

THE WORLD VIEWS

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The Mullah: Uncommitted Formalism

The Mullah, a middle-aged man, represents religious learnedness and authority in the village. He completed four years of formal studies in theology and sacred law in Qom, the religious center of the Shia in Iran, and is supposed to use this knowledge for the spiritual benefit and ritual guidance of the people and to present a model of Islamic morality. In the eyes of the villagers, however, he has not lived up to these expectations during the twenty-five years of his residency in the village. For this reason, and also because of the general disrepute in which the clergy is held, ranging from biting anticlericalism to general distrust, he is not well accepted by the villagers.

People have become especially alienated by the Mullah's habit of leaving the village for a town outside the tribal area during Ramadan and Muharram, the two most significant religious months of the year, to earn more money. When, in 1970, the villagers asked him to stay, he demanded an honorarium of five *toman* per household. For this fee he held two *rawzah* services each night with impressive pathos, complete with religious instruction, sermon, recitation of the passions of Husayn and his family, prayer, and invocations. Inevitably, these performances earned him the caustic comment that for five toman he cut off the head of the Imām Husayn several times a day. But there is no doubt that the huge participation in the rituals on Tāsū'ā and 'Ashūrā was due to his performance.

During Ramadan and Muharram the following year, however, the Mullah left the village again, this time to serve the administrative center's new mosque, which enjoys the patronage of well-salaried government employees and officials. The peasants were upset about it, but the Mullah defended himself, saying that unlike the city people, the villagers were ignorant, impious peasants who were unwilling to honor his right to proper

remuneration. In the eyes of the villagers his excuse was invalid, because his substantial income from various enterprises such as ownership of a store, shares in flour mills, partnerships in a transport business and herds, together with a small salary and fees for services, provided him a living standard surpassing anybody else's in the village.

His shift from a peasant community to a congregation of government officials indeed reflected more than just a consideration of earnings and audience receptivity. It meant definite upward status mobility. In the preceding fall he had attended the congress of clergymen held annually under the auspices of the government and designed to form a Religion Corps analogous to the Literacy and Development Corps. The mullahs were lectured by government officials on themes like the role of religion and the clergy in modern Iran and the correct reading of the scriptures in regard to modernization. They were also admonished to stop criticizing the regime in their sermons by way of allegorical symbolism and refined allusions. This week long training in the new language of the national culture enabled him to address successfully an audience of government officials. Given the prospect of social advancement, he did not miss the opportunity to use these means.

Besides failing to attend properly to rituals, he also seemed to fail in presenting a good moral example. In the eyes of most villagers, he is not committed to safeguarding village morality, and there have been rumors of improper advances to married women in the past. He is never seen at the mosque for prayers, and only officiates at marriages and burials for renowned persons. (Common peasants turn to certain fellow villagers for services like saying the prayers over the dead). He does not act as mediator in quarrels either. Soon after his arrival from Qom he became involved in personal and political disputes which discredited him considerably amongst the peasants. In the political arena he took the side of the landlords who then, twenty-five years ago, enjoyed almost absolute power over the peasants. His political stance was sealed by his marriage to one of the landlords' daughters and has not changed since. In the past he even condoned the oppression of the landlords by performing rituals on their behalf.

All this compounds to discredit him hopelessly in the eyes of most villagers and to compromise his religious credibility. People believe that what he says about religious issues he says only to earn a living, not out of deep conviction. Also, the air of honesty, dignity, and religious solemnity which surrounds his manners and speech is seen rather as something he owes his job than something that reflects substance. Thus, the negative image people have of the clergy is both confirmed and actively shaped by the Mullah's behavior.

It is difficult to determine how influential his presence and his activi-

ties actually have been on the religious life of the community. Judging from overt evidence, his impact has been very limited.

In the past, he was unable to prevent what to the peasants were the gravest sins: the abuses of power by the landlords. Neither could he stop the raiding expeditions of both landlords and villagers.

At present, participation in the traditional rituals at certain core festivals, such as *Tāsū'ā* or *'Ashūrā*, is strikingly higher whenever the Mullah performs them, but he does not have the authority to introduce any religious innovations.

There are indications that certain expressions of piety, such as saying the prayers and fasting, have increased over the past decades. But this has happened more as part of the general Islamization process which occurred in the wake of the opening up of the tribal area than as result of the Mullah's specific activity. The observable increase in mosque contributions and pilgrimages is also related to this and, of course, to the general rise in living standards. Religious taxes (*zakāt* and *khums*) were never paid and the Mullah has not been able to change this.

Nor has the Mullah much influence on the fulfillment of the prescriptions. The villagers send their daughters to school if and when it is economically feasible, whether he approves of it or not. About one-third of the village women use contraceptive pills, but only one or two actually know the Mullah's opinion about it. As to dancing at weddings, there are only two women (one of them his wife) who explicitly refrain from it because the Mullah says it is sinful. The others dance whenever the social situation calls for it, confidently waiving the Mullah's scruples. The observance of ablutions and ritual bathing may be stimulated by his sermons, but people are not willing to accept his orthodox standards. Once, in the mosque, he gave orders to wash more carefully than usual the glass I had used, only to be severely criticized by a villager who told him that a Christian was not more polluting than a Muslim.

In fact, the Mullah himself implicitly admits his limited impact on the people when he considers them impious peasants, not very much different from the way they were when he came to the village from Qom twenty-five years ago. This means that by his own standards he has failed to induce the change in religious attitudes he declared his avowed goal as a young mullah. Surely, however, his personal shortcomings are only one factor in his failure, probably even a minor one, beside traditional attitudes, cultural norms, general evolutionary trends, secular education, and the collapse of the power structure he was connected to. (1971).



What are man's duties?

Man's duties are to recognize God and to live by the rules of the religion. There are five different types of behavior: obligatory (*vājib*), forbidden (*harām*), desirable (*mustahabb*), disapproved (*makrūh*), and neutral (*mubāh*). Failing to do the obligatory acts and doing the forbidden ones is sinful, whereas doing the desirable acts and abstaining from the disapproved ones earns merits.

What is obligatory behavior and for what reason is it obligatory?

The daily prayers and the preceding ablutions are obligatory to satisfy and please God, to worship Him, and to ask for help. Fasting is obligatory to give rest to the body. Giving alms, *khums* to poor Sayyids, and *zakāt* to poor non-Sayyids and for public works is obligatory because it collects wealth for the strength of Islam. Bathing (*ghusl*) after intercourse, childbirth, and menstruation is obligatory because there is sweat and filth on the body, and bathing after touching a corpse because one may contract a disease. In general, washing is obligatory if the things touched were polluting (*najis*), like blood, semen, or excrements. If things are just plain dirty (*kasīf*), washing is only desirable, except when the body is so covered with filth that at ablutions before prayer water cannot reach the skin. In this case washing becomes obligatory too. For a woman it is obligatory to cover, not necessarily with a veil, all her body except face and hands because a fight might start if a beautiful woman is seen: the eyes that see her will cause the heart to want her. For a male, circumcision is obligatory: otherwise he is filthy.

What are forbidden acts?

Stealing, lying, murder, false accusations, abuse, and beating a person without reason are *harām*. Slander is *harām* because the victim is annoyed by it; wine-drinking because, if drunk, a man cannot recognize his mother, daughter, or other forbidden relative and might sleep with her; the habit of opium smoking because a person stops working; eating pork because pigs feed on dirt and have a worm; eating the meat of animals whose throat has not been cut because when the blood stays in the body, the meat gets rotten; and adultery because it is a violation of other people's property.

Taking interest is forbidden because it distresses people. But the prohibition stipulates only that no interest be taken of the same kind: that is, it is unlawful to take back twelve kilogram of honey if you gave only ten kilogram, or take twelve toman cash for a loan of ten toman cash. It is lawful, however, to give ten toman worth of sugar and take back twelve toman worth of butterfat if it was first stated that the sugar given was worth twelve toman; or to give a hundred toman plus some sugar and take back 150

toman; or to give seven or eight toman cash if stating that, in fact, the loan was in the amount of ten toman, and in return taking some produce worth ten toman.

Hearing music is forbidden because it tends to become a habit and keeps people from working. But some authorities dispute this prohibition. Some say growing a beard is forbidden, but others say that it is obligatory, although the beard need not be long. The regulations regarding these two issues are based on consensus, not on the Qur'ān. In any case, their violation is a small sin as compared, for example, to murder.

What are desirable acts?

These are acts whose practice is better than their non-practice. If done they earn merit, but if not done, there is no sin. There is a very large number of such acts, such as,

- Helping people by giving money, food, and assistance, by remitting debts, and so on. Reason tells us that this is good. It makes people happy.
- Cultivating the land, raising animals, tending gardens, digging irrigation channels, trading, and doing business. This has merit because it increases possessions. It safeguards a man from becoming poor and becoming a thief. Also, a poor man cannot give good food to his children.
- Having social relations with one's relatives, loving one's neighbor, visiting the sick, accompanying a funeral procession, respecting father and mother, respecting one's husband, and loving one's wife, because this makes people cheerful and happy.
- Putting perfume on one's clothes, so people won't be offended by bad odors. Also it is based on the tradition that Muhammad valued three things in this world: good smell, women, and prayer.
- Giving parties of any kind. This communicates love to people, and, possibly, among the guests is a poor man who will be helped, and even animals profit from the bones and other waste.
- Studying and teaching, because they enlighten and make good use of one's faculties.
- Learning how to ride, swim, shoot, and such, because these are skills that serve the protection of the country, and, also, because learning is better than not learning, and knowing is better than not knowing.
- Watering and feeding the animals because they have souls.
- Frequenting the mosque and saying the prayers there. About the Friday-noon prayer there is, however, a dispute: Some say it is oblig-

- atory to say it in the mosque, but others say it is only desirable.
- Taking a wife and giving a daughter in marriage, because these serve the social life, sexual satisfaction, and the procreation of children. To take a wife becomes obligatory, however, as soon as one starts doing forbidden things, such as adultery.
 - Washing filth off one's body, brushing one's teeth, stopping to eat before one is fully satisfied, removing pubic hair because it is dirty, dressing in white clothes on which filth shows easily: all this is meritorious because it prevents disease. Muhammad for sure knew about bacteria and therefore he gave us all these regulations about purity, bathing, washing, and ablutions. But in his time he couldn't talk in these terms. People would never have believed in him and his message. How wonderful his knowledge was becomes evident only today.
 - Economic progress, according to some authorities, is neutral, according to others, desirable. It is considered desirable because it is good for the society. A few people may become destitute in its course, but without development everyone would become destitute.

What are disapproved and what are neutral acts?

Disapproved acts are those whose non-practice is better than their practice. If you don't do them, it earns merit, but if you do them, it is not sinful. About that last point, however, opinions are split: some say that doing these acts is sinful, although, to be sure, much less so than doing forbidden acts. Such acts are, for example: defecating and urinating on a road or into water; saying the prayers in the bathhouse, where one's attention is distracted, or in the dry river bed of summer torrents, where there is danger; going without work, as one has to care for a family; soiling one's body; dressing in black clothes; cutting down green trees; selling expensively and bargaining excessively; doing butchery work, which makes one uncompassionate; smoking cigarettes, which is unhealthy for the body; sending daughters to school, where something may happen to them, but educating them at home is not disapproved of.

Neutral or indifferent acts are, for example, eating, sleeping, walking, joking, and such. But again, joking may earn merit if done to make other people happy.

What is the order for family relationships?

The father has the "right of order" over a son till the son is fifteen and over a daughter till she is nine years old; that is, till the ages at which their reason matures. Up to these ages obedience is obligatory for them; after that, only desirable. The right of order is also held by the viceregent (*vakil*)

who is elected by the people, like the Shah, and by a master over his apprentice, but not by a husband over his wife. The husband does have, however, a "veto right" vis-à-vis her; that is, he may not allow her to do certain things.

A man ought to work and care for his family and be ready to fight in the defense of the country and in a holy war (*jihād*). A woman ought to be ready for her husband, make herself beautiful for him, care for the children, and do the household chores; she must not go out without permission of her husband. A son ought to carry out the orders of his father and must not do anything without his permission. A daughter ought to do what her father tells her; she ought to have modesty and restraint and must not sit and eat with men who are not closely related to her.

How can one explain the fact that some people observe all these rules and regulations and others don't?

There are four forces in man: rage (*ghazah*), as when one person hits or abuses another; desire (*shahvat*), as a man's desire for food, women, status; fear (*sahm*) and reason (*'aql*). Evil behavior results whenever the first three of these forces are in any state of excess. It is the excess which is bad, not their presence, as such. If they were totally absent, it would not be good either. Someone who follows only these three forces is worse than an animal. But a person following reason and controlling the other three forces is noble. Such a person, like Jesus and Muhammad, is higher than the angels because angels don't have the option to do evil. Essentially, every man is capable of following reason and achieving moral excellence, but only some do it—in the same way as the stones of dates are all alike, but some grow into a tree and others don't.

To what degree then is man responsible?

This relates to the distinction between matters which are given by creation (*takvīn*) and matters of duty (*taklif*). Man can exert no influence upon matters of creation, like the shape of the nose, but in all matters of duty man is responsible. An idiot is not liable, of course, but any person who is able to discern between good and evil is responsible for his moral behavior, irrespective of whether he has seen a good example from his father or has grown up in the house of a thief and learned bad habits. He possesses reason and must follow reason to become good. If it becomes hard to do this, he must force himself and use restraint. In this effort it helps if he stays away from temptation, associates with good friends, and reads good books.

God's punishment for disobeying the rules is hell in the next world and in this world it is whatever the Qur'ānic laws prescribe: cutting off a finger for stealing a small amount, the hand for more, death for murder.

Also, earthquakes, droughts, and so on, may come as God's punishment for evil behavior, as happened in the case of the city of Lut.

Is poverty God's punishment too?

That's possible, but not all who did something evil are necessarily punished that way: there are evil-doers who are rich. For in this world God is merciful (*rahman*), that is, evil-doers also may profit from God's kindness; but on the Day of Judgment God will be merciful and just (*rahīm*). Quite evidently, poverty is the result of a person's behavior. After all, God has given to every man the energy to work. So, if he becomes poor, it is his own fault: he just did not use his reason and energy right. To a degree, his poverty might be also the fault of the social group he lives in.

The same is true for a man who gets sick: it is his own fault. He was careless in his food habits, ate something dirty, ingested some bacteria. In cases where this cannot account for the disease, it may be something that God has sent for a man's benefit and he simply does not understand it. It's as in the story of the man into whose mouth crept a snake while he was sleeping and who was forced by his companion, who had seen this, to eat all kinds of bad-tasting leaves. It was not until the snake escaped and the friend explained his behavior, that the man understood the reason for the trouble he had been caused. A disease may serve the same purpose: if God had not sent it, the person might have done some evil, or something even worse might have happened to him.

By the same token, if God gives blessings—if, for example, a field yields fifteen times the amount of the seed instead of the normal ten—he gives it either as a matter of creation, upon which man has no influence, or as a reward for virtue and hard work. But at the same time, the high yield is also due to the man's hard work in plowing, irrigating; tending, and improving his field.

What happens after death?

In the first night after the burial, the soul of a deceased, which has been around somewhere, re-enters the body in the grave and the two angels Nakīr and Munkar descend to question the person about past faith and deeds. At this interrogation it becomes manifest whether the person is destined for heaven or for hell. In the first case, the soul is carried to a pleasant place near Najaf where, through an open gate, it is allowed to look into paradise. In the other case, the soul is carried to a place of torment where a gate to hell is open. The souls stay in these places until the Day of Judgment. It is not known when the Day of Judgment will come, not even the Prophet and the Imāms knew it: only God knows. On that day all bodies of the dead will come to life again and God will sit in judgment over all men

as their sins and merits are weighed on the scales. Then a person will be taken either to hell or to heaven. Hell is like a hard and arduous prison of torment and fire where people stay—similar to sentences in this world—for one year, two years, or longer, or even eternally. In paradise there are ranks according to merits: those of higher standing live, for example, in better quarters—such as houses of sultans—than others.

Isn't remission of sins possible?

Certain sins, like the belief in no God, or two gods, are not forgivable at all. Other sins, but only those against the "right of God," can be redeemed by merit. For example, if one does not say a prayer, it is a sin that can be made up for by giving alms; but there are no norms as to how much merit is needed to compensate for certain sins. Also, repentance may be made for committing such sins, and God may forgive them on this basis. But sins against the "right of man" are up to people. Such sins cannot be effaced by merit. Rather, whatever has been taken from the other person has to be restituted. And such a restitution implicitly constitutes a repentance. Very hard, however, are crimes such as murder, adultery, and oppression because what has been taken cannot be restored. If a restitution is not made in this life, one will have to pay compensation on the Day of Judgment by giving one's own merits to the offended party. If one does not possess sufficient merits, God may possibly give one what one needs. Otherwise one will be tormented for one's crimes. It is also possible that one will be forced to assume, in proportion to one's offences against the other person, some of the sins committed by that other person and that one will be tormented for them.

And the Imām Husayn's intercession?

The learned men affirm the existence of the Miniature World (*'alam-i zarr*), in which all men issued from the body of Adam like small ants. But they don't support the belief that the Five Persons—Muhammad, Fatima, Ali, Hasan, and Husayn—existed already at that time: their existence should be taken merely allegorically. By the same token, they reject the belief that in the Miniature World the Imām Husayn drank the Cup of Good Deeds which, in consequence, entailed his suffering and passion. Rather, the Imām Husayn simply saw that the people of his time had deserted the religion and he sacrificed himself for the propagation of the true faith. As to his intercession, if he wants to intercede, God will certainly listen to his plea. But, in any case, this would concern only sins against God, not sins against people.

The same is true for the Prophet. The general opinion is that he will intercede, but again, only in cases of sins against God and only if a person's

sins are few. If a person has committed many sins, Muhammad himself will take offence and won't intercede.

Doesn't the religion place too much emphasis on rituals and prescriptions, such as prayer, rather than on moral behavior, like honesty?

No, on the contrary: the emphasis is on moral behavior. If rituals and prescriptions are, in fact, carried out better than the moral rules, then this is for several reasons.

First, certain regulations, as the prohibition of pork, are observed because of habit: people would vomit if they ate pork. Others, as the prohibition of adultery, would cause fighting and killing if they were violated. So the observance of certain regulations is supported by custom, but moral rules, such as not stealing and not lying, are not.

Second, praying and fasting doesn't harm people, so they do it. But to agree on projects that would benefit the community as a whole would mean possible harm for one or the other, so they don't do it. They can't overcome their private concerns. They don't have the moral zeal to do so.

Third, the religion has the method, as laid down in the *shari'at*, to enforce the moral rules, but the state doesn't accept it. In Saudi Arabia, where the *shari'at* is the accepted law, there is very little stealing and lying. So it is the fault of the state, not of the religion if these things are done. The learned men disagree very much with the state on this point but they don't have any power.

Isn't the observance of rituals like praying, fasting, and veiling declining in the cities partly because it has become inconvenient?

No, it's not because it is inconvenient. Bank robberies aren't done either because their prohibition is inconvenient. If women don't cover their heads—as many do not do now—this is just personal misdemeanor, in the same way as a bank robbery. People have free will. If they choose to do evil it is personal misdemeanor and has nothing to do with the religion.

Aren't certain teachings of the religion in conflict with generally accepted modern views and behaviors?

No, they aren't. There were misinterpretations, though. For example, the passages in the Qur'an about the creation of man are not to be taken literally. They just mean that man somehow was created by God. There is no conflict with what scientists say about the evolution of man.

Or the belief in spirits, *jinn*. In the Qur'an one passage speaks about the creation of *ins* and *jinn* [sura 51/56]. It was thought that these mean "men" and "spirits," and that thus the belief in spirits was validated by the Qur'an. In fact, however, *ins* refers to city dwellers and *jinn* refers to people living outside cities, like tribesmen and villagers. *Jinn* does not mean spirit

in this context. The way people conceive of this passage is plain superstition.

Or the evil eye. There is a passage in the Qur'ān in which Muhammad is warned that some were casting the evil eye against him. But that doesn't mean it is right to believe in the evil eye.

Or the veil. The Qur'ān only says that a woman must cover her head in a way that all hair is concealed. This can be done by a scarf or kerchief: it mustn't be a full veil, which hinders work.

Or modern hygiene. True, it is said that water which has flowed at a certain speed over a certain distance is pure. Of course, such water is not necessarily clean in a hygienic sense. But this rule was made for the whole world. If one had said to the Arabs that muddy water was impure, they would have perished because they couldn't have used any. And as to the present time, there is a passage in the Qur'ān which says that it is forbidden to kill oneself. This means that once it is known that certain water contains bacteria and causes diseases, it is forbidden to drink it. Today, muddy water, even if flowing, isn't to be considered pure: it is unhygienic and is forbidden.

Or birthcontrol pills. There is nothing said in the Qur'ān to forbid them. Some ignorant people say that taking the pill interferes with the will of God. If this were true, one would also have to say that taking medicines interferes with the will of God—which is evidently wrong because God has charged us to take care of our health.

What about the prayer-invocations (du'ā')?

Don't you believe that there is a power which can heal diseases? Prayers are supplications to God. One says, "It is up to You, oh God; I can't do anything." So God's grace is one effect of the prayer. The other is the psychic effect: it is a reinforcement in the same way as when one says to somebody on the road, "The village is quite near; you will get there soon," when, in fact, he will have a long way to go.

But the prayers written on a piece of paper. . . .

. . . and hung around the neck of a child, and so on? That's superstition. It's superstition just as killing an animal when a twist forms in a wheat field: this is meant to ward off a misfortune; but such a misfortune would be either due to a psychic effect—people talk about the rich field, the person becomes haughty and conceited, and so is likely to make a blunder—or to the effect of the evil eye in consequence of the people's envious talk. And in the same way it is superstition to believe that a *dam-band* can check a wolf, or that pausing after a sneeze prevents mishap, or that giving eggs to a neighbor at night brings bad luck, or that studying the

stars can reveal the future, or that certain days of the week and dates of the month are inauspicious.

But the mullahs have tolerated the superstition, such as prayer-writing, quite generally.

There are even some who don't ride in a car because they consider it forbidden, and others who say that inoculations and Western medicine are forbidden. But only illiterate, foolish characters say that. And besides, one has to understand the position of the mullahs. If a man comes to a mullah and the man isn't at all interested in the prayers, or the law, or the wisdom of the religion, but instead asks, "Is it good to go to a certain place today or not?"—what shall the mullah say? He is forced to give some answer to this question even if he considers it all nonsense; otherwise the man will regard him as an illiterate and ignorant person.

Thus the religion has not been an obstacle to development?

Maybe some religious men have been, but not the religion. The religion says that science should be encouraged even if it were to be found only in the stars. The religion indeed demands the pursuit of science—though not by every individual. It is a group obligation, that means, only one or the other of a group of people has to engage in it. Also, it is said, "Educate your sons in the true spirit of the time," which means that it is requisite to adjust to the changes time brings about, such as no longer fighting with arrows and swords but with rifles and jets. No, if we are backward, it's not the fault of the religion.

Rather, we are backward because of inner fragmentation: different states, different provinces within the state, and so on. If a village like this cannot achieve unity for the purpose of building a road, a bathhouse, or a clinic—how can a state? The three forces I mentioned earlier hinder man from subordinating himself to someone else. But the religion doesn't say they shouldn't. On the contrary, the religion suggests that they should do so for the benefit and strength of Islam. But people don't do it—just as they don't say the truth either.

It is also said that Islam must be backward because most of the modern inventions were actually made in the West. But inventions are ideas, and ideas have nothing to do with religion as such. Also, it is by no means established that this claim is true. In fact, in Iran there were men such as Ibn Sīnā and Omar Khayyam, the great mathematician. And Sa'dī said:

"In the heart of every particle you split,
behold the sun in its midst."

This means he understood already then, 700 years ago, what only today we know as atomic theory. What an enlightened mind!

Above all, the wisdom is written down in the Qur'ān. For example, formerly people thought that the earth was stable and the sun revolved: this was a general opinion, but it's not written in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān, in fact, says:

“And you think the mountains you see don't move.
Yet they move like the clouds.” [27/88]

It is only now that this passage is understood correctly. And even if it had been understood earlier, it still would have been impossible to say it because people would not have believed it. This shows also how knowledgeable and enlightened the Prophet must have been to say this 1400 years ago. We ourselves have ignored all this knowledge. But the foreigners learned the whole science from the Qur'ān.

The wisdom of the Qur'ān shows you that Islam is the most perfect religion. Reason tells you that. For it stands to reason that a religion which says, for example, that a certain mountain is God or that the cow should be worshipped is wrong. And likewise, it stands to reason that a religion which says that Jesus is the son of God, and that divorce is forbidden, and that birthcontrol pills are forbidden cannot be perfect. Reason tells you that.