

Khomeini and the "Primacy of the Spiritual"

by Maxime Rodinson

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Jacques Julliard made intelligent use of the events in Iran in order to reexamine the conventional wisdom of the European Left. (See Julliard 1978.)⁹⁷ He boldly questions a basic judgment inherited from our venerable intellectual ancestors: Religion is organically tied to obscurantism and oppression. Nothing good can come of it. Freeing oneself from it is "pulling the mind out of the dungeon," as the good Communard Pottier expressed it in verse.⁹⁸ This, at least, is a first step toward total liberation. What irony that the transcendence of this conception, at the very least a simplistic one, takes place under the influence of the most archaic men of religion, the Iranian mullahs and the Orthodox popes, whose message is conveyed, it is true, by the eloquent Solzhenitsyn.

Do we need to invert Voltaire, as Marx inverted Hegel? Is it religion that liberates and philosophy that oppresses? Julliard does not think so, and he is right. Things are more complex. Here, I would only like to suggest a few lines of reflection inspired by a degree of familiarity with the ideological histories of the East and the West.

Neither philosophy nor religion is under consideration here. The content of an ideology does not necessarily play a decisive role in the movements that that ideology supports with its authority. In the beginning, Christianity preached submission to Caesar, and Marxism, revolt against all oppression. This did not prevent radical revolts, like those of the Anabaptists, from legitimizing themselves through the Christian scriptures, nor Marxism from canonizing submission to renewed oppressions. Religious and secular theorists are immensely skilled at interpreting an apparently very clear principle in infinitely different ways, occasionally opposite to its most evident meaning.

Revolt is first; it is (up to now) eternal, as seems to be the desire to establish (even to live in) a stable and inevitably (until now) inegalitarian order. So too is the necessity to justify the one and the other. The protest against an unfavorable situation, just like the authority that wants to disarm and repress that revolt, is always seeking a source of ideological legitimation. Religions, philosophies, sects, schools, parties, and even vague, barely conscious tendencies can all serve to attain this objective. Clearly, at certain moments, in certain circumstances, some are more suitable than others for producing the anticipated legitimations.

A few categories and some examples will suffice here. Against an ideology used by government, one can mobilize in the name of a prior, rival ideology, one that has been defeated but continues to exist. Ideological victories are not always total, nor are they irreversible. Consolidation depends on many things: the institutions established by the new or renewed government, the depth of their penetration into the different social or national layers, the structural transformations achieved; this without neglecting, far from it, the conjuncture, the circumstances.

Shortly after the triumph, there is often hesitation. Christianity, victorious in the Roman Empire after Constantine, was still poorly consolidated forty years later. Julian's pagan reaction, based on the elites, resulted in neither a strong resistance nor a mobilizing enthusiasm.⁹⁹ However, it took many centuries and much skill, in order even superficially to Christianize the peasant masses (*paganus* [pagan] signifies "peasant"), which remained passive.

Disputes soon arose among the new Christian tendencies, which battled each other ferociously. The last of the pagan elite were reduced to deploring the triumph of those they bitterly called the preponderants.

Three centuries later, the Berbers, who relentlessly resisted Arab Islam, did

not waste any time in imbuing their protest with dissident Muslim "heresies." After the same Arab victory in Iran, the Iranians followed the divergent paths of the defeated Zoroastrian ideology, of Muslim "heresies" more or less penetrated by the musty odor of Zoroastrianism, or of those ideologies formerly persecuted by the defeated Zoroastrian state, Manichaeism or communist Mazdakism.¹⁰⁰ Or the Iranians simply fought under the banner of purely Muslim tendencies (of Arab origin) like Shi'ism, among others.

In the Soviet Union, the victorious ideology was connected to the radical transformation of society. Society was indeed transformed, and the state ideology penetrated all sectors. However, alongside other ideological outlets, discontent found a way to express itself through the defeated Russian Orthodoxy. The latter seemed moribund after the collapse of its political and social base, and after the persuasive and largely justified denunciation of undesirable growths on the Church, which it had sanctified.

Recourse is always available. It takes the form of spontaneous ideological tendencies, unorganized and eternal, despite shorter or longer periods of eclipse. Thus, nationalisms and egalitarianism are always ready to flower again after periods of resignation to the requisite hierarchy. Religious yearning also seems like a somewhat universal tendency. It can lead, it is true, to indifference to the social order in a quest for individual salvation or mystical ecstasy. But it frequently serves to shape an organized movement, often violent, of national or social protest.

Mobilizing ideologies can be autochthonous or can seek the authority of foreign "prophets." The role of intellectuals, with their preoccupations and their own interests, should not be minimized. There is always a layer of intellectuals (in general neither the most learned nor the most profound, nor especially the most disinterested) seeking an important (even if painful) role as guide, or as defender or oppressor of the people, often successively or both at the same time.

In particular, the "ideological movements" (I have tried elsewhere to specify this category),¹⁰¹ especially when they have taken power, resemble the catch-all parties. Under the veil of an artificial unity, contradictory variants of their ideology subsist or develop. The leaders never succeed in totally imposing their interpretation of the common doctrine on all of their "faithful" followers. Tendencies crystallize and often organize. They can go as far as to push for a revolt against the new establishment in the name of faithfulness to the very values that the latter extols. This is often seen in Christianity, Islam, and elsewhere.

Everywhere, Islam, Sunni or Shi'ite, is again suited to the maximum degree (after the obvious failure of other doctrines) to serve as the banner or as the "foundational doctrine" for those who want to translate (translation,

treachery!) generalized aspirations. One can find in the innumerable precepts that its more or less sacred texts contain (as well as in texts that are Christian, Jewish, etc.) enough to justify social protest. The humiliations of a situation of national dependence make attractive the ancestral religious identity, a historic enemy of the current dominant forces. The fervent faith of the masses has been lessened only slightly: God is not dead; the machines have not killed him. Islam, which does not possess very many concretely applicable political and social prescriptions, has always proclaimed itself, in contrast to Christianity, qualified to establish equitable institutions on its own, rather than merely preaching the moralization of the mainsprings of society and of iniquitous or indifferent men.¹⁰² This is still widely ascribed to it.

Islamic doctrine is by no means sufficient, but it can help. Shi'ism has more often been in the minority, thus persecuted and dissident. Its founding myths exalt resistance to oppression and to reasons of state.

The Iranian elites and masses were horrified by the arbitrary authoritarianism of the shah, the repressive actions of an omnipresent and cruel police, and the modernization imposed from above with its attendant corruption, injustice, and misery. No charismatic secular leader was available. Moreover, secular heroes always fade before religious guides, who can add holiness to ordinary forms of charisma. In contrast to the Sunni *ulama*, the Shi'ite mullahs, also at the grassroots level close to the people, constitute a self-governing force. They form a "church," whose own wealth makes it independent of the state, which allows it to support or to attack the state.¹⁰³ Hence, Khomeini's success as an irreconcilable and sacred leader at the apex of a powerful, rich, and untouchable hierarchy, for a people who no longer wanted reconciliation.

There is neither improbability nor scandal in revolutionary mobilizations that take place in the name of religion. They can succeed better than others. However, it is necessary to be vigilant toward their victories. It is also necessary to maintain a critical attitude toward both the propaganda of the intellectuals within these movements and the credulity of those outside them. A revolutionary tendency can easily continue to be put forward under the banner of Islam. But what superior facilities religion has for those who want to smother society with conservative and reactionary options! Religions are not dangerous because they preach belief in God, but rather because the only remedy they have at their disposal concerning the inherent evils of society is moral exhortation. The more they seem to have such remedies at their disposal, the more they make sacred the social *status quo* that more often than not suits their clerics. In power, they succumb more often than not to the temptation of imposing, in the name of moral reform, an order of the same name.

Khomeini does not have the necessary capacities, even at an illusory level, to be a Robespierre or a Lenin. They were not archbishops. He could be a Savonarola or, if power inspires him with some politically practical ideas, a Calvin or a Cromwell. Let us hope for the Iranian people that he does not reveal himself to be a Dupanloup tending toward a Torquemada.¹⁰⁴