

CHAPTER 4

Every Day 'Ashura, Every Tomb Karbalā: Iran, 1977–1981

The first entire country to become an arena of religious violence in the twentieth century was Iran, from 1977 to 1979. The demonstrations and street fighting against the Pahlavi regime made use of the concepts of history and the rituals of the Twelver Shi'a and thoroughly modernized them. An annual procession in the month of Muharram was meant to keep alive the memory of the murder of the third Imam, Husain, on the orders of Caliph Yazid near Karbalā in what is now Iraq in 680 CE. In the month of Muharram, which fell in December and January 1977–1978, the processions swelled to become enormous political demonstrations against the Shah's regime. When the clergy in Qom, a stronghold of Shi'ite learning, joined their students in demanding that the regime grant the rule of law and freedom, the army used force against them and shot many of them on January 9. The leading clergyman in Qom then declared that those who had been shot were martyrs, and that the government was the enemy of God. Forty days later, when the memorial service prescribed by ritual was held on February 18, the dead were commemorated as martyrs. When the army advanced on the demonstrators and once again people were killed, memorial services for the martyrs were held once again, forty days later. A "chain of martyrdom" accompanied the deterioration of the old order. At intervals dictated by the ritual, the uprisings spread across the land in a kind of snowball effect, until the Shah's regime was swept away because of its own violence.¹

Newspaper reporters give us glimpses of the ceremonies of mourning that commemorated those who had been shot. For example, Arnold Hottinger, the correspondent of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, wrote as follows about an assembly in Isfahan at the beginning of 1979:

The speakers [in the mosque] follow one another, and their listeners are repeatedly given the opportunity to shout out their cries and slogans, as is certainly in keeping with the religious tradition of the ceremonies of mourning. A mixture of religion and politics is presented: the speakers, mostly clergy but sometimes also laymen, speak of the pioneers of the Shi'a who laid down their lives. This leads them almost automatically to speak of the bloody sacrifices that "we are making today for freedom." The people mourn Husain and promise that they are ready to sacrifice themselves for him, like so many others of his companions and successors. The speaker adds: "This is the meaning of our struggle against the Shah to establish an Islamic republic." (*NZZ*, January 7–8, 1979)

The speakers praised the deaths in the street battles as lives laid down for Husain, and those present promised in reply that they were willing to make a similar sacrifice. Another source reports a woman participant as saying: "Khomeini has said that whoever dies in the struggle against the Shah's regime dies the death of a witness, martyrdom—naturally, this applies only to the one who consciously takes part in the demonstration, not to one who happens to be shot while passing by."² The speakers here are not in the least members of the uneducated, traditional classes, but young educated urban dwellers. After the unrest broke out, an Iranian woman who lived in the West returned to her country and kept a diary in which she recorded her experiences and her motivations. Omol Bani relates enthusiastically that Imam Husain's death as a witness has been reinterpreted by Ali Shariati, and that this has greatly intensified the willingness to fight. In her thoughts, she herself lives in the age of Husain. In the darkness of ignorance, an angry son is born of the little house of Fatima, the daughter of the prophet Muhammad and wife of 'Ali—Husain, who rises up against the rule of the palaces and the exploiters: "The only weapon this man has is his own death. But he comes from a family that has taught him the art of dying rightly. This is *shahada*."³ *Shahada* designates the first of the five pillars of Islam: "I bear witness that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God." However, it also designates testimo-

ny in the sense of martyrdom, and was therefore a slogan in the struggle against the Shah's regime.

Unlike the concept of sacrificial death in other cultures . . . *shahada* is not a death which the enemy forces upon the revolutionary and imposes upon him. It is the welcome death which a fighter himself chooses in full consciousness of his situation. . . . *Shahada* is a challenge to all the centuries, to all the generations: "If you can kill, then kill; and if you cannot kill, then die!" (a quotation from the Iranian intellectual Shariati)⁴

Martyrdom is not a fate that overtakes a person. It is a freely chosen action.

A Shi'ite Ritual of Revolution Is Performed Anew

The events to which this idealization of dying was linked lie far back in the past. They occurred in connection with the struggle for the succession to the deceased Caliph Mu'awiya. 'Ali's party believed that Husain was entitled to the succession to the Prophet, but when he set out in the year 60 after the Hegira (680 CE) to assume this office in Damascus, he was intercepted and besieged in the Iraqi city of Karbalā by the general of the Caliph Yazid, who had taken power in the meantime. For days on end, the troops prevented him and his followers from getting access to water, so that they nearly died of thirst. Then, on Muharram 10, the day of 'Ashura, they attacked the little group and killed Husain together with his family and some who remained faithful to him. Only four years later, his adherents held a penitential march on that same day. They lamented what had happened and accused themselves of complicity in abandoning the Imam. The oldest element in these memorial celebrations, which soon underwent a considerable elaboration, was Husain's request for a drink of water, which was refused.⁵

Celebrations on the day of 'Ashura were organized above all after Shi'ism became the state religion in Iran in the sixteenth century. European travelers, who visited Persia in growing numbers from the beginning of the seventeenth century on and were fascinated by what they saw, inform us about the Shi'ite practice of marching with lamentations through the streets of their town or city quarter on Muharram 10, the anniversary of the murder of Husain. We are also told about the societal composition of the processions. The committees that organized the celebrations

relied on the clientele of a rich patron, on a neighborhood group, on the religious followers of a respected clergyman—or on all three together. The processions were thus based on already existing relationships of loyalty.⁶ In practice, the processions were usually performed by craft guilds.

A Demonstration of Willingness to Die

The participants in the procession were inspired by the idea that the events of the past were once again present in the days of 'Ashura. A report from the beginning of the twentieth century quotes a participant as saying: "Today is the day of 'Ashura, and these events took place in Karbalā."⁷ The slaughter of Husain and his followers was reconstructed on the streets in a way that profoundly moved the onlookers. One particularly striking feature was the men who scourged themselves with chains and sabers until the blood flowed. These men wore shrouds in order to emphasize that they were willing to sacrifice themselves; and they were ready to demonstrate this in practice too, in street battles there and then—for the European travelers agree that when the processions met each other, they assailed and fought each other. One early account summarizes all the distinctive features of these encounters:

Likewise, all the people from the neighboring towns take part in these processions with long and thick clubs in their hands, in order to use these at the given time against the other processions that they may chance to encounter—not only for the sake of precedence, but also (I believe) in order to depict the battle in which Husain died. And they firmly believe that the one who stands firm in his place in such a skirmish, since he is dying for Husain, goes directly into Paradise. Indeed, they believe that the gates of Paradise stand open throughout the entire period of their 'Ashura, and that all the Mohammedans who die in these days will be brought in there immediately.⁸

Other travelers confirm these words point by point: that the fighting broke out over ritual objects, that they fought with clubs, that the fighting was due to the rivalry of the different processions to get precedence, that it portrayed the events of Karbalā, that it was suppressed by the state, that those who died in these fights were considered martyrs like the martyrs of Karbalā, and that people believed that the gates of Paradise were open in the days of 'Ashura. All these features show that the 'Ashura celebrations

belong to the type of periodical, collective rituals of revolution, and that like such rituals, they too temporarily suspend the legal order.⁹

These rituals of revolution are widespread, and their interpretation is a matter of controversy. For a short period, these rituals turn upside-down the existing asymmetrical relationships between men and women, between rulers and subjects.¹⁰ Many British social anthropologists were once convinced that such rituals had the function of purifying a society from the aggressions of some of its members, thereby stabilizing the hierarchical structure.¹¹ The ethnologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) examined this hypothesis by means of field studies in Africa, and he dismissed it. He recognized in the rituals of revolution the presence of two antithetical types of societal relationships: on the one hand, a hierarchical structure of positions and roles, and on the other hand, an undifferentiated communality, which he calls *communitas*. Both societal types—the structure and the *communitas*—make their own independent claims to validity: “For individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality.”¹² When hierarchies become rigid, however, social movements can draw on the experience of communality and overthrow them.

In Iran, too, the ritual street battles in Muharram provided a setting for staging the tensions latent in everyday life between the different loyalty groups in the Iranian cities. This had consequences for the significance that the historical events of Karbalā acquired. Historically speaking, the conflict between Husain and his enemies was a confrontation between two parties (later called Sunnites and Shi‘ites) about the legitimate caliph; but in Iranian society, the battles were fought between Shi‘ites. Now, it was the sacrifice for one’s own loyalty group that had an exemplary religious character—no longer the sacrifice for the community of all the Shi‘ites. The drama of Karbalā was staged as the readiness to sacrifice one’s life for one’s own group.

The remembrance of the past events was kept alive in another way too, by means of a Passion play. The martyrdoms of Karbalā were depicted on the stage: in addition to the martyrdom of Husain, those of his companions ‘Abbas, Qasim, ‘Ali Akbar, and others. Each act of the play illustrates anew that the redemption that Husain’s death

brings is effective only when one takes him as the model for one's own action:

O Shi'ites, Husain gave his head for you. Smite yourselves on the head out of grief for the king of the East and of the West. Husain made his life a ransom for the Shi'ites. Now strew your life on Husain's path.¹³

The actors in the play continually address each other with the words: "May I be your ransom."¹⁴ This is more than a mere cliché: the corresponding concepts of *fedā* (ransom, ransom money, etc.) and *qorbān* (sacrifice) speak to deep-rooted societal expectations. Both in the past and in the present, the security of the individual has been guaranteed not so much by the government as by the solidarity of the group to which one belongs. When people become dependent on others as a result of war, debt, or other reasons, the only thing that helps them is ransom by their own group. This is why the Passion play presents ransom as a moral obligation incumbent on all those who belong to a loyalty group. When some people want to discourage him from martyrdom, 'Ali Akbar cries out in indignation:

Behold, my father is left without companions and lamenting. He has no one in this wilderness to bring (him) aid.¹⁵

It is however not permissible for simply anyone to bring this aid. In the Passion play, this is reserved exclusively to young men, and the myth of the sacrifice of Ishmael inculcates this point: "The life of the son is worthy to be sacrificed for (his) father."¹⁶ Women have another task, namely, to give their consent to the path to sacrifice on which their sons set out. Before the Imam sends the two young men 'Ali Akbar and Qasim out to the battlefield, he sends them back to their tent: "It is your mother who must give her consent to this action."¹⁷ 'Ali Akbar's mother still hesitates, but when Qasim's mother tells her that she will certainly allow her son to take part in the battle, she too utters the decisive words:

Place your hope in God the righteous judge, go and sacrifice (your) life for (your) father.¹⁸

The exemplary religious action remains linked to the decision taken by others. It is embedded in a societal world in which loyalty groups dominate and compete with one another.¹⁹ Readiness for sacrifice is the presup-

position for societal survival. As yet, the believer lives in a world that is full of injustice (*zulm* = tyranny); this will change only when the Imam Mahdi emerges from his occultation and fills the world with justice (*'adl*).²⁰

The Tyranny of Westernization

The European expansion that became ever more noticeable in Iran from the nineteenth century on soon had momentous consequences, in a new interpretation of the 'Ashura ritual. When Nazir al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896) granted an Englishman the tobacco concession for the whole of Iran in 1891–1892, a storm of protest broke out in the country. Bazaar merchants and craftsmen, clergy, and intellectuals declared the shah to be a tyrant like the usurper Yazid. At the high point of the dispute about the tobacco monopoly, demonstrators clothed in shrouds marched through the streets in order to proclaim publicly their willingness to die, if need be, in the struggle for a just social order.²¹

This interpretative pattern declined in importance in the 1920s and 1930s. After Reza Shah Pahlavi came to power in 1925, he employed every legislative instrument available in order to deprive the Shi'ite faith community of legitimacy. The clerics, who had previously been exempt from military duty, could now be drafted; their influence on the legal system and the schools was cut back, they were forbidden to carry out the bloody Shi'ite rituals, and the religious foundations were subjected to state control and regulations. A law about clothing forbade women to wear the veil and men the traditional garb. The only exception was the clergy—for in this way, it would be possible to distinguish them externally from the laity. The goal of all these measures was to expel Shi'ism from the public life of Iran and to stigmatize it.²²

The End of Traditional Village Societal Forms

The marginalization of the Shi'a was well advanced by the time that the son of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941), Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (r. 1941–1979), whom the United States had brought to power, undertook a radical modernization of the country at the beginning of the 1960s. Of all the various reform measures of the "White Revolution" of 1962, the

land reform was particularly far-reaching and had the most serious consequences in the long term. Until that date, the traditional large landholders had owned immense territories, which were cultivated by dependent peasants. The harvest was divided between the landlords and the peasant farmers according to a traditional ratio that took into account the possession of one of the five factors of production: land, seed, draught cattle, water, and physical work. If (as was frequently the case) the peasants had nothing to contribute apart from their manpower, they were left with only one-fifth of the harvest.²³ Every impartial observer must regard this sharecropping as the embodiment of injustice and exploitation.

The agrarian reform, recommended and conceived by American experts, destroyed this system. The farmers received the property rights to the fields that they cultivated, although with the stipulation that they must compensate the former landholder. The former owner was compensated by a state-owned bank, which the new owner then had to repay. A rationalization of cultivation was intended to make it possible for the peasant farmers to pay these credits back. The intention was to create a new class of farmers who sought to earn money. However, this reform ignored the many agricultural workers—estimated at 40 percent of the village families—who did not possess any customary right to the sharecropping, but belonged to the village community and formed working teams (*boneh*) with the peasant farmers, receiving for this a share in the harvest. Thanks to the introduction of machines, these agricultural workers lost their employment and were obliged to move to the cities. The experts had included this in their calculations, since the increasing oil revenues would bring an industrialization of the country and thereby many new jobs; but things did not turn out in this way. Too few new jobs were created, and those that were created made demands that did not match the low-level abilities of those who had moved to the cities. Worse still, the landless were soon followed by many of the new farmers—the expectation of an agricultural revolution had been deceptive. Instead of more agrarian products being produced in Iran itself, even grain came to be imported, paid for from oil revenues. In the end, the land reform had destroyed the societal forms of the villages, but without the simultaneous emergence of an industrial society. In the cities, this led to an explosion of the number of inhabitants and of the slums.²⁴

The Growth of Shi'ite Networks

In Iran's overpopulated cities, it was religious institutions that were most qualified and most willing to take care of those who had been uprooted and disappointed. Looking back on the 1960s and 1970s, Said Amir Arjomand observed a noticeable increase in religious activities; there had been a mushrooming of religious associations, which migrants joined.²⁵ The legal reforms had gravely weakened the Shi'ite institutions, but they still had income and assets, as in the past. Accordingly, the progress of the Western modernization in the countryside drove the uprooted persons in the cities into Shi'ite networks, which, despite all the government measures, had remained close to the poor, many of whom had been steamrollered by the economic developments in Iran and found social Shi'ism attractive. Instead of being embedded, as previously, in rural societal forms and relationships of loyalty, they formed a faith community.

From the very outset, the land reform that was enacted by the Shah's regime and the further program of modernization (the "White Revolution") had also encountered opposition on the part of the bazaar merchants and craftsmen. Among the city dwellers too, the modernization brought advantages only to certain social classes, while others were affected adversely by it. Craftsmen and merchants in the bazaars were largely excluded from the oil wealth, but they were suddenly forced to compete with firms that received state subventions, operated factories that produced goods for everyday use that had previously been made in the bazaars, and sold these products outside the bazaars in modern shops. The discontent exploded in June, 1963, when a great protest demonstration against the Shah's regime was held in the Shi'ite month of grief, on the 'Ashura day (Muharram 10 = June 5, 1963). The Shah's troops dispersed it with bloodshed.

Karbalā Becomes the Model for Action Today

Clergy took part in the revolt in 1963. Alongside the predominantly apolitical clergy, a politically active group had formed, which entered the public arena. Ruholla Mussauī Khomeini (1902–1989) played a prominent role as the harshest critic of the Shah in this group. After the bloody confrontations, he was forced into exile, first in Turkey, then in Najaf in Iraq.

Najaf was an appropriate place for his activities, since the tomb of Imam 'Ali drew Shi'ite pilgrims from all over the world. It was a center of Shi'ite scholarship, where the younger generation of clergy from many countries studied. In exile, Khomeini elaborated his radically new theory that the state form of monarchy was incompatible with Islam. As long as the Imam Mahdi remains hidden, only a "government of the jurist" (*velayat-e faqih*) is legitimate.²⁶

A genuine renaissance of Shi'ite theology took place in Najaf in the 1960s, especially with regard to the conception of martyrdom.²⁷ In 1963, the Shi'ite clergyman Ayatollah Taleqani declared that death in the struggle against the Shah's regime was an act of martyrdom, and laid claim to the core metaphor of Sufism, *fana* (annihilation of the self in God), for this action. Anyone who is led by the knowledge of the truth to be willing to sacrifice himself, in order thus to realize the truth, is a martyr, and this also applies to those killed during the demonstrations in 1963. It is indeed true that there was a tension between this transposition of a conception of Islamic mysticism to death in the struggle for an Islamic societal order, on the one hand, and the predominant rejection in classical Islam of every form of taking one's own life, on the other. But laying claim to the mystical concept of "annihilation" for such an act (as was done shortly afterwards by Sunni adherents of the jihad in Egypt too) meant that the intention of the acting person became decisive for the religious legitimacy of his action. One may speak of a dying in the jihad only when this completely corresponds to the intention of the one who acts (*niyya*). A conscious and intentional death in the struggle against the impure, unjust world was ethically exemplary and, when seen from the perspective of the apocalyptic end of history, a victory. And in any case, it was not a reprehensible suicide.

Young theological students from Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, who believed it was necessary to mobilize the faith communities of their countries against the increasing cultural Westernization, adopted this concept of martyrdom. Even a deliberate destruction of one's life in the struggle against the powers of godlessness was no longer taboo: on the contrary, it was elevated to exemplary status. Theologians who kept in touch with one another even after their studies in Najaf, and who had considerable influence on public life in their native countries, such as Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq, Musa al-Sadr and Sayyid Muhammad Husain Fadlallah in Lebanon, and

Khomeini in Iran, brought about this transformation of the Shi'ite tradition into a religious activism. In all their sermons and writings, they taught that Shi'ites must never again abandon Imam Husain, as had once happened in Karbalā. Instead of ritually lamenting, the believers should rise up like Husain to fight against injustice. But we no longer hear that the consent of the women of the family is necessary for such a decision: the action has become utterly individual, and all that counts is the pure intention. It belongs to God—and here and now, to the Shi'ite authorities—to discern the purity of a person's intention. In this way, a religious practice embedded in loyalty groups became an action that was subject to the judgment of the faith community.

The new generation of clergy moved away from the earlier view that the believers must above all learn how to bear injustice patiently. Khomeini's gradual ascent in the course of his exile to the role of the highest Shi'ite cleric, the *marja' at-taqlid* (Arabic "authority"), to whom both laity and clergy owe obedience, sounded the death knell of political abstinence.²⁸ He summoned believers to fight actively against injustice and on behalf of "the humiliated" (*mostaz'afin*). For a long time, Shi'ites had been bidden to conceal their identity, as long as the Imam Mahdi had not yet emerged from his occultation and they were living in a dangerous world full of injustice and falsehood—but now, Khomeini demanded that they abandon this practice, in view of the attack on the faith community of the Shi'a. Instead, they must be ready to fight and to die.

From Concealment to the Public Profession of Faith

Concealing one's faith (in Arabic *taqiyya* or *ketmān*, literally, "caution," "fear," "concealment") was typical of the Shi'ite way of life at an early date, as we see in affirmations of the imams:

He who has no *taqiyya*, has no faith; a believer without *taqiyya* is like a body without a head.²⁹

This, however, does not determine what exactly was demanded in practice. Ignaz Goldziher holds that this was an absolute obligation,³⁰ but Etan Kohlberg has argued against this position. He writes that even for the Shi'a, *taqiyya* is not in every situation an obligation, but only when a can-

did profession of the faith would harm the imam or his community. The exception to this rule is constituted by actions that belong to the distinctive characteristics of the Shi'ite legal school; but since the Shi'ite legal tradition differs from the other Islamic legal schools only on small and rather marginal points, the *taqiyya* would only seldom have been a religious obligation irrespective of the situation.

This means that the requirement of *taqiyya* remains rather unclear, if one compares it to the clear maxims of an ethic for the laity. This prompted Egbert Meyer to study the occasion and the sphere of application of the *taqiyya* in the works of Shi'ite theologians more closely. His finding is that they treat *taqiyya* in connection, not with ethics, but with the coming of the Imam Mahdi. "Until the appearance of the imam who is to return, when that which is true will gain the upper hand once and for all, *taqiyya* is an action which is worthy of consideration at all times."³¹ This means that there is an inherent link between the occultation of the Mahdi and the practice of concealment. As long as the Imam is hidden, *taqiyya* governs the conduct of the believers on purely rational grounds. In turn, the occultation of the Imam Mahdi itself is linked to the practice of *taqiyya* (literally, "caution"). When the twelfth and last Imam went into hiding, this was justified by reference to his fear of his enemies: the Imam was obliged to shelter from them. Reason dictated the concealment. However, the opposite is also true: if the believers await the imminent return of the Imam Mahdi, the end of the concealment is likewise at hand.³² It will cease definitively only when the Mahdi appears. But if the Shi'a itself is endangered, no concealment is permitted.³³ This danger existed in Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. In this situation, Khomeini summoned the believers to distinguish a correct *taqiyya* from a false *taqiyya*. In such a situation, the believers were obliged to fight for the truth. *Taqiyya* was no longer an option for their conduct; the time to rise up had come.

Westernization as Poison, Infection, and Temptation

Academics and intellectuals also belonged to the opposition to the Shah's regime. Secular opposition figures in Iran had recognized that the growing numbers of those who had lost their rights through the land reform and modernization measures formed a revolutionary potential for

a change of government. As long as the Shi'ite clergy were apolitical, the chances for a secular Marxist alternative were good; but the new Shi'ite activism confronted the secular opposition with a new situation. Some of its members turned their backs on Marxist atheism, while retaining the Marxist criticism of society—with the difference that they now understood themselves as Husain's comrades-in-arms, as *mojahedin*.³⁴ They conferred a new prestige on the Shi'ite view of history and the Shi'ite ethos in the educated middle classes. Two of their spokesmen made a particular contribution to the change of position on the part of educated persons.

The Iranian writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) diagnosed the situation of his country as *gharb-zadegī*: Iran was the victim of a poison or infection (*zadegī* means both of these) through the West (*gharb*). Healing required the removal of the external poison and a strengthening of the body's defenses, and the Shi'a of Iran was regarded as the appropriate remedy.³⁵ The other pioneer thinker from the educated middle classes was Ali Shariati (1933–1977), the son of a clergyman from Mashhad and a fervent admirer of Al-e Ahmad. He had spent some time studying in Paris, where he had read Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which he later translated into Farsi.³⁶ Fanon argued that the peoples of the Third World should not merely expel the colonial rulers from their countries. It was only by killing these rulers that they could liberate themselves from something much worse, namely, the inner dependence on them. This violence had a “detoxifying” effect, liberating the colonized person from his inferiority complex and rehabilitating him in his own eyes. For Fanon, therefore, violence was the only effective instrument for the liberation from oppression.

Ali Shariati sympathized with this anti-colonial glorification of violence and connected it with a new interpretation of the early Shi'a, with which his professors of Islamic studies in Paris had acquainted him.³⁷ In this view, Ali's party, the Shi'a, in its early period had engaged in a militant struggle for a just social order and against an unjust order, before the Shi'a degenerated into a “black” religion of penitence and self-flagellations. The official “black” Shi'a represented by the clergy was a distortion that must be replaced by the genuine militant “red” Shi'a. When the Shah's regime executed young resistance fighters who were friends of Shariati's in 1972,

he declared them to be martyrs whose action had consisted of two elements: the blood they shed and a message. Six years later, one of the rousing slogans of the rebellion against the Shah's regime was generated by his ideas: "Every day 'Ashura, every tomb Karbalā."³⁸

In this connection, we must look at the characterization of the United States as the Great Satan. William Beeman has freed this from a mistaken interpretation that helped to give Iran an assured place in the Evangelical scenario of the Last Days as the dwelling place of evil.³⁹ In Islam, however, Satan is not the same figure as the Antichrist in Christianity. He is not the ruler of the world at the transition to the eschatological millennium—for in Islam, that is the role of the *dajjāl*. Satan is the seducer who turns people aside from the way of God, exactly as we know him from the story of the temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:1–11). The temptation comes from outside, and is a test where one must prove one's worth by fighting it off. This view is a fundamental element in the Shi'ite worldview, which sees the origin of moral impurity, not in the human being, but as coming from the external world.⁴⁰ Scantily clad women, sexual permissiveness, pornography, alcohol, Western music—all these turn Muslims aside from doing what is right. Western culture appears as the great seducer that does everything in its power to sully the inner human being.

Stagings of Martyrdom

The resistance to the aggressive war that Iraq fought against Iran from 1980 to 1988, with the support of the United States, was a testing ground for the new religious practice. In order to resist the assault on its territory by its hated enemy, the Islamic Republic drafted even the poorest of the poor, and indeed even children, for military service, promising them the honorific title of "martyr" and financial support for their families. The insidious plan did not expect the children to fight with weapons: rather, they were to use their little bodies to set off landmines, thus clearing the path to the front line for the army.⁴¹ One little boy who threw himself under a tank with a hand grenade was celebrated as a national hero. Iran officially commemorated this Mohammad Hosein Fahmideh with pride.⁴² Willingness to die was proclaimed the test of faith, and martyrdom became a prominent topos in the political self-portrayal of the Islamic Republic.⁴³

The late Iranian journalist Freidoune Sahebjam recorded a story told him by a thirteen-year-old Iranian boy in 1982 that almost beggars belief. He and a thousand other children ran over the minefields of Khuzistan in order to clear the path for the Iranian troops. Before he set out, mullahs in the barracks had promised him and his companions that if they were lucky, they would meet the Imam Mahdi in person. And so it was: as mines exploded on all sides around the boy, and his companions were blown to shreds alongside him, he suddenly saw nearby a white horseman bearing the banner of Islam and pointing in the direction of Iraq, shouting: "Run, children! Run over there!"⁴⁴ The boy miraculously survived and was taken prisoner by the Iraqis. But since it was a disgrace for a martyr to survive, he could not return either to Iran or to his mother, who was already receiving a pension both for him and for her husband and other sons who had fallen in battle.⁴⁵

There are also accounts from the other side of the front line, from the Iraqis, which are equally difficult to believe. Christoph Reuter cites a journalist's report of an Iraqi machine gunner who heard a sound like a swarm of locusts coming closer and closer and eventually realized that it came from the mouths of thousands of children chanting: "Ya Karbalā, ya Husain, ya Khomeini!" As the children drew near, the machine gunner shot them down as if they were row upon row of bottles, and yet they still came on in waves from behind trenches and hills, clambered over the dead bodies, and ran toward him until they almost rolled over him and he fled from his position. After this onslaught, the journalist, who happened to be on the scene, and a colleague counted more than 23,000 dead bodies, until night came and they had to stop counting. Around the necks of each of the dead children hung a key: "In order—so it was said—that they would be able after their martyrdom to open the gate to paradise."⁴⁶

Last Wills of Martyrs

In the accounts from the war between Iran and Iraq, the martyr's death has a double significance, both military and religious. On the one hand, it is a contribution to the defense of the country, an action that Durkheim in his study of suicide called the altruistic suicide and that he attributed to moral pressure exercised by the troop on the individual sol-

dier.⁴⁷ In his presentation of the recent history of the military suicide attack, Joseph Croitoru concludes that the first cases in the Middle East imitated Japanese models, and that the genuinely Islamic element is therefore rather small.⁴⁸ However, this element must not be ignored, even if the reference to the well known “Assassins” of the eleventh and twelfth centuries does not take us very far. Tilman Seidensticker has shown that there were accounts of Islamic suicide attacks in the eighteenth century, in the context of the European expansion in South and Southeast Asia. These accounts, which have been overlooked up to now, indicate that the Assassins were not the only precursors.⁴⁹

The wills of martyrs, which were widespread on the Iranian side in the war between Iran and Iraq, give us information about the second dimension, the religious. Werner Schmucker has examined roughly 175 such wills written by Iranian soldiers in 1980–1981. These were subsequently published by third persons in newspapers and periodicals, and were also brought out in the form of anthologies. According to Imam Khomeini, “These wills make one shudder and wake up.”⁵⁰ Representatives of the Islamic Republic and relatives of those killed were equally interested in these wills. The published texts consist of two parts, the will in the strict sense of the term and a biography written by a third person, often a journalist. The wills were written by soldiers who sensed that their death was approaching and often took the form of a letter. The structure follows the legal formulae of the legacy in inheritance law. After an invocation of the name of God (*bismala*) and verses from the Qur’an comes a justification of the sacrifice of the soldier’s life. The martyr gives himself a place here in the passion narrative of the Shi‘ite saints. He has heard Husain’s despairing cry in the Passion play—“Why have you abandoned me?”—and he has responded: “I am at your command!” He does not abandon Husain. This part of the will, often written in the form of a prayer, is meant to bear witness to a passionate commitment to the sacrifice of his own life, a sacrifice that is affirmed voluntarily and joyfully. This is immediately followed in the will by a declaration in the first person singular, addressed to his parents, brothers and sisters, his wife, the nation, or the Islamic world, explaining the meaning of his death. Then come requests for forgiveness of his faults, as well as material dispositions.

The martyr’s sacrifice serves both the good of society and his own

self. This deed is a kind of “injection of blood for the organism of society as a whole,” an investment in the “divine revolution,” vengeance and retaliation.⁵¹ In the eyes of the one who acts in this way, it is a barter with God in which a worthless life is exchanged for an eternal life. Through this action, the self is disciplined and the desiring soul (*nafs*) is extinguished. This is accompanied by an expiation of all guilt.⁵² Here we can see the transposition of maxims of Islamic mysticism to dying in battle. This transposition had its origin in the Islamic renaissance in Najaf, and was not truly compatible with the rigorous rejection of every kind of self-killing in classical Islam. Above all, this interpretative pattern goes far beyond the framework of military expediency and ennobles the real war between Iran and Iraq, making it an event in salvation history. Here, the annihilation of the self preached by Sufism takes place. In the real war (in Islamic terminology, in the little jihad), one is offered the chance of spiritual self-disciplining (the great jihad). This view was also put forward in the 1980s by the Egyptian author Abd al-Salam in his book *The Neglected Duty*, and we find it once again in the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Farhad Khosrokhavar points out the contradiction inherent in this conception of the warrior. On the one hand, we have the aggressive militant warrior who loses his life in the battle against the enemies of God; and on the other hand, we have the witness who suffers in defense, who sacrifices himself for the truth and thus attains redemption. It was above all Ali Shariati who drew a systematic distinction between dying for the faith and death in war, since dying for the faith is not generated by any kind of necessity to defend one's country, but by the free decision of the individual to renounce the world of *jahiliyya* and to become a sacrifice for Husain. The community to which this decision is related is no longer a territorial entity. Khosrokhavar links this with the transnational Islamic community in whose name the members of al-Qaeda act. The kind of individualism that finds expression in the section of the Iranian martyrs' wills that justify their death is heading towards a detachment from national necessities and the assumption of traits of a universal religious ethics of conviction. This means that we could speak of an adoption and transformation of western individualism.⁵³

The Category of Fundamentalism

Since the 1978–1979 Iranian revolution, “Islamic fundamentalism” has conventionally been regarded in the media and in politics as dogmatic, intolerant, and violent. Since it threatens the bases of a peaceful coexistence in human society, no holds are barred in the fight against it, even if this should entail the infringement of established law. Mark Jurgensmeyer, an expert in the field of fundamentalism, has made a critical examination of this rhetoric. His conclusion is that one must study “antifundamentalism” in order to comprehend the terrified reactions to fundamentalism.⁵⁴ Neither he nor the researchers at the Fundamentalism Project of the University of Chicago have identified the exercise of violence as a constitutive characteristic of fundamentalism. After the publication of five volumes containing a wealth of empirical studies, three of these researchers have drawn an interim conclusion that describes this phenomenon as follows:

Fundamentalism, in this usage, refers to a discernible pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled “true believers” attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.⁵⁵

They do not assert that such groups *could not* become violent; the point is only that their militancy is not necessarily martial. These groups too speak a language of violence, but this does not lead necessarily and inevitably to a practice of violence. The rhetoric of violence does not ineluctably lead to de facto violence.⁵⁶ In this case too, one must also bear in mind the dynamic of the conflict. When violence is used against fundamentalist groups, or they believe that their existence is threatened, their attitude to violence changes, and they can employ violence to protect religious communality: “Fundamentalist violence, per se, is a response to government oppression and/or to the growth or empowerment of social groups deemed threatening to fundamentalist interests.”⁵⁷ In such exceptional situations, the use of violence can be a religious precept, and the believers use every means to defend their community, as the Maccabees once did—as a performative act of faith that gives proof of their willingness to die for the truth.⁵⁸ It is only an “antifundamentalism” that interprets this as a community that is intolerant and violent as a matter of *principle*.

When fundamentalists come to power, as in Iran, their relationship to violence can change. Like the Jacobins of the French Revolution (to whom Shmuel N. Eisenstadt compares them), they can launch a violent transformation of society in keeping with their own ideas. In this process, they follow a political program that is typical of the tensions of the modern period.⁵⁹ Iran is not unique here: the attempt to shape society in accordance with religious principles has made its appearance in democratic states too.⁶⁰

The United States Remains the Captive of Its Own Assumptions

When U.S. President Jimmy Carter championed the respect for human rights during his period in office (1976–1980), not a few Iranians hoped that the necessary change of system in their country would occur peaceably. The outcome was completely different, since the U.S. administration took the side of the Shah—a decision that made it a partisan of the violent Caliph Yazid in the eyes of the Shi'a. All the fury that had built up against the Shah's regime now erupted against the U.S. administration. Puppets depicting Carter were burnt in the streets of Teheran, and the U.S. embassy in that city was occupied for more than a year.

Looking back, Gary Sick, who was a member of the National Security Council under President Carter with responsibility for Iran, has related how difficult it was for those with political responsibility to make sense of the events in Iran—the contradiction between what was happening under Khomeini and the Western tradition of secularizing revolutions was too blatant. No one had been able even to guess that a revolution was beginning. “We are all prisoners of our own cultural assumptions, more than we dare to admit,” he adds self-critically.

Khomeini's call for the establishment of a religious philosopher-king, the *velayat-e faqih*, and clerical management of political institutions according to religious law was so unexpected, so alien to existing political traditions that it was less a surprise than an embarrassment. The participation of the church in a revolutionary movement was neither new nor particularly disturbing, but the notion of a popular revolution leading to the establishment of a theocratic state seemed so unlikely as to be absurd.⁶¹

Nevertheless, these self-critical words are still based on an interpretative pattern of the “cognitive distancing” type that we have already seen in the persecution of cults in the United States, namely an intentional disassociation from something for which one has a share in responsibility. They ignore the fact that the type of modernization conducted by the United States was one cause of the rise in the numbers of those who had suffered degradation, and then found protection in the Shi‘ite networks, and interpreted their experience in the concepts of the Shi‘ite tradition of suffering. Instead, Iran is demonized and becomes the location of something utterly incomprehensible. A comparison from the science of religion may be somewhat daring, but it will help to illustrate this point. We know from research into the persecutions of witches in the seventeenth century that most of those accused of witchcraft were women to whom the “victim of witchcraft” had refused at some earlier date to display a solidarity that tradition demanded. The “victim” therefore feared the resentment of these women and charged them with responsibility for some misfortune that had happened to him or her. Accusations of witchcraft were preceded by a breach of moral obligations on the part of the “victim of witchcraft.”⁶² Something similar may have played a role in the demonization of Islamist Iran by the United States. The United States was a contributory factor to the genesis of the Iranian hostility—which it now persecutes as something demonic.