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Frontline Mysticism and Eastern Spirituality

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Iran and Beyond
MOHAMAD TAVAKOLI-TARGHI

Love mysticism, long viewed as the finest expression of religious experience in Islam, has been displaced in the past two decades with 'frontline/hate mysticism'. This militarized spirituality was nurtured in the 1980s by Iranian theologues, who during the war with Iraq promised prospective teenage martyrs 'ascendancy' to heaven. Soon adopted by Islamist activists in other parts of the world, this vengeful modality of piety was an extension of a politicized spirituality that emerged in the aftermath of World War I by redefining the East as spiritual.



Kazim Chalipa, 'Isar' (Self-Sacrifice)

The first part of the following retrospective essay examines the particularity of hate mysticism; the second identifies the foundational assumptions concerning the Orient and the Occident that allowed for the politicization of spirituality in the 20th century.

Hate mysticism

The tragic events of September 11 were products of a militarized religious subjectivity, a subjectivity that was labelled as 'frontline Gnosticism' (*'irfan-i jabhahyi*) by the Iranian-Islamist art ideologue Murtiza Avini.¹ Avini articulated this concept in a commentary on Ayatullah Khomeini's September 1988 letter to Islamic revolutionary artists. In his letter Khomeini radically redefined 'artists' as those 'wise' individuals who shed their 'pure blood' on 'the front-line of love and martyrdom'. Turning to the conventional notion of art, Khomeini asserted that '[b]eautiful and pure art is one that clashes with modern capitalism and with the blood-sucking communism and destroys the Islam of comfort and luxury, the eclectic Islam, the Islam of compromise and ignobility, the Islam of the pain-free comfort-seekers, and in one word the American Islam [*Islam-i Amrikayi*].' Khomeini advised artists 'to engage only in an art that teaches the path of clashing with the globe-mongers of the East and the West who are headed by the [United States of] America and the Soviet [Union].'² By denouncing non-combative piety and religiosity as 'American Islam' in the course of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988, Khomeini and other Iranian theologues established a distinctive paradigm of *militarized spirituality*.

While claiming to represent 'the pure Muhammadan Islam' (*Islam-i nab-i Muhammad*), this modality of piety negated the most cherished aspect of Islamic religious experience that has been historically exemplified by love mysticism.

With the intensification of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Iranian war theologues promoted the themes of resistance, self-sacrifice and martyrdom. During that period, 'martyrdom-seeking' was promoted as a fundamental distinction of the Islamic Revolution.³ By sacrificing oneself for the Islamic nation and the revolution, which were under assault by Iraq, the martyrs were guaranteed ascendancy (*'uruji*), a vertical movement toward heaven and God. Replacing the linear and temporal concept of 'progress' as the organizing element of political discourse, the concept of 'ascendancy' promoted a directional shift from a horizontal movement towards a desirable future to a vertical movement to a heavenly afterlife. Whereas Iranian revolutionary discourse promoted a collective march towards 'freedom' and the Islamic Republic, the war discourse publicized the individualized heavenward ascendancy of the 'avenger of God' and the 'revolutionary guards'.

While this vertical ascendancy had affinity with the medieval Gnostic concepts of perfection (*kamal*) and union (*vasl*), it rested upon a radically different form of subjectivity. In its medieval articulation, ascendancy was viewed as attainable only through solitude, asceticism, and the rejection of the material world. But the ascendancy that was promised to the martyrs during the Iran-Iraq war was indeed a displacement of the patriotic willingness to die and to kill for one's own homeland. This theological 'insurance' for well being in the afterlife of the martyrs was also deployed by the Afghani Mujahidin, the Pakistani Sipah-i Sahaba, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Lebanese Hizb Allah, and the Palestinian Hamas sodalities. Thus 'martyrdom' and 'ascendancy' became significant components of nationalized religious rhetoric. This new military rhetoric was sanctified by resorting to the Qur'an and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad. But the architects of this rhetoric conveniently forget to explain that the Prophet Muhammad and early Muslim warriors never referred to their military endeavours as jihad and did not hail a comrade who died on the warfront as a martyr. By de-historicizing and naturalizing jihad and martyrdom, in the past two decades these variegated concepts have been utilized for the purpose of endowing religious sanctity on combative subjectivity. It was such a combative subjectivity that was hailed as 'frontline mysticism' by the Iranian ideologue Murtiza Avini.

Unlike historical Islamic love mysticism, which has been predominantly apolitical and introspective, frontline mysticism is consciously political and vengeful. Instead of meditation and solitary contemplation for the purpose of annihilating the ego-centred self (an endeavour which was called 'the greater jihad'), frontline religious activists publicly propagate their will through physical self-annihilation. Unlike the love-mystics who encouraged ascetic endeavours for the goal of unity with the Other, contemporary religious activists are im-

pelled to violently eliminate the Other through physical self-annihilation.

In contradistinction to the solitary and privatized subjectivity of medieval mystics who sought to obliterate the Satan within themselves, the religiously inspired activists of our time are informed by a globalized vision of oppression, injustice, inequality and tyranny, all construed as the material manifestations of the Great Satan. Often identified with the United States and its foreign policies, this externalized, politicized, and territorialized Satan is considered as arrogant as the biblical Satan who refused to obey the divine command of bowing down to Adam. The physical identification of Satan with the United States has radically altered the notion of mystical journey. Whereas the mystical journey of the earlier times involved ascetic passages of self-discovery, in the militarized piety of our time 'the journey' is defined as a suicidal mission for the obliteration of the Other through physical self-annihilation.

The approaching self-annihilation was anticipated in a note found in the handbag of Muhammad 'Atta, a commander of the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center: 'The time of judgement has arrived. Hence we need to utilize those few hours to ask God for forgiveness. You have to be convinced that those few hours that are left you in your life are very few. From there you will begin to live the happy life, the infinite paradise.' Prepared for the tragic events of September 11, the suicidal journeymen were admonished to '[k]eep a very open mind, keep a very open heart of what you are to face.' Mentally prepared for the journey, the note promised: 'You will be entering paradise. You will be entering the happiest life, everlasting life.'

Contrary to conventional Islam, here the day of judgement is equated with the successful execution of the hateful mission. Consequently, a revengeful destruction of the Other is conceived as the ultimate judgement of God. 'The day of judgement' and 'eternal afterlife', which are conventionally postponed to the end of time, are viewed as contemporaneous with physical self-annihilation and the destruction of the Satanized Other. This vengeful piety is a radical negation of a conventional view of spirituality as composed of compassionate and merciful acts, the kind of intentional acts that are identified with God in the Qur'anic formula of initiation, 'in the name of God the Compassionate and Merciful'.

The spiritual East

The rhetorical significance of Islam in modern national-political discourses in the Middle East and South Asia is foundationally grounded in an Orientalist epistemological distinction between the East and the West. The architects of 19th and early 20th-century modern political discourses in these two regions accepted the Orientalist postulate of the non-contemporaneity of Occidental and Oriental societies. In this 'time-distancing' postulate, Europe was viewed as modern and dynamic and the Orient as pre-modern and static. Both Orientalist and nationalist discourses attributed the backwardness of the Muslim Orient to Islam.⁴ But this assumption was refigured in the aftermath of WWI. The destructions of WWI prompted the development of vernacular political

strategies that defined the national selves in contradistinction to the European Other, which was increasingly defined as materialistic. Thus a new generation of European-educated intellectuals sought to distance themselves from the assumed materiality of the West by turning to the contingently fashioned 'spiritual East'. This counter-European self-recognition as 'spiritual' provided the epistemological foundation for the increased significance of religion in the nationalist political discourses of South Asia and the Middle East.

Informed by German New Romanticism and Oswald Spengler's 'The Decline of the West', for instance, the post-WWI Iranian intelligentsia developed a critical approach to European civilization by articulating a vernacular modernity, a modernity that was grounded in the spiritual rejuvenation of Iran and Islam. In 1924, for instance, Murtiza Mushfiq Kazimi proposed that Iran needed a 'clerical modernity' (*tajadud-i akhund*).⁵ A year later Habib Allah Pur-i Riza suggested that what was needed was a 'sacred revolution' (*inqilab-i muqaddas*) with 'thinkers like Luther and Calvin'. Criticizing westernization as 'borrowed civilization'⁶ in 1926, Tuti Maraghah'i instead called for the development of a distinctly Iranian civilization that could harmonize the antagonistic relations of the European-mannered intelligentsia and the Muslim clerisy.⁷ Husayn Kazimzadah likewise called for an 'intellectual and religious revolution', a revolution for 'the purging of superstitions and superfluities' from Shi'ism. Kazimzadah argued that the material progress of the West should be synthesized with the spirituality of the East. He thus prescribed a synthetic modernity that sought the concordance of 'science with religion, materiality with spirituality, life with action, and action with nobility'. Reconfiguring the role of Islam in comprehension of modernity, in this scenario '[a] modern person must be religious and religious person must be modern'.⁸ These ideas informed Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946) who viewed the notion of 'European superiority' as a deceptive device for the promotion of colonialism and capitalism.

In his *Ethos (Ayin)*, which was published in 1932, Kasravi offered a comprehensive critique of European civilization and the mimetic project of 'Europism' (*urupayigarayi*), a futurist project that viewed the present of the West as the future of the Rest. Believing that 'Europe faced a dreadful future', Kasravi called for the purging of the 'malady of Europism' and for returning to the noble values that were trampled upon by the Iranian enthusiasts of European ways. In this counter-European project, religion was to play a pivotal role as the foundation for a compassionate, rational and ethical life, which was viewed as an alternative path of progress and development that could detour the social and economic problems of Europe.⁹ With varying degrees of sophistication, similar ideas were articulated by the Indian Muhammad Iqbal (1875–1938) and Abu al-ʿAla Mawdudi (1903–1979) and the Egyptian Rashid Riza (1865–1935) and Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949). By turning to Islam, these and other publicists sought to supply the content of the discursively spiritualized Orient, a turn that hindered the development of a civil and

secular political culture in the Middle East and South Asia.

Viewed as the guardians of fatalism and expectationalism, the early proponents of clerical modernity and spiritual revolution were intensely anti-clerical. In their formative phase, these calls were calls for the transformation of a sedimented notion of religion into a dynamic modern ideology and culture. For instance Kasravi, whose contribution to the emergence of Iranian Islamism has been effectively suppressed, viewed religion as 'humanism' (*adamigari*) and as 'the source of worldly prosperity'.¹⁰ To establish Islam as a counter-Europist 'guide for life', he called for 'the returning of Islam to its foundation by purging it of the irrationalities of Sufi predestanarianism and Shi'i expectationalism'.¹¹ As a rational humanist project, Islam was thus set to provide both the content of Eastern spirituality and the perimeters of a modern and progressive political culture. Overburdened by these modern requirements, religiosity and spirituality were increasingly politicized and religious sodalities assumed the role of political parties and civil institutions. Early examples of such associations that contributed to the formation of Islamic public sphere are the Egyptian Ikhwan al-Muslimun, the Indian-Pakistani Jama'at-i Islami, and the Iranian Hay'ats, an extensive network of neighbourhood associations that emerged all over Iran between the 1940s and the 1970s.

By claiming authenticity, morality, and spirituality as their own exclusive domain, these and other Islamist formations constituted their secular counterparts as replicas of the materialistic, immoral, inhumane, and decadent West. Consequently Islamist formations, instead of contributing to the invigoration of ethical, humanist, and civil values, have predominantly fostered violence, intolerance, incivility, and religious bigotry. As the Western claim of superiority espoused colonialism and imperialist domination, the Eastern claim of spirituality has likewise produced shameful manifestations that are contrary to basic norms of human decency. The events of September 11 are

the latest expression of this degenerated and vengeful spirituality. As postcolonial scholars have critiqued the claims of Western exceptionality, it is now urgent that the foundational assumptions of Eastern spirituality are likewise deconstructed.

Notes

1. Murtiza Avini, 'Manshur-i tajdidi-i ahd-lhunar', *Surah* 1, no. 1 (Farvardin 1368/March 1989): 4–15, particularly 15.
2. For the text of Khumayni's letter, see *ibid.*: 7.
3. 'Khatt-i Shahadat-talabi istiratizhi-i asasi-i inqilab', *Payam-i Inqilab* 45 (23 Aban 1360): 29–31.
4. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), particularly 1–17.
5. Murtaza Mushfiq Kazimi, 'Zindigani-i Urupa'i va zindigani-i Irani', *Iranshahr* 2, no. 8 (April 1924/Urdibihisht 1303): 458–467, quote on 462.
6. Mirza Husayn Tuti Maraghahyi, 'Din ya Asas-i 'Ilm va Tamadun', *Iranshahr* 4, no. 6 (August 1926/Shahrivar 1305): 347–355, quote on 352.
7. *Ibid.*: quote on 353.
8. Husayn Kazimzadah, *Rahbar-i nizhad-i naw dar justuju-yi khushbakhti* (Berlin: Iranschär, 1928).
9. Ahmad Kasravi, *Ayin* (Tehran: Jar, 2536 [1977]), respectively on 47, 48, 52–57.
10. *Ibid.*, 52.
11. Ahmad Kasravi, *Ma Chah Mikh'ahim* (Tehran: Kitabfurushi-i Paydar, 1319 [1940]), 200.

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