

THE IRANIAN RELIGIOUS CLASS

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One of the many important aspects of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 is the increased prominence it has brought to the religious class in the affairs of that country. Although a distinct and identifiable group of religious scholar-specialists has existed in Iran among the Twelver Shi'ah Muslims for centuries, never before has this class commanded the power that it exercises today. Members of the religious class, or the ulama, played a fundamental role in organizing, orchestrating, and leading the massive demonstrations that brought down the Shah's regime. One of the higher ranking and more respected members of their number, the Ayatullah Khomeini, became the focus around whom the various revolutionary forces and groups mobilized. So basic was the contribution of the Iranian ulama to the revolution that it would be impossible to conceive of its having occurred without their participation. Most Iranians refer to the revolution, not as the Iranian, but as the Islamic Revolution. This characterization of the events that have so radically changed the modern history of their country is a testimony to the continuing importance of religion as a determinant of identity and social values for most Iranians. It is also an affirmation of a continuing vital role in national life for the religious class who act as the principal guardians, transmitters, and interpreters of those values.

The Success of the Revolution and the Ulama's Growth in Power

The growth in power of the Iranian ulama only began, however, with the success of the revolution. Under the arrangements established in Iran after the Shah's disappearance, they have come to control the political scene. The Islamic Republican Party, which in the early phases embodied the ulama's vision of the new Islamic Iran, consolidated its dominance by ruthlessly destroying any effective opposition. In the process, it ran roughshod over its former allies in the revolutionary struggle: religiously motivated elements, leftists, nationalists of varying shades, moderates, and secularist intellectuals. Literally thousands of political dissidents have been executed in Iran, especially in the early 1980s, while others have had their property confiscated, have been driven into exile, or have been ostracized socially. The ulama dominated party even extended these harsh measures against certain high-ranking members of the religious class itself who had criticized the prevailing trends or disagreed with the policies of Khomeini and the government.

The referendum of 1979, which determined that Iran should be an Islamic Republic, provided a legal basis for the religious class to continue to have a

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dominant position. The new Constitution (approved in a subsequent referendum) reserved the post of head of state for a member of the religious class, Khumayni in the first instance. In addition, all legislation was subject to the review and subsequent approval or veto of a Council of Guardians consisting of particularly learned ulama who are experts in Islamic law. Further, the majority of the members of the National Assembly come from the religious class, and most of the high administrative posts in the country are also held by these traditional religious scholars. In short, Iran, which in pre-revolutionary days was notable for its headlong rush towards modernization and secularization, has been transformed into a veritable theocracy, an ulama-run state. The religious class whose prestige and place in society were being steadily eroded under the Pahlavi dynasty, emerged as the most powerful element in the Iranian polity.

The problem to which this paper is addressed is that of understanding how this transformation in the role of the ulama could have taken place. The Islamic Republic of Iran itself and the status which its existence has conferred upon the religious class are both novel and unique. It is true that from time to time in the past, certain of the Twelver Shi'ah ulama in their theorizing about jurisprudence have laid explicit or implicit claims to exercise political power. At no point, however, in Iranian experience nor in the history of the Shi'ah and of Islam in general, has the religious class actually been able to form and control a state. Indeed, for the most part they have not even tried to do so, but have contented themselves with the role of spiritual guides and interpreters of the religious law, while leaving mundane worldly affairs to secular rulers. The legitimacy of secular rule, which the religious class at least implicitly calls into question, is a vexed and complex aspect of the intellectual history of the Shi'ah and one that there shall be no attempt to unravel here. The only point relevant to the present objective is as follows: however much the Shi'i ulama may have thought themselves entitled to power, and however logically their claims to authority may seem to flow from the basic religious doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism, they have never before been successful in actually wielding power. There are no Shi'i nor Iranian precedents for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The exclusion of the Shi'i religious class from power is not peculiar to them; the situation has not been greatly different for the majority party of Muslims known as Sunnis. A distinctive group of religious experts emerged quite early in Islamic history around the beginning of the 2d century of the hijrah. The great conquests of the 7th century A.D. saw Muslim armies spread rapidly over the Middle East. The rulers of the early Arab-Islamic kingdom were necessarily preoccupied with the day to day issues of governing the vast areas that had come under their dominion. There was little in their native Arab tradition that prepared them for leadership on such a scale. Confronted with the manifold problems of controlling a large alien population and administering an immense territory, they were forced either to innovate for themselves or to adopt many things from the conquered peoples, ranging from administrative practices to elements of law. As

a result, there were many departures from the policies and practices followed by the primitive Islamic community in Arabia under the Prophet and his immediate successors.

For some of the more pious elements of the community these developments gave rise to unease and dissatisfaction, and they began to oppose the rulers' deviations from the primitive ways, insisting on a religious ideal for the conduct of the community's affairs. It was this pious opposition that eventually developed into a distinct Sunni religious class specializing in matters pertaining to religion and law. The pattern of alienation or even opposition to the state, which was there in the beginning for the religious class, persisted through most of the subsequent history of the Sunnis. In this matter Shi'ah and Sunni ulama have for the most part shown a common attitude; both groups historically have exhibited a strong suspicion of any association with those in power, and both have shown an aversion to accepting posts in the state apparatus.

It has become commonplace in our time, especially under the influence of Islamic resurgence movements, to argue that Islam does not recognize any separation of religion and state, that the Islamic order is a seamless unity of divine commands respecting both individual and social life. This view is perhaps accurate for the primitive community at the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors. In that period, the only community in existence was the religious community: the Prophet was at the same time its law giver, its ruler, judge, military commander, and spiritual leader. It is also perhaps an accurate portrayal of the ideal that many Muslims have held for the polity under which they should live. It does not, however, reflect the actual history of the community where the reality has been a sharp distinction between the religious and governing institutions, with the former normally being subordinate to the latter. What is more, the ulama, both Shi'i and Sunni, have acquiesced in this separation, citing the necessity for society to have leadership to prevent social disorder, even if that leadership is unjust.

From the side of the state, the dominant approach in relations with the religious class has been to forestall possible criticism and to enlist religious opinion in support of the state. Leaders, therefore, have often followed a policy of co-opting the religious scholars by making them part of the ruling apparatus. This goal was accomplished by building and financing the schools in which they were trained or by appointing them to official posts in the judicial, military, religious, educational or bureaucratic establishments where they were subject to control because their salaries were paid from the government treasury. Co-option by rulers has been the general pattern for the Sunni ulama, but it is true to a lesser degree and only at certain periods for the Shi'i religious class. The pattern persists into our own time. For example, in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the religious class acts as agents of the state to provide legitimization and moral undergirding for the policies of the secular authorities. They have little true autonomy or power of

their own, but function within the structure of the existing system. Most notably, they lack the freedom to attempt to replace that system by a more Islamic one in which they themselves might exercise power. To the contrary, they have often been instruments of the state authorities in the battle against revolutionary Islamic forces that hold such views. Precisely what differentiates the Iranian religious class from their colleagues is the success of the former in doing what the ulama have never done before, actually seizing and exercising power. Everywhere in the Sunni world the ulama are more or less under the thumb of the state; whereas in Iran alone, the ulama have assisted in destroying a powerfully entrenched regime, wrought a genuine revolution, and created a state in accord with their own vision.

The numerous contemporary Islamic resurgence movements provide a further contrast between the Iranian religious class and their colleagues in Sunni countries. In the last two decades, Muslim groups have emerged demanding that old regimes be overthrown and replaced with Islamic ones that will uphold the Shari'ah or Islamic law as the basis for society and politics. Some of these movements have not hesitated to espouse violence and terrorism as the means to achieving their ends. There is no need to discuss these groups in detail or to recite their more notorious activities, since our daily newspapers are filled with accounts of them. The religious class, who might be thought of as the natural exponents of religious revivalism, play almost no role in these movements which are the most vigorous expressions of Islam in the contemporary world. For the most part, the resurgence movements are led by laymen and their following consists of alienated, lower middle class urban dwellers. More telling is the groups' strongly critical, even contemptuous attitude toward the religious class. The ulama are blamed for having failed to preserve the spiritual heritage that conferred past greatness on the community and for not having warded off the corrupting influences of Western civilization which destroy the foundation of society. In their eyes, it is the religious class who are largely responsible for the state of decline and crisis that afflicts contemporary Muslim life. It is not, therefore, the religious class who provides the mobilizing and rallying force for the many Islamic resurgence movements of our time, with the sole exception of Iran and its offshoots in Lebanon. The Iranian situation is unique and it is that aspect which makes it worthwhile to discover how and why the religious class has attained its position of dominance.

The Dominance of the Religious Class: An Explanation

In order to arrive at an explanation for the dominance of the religious class in present day Iran, it is necessary to trace two different tracks of development in the history of Iran and of the Shi'i religious class. The first development concerns the theory with respect to the powers and functions of the religious class among Twelver Shi'ah Muslims. This theory changed markedly in the 18th and 19th centuries, resulting in the assertion of previously unknown prerogatives for the ulama. The second development involves the changing relations between the

ulama and the ruling authorities evidencing the religious class' growing autonomy and increasing political influence. Hence, developments in the ideological and political spheres must be examined in detail.

The ideological development will be explored with respect to the powers and functions of the Shi'i ulama by considering some of the basic aspects of Twelver Shi'ism. The distinguishing mark of this majority group of the Shi'ah, to which most Iranians belong, is its doctrine of the Imamate. This doctrine holds that human beings require the continual presence of a spiritual guide who will direct them religiously and morally. Without such a guide, known as an Imam, neither could men hope to live as they should, nor, since the Imam is the locus of divine presence and power in the world, could the world continue even to exist. The divine creator has provided for spiritual guidance through a cycle of prophecy which ended with the Prophet Muhammad. After him, guidance was carried on through a cycle of twelve Imams who have acted as spiritual legatees or guardians. The first Imam was designated by the prophet and each of the others by his predecessor. All are divinely appointed and therefore have been preserved from sin and error. Furthermore, all are in the line of descendants of Muhammad through his daughter, Fatimah, and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. They constitute mankind's only access to divine truth, and hence the Shi'i saying, "He who dies without knowing the Imam of the Age is lost."

In its earliest phases, Twelver Shi'ism was an activist political movement contending, often militarily, for the right of its Imams to rule the community. The efforts in this direction, however, were frustrated. None of the Twelver Shi'i Imams, with the exception of Ali, succeeded in winning any degree of political power. Even Ali's rule was disputed and short-lived, ending in his murder by a fanatic. Under the leadership of their fifth and sixth Imams, the Shi'ah gradually relinquished their political aims, foreswore their activism and radicalism, and took on the nature of a religious sect. Whereas the Imams had previously been the focal points or agents of armed insurrections, they now led the community in an essentially passivist and spiritual direction. A crisis of severe proportions arose for the Shi'ah with the death of the eleventh Imam who died without an apparent heir to succeed him and carry on the Imamic line. The Shi'ah resolved the crisis by the doctrine that a twelfth Imam, the infant son of the deceased eleventh, had gone into occultation. Contact with his followers was retained through a series of special agents during a short period known as the Lesser Occultation. This period was soon followed by the Greater Occultation that continues to our own time during which the Imam no longer has special representatives nor sends messages to his devotees.

Though the Imam was and continues to be present in the world as its support and guide, he has become invisible to human eyes. Yet the Shi'ah hold that he will return again at the end of time as the Imam Mahdi to obliterate injustice and tyranny from the earth and to initiate an era of peace and justice. The Occultation

has given Shi'i piety its characteristic eschatological colouring: the disappearance of the Imam ended any justification for a struggle to secure the place of rule for him. Hence, mainline Twelver Shi'ism became a religion of waiting and anticipation. Lamenting the suffering of the Imams and the usurpation of their rights, the faithful looked forward to that distant time when history would be consummated with the return of the Imam and the rectification of all the ills endured by the divinely appointed leaders and their followers.

In the eyes of the Shi'ah continuing guidance is necessary for humankind, but from whence is it to come in the absence of the one divinely appointed to give it? The Shi'ah found their answer in the religious class who, by virtue of their knowledge of the Hidden Imam's teachings, were able to assume many aspects of his guardianship over the world. A significant role for the religious class in Shi'i life began, therefore, only with the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam; prior to that time, because the Imam was present, visible, and accessible, he could be resorted to directly whenever problems arose. Thus there was no pressing function for a religious class to perform. The status quo was not maintained, however, as the roles and privileges of the religious class were altered in three phases.

The first stage in a series of expanding claims by the religious class began with a controversy in the 18th and 19th centuries between two groups of Shi'i ulama over issues of jurisprudence.¹ This struggle, the roots of which lie in a much earlier period of Shi'i thought, is known as the Akhbari-Usuli controversy. Like many other of the great religious disputes in Islamic history, it involved religious authority: how, by whom, and according to what principles are questions concerning Islamic faith and practice to be decided? The Akhbaris² were strict traditionalists who held that all matters were to be resolved according to the information or akhbar (hence the name Akhbaris) available about the teachings and practices of the Imams. A tradition from the Imams was to take precedence over even the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet since the Imams were the authorized interpreters of these two great sources of religious guidance. If there were no clear akhbar concerning a matter under discussion, a decision about it was to be held in abeyance. The school was particularly critical of a rationalist tendency in the interpretation of Islamic law and in the finding of religious rulings that was characteristic of some scholars in the past, including the great figures of the classical Shi'i tradition. In the place of rational speculation, the Akhbaris advocated strict reliance upon the statements of the Imams. Attention was focused on the figures and biographies of the Imams, thus denying any possibility of a legal or theological contribution by the religious scholar himself. The result

¹Demands by the religious class eventually climaxed in the assertion of the right of the faqih (expert in Islamic law) to rule.

²The Akhbari school was founded in the 17th century by Mulla Muhammad Amin al-Astarabadi.

was to restrict the role of the ulama, both doctrinally and practically, to that of transmitters of information from a former time.

The opposing group, called Usulis (from *usul*, meaning principles), found their strongest exponent in a certain Muhammad Baqir al-Bihbihani. This school held that Islamic law embodied certain principles that, once grasped, can then be applied through the exercise of reason both to understand the sacred law and to resolve issues upon which there were no clear teachings from the Imams. This process of using the human faculties to expound the law was known as *ijtihad*, and the person who does or makes *ijtihad* was a *mujtahid*. After approximately one and one half centuries of dispute and sometimes violence between the Akhbaris and the Usulis, the latter emerged as clear victors, to the extent of virtually driving the Akhbari school out of existence. The victory was momentous for the status of the religious class: they gained a powerful new authority and prestige as the sole group having the recognized qualifications to exercise *ijtihad*. The Akhbaris maintained that any man with the ability to read Arabic and who possessed some understanding of the Imams' use of terms had access to the Imam's teachings. In contrast, the victorious Usuli doctrine makes the religious class the sole custodians of the religious and moral truth upon which the spiritual life of the community depends. The ulama thus became the indispensable intermediaries between the Hidden Imam and the common people. In addition, the Usuli victory contributed to the institutionalization of ulama power by enabling them to collect a religious tax whose proceeds supported their theological students, helped those in need, financed their institutions and generally forwarded religious causes.

A second stage of the ideological development is marked by the emergence of an informal hierarchy among the religious class consequent upon the victory of the Usulis. This hierarchial ordering distinguishes among the many individuals who wear turbans and traditional religious dress. The lower ranks consist of preachers, mosque prayer leaders, teachers in religious schools, theological students, and leaders of the peculiarly Iranian religious ceremony known as *Rawdah Khan*. The higher ranks consist of the learned masters of the religious law known as the *mujtahids*, or the "proofs of Islam" as they are sometimes called. There is no institutionalized method by which an individual is elevated to a higher position among the religious class or recognized as a *mujtahid*. Emphasis is placed on a man's reputation for piety and learning in addition to his personal characteristics that enable him to gather a circle of pupils and devotees about him. Although all members of the religious class enjoy a certain prestige among the popular classes, it is the select few recognized as *mujtahids* who stand out from the rest and wield immense influence and authority. The emergence of a hierarchy has strengthened the respect which these highly esteemed men already enjoyed. An outstanding *mujtahid* with a large following is usually designated as an *Ayatullah*, a miraculous evidence of God. This title has come into use in Iran only in the past century in conjunction with the hierarchization of the ulama. The massive learning, subtlety and skill in dialectical argument which the foremost ulama exhibit cannot readily

be described in a few words; suffice it to say that their accomplishments in these respects are indeed formidable. Their tradition of scholastic learning is different from our own modern one, but in its rigor, attention to detail and logical refinement it in no way suffers from a comparison.

A third and vital stage is the evolving concept of the "Supreme Source of Authority" or "Supreme Source for Emulation". The essence of this notion is that Shi'i laymen lack the capacity to comprehend the Imam's teachings for themselves. Hence they must turn to those who do comprehend, that is, to the Imam's general agents during the time of Occultation, the ulama. Practically, this stance means that it is the duty of every individual not of scholarly rank to seek out a mujtahid and unquestioningly follow his teachings. When one's mujtahid dies, it becomes obligatory to adopt another as the pattern for emulation; to continue to follow the opinions of a dead mujtahid is to be without a living guide and is strictly forbidden. The concept of the "Supreme Source for Emulation" is, thus, a powerful affirmation of the importance of the highest ranking members of the religious class for both public and private life. An individual might choose whichever one of the ulama he wishes as his "Source for Emulation" and as a result there may be a number of competing "sources" at any one time. Yet, among the Usuli thinkers the tendency also grew to consider one of the mujtahids as superior to all others in learning and piety; this single "Supreme Source for Emulation" was to be recognized by all Twelver Shi'ah. Historically, there have been several such great scholars as the Ayatullah Burujerdi who died in 1961. There then followed a time when several different Ayatullahs were acknowledged as sources for emulation by various segments of the Iranian population, but after the events of 1978-79 in which the Ayatullah Khomeini emerged as Iran's leader, religious opinion tended to converge upon him as the sole "Source" of his time. The effect of this doctrine was to confer an unrivalled authority over religious, ethical and legal matters upon a single individual. There can be little doubt that the general acceptance of the "Sole Source for Emulation" greatly enhanced the ability of the religious class to influence the public life of Iran by providing a firm ideological basis for the authority of the mujtahids.

The zenith of the claims made on behalf of the ulama was reached with the Ayatullah Khomeini's assertion of the *wilayat-i faqih*. This phrase can be translated as "the right of the supreme jurisconsult to rule". Literally, *wilayat* signifies "guardianship" and it is one of the prerogatives of the Imams who have responsibility over the affairs of the world. As previously discussed, during the time of the Occultation the religious class took over part of the *wilayat* of the Imams as their general agents and representatives. Certain aspects of this deputyship in *wilayat* have never been in dispute. There is unanimous agreement that the religious class speaks in the name of the Imam and has the right to claim obedience where strictly religious or moral matters are concerned. As well, all recognize the right and responsibility of the ulama to collect and dispense religious taxes on behalf of the Imam; to oversee the affairs of orphans, infants and women

without guardians to act for them; to administer religious institutions; and to judge in disputes between Muslims.

The one aspect of the Imam's *wilayat* which the ulama have been reluctant to claim is that of political power. The early Shi'i Imams, as descendants of the prophet and his divinely appointed legatees, fought physically to assert their right to rule. The fullness of their *wilayat*, therefore, includes the exercise of power and the control of the polity. It is notable, however, that none of the "Sources for Emulation" of the 19th and 20th centuries prior to Khumayni had claimed for himself the right of absolute *wilayat*, which of course includes political power. The ulama have always asserted certain prerogatives against the ruling authority such as the obligation of a ruler to consult the religious scholars and to follow their advice in certain matters. Only rarely, however, have individuals or groups controverted the right of the Shahs to rule, and when they have done so, they have normally been rejected as too radical. Yet this radical view of the ulama's function is precisely what Khumayni asserted and presented as a logical and necessary element of Shi'i religious belief. Khumayni has taken the common Shi'i doctrine that the ulama represent the hidden Imam and pushed it to its extreme. His claim in this regard has not won universal acceptance even from his fellow mujtahids, most of whom are inherently conservative. For example, both Ayatullah Mahmud-i Taleqani, the most socially conscious of the great mujtahids of the contemporary era, and Ayatullah Shari'at Madari, considered by many to be more learned and therefore more worthy to be looked upon as the "Supreme Source for Emulation" than was Khumayni, disputed the *wilayat-i faqih*. Nevertheless, the *faqih* or supreme jurisconsult is now firmly established in the Iranian Constitution of 1979 as the head of state and supreme authority in the country. In the future, the role of the *faqih* may be exercised by a council of recognized mujtahids, but the principle of the right of the religious class to rule has been asserted in theory and now is established in practice. Indeed, it is held that a true Islamic polity and a full realization of the Islamic ideal cannot be achieved under any other arrangement.

The conclusion is that Iranian thought regarding the functions and prerogatives of the religious class has undergone a gradual evolution resulting at each stage in broader claims on its behalf. This evolution has provided an ideological base and legitimization for the political activism of the ulama and their access to power in Iran. The dominant position which the religious class holds in Iran today cannot be accounted for unless this ideological development and its acceptance by the Iranian population are understood.

The Political Role of the Iranian Ulama

In order to demonstrate the changing and growing role of the Iranian ulama in politics, it is necessary to trace their relationship with the ruling authorities over

the past several centuries. Significant relations between the Twelver Shi'ah religious class and the ruling authority in Iran began with the founding of the Safavid dynasty in the opening years of the 16th century. Although previously most of Iran had been dominated by Sunnism, in 1501 the first Safavid ruler, Shah Isma'il, made a public proclamation of Twelver Shi'ism as the religion of the state. Religious sanction for their rule has always been important to Muslim monarchs, but in the Safavid case it was especially so because of the claims of the powerful neighbouring Ottoman sultans to the Caliphate. The adoption of Twelver Shi'ism was no doubt an effort both to establish a firm base for Safavid legitimacy and to offset the religious claims of their Ottoman rivals. As a result of its Sunni history, however, it was no easy task to convert Iran into a Shi'i country. In order to insure the success of the conversion, Shah Isma'il and his successors found it necessary to mount campaigns against Sunnism and the Sufi mystical orders. The Safavid Shahs also presented themselves as the lineal descendants of the 7th Shi'i Imam and, thus, as deserving of the respect proper to those in the Imamic line. It was deemed necessary to import members of the religious class who were learned in the classical Twelver Shi'i tradition from Shi'i centres in Syria, Bahrayn and Iraq. Only the presence of experts would ensure that the Shi'i tradition would become firmly rooted in Iran. In other words, the Safavid Shahs are responsible for laying the foundations of the Iranian religious class and for promoting its activity and well-being.

The state sponsorship of the ulama under the Safavids largely determined the relations between the religious and the governing establishments. With the Shahs exercising the prerogatives of descendants of the Imams,³ it is clear that the ulama had little autonomy in the state. The Shahs used the ulama to further their policy of conversion to Shi'ism and thereby to consolidate their authority. To ensure control of the ulama, they created a governmental department administered by a member of the religious class empowered to make appointments and otherwise to conduct the affairs of the ulama. In the reign of the great Shah Abbas I, who ruled from 1586 to 1629, the Shi'i ulama were fully integrated into the structure of the state as a Shi'i hierocracy.

With the decline of Safavid power in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, this relationship began to change. The last Safavid King, Shah Sultan Husayn, was a weak ruler. An ascetic by temperament, he spent much of the latter part of his life as a recluse in one of the famous theological schools of Isphahan. The Shah's religious inclinations made him more responsive to the ulama than were his predecessors and consequently the religious class were able to influence state activities as never before.

³Shah Isma'il went further and made the radical assertion of being an incarnation of the Imam and even of God.

With the fall of the Safavids to Afghan invaders in 1722, Iran entered upon a period of chaos and strife accompanied by a pause in the growth of ulama power which lasted almost three-quarters of a century. During this time there were efforts to re-establish Sunnism which, of course, worked against the interests of the Shi'i religious class. The disturbed conditions of the country and the absence of an effective central government left the ulama powerless to forward their cause.

Events transpired in favour of the religious class with the founding of the Qajar dynasty in 1746. The Qajars were Turkomen tribesmen who made none of the religious claims of the Safavids, but rested their authority upon their tribal identity. Perhaps because of the contrast with the Safavid reign they were eager to gain religious legitimization which they sought through courting the religious class. In one of the wars against Russia in the early 19th century, the Qajar Shah felt obliged to implore a prominent member of the religious class to declare the conflict a jihad in order to give it validity. Fath 'Ali Shah, the Qajar King between 1797 and 1834, was well known for his patronage of the ulama. His respect was demonstrated by visiting the ulama, building mosques, embellishing shrines, granting sums of money, and commissioning religious works. In 1828, ulama pressure was sufficient to compel the Shah to renew the war with the Russians. The outcome was the disastrous (for Iran) *Treaty of Turkomanchay* that sealed Iran's loss of the Caucasus to the Tsar. The same treaty granted access to Russian consular and commercial agents thus marking the beginning of massive foreign intrusion and the intense Russian-British rivalry that reduced Iran to a state of impotence by the early 20th century. In other respects, the power of the ulama grew steadily in the 19th century; they were able to effect the dismissal and replacement of officials and in some cases became the actual, though unofficial, rulers of certain towns or regions. The tyranny of the regime and the ever increasing foreign influence ultimately provoked a negative response from the ulama in spite of the outward signs of esteem demonstrated by the Qajar Shahs. By the end of the century, the ulama had emerged as important spokesmen of the national interest and their alienation from the regime had become all but complete.

A decisive manifestation of ulama power is linked with the protests against the Shah's concession granting a monopoly over the production, sale and export of tobacco to a British subject in 1890. Far from being the first such concession to a foreign power, the Tobacco Concession was simply the extension of a policy that had commenced long before. It was far less sweeping than the 1872 concession to Baron Julius de Reuter for the building of railways, the exploitation of minerals and other vast industrial projects in Iran. The Reuter Concession had been withdrawn under the force of protest, but the uprisings that followed the Tobacco Concession were on a vastly larger scale almost amounting to a revolutionary movement. The key figure in precipitating the outcry was Mirza Hasan Shirazi, the "Supreme Source for Emulation" of the time, whose call for a boycott on the

sale and use of tobacco met with almost universal obedience (including the wives of the Shah). The effectiveness of the boycott and the resulting success in annulling the concession were due in large part to the coordinated efforts of the Shi'i ulama in both Iran and Iraq. For the first time the true potential of the Iranian religious class to shape government policy was revealed.

Undoubtedly the single most important exercise of the ulama influence against the Qajar government was the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-06. Both its inspiration and its leadership came from the ulama though others were also involved. The principal leaders were mujtahids, Sayyid Muhammad Tabataba'i and Sayyid Abdullah Bihbihani. The mass migration of the Teherani ulama to the shrine city of Qum and the action of the ulama elsewhere in seeking refuge in shrines were among the most effective weapons in forcing the Shah to accept a National Consultative Assembly in 1906. It is questionable whether the religious class understood the full implications of a constitutional government. Nevertheless, the motivation behind the Constitutional Revolution seems clear: the determination to rid Iran of the yoke of foreign domination and the resolve to limit the arbitrary, tyrannical and irresponsible power of the Shah. In the short run the Constitutional Revolution must be considered a failure because the National Assembly was quickly suppressed by the Shah with Russian assistance. In spite of the civil war's restoration of constitutional government for a short period of time, the vigour was gone from the movement, and Iran lapsed into her old ways. Even so, the movement had once again illustrated the capacity of the religious class to intercede in the political sphere and marked a new stage in the evolution of the ulama's power.

The situation in Iran changed dramatically in 1925 when Reza Khan, formerly Minister of War, was elected by the National Consultative Assembly to be Shah. The Qajar dynasty was thus abolished, and a new dynasty, the Pahlavi, was established. The years of Pahlavi rule in Iran were not propitious for the Shi'i religious class. Both Reza Shah and his son were adamantly set upon modernizing the country and bringing it to the political, economic and military level of the more favoured nations of the world. Father and son also considered the religious class to be obstacles in the way of achieving a vigorous modern Iranian society and, hence, sought to curtail the ulama's influence. The religious class found themselves progressively deprived of their chief functions and their means of support. The introduction of a modern school system broke their hold upon education, while the creation of secular courts and the promulgation of a civil code undercut their judicial function. The task of registering documents, one of their most important sources of income, was given to a civil authority. The pious endowments which financed their institutions were brought under government control and administration. Although the Pahlavi Shahs made conciliatory gestures, the government policy marginalized them politically and socially by emphasizing that their proper concern lay with the essentially private and individual realm of religion. Even so, some of the ulama managed to play a visible

role in political life under the Pahlavis. Examples include the religious leader who led the opposition to Reza Shah in the National Assembly and the well known Ayatullah Kashani who supported the nationalist government of Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq during the crisis with the British over the nationalization of Iranian oil in 1951.

Ulama resentment of the Pahlavis reached its climax in 1963 with the outbreak of widespread disturbances in which the religious class once again had a leading role. The Shah was in the process of initiating his White Revolution involving measures that displeased the religious class, such as the liberalization of electoral laws for women and efforts at land reform. More important than the content of the measures was their introduction by royal decree without consulting the ulama and at a time when the National Assembly was in suspension. The killing of a theological student during a demonstration in Qum provoked rioting in other major Iranian cities in June of 1963, requiring the intervention of the police and the army.

One of the most important consequences of the 1963 events was the emergence of the Ayatullah Khomeini into the political arena. Whatever else he may have been, Khomeini was an extremely courageous man who persisted in speaking his mind in spite of threats and the sanctions taken against him. Khomeini's gift for impassioned and vitriolic oratory was used to the full in his condemnations of the Shah's actions. In addition to his outrage at the Shah's unconstitutional and arbitrary way of governing, the chief objects of his wrath were Iran's friendship with Israel and the growing ties with the United States. In the latter connection, the capitulatory arrangement by which the government exempted American military personnel from the jurisdiction of Iranian criminal law was particularly galling. On learning of the matter, Khomeini is reported to have said that "Any dog of an American can bite the Shah's leg, and the Shah will not even kick back." The demonstrations were eventually suppressed, but not without revealing the political clout of the ulama. Khomeini himself was secretly arrested and sent into exile in 1964 from which he triumphantly returned in 1979. It is critical to note what Khomeini was not protesting against, in addition to the grievances that he had registered in the 1960s. Most notable is that his condemnation of the Shah was just that, grievances against a ruler who had not acted as he should. They were not criticisms of the institution of monarchy nor of the structure of the Iranian polity in general; neither were they claims of a right to rule inhering in the ulama. Those issues were later raised in the 1970s in the series of lectures delivered to his students while exiled in Iraq and were eventually assembled into the book entitled, *Islamic Government (Persian, Wilayat-i Faqih)*.⁴ Khomeini's restraint was echoed by other Ayatullahs and high ranking members

⁴This work has been translated into English several times. It is available among other places in H. Algar, trans., *Islam and Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif.: Mizan Press, 1981) at 27-150.

of the hierocracy who agreed with the government's position: the ulama had no business interfering in politics.

Other Factors Explaining the Status of the Ulama

A series of other factors will help to illuminate the status of the ulama in present day Iran. The leadership exerted by Khumayni and his learned colleagues was not due solely to the growth of an ideology which laid a basis for their authority nor to their past success in shaping Iranian politics. The ulama also enjoyed certain advantages in relation to other forces and groups that were opposed to the Pahlavi government. These advantages permitted them to do what the others could not. The ulama possessed a wider popular following among the lower classes of Iranian society than other groups such as leftists or nationalists because of the innate attraction of religion and their custodianship of the Shi'i religious symbols. They also enjoyed blood ties and commercial relations with the lower middle class of bazaar merchants among whom their influence was particularly strong. The religious class had a loose organization, although disagreements amongst themselves were frequent. This organization was based on the shrine cities and on the network of students which the leading Ayatullahs gathered about themselves. The control of institutions encompassing mosques, theological schools and shrines afforded the ulama an opportunity to carry on their political activities. Of equal magnitude is the ulama's direct access to funds: religious taxes are paid to the mujtahids to be expended on behalf of the Imam. Last, but not least, the religious class had access to bases of operation outside of Iranian territory, principally in the great shrine cities of Iraq, from which they could function unimpeded by the intrusions of the Shah's secret police. The Iranian secret police were both effective and efficient to the point that they were able to interdict any overt or truly threatening political activity by opposition groups on Iranian territory. The ulama alone were insulated against the depredations of the police through their ties with the populace and the establishment of their foreign base. Only they retained any possibility of effective opposition; all other resistance had simply been destroyed. Once the agitation gained momentum the ulama were favourably situated to take advantage of the existing political vacuum. The ultimate success of the ulama was owing as much to the disarray of all other political groups as it was to their own initiative and perspicacity.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explain the present day dominance of the religious class in the political life of Iran. The argument outlines the two bases of the ulama's rise to power, one in ideology and the other in actual political terms. It should be emphasized that the focus on the religious class is not an indirect way of claiming that the ulama caused the Iranian Revolution. To trace the roots of

the Revolution would broaden the scope of the article far beyond the consideration of what the religious class alone may have thought, said, done or been. Indeed, the participation of every element of society, including the most privileged, marked the 1978-79 revolt against the Pahlavi monarchy as a true revolution. For reasons that were previously demonstrated, the ulama were uniquely situated to mobilize many of these elements and to fill the leadership vacuum in Iran. Yet it is unthinkable that the religious class could have carried the revolutionary movement alone or that the revolution could have occurred at all without a host of deeply seated grievances troubling the Iranian population.

In conclusion, the political situation in Iran presented the ulama with an opportunity they were able to seize and exploit, but which they were far from responsible for creating. However the ascendancy of the religious class came about, it has unleashed a new force and imparted a new orientation to Shi'i piety. Passivism in the endurance of suffering and looking to a distant future for the redress of wrongs have given way to a militant, self-confident, and vigorous movement that seeks to remake not only Iran, but the entire world in the Islamic image. The religious class are now firmly in command in the Iranian state and it seems unlikely that their dominance will be shaken in the immediate future. The influence of the religious class has brought a powerful force of Islamic militancy into the world which must be reckoned with for decades to come.