:

> The Turkish army had a meeting, they said they would stand in the way of the Islamists: 'We will not let Islam progress here!' they said. They were firm and decisive. Just like the sparrow that was attacking a big tree and said 'be sure I will cut you off!' and the tree answered: 'I didn't see when you came nor when you left, you little man!'[86]

Thus, I have tried to summarise the main topics brought up and discussed in the lecture material. Suggesting that the main emphasis in this material lies in discussions on *akhlāq*. In this case it is the Islamic ethical system that places virtue, *taqvā*, as the primary goal of human life. A virtuous person, according to the lectures, is characterised by humility, friendliness, religious orientation and struggling against sin. These goals, furthermore, all find their expression in a

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[84] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.
[85] Lecture, August 5th, 1999.
[86] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.

love for *Ahl-e beyt*[87] and in following Islam's ritual commandments. By striving towards virtue, a person or a community does not only avoid divine punishment, but also facilitates societal improvement in this world. In order to be able to do this, the listeners are advised to completely avoid sin and anything that might tempt to sin, and instead seek help and refuge in God by following his commandments, not least by regular prayer. The lecturers, furthermore, discuss the problem of being virtuous in connection to the political and social problems they see in Iranian society. In this discussion two camps are portrayed: the enemy, composed by the United States and Israel and the moral degeneration they are believed to inflict on Iranian society, and the defenders, i.e. the *ʿolamā* and those who follow them. In the struggle between these two camps, Islam, represented by the *ʿolamā*, will ultimately be victorious.

Lamentations

The lamentations, which I will now present, are given different names when referred to in Persian. The word *mosibat*, which literally means tragedy, is used by the lecturers to designate tragic stories from the lives of the *Ahl-e beyt* that are retold in connection to the lectures. The word *rowze* literally means garden and originates from the name of Vāʿez Kāshefi's book Rowzat osh-shohadā (The garden of Martyrs), which was composed in the early 16th century and was read at gatherings for the commemoration of Karbalā.[88] Today the word is used for these gatherings themselves. In the following presentation I will not differentiate between these two kinds of sorrow meetings. Instead I will treat them as two forms of the Shiʿite commemorative ritual tradition in which listeners are encouraged to cry while listening to prayers and/or the retelling of tragic incidents from the lives of *Ahl-e beyt*.[89] In addition to the *mosibat* at the ends of lectures and the explicit *rowze* meetings in the mosque, lamentations in connection with other supplications, chiefly *Doʿā-ye Komeyl*, and informal small-scale *rowze* meetings are included in my material.[90]

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[87] Lecture, April 19th, 2000.
[88] Chelkowski 1995: 465.
[89] This ritual tradition is sometimes referred to as *majāles-e ʿazā*.
[90] For a presentation of the historical roots of Shiʿite rituals in Iran, see, for instance, Calmard 1996 or Hussain 2005.

Although the occasions vary, the prayer leaders' presentation technique and arrangement are usually similar. A certain episode from the Karbalā incident or some other significant Shi'ite tragedy is retold in great detail. This is intermingled with references to the situation of those gathered, appeals to these to take the opportunity to pray,[91] prayers for God's help and forgiveness, poetry,[92] and sometimes political statements. It is common that the prayer leader sobs mournfully while talking. Sporadic calls for the crowd to do the same are not uncommon.

The following presentation is based on 46 lamentations. 28 of these have been given in connection to the above presented lectures and the remaining 18 were given at separate prayer meetings. 27 lamentations have been chosen for a more thorough analysis. I have categorised this material in the same way as I did the lectures. This resulted in 13 types of subject matter besides the related tragedies.[93] The following presentation is based on this categorisation.

The purposes of the lamentations, according to the prayer leaders themselves, are manifold. To begin with there is an explicit intention to give the listeners an opportunity for emotional relief.[94] To achieve this, the listeners are called to identify with the *Ahl-e beyt*,[95] and to see these as examples for the listeners' own lives. One of the lecturers express this opportunity in the following words:

> Which religion in the world is like Shi'ism? Which has an example for women like Zahrā or an example for men like 'Ali? Tell our youngsters to see how 'Ali and Hoseyn lived! For brave men we have Hazrat-e 'Abbās, for women in pain, Zeynab! Our religion is full of examples. What a good religion we have![96]

To listen to and cry with the lamentations is also considered to be spiritually beneficial and the crying is sometimes explained to function as a prayer in itself.[97]

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[91] *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, August 12th, 1999.
[92] *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, August 26th, 1999.
[93] These types of subject matter were: call to pray for others; about prayer; prayer for Shi'ites; separation from God and the *Ahl-e Beyt*; death; Imam Mahdi; crying; call for people not to sin; prayer for forgiveness and declarations of failure; pilgrimage; God's revenge; homage to *'olamā*, especially Khāmene'i; and God.
[94] Lecture, May 9th, 2001.
[95] Lecture, April 27th, 2000.
[96] Lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[97] Lecture, May 3rd, 2001.

Stories

I have chosen not to relate the tragedies of the *Ahl-e beyt* in detail here. Such a venture would be far too lengthy and would not serve the immediate purpose of this presentation. Instead, I will summarise the general themes of these stories and try to pinpoint some of the ideas that they convey. The major theme of the tragedies is the unjust oppression of innocent people, a theme that in Shi'ite historiography finds its foremost example in the sufferings of the *Ahl-e beyt* who are seen as the most innocent and unjustly oppressed. Connected to this theme is the reminder of people's (i.e. those who attend the prayer meetings) own sinfulness and the prayers for forgiveness.

Most of these stories deal with the Karbalā incident (the heroism of Abolfazl, the martyrdom of Hoseyn's sons 'Ali Asghar and 'Ali Akbar, the death of Hoseyn himself, the sorrow and courage of his sister Zeynab, the grief of the girl Roqaye and so forth).[98] Other stories are about Fāteme Zahrā (her martyrdom at the hands of 'Omar, her burial and the sorrow of 'Ali and her sons) or Khadije (her death, the sorrow of the Prophet and so on). There are also several stories that relate people's encounters with Imam Mahdi. The following example about the death of Khadije will hopefully give the reader an idea of the character of these stories and the empathy and vivid style with which they are presented:

> The Prophet sat beside Khadije on the last day of her life. He said: 'Do you have anything to say?' 'I have two things' she answered, 'first: forgive me'. He said: 'I forgive', 'You are so generous to me, second: I have brought you children but they all died, two or three boys, and three girls and a fourth girl which is Fāteme'. At that time she was five years old. 'I will only be remembered by Fāteme and she will be motherless, she may become impatient. O Prophet! You have to be her mother. Please be kind to her!' 'Be sure!' said the Prophet 'I will do what I can'. Khadije said: 'I want to say a third thing to you but I am ashamed, I will say it to Fāteme and she will tell you.' The Prophet left and Zahrā came, Khadije told her: 'I am afraid of the grave, the loneliness. I want your father to shroud me in the clothes he wore when he first was inspired. Then God will forgive me and I

[98] For a thorough presentation of these stories, see, for instance, al-Mufid (no date) or Ahmad Ali 1987.

> won't suffer, but I cannot tell your father.' How polite she is. She gave everything and she is ashamed for this. The Imams were proud of her. The Prophet came in, Zahrā told him what her mother wanted. He said: 'Of course I will do it!' /. . ./ O Prophet! When your daughter lost her mother you soothed her![99]

Most stories, like this one, focus on the death of a person and the reaction this causes among family members. The patience and devoutness with which the *Ahl-e beyt* have carried their sorrows are, hereby, often emphasised. Sometimes an explicit moral lies in this, as in the following example about the martyrdom of Hoseyn's infant son 'Ali Asghar:

> [Hoseyn] held up his child. 'People can't you see? my child is about to die! Look at it people!' and there is a message for Shi'ites in this story. /. . ./ because as he was talking an arrow came. Hoseyn looked down and saw that the arrow had hit his child and that his head was falling back. He talked to God, and in this is the message, he said: 'Since it is for you it is easy!'[100]

Cosmology

Besides presenting the *Ahl-e beyt* as examples of ideal behaviour, their incomparable position in Shi'ite cosmology is sometimes touched upon in the lamentations. Mystical discussions on the cosmic function of the *Ahl-e beyt* are important in Iranian Shi'ite tradition. Although the gnostic cosmology developed by Iranian thinkers such as Sohravardi or Mollā Sadrā[101] is not at all referred to in the lecture material of the present study, its influence sometimes shines through in the lamentations. On one occasion the prayer leader connects to this tradition while speaking about Fāteme Zahrā in the following poetic words:

> Zahrā was the star in the sky of messengers. Zahrā, whose orders are followed by everyone, was the one who sat behind the curtain of the Prophet, the one who was very patient. My everything is devoted to you. If being innocent is the wheel of the cosmos, she is its shining star. If not committing sins is a sea, she is its pearl. If esoteric knowledge ['*erfān*] is a necklace, she is its jewel. If belief is a compass, she is its fixed centre.[102]

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[99] Lamentation in connection to lecture, April 28th, 2000.
[100] Lamentation in connection to lecture, September 2nd, 1999.
[101] For a thorough presentation of this cosmology see, for instance, Corbin 1990.
[102] Lamentation in connection to lecture, August 23rd, 1999.

Political Statements

Occasionally there are also political statements intertwined in the lamentations. This is especially apparent at the *Do'ā-ye Komeyl* gatherings, since young, politically engaged men belonging to the *basij*-organisation often read that prayer. Political statements in the lamentations are often short polemic references to the international enemies of the Islamic Republic: the United States, Israel or Saudi Arabia.[103] More often, however, they are calls for support of the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, 'Ali Khāmene'i, or regretful complaints about the declining situation in Iranian society:

> I am ashamed. /. . ./ I do not do my duty towards my leader. The leader has become lonely. /. . ./ Things have become so bad that in his speeches His Excellency has to support the *Sepāh*[104] and *basij*, since they are no longer respected. At the time of the Imam,[105] *basij*, the revolutionary forces and the *'olamā* all supported the Imam but now he has to support everybody! May I die for him![106]

Human Sinfulness and Dependence on God

I have thus tried to exemplify how the lamentations, through the stories they convey, include moral exhortations, mystical references and political statements. These aspects of the lamentations are in my view, however, only secondary to the main message of the tragedies and prayers. I would like to propose that the major message which the material conveys is of theological concern and circles around the notion of the sinfulness of humankind and complete dependence on God. In the following I will present this central message of the lamentations.

Humans tend to be sinful and incomplete. Human existence in this world is therefore characterised by separation from God. Through the divine revelation, which Islam is, and the holy family who are the foremost conveyers of this revelation, humans are given the opportunity to be purified and devoted, mokhles, and thereby given a chance to come closer to God. The prayers, which are said in the

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[103] Lamentation in connection to lecture, August 23rd, 1999.
[104] *Sepāh* is the revolutionary forces.
[105] Here referring to Khomeyni.
[106] *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, April 20th, 2000.

lamentations, mostly express a wish for this to happen, in this world or the next. These prayers, therefore, naturally often focus upon death.[107] In the hereafter, many prayer leaders declare, those who have been faithful will be saved;[108] they will meet Hoseyn and the *Ahl-e beyt* and their separation from God will come to an end. In this world, the final end to the separation will come with the parousia of Imam Mahdi. This future event is something that is constantly returned to in the lamentations.[109] Before that, however, prayer and devotion to Islam and the *Ahl-e beyt* can bring humans closer to God.[110] On a small-scale *rowze*, my informant Mohammad Mahdi expresses his desire to end the separation. He also emphasises the value of religious activity by praying to God in the following words:

> These spiritual moments, being close to you, talking to you, we don't know its value. God! Our sins, my sins keep me away from you. /. . ./ By your Koran, tonight and day by day, let us taste the sweetness of remembering you, bring us closer to *Ahl-e beyt* and Koran![111]

The urge to be forgiven is closely linked to the desire of being close to God. The prayer leaders often express that they are ashamed of their sinfulness,[112] but that they trust in and are completely dependent on God's forgiveness.[113] During a *Do'ā-ye Komeyl* meeting, these thoughts were expressed as follows:

> How much haven't I committed sins that you have forgiven? How much haven't I repented and then committed them again? O my God! I hope my sinful deeds will not cause you to put me to shame.[114] You have covered me whenever I have committed a sin. You haven't put me to shame. My God! I've come again, empty handed, I have nothing. /. . ./ God forgive me! I am a sinner! I am small! I am nothing! I am miserable! I have nowhere else to go but to you. If you push me away where shall I go?[115]

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[107] Mohammad Mahdi, small-scale *rowze*, May 20th, 2001 and *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, April 17th, 2001.

[108] lamentation in connection to lecture, April 20th, 2000.

[109] *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, August 12th, 1999.

[110] Mohammad Mahdi, small-scale *rowze*, May 20th, 2001 and *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, April 17th, 2001.

[111] Mohammad Mahdi, small-scale *rowze*, May 20th, 2001.

[112] Blaming oneself is a well-known theme in Persian literature and culture known as *qalandari* or *malāmati*.

[113] Lamentation in connection with lecture, April 19th, 2000, *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, April 20th, 2000 and Mohammad Mahdi, small-scale *rowze*, May 27th, 2001.

[114] Put me to shame, *rosvā konid*, here refers to letting others know.

[115] *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*, May 17th, 2001.

In a small-scale *rowze*, Mohammad Mahdi expresses similar ideas:

> Alas! My life was wasted with a lot of sin. I have spent my life without praising you, I haven't been a good servant to you. You did good things for me, I did bad things for you. But my good God! Do you know how sure I am that you are kind? Whatever bad things I do, again you accept me! You place me by the Koran! You bear me so that I can call you! You don't turn your face![116]

Furthermore, the prayer leaders' constantly urge the listeners to cry for and with the *Ahl-e beyt*.[117]

> In *'āshurā*, Hoseyn cried aloud. You can also cry loudly. When did he cry aloud? When he was lying on the ground, bleeding and thirsty. When his friends had died. /. . ./ He wanted to stand but he had no energy. Sometimes he stood up with difficulty and then fell down, and here it is written that he cried loudly. You should cry loudly too![118]

With this, I have proposed that a specific theology and outlook on humankind is central to the canonical message which is communicated through the lamentations. The core of this is the idea that humans, through their sin, are separated from God and that they therefore need God's forgiveness. The *Ahl-e beyt* constitute both the foremost examples of what human beings should be like, and the route by which men and women can reach such a position. To cry about their tragic destinies is therefore not only an expression of empathy for human misfortune, but also a practice through which one can be purified.

The purpose of this study is not to make inter-religious comparisons. But it is striking how many features the religiosity of the community share with, maybe especially Catholic, Christianity: the mourning for the martyrs, the redeeming dimension of suffering, the corporal expression of the passion plays and the belief in intercession through saints. It is also worth mentioning that other forms of Islam, not least Salifite or Wahabist Sunni Islam, strongly rejects the belief in Intersession through Imams. For Muslims of these denominations many rituals, that the informants of this study take part in, would be considered superstitious or even idolatrous.

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[116] Small-scale *rowze*, May 20th, 2001.
[117] Lamentations in connection with lectures, April 19th, 20th and 21st, 2000.
[118] Lamentation in connection to lecture, April 22nd, 2000.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CREATIVITY OF RITUAL

In this final chapter I will begin by summarising the main points of what I have done. Thereafter I will make some methodological reflections before discussing the theoretical attitude to ritual that this study has resulted in. I will end by listing my conclusions.

Summary

In this study I have tried to present as true a picture as possible of the ritual lives of Jamie, Mostaʿār, ʿAli Bakhtiāri, Mohammad Mahdi, Amir and the community to which they belong. What I have tried to do is to portray how this community and these individuals have tackled the project of ritualising life in different ways. In search of different levels of meaning I have presented some incitements for doing this and shown some of the various methods which have been used. In the different chapters of the study I have ventured to do this from somewhat different points of view. The idea has been to show the comprehensive character of the Islamic project in the informants' lives. Beginning with a presentation of their community—that is, the religious context in which they have put themselves and from which they get the major input that forms their religiosity—the study continues to discuss how ritual practices and ideas of the community become tools of comfort or self-control in the informants' own particular life situations. In this way I have wanted to show that Islam, as it is experienced by the informants, through processes of ritualisation is made an all-encompassing regulating system; from the abstract level of ruling political ideology in the Islamic Republic to the actual physical level of heartfelt emotions and tears. The stories of the informants in this study are good examples of how this project may turn out, how it may succeed, and how it can fail, not on the political level, but on the individual and social levels.

In chapter 2, then, the scene was set. I presented in brief the societal situation in post-war Iran and the specific position of the conservative community to which the informants of this study belong.

It is an open community of bazaar workers and religious students, which is located in an old mosque in the traditionally oriented part of the city and which revolves around the charismatic personality of a highly esteemed and influential conservative Ayatollāh. The main activity of the community is the evening prayer, but there is also a rich agenda of other activities among which lectures, Koran classes and sorrowful prayer meetings would count as the most important for the informants of this study.

In chapter 3, I discussed how the informants ritualise their lives in order to be virtuous. Their stories show that they perceive worldly temptations and then especially sexual desires to constitute the greatest threat to this undertaking. In order to keep themselves on the right path the informants ritualise their lives in ways that keep them in a state of constant awareness of their religion. For instance, they limit their own mobility in the public sphere, think about death, stay ritually pure and constantly remind themselves of God.

Having presented these methods, I concluded that being Muslim, as my informants see it, is to *live* and practice the Islamic ideal of virtue. To do this, I have found, is not only a matter of thought and existential reflection but, and indeed literally, also a bodily experience. There are many reasons for this conclusion. To begin with, their ritual activity is in itself physical in many ways. The movements are physical, but the rituals also cause the body to change: they make the eyes full of tears, people are physically healed through ritual, inclination to sin is prevented by fasting, ablutions are felt to be more powerful as long as the dampness can be sensed on the skin and carelessness with religious duties is experienced to give headache. The informants' incitements to try to live virtuous lives are often physical in character. Whether it has been physical pain, puberty or illness which has decided their individual choices, it is clear that many informants have chosen to begin their religious life style after experiencing physical problems of some sort.

Furthermore, I let these observations lead to some conclusions concerning the Islamic culture of my informants. This is created through a conglomeration of the culturally conveyed canonical interpretation of life that is provided in their community and their own embodied experiences. I argued that the informants themselves play an active and conscious part in their own formation of self. The process of embodying the ideal of virtue, thus, should not be seen

as a superimposed socialisation process only but as a deliberate and purposeful struggle among the informants to change themselves.

In chapter 4 I continued by exemplifying the informants' struggle to shape themselves through the most predominant of their ritual activities, namely the rituals of sorrow. I showed how these rituals are used as tools to express spiritual longing, to channel frustration, to give emotional relief and to provide a feeling of meaning to the informants. I also discussed how they formulate the ideology of the rituals so as to fit their use of these and I illustrated how the emotional experiences of the rituals, to a certain extent, are shaped through a process in which the informants are active agents rather than passive pliable subjects.

In chapter 5 I discussed the concept of authorisation. I define this as the form of power implementation which needs neither persuasion nor force to uphold hierarchy. According to my definition a person has authority if he or she is seen as hierarchically superior without having had to prove this position through arguments or force. Authorisation is the social process of creating such authority. It is one of the continuous social processes through which the community is preserved, recreated and legitimised and it happens through acts of speech and body that communicate respect to symbols of significant importance for the community. I suggested that the ritualised activities in general and the lectures and lamentations in particular contribute to authorisation since they: explicitly appeal for obedience and respect for the authorities; encourage emotional identification with *Ahl-e beyt*; propose a sense of continuity of authority between *Ahl-e beyt* and contemporary *ʿolamā*; and are carried out within the already authorised framework of ritual.

I went on to discuss the success of the authorisation in the chosen community and to relate the discussion to the stories of the informants. I showed that their explicit attitudes towards the authorities are varied. Some of them utter unconditional praise, whereas others are more sceptical. However, they all contribute to the authorisation by their very presence in the mosque. The manner of conduct which is expected in the mosque, is structured in such a way as to make everyone do this. A person's contribution to authorisation in the chosen community does not necessarily imply that this person approves of the authorities. The stories of the informants, on the contrary, clearly show how changeable and varied the attitudes to

authority, even within this seemingly homogeneous community, can be. Jamie's story is clear evidence of the reprisals that threaten to fall upon anyone who goes against the authorities.

My general conclusion concerning the authorisation in the chosen community was that it is somewhat strained. The facts which bring about such a conclusion were that: the questioning of authority is something all informants had thought about; that both persuasion and force exist as a means of power implementation in the community; and that the authority of some *ʿolamā* are questioned. If authority was complete, I have argued, there would be no need for argumentation or questioning thoughts. Now, that such thoughts exist, they show that the studied community is found in a society where its values are questioned. In chapter 6, I showed that the power struggle in contemporary Iran is fought not only between groups but also in the minds of individuals belonging to the core group of its revolutionary supporters.

In chapter 7 I left the focus on the individual informants and presented the content of the lectures and the sorrowful prayer meetings, which I referred to as lamentations. I concluded that the central theme in these was the issue of virtue, *taqvā* in Persian. Being Muslim, as the lecturers and prayer leaders of the community would have it, is to struggle to uphold one's moral purity in a world of temptations. Ritual activity as well as political struggle, everyday behaviour and family life all relate to this all-encompassing ambition. The foremost prototypes of virtuous living are found in the tragic life stories of the *Ahl-e beyt*. These tales are constantly told and retold in the mosque as cautionary examples, emotional triggers and as inherent parts of the Shiʿite homiletic tradition.

Methodological Reflections in Retrospect

As I have worked with this study, my ways of dealing with methodological problems have turned out to be rather diverse. Although I have always begun my field trips with a clear picture of how I am to proceed methodologically, this image has always been altered as I have continued. In the end, my choices of method have most often been guided by practical experience. As I have made friends with my informants it proved difficult to stick to a previously defined method and instead it has become a partly uncontrolled processes

of trial and error, which has decided the manner by which I have chosen to carry out my study.

The method chosen by this study has been primarily qualitative. By this I mean that the perspectives of the informants have been highlighted, that analytic depth has been given priority over generalisation in the analysis and that the material has been gathered with this priority in mind. Among the various methods that can be described as qualitative, participant observation and interviews have been used in the present study. I believe they are the most suitable methods to answer the questions which I have posed. Due to the present political situation in Iran they have also been the only possible ways of research in the field of my interest. The government's repressive policy and the tense political situation has meant that any fieldwork carried out in the Islamic Republic will be severely restricted. Especially investigations concerning religious matters have to be made with great sensitivity and caution in order not to raise the dislike of the authorities. In the case of a study like this one, in which many of the informants themselves are members of organisations like the *basij*,[1] caution is, naturally, of even greater importance.

As the term itself indicates, being a participant observer has two sides to it: participation and observation. Ideally, the field researcher observes the informants critically at the same time as s/he takes an active part in their activities and thereby hopes to understand these from an insider's point of view. My ideal has always been to pay close attention to what is going on and to never be carried away. I have wanted to register mentally and, from an outsider perspective, soberly analyse what is happening around and within me in every single situation. Naturally, here there are several aspects which cause me, as a participant observer, to be different from the ordinary participants: I have tried to be aware of behaviours and intentions that ordinary participants take for granted or do not reflect upon; I have aimed at finding explanations and connections that transcend common models of interpretation; and I have had the ambition to be introspective throughout the research process.

In the interview situation my ideals have been similar. Thus, here too I have been eager to find a balance between analytical progress

[1] The Islamic mobilisation forces.

and social comfort in my discussions with the informants. I have tried to avoid asking leading questions while struggling to make the informants discuss matters that have been relevant to my purpose.

As I have worked with this study, several problems of methodology have arisen. Some are abstract, whereas others are practical. However, they have all affected the way I have been able to carry out the fieldwork and their subsequent analyses. In the following I will bring to attention some issues which I find particularly relevant. I will begin with a discussion about the limits of analyses based on field material and the problem of inequality, which the field situation inescapably entails. Thereafter follows a more theoretical discussion on the epistemological premises of knowledge gathered from a social situation.

Limits of Analysis and the Issue of Equality

There are several limitations, which hinder the researcher to reach a genuine insider understanding of a studied culture: one cannot possibly spend enough time in the field to fully experience reality as an insider; academic, personal, social, political or ideological interests may effect the choice of material and interpretation; terminology and language may make culturally rational ideas and practices seem abnormal, and questions may cause informants to change their views.[2] Contextually defined understandings of reality, furthermore, may determine how the researcher understands the material. One such categorisation, which is prominent in western culture, is the dichotomisation of reality. Body is often contrasted by soul, urbanity by rurality, east by west, male by female and so forth. Even if these dichotomies sometimes are conscious simplifications used as tools in an analysis, they may at times be understandings not considered before and may affect the way the scholar comprehends the material in a negative way. Cultural categorisations or dichotomisations do not only sort reality in various categories, they also tend to bring about a discriminating evaluation of these, which results in the devaluation of certain categories and the appraisal of others. Hence patriarchal, logocentric or other cultural biases risk to further limit the analysis as a side effect of categorisation. In the study of polit-

[2] Donovan 1999: 236.

ical Islam, for instance, the Christian and secularist dichotomisation of politics and religion may bring about an understanding of "politicised religion" as something abnormal. The dichotomisation of mind and body is, furthermore, is noticeable in many theoretical approaches which aim at explaining culture and that, more or less consciously, treat the mind as hierarchically superior to the body.

There are many ways of responding methodologically to the limitations which our pre-understanding causes. An initial way to do this lies in establishing equal relations to the informants and thereby to avoid soiling the material with biases due to differences in culture, or to affect the choice of material by the intentions or expectations of the researcher. If one spends much time among the informants and learns their ways, many mistakes can be avoided. I do not, however, believe that equal relations should be sought primarily by trying to become an insider. Inequality, as we know, is common even among members of the same community and there are several factors which will continue to uphold the sense of inequality between researcher and informant, no matter how well one speaks the language or know the social codes of conduct. As has been proposed by Michel Foucault, all forms of research can be seen as a legitimisation of the scholar's superiority over those studied. The very attempt to analyse other human beings, and the assumption that this analysis will bring about knowledge about them of which they themselves are unaware, seem to have its origin in a feeling of superiority, at least in terms of knowledge and analytic ability. In the case of the present study, as with most studies of this sort, where the researcher comes from a part of the world that politically, ideologically and economically dominates the global society, to a part that does not, this inequality becomes all the more apparent.

I have reached the conclusion that, no matter how long I stay in the community of my focus, I will never become one of its members—it would be preposterous to believe anything else. There are many aspects of my appearance that clearly reveal that I am a foreigner, both to the Iranian country and culture in general, and to the pious Islamist community in particular. My physical appearance, to begin with, is one. Although it has become my habit to grow a beard and to avoid wearing blue jeans and other potentially provoking clothes during my visits to Iran, my Scandinavian look, my non-Iranian clothes, my notebook and the green shoulder bag I always carry, inexorably reveal my origin. My Persian, furthermore,

immediately reveals my alien status as does my behaviour in general: the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I wash, the way I take an interest in things that others take for granted and the way I sometimes must appear exaggeratedly eager to be polite and respectful. All these things, and more, mark my role as a foreigner.

On a less obvious level the knowledge that I will always be in the community for a limited amount of time has consolidated my status as an outsider. For me, there has always been a place to go back to. Even if I sometimes have doubted it myself, this place, that I have come from and to which I will return, will always be the place where I primarily belong, both in the eyes of my informants as well as in my own understanding. It is the place to which I will always have the strongest connection and therefore the most lasting loyalties. My unwillingness to marry an Iranian woman (something I have been offered on several occasions) and my refusal to accept Islam as my religion have, I believe, been understood by my informants as signs of this.

Moreover, the differences in economic resources between my informants and me have assured, to me as well as to them, that I will never completely be a proper member of the community. The majority of my informants are very poor. They work almost incessantly to support their families and live materially simple lives. My economic situation have thus, by comparison, been very privileged. Even though this subject has never been touched upon in any conversation, it no doubt has had an effect on my relationship with the informants. This effect has been twofold. Firstly, it has widened the gap between us since it has always been clear that I will never have to suffer the material difficulties that many of them do. I believe that this knowledge has fuelled a feeling, in me as well as among them, that I will never be able to fully comprehend their situation. Secondly, there has always been a risk that my financial advantage would cause the informants to treat me, and me to treat them, differently than would have been the case if our economic standards had been equal. This had risked destroying the equality of our relationships.

Finally, the very fact that I have, at least to certain extent, a double cultural competence may have added to the inequality rather than, as one could have hoped, decreased it. I speak Persian and I have knowledge of the tradition to which my informants belong—in some respects a knowledge that surpasses their own. Still I am not one of them. Sometimes it has struck me that the situation would

be far more equal if I had known nothing of their religion or language. As it is now, I have, so to speak, been participating in their arena. It may have been difficult at times, but there has never been any risk that they would ever participate in mine.

Solving the problem of inequality, then, has been something that could not be wholly done. In this regard I agree with Foucault's assertion. What I have done in my fieldwork, however, is to try to make as straightforward a declaration of my own religious and ideological positions and the intentions of my stay in the mosque as possible. By doing so I have hoped to clarify the prerequisites of our relation both to myself and to the members of the community. Because of the open-mindedness of my informants, this policy has not hindered me from actively participating in the various activities of the mosque.[3] On the contrary, since the members of the congregation welcomed me, it enabled me, as an outsider, to take part in the activities without temporising with either my scholarly task or my moral obligations. To a certain extent I have also let the informants decide the course of our social interaction and the topics of conversation. By letting them play a dominant role in the construction of the material that I analyse, I have thus hoped to decrease the impact of our unsymmetrical relations.[4]

During the first fieldwork of this study, my intention was to affect my informants as little as possible. As a result of this, I never expressed my own opinion about matters that we discussed, neither did I, on a personal level, ever really consider any critique, suggestion or opinion that my informants had concerning the culture and attitudes in the part of the world which I come from. My ambition was to be an impartial observer that neutrally writes down and analyses whatever beliefs and opinions the informants might have. It is now my viewpoint that this ambition was both presumptuous and faulty, partly because, obviously, no proper neutrality could ever be reached, but

[3] My participation in the activities, to my knowledge, very rarely caused problems for my informants. Once, however, I understood that some believers had refused to drink water from a bowl because I, as a non-Muslim, had drunk from it. This incident caused a minor discussion about Islamic regulations of purity among the members of the congregation and ended with a confirmation by one of the *ʿolamā* that it is not forbidden for Muslims to drink from a bowl used by a Christian and, of course, with my avoidance of further use of public food-utensils in the mosque.

[4] This approach is inspired by Bourdillon 1996: 141.

also because it helped establish inequality between my informants and me. When they made an effort to get to know me as a person and engaged personally in discussions concerning matters they considered important with me, I remained silent and never let myself be emotionally involved. Such an inequality is, no doubt, common in relations between researchers and informants, as it is in relations between therapists and their clients. It does not have to be a problem and sometimes it is even necessary. In my study, however, where I interacted with my informants on a daily basis and therefore became an important part of their lives during my stay, I felt that it became indefensible. It hindered me from getting to know them better; it created, or risked creating, a sense of mistrust on their side, and it upheld a false concept of what kind of an experience I was actually going to study. Therefore, in later stages of my research process I chose to change my strategy. Instead of being passive I accepted my differences in opinion and chose to be frank about them in discussions. Thus I have sometimes allowed myself to be engaged in arguments with the informants, I have declared divergent opinions when I have had them and I have allowed myself to express my agreement or to be upset by views expressed by my informants. It is my experience that the consequences of my change in attitude have been predominantly positive. Through the mutuality which it caused in our relations, greater trust was established between us. This, in turn, led to deeper friendships and a better understanding. It should be clear, however, that the attitude I chose to have became fruitful not least due to a willingness to argue and discuss among the members of the community. If personal involvement had obstructed friendly communication or if disagreements in opinion had been so emotionally charged that they had ruined my relationship with the informants, another attitude would have had to be chosen.

Problems of Epistemology

The study of religion can never truthfully describe the religious experience itself. Between it and the researcher lie too many layers of interpretation. The experience is altered, firstly, by the informant's unconscious cultural interpretation of it, then limited by language and changed to suit the expectations of the scholar who in his or her turn interprets it and models it to fit into academic language

and theory.[5] Hence, when I, in the different chapters of this book, have discussed the experiences of the informants, what I have done is discussing several different things: I have described what they said they experienced, what I believed they meant by this and what I believed actually happened. A way to describe the problem, which this ambiguity entails, is to epistemologically distinguish between different layers of the human perception of reality. It might be fruitful to differentiate between three such layers. The first would be the non-reflected perception of reality, i.e. the perception which humans experience as obvious, which represent conjunctive knowledge,[6] are unspoken, tacit and implicit in thoughts and actions. The second layer would be reflected perception. These are the perceptions the term usually refers to. They are conscious, explicit and are experienced as varying and changeable. The third and final layer, then, would be people's perceptions of their own perceptions, meta-representations that unite the various reflected perceptions into coherent systems. These perceptions are conscious and explicit and they express the way an individual or a community looks upon itself.[7]

A risk with studies like this is that one wishes to reach and conclude something about the first unreflected layer of concepts whereas the layers reached in communication with the informants can only be the third or, at best, the second. Such impossible ambitions also risk leading to a situation where the researcher believes the original concept of reality of the informant has been reached when this is not the case. Instead, as I shall discuss below, the only available reality is created in the very interaction between the researcher and the informant. A misunderstanding of what reality it is one is able to reach risks resulting in an unfortunate sensation of superiority. The first step, if one wants to come to terms with this problem is to be aware of its existence and, consequently, to be humble in one's ambition to reach the layer of unreflected concepts.

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[5] Several scholars have discussed the various levels of interpretation, which religious experiences go through before they reach the researcher. See, for instance, Rydving 1995: 27–28.

[6] The term *conjunctive knowledge* I have borrowed from Karl Mannheim. Mannheim and Kegan 1982.

[7] Sperber 1985; Ericson 1997: 14–15.

Thus I have argued that the researcher cannot easily reach farther in an understanding of the informant's reality than to the outer layers of communicable and reflected experiences. But not even this social reality, it will be argued, is objectively available. All social reality, arguably, is constructed in the interaction between people. The concepts of reality that one reaches in an interaction with the informants are no exception to this. On the contrary, I believe it is important to stress that these concepts are also the result of, primarily subconscious, social negotiations, not only between the members of the studied community, but also between the informants and the researcher. Hence, even if it appears to justly portray the informants and their community, the material of this study is to certain extent my construction. The informant material upon which I base this study then, is constructed through negotiations between me and the informants and it reflects and confirms the views and values both of them and of me. It also reflects our relation to one another.

A possible extreme post-structuralist solution to this epistemological problem is a general abandonment of the ambition to explain social reality. If subjective reality is constructed in negotiation between people, and objective reality, if such a thing exists at all, is hopelessly unavailable to humans, it would be pretentious and delusive to even try to explain anything with absolutist intentions. However, I have not gone as far as this. Although I certainly have had no absolutist intentions, I do hold that there are a substantial amount of cultural truths in the stories I have conveyed. Yet, human experience is by necessity contextualised and any attempt to talk about it, therefore, also has to be.

My position in this matter is connected to a certain methodological agnosticism insofar as I have not pretended that my conclusions are ontologically certain.[8] By holding such a position, I have hoped that I also can confirm my respect for the world view of my informants as well as for them. To be methodologically agnostic has for me been to affirm that one's analysis and conclusions are statements about a social reality that is true only if the epistemological and cultural framework of the study is accepted. There are other cultures, such as the one focused on in this work, and epistemologies, such

[8] For further discussion, see, for instance, McCutcheon 1999: 6.

as the acceptance of revelation, to which the conclusions of the present study may be simply untrue or irrelevant. I believe it is important to be aware of this and to be humble about the claims that a study like this can have. Hence I have not considered the epistemological limits to be a serious problem.

Ritualisation and Meaning

Spradley has rightly pointed out that the more one knows about a situation the harder it is to analyse it as an ethnographer.[9] Theoretical constructions may aim to elucidate underlying structures in a chosen context. To do this they need to simplify matters, they need to emphasise certain aspects and avoid others. The whole analytical process, by necessity, involves a greater or smaller measure of simplification, and maybe a certain methodological reduction is inevitable. In this study I have not had a ready-made and formulated theory as my general framework. On the contrary, the stories of my informants have disproved most of the general theoretical assumptions I set out with. Through concepts such as emotion, authorisation and embodiment, however, I have been able to approach the stories of my informants and to structure the various impressions that my meetings with them have engendered into discussions that hopefully will contribute to our understanding of contemporary Iranian Shi'ism.

The most central concept of this study has been ritual. The acts, words and thoughts, which have been focused on here, circle around the mode of human activity which is usually thought of as ritual. I will now, in a coherent way and with reference to the theorists who are of immediate relevance to my perspective, outline my own understanding of this concept as it has developed during my work with this book. I will do this by presenting three different levels of what I will refer to as ritual meaning. These levels I have found suitable to sum up the analyses of the ritual activities of my informants.

As the chapters in this book have shown, I have felt important, not to cut the informants from the religious and ideological milieu in which they are situated and which, to certain extent, regulates

[9] Spradley 1980: 61–62.

their beliefs and practices. At the same time, however, I have tried to avoid to speak about my informants as if their religious lives were merely reflections of the religious ideology to which they adhere. This study, and the following conceptual summary of it, should be seen as an effort to balance between these two theoretical poles.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars of ritual have often focused on trying to understand what different rituals mean. Theorists, such as Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, have approached rituals as complicated presentations imbued with symbolic meaning. The task of the scholars in this tradition has been to find and verbalise the meanings that a ritual has in its specific cultural context. Whether this meaning was thought to be inherent in the symbolic components of the ritual or seen as the conglomeration of the participants' interpretations, it can be said that rituals were often approached as performed texts, which the scholars could decode or decipher by analysing their different symbolic components.[10]

Arguably, this understanding of ritual falls back on the heritage of the myth and ritual-school of the early twentieth century in which ritual was primarily seen in its relation to myth as the physically performed representation of mythical stories. An implicit notion in such an understanding is that human activity is preceded, consciously or unconsciously, by thought, and that this thought, in a sense, is more important than the act which is believed to represent it. Such an understanding falls back upon a widespread dichotomy in western thought between mind and body in which the mind is seen as hierarchically superior and as that which controls the body rather than vice versa; thoughts, then, are believed to precede acts and theological speculation is often assumed to cause ritual activity rather than the other way around.[11] My position in this study has been that this dichotomisation constitutes an obstacle for a correct understanding of the religious activity of my informants. Their religiosity, as arguably the religiosity of all religious people, is caused and continuously upheld both as thought and bodily experience. The very dichotomy of mind and body is, therefore, to a certain extent, faulty when it comes to describing religious experience. Because of this,

[10] Asad 1993: 56–58.
[11] Olsson 2000: 9 and Østergaard 2002: 51.

I have stressed the importance of treating both mind and body when discussing the meaning of my informants' rituals. Meaning, then, needs to be sought on many different levels simultaneously. When I in the following raise the issue of meaning it is not instrumental purpose I speak of, but rather the subjective experience of meaningfulness.

Embodied Meaning

The first level of meaning, then, is the *embodied* meaning. Ritual is something which involves the body. Ritual acts are performed through or by the body. For an outside observer it is to a large extent by looking at the bodily movement and positioning that a ritual act can be distinguished from other acts. In the present mosque community the most obvious ritual activities are remarkably physical: the chest beatings of the lamentations and the prostration series of the *namāz* are but two examples. This being so, many recent ritual theorists underscore the importance of the body in ritual activity. Rituals, they argue, are first learnt by the body[12] and it is primarily in our bodies that rituals are incorporated as parts of our physical repertoire.[13] In Islamic tradition, for instance, the movements of prayer are often mastered before the spoken words are learnt by heart and definitely before the theological purposes and meanings of the prayers are reflected upon. Ritual activity, then, is not primarily a matter of conscious thought, but rather something which has to do with bodily experience and expression. In ritual, as indeed in all forms of activity, we humans live and reflect not only through our minds but also through our emotions and bodies.

Some scholars, whose theories I have chosen to connect to, question the meaningfulness of trying to find hidden meanings in ritual activities in the way of, for instance, Clifford Geertz. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, for instance, conclude that such a venture is based on a misunderstanding of what ritual is.[14] Previous scholars, they argue, have acted as theatre critics trying to find and analyse what the ritual performances are trying to express. But most rituals do not fulfil the conditions that would make criticism a valid

[12] See, for instance Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 266.
[13] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 260.
[14] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 261.

endeavour—there are usually no individual intentions among the performers and there is rarely an audience to which such intentions could be conveyed.[15] I agree with the viewpoint of Humphrey and Laidlaw in this matter. Rituals, it seems, do not always have meanings which are possible to verbalise or decipher. On the contrary, it is my experience from this study that the most common answer one gets if one asks a ritual participant why s/he does this or that movement or gesture is a surprised "I do not know". To always ascribe meaning that can be verbalised to ritual movements or behaviours may therefore at times be somewhat forced. It may also be misdirected since the verbalised and regulated religiosity of ritual specialists or theological authorities can be accepted at the expense of the experience of the ordinary ritual participant.

Instead of looking for meaning that can be verbalised, I suggest, it is reasonable to acknowledge that there are aspects of human experience that cannot be conveyed through language and which ritual activities serve as a means to express. There are, then, aspects of ritual activity which cannot be verbalised but which still must not be forgotten in an analysis.[16] Spiritual, emotional and bodily experiences may constitute such sides. I do not, then, consider formulated and well thought-out meaning to be the only or even the most important form of meaning. There are cultural meanings, which are neither verbalised nor conscious but which still may be crucial to how and why a person behaves, thinks or experiences in certain ways. Meaning can be emotional, esthetical or bodily, in which case it is not necessarily possible to express in words. Indeed, if the meaning of ritual behaviour could easily be verbalised there would be no point in expressing it in the complicated and round about way of ritual.[17] Ritual, then, presents and expresses bodily, spiritual, cultural and social experiences which other forms of expression fail to communicate.[18]

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[15] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 263. Not all recent theorists agree with this understanding: Grimes, for one, has a different understanding. He analyses ritual as a performance, which is carried out for an audience. See Grimes 1990.

[16] Østergaard 2002: 47.

[17] Olsson 2000: 16.

[18] In this understanding of ritual, I am inspired by Tord Olsson. See, for instance, Olsson 2000: 16.

A prerequisite for this understanding is the assumption that emotional and bodily experience exist in our bodies also prior to our conscious recognition of them. As has been stated by Österberg, expression is something that is inherent in our bodies from our earliest childhood. We experience, and express ourselves before we have verbalised the cause of our expression. Therefore, bodily expressions such as rituals, cannot only be seen as expressions caused by that which they convey. Instead, the bodily expression of ritual, or any other activity, must be seen as intimately connected to that which is expressed.[19] An increased pulse and a scream of intense anger, for instance, are not merely arbitrary signs chosen to express that particular emotion but, rather, inherent parts of it. Likewise, when my informants are asked why they prostrate their bodies in prayer they may answer that they do so in order to show their respect to God or because it is ordered by Islamic law. But the act of prostration, which they perform with their bodies, is not merely, as I see it, a random sign of these particular ideas. Rather, I hold, it should be seen as the embodied enactment of an experience, the verbalised aspect of which is the expressed respect for God or Islamic law. In these rituals, then, the various forms of expression as well as the expressed notion or idea belong together. They enrich each other and cannot be easily separated. "Rites, more than any other type of practice", says Bourdieu, "serve to underline the mistake of enclosing in concepts a logic made to dispense with concepts; of treating movement of the body and practical manipulations as purely logical operations".[20]

Thus, I conclude that there is an aspect of human activity which cannot be verbalised but which still may be meaningful. I have chosen to call this level of significance in ritual activity the *embodied* meaning.

The Ritualisation of Activity

In accordance with the above given understanding of ritual, Tord Olsson has argued that the constituting elements of rituals are acts rather than symbols.[21] He is not alone in this understanding. Many

[19] Österberg 2001: 21.
[20] Bourdieu 1977b: 116.
[21] Olsson 2000: 16.

recent ritual theorists have emphasised the view of ritual as a mode of action. Humphrey and Laidlaw concur in this understanding,[22] and so does Catherine Bell who has defined ritual as a type of human activity, which is distinguished from other activity by culturally defined classifications. According to Bell, ritual is characterised by some features which are inherent to all human activity. For instance, it is situational, by which she means that it can only be understood in its specific semantic framework.[23] It is also strategic in the sense that it creates mastery and control of one's own situation and connects this situation to God or other spiritual powers. In this sense, ritual, like other forms of activity is manipulative and logical. Furthermore, she argues that similar to other activity rituals reflect the world order since they are bound to social class, gender et cetera.[24]

The purposes of approaching ritual as a mode of activity are manifold. To begin with, it challenges the above mentioned dichotomisation of thought and action.[25] Its foremost gain, however, is that it opens up to greater flexibility in our definition of what rituals are. Instead of approaching these as fixed pre-defined entities, Bell speaks about more or less *ritualised* activities. By introducing the verbal noun ritualisation, then, she argues that rituals are ongoing processes rather than fixed entities.[26] Human behaviour cannot be simply divided into that which is ritual and that which is not. The material of this study, for example, has provided a multitude of examples of activities which are somewhere in between these two extremes. By speaking in terms of more or less ritualised activity many problems of categorisation are therefore solved. Bell states that the aim of her own theoretical contribution is to "forge a framework for reanalyzing the types of activities usually understood as ritual".[27] I have felt that Bell's approach has been fruitful for interpreting the material of the present study. The ritual life of my informants, as I have shown, does not only consist of attending fixed institutionalised rituals, such as evening prayers. On top of institutionalised ritual occasions, the rich Islamic

[22] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 267–8.
[23] Bell 1992: 220.
[24] Bell 1992: 81–83.
[25] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 3.
[26] Bell 1992: 140 and 1997: 81.
[27] Bell 1992: 219.

ritual repertoire is continuously utilised and referred to in order to sanctify everyday life in situations which cannot easily be defined as ritual in a traditional sense.

The Otherness of Ritual

A most basic question that has risen when I have dealt with the material of this study has concerned what it is that distinguishes ritualised activity from other activities. What is the difference between drinking wine at the dinner table and doing the same thing at the Christian Holy communion or between ordinary washing and a Muslim's ritual ablution before prayer? According to Bell, ritualisation is essentially marked differentiation. A ritualised act is different from one that is not ritualised. It differs because of the way in which it is carried out. But what precise components constitute its difference is culturally defined and cannot be generalised.[28] Ritualisation, then, is "fundamentally a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are distinct and the associations that they engender are special".[29] Humphrey and Laidlaw have a similar definition of ritualisation. But, unlike Bell, they highlight the experience of predefinition as the major component of a ritual's otherness. "The degree of ritualization", they ascertain, "corresponds to the degree to which actions are felt to be stipulated in advance".[30]

Although I hold that it may be precarious to make general claims in this matter, I believe Humphrey and Laidlaw's assertion is important, because it underscores that an act is partly constituted by the attitude of its agent.[31] Such a qualitative understanding of action is fundamental to the understanding of ritual that I have tried to show in this study. I concur in the definition of ritual as marked otherness but refrain from trying to define any general characteristics of what this precisely means. Although universal qualities of ritualised

[28] Bell 1992: 140.

[29] Bell 1992: 220. It is worth mentioning that a possible way of defining the characteristic of the otherness of ritual is to do so by comparing it to that which it is different from, i.e. from non-ritualised activity, focusing on formalized aspects rather than subjective intentions. Within the field of linguistics such distinctions have been discussed at length. For a further discussion on this matter see, for instance, Jackson 1999: 158–164.

[30] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 12.

[31] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 4.

action may very well exist, it has not been the purpose of the present study to form a general theory of ritual. In the individual cases of my informants, however, I believe it is reasonable to say that one paramount characteristic of ritualisation in their context is the perception that an action is carried out in accordance with the Islamic world view and life style. One aspect in their ritual understanding, which is also fundamental to their spiritual experience, that somewhat verifies Humphrey and Laidlaw's understanding that the ritualisation corresponds to the degree of predefinition is the feeling of surrendering one-self. To engage in a ritualised activity is, as they experience it, to give oneself up to a higher order, to abandon one's own subjective desires and preferences and instead becoming a part of a pre-defined tradition ordained by divine intervention. It is, to put it in their words, essentially to yield oneself to God and to put one's trust in God's compassion alone. That which they yield to, then, is experienced to be a never changing system, which is changing them rather than vice versa. This experience of self-surrendering is, as I see it, essential to the informants' ritual experience. It is, certainly, also in accordance with mainstream Islamic theological understanding. Arguably, the word Islam, meaning submission, can itself be construed as denoting this experience. The more an activity is felt to be in line with the purpose of the overall and, as it is believed, the divinely inspired Islamic system, then, the more it is charged with the otherness of ritual in the experience of my informants. Thus, activities which are directly ordered by Islamic law, such as the movements of the prayer, can be denoted as highly ritualised whereas activities that are not directly ordered, but very well experienced to be in accordance with the Islamic purpose, such as studying hard or refraining from sexual thoughts, are also somewhat ritualised. The ritualisation of my informants' activities, then, as I see it, is largely defined by their own perception of what they do.

Self-Referential Meaning

It may already be clear that it has not been my intention to look for hidden social or psychological functions in the ritual lives of my informants.[32] When I have discussed the meaning of ritual it is rather

[32] There are several influential scholarly traditions which analyse religion with a

their experienced meaning I have referred to. I have concluded that there is a level of ritual meaning which by definition is impossible to verbalise. I have labelled this level the embodied meaning of ritual. I will now go on to discuss the level of meaning which I will refer to as *self-referential*.

Catherine Bell, although she dissociates herself from classical functionalist theories of ritual, still proposes a general purpose of ritualisation. This, she claims, is solely to produce embodied knowledge of and familiarity with ritual systems. "The ultimate purpose of ritualization", she says, "is nothing other than the production of ritual agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies".[33] In Bell's idea, then, ritualisation creates a form of practical knowledge among the ritual participants who become capable of deploying their ritual mastery for whatever purpose they see fit. It can be said that Bell, in this definition, lifts forth the embodied meaning of ritual as its fundamental purpose. I agree with Bell that the embodied meaning is important. In the case of my informants, the repertoire of activities, prayers, gestures and movements, which their rituals provide, are like a toolbox from which they can pick whatever components they need in order to deal with their individual situations. Contrary to Bell, however, I believe this study has shown that one cannot fully understand ritual without also regarding its verbalised meanings if such are ascribed to it by its participants. With Humphrey and Laidlaw, I therefore hold that the motives, intentions and stated purposes of the ritualised activity of the participants need to be taken into serious consideration when the issue of ritual purpose and meaning is addressed.[34] One thing that I have looked for in this study is this self-referential meaning, that is, the significance of ritual, as it is experienced by the informants. I will now elaborate a bit further on this.

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focus on its function. The sociological tradition which analyses religion as means of reality-construction and social unification within a society is an example of such a tradition. Emile Durkheim, the founding father of this tradition, claimed that the main function of religion was the social control of the members of a community. After him, scholars like Mary Douglas (See Douglas 1986), Victor Turner (See Turner 1969), Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and Clifford Geertz (See Geertz 1973), have expounded his analysis and improved his methods further.

[33] Bell 1992: 221.

[34] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 5.

A basic assumption in my theoretical approach has been that humans try to find meaning in their existence. There is a striving towards creating systems of belief and interpretation which explain, justify and give meaning to the flux of experiences which we all have to relate to. "Humanity", says Roy Rappaport, "is a species that lives and can only live in terms of meanings it itself must invent".[35] The individual *Islams* of my informants—their theological convictions, their ethical systems and their methods of coping with the hardships of their lives—are examples of solutions which have resulted from this endeavour in their particular contexts. This study is an example of how the same striving can be responded to in the context of Swedish academia.

Following this assumption, I do not consider there to be any one true meaning of ritual. Here I concur with Fritz Staal who published an article in the late 1970's on what he called the meaninglessness of ritual.[36] Staal argued that, rather than meaning something in and of itself, a ritual as such is by necessity meaningless outside its culturally situated context. Consequently, the same activity may have entirely different meanings to different people although they may perform it identically. As this study will indicate, this maybe especially true in the case of ritual activity.

The idea of multiple meanings in ritual is not new. As early as in the 1960's Victor Turner proposed that human activities can be said to be multivocal,[37] that is, they have different meanings to different people and may be interpreted differently and in accordance with the specific conditions and situation of the individual. Maurice Bloch, to present another example, argues that religious symbols have to be ambiguous or multivocal since they represent a complex and incongruous social reality. If they did not have this ambiguity, Bloch argues, they would fail to respond to people's experience of reality and consequently fade away.[38] Humphrey and Laidlaw go even further: "a custom does not become 'a ritual'", they argue, "until people disagree about its meaning".[39]

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[35] Rappaport 1999: 8.
[36] Staal 1979.
[37] Hylland Eriksen 2000: 240; Turner 1967: 50–52.
[38] Bloch 1986: 195.
[39] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 12.

By necessity, a ritual tradition, according to these scholars, has to be possible to interpret in different ways in order to survive. Islam, like all living religions, is not a homogeneous and monolithic entity. If it were, it would fail to be the base of existential reflection and meaning that it is to many of its followers. The material of this study shows with much clarity that a group of seemingly homogeneous individuals choose to construe and apply the rituals and messages of their community in different ways. This is why I have chosen to highlight the individual cases of my informants and to regard these as individuals and independent agents who utilise and construe the social context in which they live to solve their own specific predicaments. The cases of the informants of this study have shown how individual actors can appropriate ritual acts and align them with their own intentions and needs.[40] By underscoring this, I have sought to acknowledge that there is a creative aspect in the ritual life of my informants. As independent agents they contribute to the forming of their own religious lives by creatively utilising the tools provided by Islam's ritual repertoire.

For the ritual participants of this study, the fact that their physical behaviour is more important than their individual interpretation of the rituals means that people of different worldviews or ideologies can pray together without any problem.[41] From an outsider's analytical point of view, the focus on bodily activity and individual interpretations means that the often prevalent incoherencies in people's theological systems need not be an obstacle in our endaveour to comprehend the meaning of ritual. Ritual, as indeed all experienced reality, cannot be expected to be either consistent or coherent if exposed to logical scrutiny. Reality, as we experience it, through our minds and bodies, is not singularly comprehensive but rather is a flux of impressions and experiences of different form or character. Our own belief, contrary to this however, is often that we have a coherent world view and that our experience of reality is neither inconsistent nor contradictory. We often hold this belief even if we have never really scrutinised or formulated our perception of reality in a coherent way. It seems that what is important to most

[40] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 260.
[41] For further discussion on this matter, see Olsson 2000: 56.

humans in their everyday lives is not to have a well reasoned and coherent world view but rather to have one that functions emotionally. Thus, for instance, it is possible for people to consult both traditional healers and modern biomedical doctors to cure a health problem without finding this controversial although the world views that make up the foundations of these treatments are largely incoherent.[42] It appears, then, that we tend to be rather flexible and pragmatic in our world views, religious as well as secular. It does not matter if our comprehension is coherent as long as it works emotionally and can confirm and be confirmed by experience.[43] This is, by all means, also true of ritual. "Variety, discordance and even absence of interpretation are all", to put it in the words of Humphrey and Laidlaw, "integral to ritual".[44]

As I have shown in this study, the stories of my informants all reveal that their religious activity corresponds closely to their specific individual life situations. No matter how eloquently they formulate the universal applicability and timelessness of their religion, it is clear that they choose to enhance and focus on the aspects of Islam which can help them with their present needs. Following in the footsteps of Bell, Humphrey and Laidlaw, I have tried to distance myself from viewing ritualised activities as decipherable texts whose symbolic meaning can be verbalised. If ritual is to be compared to text, it is apparently not the text of a straightforward instruction manual that it resembles, but rather the ambiguous and multifarious wording of abstract poetry. The meaning of ritual, just like the meaning of such poetry, is by necessity dependent upon its interpretation.

For the individual participant ritual acts may be an expression of something that cannot be understood from the movements and words of the activity itself. Hence, rituals can be said to sever the link between the individual intention of the actor and the identity of the act.[45] Arguably, a methodological consequence of this view is that the issue of ritual meaning cannot be solely approached on the level of embodied meaning but that it also needs to be approached on

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[42] For studies on medical plurality see, for instance, Sussman 1983 or Dahlin 2002.
[43] Hylland Eriksen 2000: 245.
[44] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 264.
[45] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 260.

the level of self-referential intention where the individual participant's personal interpretation is communicated. In order to give as thorough a picture as possible of the ritual life of the informants of this study, I have made efforts to present and discuss their rituals' physical form and context as well as the meaning ascribed to them by the informants themselves.

Canonical Meaning

I have stated that ritual is fundamentally a bodily activity and that the meanings which are ascribed to it are dependent on the individual interpretations of its participants. Since I hold that the participants' comprehension of it has to be seen as a part of a ritual action, it can furthermore be said that ritual is a mode of action which takes different forms inasmuch as the interpretations of its participants differ.[46] This, I believe, is an understanding which is verified by the individual cases of my informants who all give utterance to personal and, among themselves, much varied understandings of what their rituals mean. However, even if I concur with the idea that the personal interpretations of a ritual's meaning should be approached as responses to that ritual rather than as the cause or the underlying fundaments of it,[47] I hold that it would be faulty to completely disregard the fact that there also are predefined meanings to the rituals of my informants. There are answers among Islamic scholars concerning the canonical meaning of ritual. Such answers are conveyed through literature, lectures and prayer meetings and do not depend upon the personal interpretation of the individual. I will refer to this third level of ritual meaning as *canonical.*

Although this study primarily focuses upon individuals, these individuals are members of a clearly defined community. This community is, by all means, a culturally and religiously defined group. They are Iranian Shi'ites united by their zealous religiosity and their support of the conservatives in the regime. I believe it is impossible to truly depict the personal understandings of the informants without regard to the cultural context from which they get their major theoretical inspiration. This cultural context, as I define it, is essentially

[46] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 267–8.
[47] As claimed by Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 265.

a shared system of meaning, which individuals may utilise to interpret their experiences. It is not primarily a static set of ideas and behavioural patterns which individuals are bound to follow, but rather a repertoire of tools, which they can utilise to construe, express, structure and understand their own experience, in thought as well as emotionally and physically. As I have come to see it, then, there are no fixed boundaries between the cultural spheres in the Iranian society of my informants, nor, indeed, between cultures in general. As a matter of fact, I feel hesitant to speak of culture in the plural form, i.e. as *cultures* in the first place. Such an expression, it seems, implies a notion that there are separate autonomous and definable cultures, as if *one* Iranian culture exists, which is clearly separable from *the* Swedish culture, and so on. My experience from the meetings with the informants of this study is contrary to any such notion. With them I feel a heartfelt depth of cultural unity in some respects and an almost complete incomprehension in other. With ʿAli Bakhtiāri, for instance, I share a liking for walking in the mountains and an interest in discussing religious and Islamic issues. In these fields I connect better to him than to most Swedes I know. Still, when it comes to political ideology or sexual morality, both our intellectual and emotional reactions are entirely different. Hence, my definition of culture would be close to that of Clifford Geertz, who has defined this devious concept as "webs of significance in which humans are suspended".[48] There are threads of meaning among which we dwell as cultural beings. Amid the flux of experiences, we use these threads to interpret and express, through acts of mind and body, that which we are subjected to.

To continue the Geertzian metaphor, I see the Islamic religion of my informants as a pattern in the web of meaning. It is an aspect of their culture insofar as it, like all culture, provides tools for interpretation and expression of experience. As with other seemingly comprehensive forms of culture, I do not see their religion as a fixed and definable category. It is held together only inasmuch as those who practice it perceive it in such a way, but as an analytic category I do not consider it definable or demarcated enough.

It is from this cultural and religious toolbox, then, that the informants choose the ways by which they construe their lives in general

[48] Here Geertz falls back on Max Weber. Geertz 1973: 5.

and their ritual activity in particular. But unlike most non-ritualised actions, such as driving one's car or eating an ice-cream, rituals also have a predefined meaning which the informants receive from the religious authorities and which they have to relate to. This makes ritualised activity, in the context of my informants, different from most other forms of action. Humphrey and Laidlaw have rightly pointed out that the actors of ritual activity, because of this predefinition, both are, and are not, the authors of their acts.[49]

As I see it, then, another level of ritual meaning needs to be added to the above-mentioned levels of embodied and self-referential meaning. This is the predefined meaning provided by religious authorities. Borrowing the terminology of Roy Rappaport, I choose to label this level of meaning as canonical.[50] It is a level of meaning which is not determined by the participants themselves and which is less flexible than their individual interpretations. Furthermore, it is, in the case of my informants, a level which does not necessarily have to be comprehended or approved, but which they have to relate to when they formulate the meanings of their ritual activity to an outsider.

It has not been the purpose of the present study to construct a coherent and generalised theory of ritual.[51] Rather, I like to see the remarks I have made in this final chapter as a declaration of the viewpoint that I have developed while approaching the group of politically oriented Iranian Shi'ite Muslims whom this study has been about. In this approach I have concured with Bell's call for a contextualisation of ritual.[52] Inspired by her and other prominent ritual theorists I have defined ritualisation as the construction of otherness in human activity. The more or less ritualised acts find their meaning on several different levels simultaneously. I have argued that

[49] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 5.
[50] Rappaport 1999: 52–53.
[51] Many of the ritual theorists, whom I have been inspired by (i.e. Bell, Humphrey, Laidlaw and Rappaport) have generalist ambitions in their discussions on ritual which they can be criticised for. Humphrey and Laidlaw, for instance, have been criticised for trying to form a universal theory of ritual based on the study of a very liturgy oriented Jainist *puja*. It has been argued that many rituals which are more focused on performance, such as various rituals of obsession, are excluded in their understanding. See, for instance, Schieffelin 1998: 194 and Stausberg 2002: 25.
[52] Bell 1992: 141.

embodied, self-referential and canonical meanings all need to be brought into consideration if the ritualised expressions and experiences of my informants are to be properly depicted and understood.

I have chosen to use the term ritualisation because I have found it suitable for describing the ritual practices of my informants in two ways. Firstly, it helps to underscore that activities other than those intuitively labelled as ritual can be charged with the otherness characteristic of ritual activity. Secondly, it hints that there is a creative and constructive aspect in ritual. Ritualisation, then, is the creation of otherness and ritualised activity helps construct structures and frames of interpretation which form the ways in which we experience and construe reality. In the chapters of this study, I have exemplified how the ritualisation in the lives of my informants contributes to their construction and construal of authority, body and emotion.

The Purposes and Meanings of Ritualisation—Conclusions

What, then, are the purposes and meanings of ritualisation in the lives and experiences of my informants? The first answer is that there does not, necessarily, have to be any verbalised meanings in ritual. As a mode of activity, ritualised behaviour may have embodied meanings which elude definition. The ascribed meaning of a ritual act is one aspect of that act and not the singular cause of it. And just like the other aspects—bodily movements, words, emotions, spiritual experiences—the verbalised meaning cannot by itself explain the overall meaning of a ritualised activity. Indeed, it does not necessarily have to be a part of it at all.

Yet, even if we focus upon the verbalised aspect of meaning the answer has to be that there is no *one* meaning or purpose in the ritualised activities of the informants. The ritualisation of everyday life, which they are so devoted to, is a creative and inventive activity insofar as it involves finding methods and meanings which correspond to one's own individual needs and ends. These individual ritual meanings of the individual informants are not coherent or homogenous even though they belong to a seemingly close knit and clearly defined religious conservative group. Rituals have many meanings simultaneously and different meanings for different people. The personal interpretations of the meaning and purpose of the rituals,

therefore, also vary significantly between the different informants. The rituals which help Jamie deal with his loss, for instance, enable Amir to focus on his studies, Mostaʿār to endure his poverty and ʿAli Bakhtiāri to overcome his depression. On this level the meaning of ritualisation is clearly self-referential.

At the same time there are canonical meanings pertaining to the various rituals and ritualisations. The methods and meanings, which the informants utilise, are picked from a defined repertoire of canonical meanings and methods. These canonical meanings are brought from the richness of Islamic tradition and are by no means entirely homogeneous. In the present community, however, they are most apparently available in the lectures and lamentations and are presented there in a somewhat coherent way. The informants often refer to these canonical interpretations. What parts of the understanding they refer to, however, varies considerably, and therefore the canonical understanding can be seen as a toolbox from which the informants may pick whatever ideas they need in their own personal situations. The cases of Jamie and the other informants illustrate how a group of seemingly homogeneous individuals may relate and act independently in relation to the canonical messages of their community. These individuals use rituals and different canonical interpretations to the extent they need them and their personal belief systems need not be entirely coherent with the canonical theology. Instead, the rituals get their meaning through their applicability and relevance in the particular life situations. The theological ideas and rituals, as the case of Jamie clearly shows, become important only when they have immediate relevance in personal experiences, when they can help to deal with experience, help to explain, formulate, understand or control it. Canonical concepts, ideas and rituals are used as tools, and when these tools no longer have the desired effect they can be reinterpreted or abandoned. The canonical messages, and indeed the whole social environment focused on in this study should be seen as a provider of tools, which can be used according to the personal preferences of individuals, rather than as something which defines these preferences.

To put it concisely, one overall conclusion of this study is that there is indeed meaning in the ritualised activity of the informants but that this meaning is created through a complex exchange between bodily experience, self-referential reflection and assimilated canonical interpretation. Meanings are bound to the different life situations

of the individuals who hold them and may, as some of the cases of this study clearly illustrate, change dramatically with the passing of time.

The rituals can be charged with different meanings and purposes. Through rituals different ways of behaviour and modes of interpretation can be constructed. In the different chapters of this study, I have shown some effects that the ritualisation in the life of my informants has created. The different chapters have their own conclusions and much has therefore already been said that otherwise would have been suitable to bring up in a concluding chapter such as this. However, in the following I will very briefly present five conclusions regarding the ritual constructions that I have discussed in this study.

1. *The Unity of Experience*

A third conclusion is that ritualisation contributes to the construction of unity. It would be misleading to discuss the different aspects of the informants' experience as separate and clear-cut entities. Body and mind, politics and spirituality, communal and individual ideas, all interact in the web of experience that form our lives. In the case of the informants, these connections are obvious and striking. In their experience, the bodily sensation of pressing one's forehead against the prayer stone is linked to the political ideology of Khomeynist Islamism; as the everyday struggle against personal anxiety is related to the fate of ʻAli and his descendants in the 7th century; or as the sexual frustration of being young and unmarried in a world of temptations is connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are no distinct boundaries between experiences, whether they are bodily, spiritual, emotional or intellectual. They all make up the flux that humans have to relate to and somehow deal with. When the authorisation process strengthens the community through rituals, it does so by approaching the human experience as a whole. Body, emotion, thought and spirituality are addressed simultaneously. People are asked to cry and thereby to protest against the United States and Israel, to support the regime and thereby to come to terms with their own sorrows, to mourn their lost relatives and thereby to come to know God. In the canonical ideology of the lectures and lamentations, and indeed in mainstream Islamic tradition as such, this idea of unicity of experience is nothing new. As expressed through the central concept of *towhid* it constitutes a fundamental principle in

Islamic thought. The Islamic project has, in Muslim understanding, been a project of *making one*, of creating unity from the time of Mohammad: the unity of God reflected in the unity of the Muslim *omma* and of human experience as such. What I have tried to show is that this understanding of self can also be appreciated from an outsider's non-confessional and analytical point of view. The rituals contribute to the construction of an experience of unity.

2. *The Authority of Emotion*

The first conclusion is that the rituals of emotion constitute a central component in the authorisation process of the community in focus. They thereby contribute to the construction of authority. Victor Turner claimed that rituals have to involve both politics, i.e. social structure and legitimacy, and emotional and existential needs in order to be effective.[53] The sorrow gatherings portrayed here are clear examples of rituals which involve all these components. It is my conclusion that the bridge between personal sorrow and political authority, which they make up, becomes an important factor in the authorisation process of the community. I have shown how ritualised crying is appreciated, encouraged and promoted by the regime and by mosque authorities. The message of the lectures and lamentations, which was discussed in chapter 4, clearly show this. Ritualised crying in the community is a social act which communicates affinity and kinship with the objects of sorrow and with the other mourners and which thus strengthens the communal feeling of belonging together. In the political environment of the mosque, where the authority of the *Ahl-e beyt* is so strongly connected to the authority of the *ʿolamā* and the present regime, ritualised crying becomes a symbol of support for the present state of affairs, rather than an expression of discontentment. Therefore the ritualised emotions of my informants are rightly seen as a part of the authorisation process. These rituals construct an acknowledgment of authority.

3. *The Embodiment of Authority*

Furthermore, the rituals contribute to the construction of embodied authority. Authority, that is power experienced as legitimate, is created

[53] Hylland Eriksen 2000: 241.

in a process of embodiment. By this I mean that the process of authorisation in the chosen community connects embodied experiences with socially conveyed canonical ideas. The clearest example of this is emotions which are experienced as bodily and which cause the body to change but which, all the same, become expressions in support of authority. Authority is not just intellectually accepted and obeyed but is also undeniably, emotional and physical. The informants' physical and emotional experience in ritual activity is clear evidence for this. The rituals contribute to the construction of embodied authority.

4. *The Borders of the Community*

Another conclusion is that the experienced unity within the community may create clear-cut borders towards other communities and groups in the Iranian society. As long as authority is accepted, force and persuasion are not necessary and thus invisible to the informants. As soon as one chooses to question or leave the community, however, these adjoining means of power implementation quickly become evident. Jamie's story is a striking example of how things may turn out. His choice to display discontentment with the views and ways of the community resulted in immediate repression which forced him to retract his criticism and pretend to comply with the views of the authorities. The informants may choose to stay within the community and adjust to whatever they find there for their own needs and desires, or choose to leave and face repression. Power in the community, it seems, is invisible until it is questioned. The rituals contribute to the construction of community borders.

5. *The Individual as an Independent Agent*

Ritualisation constructs independent agents. There is a paradox in the culture of my informants. As individuals they are subordinated in a collective system of thought and action through a process of authorisation. In this process they are connected to their community, not only in terms of thoughts and opinions, but also through their emotions in a physical and bodily way. In the same process through which they are *bound* to their community, however, they are also given the ritual and interpretative tools that enable them to deal with their lives independently. Therefore the process of ritualisation

can be compared to a process of creating, not just understanding and meaning, but also independent agency.[54]

Life Goes on . . .

So ends the story of Jamie, Mostaʿār, ʿAli Bakhtiāri, Mohammad Mahdi and Amir. For a few years I have had the opportunity to follow their lives from time to time. It has been a privilege. Since my last visit in May 2002 I have received and written a few letters to some of them. The letters I have received have been brief, mostly polite standard formulations and exhortations that I have to send a copy of my book, as soon as it is finished.

However, I have not heard from Jamie. One of the last times I met him in Iran we switched roles and he interviewed me. He asked me about my ideas about Iran, Islam and religion in general. At that time his own position was definite in its denial of the authorities and we laughed about the title he had suggested for my study: *The craziest, most illogical and religious country in the whole world.* After that occasion we met a few times for social reasons but never spoke again about the matters of the study. Jamie went on with his life, consolidating the extremes of his new ideological orientation I suppose, finding new strategies to deal with it.

The last time I met Mostaʿār, he was absorbed in his duties at the *madrese.* As usual there were many people around him, other *tollāb* and colleagues always busy with their dealings but never busy enough to be prevented from drinking a cup of tea with the visiting Swede. At that time Mostaʿār said a few words, which he wanted me to quote in my book. Apparently, he saw them as a summary of his religious thoughts, which he wished to convey to the western readers of this study. The words that he told me concerned the necessity to contemplate one's life:

> Think about where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going! What is our responsibility in this world? How are we different

[54] This duality has also been discussed by others. Judith Butler, for instance, labels it the paradox of subjectivation. See, for instance, Butler 1993: 15 and Mahmood 2001b: 210.

> from animals? Humans should not spend their lives hunting for food and material things only. The status of humans is really high![55]

I suppose these concluding words of Mostaʿār reflect his idea about the problems of the western world; they are a final effort to convey something about his conviction to the imagined audience of my readers. However, maybe his words also reflect his own struggle. Throughout the period of this study Mostaʿār has had to deal with his own poverty, finding financial resources to marry and to support his family. For him, the struggle for food and material things is not an abstract but an everyday experience, and Islam, as I see it, is also a method for him to cope with this. It directs his attention to other aspects of reality and perhaps calms the frustration. Mostaʿār's poverty was there when I first met him, it was there when we bid each other farewell for the last time on a sunny afternoon in 2002, and I suppose it will be there, more or less, throughout his life. He will have to find ways to deal with it. In this respect I do not envy him.

ʿAli Bakhtiāri was full of optimism and dreams for the future when we parted for the last time. He had plans to become a politician as soon as he had finished his studies. "I am good at speaking, I can defend people, I can defend their rights",[56] he told me and revealed that he hoped to become a member of parliament in the future. Sitting in the ramshackle room that is ʿAli's home, his dreams seemed very optimistic to me. But no matter how realistic his future plans may be, there is no doubt that it was a changed ʿAli Bakhtiāri that I left after four years of friendship. Instead of the depressed and quiet man whom I had once come to know, there now was a confident and career-oriented *basij* with high hopes for the future. I have a strong impression that ʿAli really has managed to come to terms with his problems. No doubt he experiences his religious fervour to be the cause of this and from what I have seen during these years there is nothing that refutes such a conclusion. Before I left him he gave me a *kefie*, the characteristic scarf worn by the *basij*, as a parting gift. Although I would wear such a garment because of the political statement that it entails, I took it as a token of his appreciation of our friendship. He will find his way.

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[55] Mostaʿār, April 24th, 2002.
[56] ʿAli Bakhtiāri, May 5th, 2002.

As for Mohammad Mahdi, I suppose his life as a father and Koran teacher will go on as it did during the time of this study. The last time I saw him we spoke about the Iranian situation, the progress of the reformists in politics and increasing social problems. "If they could just listen", Mohammad told me then. "Our leader has ordered people to fight against the social differences among people, poverty and corruption. Money is spent without reason and he has ordered it to stop . . . but they do not listen and it will get worse."[57] Mohammad Mahdi will continue his life struggling against societal change through his teaching, and as Iranian society changes, I assume he will also find strategies to deal with it, in his own way.

Finally, I left Amir in a completely different situation. Young, talented and ambitious as he is, his life has an abundance of possibilities. At that time he was about to take admission exams to enter university. Before I left we spoke a great deal about him visiting me in Sweden, and unlike the other informants, such a venture would not be entirely impossible for Amir. When I last saw him he had abandoned the religious life style he had when we first met. He had come to terms with the problems that previously bothered him and redefined what it means to be a good Muslim. To have a sharp mind, to be focused, successful and self controlled, that is what Islam had come to be about in Amir's new situation. I do not doubt that he will succeed with whatever he chooses to do.

New situations bring about new definitions and new ways. Five individuals, when I found them for a while united—by their choice of mosque, their life style and their zealousness—and now, only a few years later, scattered like reeds shaken by the wind. That is what it is like, I suppose, to practice a religious tradition: ups and downs, comings and goings in a constant struggle of definition and redefinition, discovering new methods to deal with experience. The struggle goes on, of course, for me and for the others: Jamie, Mostaʿār, ʿAli, Mohammad and Amir—finding their way through the flux.

[57] Mohammad Mahdi, May 1st, 2002.

SUMMARY IN PERSIAN

تشیع زنده: زندگیِ مذهبیِ مردان در ایران معاصر
نویسنده: داوید تَورفی‌ئل

کتابی که پیش رو دارید پژوهشی است در مورد تاریخ مذهب؛ پژوهشی در مورد اسلام شیعی در ایران معاصر با تمرکز بر زندگیِ مذهبیِ مردانی که به طبقات مختلف جامعه‌ی ایرانی تعلق دارند. در باره‌ی فقه اسلامی فَیلسوفانَ و علما بسیار نوشته‌اند، اما کتاب‌های اندکی در مورد زندگی روزمره‌ی معتقدان به اسلام و اهمیت این زندگی برای این افراد در دسترس خواننده‌ی انگلیسی‌زبان قرار دارد. بنابراین سئوال اصلی‌ای که من تلاش می‌کنم در این پژوهش به آن پاسخ دهم، این است: زندگی مذهبیی برای گروهی از مردان در ایران امروز چه معنایی دارد؟ بر مبنای این سئوال بحث تئوریکی در مورد عبادت و معنای هستی‌شناسانه‌ی مذهب ارائه خواهد شد. این پژوهش به پاره‌ای از آیین‌های عبادی تشیع نیز خواهد پرداخت؛ آیین‌هایی چون نماز، روزه، جلسه‌های قرائت قرآن و دعای کمیل. برای یافتن پاسخ معنای مذهبی عبادت، من در طول سه سال، چهار بار از مسجدی در اصفهان دیدار کردم. طیِ دیدارهایم از این مسجد، با بزرگواری و مهربانیِ بی‌دریغ اعضا و مدیریت مسجد روبروَ شدم و امکان یافتم که در جلسه‌های گوناگون عبادی شرکت و در مورد مسائل مذهبی- وجودی با بسیاری گفتگو کنم. برای آن‌که بتوانم به‌درستی بفهمم زندگی مذهبی برای یک فرد مؤمن چگونه تعریف می‌شود، تصمیم گرفتم این پژوهش را بر روی پنج نفر متمرکز کنم. در طول اقامت‌ام در ایران این فرصت را یافتم که این پنج نفر را بهتر بشناسم. در جاهایی از این پژوهش من از این افراد، که البته با یک‌دیگر تفاوت‌هایی دارند، سخن خواهم گفت. معمول چنین است که در پژوهش‌هایی از این دست، مصاحبه‌شوندگان ناشناخته بمانند. بنابراین، در این پژوهش از آنان با نام‌های مستعار یاد خواهد شد.

نخستین فرد، علی بختیاری است که همان‌گونه که نام مستعارش نشان می‌دهد از ایل بختیاری است. او در یک خانوادی فقیر کشاورز متولد شده و در سال‌های سخت جنگ ایران و عراق در روستایی کوهستانی در منطقه‌ی چهارمحال بختیا بختیاری پرورش یافته است. از کودکی‌اش تنها کار سخت، اندوه و مشقت را به یاد می‌آورد، اما اینک به شهر نقل مکان کرده است تا ضمن تحصیل در دانشگاه پولی نیز به‌دست آوردهِ و برای خانوادهاش بفرستد. در طول سال‌هایی که من این سعادت را داشتم که با علی بختیاری معاشرت کنم، او چه از جنبه‌ی شخصی و چه از نظر مذهبی پخته‌تر شده است. علی

پیش از آن‌که با من آشنا شود، از افسردگی شدیدی رنج می‌برد، اما به دنبال فهم مسائل وجودی بر مبنای مطالعه‌ی متون اسلامی و به لطف یک زندگی عبادی سخت توانسته است بر مشکلات‌اش فائق آید. اسلام برای او راهی به سوی خودشناسی و سلامت روحی بوده است.

نفر دوم را مستعار می‌نامم. او در حوزه‌ی علمیه طلبه است و هدف‌اش تحصیل و تتبع تا رسیدن به مقام مرجعیت است. در شهری کوچک در غرب ایران متولد شده، اما در تهران پرورش یافته است. همچون علی بختیاری، چندان مایل نیست از کودکی‌اش یاد کند. وضعیت خانوادگی او متعادل نبوده و حتا این خطر وجود داشته است که به کارهای خلاف کشیده شود. خدمت نظام‌وظیفه او را نجات داده است. در دوران نظام‌وظیفه با افرادی مؤمن آشنا شده و به راهی کشیده شده که اکنون در آن گام برمی‌دارد. برای مستعار، زندگی اسلامی به معنای رهایی از سقوط بوده است؛ آگاهی از این نکته که انسان ارج و توان بسیار دارد؛ که زندگی انسانی تنها دربرگیرندهی پاسخ به نیازهای مادی نیست، بلکه هدف معنوی متعالی‌تری را نیز در برمی‌گیرد. اسلام در همه‌ی زمینه‌ها راه کمال را نشان می‌دهد.

سومین نفر، جامی نام دارد. برخلاف دیگران او فعالیت عبادی خود را در پایان دورانی که این پژوهش انجام می‌شد، کم کرد. در میان این پنج نفر جامی از همه مسن‌تر است و پیش از انقلاب چندین سال در خارج از کشور تحصیل می‌کرده است. نخستین باری که با او دیدار کردم به‌تازگی یکی از بستگان نزدیک خود را از دست داده بود و به‌شدت درگیر مراسم گوناگون عزاداری بود؛ مرد عزاداری که مدام در مسائل وجودی تعمق می‌کرد. اسلام برای او راهی بود برای فهم چرایی فانی‌بودن حیات؛ تکیه‌گاهی برای آن‌که خود را بر زندگی پس از مرگ متمرکز کند و موقتی بودن غم‌های جهان خاکی را دریابد. هنگامی که این پژوهش به پایان می‌رسید، جامی تغییر نظر داده و به ارزشمند بودن زندگی اعتقاد پیدا کرده بود؛ تغییری که سبب شد فعالیت مذهبی او کاهش پیدا کند.

چهارمین نفر، محمد مهدی نام دارد. محمد مهدی در دورانی که من فرصت معاشرت با او را داشتم زندگی بسیار پرآشوبی داشت، صاحب اولین فرزند خود شده بود و برای تأمین معاش خانواده‌ی خود روزهای سختی را می‌گذراند. محمد مهدی مردی بسیار مؤمن است و خود را وقف آموزش و تدریس قرآن کرده است. برخلاف چهار نفر دیگر محمد مهدی گذشته‌ی غیرمذهبی ندارد، بلکه مذهب همواره در زندگی‌اش حضوری تعیین‌کننده داشته است. از زمانی که او استعداد نادر خویش در قرائت قرآن را نشان داد، قرآن به مشغولیت اصلی او تبدیل شده است. نوع زندگی و اندیشه‌ی محمد مهدی به‌شدت بر تعلیمات قرآن متمرکز است. او توانست به همه‌ی سوآل‌هایی که من طرح کردم با رجوع به قرآن به‌خوبی پاسخ دهد. اسلام برای او نظامی یک‌پارچه است که رستگاری انسانی را از

طریق وحی قرآنی متحقق می‌کند. محمد مهدی را فردی جدی، سخت‌کوش و مؤمن یافتم که تمام تلاش‌اش را به کار می‌گیرد تا مطابق این وحی زندگی کند.

پنجمین و آخرین نفر، امیر نام دارد که جوان‌ترین فرد این جمع است. زمانی که من برای این پژوهش با او مصاحبه می‌کردم هنوز نوجوان بود. او در یک خانواده‌ی خوزستانی متولد شده است و در دوران تحصیل به‌سختی درس خوانده است تا سنگ بنای یک زندگی آکادمیک را بگذارد. در دورانی که این پژوهش انجام می‌شد با ناکامی‌های مختلف دوران جوانی درگیر بود. با پدر و مادرش گهگاه دچار اختلاف می‌شد و از افکار تشویش‌آور رنج می‌برد. امیر در آغاز این پژوهش زندگیِ عبادیِ فعالی داشت. در آن هنگام فکر می‌کرد اسلام می‌تواند به او روش‌هایی جهت کنترل این تشویش‌ها ارائه کند. او مشتاق پاکی روح بود و اعتقاد داشت که اسلام و اهل بیت می‌توانند به او در جهت نیل به این هدف کمک کنند. هنگامی که به پایان این پژوهش نزدیک می‌شدیم، نگاه امیر به‌تدریج تغییر می‌کرد و پیش از هرچیز به اسلام به مثابه روشی برای روشن و متمرکز اندیشیدن می‌نگریست. بدین ترتیب اسلام سرانجام برای او تبدیل به تکیه‌گاهی جهت نیل به کامیابی‌های آکادمیکی شد که آرزو می‌کرد.

فصل‌های گوناگون این کتاب به زندگی مذهبی این افراد از جنبه‌ها و منظرهای گوناگون می‌پردازد. فصل‌های اول و دوم به مقدمه اختصاص دارند. در این دو فصل پیش‌زمینه‌های تئوریک پژوهش و نکات روش‌شناختی مورد بحث قرار می‌گیرند؛ از جمله موقعیت من در مسجد به مثابه دیدارکننده‌ای خارجی. در فصل‌های سوم و چهارم چگونگی جلسه‌های عبادی‌ای که این افراد در آن‌ها شرکت می‌کردند، توصیف می‌شود، فعالیت‌های مختلف مسجد مورد بحث قرار می‌گیرند و به محتوای سخنرانی‌ها و جلسه‌های دعا اشاره می‌شود. در فصل‌های پنجم و ششم نقش مرجعیت مذهبی مورد بحث قرار می‌گیرد. در این فصل قبل از هرچیز بر اهمیت امام مهدی و نقش علما متمرکز می‌شویم. سرانجام در فصل‌های هفتم و هشتم در مورد روش‌هایی که مصاحبه‌شوندگان برای زندگی مطابق وحی اسلامی در جامعه‌ی امروز ایران به کار می‌برند، بحث می‌شود؛ به‌ویژه در مورد اهمیت کنترل وسوسه‌های انسانی از طریق به یاد آوردن اهل بیت، اندیشه به مرگ و شرکت در مراسم عزاداری که در مسجد و یا جاهای دیگر انجام می‌شود. در فصل نهم مهم‌ترین جمع‌بندی‌ها را ارائه خواهم کرد.

چنان می‌نماید که برای این سئوال که زندگی عبادی چه معنایی دارد، پاسخ ساده‌ای وجود ندارد. پژوهش‌هایی که در این مورد انجام شده است، اغلب به ارائه‌ی پاسخ‌های ساده‌ای قناعت کرده‌اند که تصور می‌شده است در مورد همه‌ی مناسک مذهبی صدق می‌کنند. پژوهش من نشان می‌دهد که راه حل ساده‌ای وجود ندارد. اسلام به مثابه یک مذهب بسیار پیچیده‌تر و چندوجهی‌تر از آن است که در چهارچوب یک مدل تئوریک

ساده درک شود. در سنت اسلامی غنایی وجود دارد که سبب می‌شود اسلام هم بتواند تکیه‌گاه انسان باشد و هم در موقعیت‌های گوناگون به‌خوبی فهمیده شود. به‌طور مثال همان عبادتی که به علی بختیاری کمک می‌کند که بر افسردگی خویش فائق آید، به امیر کمک می‌کند که بر تحصیل خویش متمرکز شود. به گمان من برای فهم عبادت‌های اسلامی باید همزمان به سطوح مختلف نگریست؛ به عنوان نقطه شروع به سطح بدنی که اهمیت زیادی دارد. حرکت‌ها، حالت‌ها و واکنش‌ها برای همه یک‌سان اند و معانی‌ای را در بردارند که با کلمات قابل بیان‌کردن نیستند. به عنوان مثال برخی از این افراد شهادت می‌دهند که عبادت آن‌ها را در حل مشکلات فیزیکی کمک کرده است. سطح رسمی‌ای نیز وجود دارد. سطحی با معانی و توضیحات گوناگون که توسط قرآن و سنت‌های اسلامی ارائه می‌شود. در مسجدی که من برگزیده بودم، معانی رسمی در سخنرانی‌ها و خطبه‌ها مطرح می‌شد. توجه به این نکته اهمیت بسیار دارد. علاوه بر این سطوح معنای فردی‌ای نیز در فعالیت‌های عبادی وجود دارد؛ معنایی که یک عبادت ویژه، به‌طور مثال شرکت در افطار، برای یک فرد دارد. به‌عنوان جمع‌بندی می‌توان گفت که اسلام به‌عنوان مذهب و روش زندگی نه می‌تواند در اعمال قانونمندانه‌ی بدون اندیشه فروکاسته شود و نه در یک نظام تئوریک آماری. اسلام عملی باید بر بستر همه‌ی پیچیدگی‌هایش به عنوان مذهبی زنده و همه‌جانبه فهمیده شود؛ مذهبی که می‌تواند به انسان در بسیاری از زمینه‌های هستی کمک کند.

می‌خواهم این جمع‌بندی بسیار فشرده را با سپاسی گرم و صمیمانه تمام کنم؛ سپاس از جمعی که مهربانانه و مهمان‌نوازانه به من اجازه داد که در زندگی مذهبی‌اش شرکت کنم، به‌ویژه از کسانی که در این کتاب علی بختیاری، مستعار، جامی، محمد مهدی و امیر نامیده شده‌اند.

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August 12th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
August 12th, Thursday night, *Doʿā-ye Komeyl.*
August 19th, Thursday night, *Doʿā-ye Komeyl.*
August 23rd, *Shahādat-e Zahrā*, lamentation in connection to lecture.
August 23rd, *Shahādat-e Zahrā*, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.
August 25th, *Shahādat-e Zahrā*, lamentation in connection to lecture.
August 26th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
August 26th, Thursday night, *Doʿā-ye Komeyl.*
September 2nd, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
September 2nd, Thursday night, *Doʿā-ye Komeyl.*
September 4th, ordinary, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.

2000
March 2nd, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
March 9th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
March 16th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
March 23rd, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
March 30th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 6th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 19th, month of Moharam, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 20th, month of Moharam and Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 20th, Thursday night, *Doʿā-ye Komeyl.*
April 21st, month of Moharam, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 22nd, month of Moharam, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 26th, month of Moharam, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 27th, month of Moharam and Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 27th, Thursday night, *Doʿā-ye Komeyl.*
April 28th, month of Moharam, lamentation in connection to lecture.

2001
February 23rd, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
March 2nd, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 12th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
April 19th, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
May 3rd, Thursday night, lamentation in connection to lecture.
May 8th, month of Safar, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.
May 9th, month of Safar, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.
May 13th, small-scale private *rowze*-meetings.
May 16th, month of Safar, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.
May 17th, month of Safar, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.

May 17th, Thursday night, *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*.
May 20th, small-scale private *rowze*-meetings.
May 22nd, month of Safar, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.
May 31st, Thursday night, *Do'ā-ye Komeyl*.

2002
April 26th, month of Safar, *rowze*-meetings in the mosque.

Lectures

1999
July 8th, Thursday night.
July 15th, Thursday night.
July 22nd, Thursday night.
July 29th, Thursday night.
August 5th, Thursday night.
August 12th, Thursday night.
August 23rd, *Shahādat-e Zahrā*.
August 23rd, *Shahādat-e Zahrā*.
August 25th, *Shahādat-e Zahrā*.
August 26th, Thursday night.
September 2nd, Thursday night.

2000
March 2nd, Thursday night.
March 9th, Thursday night.
March 16th, Thursday night.
March 23rd, Thursday night.
March 30th, Thursday night.
April 6th, Thursday night.
April 19th, month of Moharam.
April 20th, month of Moharam.
April 21st, month of Moharam.
April 22nd, month of Moharam.
April 26th, month of Moharam.
April 27th, month of Moharam.
April 28th, month of Moharam.

2001
February 23rd, Thursday night.
March 2nd, Thursday night.
April 12th, Thursday night.
April 19th, Thursday night.
May 3rd, Thursday night.

2002
April 25th, month of Safar.
April 26th, month of Safar.

Texts
Text written by 'Ali Bakhtiyāri, 2001.

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