



# Fantasies of Reason: Science, Superstition, and the Supernatural in Iran

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Fantasies of Reason: Science, Superstition, and the Supernatural in Iran

**Abstract**

This dissertation examines uncertainties about the supernatural among members of the urban middle class in Tehran, Iran. In particular, I attend to the ways in which the category of the supernatural (*mavara*) has become, for some people, an object of potential scientific ('*elmi*) inquiry that must be distinguished from approaches usually ascribed to the rural, the uneducated, and the poor, often deemed as either superstitions (*khorafat*) or parochically religious (*dini*). By examining a range of encounters with the supernatural – such as attempts to explain communications with the souls of the dead, make sense of spirit possession, and differentiate real magic from charlatanism – I highlight the varied modalities through which perspectives and forms of reasoning imagined to be rational and scientific are brought to bear on matters that are understood to lie, at least partially, within the purview of religious knowledge. I situate such supernatural encounters against a backdrop of state disciplinary and coercive measures, thereby illuminating important shifts in Iran's politico-religious landscape in the past two decades, such as the waning of the religious authority of the Shi'i ulama among certain sections of society. This declining authority does not necessarily imply a weakened interest in Islam (although this is sometimes the case). Rather, it has opened up a space for reception and deliberation of a multiplicity of sources of religious knowledge, both Islamic and non-Islamic. These include forms of Western-imported spirituality and occultism that have been entering Iran for over a

century, with their most recent wave consisting of translated texts of New Age spirituality, self-help success literature, and popular psychology that have gained popularity since the end of the war with Iraq. The metaphysical models on offer through these spiritual systems are usually promoted and understood as scientific rather than religious. That is, rather than being seen as contradicting Islamic notions, these formulations are often viewed as parallel to them. By attending to such notions and their everyday manifestations, my project brings into focus various hybrid forms of religious-scientific knowledge, experience, and discourse that have largely been ignored in the study of modern Muslim societies.

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Many centuries ago, the great Sa‘di of Shiraz admonished his readers that “Clouds, wind, moon, sun, and spheres are at work, so that you may obtain a loaf of bread and eat not in ignorance.” If our daily bread depends on such a propitious confluence of cosmic activity, so too, no doubt, must the writing of a dissertation. It is in this spirit that I extend my deepest gratitude to a fraction of this vast theatre, the human individuals and institutions that have made this project possible.

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## Introduction

Mr. Gorji,<sup>1</sup> the blacksmith, arrived about two hours later than scheduled. He was a short, round man, in his mid-forties, with a mustache and stubble, and a hairless patch just behind his left ear that seemed to indicate a light burn. He wore a black wool hat, grey shirt and pants, and a windbreaker jacket. His appearance and attire would have instantly singled him out as a person of a social class different from any of the other guests who had gathered to hear him speak that April evening. But if that were not enough, he spoke with a heavy southwestern Luri accent, at times using vocabulary that we had to strain to comprehend. As he entered through the front door of the apartment, he nodded toward an empty space near the ceiling and smiled, as if greeting blessed beings invisible to the rest of us.

Before long, Mr. Gorji launched into the story he knew we all wanted to hear. Several years earlier, while taking an afternoon nap in the living room of his house, the side of his torso had opened up like a zipper. His soul had left through the opening and, growing much larger, had ascended to a plane above the earth. On this plane, he had mounted a steed and traveled at lightning speed to another land. He had arrived first at hell, witnessing such horrific scenes as sinners suffering at the hands of grotesque monsters, giant dogs baring their menacing canines, and a nauseating pool of blood and filth through which he had been forced to wade. Shaken and eager to leave, he had mounted the steed once more to ascend to heaven. He had been welcomed there by thousands upon thousands of men and women singing hymns in unison. He had walked

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms, except those of well-known politicians and public figures. I have also changed the names of websites when including their original names might lead to identifying interlocutors who participated in them.

through streets paved with rubies, emeralds, and diamonds, and had been served by robot-like angels answering to commands punched into keypads and carrying baskets of succulent fruit. “Heaven is all love and kissing and cabaret,” he said, “and a single kiss there lasts a thousand years.”

But Mr. Gorji had not been satisfied with these pleasures. He had asked to meet God himself. “I always used to pray to God: dear God, mix me up with yourself [*khodaya, mano ba khodet qati pati kon*].” There in heaven, God had told him: “Abolfazl, I am here.” Then, a switch on his head had turned, and the top of his head had opened up. Inside, where his brain should have been, there were numerous light bulbs, but only one of them was on. “This bulb is what makes you who you are, a doctor, an engineer, a judge, or whatever,” he told us. Suddenly, all of the bulbs in his head had lit up at once: Here was God himself, “perfect reason,” (*‘aql-e kamel*) Mr. Gorji said.

Eventually, he had returned to his earthly body. He had “cried blood” for weeks, longing to go back. He had spurned his wife and relatives, telling them that he hated this “life of mud” and wanted to return to the other world. He had once gone to the brink of suicide, almost throwing himself off the top floor of a construction site. His family had thought him mad or bewitched. They had taken him to psychiatrists and healers. Finally, they had accepted him for who he was, or rather, who he had become.

Mr. Gorji realized that his story was hard to believe, just as his family had found it difficult to accept. “You will think I am crazy,” he said. But this could not prevent him from insisting that it had all been true. Nor would it restrain him from making pronouncements on such grand themes as the nature of the universe and imminent events that would transform life as

we knew it. “When I was there,” he said, “I saw that everything is math, math is speed, and speed is time.” “The Qur’an is the book of love and passion. It is the book of science. It is the book of mathematics. It hugs and caresses you. It remakes you, if you go inside it.” “In ten years’ time, a number will come that will transform the world. Each person will have their own number, which will strike them if they ever lie. No one will ever be able to lie again. Everything will become pure thought.”

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When I arrived in Tehran in the summer of 2008 to study Iranians’ encounters with the supernatural, talk about such encounters was more widespread than I had ever experienced it in prior research trips, or during the seven years of my adult life that I had spent in Tehran as a college student, teacher, and journalist. By the time I began fieldwork, newspapers were regularly carrying reports about charlatan fortune-tellers who duped young women with promises of magical solutions to their problems. Sports tabloids were publishing rumors that some of the most popular football teams in the country had been employing sorcerers in hopes of enhancing their chances of victory. Religious bookstores were selling hagiographies of contemporary mystics that glorified their marvelous powers – from teleportation to clairvoyance to spiritual healing. Seminars on “metaphysics,” myriad forms of mysticism, and superior mental powers such as telepathy and telekinesis, had mushroomed throughout Tehran and other major cities. Police occasionally announced the arrest of mystical pretenders, or impostors claiming to be the promised Imam Mahdi, having returned from occultation to fulfill the apocalyptic promises of Islam and usher in global justice and peace. State television continued a tradition it had established only three or four years earlier, broadcasting popular “spiritual” (*ma’ nagara*) serials during the month of Ramadan that depicted devils, the afterlife, the souls of the dead, and

the marvels of mystics. University students held conferences on Satanism and its alleged spread in Iran through imported heavy metal music. Even politics was not spared: in the run-up to the controversial presidential election of 2009, opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi called the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a “government of geomancy and palmistry.” Two years later, Ahmadinejad’s own erstwhile allies would speculate over whether he had been bewitched by one of his closest confidants.

And yet, this was also a time of dramatic appeals to the charisma of science and reason. When Mousavi condemned the “palmistry” of Ahmadinejad’s cabinet, he claimed that the next government – his own – would be one of “science and rationality.” Ahmadinejad, for his part, took every opportunity to trumpet the nuclear energy program as a supreme achievement of national scientific struggle. In early 2009, the Royan Research Institute cloned a goat for the first time, to much media fanfare. The Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology regularly released reports of the rise of scientific publications by Iranian researchers in journals recognized by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI). The Majlis (parliament) became exceedingly sensitive to charges of plagiarism and scientific fraud, even impeaching an ill-fated Interior Minister in 2008 who had falsely claimed an Oxford Ph.D. (he died of cancer exactly one year later). Perhaps most importantly for my purposes, many of my own interlocutors spoke of the supernatural in terms of science and technology. Metaphysics was a science. Witchcraft could be understood in terms of frequency, waves, and energy. The jinn may be thought of as inorganic beings. Achieving one’s worldly desires may require acquiring certain technologies of thought. Even Mr. Gorji the blacksmith would articulate his greatest insights from his journey to the afterlife in terms of mathematics, speed, and time.

My research was motivated by two broad lines of inquiry: First, why had the supernatural become a matter of widespread interest and public concern, in a way that seemed discontinuous with the near past? Second, given this widespread currency of the supernatural, its manifold circulations across the landscapes of urban life, how did middle class Iranians fashion their own orientations toward such phenomena? The first question requires that one look for large scale shifts – economic, social, religious, and political – that might explain the rise of new kinds of practices, or the attribution of new kinds of significance to old practices. The second question demands that one investigate practices of knowledge production and validation. How do people discriminate true from false, reliable from unreliable, rational from superstitious? How do they reconcile their commitments to reason and science with their supernatural engagements?

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The gathering I had attended that April evening with Mr. Gorji the blacksmith was a small and intimate affair, held at a private apartment with only about a dozen people in attendance. Our host was Ziba, a divorced, thirty-something-year-old journalist who wrote reports for the culture and society pages of a handful of newspapers and magazines. The meeting was arranged by her friend Nafiseh, an aspiring actress and pop singer in her late twenties, who had also been divorced and spent much of her time pursuing a variety of mystical and occult interests.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there were Ziba's mother, two of her sisters (one in her mid thirties, the other in her late twenties), their husbands, a television makeup artist and Reiki practitioner by the name of Shahin Khanom, and Farhad, a photographer. Finally, there was Mohsen Roshani, a loquacious poet, actor, author, and professor or “master” (*ostad*) of metaphysics (*metafizik*)

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<sup>2</sup> Nafiseh is one of the central figures in Chapter 2.



whom his associates referred to as *hazrat-e darvish* (his eminence the darvish). He was accompanied by his older brother and two middle-aged male friends.

The group represented a fairly good sample of the range of people I had gotten to know over the previous year in the course of my research among urban Tehranis. They were men and women of different ages, with varying degrees of attachment to orthodox Shi'ism – from the pious believer to the atheist to those committed to or experimenting with various alternative traditions. They had little in common besides an interest in the supernatural and what – for lack of a more precise descriptor – I would call their “middle class” background: They were all either professionals or married to professionals. They had all obtained high school diplomas, although most had also gone on to acquire a level of college and graduate education. They all read widely and consumed various other media, from Hollywood movies to the internet. Some also contributed to discussions on the supernatural by authoring books, teaching seminars, or participating in forums online.

My interlocutors had widely diverging reasons for their interest in the supernatural. They also made sense of their encounters in varying ways. Some were looking for solutions to particular problems – of marriage, health, wealth, and so on – and were prepared to try almost anything, even at the risk of being fleeced by a charlatan. Some looked to the metaphysical for strategies of self-improvement, self-enhancement, and spiritual uplift. Others said they were merely curious. Ziba, our host that evening, had told me that her fascination with the supernatural was driven by a love for magical realist literature – especially that of Gabriel García Márquez. She did not believe in God or “the nonsense of prophets and holy books,” she said, but she did believe in “metaphysical things” (*chizha-ye mavara'ot-tabi'eh*), in which she included “our dreams and imaginations.” With Mr. Gorji, her concern had been to figure out where

exactly to place his narrative: In a Márquezian realm of the magical and imaginative, or on the dung heap of nonsense and superstition. Nafiseh, who had found us the blacksmith, had become entangled with the supernatural partly through attempts to rid herself of a tenacious suitor, but had later refined her occult encounters in such a way as to fashion her own distinct path to spirituality. Mr. Gorji's recounted adventures represented one aspect of this spirituality, which she insisted she had to verify by listening to him retell his story and examine it for inconsistencies. Shahin Khanom, the middle-aged makeup artist, was an ardent practitioner of Reiki with experience in a variety of New Age spiritual systems. The blacksmith's experience of heaven and hell, she argued, was a truth that had taken on the shape and hue of his own parochial worldview. Farhad the photographer came from a Kurdish *Ahl-e Haq* family who believed in reincarnation. He was convinced that he had seen jinn on multiple occasions and sought out any opportunity to corroborate his experience. He was titillated as much by my research on early twentieth century Iranian Spiritism<sup>3</sup> as he had been gripped by the marvelous tales of Mr. Gorji. Mr. Roshani the darvish, whom I met only once at that evening's gathering, told us that he practiced hypnotism and spirit-communication, and that he was a member of a circle that had attempted to photograph the souls of the dead. Almost every point that the blacksmith raised during his impromptu speech would give Mr. Roshani an excuse to interject a doctrinal point from within his own eclectic concoction of Sufism and Spiritism.

No matter what the guests believed or disbelieved, they agreed that Mr. Gorji's story had been fascinating. One refrain I heard them quote and discuss repeatedly after the man had left was his aphorism "everything is math, math is speed, and speed is time." "Quite an interesting

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 4.

statement,” observed Ziba’s brother-in-law, an engineer. Mr. Roshani concurred: “He was probably talking about relativity theory.”

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My decision to frame my research in terms of two questions to be pursued simultaneously – why supernatural phenomena have become a matter of widespread interest, and how Iranians fashion their orientations toward such phenomena – reflects a dissatisfaction I feel with most anthropological studies of magic, the occult, the supernatural, shamanism, and similar topics in modern societies. These studies usually attempt to answer some sort of variation on one of the above questions, to the exclusion of the other. Those asking a variation on the first question, drawing connections between the efflorescence of supernatural practices on the one hand, and transformations in the economy, the state, and religious institutions on the other, usually take some form of belief for granted: It seems only to make sense in these formulations to posit, or assume, the emergence or proliferation of supernatural encounters as unproblematically adopted, because the point is to show how the putative content of the supernatural encounter sheds some light on economic, political, and social processes and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> Admitting that this content may not be viewed or experienced in such unproblematic fashion by those whose lives and perspectives we seek to understand would weaken the explanatory thrust of most of these arguments.

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically, I have in mind here studies of modern occult practices as strategies for exerting control over the vagaries of political power (Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001; Tambiah 1984:335-357; West 2005; and several of the contributions to West and Sanders 2003), as responses to transformations wrought by capitalist encroachment (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Kendall 1996; Taussig 1980), and even as the result of the breakdown of identity following the disintegration of a totalitarian state (Siegel 2006). Historians of spiritual revival and occult efflorescence, particularly in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America, have likewise situated the emergence of specific practices within the context of large scale tensions and shifts in the political, economic, religious, and intellectual milieu (Brower 2010; Darnton 1968; and Owen 2004, among many others).

Conversely, those anthropological studies that take as their object the epistemological questions posed by supernatural encounters usually do not care to position such questions in relation to economic, political, and religious shifts within society.<sup>5</sup> Granted, such shifts may not be salient in every context. But what if the particular ways in which people orient themselves toward the supernatural did have something to tell us about broader societal transformations?

In this dissertation, I draw connections between these transformations and individual conceptualizations of the supernatural in two ways: First, by focusing on the way in which the supernatural has been constituted as a category of knowledge and experience that is not adequately or exhaustively captured by any available Islamic discursive framework; and second, by emphasizing doubt, uncertainty, and hesitation, as orientations that are productive of particular modes of sociality, subjectivity, and experience.

In some ways, this is a study of religion across a population that seems not to agree on much about religion at all, while nonetheless sharing something in their disparate forms of activity, belief, and reasoning that warrants their consideration in relation to one another, as part of a shared conceptual and experiential universe. This something is not Islam, even though it is thoroughly haunted by Islam and even though plenty of people – including powerful individuals and groups working for or allied with the Islamic state – strive to make Islam its organizing principle. Instead, I suggest that this something is a domain of potentially knowable existence and a bundle of attitudes and orientations toward it: Iranians sometimes call it *metafizik* (metaphysics), and sometimes *mavara* (“the beyond,” from *ma wara al-tabi‘a*, the Arabic translation of “metaphysics”). But just as often, they gesture ambiguously to a collection of

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<sup>5</sup> Evans-Pritchard’s work on the Azande is the paradigmatic case (1976). See also Luhrmann (1989) and Christian (2006).

phenomena, beings, and forces by simply calling them “such matters” or “these issues,” presuming that their addressees will understand the reference if only one item in the set is named. Thus “such matters” could include any or all of the following: witchcraft, the evil eye, occult science, dreams, divination, premonitions, clairvoyance, extraordinary mystical powers, hypnotism, telekinesis, telepathy, astral projection, contact with souls of the dead, jinn, and so on, some of which we will encounter in the chapters that follow. I have chosen here to use the term “supernatural” to refer to all of these things, because I think the English sense of the word more closely captures the notion of *mavara* than does, say, “metaphysics.” Why *mavara*, *metafizik*, or “such matters” should find wide usage in common parlance and, at least among some people, replace an Islamic concept like *ghayb* (the unseen) will be treated further below.

The “bundle of attitudes and orientations” that I claim many urban Iranians share toward “these matters” consists primarily of three things: First, a persistent attempt to demarcate their own understanding and approach from what they consider to be superstitious (*khoraifi*, from *khorafeh* – superstition). Instead, even though they do not always state this, their approaches are purportedly rational (‘*aqlani*) or logical (*manteqi*). Second, these attitudes are very often articulated to be in line with scientific knowledge and discovery; if not always an already existing science, then at least one that was present in the distant past but has been lost, or one that will come into being in the future. This commitment to science is not infrequently accompanied by fantasies, sometimes utopian, about the marvelous possibilities that science and technology are thought capable of effecting in the world. Third, their understandings are usually shot through with hesitation, uncertainty, and doubt. In part, this is a rationalist uncertainty motivated by the concern that one is in danger of being duped into believing something to be supernatural when it is, in fact, the product of a charlatan’s tricks or the hallucinations of a mind

– one’s own or others’ – perhaps in need of psychiatric attention. It is, in other words, the hesitant underside of the conviction that one’s own attitudes are to be distinguished from the superstitions of the uneducated, the rural, and the gullible. But for some people, there may also be doubt over the particular explanation or conceptualization on offer when it seems to conflict with received Islamic doctrine: Intimations, for instance, that the soul of a departed loved one may have taken on a new human body, when Twelver Shi‘i Islam rejects the possibility of reincarnation. There are still other valences to people’s doubts about the supernatural, as we shall see below.

Hesitation, doubt, and uncertainty may be the most important of these three interrelated orientations toward the supernatural. Commitments to rationality and science often enter the picture in order to fill a gap opened up by uncertainty. In the chapters that follow, I examine what various kinds of uncertainties do and how they articulate with people’s stated commitments to science, reason, and religious doctrine. This discussion will, I hope, shed light on a process whereby a significant section of Iranian society is renegotiating the terms of its relationship to religious truth and scientific authority, at a time of widespread political, social, and moral uncertainty.

## **Occult Circuits**

I made the decision to study Iranian encounters with the supernatural in the summer of 2006, when I was in Tehran conducting preliminary fieldwork and interviews for an entirely different research topic: the production, circulation, and consumption of religious commodities, including controversial visual representations of sacred Shi‘i figures. About a year prior to this fieldwork, I

had begun to hear stories from friends and family in Iran about people's involvement with the supernatural. A close family friend had consulted an occult specialist to check whether her son had been bewitched (he had become unusually aggressive toward his parents). Another friend's thirty-year-old brother had been considering hiring a seer to help him locate buried treasure. One of my friends and classmates from college had told me that he was convinced Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had won the 2005 presidential election through witchcraft – "How else could one explain the sudden popularity of a virtual unknown?" he had asked. These accounts surprised and fascinated me. I had lived in Iran at different points in my life for a total of fourteen years, but I had never heard any such stories, or if I had they had not seemed important enough to leave an impression on my mind. When I was in fifth grade I had read and was astonished by books (in Persian) about UFOs and the Bermuda Triangle, alongside my collection of astronomy titles. Several years later, probably like many other adolescent Muslim boys around the world, I had become curious about the jinn described in the Qur'an. A few times I had frightened myself by thinking about them too much, perhaps in a way not dissimilar to American children spooking one another by telling ghost stories around a campfire. But that was it. Eventually I had grown up and shifted my attention onto more important matters, like religion, politics, and women. Now, after many years, I was suddenly encountering the supernatural everywhere: in the intimate lives of family friends, in newspaper criminal reports, and in political discourse. How was this to be explained? When I began my preliminary fieldwork for what, at the time, I thought my doctoral project would be about, I also started to investigate accounts of supernatural experience on the side. Before long, this secondary interest had completely taken over and I realized that I had found a new dissertation topic.

The decisive moment came in a conversation with two of my college friends, Morteza and Amir, who had founded a private telecommunications engineering company after graduating from the University of Tehran. We talked about a range of different issues that they considered to be connected: Dreaming, spiritual healing, occult science, the marvels of mystics, telepathy, jinn, and so on. These were matters that, for my friends, lay beyond the boundaries of ordinary human understanding, and yet, to the extent that they involved “realities” (*vaqe’iyat*) of the universe, they were comparable to scientific knowledge. Comparable, but not necessarily commensurable. Morteza put it like this:

I have always thought about these matters and wondered why there aren’t tools (*abzar*) to study this kind of thing, and why ‘*elm* [about them] hasn’t advanced.<sup>6</sup> Seriously, I personally think that if ‘*elm* is made of twenty parts, fifteen parts would be in these fields, like astrology (*nojum*) and [the effects] of the moon being in Scorpio (*qamar dar ‘aqrab*). Physics, the laws of movement, acceleration and that sort of thing might be five parts of ‘*elm*. There is a *hadith* that when Imam Mahdi returns,<sup>7</sup> a great part of ‘*elm* has not even been touched by humanity. These things exist and have effects. With many of the ‘*olum* that we have today, we have defined something and advanced it bit by bit, and we call it ‘*elm*. But real ‘*elm* is the reality of the universe, not defining something yourself and advancing it and claiming that you’ve become an ‘*alem*.<sup>8</sup> Now physics you can say is an ‘*elm*. But [he laughs] many things that exist in engineering for example, are really not ‘*elm*. You can’t call it ‘*elm*. But the realities of the world... that’s something different.

Morteza’s interest in these matters had peaked after his father’s untimely death in a traffic accident a year earlier. Anguished that he had not been able to adequately connect with his father

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<sup>6</sup> ‘*Elm* (plural ‘*olum*) is an Arabic word meaning science, scholarship, knowledge, or learning. Among Persian speakers, it is used in several different ways: in the specific sense of “modern science;” in a broader sense denoting any systematic form of knowledge, including “religious sciences” such as theology, Qur’anic exegesis, and hadith scholarship; and, in the most general sense, as “knowledge.” Morteza was using ‘*elm* in a deliberately polysemic fashion to complicate the boundaries between modern science and knowledge of the supernatural.

<sup>7</sup> Imam Mahdi is the twelfth and last Shi’i Imam, a descendent of Prophet Muhammad who went into occultation (*ghaybat*) in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and will return at the end of time to rid the world of tyranny and preside over a period of global peace and justice.

<sup>8</sup> ‘*Alem* shares the same root as ‘*elm* and can mean scholar, or one who is learned or knowledgeable. Usually the term designates a man of religious learning, especially in the plural form ‘*olama* (rendered in English usually as *ulema*). A scientist in the modern Western sense is most often designated by the Persian *daneshmand*, although this term may also be used to refer to religious scholars.



during his lifetime, he wanted to attempt to communicate with his soul. Amir, on the other hand, had more material ambitions. One of his friends had been practicing occult science with a specialist who claimed to have made hundreds of millions of tomans speculating in the stock market with the assistance of jinn. Amir and his friend wanted to employ the man's occult expertise to locate buried treasure and neutralize the talismanic witchcraft that they believed guarded it against discovery and excavation.

Having never heard of these things, especially from such close friends whom I had known for more than a decade, I asked them if they thought interest in the supernatural was a recent phenomenon in Iran, or if there had been some form of resurgence among urban Tehranis. They both denied that there was anything new about these interests. People had always been curious about the supernatural and had attempted to harness its unknown powers. But there was something new, they said, about people's *knowledge* of such phenomena. Both Amir and Morteza claimed that for earlier generations, supernatural matters were much less ambiguous. Truth and falsehood were more easily distinguished, in the same way that good and evil people could be more easily told apart. Over time, matters had grown much more complicated. "Lies and rumors have mixed in with realities," said Morteza. "The problem, in this realm, is that you can prove nothing and you can disprove nothing." Amir agreed: "Truth and lies are indistinguishable. Society is now like that. How can you tell a good person from a bad person these days? Everything is mixed up. Hypocrisy has really filled every space. In the old days, it wasn't like that. If someone was good, they were good, and if someone was bad, they were bad. The boundaries were very clear." It was this ambiguity that led Morteza to repeatedly assert that he was unsure of the veracity of this or that report of supernatural power. "I am 50/50 on this," he would say, for example when referring to a nutritionist trained in Russia who had become

famous for his marvelously precise Qur'anic divinations (*estekhareh*). In the course of my research, the “50/50” attitude was one that I would encounter again and again.

Taking my conversation with Amir and Morteza as a starting point, I proceeded over research trips during the next five years to interview people who had encountered some phenomenon or other from among the set that my friends, and many others like them, had enumerated as part of an interrelated domain. My inquiry took me to private homes, business offices, shops, hospitals, conference halls, New Age seminar rooms, parks, and online discussion boards. I observed and interviewed mystics, occult specialists, fortune-tellers, and their clients; and spoke to psychiatrists, engineers, university professors, clerics, teachers, students, housewives, businessmen, store owners, police commanders, Basij activists, and Revolutionary Guards. Meanwhile, I followed the public circulations of occult forms by viewing numerous television programs, reading newspapers reports, visiting bookstores, and examining DVDs and online material.

The people I got to know, the knowledge they consumed and produced, and the materials that mediated their knowledges and practices, were connected by more than just a set of common interests. There were material circuits that strung them together. This is important to understand because my interlocutors were neither part of a single community, nor members of a network. They were not bound to a singular geographic place (a neighborhood for example), but neither did they hold together as a single public (Warner 2002). And yet I argue that they could still be considered as part of a collectivity, even if they did not imagine themselves as such. The shifting, crisscrossing, overlapping circuits that brought this collectivity into being was one that was simultaneously produced by the movements and actions of people pursuing their specific interests and projects, and that gave these interests and projects their content, form, and direction.

I conducted my research by following the movements of objects, narratives, persons, and knowledge within these very circuits.

Here is an example of one such circuit and my movement through a few of its nodes: In July 2006, at an apartment building in Cyberjaya, Malaysia, I attended a recitation of the *Do'a-ye Komayl*, a prayer well-known to Shi'i Muslims. As I spoke to one of my friends there, a master's student in information technology named Mahmoud, I noticed that there was a strange and colorful card lodged in the middle of a prayer book he was holding. I asked him about it and he pulled it out immediately and handed it to me: it was a laminated card with a light turquoise background and white margin. Most of the front was covered by a large green leaf with the word "Ali" written across it in golden Arabic script, and various other sentences, in Arabic and Persian, written in black on a light green background. A white cloud with the word "Muhammad" floated on the upper left corner of the card, and several drops of water with various letters of the Arabic alphabet rained down onto the leaf. An abstract silhouette of a mosque with a single minaret sat on the lower-right corner. It was covered with tiny letters, words, sentences, and symbols, some of which I could barely make out, and most of which made no sense to me. There were other elements to the design that I noticed only later and upon closer inspection. Mahmoud told me that the card was made by a certain Haj Hossein Qanbari Qa'em, also known as "Dr. Nabati" - the Doctor of Crystallized Sugar. The card was a *ta'viz*, an amulet for protection and for bringing blessings to the person who carried it. All of this was confirmed by the card itself: the amulet-maker had signed his name on the front and dated it 1367 A.H., or 1988 C.E. On the back, there was a detailed description of the amulet's designs and the uses to which it may be put, also written by its maker. "Go to my parents' house when you return to Tehran," said Mahmoud, "and you'll see a larger version of the same *ta'viz* on their wall." He

gave me a quick description of some of the amulet's elements, but he suggested that I talk to his grandmother and ask her for more details: "She knows it all and would be happy to give you a long and detailed explanation." I was fascinated by the card, the likes of which I had never seen – it reminded me of calligraphic greeting cards, of miniature prayer cards, and of cards used for divinations based on the poetry of Hafiz. It resembled all of these things and yet it was not quite any of them. I brought the card closer to my eyes to try to make out the writings on the minaret, then flipped it around to read the Persian text on its back one more time: "... for the benefit of everyone from its extraordinary effects for health and protection from mishaps and calamities, and for deflection of injuries of the evil eye and omens, and lifting [spiritual] statures and states, and solving problems and difficulties and every kind of increase and victory and advance and progress and expansion of sustenance..." "Take it," said Mahmoud, "It's yours."

Back in Tehran, I decided to look up Dr. Nabati, the amulet maker. As luck would have it, my friend Amir the telecommunications engineer had heard of him. He told me that the man was a well-known mystic and healer who lived on Dezashib Street in the Shemiran district of northern Tehran. Outside his residence a small sign declared that the building was a "house of healing" (*dar ol-shafa*). As I took my place in a long line to meet him, I struck up a conversation with a man next to me who told me about a VCD that documented Dr. Nabati's life, his spiritual path, and his marvelous acts of healing. Across the alley, I noticed a small convenience store whose larger display window was decorated by a letter-sized version of the amulet I had acquired in Malaysia. I asked the store owner if he had any VCDs about Dr. Nabati. He sold me a copy for three thousand tomans.

Two years later, on a visit to the Tajrish bazaar, not too far from Dezashib street, I noticed a colorful shop that sold a great variety of religious objects: books, prayer mats, VCDs,

amulets, beads, jewelry, and so on. Ali, the owner, showed me some of his goods, which included laminated copies of my Nabati amulet. A few inches away, I noticed another line of amulets, one of which seemed like a crude copy of the one made by Dr. Nabati. These, Ali explained, were created by Ayatollah Sajjad Isfahani, a mystic in Isfahan who ran an orphanage and sold amulets to raise money for his organization. On another wall of the shop, I saw beautiful brass talismans with intricate engravings of fish, lions, women, and other designs. I bought one of each. A discussion ensued about the difference between these talismans and the amulets Ali had shown me a moment earlier. A middle-aged woman wearing a loose headscarf meanwhile had noticed the Nabati amulet. She told us that she lived in Houston, Texas, and was temporarily in Iran to visit her family. Her friend's father had been cured of a difficult disease by Dr. Nabati. She wanted to find out where he lived so that she could visit him. Ali did not know his address, but I did, so I gave her directions.

Dr. Nabati never advertised, and yet he was widely known outside of his local neighborhood community. His fame traveled on various media – an amulet passing from hand to hand, a story conveyed from mouth to ear, a video copied from CD-drive to hard-disk, the lines of sight that connected eyes to objects (the amulet hanging in a store, the photo of the mystic on a storefront), and paths of overhearing that conveyed messages intended and unintended (a conversation among friends in the office or between strangers in the mosque). It traced out circuits, faint and ambiguous in some places, bold and explicit in others, that connected the mystic and his constituencies. But these circuits were about more than just one man and his potential or actual clientele. They activated, illuminated, and reinforced, but also contested, undercut, and challenged fields of practice and knowledge. For example, through its very circulation, an object like Dr. Nabati's amulet activates a set of symbols, a language, and an

associated science of the occult, the same way that an invoice activates (but also, due its pervasiveness, presumes) a set of symbols, a language, and a science associated with mathematics and accounting. The circulating amulet puts into motion a form of knowledge of the esoteric, the occult, the magical, if only in a schematic way, as a shadow and a hint: one sees strange symbols resembling alphabetical characters twisted out of shape, crooked lines, crescents, five-pointed stars, numbers in strange places, words whose fractal-like contours are traced by more words, words that make no sense. But clearly the card is more than a piece of nonsense and gibberish. The eerie order in which the signs are laid out, their intermixing with more familiar signs – Qur’anic verse, Prophetic hadith, and names of God and the Imams – and, equally important, the descriptive text on the back of the card and the name given to it – a ta’viz – hint at its association with something systematic and authoritative: a science of the occult, which most people have heard about but can rarely describe in any detail.

At some point after meeting Dr. Nabati, I typed his name into a search engine. One of the results took me to a large online discussion board called *Asrar* (secrets), which at the time (in 2006) was subtitled *‘Erfan va olum-e gharibeh* (mysticism and the occult sciences). Users discussed a large variety of topics, including the marvels of mystics like Dr. Nabati, among which was the “eye of insight” or “isthmus eye” (*chashm-e barzakhi*) with which mystics are able to peer into the secrets of the universe as well as of other human beings. They also shared amulets and talismans that could be downloaded and printed. Eventually, I met some of the members of *Asrar* in person, and exchanged emails with a few others. Through Behnam, one of the site moderators and the owner of a struggling internet café, I learned of connections some occult enthusiasts were making between the mystical eye of insight and the Third Eye or *ajna* chakra of Hinduism. Another member, whom I never met, told me of a metaphysics seminar

taught by a certain Dr. Baradaran in Tehran. I signed up for three terms of his seminars on “Consciousness” in 2008, a seeming blend of Theosophy, Eckankar, and Islamic Illuminist mysticism.

I could go on. The point here is not simply that I conducted fieldwork by following connections. Every ethnographer does that. Rather, my field was constituted by these circuits and nothing else. My fieldwork could not but follow the paths that strung together people, ideas, objects, spaces, stories, practices, and knowledge, even as they cut across communities, networks, neighborhoods, publics, and boundaries of religious belonging. Anyone who participates in the supernatural in an urban environment like Tehran partakes in one form or other in these circuits. They do so in much the same way that I did as an ethnographer.

### **Occult Economies, Uncertain States, and Partial Connections**

There is a challenge in a work such as this to make a clear-cut identification of specific trans-local forces and processes – economic, political, intellectual, discursive, and so on – that have caused, instigated, made possible, or otherwise made legible particular small-scale phenomena. Several difficulties present themselves at the outset. First, there is the problem of the diversity of phenomena being studied. In my research, accusations of witchcraft in the realm of politics cannot easily be related to the rise of alternative spirituality or to the interest of young pious men in mystics’ hagiographies. They are connected to the extent that they are part of the circuits of supernatural encounter I described above, are animated by various forms of uncertainty and doubt, and raise concerns about rationality, orthodoxy, and superstition. But while the two latter factors may be related to larger-scale processes, they do not relate necessarily to the *same*

processes. Moreover, there is complexity even within something like an experience of “uncertainty” that cannot be reduced to a single factor such as politics, economics, or social stability. Some forms of uncertainty are clearly economic, while others have to do with the breakdown of moral authority, and so on. Second, there is the problem of historicity. Just what is new, and what can be shown to have a longer historical pedigree? Where can one identify continuity, and where rupture? The kinds of explanatory schemes an analyst deploys depend in large part on her answers to these questions. In Iran, for example, Western-imported alternative spirituality mushroomed after the end of the war with Iraq in 1988. But if one takes a longer-stretch historical view of things, it is impossible not to notice the rise of Spiritism in the early twentieth century, the popularity of Theosophy between the two World Wars, and the numerous eclectic syntheses between various imported spiritualities and local mystical traditions that have emerged in the ensuing decades. Moreover, some phenomena may be perceived as novel by some people, but may in fact not be so new at all: Reports for example of occult specialists duping gullible customers (mainly identified as women) have risen considerably in the past few years, but that only indicates a heightened media sensitivity toward such matters, not necessarily a proportionate shift in actual practices. Third, there is the challenge of sifting etic explanations from emic ones. In Iran, both ordinary people and elites circulate their own large-scale explanations for why supernatural encounters have grown. For example, the standard journalistic exposé of fortune-telling, divination, and witchcraft points to economic uncertainty as the cause of psychological insecurities that people attempt to assuage by turning to the occult. In private, and in diasporic media, political oppression or indoctrination is added to the mix. People are said to turn to superstition either because they have been made superstitious by a superstitious state, or because they are escaping religious strictures and political oppression (two explanations



which, incidentally, contradict one another, as one posits a population of drones that are at the mercy of the state to fashion them in whatever form it wants, and the other grants them a free spirit of rebellion against domination).

The solution, I think, is to avoid imposing a totalistic explanation. While I agree with Jean and John Comaroff's (1999) invitation to conduct ethnography on an "awkward scale," tacking between local and global processes, I think that such scale-jumping may itself have to be partial and provisional in order to do justice to its material. Marilyn Strathern has convincingly argued that the amount of complexity and detail in a study does not change no matter what the scale of observation and comparison (2004). Differences come into focus on some levels that are invisible in others. Some nuances are likewise lost at one level, and gained in another. Her proposal is to make "partial connections" between different constellations of data, as opposed to attempting to construct an all-inclusive map.

What would it mean to conduct ethnography on an awkward scale, in a provisional, partial manner? One image that would help capture my approach is that of two sets of overlapping mosaics. At the lower, concrete scale of things, there are the overlapping, intersecting, circuits of the occult. On the higher, more abstract scale, there are likewise overlapping circuits – political, economic, religious, discursive, and so on. Things on the lower set of mosaics are connected in multiple ways to things on the higher set, but never in a clear one-to-one fashion. Hence in the chapters that follow, I will often provide historical background and large-scale sociological, discursive, and political contextualization for Iranian supernatural encounters. But these explanations will not add up to one comprehensive whole. Below I will offer a preview of things to come by presenting the contours of several explanatory schemes, and the connections between them.

I noted at the beginning of this introduction that many of my interlocutors were concerned with differentiating their rational and scientific understandings of the supernatural from superstitious or irrational beliefs. This discursive opposition between the scientific and the superstitious can be traced back to the emergence of Iranian modernism. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, modernists mounted vigorous attacks on what they perceived to be the pillars of a backward and stagnant social order that had sustained the decrepit Qajar dynasty. Their targets included the superstitions of the masses and the useless metaphysical speculations of the Shi‘i clergy, which, they argued, should be displaced by rational, practical, exact, and useful knowledge. Such knowledge would be best exemplified by modern European science, which modernists resolved to propagate and to harness for remaking Iranian society. Over a century later, science continues to emanate an impressive aura. State officials appeal to its charisma to justify national projects (the nuclear energy program being one of the more glaring examples), experts resort to its authority to support or question government policies, young people compete over its mastery in hopes of securing better jobs and more prosperous futures, and countless others invest it with fantasies – of progress, power, precision, speed, longevity, and other desires. And yet, the ascendancy of science has spelled the end neither of Shi‘i clerical authority, nor of superstitious beliefs in irrational forces. The former has, since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, been elevated to the level of state power, more than the Shi‘i ulama had experienced in centuries, or perhaps ever. And the latter persists as a stubborn presence, demanding continual identification, naming, and (usually fruitless) attempts at its elimination. As I will argue in differing ways in chapters 1, 2, and especially 4, efforts aimed at cordoning off the scientific from the superstitious have only succeeded in proliferating hybrids. But they have also engendered doubts: Both among those whose practices are singled out as superstitious and who

worry about losing the benefits of identification with science and reason, and among those who are titillated by the possibilities that lie beyond the limits of what is today recognized as rational or scientific.

The supernatural encounters that I examine in different forms in this dissertation unfold against the backdrop of these long-standing discursive tensions between rationality and superstition, and in relation to shifting and unstable epistemic boundaries between the scientific and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural. But when viewed through a somewhat more close-up historical lens, with a timeframe of two decades rather than over a century, other important developments come into focus. Here I will refer to three processes, one economic, and the other two political and religious.

In the years that followed the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, the Iranian government initiated, in haphazard fashion, various policies of economic liberalization. The changing economic environment both provided opportunities for increasing prosperity for the middle and upper classes, and heightened uncertainties, anxieties, and suspicions about being left out of the promises for a better life. Following Jean and John Comaroff (1999), one could speak of the emergence of an “occult economy” marked by perceptions of the murkiness of flows of value and by attempts to tap into these flows by magical means: Pyramid schemes, antique treasure hunting, and appeals to occult specialists proliferated alongside the teachings of motivational speakers preaching positive thinking as means of acquiring fabulous wealth. In chapter 3, I describe these economic shifts and their attendant cultural flows as part of the confluence of forces that encouraged the spread of various forms of alternative spirituality. The proponents of these spiritual systems largely cater to demand for psychological proficiencies like “concentration” and “peace of mind” directed toward survival and prosperity in increasingly

unsettling, hostile urban settings. Moreover, they often deploy scientific models of metaphysics as the ontological grounds of their therapeutic teachings.

The end of the war with Iraq, the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the ensuing power struggles between various factions of the Islamic Republic also bred a climate of political uncertainty whose effects soon spread to the realm of urban religiosity. Voices critical of state-enforced religion arose from the ranks of once-revolutionaries in the guise of “religious intellectualism” (*roshanfekri-ye dini*), some of whose key figures and arguments I describe in chapter 3. At the same time, a youthful culture of defiance against established social and religious norms flowered among some segments of the urban population (see Khosravi 2008 and Varzi 2006). In chapter 5, I examine official anxieties about “flight from religion” (*din-gorizi*) and “moral anomie” (*anomi-ye akhlaqi*) among the youth, and argue that one of the solutions advocated by some thinkers and activists allied with the state’s projects of inculcating Islamic spiritual values has been to sponsor the publication of biographies of apolitical Shi’i mystics – figures whose pious lives can be held up as moral exemplars for the youth without bearing the taint of association with politics. The public that has come into being around these biographies, as well as those of other texts of leisurely-cum-edifying religious reading, has yet to be studied in any depth. I focus in chapter 5 on the allure of the supernatural elements of mystics’ biographies, showing the ways (unintended by their authors) in which their readers sometimes technologize certain miraculous powers attributed to mystics in the service of resolving uncertainties about personal piety or arbitrating crises of faith. In turn, this technologization of mystics’ extraordinary abilities often draws on sources from within the newly popular alternative spiritual systems, which are the subject of chapter 3.

If youthful flight from religion has emerged as one area of concern for proponents of Shi‘i piety, particularly those within and allied with the state, there is a greater problem of diversity among sources of religious authority, which threatens to disrupt the centralizing projects of the state-allied ulama, with the office of the supreme jurisconsult, the *vali-e faqih*, in their lead. In recent years, this problem has manifested itself in two dramatic – and related – forms: First, in the emergence of dozens of small-scale messianic movements led by “false claimants to Mahdi-hood” (*modda‘iyan-e dorughin-e mafdaviyat*), which have prompted usually swift crackdowns by the intelligence services and denunciations in the press. Second, in accusations that no-less than the president of the Islamic Republic, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has been taking orders from obscure charismatic mystics. Tensions over the domestication of these forces, both of which defy Shi‘i juridical authority, have broken out in the form of accusations of superstition, deviance, and witchcraft. Chapters 1 and 2 both deal with the public denigration of superstition through the abjection of the *rammal* or “geomancer,” who is the practitioner of witchcraft par excellence. What is at stake in these denunciations, however, is more than the exertion of rationality as epistemological or methodological commitment. It involves also a struggle over the right to properly and authoritatively speak for Islam.

### **Different Orientations: *Mavara* and *Ghayb***

Earlier I pointed out that, for my interlocutors, the supernatural was a domain of potentially knowable existence. Sometimes they referred to this domain as *metafizik* (metaphysics), sometimes *mavara* (“the beyond,” from *ma wara’ al-tabi‘a*, the Arabic translation of “metaphysics”), and sometimes “these issues.” On the other hand, anyone with the most cursory

knowledge of Islam knows that Islamic cosmology incorporates a number of invisible entities and realms beyond the sensible, material world. These include angels, jinn, heaven and hell, the throne (‘*arsh*), news of the unseen in the form of prophesy and inspiration, and so on. Muslims, to the extent that they give credence to doctrine or accept the Qur’an as divine speech, have a relationship, a position, toward these entities. This relationship can take on very different forms. It may be contextually specific, and shift from one form to another within the same person in response to different experiential and discursive situations. The kind of relationship to the supernatural that I am examining – as a realm of knowable existence – is only one of these forms. To demonstrate its particularity, I will contrast it here to another possibility, that of faith (*iman*) in *ghayb* – the unseen.<sup>9</sup>

I will illustrate this relationship through two examples about jinn. The twelfth century C.E. “Wonders of Creation” (*ajayeb al-makhluqat*) by Muhammad ibn Mahmud ibn Ahmad Hamedani (Tusi), a compendium of marvelous creatures and phenomena, includes the following story about a dispute between two ninth century C.E. theologians of the Mu‘tazili school over the existence of jinn (Tusi 1966:485; my translation):

[Abu Ishaq] al-Nazzam the theologian was in debate with Abu al-Hudhayl [Muhammad ibn Abdullah – known as al-‘Allaf the Mu‘tazili, the former’s uncle] over jinn. Nazzam says that jinn exist. Abu al-Hudhayl says jinn do not exist.

Their enmity ran long. The caliph of the time made peace between them and said: demons cannot be shown by proof, but must be believed in by virtue of the Qur’an.

And Abu al-Hudhayl had a well from which he drew water. Nazzam hid in that well. When Abu al-Hudhayl threw a pail into the well, Nazzam held it with his hand. Abu al-

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<sup>9</sup> There are still other possibilities. For example, some Muslims would treat angels, jinn, and other beings ungraspable in material terms as metaphors for something else, or as cultural-linguistic artifacts of a specific time and place (7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Arabia) that need to be reinterpreted to suit modern sensibilities. See the discussion further below.

Hudhayl pulled. Nazzam made a horrible cry and said: why do you insult demons and spirits [*pari*]?

Abu al-Hudhayl sealed the well with a stone and informed the caliph that Nazzam has hidden in the well and pretends to be a demon and threatens me.

The caliph sent someone to bring him out, and, slapping him, took him to the caliph.

The caliph says: What is unseen [*ghayb*], if someone wants to make visible and treat with proofs, he will fail. Thus it is with the punishments of the grave and the *munkar* and *nakir* [the angels that interrogate the dead during the first night after death]. One must have faith in these all. They are of the ear [one must hear and listen], not of reason. And he who seeks to prove them, will become humiliated like you did.

By this we mean that since the Creator said that jinn exist, we must have faith.

The story is almost certainly apocryphal. Some medieval Muslim theologians and philosophers were known to have doubted or denied the existence of jinn (see for example Kennedy-Day 2003:119-120 and 150-152 on Avicenna. Also see Tahanawi 1966:261-262). Among theological schools of thought, the Mu'tazilis were particularly notorious for harboring skeptical attitudes toward not only jinn, but witchcraft and the marvels of saints as well. Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi has detailed some Mu'tazili theologians' skepticism toward these matters and their attempts to reinterpret Qur'anic verses that deal with them (Al-Dhahabi 1976:272-273; 281-282; 320; 324-325). He singles out Al-Nazzam as one scholar who explicitly denied the existence of jinn (ibid:272). In the story above, Al-Nazzam was going to absurd lengths to prove that jinn exist, even resorting to demon impersonation. Such discrepancies aside, the story should be read as an expression of suspicion toward attempts by philosophers and theologians to domesticate matters of the unseen by dragging them into the realm of rational speculation. The caliph figures as the voice of final moral authority: rationalist speculation is futile when it comes to matters upon which God has already spoken. God mentions jinn in the Qur'an. We therefore have no choice but to believe that they exist.

An analogous position is evident among many contemporary Iranians who look down upon reports of jinn sighting, possession, and exorcism, and yet claim that they believe in jinn because they are mentioned in the Qur'an. One person who articulated such a position to me was Dr. Nader Mahluji (not his real name), a psychiatrist at a large teaching hospital in Tehran. I was speaking to him about exorcisms among a modern mystical group whose healers claim to purge inorganic viruses – that is, jinn and the souls of the dead – from their human hosts by deploying defensive radiation (see chapter 3). Dr. Mahluji quickly responded that “if they aren't charlatans, what is happening is what we call dissociation.” That is, the issue is psychological and has nothing to do with invisible creatures. He added that he believed in jinn because God mentions them in the Qur'an, but he did not believe that jinn interact with humans.

Faith in the unseen (*ghayb*) is endorsed in a verse in the Qur'an that appears at the very beginning of the second chapter, The Cow (*Al-Baqara*):

This is the book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear God. Those who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them. [2:2-3]

The word *ghayb* is used dozens of times in the Qur'an, in different contexts and with obviously different meanings. Exegetes differ on the specific referents of the word in some verses, including the one above. According to Allameh Sayyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai, *ghayb* in this verse refers to “that which is not subject to sense perception [*hess*],” meaning “God Exalted and His greatest signs, which are absent from our senses, and one of [these signs] is revelation [*vahy*]” (Tabatabai 1953:43-44).<sup>10</sup> *Iman* is the “firming of belief in the heart, acquired from trust and security [*'amn*],” and guarded from “doubt and uncertainty” which are the “plague” of belief

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<sup>10</sup> See Iranpour (2007) for a more detailed treatment of the notion of *ghayb* in the exegesis of Allameh Tabatabai.



(ibid:43).<sup>11</sup> Other commentators state that the unseen in which one must believe includes heaven and hell, resurrection, the Day of Judgment, angels, prophets, divine recompense, and the coming of the Mahdi (see Bar-Asher 2011. Also see McDonald 2011 for a discussion of *al-ghayb* as “the mystery”).

I have not encountered any Qur’an commentaries that include jinn among this category of the unseen. It is possible that this is because *iman* in the unseen has to do with attachment and loyalty to the divine, where revelation, recompense, angels, heaven and hell, the prophets, and the Mahdi are all part of a divine apparatus and plan. The jinn are not. If anything, the Qur’an discourages against believing in jinn, in the sense of putting one’s trust in them or taking them as associates with God (Chabbi 2011).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Qur’an strips the jinn of some of their purportedly extraordinary powers, including the ability to eavesdrop on the secrets of the heavens (ibid). In more than one way then, the jinn are actually excluded from the divine unseen by the Qur’an itself. Still, for most commentators, it simply will not do to deny the existence of jinn. This is not because jinn are somehow worthy of belief, but because their existence has been attested by divine revelation. To deny them would be to deny revelation. Trusting belief in one unseen (revelation) leads to belief in the existence of another (jinn).

Let me reiterate the argument of this section about the difference between an orientation toward the supernatural (*mavara*) as a realm of knowable existence, and one of belief in the unseen (*ghayb*) as a domain confirmed by revelation. To highlight the distinction further, I will

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<sup>11</sup> For Tabatabai, this *iman* in an unseen God is, in the first instance, the result of a sound *fitra* or creation and the product of an in-born reason: “one who is of sound creation [*fitra*] cannot but attest to his poverty and neediness toward something that is outside himself, and similarly of the need of all other things that can be perceived, imagined or intellected, for something outside themselves that stands above the chain of needs. So [the person of sound creation] attests and has *iman* in the existence of a being that is absent from his sense perception, from whom everything originates and to whom everything ends and returns” (Tabatabai 1953:42).

<sup>12</sup> See Pouillon (1982 [1979]) for a discussion of different valences of the verb “to believe,” especially the slippage between “believing that” and “believing in.”

briefly introduce a third position which holds that certain references in the Qur'an to supernatural forces and beings – for example about jinn, witchcraft, and the evil eye – are reflections of the culture of the particular time and place in which the Qur'an was revealed. Baha'uddin Khorramshahi, an author, poet, translator, and Qur'an scholar has defended this position, with the additional argument that this “cultural reflection” is part of a deliberate divine plan, rather than the spontaneous influence of a milieu on a text (which would be more damaging to the divine origin of the Qur'an). God has purposely taken advantage of “slices of the culture of that era” in order to express “the infinite in terms of the finite” and to “reflect the sea in the pond” (Khorramshahi 1995:95). Among his examples of cultural reflection, Khorramshahi refers to the jinn: “In the Qur'an there are references to the existence of jinn and there is a chapter named The Jinn and verses describing how some of them became believers and listened, captivated, to Qur'anic verses... whereas it is unlikely that today's science or scientist would attest to the existence of jinn” (ibid). There are at least two possible reactions to this argument, which are, I stress, not mutually exclusive. One is of the “belief in *ghayb*” variety, and can be seen in the excerpt below from an article by Reza Haq Panah:

[...] That the Qur'an has spoken of jinn and today's science might not accept it cannot be the basis for [arguing] that the Qur'an has been influenced by the culture of the *jahiliyya* [the era of pre-Islamic Arabs, labeled by Muslims as the “age of ignorance”]. The Noble Qur'an has spoken of many other things that today's science is unable to comprehend, like angels, the soul, revelation, the unseen world, and unseen forces. The Qur'an explicitly accepts the existence of jinn without reflecting the degenerate culture of [pre-Islamic] Arabs... If the existence of jinn were fictitious, why would there be a chapter in the Qur'an named after the jinn that would – we seek refuge in God – falsely describe their belief and unbelief? Today's science cannot say anything in the way of proving or disproving the existence of jinn, and one cannot deny the existence of jinn, which has been explicitly cited in the Qur'an, based on the silence of science, just as one cannot deny the existence of angels, the soul, revelation, the realm of *barzakh*, heaven and hell, to which the empirical sciences have no access. (Haq Panah 2000:175-176, my translation)

The second response is to go beyond the mere acceptance of the existence of jinn in order to posit properties, biographies, and histories for these creatures, and even jurisprudence regulating human interactions with them. It is to move from the silence of science to a science of the unseen. This knowledge may be based on the Qur'an and hadith literature, but might also draw on jinn sightings, mystical vision, and reports of possession, exorcism, and other interactions (such as, for example, sexual intercourse) with the jinn. This is the approach that animates clerics who are invited on national television in Iran to answer viewers' questions about jinn, and young students who produce multimedia CDs on jinnology (*jinn-shenasi*). It is an orientation based on the assumption that the unseen can be the subject of knowledge and inquiry.

If we call the domain of the knowable unseen the "supernatural" (*mavara*), where does knowledge of supernatural phenomena come from? For Muslims, the Qur'an and hadith can provide a starting point, even if an inchoate one. More systematic knowledge may be gleaned from at least four sources: Islamic philosophy, mysticism, and occult science, in addition to modern esotericism. I will make a few brief remarks on each of these sources as they pertain specifically to the ways in which my own interlocutors conceived of the supernatural.

Philosophy: the concept of *mavara* properly begins in philosophy. The word is a truncated version of *ma vara al-tabi'eh* (Arabic *ma wara' al-tabi'a*), an Arabic translation of "metaphysics" along with *ma ba'd al-tabi'a* (literally: that which comes after physics) and first used to refer to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In Islamic philosophy, metaphysics treats of a range of topics, the most important of which is the study of "being qua being" (see Druart 2005). But the area most relevant to contemporary understandings of the supernatural is that of an order of existence of material and immaterial beings arranged along paths of "ascent and descent" (Parsania 2006). For example, the philosopher Al-Farabi understood the entire world of being to

emanate downward from the First Cause (God) through immaterial “Intellects” (which he said could also be called spirits or angels) corresponding to the nine celestial spheres of Ptolemaic astronomy, and finally to the “Active” or “Agent Intellect” (which he said could correspond to the Holy Spirit) that brings into being the material world of the elements (earth, water, air, fire), minerals, plants, animals, and humans (Reisman 2005:56-58). Variations on this neo-Platonist scheme have been incorporated into more explicitly theological understandings, such as one adapted to Qur’anic cosmological verses in an article by Hamid Parsania. “In the Qur’anic view,” he writes, “all existents have descended from God, and all of them return to Him” (2006:13). Descent into nature takes place through three overall stages (ibid:15):

First is the stage of the treasures (*khaza'in*). The definitive feature of this level is that the things in it lack a particular measure or limit and exist in a non-delimited fashion. Second is the stage of the determining (*taqdir*). This level, though free of temporal and spatial limits and their corollaries, such as gradual change and movement, is nonetheless given to certain measures and amounts. The realist phenomena of the dream-state correspond to this level of being. This is so because, though they have specific measures and a degree of dimensionality, they are neither limited by time nor by the other limitations of the natural realm – being free from the vicissitudes of the latter. Third is the stage of the natural and physical world. In addition to dimension and quantity, the things in the natural world are subject to other limitations specific to this realm.

Mysticism: If the philosophers resorted to rational speculation to describe immaterial realms and beings and their relationship to the material world, the mystics would do so through direct experience and vision. The vision through which secrets of the unseen are opened before the mystic is sometimes known as *mokashfeh* (unveiling). Receiving visions is one indication that the mystic is progressing on the path to unity with God the Beloved. Accounts of such visions are a staple of the Islamic mystical tradition, both Sufi and Shi'i. They have been systematized and rationalized through the *Illuminationist* philosophical tradition of Shahabuddin

Suhrawardi and the *Transcendental Philosophy* of Mulla Sadra. Thus a philosophical discussion of the hierarchy of being in contemporary Iran may draw on both logical reasoning and mystical intuition. Parsania again (ibid:15-16):

Muslim thinkers... by availing themselves of both the methods of mysticism and discursive philosophy, have put forward arguments and proofs for the stages of descent and ascent of the world and man. The Peripatetic philosophers [Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and others] have, in their turn, set up proofs for the two stages of ascent and descent. They call the world that is free of measures and amounts the “world of intellects,” and the one that is dependent on it the “world of nature.” They have, however, been unable to prove the existence of the middle ground between the natural and intellectual orders. The mystics or ‘urafa, on the other hand, have reported in their visions a world similar to that found in traditions: a world where things have measures and quantities but not material. In both Transcendental Philosophy (*hikmat al-muta‘aliyah*) and the Illuminationist school (*maktab al-ishraqi*), the existence of this middle world has been proven.

Occult Science: In Islamic occult science, the world described partially by philosophy and mysticism is elaborated and subjected to technical operations for attaining specific ends.

Modern Esotericism: Beginning with Spiritism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a series of modern esoteric systems flowed into Iran and were blended with local philosophical and mystical traditions. The unique contribution of these systems was to tie metaphysics to modern science, particularly with its emphasis on experiment and empirical observation.

We can view these four sources of systematic knowledge about the supernatural almost as a chain that might extend the basic concepts and images offered in the Qur’an and hadith. Thus if the Qur’an and hadith provide conceptual building blocks of the unseen through *revelation*, philosophy works out the order of the invisible realm and its relationship to the material world through *rational speculation*, mysticism confirms the findings of philosophy and

supplements them with its own knowledge obtained through *vision*, occult science elaborates and deploys this knowledge for *technical operations*, and modern esotericism assimilates the entire edifice to *science*. This should not, however, be taken to suggest that contemporary notions of the supernatural are necessarily derived from all of these sources at one and the same time. Rather, these connections are only *possible*, while very often only one or two may be shown to be involved in a specific conception or practice. Of the chapters that follow, the first two discuss occult science. Chapters three and four focus on modern esoteric systems and their entry into Iran. And chapter five in part zeroes in on Illuminationist philosophy.

### **Doubt, Belief, and Anthropology**

While approaching the supernatural as a domain of potentially knowable existence, most of my interlocutors grappled with various forms of doubt. How should these doubts be theorized? Anthropologists have long contended with questions of religious doubt and skepticism among the people they have studied. But their analytical orientations toward doubt have shifted in important ways. Conceptually, it is possible to sketch two broad approaches, although these are not mutually exclusive and can sometimes be seen as different aspects of the same work. The first is to view doubt as a kind of lack, attenuation, or ripple in belief which finds its most extreme and dramatic expression in *disenchantment* and unbelief. In this approach, the significance of doubt can only be grasped in relation to its other, belief, sometimes in the form of an exception to the socially normal. The second approach is to view doubt as productive in itself, engendering forms of experience, subjectivity, and sociality that cannot be adequately captured when doubt is viewed as a negativity rather than a positive mode of orienting toward the

religious life-world. The focus here is not only on illuminating the relationship between doubt and belief, or even on explicating the social, historical, and political context of its emergence, but more importantly on what doubt does once it appears as a social force.

A classic example of the first approach may be glimpsed in E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1976). In sketching out the various dimensions of Zande belief in witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard wrote of pervasive socially-sanctioned skepticism toward "witchdoctors," whom he said his informants often suspected of fraud. But he claimed that the mode of thought that sustained belief in witchcraft persisted in the face of skepticism, even among the skeptics themselves. On the one hand, he promisingly wrote of "wide differences of mental approach between different laymen; and, indeed, differences of attitude of the same man in different situations" (1976:105). He even remarked, in a phrase that could have been taken from an anthropological text decades after his time, that Zande beliefs "are not absolutely set but are variable and fluctuating to allow for different situations and to permit empirical observation and even doubts" (ibid:109). But on the other hand, he claimed that such doubts did not disturb belief in witchcraft. This was because, firstly, skepticism was usually directed at specific witchdoctors rather than the entire class of specialists, and secondly, even cheating witchdoctors were thought to be able to effect marvelous cures by entering into bargains with witches (ibid:105-108). Faith in witchdoctors persisted in spite of, and indeed sometimes because of, doubt toward specific practitioners. For Evans-Pritchard, this faith fits within a broader "web of belief," in which "every strand depends on every other strand, and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because this is the only world he knows... It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong" (ibid: 109). The "web of belief" ultimately trumped particular instances of skepticism, which was necessary if his model of an

all-encompassing, coherent system of thought wholly other to that of the modern West were to endure.<sup>13</sup>

Evans-Pritchard was ultimately not interested in explaining doubt. The question, rather, was how and why the Zande “web of belief” held together in spite of skepticism.<sup>14</sup> But his view of a homogenous cultural system that could always submerge internal challenges was not shared by everyone. For example, Robert Lowie, writing at around the same time, cautioned against the notion that in primitive societies, “tradition completely submerged all individual talent” (1933:320). Lowie described various examples of “primitive” individuals who doubted the conventional wisdom of their societies, either by virtue of their superior intellectual ability or their “caste” positions, or simply because their “experience” had convinced them to think differently. Some among them merely doubted this or that shaman whom others trusted. But occasionally, there arose the “infidel” who cast doubt on the entire system. In some societies, social reproduction even depended on the systematic cover-up of religious lies by powerful men, who assumed (often incorrectly) that others (the women for example) were not privy to their secrets. Finally, Lowie argued that a certain kind of skepticism arose everywhere as a result of the “basic human revolt against suffering” (ibid:323). In the face of perceived cosmological injustice – the “Problem of Evil” – there emerged “Voltaires among primitive peoples as among the civilized” (ibid).

More recently, Jack Goody has developed similar arguments to challenge claims that religious doubt and skepticism are uniquely modern or Western phenomena that emerged in the European Enlightenment or were, at most, born in ancient Greece (1996). While suggesting that

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<sup>13</sup> See Michele M. Moody-Adams (1997) for a critique of this notion of “cultural integration,” which specifically faults Evans-Pritchard for explaining doubt away. Also see Jack Goody (1996), especially pp. 676-678.

<sup>14</sup> See also Lévi-Strauss (1963:169-172).



organized skeptical “counter-traditions” seem to rely at least partially on the development of writing systems that allow “a measure of decontextualization of speech and thought” (ibid:670), Goody insists that individual instances of doubt are rooted in the human condition itself. Human societies construct models to represent the world and their place in it, but these models do not always persuasively explain lived reality. The problem of cosmic injustice, as Lowie also argued, is one area that can instigate doubt. Contradictions, cognitive and otherwise, arise through the very “conceptualization of supernatural beings whose presence can only be deduced from their possible effects” (ibid:679). In response, people develop doctrines to suture the gaps and contradictions, but there always remains a “kernel of doubt.”

Goody’s conception of doubt, like that of Lowie and Evans-Pritchard before him, privileges the individual intellect, although both he and Lowie do leave space for non-cognitive forms of contradiction, which following Lowie we might expand to include emotional “disturbance” (Lowie 1933:323). Ironically, this individualistic approach harks back to the much earlier work of E. B. Tylor who traced “belief in spiritual beings” to the intellectual musings of “savage philosophers” (1874:428), a theory that anthropologists have long since discarded. If belief itself can no longer be convincingly explained in intellectualist terms, it seems that doubt has had a harder time qualifying as a genuine *social* phenomenon. To put it differently, it could be that precisely because religious belief was long understood in Durkheimian terms as a phenomenon that transcended and subsumed individuality (Goody 1996:676), critics sought to explain exceptions to the general order in terms of individual intellect.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> A sophisticated alternative approach to doubt and ambivalence that likewise positions its movements within the individual is that offered by Katherine Ewing (1997). Ewing’s project is to develop a theory of the “experiencing subject,” a subject who is “transected by multiple discourses” (163) and yet is not perfectly captured or structured by any of them. She charts the traces of this “elusive and ambivalent subject” through individuals’ conflicted accounts of their experiences with Sufism. The obvious advantage of Ewing’s formulation is that she does not posit the

One way in which anthropologists have considered doubt as part of a social process has been in analyses of colonial encounter and modernization in which native populations waver in or abandon their customary beliefs as they acculturate to the norms of newly dominant groups. When viewed as part of a wider historical expansion of capitalism, science, and bureaucratic rationality, this doubt might be understood in relation to a Weberian *disenchantment of the world* (Weber 1946). But especially in colonial and post-colonial contexts, doubts can also be instigated through the missionary efforts of the representatives of globalizing religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Such is the view, for example, presented in certain works of Africanist anthropology in which skeptical natives are written off as the products of modernization or acculturation (Hountondji 1983:164, cited in Gable 1995). In Iran, a similar perspective has been influential among nativist intellectuals such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, whose critique of “West-struck-ness” (*gharbzadegi* – also rendered in English as “Westoxication” and “Occidentosis”) has been appropriated for official discourse since the Islamic Revolution, finding its most recent incarnation in pronouncements about the “cultural onslaught” (*tahajom-e farhangi*) and “soft war” (*jang-e narm*) waged by the West in order to colonize the minds of Muslims and empty them of commitment and authenticity. Writing in the 1960s of the contradictions arising from the strange encounter between the Pahlavi state’s Western-looking modernization efforts and the religious convictions of Iranians, Al-e Ahmad claimed that,

“... every schoolchild, in learning the ‘Imperial Anthem’ as the national anthem, forgets the prayers. In setting foot in sixth grade, he departs the mosque. In going to the movies, he consigns religion to oblivion. Thus 90 percent of those of us with a secondary school education are irreligious, or rather, indifferent toward religion [*horhori-mazhab*]. They

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ambivalent or doubting subject as an exception to the socially normal. For my purposes, however, her psychoanalytic conception of the ambivalent subject does not aid in understanding practices and discourses that are shot through with doubt and yet express emerging forms of sociality that have relevance beyond the experience of the subject.

are suspended in a void. They have nothing to stand on, no certainty, no faith” (Al-i Ahmad 1984:72)

Even if religious doubt appears as a social process in such conceptions, it still fits within a broader theoretical paradigm in which its value is constituted only through a lack or rupture in relation to belief.<sup>16</sup> While this approach is helpful in understanding some aspects of doubt, it falls short in capturing much of the social as well as subjective complexities where doubts are involved.

This brings me to the second anthropological orientation toward doubt, which has emerged in more recent studies. Doubt, in these works, takes on a life of its own, and the anthropologist’s task is directed at documenting and explaining its complex expressions and articulations. Hence Thomas Kirsch, for example, writes of a pervasive skeptical attitude among the Zambian Gwembe Tonga toward spirit mediums and Christian prophet-healers alike (Kirsch 2004). On the one hand, there are ambiguities in the classification of spiritual entities that are suspected of having afflicted a patient in a particular case, each of which requires a specific curing process. Healers thus adopt procedures of trial-and-error and post-hoc assessments where the afflicting spirit is identified only after the corresponding cure is found to be efficacious. On the other hand, both spirit mediums and prophet-healers are understood to sometimes lose the privileged spiritual connections that allow them to heal. They may be thought of as ineffective, or worse, charlatans or in league with evil spirits. The pragmatic search for therapy therefore leads to an ethos of experimentalism where patients try different healers but move on to someone

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<sup>16</sup> For a different kind of social contextualization of doubt, which nonetheless fits within the paradigm of doubt as negativity, see Wadley et al (2006). Rather than privileging modernity as the constitutive force in religious skepticism, these authors attend to other factors influencing its outward expression, such as social status, kinship and marriage ties, and existing political tensions within the social group.

else if the cure does not work. Complicating this ethos is the understanding (apparently imported from Christian contexts of healing) that for cures to be effective, the patient has to genuinely believe in the procedure and the healer. Experimentalism is thus coupled with “volitional” belief: “In whichever religious practice one chose to participate,” writes Kirsch, “one had to take it seriously and believe in it, because otherwise one would never see whether it worked” (ibid:707). Here, skepticism does not undercut or dampen a belief understood as some form of stable internal state, but rather produces a need to cyclically “restage the will to believe” (ibid).

Eric Gable has likewise written of skepticism as an integral part of a specific religious ethos, in this case among Manjaco men of Bassarel, Guinea-Bissau (1995; 2002). Showing that there are a wide variety of skeptical attitudes toward spirits among the Manjaco, including what he characterizes as atheism, Gable nonetheless argues that such skepticism is not necessarily the product of colonialism or modernity. Rather, the Manjaco’s “non-hierarchical” religion involves an attitude toward spirit-human relationships as “a social contract that a people writes or rewrites according to its civic interests” (1995:254). Hence when some men express even the most defiant kinds of skepticism about spirits, they may be seen to be casting doubt on the presumed benefits of the social contract, and therefore receive praise as “men with soul” who are “willing to assert [their] own position against social conventions” (ibid:253). In a later article, Gable has analyzed similar expressions of skepticism as part of a “homegrown youthful attitude” central to the “ongoing production and transformation of Manjaco ‘neotraditions’” – that is, as part of a process of religious change (2002:42). Focusing on instances of playful religious mimicry among the youth, Gable argues that religious play both opens up a space for skepticism, and creates an “atmosphere of believability” around ritual (ibid:54). That is, it can work both as a vehicle for

intergenerational antagonism, and as a means for the performative reproduction of some of the very forms toward which the youth are critical.

In a study that is particularly close to my own work for its attention to religious doubt among people of Muslim origin, Samuli Schielke (forthcoming) has examined “non-belief” among Egyptians in order to illuminate “the positive ground on which a non-religious life can be built in a social world that is saturated by religion.” Schielke argues against the assumption that Muslim non-belief must be a product of European secularity, instead analyzing religious doubt as a form of “moral discontent” intimate to the experience of religion against a background of Islamic revivalism. In terms of helping us to think through ways of theorizing religious doubt as a positive orientation rather than as a lack, Schielke offers at least two arguments: First, for his interlocutors, becoming non-believers depended on a “ground of certainty” involving a strong trust in their capacities for independent moral judgment: It was by relying on their own sense of moral right and wrong that these Egyptians were able to critique religion and to lose confidence in its promises without losing their existential footing. Second, religion continued to haunt the lives of non-believers as an ambivalent presence; for example, in the ways they used Islamic phrases in everyday language and in their appreciation of the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of religion. One way that some of these individuals resolved their ambivalence was to accept Islam as a “culture” that shaped their identities even if they could not accept it as a religion to which they were committed.

## **The Chapters**

How, then, does my dissertation approach doubts about the supernatural among urban Iranians?

Each chapter focuses on a different problem and the particular dynamics that arise from it.

Chapter 1 – An Uncertain Reason – examines the public denigration of superstition in Iran, particularly as it involves women’s visitations to occult specialists deemed charlatans. I show that gendered ideas of reason and rationality are performed in public in part through the discursive negation of superstition. But as soon as we investigate the constituents of this rationality in Shi‘i jurisprudence, theology, and the everyday practices of champions of reason such as law enforcement officers, clear-cut distinctions between logic and superstition, the authentic mystic and the charlatan, and lawful and unlawful appeals to the supernatural evaporate. The performance of rationality, then, may have more to do with attempts to bury the complexities and equivocations at the heart of encounters with the supernatural, than with any positive notion of reason.

Chapter 2 – The Fantastic – continues the theme of women’s encounters with occult specialists by focusing on the practices and conceptions of these women themselves. While the public narrative that posits female superstition against male rationality is ruptured by ambivalences about the truth or falsity of occult science, this ambivalence and a commitment to rationality and distancing from superstition, I show, are performed by many women themselves as they hire the assistance of occult specialists for specific practical ends. The space of hesitation opened up by the performance of rationality, what following Tzvetan Todorov I call the “fantastic,” produces various rich possibilities that, I argue, escape the determinations of the discourses of rationality and religious orthodoxy.

Chapter 3 – Arguing the Supernatural – turns to the rise of alternative spiritualities in Iranian urban centers following the end of the war with Iraq. Against a backdrop of rising concern among religious and political authorities about the deviance spread through novel spiritual systems, I examine the trajectories of three women who participated in one popular

group and the ways they dealt with their doubts and suspicions about the claims that had been put forward by the group's teachers. I show that by working out their own unique solutions to their ambivalence, each of these women was able to fashion a relatively stable relationship toward the mystical group: One by quitting the group because she found it to be contradictory to Islam; a second by wholeheartedly embracing the group but maintaining a spirit of independence against its structures of authority; and the third by deciding consciously to believe that the supernatural claims of the group were true against the possibility that she may have been duped, because she found that participation in the group brought her psychological fulfillment.

Chapter 4 – The Scientific Imaginary – examines the ways in which a mode of thinking commonly associated with modern science began to be attached to religion around the time of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-06 and has undergone various transformations in the following century. In part, I focus on the way in which the scientific claims to metaphysical truth among Iranian spiritists prompted their opponents to perform a kind of empirically-minded openness in their polemical attacks upon them. That is, while fiercely attacking Spiritism, these opponents resorted to experiments and had to at least rhetorically allow for the possibility that spiritists' claims may be true. The rhetorical performance of doubt – at times subtle, at other times more pronounced – about the possible outcome of these experiments allowed the authors to drive home their polemical points. But in doing so, they also reinforced an empirical orientation toward supernatural matters that has found various manifestations up to the present time.

Chapter 5 – Proof of the Eye – focuses on contemporary interest in mystics' hagiographies among a mostly young, male, pious public. I show that the proliferation of these hagiographies since the 1990s has been sponsored by individuals and groups (some allied with the state) concerned about “flight from religion” (*din-gorizi*) among a new generation of

Iranians. In turn, these youth sometimes read mystics' hagiographies in search of ways of resolving religious doubts – at times about their own spiritual status in the eyes of God, at other times about the truth of religion itself – but they do so in ways not always anticipated by the authors or proponents of the circulating texts. One unexpected effect that these texts have produced has been a rising fascination with the concept of a mystic's extraordinary inner eye by which he is able to directly perceive the invisible. This eye has become the object of fantasy among some men who seek to reach certainty about their own or others' inner truths, or to determine once and for all whether anything supernatural exists.



## Chapter 1 – An Uncertain Reason

Conversations about the supernatural in Iran almost invariably touch upon the problem of superstition (*khorafat*). How is one to distinguish a rational, perhaps scientific, understanding of supernatural phenomena from hoaxes, lies, delusions, and uncritical repetitions of irrational ideas circulating among the uneducated and the gullible? To speak the word “superstition” is already to make a move of social distancing and differentiation: The speaker lays claim, through this move, to an authoritative assemblage of reason, science, progress, and modernity. But in so doing, he or she must also exclude. Superstition requires “the superstitious” – those people who, by virtue of deficiencies in their knowledge or reason, adopt and repeat irrational ideas and practices. It also necessitates that someone be the purveyor of superstition. If the latter themselves believe what they disseminate, they will be included in the superstitious. If they do not, then they must belong to a more unsavory category, that of charlatans. This chapter is about the public production of superstition and its opposite, rationality. But it is also about the ambiguity and indecisiveness in this production, the insuppressible remainder that haunts all distinctions of the rational and the irrational, the licit and illicit, the authentically Islamic and the deviant.

My focus, specifically, will be on representations of the “gullible young women” who fall prey to the conniving of sinister occult specialists and charlatans – usually identified as the *do‘anevis* (prayer writer), *jingir* (exorcist), or *rammal* (geomancer).<sup>17</sup> I argue that the public

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<sup>17</sup> Each of these terms refers to specific occult procedures and techniques, but may be used to identify a variety of occult specialists. *Do‘anevisi* is “writing prayers” or “prescriptions” (*noskkeh*) for any of a wide range of purposes. The written prescriptions range from Qur‘anic verses to magical shapes and letters indecipherable to all except the occult specialist. *Raml* – geomancy – is a divination method involving two sets of four dice each, normally made of copper or brass. The diviner who uses the science of *raml* may be called a *rammal*. *Jingiri* (literally: “jinn capture”) is the exorcism of jinn from human hosts, but it may also be applied to any kind of control or deployment of jinn for

denunciations of rammals should be viewed as performances of rationality, in which opposing conceptions of superstition and reason are constructed, and their ideal social bearers constituted. This is important not for the assertion of a particular epistemological or juridical view of magic – its truth or falsity, licit or illicitness – but for the affirmation of a specific view of social order in which police, journalists, and intellectuals are the rational defenders of society, and society itself, as represented through the figure of the gullible young woman, is in need of education and rescue. As I also show in the chapter, this view of the social order begins to crumble as soon as we pay close attention to the specific conceptions, practices, and narratives of those who are held to be the champions of rationality.

### **Gullible Victims**

Encounters with occult specialists in Iran have become a matter of public concern in the past few years. Hints of a rising anxiety are scattered among the “incidents” (*havades*) and “social” (*ejtema ‘i*) pages of newspapers, with the occasional story or analysis making its way to front-page headlines. The problem is usually described as one of *khorafat* (superstitions, sing. *khorafeh*). In conservative and right-wing newspapers, the superstitious appeal to occult specialists is often denigrated alongside *erfan-hayeh enherafi* (deviant mysticisms), which refers

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practical ends. The specialist who possesses or controls jinn, or who is able to exorcise them, is called a *jingir*. A fourth term, *jadugar*, could best be rendered as sorcerer or witch, and like sorcerer and witch in the English language, the term carries a mostly derogatory sense and is rarely used by an occult specialist for self-identification. In ordinary parlance, any of these terms might be applied to any occult specialist, even if they are not known to practice the specific procedure or technique for which the term itself stands. As a general rule, *do ‘anevisi* (prayer writing) has the least negative value attached to it, and *jadugari* (witchcraft) the most, with *rammali* (geomancy) and *jingiri* (exorcism) closer to the negative pole.

to ostensibly heterodox or heretical doctrines propounded by any of a plethora of books, seminars, or “cults” (*ferqeh*) that have gained popularity in Iran since the mid-1990s.<sup>18</sup>

The victims of these superstitions and deviant spiritualities are usually identified as the ignorant, naive, or uneducated. But within this undifferentiated mass, one particular social group tends to receive overwhelming attention: gullible women and girls (*zanan va dokhtaran-e sadeh-lowh*). Women are more likely than men, we are told, to fall prey to the charlatanry of witches, fortune tellers, or pretenders to mysticism (*modda 'iyan-e 'erfan*). When they do, the least harm that can befall them is to be defrauded of their money. But in more serious cases, they may be robbed, drugged, intimidated, extorted, kidnapped, sexually abused, raped, or murdered. It is up to the media to educate and inform the public, particularly women and girls, so that they will stay away from the dangerous purveyors of superstition. This they do through regular news reports from across the country about incidents of criminal activity by rammals and do‘anevises. Meanwhile, the same media publish occasional warnings from police and judicial authorities declaring that these charlatans (*shayyad*) or fraudsters (*kolahbardar*) will be arrested and prosecuted.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> These “deviant spiritualities” will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>19</sup> The first mention of rammali in the Iranian legal code appears in the 1945 “Violations Guideline” (*aayin-name-ye omur-e khalafi*) which details violations of public order, public security, and public health initially stipulated in schematic form in article 276 of the 1925 legal code. Article 3 of the guideline lists violations that are punishable by seven to ten days *takdiri* imprisonment (substitutable with financial penalty) and 100 to 200 rials in fines. The list includes public health violations like fruit-sellers’ failure to keep their shops and produce clean, barbers’ neglect to wear clean white aprons, and bakers’ use of saccharin in their sweets. It includes matters of public disturbance, like “chasing girls, boys, and women persistently,” “playing with fire” on public pathways, and causing an automobile to stop with “intention to harass.” A few deal with solicitation and selling wares without permit. Number 18 names “those who use rammali, *jafr* (numerology), dream interpretation, palmistry, spell-casting, witchcraft, exorcism, fortune-telling, augury, *chelleh-neshini* (lit. “sitting for forty days” to secure some result), opening of fortunes and the like, for itinerancy (*dowreh-gardi*) or to draw crowds (*ma'rekeh*), or set up a shop or home to make a profession and draw income and profit from these actions.” In 1973, the ministries of justice and interior ratified a single article that eliminated imprisonment as a punishment for violations, including those listed for rammali and the like, and replaced them with financial penalties. With legal reform after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Violations Guideline was rendered obsolete, even though prosecutors have occasionally made public statements in which they

The frequency of criminal reports involving rammals has grown dramatically in recent years, although it is unclear whether this is due to a higher incidence of such crimes or increased attention and interest among the press. For example, over a period of four and a half years from October 2001 through March 2006, the mainstream newspaper Jam-e Jam, owned by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting service (IRIB), published twenty-four such reports (an average of less than one report every two months for this period). But over an equal period in the next four and a half years, from April 2006 through the end of September 2010, the same paper published one hundred and ten reports and commentaries on criminal rammals (an average of more than two reports per month; that is, more than quadruple the 2001-06 average). Below are headlines (in bold) and summaries from a few such reports in 2008, which I collected during my fieldwork:

25 Feb 2008 – Jam-e Jam: “**The tricks of kidnapping rammals for extorting parents of 13-year-old youth**” – A criminal gang in an unspecified city in Hormozgan province abducted a child. One of them posed as a rammal and told the boy’s parents that he would locate the child in return for a few million tomans (a few thousand dollars) cash. The gang members were arrested and the boy released. A police official warns the public to instruct their children to stay away from strangers.

27 April 2008 – Jam-e Jam: “**Rammal woman’s prescriptions for happiness blackened women’s fortune**” – A woman in Karaj was arrested for fraud after police received complaints from several women who had received love prescriptions from her. Police searched the rammal’s house and confiscated business cards, talismans, locks, and

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have referred to the law as though it is still in force. Currently, rammali is treated as fraud, a much more severe designation than the previous category of violation. Punishment is decided according to article 1 of the “Law for Intensifying Punishment of Perpetrators of Bribery, Embezzlement, and Fraud,” ratified in 1988. The article partially reads: “Anyone who, through trickery and fraud... makes people hopeful about unreal (*gheyr-e vaqe’*) matters or frightens them about unreal incidents... and through one of these means or through other fraudulent instruments obtains cash or property... and thus takes [money] belonging to another person, is considered a fraudster (*kolah-bardar*) and in addition to returning the original property to its owner, will be sentenced to imprisonment of one to seven years, and payment of a cash penalty equivalent to the value of the property that he has obtained.” In some cases, rammali may be considered a form of “panhandling” (*takaddi*) or “extortion” (*kallashi*) which, according to article 712 of the Islamic Penal Code ratified in 1996, is punishable by one to three months imprisonment. Presumably the latter may be applied to “vagrants” who practice raml on the streets. In recent years, there have been some calls in the press for explicitly criminalizing rammali in the legal code. The judiciary bill for a revised Islamic Legal Code presented to parliament in 2007 stipulated the death penalty for “Muslims who are involved with witchcraft and sorcery and propagate it in society as a profession or cult.” But parliament struck all references to witchcraft in their revised law, which has yet to be fully ratified.

“happiness prescriptions” (*noskhe-ye khoshbakhti*). A police official warns the public not to trust charlatan rammals with their life problems, since often these criminals acquire personal information which they use for extortion and blackmail.

14 May 2008 – Jam-e Jam: “**Cunning rammal**” – A rammal man was arrested for fraud and theft in an unspecified city in Golestan province. A young woman complained to police after going to the man to receive a love prescription but instead being drugged unconscious (from a water bowl fed to her as part of a magic ritual) and waking up to find her jewelry stolen. The rammal’s wife was his accomplice and helped him recruit “gullible young women” to rob.

26 May 2008 – Jam-e Jam: “**Calling herself a doctor, rammal woman defrauded people**” – A rammal woman in an unspecified city in Gilan province claimed to solve family problems, transform people’s appearance (beautifying them through magical means), and help women lose weight. She was arrested after police received multiple complaints of fraud from her customers.

26 July 2008 – Iran: “**Deceived women and girls in the trap of Satan**” – A man was arrested in Qom on charges of illicit sexual relations with several women. The man deceived “lonely, helpless” women into thinking he would solve their life problems by voiding the witchcraft with which they had been entangled. He would then trick or intimidate his victims into having sexual intercourse with him. Police discovered dozens of “immoral” photographs of his victims on the man’s cell phone. The prosecutor general of Qom requested that newspapers publish the accused’s full photograph so that other victims could come forward and file complaints.

10 August 2008 – Jam-e Jam: “**Cunning rammals made gold disappear**” – A criminal team comprised of three women and four men defrauded families seeking to increase their wealth through magical means. The team, which operated in the provinces of Fars, Khoozestan, and Hormozgan, claimed to be able to double their customers’ gold. But when victims presented their jewelry to the rammals for doubling, they would secretly swap them for fakes, wrap them in cloth and instruct their owners not to open them for forty days, the time required for the magic to work. A police official warns the public to stay away from rammals, since “if [these individuals] could solve anyone’s problems, they would first solve their own.”

Women are by no means the only ones who consult rammals.<sup>20</sup> Nor are they the only ones to fall victim to the criminals among them. News reports about rammal crime very often

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<sup>20</sup> In the course of my research, I was asked on at least two occasions by male friends and acquaintances to recommend a good occult specialist to them. In one of those cases, a friend wanted to consult a rammal about his love troubles (he was worried that the reason he wasn’t married yet at the age of thirty might have to do with

involve male victims, sometimes at the hands of female rammals. But public discourse about this kind of crime, and about gullibility and superstition more generally, is heavily gendered. If the naïve, ignorant, or uneducated – those in need of guidance or protection – are given any kind of sociological specificity, it is more often than not in terms of gender: always female, never male. This discrepancy has to do with a frankly patriarchal conception of male and female difference: regardless of political inclination or (in most cases I've encountered) even gender, most public commentators see women as naturally less rational, more emotional, and closer to superstitious belief and practice than men.

An essay in *Farhang-e Puya* magazine, titled *Reyhaneh zir-e pa* (trampled basil leaf) captures this tendency with vicious candor (Dashti 2007):

Counterfeit mysticism, superstition, witchcraft and sorcery, opening fortunes<sup>21</sup>, [magically] capturing others<sup>22</sup>, and so on are matters that attract naïve individuals very quickly. Among human beings, women have more delicate emotions and, for this reason, they have a special place [in the schemes of] the pretenders of false mysticism, for attracting and exploiting individuals.

Explaining a “typology” (*tip-shenasi*) of women’s inclinations to superstition, Dashti says that “most issues in this domain [of the superstitious] are addressed to women. It is as though girls are deprived of the peace and tranquility that Islam considers marriage to provide, because their marital futures are unclear.” But even married women, who should be secure in this particular respect, are not exempt, as “they are after dominating their spouses, [or] they seek to ensure the economic growth of the family through extrasensory [sic. *fara-hessi*] means, or, if a child has not

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witchcraft). In my own visits to rammals for observations or interviews, I saw as many, if not more, male customers as female.

<sup>21</sup> The Persian term is *bakht-goshayi* and it refers to magical means to improve the fortunes of a person (usually a woman) for finding love and enhancing her marriage prospects. One’s fortunes can be “bound” (*basteh*) through witchcraft or the evil eye, and hence may require “opening.”

<sup>22</sup> *Taskhir-e digaran*. This refers to magic aiming to “capture” a person, usually a man, for love or marriage.

lit up the center of their lives, they are preoccupied with the birth of an infant. All of these issues cause women to take refuge in invalid supernatural and superstitious matters.”<sup>23</sup>

This female proclivity for superstition is historically entrenched, argues Dashti:

In previous eras some individuals went to do‘anevises and rammals to solve their life problems. These visits, and the acquisition of false solutions, are still prevalent. When a mental, bodily, or material problem would arise, the lady of the house would rush to the do‘anevis to solve the problem through metaphysical means. For this reason, jadugars, rammals, and do‘anevises have always maintained a lucrative market in solving problems like joblessness, bound fortunes, childlessness, co-wife [*havu*] rivalry, and other issues.

The trade in superstition continues more or less as it did in the past, with some notable updates in techniques, sources, and knowledge forms:

This market isn’t as hot as it was in bygone eras, but even now many superstition-believing women stroll through its [alleys]. Girls who are on the threshold of marriage consult Chinese, Indian, and Iranian astrology to see if their stars match those of their spouses. Today color psychology has joined palmistry and fortune-telling to enhance the profits of geomancers, who easily express opinions about individuals’ futures... With the growth of technology, superstitious tools and instruments also evolve. Today human thought is more developed compared to the past, and the intermixture of western and eastern thoughts with religious notions have also increased. The machine-dominated life of our age, the rise in economic problems and individuals’ distance from one another, shifts problem-solving to a different terrain. Topics like creative imagination, dance and music therapy, yoga and meditation, Satan-worship – whether Sufi or western – Native American and American (Eckankar [sic]) mysticism, and Indian mysticism (Sai Baba [sic]), all invite today’s modern human to this market.

Women are, as Dashti has already stressed, more easily seduced by this market’s glamorous wares, both due to their more subtle emotional constitution, and the specific anxieties of their

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<sup>23</sup> In the next chapter we shall see that one of my interlocutors, a female do‘anevis and fortune-teller, espoused many of these same views, but with a feminist twist.

social position.<sup>24</sup> In the final sentences of his article, he goes into further detail about the causes of women's superstitious beliefs:

Usually, superstition grows more in families that haven't benefited much from knowledge... One can say that the gender factor and the prevailing culture in society have an important role in the emergence of superstition and superstitious acts. Women's personality features and individual differences are also important. Women who suffer from an emotional vacuum or who do not enjoy a desirable position in the family, are more prepared to accept superstitious matters. Weakness in the foundations of [religious] belief can also enable women to take refuge in imaginary and fantastical concepts rather than acquiring information and discovering causes. Depression and mental and emotional disorders can also be considered one of the most important causes for women's gravitation toward superstition. Also, human ignorance can lead the individual toward unscientific methods to compensate for her ignorance.

The problem with superstition is not merely that it represents a species of false belief, but that it is the gateway to moral degeneracy. With women, the most salient form of this corruption is sexual:

Currently, in the superstitious teachings of [deviant mysticisms], sex meditation, worship and concentration on fully nude images, and incest are offered as solutions for spiritual and psychological problems. This is while according to psychologists, the most severe spiritual and psychological harms result from lack of control of one's instincts and lack of proper moral upbringing. This market attracts customers from all groups and masses. Today, mystic-pretenders infiltrate women's Qur'anic meetings and mourning ceremonies to identify individuals and design three stages for them. First, they accompany the woman as she wears her *chador* [full body veil that only leaves the face and hands uncovered]; then, after a while, [the woman begins to] appear with a manteau and scarf in mystical *zehr* and *sama'* meetings;<sup>25</sup> and finally, she can be found without her scarf or Islamic covering in the embrace of unrelated [*ajnabi*, lit: alien] male mystic-pretenders.

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<sup>24</sup> Dashti never makes it clear why men, who, he admits, have their own share of anxieties and uncertainties to deal with, are not victims of superstition to the same degree. One is left with the impression, then, that anxiety and uncertainty are not sufficient causes for people to seek recourse in superstition. Ultimately it is women's emotional nature, as opposed to men's rational nature, that is decisive.

<sup>25</sup> These are Sufi practices generally looked down upon in orthodox Shi'ism, even if they enjoy widespread popularity in their literary manifestations and representations in classical Persian poetry. The actual ritual performances are limited to Sufi communities and some Sufi-inspired New Age groups.



And if these women's own deviance were not enough, they also lead their husbands and children astray:

When a man gravitates toward these groups, he can more easily maintain these beliefs in secret... whereas if a woman becomes inclined toward these cults, she not only [follows them] herself, but she brings her spouse and children along as well. And this is the very objective that the pretenders of false mysticism pursue, and that women make possible.

In sum, women are naturally more prone to superstition than men. They are easy prey for the machinations of charlatans and false mystics, who lead them away from sound religious beliefs, deliver them into the depths of sexual depravity and immorality, and corrupt their husbands, children, and other relatives along with them.

The denigration of female superstition in Iran is nothing new. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the Shi'a cleric Aqa Jamal Khwansari (d. 1710) wrote *'Aqa'ed al-Nesa'* (Beliefs of Women), a social satire critiquing the beliefs and practices of well-to-do women in Isfahan, the seat of the Safavid empire. Khwansari ridiculed the norms of sociability and religiosity among Isfahani women, particularly their passionate bonds of sisterhood (*khwahar-khwandegi*), their disregard of ritual obligations, their recourse to heterodox supplications, magical invocations, and amulets, and their liberties in mixing with unrelated men. As Kathryn Babayan has argued, the treatise was written near the apex of a process of sedentarization, centralization, and rationalization of the empire, when Imami Shi'i Islamic law and social norms provided a powerful foundation for Safavid rule (1998:351). Around a decade later, the last ruler of the Safavid empire, Shah Sultan Husayn, decreed a new set of restrictions for women as part of a tightening of *shar'i* prohibitions (ibid:358):

Shah Sultan Husayn decreed that contrary to past practice, women [*nisvan*] should not linger in the streets [*mahallat*] and bazaars without *shar'i* and customary [*'urfi*] reasons. They should not stroll in gardens and go on pleasure promenades with anyone other than

their husbands. They should not loiter in public gatherings [*ma'rika*] or frequent coffeehouses. And from now on, when they took their children to learn a trade or craft, they must not socialize with craftsmen. They were to move out of their private harem only with the permission of their husbands or their male legal guardians [*sahib-i ikhtiyar-i shar'i*].

Judging from Khwansari's satire, Isfahani women of his time inhabited a very different social world than what the ulama would find appropriate. In one chapter, he mockingly suggests that women would rather avoid their husbands and other male relatives, as well as any man wearing a turban,<sup>26</sup> and any seeker of knowledge, preferring to associate instead with the Jewish lace maker, the vegetable seller, the cloth merchant, the doctor, the rammal, the do'anevis, the jadugar, and the minstrel (Khwansari 1970:28). It is hard to miss the similarities between this criticism and the concerns of contemporary authors like Kamal Dashti above, who see a direct connection between women's association with rammals, jadugars, do'anevises, and mystic pretenders, and a dangerous flouting of sexual boundaries and norms of modesty.

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth, the superstitions of women came under attack from a new direction. This time, it was modernist intellectuals who found the superstitions of "traditional women," and those of the "masses" more generally, to be backward and an obstacle to nationalist renewal (*tajaddod*) and progress (Amin 2002:67-71; Najmabadi 2005:147-148; Schayegh 2009:35). This criticism was part of a much broader attack on the political, social, and religious foundations of the Qajar dynasty, which itself appealed to the legacy of the Safavid empire (Amin 2002:16-18). Some intellectuals identified superstitions as spurious folk accretions to a true Islam. Others equated Islam itself with superstition (ibid:25). The clergy usually bore the brunt of the attacks as those

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<sup>26</sup> "The bigger the turban, the more *namahram* its owner," writes Khwansari (1970:28). *Namahram* – non-intimate – is a member of the opposite sex in relation to whom the highest degree of separation and modesty should be observed.

most directly responsible for disseminating superstition among the masses (Schayegh 2009:35-36).

When discussing witchcraft, fortune-telling, divination, geomancy, and jinn exorcism, modernist critics often saw women as those most susceptible to false belief, most in danger of being duped by charlatans, and therefore most in need of being educated and saved. For example, the secularist intellectual Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946), who wrote a book specifically treating and debunking these superstitions (*pendarha*), dedicated his treatise to “ladies of pure religion [*banovan-e pakdin*]<sup>27</sup>” because, he wrote, “this book is about families and is pertinent more than anyone to the ladies” (Kasravi 1943:3. See also Fischer 2003:130-133). The prominent novelist and folklorist Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) wrote some of his most scathing social satire in denigration of popular piety and superstition, particularly among women. For example, in the short story *Alaviyeh Khanom* (Madame Alaviyeh) published in 1933, he depicts a wretched band of prostitutes and vagrants going on pilgrimage to the holy city of Mashhad (Hedayat 1962). The characters are dirty, nasty, vulgar, immoral, and superstitious. Madame Alaviyeh, the eponymous prostitute at the center of the short story, feeds her daughter goat fat, starch, and soil from the shrine of Imam Husayn in Karbala (*torbat-e sayyed osh-shohada*) to cure her chest cold. The girl coughed at regular intervals, writes Hedayat, “even though a prayer against whooping cough written on squash peel was hanging on her chest,” along with various amulets for warding off the evil eye. Alaviyeh tells her fellow pilgrims that when her other daughter fell sick after three successive temporary marriages and divorces, she thought her illness might be caused by the menace of jinn (*az ma behtarun*) and so she “got a prayer for her,” presumably from a do‘anevis, which improved her health. Jayran Khanom, another character, “who had tattooed a blue rooster

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<sup>27</sup> *Pakdini* was the name Kasravi gave to an “unadulterated,” “rational,” and ultimately – as Lloyd Ridgeon argues – deistic religion that he envisaged would eventually supplant Islam. See Ridgeon (2006:47-48).

on her tongue for good fortune,” and who thumbed a rosary (*tasbih*) and asked for forgiveness, while “prayer came out of her mouth like sap from the mouth of a sheepskin,” resorted to magical means to find her daughter a husband: “As soon as my daughter Robabeh entered her tenth year, there wasn’t a single pledge or prayer [*nazr-o niyaz*] that I didn’t try for opening her fortune. I had her pass under the Morvari cannon. I took her to the Jewish bathhouse. I pulled her veil through the intestines of a sheep. I sewed her a ‘wish shirt’ [*pirhan-e morad*] between two prayers...” Later, Alaviyeh recounts how, in order to “cool the love” of a particularly clingy husband, she had gone to the morgue, obtained some water used to wash the corpse of a black slave woman, and fed it to the man.<sup>28</sup>

Contemporary public attacks on women’s superstitions are heir, then, to both a pre-modern Shi‘i legalistic tradition and a rationalist, modernist discourse. They share the jurist’s anxieties about heterodoxy and the transgression of sexual boundaries,<sup>29</sup> and the modernists’ concerns for exterminating irrationality and ignorance. All are motivated by a conviction that public order is threatened by the secret liaisons of women with occult specialists whose

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<sup>28</sup> This modernist denigration of the superstitions of women could also be viewed in relation to a secular nationalist project of defining a modern masculinity. See for example Minoou Moallem’s discussion of Sadeq Hedayat’s *Haji Agha* (2005:71-72), as well as her broader analysis of the modernist project of reconstituting gender norms in the Pahlavi period.

<sup>29</sup> Modernists were not free of similar concerns. Kasravi for example, wrote that “some fortune-tellers use fortune-telling to deceive women, dishearten them about their husbands, and drive them to do very ugly deeds. Some of them become intermediaries between alien men and women. One of their excuses when making witchcraft is to tell women: ‘you must do something *haram* [forbidden]’ and with this excuse they pollute virtuous women” (1943:17). Could this anxiety be placed within the broader modernist project of defining and defending a modern family ruled by companionate monogamous love? Najmabadi (2005) sees this project as a “heterosocialization” of Iranian culture and “heteronormalization” of love and sex, in which the transformation of traditional women into educated, companionate wives was necessary for remaking not only a modern woman, but the modern man and the family. If women’s encounters with rammals and fortune tellers were (as they are today) outgrowths of their other homosocial activities (women learn about rammals through word of mouth in primarily female gatherings and exchanges), it would be necessary to short-circuit them in the interest of fortifying women’s companionate relationships with their husbands. Ironically, however, the vice that, in Kasravi’s criticism, emerges from the encounter with the rammal (sex with an “alien” man) is very much a heteronormative one. So it doesn’t seem that heteronormativity itself is at stake here (perhaps by the 1940s the project was already well established), so much as the integrity of the modern “virtuous woman,” and through her, that of the modern man.

knowledge and practice lie on the fringes of masculine power and surveillance, whether that of the Shi‘a jurists, or of a centralizing state – which, in the Islamic Republic as ideologically conceived (but not necessarily everywhere in practice), amount to the same thing.

Aside from their shared concerns, how else can one claim that the contemporary denigration of superstition is heir to earlier Shi‘i patriarchal legalism on the one hand, and patriarchal modernist rationalism on the other? As we shall see below, these different systems of thought do not agree on the exact boundaries between true, legitimate knowledge and false, superstitious belief. This is particularly important in the case of the science of raml, and its practitioner, the rammal. Still, there is overlap in the terminology deployed in attacks on women’s questionable beliefs and practices, particularly among secular modernist and contemporary religious modernist discourses: *‘aqlaniyat* (rationality), *‘elm* (science), *manteq* (logic), *khorafat* (superstition), and so on. This traffic in concepts can be understood in terms of Jacques Derrida’s notion of iterativity, or repetition (1988). Each concept has had a history of use in one or more discursive situations before being uprooted, repeated, and grafted into new contexts: *‘Elm* denoted an entire realm of knowledge and learning within the Islamic tradition before it was adopted by 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century modernists to refer to modern European science. *Khorafat* denoted a category of fantastic legends in Arabic literature, and later, the baseless beliefs of heretical or non-Islamic religious groups, before it came to stand for superstition in its modern sense. The term *‘aqlaniyat*, on the other hand, probably first appeared as a direct translation of the French *rationalité*, with a clear post-Enlightenment connotation.<sup>30</sup> Recently,

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<sup>30</sup> This connection was pointed out to me by Daryoush Ashouri. I have not systematically investigated the history of the usage of the term in Persian or Arabic. However, Dehkhoda’s *Loghatnameh* does not list the term, and neither do any of the classical Arabic dictionaries (The *Lisan al-Arab*, *Muhit*, etc) or even Hans Wehr’s *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. The earliest usage I have been able to identify for *‘aqlaniyat* is a translation by Ahmad Aram of an article by Albert Einstein titled *Din-e Jahani* (global religion) in *Yaghma* in 1956. The terms *‘aqli* (pertaining to reason) and, to a lesser extent, *‘aqlani* (rational or pertaining to reason) have a much longer history.

however, Shi‘a jurists and apologists have been using the same term to speak about the *rationality* of Shi‘ism, by which they mean its commitment to logical principles and reasoned argumentation.

There is another sense in which iterativity is helpful in understanding the relationship between contemporary denunciations of superstition and their historical precedents. What is repeated in these various instances is not just a series of signs that acquire different referents in their various contexts of use, but the *denunciation* itself as a performative utterance. Each instance of a condemnation of superstition performatively and indexically constructs – sometimes directly, sometimes in less direct ways, sometimes by negation – a notion of superstition, a concept of rationality, and the ideal social bearers of each (intellectuals, police, clergy, women, the masses, and so on). In each iteration, any of these constructions may be displaced in relation to previous repetitions, sometimes in ways that are not clear or predictable. What has remained relatively constant in the modern period, however, and continues to propel repetition, have been the signifiers “rationality” and “superstition,” and a gendered hierarchy that situates women closer to the latter pole.

### **Strange Hesitations**

When it comes specifically to the question of the rammal, there is a matter of historical disagreement, though this does not ordinarily find its way to public debate. In modernist discourse, geomancy is unambiguously a false science, and its practitioners charlatans who

exploit the superstitions of the masses.<sup>31</sup> However, in scholarly Shi‘i understanding in Iran today, geomancy – *raml* – is a legitimate, even noble (*sharif*) divinatory science founded by the Prophet Daniel, who learned it from the Archangel Gabriel (Nasr 1976:207; Fahd 2006c). Other Muslim sources trace the genealogy of *raml* to the Prophet Idris (Savage-Smith & Smith 1980:1). For centuries, *raml* has been privately studied, taught, and practiced in scholarly Shi‘i circles alongside *jafr*,<sup>32</sup> *owfaq*<sup>33</sup> and other “strange” or “occult” sciences (*olum-e gharibeh* or *olum-e khafiyyeh*). There is, moreover, a rich corpus of “prophetic medicine” (*tebb-e nabavi*), augmented among the Shi‘a by “medicine of the imams” (*tebb ol-a’emmeh*) which incorporates Qur’anic verses and prayers for prophylactic, apotropaic, and curative uses (O’Connor 2010; Perho 2009; Ragab 2009; Savage-Smith et al 2010). In practice, such medical uses of the Qur’an are sometimes actualized through procedures adopted from the strange sciences for constructing amulets, talismans, and so on. For example, the great twentieth century Qur’an exegete, philosopher, and mystic Allameh Sayyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabai (1904-1981), a master of both *raml* and *jafr* (Algar 2006:329),<sup>34</sup> has been quoted as suggesting that a *vafq* (normally

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<sup>31</sup> Modernist thinkers have not consistently opposed every form of occultism or belief in apparently strange or extraordinary forces. For example, while Ahmad Kasravi argued that belief in prognosticatory dreams was a form of superstition, he wrote that “(if sciences accept it) we don’t consider it farfetched that some people may see true dreams. We don’t see it farfetched that in humankind (or in some of them), there is a hidden power for perceiving proximate events, and that this power is activated during sleep” (Kasravi 1943:37). The communist intellectual and politician Ehsan Tabari (1917-1989) similarly made a distinction between the “discoveries of science” and “delusive revelations” (*makshufat-e mohum*) when it came to extraordinary phenomena. Specifically, he wrote that the results of parapsychological laboratory research on hypnosis, telepathy, “walking barefoot on fire,” suggestion, intuition, and so on, should be distinguished from the fantasies of “magic, religion, and mysticism” (Tabari 1969:40-41). For Sadegh Hedayat, the distinction between magic (at least as practiced in ancient times) and science was more of an evolutionary one. In the conclusion to his essay *Jadugari dar Iran* (witchcraft in Iran), he wrote that “we may ridicule and laugh at the magic and exorcism operations of Iranian and Chaldean magi, but we shouldn’t forget that the practical experience and scientific theories of these same magi were the precursors of contemporary science,” in which he included “magnetism and hypnotism” (Hedayat 1967:364).

<sup>32</sup> Jafr is a system of numerology not unlike Gematria in the Jewish Kabbalah. See Fahd (2006a, 2006b).

<sup>33</sup> “Magic squares.” See Cammann (1969a, 1969b).

<sup>34</sup> A small booklet on *raml* is attributed to Tabatabai, but the attribution is controversial. The book was edited and published in 2004 (twenty-three years after Tabatabai’s death) by a cleric and rammal in Qom. Two years later, the

translated as a “magic square”) consisting of a numerical distribution of the verse *bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim* (“In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”) is useful in “warding off jinn and [curing] people possessed by jinn” (Hosseini Tehrani 2004:366).

The vilification of the rammal, then, is not everywhere the same as the denigration of raml or other strange sciences. Such sciences may be legitimately learned and practiced by the knowledgeable, particularly among those already steeped in jurisprudence, philosophy, and mysticism. Rammals on the other hand, as known and encountered by ordinary people for the purpose of solving everyday problems, are usually depicted as charlatans or delusional. This ambivalence may be glimpsed in jurists’ official opinions on raml and other strange sciences. In June 2009, I sent an *estefta*’ (a request for a legal opinion) to the offices of all the major Shi‘i *maraje’-e taqlid* (sources of emulation; singular *marja’-e taqlid*) asking them to clarify whether learning and practicing raml, among other strange sciences, was permissible according to Islamic law. I have reproduced a translation of my question below:

Salam alaykom,

Is the study and learning of strange sciences such as jafr, raml, ’owfaq, and the sciences of talismans and amulets permissible according to the *shari’at*? If the study of these sciences is permissible, what is the status [of permissibility] of their practice according to the *shari’at*?

Thank you and with best wishes for your health and a long life.

Over the course of a few weeks, I received responses from most of the jurists’ offices. Only one, the office of Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Sistani (the most widely followed jurist in Iraq, who maintains a large following among other Shi‘a communities, including in Iran), replied in what

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man was prosecuted by the Special Court for Clergy on charges of fraud and other crimes related to his professional practice of raml and do‘anevisi, including “spreading lies” through his published books.



would seem to be an unambiguous negative: “It is not credible” (*e‘tebar nadarad*). Even so, the opinion makes no comment as to whether engaging with these sciences is *permissible*, as I had asked. The other replies were more equivocal. As is clear below, they all attempt to strike a balance between permissiveness and caution (translations mine):

**The Office of Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei** (currently supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran): What currently exists of these sciences among the people are mostly not reliable to the point that they would lead to certainty and assurance about the discovery of unseen [*ghaybi*] affairs and news about them; however, learning sciences like jafr and raml correctly is alright with the condition that there is no corruption attendant on them.

**The Office of Ayatollah Yusef Sane‘i** (a jurist close to reformist and opposition politicians): One must not spend one's life on these kinds of sciences, and if they entail *haram* actions, they are *haram*. One must not pursue these activities and make them a source of obtaining livelihood, and one must abandon these activities. Some of these activities are also certainly *haram*.

**The Office of Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi** (a jurist with close connections to conservative politicians): Given that the science of jafr is not known in its complete form by people other than the infallibles [e.g. the prophets and imams], and that its incomplete form does not have much effect, it is not approved and you shouldn't pursue it. [The response made no direct comment on raml]

**The Office of Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpayegani**: Learning these kinds of sciences is unnecessary for most persons, and some of them are even forbidden. What is necessary is to learn [what is] *halal* and *haram* in religion and to perfect religious knowledge.

**The Office of Ayatollah Sayyed Abdolkarim Musavi Ardebili** (a jurist close to reformist and opposition politicians): Learning the strange sciences, including jafr and raml, with methods that are not forbidden in the *shari‘at*, is alright in itself. Practicing it, too, as long as it is not through *haram* actions and does not require bothering or harming others, is alright in itself. However, one must note that the vast majority of those who claim to possess these sciences are either lying or delusional.

**The Office of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri** (a widely respected dissident jurist. He died in December 2009): Studying and learning the mentioned strange sciences is alright in itself as long as they are not used to commit actions that are against the *shari‘at*.

The overall impression that emerges from these responses is that it is not forbidden to learn and practice raml, jafr, and some other strange sciences; and yet, it is not a good idea to do so. Still, if one is adamant, one should proceed with caution, maintaining distance from actions that are unambiguously forbidden (harming others, engaging in illicit sexual conduct, defiling the Qur‘an, and so on), recognizing that most of the knowledge and practice that exists on the subject is unreliable, and keeping in mind that the majority of those who claim to possess occult knowledge are charlatans or mentally ill.

The ambiguity that marks attitudes toward raml and the rammal needs to be understood in relation to two prevailing and interrelated dichotomies: First, licit versus illicit appeals to the supernatural, and second, true supernatural power versus charlatanry. I want to argue that both of these dichotomies are unstable, and that, rather than clearly designating signposts by which hesitations about the truth or falsity, licitness or illicitness of particular extraordinary phenomena may be resolved, they in fact serve to sustain the uncertainty and prolong its irresolution. I will call this hesitation the “strangeness” of strange science.

The illicit manipulation of hidden or extraordinary forces is most commonly known among Muslims as *sehr*, or, in Persian, *jadu*. A famous hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad has him saying that “The fixed punishment [*hadd*] for the sorcerer [*saher*] is a blow of the sword” (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr 1993:240-244). While jurists disagree over the precise circumstances that would warrant such an extreme punishment (some say it should be reserved for when a sorcerer kills another with his witchcraft, or when he claims prophethood. See *ibid*), there is little dispute that *sehr* is forbidden (*haram*). But to say that the illicit deployment of extraordinary forces is forbidden is a mere tautology. Just what is *sehr*? It should already be clear that among the Shi‘a, not every form of occult knowledge or practice is forbidden. In other

words, *sehr* is only a subcategory of the strange sciences. And yet, not every jurist forbids every form of *sehr*. So even the equation of *sehr* with “illicit appeals to the supernatural” is problematic.

Reza Ramezan Nargesi has a useful discussion of Shi‘i jurisprudential views on *sehr* (2000). The upshot of his discussion is that *sehr* is forbidden in three cases: When harm is done to someone; when some form of deception is involved; and when there is some disrespect to the “sacred” (presumably through defiling the Qur‘an, cursing the prophet, and so on, although the author does not make this explicit) (ibid:67-71). *Sehr* used to counter the ill effects of other *sehr* is normally not forbidden. And neither is *sehr* put to use for “correct objectives” like “locating [something or someone] missing,” or “conquering the lands of infidels” (ibid:71). So *sehr* seems to be forbidden only when it is deployed for forbidden purposes, or when it requires forbidden actions. In practical situations, however, it is seldom easy to ascertain whether a particular instance of *sehr* meets these criteria. For example, one of my interlocutors, a man in his forties, obtained a prayer prescription from a *do‘anevis* to bring his wife back home after she had left him and moved in with her parents. Was the *do‘anevis* doing the man good and doing the woman harm? Was he doing them both good? Or harming both by prolonging an unhealthy marriage? Mersedeh, a *do‘anevis* I will introduce in the next chapter, told me that she regularly wrote prayer prescriptions for women who were worried about the infidelity of their husbands. To do this, she had to ritually bind (*bastan*) each man, to render him unattractive to other women. Clearly this is an instance of harm. But Mersedeh was also preserving a marriage. Forbidden or not? We are in the realm of equivocation. And so the jurist will say “stay away,” but cannot easily rule the practice “forbidden.”

The difficulty in clearly distinguishing licit from illicit *sehr* enhances the importance of the second dichotomy: true supernatural efficacy versus fraud. “The vast majority of those who claim to possess these sciences,” says the statement from Ayatollah Musavi Ardebili’s office, “are either lying or delusional.” This scholarly opinion, and the others above, may be read as simultaneously highlighting and obfuscating a persistent complexity at the heart of most serious formulations of the strange sciences among Muslim thinkers: that is, the inseparability of true supernatural magic from illusion and charlatany. The first sign of this kinship is present in Arabic definitions of *sehr*. The *Al-Mufradat* of Abul Qasem Al-Husayn Ragheb Isfahani (d. 1108/1109), a well-known lexicon of Qur’anic vocabulary, defines *sehr* as, among other things (1992:400-401):

- “Deceptions and fantasies without reality, like what a conjurer does to mislead the eyes by sleight of hand, or what a rumor-monger does by ornate speech to preoccupy the ears.”
- “Procuring the assistance of Satan by means of approaching him.”
- “What some believe to be the power to transform appearances and natures, like turning a human into a donkey, but there is no reality to this.”
- “Sometimes *sehr* is meant as beauty, as in [a hadith quoted from the prophet that] ‘some rhetoric is *sehr*.’ And sometimes it means the precision of action, as when physicians say ‘nature is a *saher* [a doer of *sehr*].’”

*Sehr*, for Ragheb Isfahani, encompasses what we might call supernatural magic, which is aided by devils, as well as sleight of hand and illusions. Reza Ramezan Nargesi cites the following additional meanings for *sehr* from other Arabic lexicons (2000:66):

- Deception, trickery, jugglery, and sleight of hand
- Those things whose elements are invisible and mysterious

The ambivalence also attends interpretations of the Qur’anic attitude to *sehr*. As Ramezan Nargesi notes, there are scholars, principally among the Shi’a, who believe that all *sehr* is

superstition. As proof, they rely on the story of Moses' contest with Pharaoh's sorcerers, particularly verse 116 of Surah Al-A'raf (The Heights):

Said Moses: "Throw ye [your ropes]." So when they threw, they bewitched the eyes of the people, and struck terror into them: for they showed a great (feat of) sehr.

According to the interpreters, "in reality, nothing was created [in the sorcerers' feat]. Rather, they had used special tricks and sleight of hand, so that the spectators imagined that the strings and ropes [of the sorcerers] had turned into real snakes" (ibid:69). On the other hand, those interpreters who argue for the reality of sehr usually refer to verse 102 of Surah Al-Baqara (The Cow), about sehr among the followers of Solomon:

They followed what the evil ones gave out (falsely) against the power of Solomon: the blasphemers were, not Solomon, but the evil ones, teaching men sehr, and such things as came down at Babylon to the angels Harut and Marut. But neither of these [two angels] taught anyone (such things) without saying: "We're only for trial; so do not blaspheme." They learned from [the two angels] the means to sow discord between man and wife. But they could not thus harm anyone except by God's permission. And they learned what harmed them, not what profited them. And they knew that the buyers of (sehr) would have no share in the happiness of the Hereafter. And vile was the price for which they did sell their souls, if they but knew!

Here, the interpreters will point out that the Israelites used the methods of sorcery they had learned from the angels Harut and Marut to hurt each other and separate husbands and wives (ibid). Still, the scholars arguing that all sehr is illusion would partially explain this verse through a psychological account. Ramezan Nargesi writes (ibid):

[Mohammad Baqer] Majlesi [d. 1699] says: Most scholars are of the belief that sehr is superstition. As for why it is efficacious, no one denies the effect of sehr. But to explain it, they say: If the bewitched knows that someone has bewitched him, the illusion of being bewitched will lead to the appearance of the results of sehr in him; like suggestion [talqin] to the sick. But if he doesn't know at all that he has been bewitched, although none of the scholars have denied this kind of effect, they have no explanation for it, other

than saying that these actions are the result of employing jinn and devils against the bewitched person.

A more systematic account of *sehr* is provided by the 14<sup>th</sup> century Maghrebi judge, historian, and social scientist Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), in his monumental *Muqaddima*. Ibn Khaldun describes three categories of *sehr* based on the quality of the sorcerer's "magical ability" (1967:158-159):

The first (kind) exercises its influence merely through mental power, without any instrument or aid. This is what the philosophers call sorcery.

The second (kind) exercises its influence with the aid of the temper of the spheres and the elements, or with the aid of the properties of numbers. This is called talismans. It is weaker in degree than the first (kind).

The third (kind) exercises its influence upon the powers of the imagination. The person who exercises this kind of influence relies upon the powers of imagination. He is somehow active in them. He plants among them different sorts of phantasms, images, and pictures, whichever he intends to use. Then, he brings them down to the level of the sensual perception of the observers with the help of the power of his soul that exercises an influence over that (sensual perception). As a result, the (phantasms, etc.) appear to the observers to exist in the external world, while, in fact, there is nothing (of the sort). For instance, a person is said to have seen gardens, rivers, and castles, while, in fact, there was nothing of the sort. This is what the philosophers call "prestidigitation" (*sha 'wadhah* or *shah 'badhah*).

For Ibn Khaldun, *sehr* can be true and illusory at the same time. The sorcerer may exert real mental or talismanic force to create some external effect, or he may manipulate existing forces to create phantasms that have no existence outside of the mind. Although Ibn Khaldun does not describe the specific processes and techniques of prestidigitation, it is safe to assume that he meant both processes that we might call "supernatural" (those that involve jinn, appeals to astral forces, and so on) and those that employ the natural properties of objects and their "sympathetic qualities" (*khawass*, see Ullmann 2006) or involve stealthy physical movements and sleight of hand.

A still more detailed and nuanced articulation of illusory magic may be found in a treatise by the 15<sup>th</sup> century moralist and exegete Hossein Va‘ez Kashefi (d. 1504/1505) titled *Asrar-e qasemi* (The secrets of Qasem). For Kashefi, illusions, jugglery, and sleight of hand tricks represent different aspects or categories of occult science (*olum-e khafiyeh*), alongside astrology, alchemy, and talismanic magic. One of his five categories of occult science, *simiya*, is “the science of illusions” (*elm-e khiyalat*) with which imaginations are manipulated “to create imaginary appearances that have no external existence” (Kashefi n.d.:4). Its procedures include manipulations of bones, ashes, and inks, the control of jinn, the deployment of talismans and magic formulas, and invocations addressed to the stars (Lory 2003:532). A master of this science can change his appearance, make himself invisible, appear to be engulfed in flames, or seem to levitate, fly, or walk on water. He can, moreover, make the sun disappear during the day and make it appear during the night, or create the appearance of leaves on a dried up tree, or lightning, rain, and snow in the sky.

Another category of occult science, *rimiya*, is the science of jugglery or prestidigitation (*sha‘badhat*), which consists of “knowing the forces of earthly essences and combining them to produce strange actions” (Kashefi n.d.:4). As with *simiya*, we are dealing here primarily with appearances and psychological effects, although the forces harnessed in *rimiya* are earthly and natural, as opposed to the subtle and spiritual forces of the more powerful *simiya* (Lory 2003:535). The practitioner of *rimiya* is able to induce artificial laughter or weeping, put people to sleep, or make women dance. He can transform the appearances of people in a room to look like angels, donkeys, or camels, and to perform other feats that amuse and impress. But within *rimiya*, there are other procedures more explicitly concerned with deception and trickery, or what Kashefi calls *dokuk va hiyal* (ruses), through which “one can make a profit and obtain goods or

wealth” (Kashefi n.d.:82), no doubt from gullible victims. He calls his first example the “ruse of astrologers” (*hiyal al-monajjemin*):

When they perform an [astrological] reading for someone, they will tell them that there is still a weakness in your fortune and the star that belongs to such-and-such organ in your body is weak, and if you want to ascertain this, I will make your likeness in wax and you put it in a bowl of water and place it on the roof, and look at it in the morning, if that organ is ruined you will know that the judgment of astrology is true and that I am truthful in my speech. Then [the astrologer will] make a likeness out of wax and place a stick of [graphical code inserted in place of the substance<sup>35</sup>] in place of the relevant organ and cover it with a thin layer of wax and give it to [the customer]. When he places the likeness in water, along with the noted substance, that organ will be corrupted and the person will be perplexed. The astrologer will, thanks to the ruse, get something from him and write him an amulet.

In the same section, Kashefi treats the ruses of thieves who use various “strange” tricks to steal.

This includes methods for silencing guard dogs, and techniques for calming livestock and changing the color of their coats in order to lead them away from their owners undetected.

Taken as a whole, then, the strange sciences are not a set of true and efficacious procedures and techniques that are ideally distinguishable from tricks, illusions, and charlatanry. Rather, they *integrate* techniques of deception as one of their principal modes. The astrologer has real astral forces at his disposal which he channels through rituals, invocations, and the construction of talismans, but he also has ruses up his sleeve with which he dupes his customers and takes their money. Contemporary discussions of the strange sciences rarely mention this complexity at the heart of occult knowledge and practice. Instead, they insist on a distinction between true occult ability – possessed in ideal form by prophets, imams, and some of their elect disciples, and, in weaker form, by a small number of specialists – and the deceptions of charlatans and quacks.

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<sup>35</sup> Kashefi makes extensive use of codes to hide the names of substances and ingredients to keep them from falling into the hands of the unqualified (Kashefi n.d.:5).



## Performing Rationality

Given the prevailing ambiguities over just what counts as a true and licit appeal to the supernatural, what are we to make of the severe public denunciations of rammals? As I have already shown, these denunciations cannot be taken as expressions of some coherent epistemological or ideological disavowal of the science of raml, or other strange sciences to which the rammal lays claim. Nor, on the other hand, would it be appropriate to see them as condemnation of specifically *fraudulent* claims to an otherwise true science. None of the journalistic accounts of criminal rammals care to distinguish true raml from fake raml, as a jurist might. The rammal and the charlatan are one, and their equivalence is taken to be self-evident.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than search for a coherent propositional commitment behind such denunciations – one that would make a clear position on distinctions, or lack thereof, between true and false raml, the genuine occultist and the fraudster – it would be more appropriate to think of these denunciations as performances. In the broadest sense, one object of these performances is to constitute and denigrate superstition (*khorafat*). In the process, an amorphous notion of rationality (*aqlaniyat*) is also asserted and valorized, though only by negation, and rarely through any direct reference. On the one hand, we have a performative, indexical construction of the social bearers of rationality – the policemen who uphold it, the jurists and public commentators who defend it, and the journalists who inform and educate the public of its necessity. On the other hand, we have a performative abjection of the rammal as the embodiment of irrationality, who, as criminal and madman, must be locked up, restrained, and kept apart from society. Finally, the victims of superstition and irrationality find their ideal expression in the figures of

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<sup>36</sup> The same newspapers and television stations that denigrate rammals hold jurists, their knowledge, and expertise in high esteem. But the notion that a true science of raml might exist, and that some respected jurists practice it, does not ordinarily enter into their discussions of superstition.

gullible young women, who substitute – synecdochally – for all of society as that which must be protected from the designs of the rammals. In this way, not only is a gendered order of rationality and irrationally upheld, but *gullibility* itself – that weakness in every social being to fall prey to the contrivances of charlatans – is feminized.

On another level, these performances of rationality both assert and dramatize state authority and surveillance over its subjects. The rammal is among a class of professionals whose practice is unregulated by any bureaucracy and escapes the gaze of any disciplinary apparatus. This resistance to state regulation can be glimpsed in the spatial organization of rammals' practices. There are no shops or businesses where rammals may legitimately sell their services. Their profession is almost always based in their private residence. Moreover, the rammals I met usually lived outside of the city, on its extreme fringes, or in lower-class neighborhoods, far removed from the business, cultural, and political centers. Even at a distance, the rammals are often spatially unsettled: They move around frequently, changing their addresses. Some say they do this to avoid state surveillance. Newspaper reports about rammal crime tell a similar story, explaining the difficulty of tracking down a certain criminal because he changes his address frequently. Stories of rammal crime, then, allow the state to perform its triumphant image of a total power that extends its arms of justice and care to every corner of society, and weeds out even the most slippery of its adversaries.

An example of such a performance can be seen in a television report, and subsequent newspaper accounts, about the arrest of a rammal in Tehran on May 17, 2009. The report was first broadcast on state television's Channel 2 news show at 8:30 PM, which styles itself a more contemporary, fast-paced, and aggressive program compared to the standard, slow, and dry fare available on other channels. "20:30," as it is called (*bist-o si*), regularly tackles controversial

social and political stories and addresses a young, educated audience. On May 17, a report showed a 20:30 journalist striding into the apartment of a rammal, accompanied by his film crew. At the outset, the police officers who would arrest the rammal lurked somewhere in the background, invisible, announced only by a caption that read “Agents enter charlatan’s home.” There was no ambiguity about the fact that the news crew had police authorization to interview the rammal before he was taken away. It was also clear that the rammal was aware of the police presence, since he willingly responded to every question, no matter how condescending.

Snippets of the interview followed:

*Caption: Rammal taking advantage of people’s beliefs.*

Reporter: Do you have contact with jinn?

Rammal (*nods vigorously*): Definitely.

Reporter: So why didn’t these jinn tell you that the [police] agents would be coming here just now?

Rammal (*repeats the question, as if surprised*): Why didn’t the jinn tell me that the agents would be coming here?

*Scene cuts to a shot of the rammal leafing through a prayer book.*

Reporter: Is this one of your prayers sir? Can I touch it?

Rammal (*hands him the prayer*): Look, you need to watch out. I’m telling you seriously. Don’t mock these things. (*raises voice*) I’m telling you seriously.

*Video skips ahead. Reporter reading from the prayer prescription, mid-sentence.*

Reporter: “[...] put with the jinn and obtain response.” (*turns to rammal*) You mean the jinn respond to this?

Rammal: To me, yes.

Reporter: They make a mark on the page?

Rammal: They respond to ME.

*Report skips ahead again. Now we see the rammal showing the reporter a small photo album. He points at what appears to be a picture of a cat.*

Rammal: One of my movakkels [jinn agents] who had gone into [the cat] passed away, God bless him.

Reporter: A cat?

Rammal (*leans forward to speak loudly into the microphone*): Yeah!

*Fast forward again. Rammal is now speaking with panache. The news team have gathered around, watching with amusement.*

Rammal: A jinn can enter into the skin of a cat! A jinn can enter... a goat. A jinn can enter you yourself!

*Cut to another scene. Rammal reads from his appointment book.*

Rammal: On Sundays I have [appointments for] opening fortunes [*bakht goshayi*]. I even have [appointments for] talismans and exorcisms.

Reporter: What does that mean, talismans and exorcisms?

Rammal: It means we cancel their talismans. We exorcise their jinn.

*Video skips ahead.*

Reporter: I've heard that you also do telepathy.

Rammal: I don't do telepathy. I FLY. I fly to wherever I like.

*Video skips ahead again. Now the rammal is standing.*

Reporter: Where is your vase?

Rammal (*points at a vase near the wall*): It's right there. Turn off the lights and take out [the jinn] if you can.

Reporter (*now standing above a vase decorated with blinking, multicolored lights*): What is this vase?

Rammal: There are jinn in that vase. Touch it if you can.

Reporter (*interrupts him*): There are jinn in this vase?

Rammal: Touch it and take it out if you can.

*The reporter now addresses the camera.*

Reporter: He is telling us that this vase is a vase of jinn. Pick it up if you can, he says, and see what consequences will befall you.

*The reporter is shown touching the lights on the vase, now turned off. He takes out a pouch and some sticks. Video skips ahead to show the vase lying on the ground. The reporter overturns it to empty its contents. Something resembling sand pours out onto the rug.*

Reporter: See, this thing was full of nails and...

*Video skips ahead again. Rammal explains his fee structure.*

Rammal: It starts with five thousand tomans [about five dollars]. If the talisman is really heavy and affects the entire family, it could go up to a million one hundred [1,100 dollars].

Reporter: You suggested to our friend that it could cost up to twenty or twenty-five million.

Rammal (*raises voice*): No! I said that's what it is in the market. He's lying!

In what remains of the report, we see the rammal again showing a picture of a cat, this time on his cell phone, and claiming that the cat was inhabited by a jinn. The reporter is unmoved and mocks the rammal. In another brief scene, he tells the reporter that, God-willing, he will spread a “dining-cloth of talismans” (*sofre-ye telesmat*) for him, so that “his faith will be strengthened.”<sup>37</sup> Immediately, the report cuts to a scene of the reporter holding a plastic bag in his hand. He asks the rammal if it contains opium. The rammal is defiant, accusing the reporters of planting the drugs. In the final scene, a police officer appears on camera. He explains that there have been twenty complaints against the rammal, for fraud. The police will hold the man for some time to allow other victims to come forward and lodge their complaints. He instructs viewers to “take care so that they are not duped by such individuals and do not give their money away to them.”

The investigative journalist in this report performs a rationalist debunking of the rammal. He mocks and teases him, exposes his ludicrous claims, and shows everyone that his “vase of

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<sup>37</sup> Descriptions of this ritual will appear in the next chapter.

jinn” is full of sand and nails. He accuses him of charging people millions of tomans for his antics. He charges him with drug possession. On the other hand, the rammal is presented as a boastful charlatan, or a madman. His looks are somewhat eccentric: Long curly black hair and salt-and-pepper mustache and beard – the appearance of a darvish, which is a title he has adopted. He speaks with drama and force. But through quick editing and multiple cuts, the reporters have reduced his speech to half-witted ramblings. He never speaks more than a sentence or two without being cut off, either by the reporter who interrupts him or the editor who cuts to the next scene. If he is allowed to speak, it is to let him make a fool out of himself. In the conclusion, the police officer who will arrest the rammal speaks in a clear, calm, measured tone. He does not engage with any of the rammal’s claims. He only explains the facts of the case and instructs the public to avoid such characters. Women do not appear in the report, except one or two customers standing in the background. But printed newspaper reports that followed the television broadcast mentioned that the majority of the rammal’s customers were “women and girls.” A few news websites, beginning with the television-owned *Jam-e Jam*, uploaded the video and introduced it with a mocking caption: “We must now wait and see if the rammal’s jinn friends can open the locks of the jail so that he can fly out and escape prison.”

Another dramatic performance of the abjection of superstition appeared in news reports about the conviction and execution of Mohammad Hosseinzadeh Abujasi in 2007. On September 11 of that year, Hosseinzadeh, 49, was publicly hanged in Qom after being convicted of “spreading corruption on earth” (*efsad f’el-arz*). The accusations against him, as recounted in the press, included more than seventy counts of adultery (*zena*), sexual abuse, and rape, as well as possession of pornographic material, spreading corruption and prostitution (*fesad va fahsha*), insulting the shrines of the infallible imams, and claiming falsely to be the promised Imam

Mahdi. As if to round out his history of criminality, a prosecutor announced that Hosseinzadeh had been convicted of murder in his youth, but was forgiven by his victim's family and hence spared the death penalty. A few years prior to his most recent arrest, he had served a one-year prison term and received ninety-nine lashes for a sexual crime (his accuser was a twenty-year-old girl). Later, he had been imprisoned again for sexually abusing his own teenage daughter, but released when his daughter retracted her complaint.

Formerly a construction worker, Hosseinzadeh had reportedly learned raml from a coworker and decided it would be a more lucrative undertaking than the job he had held. Calling himself *Darvish*, he used raml to “defraud customers” who came to him for help, mainly “gullible girls” (*dokhtaran-e sadeh-lowh*) who sought magical assistance in matters of love and marriage. He charged them excessive sums of money (in one reported case he charged a woman 500,000 tomans – roughly the equivalent of \$500 at the time). He asked some of them to remove their clothes so that he could write “obscure lines” (*khotut-e namaqhum*) on their bodies with saffron ink – an indispensable part of his magical remedy, he claimed.<sup>38</sup> Occasionally, he drugged and tranquilized his customers and proceeded to have intercourse with them. If they protested, once they found out what had happened, he would explain that his supreme spiritual stature of *morshed* (mystic guide) had rendered all women *mahram* to him, which meant sex was divinely sanctioned. Moreover, penetration was necessary, he said, if he were to drive out the evil influences with which the fortunes of these women had been bound (*basteh*). If his victims still complained, he threatened to destroy their lives with witchcraft.

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<sup>38</sup> Some newspapers printed a similar complaint by one of the female accusers of the rammal who appeared in the television report above.

Hosseinzadeh's public execution received substantial coverage in the press. Headlines highlighted his occupational identity as rammal and jadugar (witch), rather than his specific crimes: "Rammal Executed in Qom," one headline declared. "Photographs of Execution of Black Jadugar in Qom," said another. A third headline proclaimed dramatically, "Black Witchcraft Sends Rammal to the Gallows." A photograph showed a police officer blindfolding Hosseinzadeh as onlookers snapped shots with their cell phones. Another showed an officer tightening the noose around his neck as he stood blindfolded, hands tied behind his back. Others displayed his body dangling lifeless from a mechanical crane, his head tilted toward his left shoulder, as a small crowd looked on. One image captured his limp silhouette against a soft gray glow, creating a halo effect that in a different context might have befit a martyr.

In the press, Hosseinzadeh was presented as an obscure figure manifestly marginal to the ideal educated, urban center. There was no information about his roots. All the public was told was that he committed his ghastly crimes in Qom, Varamin, and Pakdasht – the latter two towns being industrial and agricultural satellites of Tehran with large communities of migrant workers. Hosseinzadeh was himself a construction worker with little or no education ("illiterate," declared one official in the prosecutor's office), and no understanding of religion or mysticism. Even what he knew of raml was copied from someone else (a nameless coworker – more obscure and insignificant than Hosseinzadeh). The lines that he wrote on women's bodies were likewise obscure, incomprehensible (*namafhum*). But out of obscurity, the rammal created wondrous illusions of grandeur: He was a great mystic, perhaps an Imam. His magical lines would cure illness and misfortune. His penis would drive away the menace of jinn.

The rammal's creation was a fraud. He took advantage of "people's beliefs." He cultivated superstition. By thus duping his hapless customers, he could satisfy his own dirty



sexual desires. He raped and abused. If only for the latter crimes, he deserved a public execution, to be photographed and broadcast throughout the country. But his corpse, rendered spectacle and example, was not just the abject body of a rapist punished by the society he had violated. It was the corpse of charlatanism and superstition. As the newspaper Ebtekar put it, “The criminal jadugar was hanged on the gallows of punishment before the bewildered eyes of his victims, their families, a large group of people, and judicial and police officials, *so that he might become an example for other conniving rammals who toy with the people* [emphasis mine].”

### **Toying with the Rammal?**

Given that police officials are the most publicly visible adversaries of rammals, one would imagine that they would be least likely to be duped into employing their services. My conversations with individuals with experience in law enforcement, however, paint a rather more complicated picture. Here I will recount one such conversation from late June 2009, with Brigadier General Ali Shirazi, an officer of the police force who had retired in 2007 after more than two decades of service in various posts across the country. In the final years of his police career, he had been appointed deputy chief for criminal investigations in charge of one of the most populous and urbanized provinces in Iran. His experience and views will allow us to examine some of the ambivalences that haunt demarcations of the superstitious from the rational and the properly Islamic.

I had asked Mr. Shirazi to explain to me the “criminological dimensions” of do‘anevisi and rammali. That is, I wanted to know when a rammal was normally considered to be a problem for law enforcement, and how the police specifically viewed such individuals. Mr. Shirazi began

by arguing that a distinction must be made between specialist (*takhassosi*) and popular (*avamaneh*) approaches to raml:

I don't know if you know this or not, but the sciences of *raml* and *jafr* are in our *shari'at*.<sup>39</sup> Some people trace them back to Imam Ali. Raml and jafr and the like are real and they are acceptable. The results... how do I put this, the results that can be derived from [studying] numbers, are a reality. Part of this is in the science of raml, and part of it is in jafr. As far as do'anevisi is concerned, there are certain beliefs in our shari'at. The Qur'an itself is said to be a cure. We are told to recite various chapters in order to achieve certain results. Or people who believe in the *Nur* verse obtain important results from reciting it. We have to make a distinction between the specialized dimension and the popular dimension of these things. The specialist dimension pertains to people who are knowledgeable about the Qur'an, who know the science of jafr and have studied it as a science. The criminal and judicial cases that have been opened into these matters all deal with a domain that is outside the specialized dimension. There are some people who take advantage of the pure beliefs that people have,<sup>40</sup> in order to make a living. They know a few things about the science of raml, they know part of it, and they use that to make money.

So far the distinction between specialized and popular seems to hinge on three things:

Knowledge of the Qur'an, the correctness of the knowledge of occult science, and the attitude toward money. The specialist (*motekhasses*) knows the Qur'an intimately (including its healing effects and so on), has learned the occult sciences methodically and properly, and will not ask for financial compensation. The popular rammal who is arrested by the police does not know the Qur'an, has not properly studied the occult sciences (even though he or she may know a few things about them), and yet takes payment for his or her services. In Mr. Shirazi's various examples, the figure that came closest to an unambiguous image of this popular charlatan was the gypsy fortuneteller. After telling me in some detail about research he had conducted for the

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<sup>39</sup> Shari'at refers to the body of Islamic law. However, I believe that Mr. Shirazi was here using shari'at as shorthand for more than just law. That is, he wasn't merely stating that raml and jafr are legally permissible, but that they have positive religious significance, including as channels to occult knowledge reserved in their most perfect form for the twelve imams.

<sup>40</sup> The problems created by the popular form of raml all depend on two things, according to Mr. Shirazi: First, that it is based on people's (justified) beliefs (*e'teqadat*), and second, that people are simple (*sadeh*).

National Security Council on the *Fiuj* group of Iranian gypsies (see Digard 2002), he recounted the following story about his encounter with a palm-reading gypsy woman in Neyshabur, near Mashhad:

My family and I were visiting the tomb of Kamal al-Molk in Neyshabur. There was a gypsy palm reader there who insisted on reading my fortune. Just for fun, I said fine, read my palm. She took a look at me and said “velvet-mustache! [*sibil makhmali*] I see something written on the forehead of one of your children” [that is, she had seen something in the child’s fate, which she proceeded to explain]. My children were there with me, with my wife. And I was laughing. I had done this only for laughs. But then I saw that my wife was starting to believe it! I told her, look, they understand some things based on our appearance, and then they say things based on what they have understood. They may say four things that are correct and a lot of things that are incorrect. Why do you see only the things that are correct and ignore the ones that are incorrect? Sometimes the fortune-tellers are able to discern things based on their prior knowledge. For example, they might say “I see a sadness in your face.” Well if the person is sad, it’s possible that there will be some visible trace of it in his face.

The gypsy woman had no knowledge of raml or jafr, but was able to read people’s fortunes by recourse to her social intelligence and by interpreting cues from her customers. On the other hand, even partial knowledge of raml and jafr can go a long way. According to Mr. Shirazi, with “just a little bit of knowledge of raml,” a person who has no prior knowledge of one’s background can “easily and accurately” discover the number of one’s siblings, one’s marital status, the number of one’s children, and their genders. But the rammal of imperfect knowledge goes on to use this information to dupe his customers and cause major family problems, for example by telling a woman that “‘your husband’s eyes are seeking after another woman,’ when really all the man has been doing is to visit his mother’s house without wanting to let his wife know about it.” In addition to this, Mr. Shirazi told me that rammals have encouraged the spread of corruption and prostitution (*fesad va fahsha*). “In Qom, for example,” he said, “a lot of women have been duped, robbed, and humiliated by getting dragged into shameful things.” We have

already seen what these shameful things refer to. For now, the important point to emphasize is that for Mr. Shirazi, these ills follow from partial knowledge of the occult, as well as from ignorance of the Qur'an, which would presumably act as a spiritual and moral restraint on the true specialist. "To summarize," he told me:

People use numerous tricks, immoral methods, sleights, and ruses, in order to deceive. The boundary is that the person who really knows the sciences of raml and jafar, is not up to the business of rammali and taking money. The person who really knows witchcraft, is not up to the business of destroying people's lives. The person who is really immersed in mysticism does not enter these kinds of games. The person who has by nature [*fetrat*] attained these matters, keeps them to himself so that it is not known about him until after he dies.

So how is one to distinguish between the specialized and the popular? According to Mr. Shirazi, it has not been possible to properly delineate the two in society, because "it's not such an easy task to make a distinction." Sure one can point out the rapist rammal as the ideal charlatan, and the spiritually-elevated mystic as the ideal possessor of occult knowledge. But between these two figures lies a vast chasm of ambiguity, where, as Mr. Shirazi put it, "it has all become mixed up, so that it's difficult for people to distinguish one from another. They see one thing that works, and they start believing in the person."

Perhaps it is in navigating this very ambiguity, this difficulty in distinguishing the specialist from the charlatan, that the prudent, rational man can set himself apart from the gullible superstitious woman. In Mr. Shirazi's own account of his encounter with the gypsy palm reader, we see him emerge as the wise and incredulous one, who, even while having fun with the gypsy, has to upbraid his impressionable wife for believing her lies. And yet, Mr. Shirazi

admitted with exasperation, “I am like that too.” That is, he too found it difficult to distinguish. He too had “believed” when he had seen things that “worked.”

As it turned out, his stories about such uncertain and problematic cases outnumbered both the definitively true and the unambiguously fraudulent. One of his encounters involved Mr. Alavi, a quiet, middle aged cleric in Qom and a well-known practitioner of the occult sciences. Mr. Shirazi thought of him as an “undisputed master of raml and jafr.” He said he “believed partly in his knowledge” because “I’ve seen that he can give you information using raml; he can read information about your life circumstances, and even give you information about the future, from raml.” He thought that it was the specialist knowledge of people like Mr. Alavi that had “created the grounds for misuse by a group of people: The fact that this science [of raml] exists and that it can be utilized, has made it possible for some people to take advantage of it for their own greed.” Mr. Shirazi had much respect for the cleric. He called his cell phone to introduce me to him and to ask if the two of us could visit him later that day in Tehran. He told him that he “missed him” and wanted to see him in person. When we met, I saw Mr. Shirazi extend the kind of humble courtesy to Mr. Alavi (who was more than a decade his junior) that many pious Iranians show the clergy.

Yet Mr. Alavi is precisely the kind of rammal who would be denigrated in public discourse. A few years earlier, two of the senior maraje‘ in Qom had filed complaints against him after he had acquired a large following and established a *hosaynieh* for religious ceremonies. He was eventually tried by the Special Court for Clergy (*dadgah-e vizhe-ye ruhaniyat*) in Qom, imprisoned for a short period, fined, and defrocked for five years. He had moved to Tehran in order to recuperate and to avoid further harassment as he continued his practice on a much smaller scale. Mr. Alavi’s renown had grown enough to draw attention from the press. In 2009,

shortly after I met him, a special edition of a widely circulating state-owned newspaper focusing on “newly emerging deviant cults” devoted three pages to him without using his full name.

Titled “Rammali in the Garb of People of Knowledge,” the report accused Mr. Alavi of “taking advantage of people’s religious emotions,” extorting them, and engaging in various forms of fraudulent activity. The article mocked his religious education and even his handwriting, saying that he had not learned much in his years at the howzeh in Qom, but had instead engaged, as he had claimed in an interview in 2004, in “research into matters pertaining to jinn for thirty years.”<sup>41</sup> The report concluded by describing the 2006 indictment against Mr. Alavi and the eventual court verdict. The charges against him included:

- 1- Defrauding the plaintiffs in the case.
- 2- Spreading lies with the intention of disturbing public minds through the publication and distribution of books.
- 3- Forging genealogies [claiming descent from the Prophet] for some individuals.
- 4- Committing haram [forbidden] actions through usurping the titles of *‘aref* [mystic], *salek* [spiritual wayfarer], *ayatollah*, etc by publishing various photographs of himself.
- 5- Keeping and watching sexually explicit CDs.
- 6- Keeping and using satellite equipment.
- 7- Publishing books without permit.
- 8- Violating the dignity of the clergy.

After deliberation, the judge had convicted him of acquiring illegitimate wealth, spreading lies, creating false genealogies, keeping and using satellite equipment, and committing haram actions (presumably referring to item 4 above). Mr. Alavi was reportedly fined a sum of 73,800,000 tomans (roughly equivalent at the time to 73 thousand U.S. dollars), and sentenced to a six month prison term suspended for five years, and fifty lashes suspended for three years. Reprints of his books were banned and existing copies were ordered confiscated from publishers.

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<sup>41</sup> The article reported this with ridicule, in a way similar to the shaming of the rammal in the television report I described earlier, where he was asked sarcastically if he was able to control jinn.

Mr. Shirazi knew of the legal actions against Mr. Alavi. He did not elaborate on the specifics in our conversation, but he did mention that he thought the primary cause of his prosecution had been the steady growth of his following, so that at one point he had had more than a hundred visitors during a single day. “The Intelligence Ministry,” he explained, “is against *morid* and *morid-bazi* [that is, the establishment of publicly visible Sufi-type relations of master and disciple] and they will try to stop it at every stage.” He may also have known that Mr. Alavi bragged about deploying witchcraft against his enemies. During a later interview when Mr. Shirazi was absent,<sup>42</sup> Mr. Alavi told me that he had threatened to bind the mayor of Qom through witchcraft when the latter had refused to grant him a permit to establish his *hosaynieh*. The mayor had declined to back down, prompting Mr. Alavi to follow through with his threat and render the mayor unable to urinate for more than twenty-four hours. With his bladder about to literally explode, the defeated mayor had been forced to deliver the permit with humility and respect. Mr. Alavi told me that he had heard that the mayor had spent “three hours urinating in the bathroom” after he had been finally released of his bind. By the standards of everyday Iranian discourse, this story was either true or false.<sup>43</sup> If it was true, Mr. Alavi was a malicious witch. If it was false, he was a boastful liar. In either case, he would not have fit the figure of the

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<sup>42</sup> It might be objected that this story was meant for my ears only (and that of my assistant, who was also present), and that Mr. Alavi would not have made a similar claim in Mr. Shirazi’s presence. However, during our first interview, when Mr. Shirazi had accompanied us, Mr. Alavi made similarly grand claims about his powers. For example, he claimed that he was regularly visited by government officials and consulted on matters of state. The elder son of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamene’i, had visited him, he said, to consult him about the country’s situation during the first term of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency. At the time, Mr. Alavi said he had used *raml* to inform the son of the supreme leader of the debacle that would plague the country in a few years, referring to the turmoil that erupted after the presidential election of June 2009. Mr. Alavi also made no secret of his scorn for most political and religious leaders of the Islamic Republic. That is, the later tale of his magical assault on the mayor of Qom, while colorful, was not particularly out of line with other things he had shared in Mr. Shirazi’s presence. Moreover, as Mr. Shirazi had introduced us to him, he would likely have assumed that we may share with Mr. Shirazi whatever he told us.

<sup>43</sup> See a discussion of a similar claim of magical power in Graeber (2001:242-243).

specialist Mr. Shirazi had in mind. Perhaps this is why he told me that he only “partly” believed in Mr. Alavi’s knowledge of the occult.

The difficulty that even a man of such power and prestige as Mr. Shirazi would face in distinguishing true raml from charlatanry, legitimate from illegitimate practice, most likely informs the overarching government policy of confronting occult specialists when they become publicly visible. As clear-cut distinctions cannot be made, it is thought best to eliminate situations in which people are called to make such distinctions. “These are realities of our society,” Mr. Shirazi told me, “and when one of these people acts openly [*‘alani*], the police confront it.” As Mr. Alavi’s prosecution shows, police occasionally confront people who they themselves may consider to be knowledgeable in the occult sciences. Mr. Shirazi had had other similar experiences to indicate that such tensions are common. About a decade earlier, while he was chief of police of a small town near Tehran, Mr. Shirazi’s forces had raided the house of a certain elderly Sayyed Hasan, an occult specialist who “possessed jinn.” “He had books dealing with jinn possession,” Mr. Shirazi told me, “and the police confiscated them after holding him for a few hours.” Some weeks later, one of Mr. Shirazi’s friends had sought police assistance in finding his stolen car:

Police couldn’t locate the thieves. My friend insisted that now that the police can’t do anything, let’s ask Sayyed Hasan for help. I told him, look, I’ve taken Sayyed Hasan’s knowledge away. If I go to him now, he’s going to tell me that you yourself confiscated my books! People had gotten results with Sayyed Hasan, and my friend knew it. Finally, I said ok, fine, let’s go. There was a time when I didn’t believe in any of these things. I rejected all of them absolutely. All of them. But today I don’t think this way, because of certain things that I’ve come across through friendships and connections. So we went to Sayyed Hasan. And he said “Salam. You’ve taken my knowledge away. If you teach at a university, you use a book. My knowledge is in my book. If I don’t have it, I can’t do anything.” So I said, well, Sayyed, why don’t you try and help out this friend of mine. He gave us an address and the car was found two days later.



In a different time and place, Mr. Shirazi had himself sought the assistance of an occult specialist to solve a difficult criminal case. It was 1993 and he was chief of police of Damavand, a small city in the Alborz mountain range. One evening, an elderly goldsmith had been walking home from his shop, carrying a loaf of sangak bread, when three men on motorbike had ambushed him. They had struck him with the blunt side of an ax, took a few hundred grams of gold he had been carrying on his person, and rode off. As it happened, the son of the goldsmith was Damavand's representative to the Majlis (the parliament), a certain Mr. Sa'idi, and so there was pressure from multiple directions to solve the case as soon as possible. Mr. Shirazi described it to me like this:

I went through hell with this case. We interrogated more than two hundred suspects in the span of a month: criminals recently released from jail, criminals from other towns, criminals from neighboring provinces. Anyone we thought had a criminal record, we interrogated. A month passed. Mr. Sa'idi was invited to speak at a popular mosque for the 21<sup>st</sup> of Ramadan. I had gone to see him immediately after the robbery and had told him that I would find the culprits. But he went to this mosque a month later and publicly announced a rumor claiming that it was his political rival from the opposing faction who had been responsible. He said that his father's gold had not been worth the theft. The thieves had wanted to intimidate the goldsmith's son. The issue had become political, and the governor of the province ordered that I couldn't leave town until I had solved the case. The MP, Mr. Sa'idi, had a lot of friends in the Rafsanjani government, and it had reached a point where all kinds of politicians and security officials would be calling me asking for updates on the case. So I was under all this stress and didn't know what to do.

When the suspects failed to turn up through ordinary investigative procedures, Mr. Shirazi decided that he would try to enlist the help of someone with supernatural skills:

I called my three deputies for intelligence, criminal investigations, and traffic into my office. I placed a Qur'an in the center of the table, and I asked them to swear by the book that even if I were to commit murder to solve this case, they would not say anything to anyone. I wanted to make progress, I told them, and I had to do something. No information would ever leave that room. Then I asked my deputy for criminal investigations: "Do you know of a rammal, a sayyed, or a bozorg [an elder] who can help

us?” And you won’t believe me when I tell you that I did not believe in this stuff at all back then. I rejected it all. He said let me see what I can do. There was an old mystic he knew who had given him good information in the past. He went to see him, but the mystic insisted that you can’t tell Mr. Shirazi who I am or where I live. My deputy then told me that the mystic had said that one of the thieves was in Tonekabon, one in Qazvin, and one in Shahriar. He gave physical descriptions, three first names, and a few more details. He also said that the thief in Shahriar had a criminal record. We would’ve required a judicial order to arrest him, since he was in a different city. But I was under so much pressure that I dispatched my men to arrest him without an order. So they brought him in. We threatened that if he refused to cooperate, we would hand him over to the Tehran investigations bureau. He was deathly afraid of Tehran, so he told us the name and whereabouts of one of his accomplices. We arrested the second person, and he gave us information on the third. The file was complete, exactly on a Thursday. I had postponed my deadline for solving the case to Friday, saying that I would resign if I had not found the thieves by then. By Friday morning, I had a taped confession from the thieves.

The case continued to puzzle Mr. Shirazi, not only because it had been a strange story in itself, but because it disturbed his sense of the boundary between true and false, legitimate and illegitimate appeals to the supernatural:

I did not believe in these things. I never thought we would be able to solve the case so easily. But he gave us the addresses and the information we needed to make arrests. People like this mystic and others have attained certain realities through ascetic practice. They have the ability to help people. But at the same time, their existence is cause for some people going astray. How do they go astray? Because everyone thinks that whoever has a long white beard and says certain things can help them out. There are things that we believe in, as Shi‘a. We appeal to the Imams for help, and we have all these prayers. But then, alongside the great mystics, other people are created who take advantage of people. And how can one explain the boundaries to people? I don’t know.

## **Conclusion**

In the realm of Shi‘a theology and jurisprudence, witchcraft and the strange sciences are objects of nuanced discussion, subtle disagreements, and contingent judgments. Those among my middle class interlocutors who had encountered the occult similarly expressed views that were partial,

hesitant, and equivocal. This ambivalence and hesitation is part of what makes the “strange sciences” strange. These sciences, and the phenomena and effects associated with them, are strange not only because they rupture the structure of everyday ordinary experience, but because it is usually impossible to be sure of the *nature* of this rupture. Has something genuinely supernatural taken place? Or have one’s eyes been deceived by some crafty sleight of hand technique? If supernatural, are the agencies at work satanic (*shaytani*) or divine and angelic (*rahmani*)? Is the person who exhibits the strange effect a mystic gifted with divine marvels? Or a possessor of jinn? Or a schizophrenic? Both jurists and lay people acknowledge a difficulty with sifting reliable reports of the supernatural from the ramblings of the mad and the tricks of the charlatans. But rather than prompting them to pass a sweeping judgment on every purported occult experience, this difficulty usually leads them to refrain from absolute pronouncements.

These hesitations do not occur in a social vacuum. Since the early twentieth century, old forms of knowledge have had to contend for legitimacy with a metric of modern scientific rationality. As science and logic have been deployed to remake society, some forms of knowledge, including that of the rammal, have been cordoned off as superstitious and irrational. The rammal’s practice, moreover, as a site of professional service unregulated by any bureaucracy and resistant to any surveillance, poses a specific challenge to the ambitions of a totalizing state. And yet, despite ideological and material pressures, these forms of knowledge persist, find new forms, and command attention and interest.

The difficulty in distinguishing rational approaches to the supernatural from superstitious ones is almost never acknowledged in public discourse. Instead, there is a proliferation of performances of rationality that purport to uphold clear boundaries, celebrate valiant servants of reason, designate unambiguous charlatans, and identify clearly discernible victims of gullibility

and fraud. As we have seen, as soon as we penetrate behind the curtain of public discourse to hear the words of even its most decorated heroes, all sense of clarity evaporates.

In the next chapter, we will listen further to the words of people behind the veil of public discourse, to see how the rationality that this discourse holds dear operates in the language of the women who are supposedly least likely to possess it.

## Chapter 2 – The Fantastic

“So what was the story of the dining cloth?” I asked Shokufeh, as we drove to the house of Haj Aqa Yusefi the rammal. I was referring to a procedure called *sofreh andakhtan* (“spreading out a dining cloth”), through which an occult specialist calls forth the jinn he controls in order to ascertain whether a particular customer has been bewitched. Shokufeh had gone to one such specialist about a year earlier to consult him about suspicious Hebrew-like markings she had discovered on the ceiling of her living room, which she was told may have been witchcraft (*jadu*).

I first met Shokufeh through a mutual acquaintance at Tehran University. She was around thirty-four, divorced, and living on her own. She had a master’s degree in English literature and was applying for doctoral programs abroad, while teaching half-time at a large English language instruction institute and occasionally working as a private tutor for advanced high school students studying for university entry exams. She was successful at her work and supported herself financially. She owned a small apartment and an Iranian-manufactured Peugeot 206, which, as I learned that day as we visited the rammal, she drove with reckless speed in Tehran’s congested streets.

Shokufeh had noticed the strange markings on her ceiling soon after her divorce. “They looked as though they had been etched with a matchstick into the plaster around the chandelier,” she told me, “but I don’t know who drew them.” Mildly concerned, and curious to get to the bottom of the issue, she invited a few friends and acquaintances over to take a look. One friend had suggested it was just the trace of an ant crawling across the plaster before it had fully dried. “This was not likely,” she said, “unless the ant had danced its way coquettishly [*ba qer-o*

*ghamzeh*] all around the chandelier.” The owner of the apartment complex, who lived upstairs, had said that he hadn’t seen anything like these markings in any of the other apartments. Her mother had weighed in with the idea that it was some kind of witchcraft. Another female friend had agreed, and suggested that Shokufeh visit Haj Aqa Yusefi, a rammal who could figure out whether she had in fact been bewitched, and void the witchcraft if necessary.

Shokufeh had resisted at first. “I don’t believe in witchcraft,” she had told her friend. “And when there is God, what can anyone else do for me?” But her friend insisted, and she finally gave in. As it turned out, the rammal was not keen on meeting Shokufeh either. The first time she called Yusefi, he told her that he would be away for forty days and she should contact him after that.<sup>44</sup> In later phone calls, he shrugged her off with other excuses, giving the impression that he wanted to avoid her – or perhaps he wanted to make sure she was serious before making time for her in his busy schedule. Frustrated, Shokufeh told him that she didn’t believe in jinn or witchcraft but she wanted to give him a try. In any case, she would only see him if God wanted it, and this was the last time she would call. Yusefi had told her to come to his house on the northeastern fringe of Tehran the next day.

“When we met, he asked me my name and my mother’s name,” Shokufeh told me. “When I told him, he said that someone had bewitched me. I told him that I had found those markings on the ceiling, and I had only been slightly preoccupied by them. So he said he could spread out a dining cloth, if I wanted, to check things out. I agreed.” “What did he do exactly?” I asked. “He spread out one of these brown bed sheets on the ground, and then he took a really big *tasbih* [rosary], one of those with the giant beads, and he put it around me. Then he brought a pot

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<sup>44</sup> This likely had to do with a *chelleh*, a forty-day ascetic retreat some occult specialists and mystics practice before writing a particular spell, or for the purpose of spiritual renewal.

of water...” Shokufeh looked at the digital recorder I was holding near her, “You’re recording this!” she laughed. “Of course I am recording!” I said, hoping she wouldn’t object, “Go on.” Shokufeh chuckled as she returned to her story: “A copper pot filled with water. He brought it and placed it in front of me.” “On top of the sheet?” I asked. “Yes, on the sheet, in front of me. He was sitting on the other end. Then there was a lid, kind of like a skillet, a copper skillet, that he overturned and put on top of the pot, to cover it. And he also brought a knife, a knife with an antique-looking handle, and a small traditional-looking salt container, and he put both of them there.” Shokufeh was beaming as she continued: “He recited some abracadabra [*ajji majji*], and then he told me to take some salt, to repeat everything he said after him, and to deposit the salt into the pot, without looking inside. Then he said something like, ‘by Moses and Jesus, by Noah and - something like - the Psalms of Abraham...’” “You mean the Psalms of David,” I offered. “Yes, ‘by the Psalms of David, and by the Qur’an of Muhammad: Find her witchcraft; Make it appear; Void it.’ [*peyda kon, zaher kon, batel kon*] As I poured the salt, he murmured some other things and then he told me to recite the *salavat*<sup>45</sup> ten times. I was then to lift the lid only enough to slide the blade of the knife inside and stir the pot. But I wasn’t supposed to look inside. He told me to look straight at him, and nowhere else, as I stirred. So I stirred.” Shokufeh’s voice now changed to a deliberate, lower-pitched quiver, while she continued to speak with a wide smile, as though she were reenacting the fright and excitement of the experience: “I was stirring, and then I felt the water get heavy. I felt that something was clanging against the knife in the pot. I told him that it was getting heavy. But he told me to keep stirring. I stirred some more until he told me it was enough. He asked me to remove the lid and to put it to one side with the knife. I looked inside the pot and saw that the water had become muddied. And there was some colored

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<sup>45</sup> The *salavat* is a short supplication uttered on many occasions during Muslim devotional practice and in everyday situations. It is “*Allahumma salle ‘ala muhammad wa al-e muhammad*” – “O God, bless Muhammad and Muhammad’s family.”

woven string and some kleenex sticking out. I thought that was all that was there. I thought probably the salt had somehow turned to mud. But when I saw the colored string, I became frightened. So he told me: ‘Now take out whatever you see.’ ‘But I’m frightened Haj Aqa,’ I said, ‘I can’t!’ He told me not to be afraid: ‘Take out whatever you see, shake off the water, and put it to one side.’ I insisted again ‘But I’m scared!’ He told me not to be afraid. So I dipped my hand inside and took out the crumpled, wet kleenex. I squeezed the water out and put it to one side. I dipped my hand inside again, and this time took out two locks. An open lock and a closed lock. It was interesting that the three keys belonging to each of the locks were still hanging from them with strings. They were complete sets. I thought that was the end of it, but he told me there was more. So I dipped in again, and took out five metallic plates, one of them white and in the shape of a pear, the rest of them dark gray squares. They were all covered with lines, shapes, and other markings. I asked him if I could take the plates home with me, to show my dad. He said no. So I asked if I could at least take a picture of the plates, to show my dad so he’d know I had really seen these things. But he wouldn’t let me. Afterwards... That was it. It was really scary though.”

I asked Shokufeh if the witchcraft had been voided through this operation. She said Yusefi had told her that he would have to void it later. “But he said if you want I can give you an amulet [ta‘viz], an agate stone, to protect you from any witchcraft. He said he had different kinds, with one *movakkel*, two *movakkels*, or three *movakkels*, at different prices.<sup>46</sup> I said ‘Haj Aqa I really absolutely don’t believe in any of this stuff. But maybe this is really just a kind of consolation [*delgarmi*].’ He said if you want to feel assured, I can give you one of these amulets.

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<sup>46</sup> A *movakkel* is a jinn controlled by a human being, usually employed for very specific tasks.



All you have to do is read the *am man yujib* prayer<sup>47</sup> over it ten times, and it'll do whatever you want it to do. So I thought to myself, I've already doled out the cash; I might as well get this too. It sounds interesting. So he took out an old-style pouch that was full of these agate stones, he picked one out, and gave it to me. He asked my name and my mother's name, and recited some prayer over it, and told me that a movakkel would always be with me from now on." Shokufeh was close to laughter again. "But you know what Alireza? The only benefit I've derived from this Mr. or Mrs. Movakkel [the jinn] is that it's a fantastic park-guard [*parkban*]. Whenever I've needed parking and haven't been able to find a spot, I've recited ten *am man yujibs* over the stone, and I swear by the Qur'an, it finds me parking spots that I couldn't even imagine! This has happened at least ten times, I can swear, by my mother's life!" "How much did he charge you?" I asked. "He charged me two hundred and fifty thousand tomans [about two hundred and fifty dollars]. A hundred and fifty for the dining cloth spread, and a hundred for the agate [amulet]. But when my friend visited him from Isfahan, the bastard charged her four hundred thousand tomans." I whistled my surprise. "That's why I'm saying," she continued, "he'll skin you alive if he gets the impression that you'll pay. I told him you're from Harvard, but tell him you're not going anymore. Or tell him you're unemployed, so he won't think he can charge you too much. When I complained to him for charging my friend so much when I had paid less than half that amount for the same procedure, he said 'That's because I have to do something different for her.' And how could we ever tell if what he did really was any different?"

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<sup>47</sup> This is the first half of verse 62 of Surah 27 of the Qur'an, An-Naml (The Ants): *Am man yujibu 'l-mudhtarra idha da'ahu wa yakshifu 's'su'* – "Or, Who listens to the distressed when he calls on Him, and Who relieves his suffering?" It is frequently recited in groups to entreat God to heal the sick.

In the previous chapter, we saw how women were represented in the Iranian media as the ideal-type gullible victims that regularly fall prey to the sinister schemes of charlatan rammals. I argued that such representations were deployed as part of performances of rationality through which figures of male authority – the police, journalists, clergy, and intellectuals – were constructed as the champions of reason while the figure of the rammal was abjected as the principal threat to rationality and social order, and gullible women and girls were depicted as his (and occasionally her) primary victims who need to be informed, protected, and rescued. As we shall see in this chapter, these public performances of rationality are disseminated and repeated in everyday conversations about the supernatural, with consequences that exceed the intentions of their original authors. Women who visit rammals, for example, regularly express skepticism about the truth of their occult encounters. If rationality and superstition are defined through the denigration of women’s practices, I ask, how do women position themselves toward these constructions? How, in particular, do those middle-class, educated, urban women who, as a matter of class *habitus*,<sup>48</sup> care to distinguish themselves as rational individuals and distance themselves from superstition do so even while they visit rammals and find themselves in the discursive crosshairs of a gendered order of irrationality? I show that by expressing skepticism, these women not only position themselves favorably toward a constellation of rationality, science, and modernity,<sup>49</sup> but also open up possibilities in their experience that may have been closed off had they been less skeptical.

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<sup>48</sup> See Bourdieu (1986). For a discussion of class habitus, hegemony, and distinction among middle class Greek enthusiasts of the supernatural, see Stewart (1989).

<sup>49</sup> I am drawing here on Simon During’s helpful argument that in post-Enlightenment Europe and America, declarations of belief or disbelief in magic do not so much express some internal state grounded in feelings or sensations, as “position [the person] in relation to the discursive web of rationality, civility, and enlightenment, and in a context where it is difficult to be a fully rational citizen and to declare a serious belief in magic” (During

## Iterations

In her study of middle class magicians in England, Tanya Luhrmann argues that her interlocutors regularly face “cognitive dissonance;” that is, disjunctions between their experiences, the beliefs they profess, and everyday commonplace ideas (1989:271-72). In a society where magic and witchcraft is disavowed as irrational or superstitious, they find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to justify themselves to skeptics both external and internal – within society, but also within their own selves. They do so, Luhrmann shows, through a “patchwork job of post hoc rationalization” (ibid:272-73), often arguing “indirectly” for the value of magical belief (ibid:282):

That is, rather than arguing for magic as a persuasive account of physical reality, magicians tend to explain why the normal criteria of truth-testing do not apply to magic. Then, they justify their involvement on the grounds of its spirituality, its freedom, its aesthetic beauty and so forth. Despite the difficulty of arguing by the normal rules, magicians are not willing to abandon their claims. That, one might imagine, would be the simplest solution to cognitive dissonance. But magicians seem to need their claims; the magical claims seem too important as the means to identify and legitimize an activity deeply significant to the practitioners.

This process of rationalization to outsiders later becomes assimilated to the “interpretive drift” by which magical belief and practice appears more and more reasonable to the magicians themselves (ibid:384):

[The magicians] produce some kind of intellectual account, suitable to their socio-intellectual context, which allows them self-consciously to assert and argue for the ideas they identify with the practice. Rationalization is particularly important in a modern context, where critical outsiders possess a culturally given language to accuse magic of irrationality. Modern magicians are forced to argue for their practice; having argued, they learn to talk about the practice in ways that make sense of and reinforce their own commitment to it.

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2002:49). “It may even be,” he adds, “that our concepts of modern civility have been constructed in the process of rejecting magic and other ‘irrational’ beliefs in the supernatural.”

This account can be transposed with little modification to the context of Iranian middle class encounters with magic, although most of my interlocutors did in fact defend the existence of occult forces and energies as scientifically true. However, if we view rationality as a concept and value that is performatively constructed through specific utterances and events that a) constitute its opposite (superstition or irrationality) and b) index its social bearers (journalists, intellectuals, the clergy, the police), it would be more fruitful to replace the notion of rationalization (which presumes we already know what is rational) with still more performative utterances that position the speaker favorably in relation to that ambiguous constellation of the rational, the scientific, and so on. Just as contemporary public performances of rationality are iterations of modern rationalist and Shi'i legalistic attacks on superstition that displace, in their repetitions, the very notions that are being indexically constructed, we can view individual enactments of rationality as repetitions of public performances in newspapers and on television, through which people attempt to situate themselves as rational and non-superstitious.

One key distinction between the two kinds of performance should be made at the outset. In the public denunciations of rammal, the performance of rationality is also a performance of certainty. There is no equivocation over the fact that the rammal is a charlatan. The journalists and the police convict the rammal of charlatanism before any judicial proceedings. When the reporter asks the rammal, on camera, "do you have contact with jinn?" he is already sure that the rammal does not in fact control any jinn. The question is a rhetorical one, designed to allow the rammal to flaunt his boastful foolishness for all to see. This certainty is necessary for the demarcation of the superstitious from the rational, the gullible young woman from the incredulous public man.

Among my interlocutors, those like Shokufeh (whom I introduced at the opening of this chapter) who sought the professional services of a rammal or do‘anevis, also performed rationality. But their performance was not one of certainty, but of skepticism, doubt, and irresolution. They seemed to be concerned with deciding the truth of the occult encounter, a question that they formulated to me with the attitude of an empiricist: Is there some rational, ordinary explanation for what I have seen, or am I in the presence of something truly supernatural? As a performance, this skeptical, questioning stance allowed Shokufeh enough distance to be able to approach that which might be considered superstitious, without necessarily being reprimanded for it. In recounting her adventure to me, she both cited her performances of rationality before, during, and after the events, and performed rationality before me as someone she probably saw as a skeptical outsider to magic, although one who was open enough to its mysteries to conduct doctoral research on the topic.

But Shokufeh’s performances of rationality, like those of my other interlocutors, were fruitful in other ways as well. In asserting a primary commitment to rational, scientific explanations, Shokufeh was affirming the primacy of a world which does not admit witchcraft. This then heightened and dramatized the puzzlement she felt when she experienced something that seemed to rupture the consistency of her world. The indeterminacy of the encounter, its irreducible strangeness, opened up a space of what Tzvetan Todorov has called “the fantastic.” I want to argue that this fantastic quality is precisely what rendered the experience a site of possibility.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> My argument here is consonant with Michael Taussig’s claim that the interplay of skepticism and faith are central to the power of magic (2006).

Todorov is concerned with defining fantastic literature as a genre positioned between two other literary genres, the uncanny and the marvelous. “The fantastic,” he writes, “is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 1975:25):

The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us... The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous.

As with fantastic literature, a person hesitating over the nature of an apparently supernatural encounter is implicitly affirming a distinction between that which is real and ordinary, and things that are imaginary, extraordinary, miraculous, and so on (see *ibid*:168). For most of my interlocutors, everyday experience in Tehran did not admit witchcraft, except in the form of a nagging hesitation.<sup>51</sup> So Shokufeh, for example, would tell her mother and friend, “I don’t believe in witchcraft,” even though she could not think of a rational explanation for the strange markings on her ceiling. Later, as her hesitations grew, she would tell Haj Aqa Yusefi the rammal, “I don’t believe in jinn or witchcraft, but I want to give your [method] a try.” Even after she had witnessed the dining cloth ritual, and watched in utter fright as talismans, locks, and colored string mysteriously appeared in her pot, she told Yusefi that “I really absolutely don’t believe in any of this stuff.” And yet she was willing to buy an amulet from him at an exorbitant price, because she thought it was “interesting” (*jaleb*), and it might work for her as a kind of “consolation” (*delgarmi*).

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<sup>51</sup> Note that I am not suggesting that the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary is the same as a distinction between the physical and the metaphysical. Many of my interlocutors believed in divine interventions in the form of *barakat* and answering prayers, as well as in the notion of the evil eye, even while they hesitated when faced with an apparent case of witchcraft.

When Shokufeh insisted to her friend and the rammal that she did not believe in witchcraft, she was both affirming, performatively, a commitment to modern rationality, and loosely allying herself with orthodoxy (“When there is God, what can anyone else do for me?”), at the expense of the superstitious, the gullible, the ignorant, but also the heterodox and the polytheist. But Shokufeh also hesitated, and her hesitation was thrown into relief precisely in opposition to that rational universe towards which she had so vociferously performed her commitment. Regarding the dining cloth ritual, I asked her if the talismans might have been lodged in some secret compartment in the pot, or taped to the skillet she used to cover it. She answered “No” in both instances, and said she had seen with her own eyes that the pot was only filled with clear water, and that the skillet had nothing inside it. Yusefi was sitting too far from her to be slipping things into the pot as she stirred it. “I thought maybe the salt [which she had stirred into the pot] was some chemical that turned into mud,” she said; “but what about the talismans and the locks?” Her brother, Amir, had also told her that there must have been something in the pot. “But I saw with my own eyes that it only had clear water in it,” she protested, “and the bottom was copper, like the rest of the pot. Otherwise, I still can’t believe it myself. Was it the salt? But how could salt turn into locks? Even if it was all just witchcraft [*jadugari*], then he’s really good at what he does.<sup>52</sup> And even if the witchcraft was not mine [that is, even if the talismans had not really been used to bewitch her, as Yusefi claimed], he’s still good, because he has some power with which he has made these things appear.”

For Shokufeh, these hesitations did not finally carry any serious consequences. It was all just “interesting.” She had been frightened, but she had also clearly had fun – enough that she would be willing to meet the rammal again and take me along. The talismans that appeared in the pot did not provoke the kind of dread that would make her want to get rid of them as soon as

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<sup>52</sup> Shokufeh seemed to be suggesting here that Yusefi might have been a powerful illusionist.

possible: They were objects of curiosity that she wanted to take home with her or photograph and show her family (this was, for the rammal, the inappropriate attitude toward them and he would not allow her to indulge her curiosity. From the perspective of folk talismanic theory, it would have been outright dangerous for her to do so). Similarly, the agate amulet and its jinn provided amusement and laughs: It was a parking spot locator; certainly an asset in Tehran gridlock, but little more.

Here is one possibility, then, that emerges from the strangeness, the indeterminacy, the hesitation, of an occult encounter hedged in by performances of rationality and doubt: a thrilling experience. It is an encounter with the occult that makes very little demand on one's cosmological attitudes and commitments (at least as long as one is prepared to repeatedly declare that "I don't believe in witchcraft"), but that, by forcing one to momentarily entertain the incredible, enables rich kinds of imaginative engagement.<sup>53</sup> Neither a fully skeptical attitude nor unquestioning faith (to the extent that any of these two ideal positions are even possible) would have furnished this possibility. It was only by inhabiting the hesitation engendered by the strange and the fantastic that this meeting with a rammal could become thrilling, and worth the price.

### **Crossing the Line**

The night after her mysterious encounter with Haj Aqa Yusefi, Shokufeh saw a jinn in her house. "I was about to have a heart attack," she told me, still chuckling, "but I said *bism illah ir-rahman*

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<sup>53</sup> This attitude of hesitation is different both from that of "suspending disbelief," as among spectators of modern magic shows investigated by During (2002:49-50), and the "cognitive dissonance" experienced by English magicians who choose to bracket off their magical experience from everyday life through ritual-spatial separation on the one hand, and post-hoc rationalization on the other (Luhmann 1989). All three attitudes might enable rich "imaginative involvement," but the role of hesitation and doubt in relation to that involvement is not the same.



*ir-rahim* [In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate]<sup>54</sup> and it was over, and I felt relief.” “Really?” I asked, “what did it look like?” “See, I had thought about it so much throughout the day,” Shokufeh said, “and I was sleeping in the bedroom, and then I got up and all of a sudden I saw something, like a black ghost, move rapidly from one room to the other. I thought I had made a mistake...” “Were you awake or sleeping?” I interrupted. “I don’t know if I was asleep or awake. All I know is that when I saw it, I said *bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim* and it disappeared. Maybe I dreamt it, or maybe I just imagined it. I don’t know what it was.”

The jinn was an unwelcome remainder, a messenger perhaps, from Shokufeh’s meeting with the rammal. Imagined or not, it threatened to keep her in the grips of the invisible realm, and perhaps in a more sinister fashion than her amusing parking-spot-locating amulet. But Shokufeh said the *bismillah* and stayed away. If she hadn’t said bismillah, if she had pursued the jinn, or if she had allowed it to approach her, she might have crossed the line, and then it may have been impossible for her to return. That is what happened to Nafiseh, another one of my interlocutors. For her, the occult encounter was the beginning of years of spiritual exploration and journeying – sometimes distressing, at other times rewarding – and a path for acquiring extraordinary powers and insights. She too performed rationality, but rather than prolonging a state of pregnant hesitation, her performance served to strengthen her attachment to ideas that some of her own friends would find irrational and eccentric.

Nafiseh was a young woman I met through another mutual friend. At the time, she was twenty-nine. Like Shokufeh, she had been divorced, and like her, she lived on her own and supported herself. Unlike Shokufeh, Nafiseh was not a professional. But she had enough financial cushioning – perhaps it was from family wealth, or perhaps from a large *mahriyeh*

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<sup>54</sup> This verse is the formula most often mentioned by ordinary people for warding off jinn, or making them disappear after they have made themselves manifest.

payment from her divorce; I never asked – to do what she wanted. Aside from her leisurely occult pursuits, which had been numerous and varied, she was an aspiring actress and pop singer. She told me that she had worked on the sets of several television serials, had taken acting classes, and had recently begun to take private singing lessons. Her induction into the world of the occult had started in earnest, like Shokufeh, with a visit to a rammal.

I interviewed Nafiseh for several hours on a gusty afternoon in May of 2009. We met at Park-e Laleh, a lush, sprawling garden just north of Tehran University's main campus. The park was full of Friday picnickers, relaxing on the grass or playing volleyball and badminton, while children screamed and chased each other in the playgrounds. We sat at a wooden picnic table in a secluded corner of the park, and Nafiseh began to tell me of her occult experiences. She told me that her first encounter with jinn was in a dream, and it was long before she had met any rammal. "It was a true dream [*ro 'ya-ye sadeqeh*]," she said, "and I realized they were jinn based on the way they moved, their sizes, their color, the way they treated one another. They entered an area that had water piping, a humid area." When Nafiseh had told a friend about her dream, she had been frightened and asked her not to talk about jinn any longer. "That was, for me, the beginning of my encounter with jinn. I had never pursued them before that. I was twenty or twenty-one."

A few years later, more jinn entered Nafiseh's life, this time in a much more dramatic and active fashion. But there were momentous events that preceded these encounters. Nafiseh had already married once and divorced. She was living in her own apartment and worked in a private business office. One of the businessmen at the office, a middle-aged man named Mansur, had fallen in love with her. "The problem was," Nafiseh told me, "he had a wife and two grown boys." She pitied him because he would cry and beg her to marry him. He claimed that he would be willing to provide enough for his first family to live in extravagance for the rest of their lives,

if only she would move to the south of Iran with him to live there. Nafiseh wanted to turn him away, but apparently a simple “no” would not do. So she devised a plan to “create some kind of obstacle” for her suitor. “Since when I was sixteen or seventeen,” she told me, “I had studied a lot of fortune-telling and palmistry books and had a lot of interest in them. I told Mansur, ‘let’s go find someone who can determine if we are really meant for each other.’ I believed in energy and I thought that if I were to send negative waves toward our fortune teller – because this really can happen – then he will tell us that we are not suitable for one another. That’s what I hoped.” Mansur had agreed. He found a do‘anevis, a darvish of the Qaderi Sufi order from Kermanshah, who had settled in Karaj, near Tehran, and made an appointment to go visit him.

Nafiseh frowned and shook her head as she recounted the event: “I didn’t know this back then and only realized recently that the Qaderis are Sunnis. I’ve come to the conclusion that we should completely put them aside and not have anything to do with them. Even if they have any kind of [occult] knowledge, they are scary creatures. Charlatans.” She paused and pointed to a long thin crack on the surface of the picnic table: “You see this line? These incidents, for people, are precisely like this line. As long as you’re on this side, you’re on this side and you don’t know what is going on across the line. But if you cross the line, you’re on the other side. You’ve seen, and you can no longer say I haven’t seen. The cost might be that you get to a point where your acquaintances tell you that you’re mad. But it’s not in your hands. Because it’s happened to you and you’ve really seen.”

So Nafiseh had accompanied Mansur to Karaj, to the darvish’s house. Mansur had told him, “Shaykh, we are here to ask you something. I love this woman very much and can’t let her go. I want to know whether or not we are suited for one another. We are here on her suggestion to find out.” Nafiseh said that as soon as Mansur had finished his question, the darvish had

responded that “Yes, you are very appropriate for one another, and your stars match. But she has some problems and you have a problem too.” “And this is why I say they are charlatans!”

Nafiseh said:

You see, I can do coffee reading. It’s true that I see shapes in the cup and can identify certain things, but I mostly use the sources of energy, including the energy that the person transmits to me. It suffices that you know how to pick them up, that you know some psychology and have a flowing sense that can capture the waves of your interlocutor. This is enough. As soon as you say two or three things [in your coffee reading] and you see the other person acknowledge it or grow pleased or volunteer more information, you just take it and continue from there. You still seek help from your senses. I’m not saying that it’s pure charlatanry. But it has its own mechanisms so to speak, and it’s not that people just spontaneously access the unseen [*ghayb*]. I think that with the darvish, it was the same. And this is something that I realized later on. I wasn’t thinking this way back then.

By that point though, matters had already slipped out of Nafiseh’s control. She had planned to use a fortune teller in the service of her own complicated ends, to mentally manipulate him to provide a negative reading, so that Mansur would leave him alone. But this charlatan had masterfully taken charge of the situation, and was pulling both Mansur and Nafiseh along.

He told Nafiseh that she had been bewitched and he would need to spread out a dining cloth for her, in her own apartment. “I had heard the word *sofreh* [dining cloth] before but never knew what it meant. I wish I had never seen it in my life.” Meanwhile, the darvish ordered Mansur to buy a male goat, but he did not explain the purpose. Mansur obliged, and within an hour or two, the darvish had killed the goat and extracted its bile (*zahreh*) and poured it into a container. Mansur, “being a generous man,” donated the meat to the darvish and his family. The three then drove to Tehran for the dining cloth ritual. Along the way, they bought some rope, safety pins, and melamine plates. The darvish made sure that Nafiseh had a pot and blanket at home. “For the entire trip,” Nafiseh told me, “I was feeling awful and felt I was going to pass

out. But Mansur had fallen in love with the darvish, who was constantly bragging about his magnificent feats.”

In the apartment, the darvish sat across from Nafiseh and placed a large pot of water between the two of them. Mansur stood near the wall. Across the pot’s rim, the darvish placed a dagger inscribed with spells, prayers, and indecipherable shapes. He instructed Nafiseh to recite a verse from the Qur‘an, but she couldn’t recall what it was. He then told her that when the jinn came, she would have to announce their arrival and recite a zekr of her own choosing.

Meanwhile, he asked Mansur to tie his hands and feet with the rope, ten knots one on top of the other. Nafiseh saw him tightly bind the darvish. He then used another piece of rope to form a lasso around his neck and tie it to his wrists so that the man would be completely immobilized. “I don’t know if all this was sleight of hand or charlatanry or what. I just don’t know what to make of what happened afterward,” Nafiseh told me. Finally, the darvish ordered Mansur to bring a blanket and affix its four corners, with safety pins, to the shoulders of the darvish and Nafiseh.

These are the events that followed, as Nafiseh recounted them:

So I’m sitting there, cross-legged, with my hands open and my palms facing up. The darvish is sitting across from me, tied up with rope. And the blanket is stretched out between us like a tent, with the pot of water and dagger underneath. He said it needs to be dark underneath the blanket for the jinn. He started his work and I don’t know what he did. All of a sudden... And I’ve wondered later on what courage I had! But it was stupidity, not courage. As I was sitting I felt that there were creatures moving around under the blanket. And he had said that he was going to call them forth [*ehzar*] so that they would bring the talismans that had been made for me [to bewitch me]. He said that if the jinn are female they will drop the talismans in my hand, and if they are male they will fling them at me. And what a scene it was! He began to recite some formulas. And the creatures came. They were very soft, as though they had long hair, brushing against me like cats. Later I was able to see them, in a state of half-sleep, because he didn’t expel them from the apartment and it got to the point where they were bothering the neighbors in the apartment. So he was saying these formulas and these things were moving around

under the blanket and under my arms, and I was trembling, because like it or not you start to tremble thinking what is going to happen next?

Their movements were very rapid and they would either brush against my hands or feet. It was very strange. On the one hand I couldn't say they were totally material like us, in a way that you could grab them, and on the other hand it wasn't that they were totally immaterial because I could feel some material touching me. And I was wondering why the man, Mansur, wasn't having a heart attack [watching all of this]. So they came and I announced 'They're here.' The darvish told me to say a zekr. I said a zekr. They threw things at me. Two muddy, wet, packages, as though they had been taken out of the pot. So he said that as soon as you say 'I got it,' Mansur needs to start reciting the Qur'an and come and put the melamine plates on the blanket over where the pot is. The darvish had scribbled my name, my mother's name, and some spells and prayers around the rim of each of the twelve plates. So Mansur would bring a plate and put it on top of the blanket, and then all of a sudden something would hit it from underneath, as if it were the head of a creature gone wild. They would hit the plates like football players doing headers, and the plates would fly off to the walls or the ceiling like flying saucers. Twelve plates flying around. It was such a scene. So the twelve plates were done and Mansur stood trembling and reciting the Qur'an.

The last scene was terrible. And I'm telling you I saw Satan in front of me at that moment. Imagine that the darvish, at first, had long but tidy hair. Now at the end of the ritual his hair was disheveled, his eyes bulging and terrifying. Then I saw the dagger emerge from underneath the blanket and slide across his throat, inching toward his eye. He kept saying 'Don't do it! Get out of here!' and reciting spells to ward them off and prevent the dagger from poking his eye out.

At last, there was calm. The ritual was over. Mansur unfastened the blanket and untied the ropes. "But did I have any energy left?" said Nafiseh. "I was dying." On the darvish's instruction, Nafiseh opened the muddy packages to see what was inside. "One of them had a wolf or hyena's tooth. I don't remember which it was. A very long and sharp tooth. He said you need to burn all of these and cast the ashes into flowing water. But he said that there's still much more to be done. I have to recite prayers for you and do this and that. In short he was making up stories and dragging it on. So in the other package, when he opened it, there was, along with a piece of sheepskin with prayer written on it, a piece of cloth from an old shirt I had. I saw a piece of my own shirt."

Here was something that was more mundane and more shocking than anything else Nafiseh had witnessed that day. “I’m still thinking, all of it was charlatanry, but what was that piece of my shirt doing there?” When she was seventeen, Nafiseh had been deeply in love with a boy. “It was adolescent love,” she said, “and the boy’s family also really liked me. So the boy’s mom at some point asked me to bring her a photograph of myself and a shirt, because she said ‘we want to spread out a dining cloth for you.’ I didn’t understand what she meant at the time.” The boy’s mother, Nafiseh later realized, was worried that her son, who was very handsome and popular with girls, might be bewitched by some envious family. So they wanted to check if Nafiseh had been entangled with any witchcraft. “See, my shirt had a very distinct color,” Nafiseh told me. “It was a mix of green and blue. In the course of what happened [with the rammal], whatever else I consider to be fake, I know that I got back a strip of that same exact shirt. The same color. The same fabric. This was a shirt that I had used to paint, and it had paint all over it, so I said to myself that I don’t need it anymore and I gave it to the boy’s mother with my photograph... And never mind that various things occurred and that relationship ended. But after some years, I saw a piece of my old shirt with my own eyes.”

What happened next brings to mind some of the criminal reports about rammals that I discussed in the previous chapter. The darvish told Nafiseh that the next stage in his witchcraft cancellation had to happen in private, in the bedroom. “And what did I know?” Nafiseh said. “I followed him into the bedroom, and it’s bad because sometimes curiosity gets you into trouble.” The darvish instructed Nafiseh to lie down and close her eyes. He pressed his fingers on her eyelids and, as Nafiseh put it, he “made his intentions clear” to her. He said he needed to insert the goat’s bile into her vagina. Nafiseh was alarmed, recognizing the darvish’s words as a poor

excuse for sexual abuse.<sup>55</sup> She leapt to her feet, faced him sternly and ordered him to get out of her house. Mansur, meanwhile, sat in the living room, clueless. “He must have been thinking he had brought God into my house, he trusted him so much.” The darvish stormed off, but before he left, he turned around and looked at one of Nafiseh’s paintings on the wall – an image of an angel. He smirked and said: “Yes, a divine spirit! Nice. You paint too!” Then he took a few steps toward Nafiseh, grabbed and twisted her ear, and said: “Watch yourself.” Nafiseh stood her ground: “You should be the one to watch yourself!” The two men left the apartment and left Nafiseh shaking and confused. The darvish took the melamine plates with him. Nafiseh thought she should have prevented him from taking them, because he clearly wanted to menace her with more witchcraft, and with the plates (inscribed with her name and her mother’s name) in his possession, he would have more to work with.

At this point, Nafiseh was teetering on the brink of the line that, as she put it, separated mundane existence from the supernatural realm. A few weeks of nightly encounters with jinn pushed her completely to the other side. But before I discuss these encounters, a comment about her dramatic experience with the rammal: Recall that in media representations and public discourse, young women were those most often singled out as gullible victims of charlatan rammals. Nafiseh’s experience shows that the picture can be much more complicated. From Nafiseh’s perspective, the person most thoroughly taken by the rammal was Mansur, the older, more mature, businessman. Throughout the day’s events, he followed the darvish’s instructions without questioning, and, according to Nafiseh, listened to him in awe and admiration as he

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<sup>55</sup> Goat’s bile is sometimes cited as a sympathetic magical remedy for enhancing love and sexual potency. The remedy rests on a view of the male goat as an animal of exceptional sexual virility. Some traditional healers would rub goat’s bile on a man’s penis to increase love and affection with his sexual partner. It is possible that the darvish thought the witchcraft on Nafiseh had rendered her sexually impotent, or bound her sexually and therefore constrained her attraction or affection. It is also possible that he really did intend to have his way with her, and the bile was a convenient excuse.



“bragged about his magnificent feats.” Nafiseh thought the darvish to be an evil charlatan, and regretted having drawn up the plan to visit such a specialist in the first place. And while, in the course of her interaction with the darvish, she retreated from a position of calculating manipulation to one of defense and self-protection, Mansur remained fairly consistently uncritical and reverential – one might say gullible. Nafiseh was certain that Mansur had met with the darvish subsequently as well, even going so far as attempting to bewitch Nafiseh so that she could not marry anyone else if she would not be his.

The encounter with the rammal started Nafiseh on a bumpy ride into the world of the unseen. That night, she was too frightened to sleep in her own apartment, so she visited her grandmother’s house. Her younger brother was also there, and they slept next to one another in the same bed. Throughout the night, she felt kicks and punches from underneath her mattress. Her brother ground his teeth loudly like he had never done before and would not wake up no matter how many times Nafiseh tried to shake him awake. She was convinced that both the kicks and punches to her mattress, and her brother’s unusual bruxism, were the work of jinn. “I was not hallucinating [*tavahhom nabud*],” she told me. The next day, she returned to her own apartment, where she faced even more harassment from the jinn. “They would not let me sleep,” she said. Whenever she was about to fall asleep, she would feel a poke on her leg or a pinch on her thigh, or there would be noises from the kitchen. One night she asked one of her neighbors, an elderly woman, to sleep next to her, but the poor woman was similarly distraught throughout the night and refused to sleep over with her the following day. For two or three months, Nafiseh could not sleep properly. “The apartment had become troublesome,” she said. Eventually the jinn showed themselves to her in full physical form. Once, she woke up to see a lazy dwarfish creature sitting on her chest, with two others playing nearby. It was grayish in color, chubby, and

covered in hair, with thin vertical eyes. On another occasion, a Japanese-looking female dwarf sat on her chest. She gently placed a golden crown on Nafiseh's head and told her with a smile "you're our queen now." Fed up from all this menace, she called a friend, a young darvish, for advice. The man told her not to repeat her jinn stories to anyone. To ward them off, he said, she should recite *la hawla wa la quwwata illa billah* (there is no power or strength except with God) and the *ayat al-korsi* (the Throne verse) ten times before going to bed, and place a Qur'an and a knife next to her pillow.

But none of this worked. The encounters grew more dramatic with out of body experiences (*parvaz-e ruh*). One night Nafiseh took sleeping pills before going to bed. Suddenly, she awoke to a noise in her kitchen (she realized later that it was her soul that had left her body; she had not physically woken up) and walked over to investigate. In her living room, she saw a large casino table, with twelve identical women sitting around it cross-legged, all facing the center. They were slender and wore shiny knee-high boots, shorts, mini-jackets, and garish make-up, like cabaret dancers in American movies. Nafiseh stood in awe looking at the women, but was interrupted by another noise from the kitchen. So she walked into the kitchen and saw a man peering inside her refrigerator, with his back toward her. He was wearing a long white shirt, like an *ehram* dress.<sup>56</sup> Nafiseh called out to him, asking who he was. The man swung around and faced her. He was short (around Nafiseh's own height, she said), with very short copper hair, and "he looked like he was ten thousand years old," with deep wrinkles on his entire face (she said she could paint his image if she wanted to, but for some reason had never done so). "But he was beaming." He glanced at Nafiseh with a chuckle, saying: "Apparently I came in through this window!" referring to a small patio window in the kitchen. Nafiseh responded with a simple

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<sup>56</sup> The *ehram* dress is a simple costume worn by Muslim men during the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. It consists of two white pieces of cloth, one fastened around the waist and the other thrown over the shoulders to cover the torso.

“yes,” but just then, the man grabbed onto her wrist and said “I’m never going to leave you again! You and I will be together forever.” Before she knew it, the man had shot out of the small window, pulling Nafiseh along with him. The two of them flew over the city at high speed. She could see the buildings underneath her and felt the wind on her face, a sense of exhilaration and fear taking over her body. “I felt that I was metamorphosing as I flew,” Nafiseh said. “We then hurtled toward the ground and came to a rapid stop underground. It was exactly like that scene in the first Matrix film where Morpheus and Neo suddenly appear in a completely white space with only a monitor in front of them.” Nafiseh felt the hard ground under her feet and looked around, only to find herself in an entirely new land, with her companion nowhere in sight. “It was a very cute [*ba mazzeh*] and quaint old market, with old buildings and carts where people sold fruits and other things. At that moment, I remembered the zekr the [young] darvish had taught me, and having practiced intoning full sentences in sleep, I was able to say it. *La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah* [there is no power or strength except with God]. And my soul returned. But how did it return? I could hear my own heavy breathing. I was soaking in sweat. My body ached all over. And I could hear the gargling of flowing water, even though I knew there was no water nearby.”

At some point in our conversation, I had told Nafiseh that I was interested in learning how different people distinguished truth from falsity and illusion in their own experiences with the occult. She now found the occasion to comment: “It is possible, when you are immersed in a fantastical atmosphere [*faza-ye vahm-angiz*], for some of your own illusions to become mixed in with reality. But on the other hand you can’t say that there’s nothing but delusion to all of this. If that’s the case I need to go straight to an insane asylum and get institutionalized.” Nafiseh paused for a moment. “It is true, though, that the science of psychiatry would reject these things. If you go now and tell a psychiatrist that you see jinn, she’ll give you medicine for mental

illness, like extreme schizophrenia or something,” she laughed. Other than those things that she had seen with her own eyes in states between dreaming and wakefulness, Nafiseh repeatedly marshaled two kinds of evidence to insist that one could not simply dismiss all her experience as mere delusion. The first was the strip of cloth from her old shirt which had appeared during her session with the rammal. The second was those cases when her experiences with jinn were corroborated by other people in her apartment: the elderly woman who slept in her bedroom once, a building caretaker who complained of being repeatedly tormented and beaten up during his sleep, and a young woman who had seen images similar to some of the things Nafiseh had described. For Nafiseh, this showed that something sinister really had happened to her apartment building, ever since the rammal had performed his dining cloth ritual there.

Nafiseh must have received more than one indication from her friends and acquaintances that they thought she was slightly crazy, that the extraordinary experiences she described were products of a psychiatric condition, or at least some eccentricity of character or overactive imagination. This was the impression I got from our mutual friend, the one who introduced Nafiseh to me, who told me that she was “a little superstitious” and eccentric. This was what Nafiseh had meant when she told me that there was a line that separated those who had seen the extraordinary, and those who had not. “The cost,” she had said, “might be that you get to a point where your acquaintances tell you that you’re mad. But it’s not in your hands. Because it’s happened to you and you’ve really seen.” She had even realized that there were physiological indications for her condition. More than once, she had been asked by complete strangers if she used glass (*shisheh* – a nickname for methamphetamines). On the third occasion that she was asked this question, by her neighbor on a flight to Shiraz, she had inquired as to what she had in common with meth addicts. The neighbor, who knew a thing or two about the topic from her

own experience, explained that glass dilates the pupils, and Nafiseh's pupils were unusually dilated. But this dilation, as Nafiseh explained to me, had been caused by the "stare that fixes the eye" when one perceives otherworldly beings, much like the wide-eyed characters portrayed in horror movies (*zhanr-e vahshat*), although she also commented that in the moment of any particular encounter, she seldom experienced fear. Repeated sightings, she said, condition the muscles of the iris to keep the pupils wide open. It was a symptom she could look for to identify other people engaged with the occult.

The occasional disparagement aside, a new world was opened up to Nafiseh when she crossed the line. This was a world filled with novel experiences, friendships, and insight. She read everything she could get her hands on about metaphysics and the supernatural – reincarnation, dreaming, out-of-body experiences, cosmic energies, jinn, karma, chakras, hypnotism, magnetism, telepathy, and the strange sciences. She made new and rewarding friendships with other spiritual travelers, each trundling along on their unique journeys into the exciting unknown. She joined discussion forums online – including *Asrar* where I was also a member – to connect with dozens of other enthusiasts of the supernatural. To some of her old friends, she became an authority on the occult. They asked her for advice, or requested written prayers for solving specific problems – to return an estranged lover, ward off negative energies from a home, and so on. For a time, she aided a friend and colleague from television who had a private Reiki healing practice in her apartment. She experimented with hypnotism and telekinesis with the same friend. Gradually, she grew more and more attuned to the waves and energies pulsating through her environment, learning to intuit unspoken messages from other people, picking up their colors, sensing their intentions. She found herself developing connections with

animals, some of whom brought her messages from beyond, like a dove that came to stay with her for a few weeks and left shortly before her father passed away at the age of fifty-four.

Nafiseh's interests and commitments to different forms of metaphysical experience ebbed and flowed. But she told me that her perception of herself and of her world had been permanently altered. "The world as I see it," she said, nodding towards the cypress trees that surrounded us, "is not this world of trees and birds, even though when I look at these trees, I really do love them, more than human beings even, because the tree is at least perfect in what it is, whereas we humans are very imperfect." "How do you see the world then?" I asked. "I see it as devoid of time and space, and yet as being anything I want it to be, depending on my spiritual power [*qodrat-e ruhi*]." She compared this view to the philosophy of *The Matrix*, where the universe bends to the spiritual power of the movie's protagonists. She explained that she was able to send pulses to whoever she wanted, to make them think of her. At night, she left her channels open, to receive messages from others. "I believe that our wakefulness is not now. Our real wakefulness is when we are asleep. That is our real self. Not this self that is present in the world." This view explained her interest in true dreams, of insights and images received during sleep, of which there were many, especially in the year after her father's death.

In the course of her spiritual journeys, Nafiseh had learned to accept certain notions, value certain experiences, and discard others. Yet much of these were provisional judgments, open to reevaluation with the emergence of new encounters, or new moods. The whole affair remained strange, and strangely indeterminate, like a waking dream. The rammal she had met ten years ago was a dangerous charlatan. And yet he had been able to materialize a piece of her shirt out of oblivion, and he may have had the power to harm her through witchcraft. She had learned to help her own friends through the techniques of strange science, and yet she often regarded the

whole thing as unimportant, trivial. She had believed for some years in reincarnation, and yet she changed her mind when her sister met the soul of their deceased father in a dream. At the time of our interview, she told me that the only notion she definitively held onto “in this realm [of the metaphysical]” was “energy” and “energy sources.” Perhaps this too was open to change. These indeterminacies had not hindered her spiritual explorations. They had propelled her onward.

### **A Career in Witchcraft**

Nafiseh told me that people’s energies can often be identified from their eyes. She commented that I, for example, had a high level of energy, and would be well-suited for hypnotism or spiritual healing. “You can just forget about what you’re doing,” she told me, laughing, “and pursue a career that will be both lucrative and secure your worldly life and your hereafter. At least you could be a healer, and there would be some use to your knowledge.” Nafiseh herself never made a career out of her occult pursuits, although she clearly believed she had the ability. She may have been too much of a wanderer to remain in a fixed path. To settle into a career would have been to betray the indeterminacy of the occult which she had so fully inhabited, creating fixity out of something inherently ephemeral, ambiguous, fluid. Perhaps that was why she thought the rammal had been a charlatan.

Months before I met Nafiseh, I was introduced to another young woman who had fashioned a successful business out of her occult knowledge and experience. She, too, radiated intense energy from her eyes, although a young male friend who had met her warned me that her eyes were “Satanic” (*shaytani*). She had also encountered a rammal at the outset of her career. And although she did not consider him a charlatan, her sense of her own magical knowledge and practice was in part forged through a denigration of the superstitions of rammals and darvishes.

She performed a relationship to rationality and science that set her apart from the rammal, even as she drew on his knowledge and appropriated it for herself. This performance, moreover, was one of certainty, not doubt. She was unequivocal both about the scientific status of her own knowledge and practice, and about the superstitions that had mixed in with occult science as conceived by ordinary people and traditional practitioners. By performing rationality in this way, not only did she position herself as a modern, educated, science-minded individual, but she fashioned her magical practice as one that was rational, scientific, and modern.

Her name was Mersedeh. She was twenty-four years old, a master's student in psychology at Azad University. She rented an apartment in Ariashahr, a young and populous district in western Tehran settled mostly by middle class immigrants from other towns (her own parents lived in Karaj). She also rented a small suite in the lower level of an apartment complex not too far from where she lived. This was her work space, where customers came to seek her expert advice and assistance. Sometimes, she received clients at a hole-in-the-wall café nearby, where she interpreted their coffee grounds, performed tarot readings, and made appointments for more in-depth sessions at her suite. This is where I met her the first time.

I learned about Mersedeh through my research assistant Mehdi, whose aunt had consulted her for some problem or other and vouched for her expertise. To arrange for an interview, Mehdi called Mersedeh on her cell phone and told her – falsely – that he was in love with a young woman who was engaged to another man. He asked if she could help him win the woman for himself. Mersedeh said that this would not be a problem; Mehdi should bring her a lock, some tar, and – if he could – photographs of the woman and her fiancée, and she would make it so that “no child of man will ever be able to bring the couple back together again.” The deed would cost Mehdi 100,000 tomans (about a hundred dollars). Then Mehdi told Mersedeh that he also wanted



to bring along a researcher from America, who was interested in asking a few questions. After some hesitation, she agreed, and a date was set.

We drove to the hole-in-the-wall café in Ariashahr, as directed by Mersedeh, and seated ourselves at a table. After two phone calls, and about twenty minutes later than our scheduled appointment, Mersedeh walked in. She was of medium height, with a round face and large brown eyes, accentuated by a heavy layer of mascara and dark, smoky eye shadow that extended to her temples. She wore light pink lip gloss, orange blush, and red nail polish. Her hair was cut short, dyed light brown, and sprayed to stand almost completely on end. A thin, black shawl lay over her head, with its ends hanging loosely down the sides of her face and over her chest. It had trouble staying in place and she was in no hurry to put it back on when it inevitably slipped off to her shoulders. Her manteau, also black, looked a size too small, probably a deliberate choice to show off her figure.

Mersedeh greeted us, then walked behind the counter to chat with the baristas for a few minutes before joining us at our table. There was some awkwardness as Mehdi and I competed for control over the conversation. We mentioned nothing about Mehdi's fabricated love interest, but did point out that we wanted our fortunes told at the end of our meeting. Eventually, I managed to ask her how she had gotten into her line of work. Mersedeh began with the story of an encounter with a rammal. "Ten years ago," she began, "I did not believe in any of this." But things changed when she became afflicted with a severe case of eczema, and she found no relief after multiple visits to doctors and dermatologists. A friend had suggested to her that she might have been bewitched. "So I went and saw an Arab man," she said. "He gave me an empty bucket and told me to fill it up with water. He also asked me to check the bucket and make sure that there was nothing inside. Then he began to recite incantations. I was sitting there cursing myself

over what I had gotten myself into, thinking that it was all fake. He gave me a knife to stir the water, and some dirt to pour into the bucket while I recited *hamd* [the *Al-Fatiha*, the first chapter of the Qur'an] and *qul huwa 'llah* [the *Al-Ikhlās* chapter]. I also added one or two spoonfuls of sugar, rose water, and salt. He recited an oath [*qasam*] over the bucket. Then all of a sudden, I saw a stream of smoke enter the room. It rippled and approached me slowly, then dived into the bucket. I heard the sound of an explosion as the smoke entered the water. I kept stirring the bucket with the knife that he had given me. After a while, the knife stopped moving. It would not budge. The water had hardened into something like cement. He did something that loosened the knife, then told me that there were things in the bucket that I could take out. He said that most women would not dare put their hands into it, but I could if I wanted to. So I dipped my hands into the water, and took out, one by one, a lost earring from a pair I had owned, a button from a manteau, a fake gold ring that I had lost, a lot of rusted locks attached to a chain, and a piece of fabric from a shroud. I began to stutter, "these things are mine!" The implements through which Mersedeh had been bewitched had been discovered and neutralized. Mersedeh said she left the rammal feeling a lightness and a "genuine feeling of drunkenness [*masti-ye nab*] that no wine in the world can give you." She felt as if she were suspended in a different dimension, apart from space and time. The treatment she had undergone with some of the best doctors had finally worked, she said, and her eczema was gone. "I am still friends with this man."

After this strange encounter, Mersedeh became interested in learning prayer-writing (*do'anevisi*) and witchcraft (*jadu*). The Arab man, now her teacher, was "stingy" with information. Others she consulted asked her for ridiculous sums to teach her the art. So she did much of the research on her own as specific practical needs arose (winning the love of a man she desired for example). At one point, she stole some of the Arab master's books, photocopied

them, then asked someone else to return them to him, for fear that she would have to face his wrath and, as she put it jokingly, “be turned into a cockroach.” “These men,” Mersedeh told me, “have a certain snobbishness [*ujb*] about them which is similar to the arrogance of the darvish who is constantly praised by his devotees. This leads them to be stingy with their knowledge. They won’t teach everything they know.” In her opinion, this (along with state persecution of the do‘anevis and the fortune-teller throughout history<sup>57</sup>) had been an important cause for the inaccurate and incomplete form in which occult science had been passed down. “Superstition has mixed in with a large part of prayers and talismans,” she said. “Some of the information that is out there is purely commercial, and most prayer writers are a bunch of drug addicts.” Still, she insisted that “every single one of these things has a scientific aspect. It is a science that has reached us in an incomplete form.”

At the end of our meeting that day, I asked Mersedeh if she would be willing to teach me the theory of witchcraft. “I’m not interested in becoming a do‘anevis,” I explained. “I just want to know how it works.” I secretly hoped that I would be able to gain some insight into Mersedeh’s practice, and gather the kinds of anecdotes that anthropologists value and that Mersedeh would have considered banal. Mersedeh agreed to teach me, saying she had trained students before. She added that it would not take more than one or two meetings to impart everything that was necessary for me to understand the theory. Learning to practice would take much longer. She said she would charge me between fifty and seventy thousand tomans (fifty to seventy dollars) for the entire tutorial.

Various circumstances intervened and I was not able to meet with Mersedeh until two months later. When I called her to arrange for a meeting, I had to remind her who I was and what

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<sup>57</sup> Her understanding of the persecution of prayer writers was informed by readings about witch burning in early modern Europe and North America.

I wanted. She again agreed to teach me the theory of witchcraft, but this time said she would charge me a hundred thousand tomans. I did not bargain.

We agreed on a date and I met her at her suite on a Sunday morning, about two weeks afterward. As I approached her apartment complex, I tried to picture what I would find inside. I had visited the residences of a few rammals by this time, but none matched Mersedeh's sociological profile. The rammals I had met were men. Their houses were outside of Tehran or on the outskirts of the city. Inside, there were usually only a few pieces of dilapidated furniture. In one case in the town of Abiyek, near Qazvin, the young rammal sat on the ground in a room so cluttered there was enough space for only two other people inside. Rugs, pieces of furniture, a television, mattresses, and other items were strewn about or piled on top of one another. Other people told me of similar spaces – old, rundown, or chaotic. Somehow I doubted that I would encounter the same scene in Mersedeh's suite.

Mersedeh buzzed me in. As she welcomed me into her studio, I was immediately struck by her choice of attire. She looked much the same as she did in the café, with copious amounts of gaudy make-up, but with far fewer articles of clothing: only a black, low-cut tank top and very short denim shorts. The studio was very small, not more than twenty-five or thirty square meters, with a garish design dominated by pinks and yellows: Pink sofas with yellow heart-shaped pillows, a yellow rug, a pink telephone set shaped like a pair of lips, pink and yellow candles, heart-shaped chocolates wrapped in pink foil on a yellow plate, yellow and pink artificial roses on the countertop and on the ground near one of the sofas, large yellow plastic pears on the coffee table. The two loudspeakers on her stereo were blaring a Hayedeh song: “At nights I keep going to the tavern... I keep going after wine and cup...”

“My taste, as you see, is somewhat strange,” she said. “This part used to be all pink. The rug, the spoons and forks, they were all pink. My taste is strange isn’t it? Have a seat.” She offered me a tall glass of sour-cherry juice decorated with a plastic pineapple slice and a long, twisty straw. As she mixed herself a drink with non-alcoholic beer, she started to explain her theory of magic:

“See, you shouldn’t look at prayer as a complicated thing, ok? Our darvishes and our do‘anevishes have always been used to confusing people. Because they thought that they had a very special and exclusive form of knowledge (*‘elm*) that has power, they would act in a bit of an exaggerated way, and would attempt to refrain from completely conveying their knowledge to their apprentices, so that power would always remain in their own hands. And because they were, in the end, ignorant (*‘aammi*), they thought they had a special kind of knowledge and science. In reality, prayer consists of a series of very general and ordinary and simple topics. Prayer and talismans are not superstitions. A series of issues have gotten mixed in with this, which have turned into superstition. But otherwise it is made up of the general laws of physics, chemistry, psychology, and, in fact, metaphysics, which is the science of the cosmos (*ka’emat*). There is a very general and basic framework for everything, and that is *‘frequency*.”

Mersedeh’s theory of witchcraft was a creative synthesis of her own practical knowledge, with her interpretation of Persian manuals on occult science, material she had garnered from Kurt Seligmann’s “The History of Magic” (1948) translated by Iraj Golsorkhi (which she offered to photocopy for me), and, most importantly, Rhonda Byrne’s “The Secret” (2006). The latter, a self-help book available in Iran in multiple translations, is a fascinating artifact of popular culture that has made a powerful impact on the imaginations of many urban middle class Iranians. A 2006 film based on the book was dubbed into Persian and shown on Iranian state television. DVDs are available in many bookstores along with the book and other products inspired by its ideas: calendars, notebooks, inspirational CDs, and so on. Motivational speakers in the cities often make direct references to the book and film, and many structure their seminars upon its principles.

Mersedeh told me that “The Secret” could be seen as the foundation of prayer and witchcraft: “To explain it in very simple terms: all the world around us is energy. Witchcraft, and prayer-writing, and talismans are all energy. Even the body consists of compressed energy. When your heart becomes happy, you send out positive frequencies to the world, and you receive equal amounts of positive frequencies from the world. When people were still unable to speak and express words, they communicated via telepathy. As we learned to speak more and more, those parts of our brain that were related to telepathy shrunk and the parts dealing with words and sentences advanced and grew. Prayer-writing is nothing but telepathy.”

The energies that humans emit can be either positive or negative, Mersedeh explained. And they remain in the world forever. Every prayer, every wish and desire, every feeling, has its own frequency. “Say you want a Mercedes Elegance. There is a wavelength to your desire that wells up from within you. This is what the cosmos hears.” These are frequencies that already exist in the cosmos. But by making a wish, expressing a desire, feeling a certain way, we make the relevant frequencies resonate. When a certain prayer has resonated frequently enough through a certain specific channel (a word, a written sign, an image), it becomes all the more likely for that particular channel to become efficacious in materializing the specific prayer or wish. Sometimes this is simply a matter of what Rhonda Byrne calls “creative visualization.” Mersedeh put it this way: If you stare at a picture of a Mercedes Elegance long enough, and imagine that it belongs to you, you emit the proper kinds of frequencies to the cosmos, and the cosmos will eventually give you the car.

Repetition is important. “Whenever something is repeated,” Mersedeh explained, “its power increases in the cosmos. It’s like if, from afar, I keep saying ‘Alireza I love you, I do I do I do.’ This eventually affects your heart. Ok? Now, the more I say this, the more it infiltrates

your unconscious. With the cosmos, there's no difference whatsoever. Everything in the cosmos is like an unconscious self. It's as if it's a storehouse where frequencies accumulate." She took my notebook and drew a few short parallel lines on a blank page: "Now, a do'anevis has at one point drawn four lines like this, with the intention that this, in the cosmos, is meant to bring love. Ok? He's drawn this for ten years, and his teacher has drawn this for ten years, and the teachers before them for another hundred years, so this now exists in the cosmos. It is recorded that these four lines mean love. Ok? When the do'anevis draws this for you now, this frequency is already there in the cosmos, so it immediately connects up to it, and you see the result quickly." I looked at my notebook and wondered whether Mersedeh had just written me a love spell. "Now, as a do'anevis," added Mersedeh, "I either have this knowledge that these lines are all my creative visualization, or I don't, in which case like the ignorant do'anevis who doesn't have this knowledge I accept that because my grandfather drew this, this shape will take Alireza to this woman."

Confidence was very important in Mersedeh's scheme. Magic works best when you believe that it works. If you want anything strongly enough, with enough certainty and assurance that your will and desire will make it happen, you will get results. It may not happen immediately; the cosmos needs time to process the frequencies, to bring together all the requisite causal factors. But it will happen. This confidence in the efficacy of magic, through creative visualization or sheer willpower, also has important therapeutic benefits. She had seen this through her part-time counseling work at a local community center, which she had secured with her degree in psychology. She would not give me many details, but she told me that her work was not radically different from prayer-writing:

"On any given day a girl might come in and say: 'I want to slash my wrist, I feel awful.' I have cases like this. Or she has actually slit her wrist. So she'll say I've slit my wrist, I

feel bad, I feel this or that. Ok. So this person's mind is a collection of negative frequencies and thoughts. Now I tell her, look, don't think negatively, your life will be fixed up, go do this or that. I offer her some strategies. But these words won't change her beliefs. Ok? She'll try to think this way, but it won't work. Now for the same person, I do counseling and I also do prayer-writing. But my prayer-writing is much more successful than my counseling. Because even though the girl comes in and gets counseling, she doesn't come to believe. From her point of view, I've shown her a strategy. But sometimes I'll say, I know how to do prayers, and I'm telling you: Go off, and take this prayer with you, and do this or that to it for forty days, and this issue of yours will be sorted out. Or go, and in forty days, this or that will occur for you. The person leaves, and with the belief that it will work, she discards all those negative thoughts, and all those negative frequencies go away and her soul is purified. And during this time, either her lover returns to her, or her issue is sorted out, or she gets some money, or some new opportunity presents itself to her and her life changes for the better."

To be convincing to her clients, Mersedeh had to exude confidence. But she also needed to be persuasive in her rhetoric. Her scientific language, and her appropriation and recontextualization of concepts already familiar to many among her clientele (positive and negative energy, creative visualization, and so on) helped her develop a "contemporary" (*emroozi*) image of her practice. Finally, she needed to look sufficiently strange or eccentric so that her clients would be convinced that she could offer something different from what they might have read in a self-help book or received from a counselor. She had learned this from the "traditional" rammals:

"Someone goes and sees a do'anevis at the far end of southern Tehran, a darvish with a long beard and bizarre dress and a felt hat (*kolah namadi*), ok, and he's got bull horns and bells hanging on the walls, and there are swords and such around him. She enters and sees him and says: 'Wow, he is a total darvish, my work will get done.' And she no longer wavers afterward with wonder and doubt over whether or not it will work. Right? The more strongly the person who is taking the prayer from you believes in you, the better the result."



Mersedeh's own style, as she put it, was modern (*motejadded*). She created strangeness through gaudiness, rather than the exotic. It was a choice that matched her contemporary, scientific outlook.

She found it important to stress, repeatedly, her distinction from the traditional rammal and darvish, not only in terms of style, but the very substance of her knowledge. When I asked what she thought about public denunciations of rammals as charlatans, she told me that Iranian society is superstitious: "You've seen a lot of these do'anevises and you know what they're like. They're a bunch of illiterate ignorant people who write something that they've been writing for generations. Some of them do good work that is effective. But not the rest. They're opium-addicted lowlifes who write prescriptions out of a bunch of offset-printed manuals and give them to wretched women." She, on the other hand, knew the scientific theory behind the working of prayers and witchcraft. She was well-read and could distinguish truth from superstition in matters of magic and religion (she believed in God as a higher, universal energy that encompassed and included everyone and everything, but thought the Qur'an and other holy books were man-made. She told me that she could open up the Qur'an and point at a verse and tell me the specific problem with that verse – even though she also believed in the Qur'an's magical uses). She was modern, stylish, educated, skeptical, and not a charlatan.

Given how closely her denunciation of rammals matched those that appeared frequently in newspapers and on television, I wondered what she thought about the other side of the equation of superstition: the gullibility of women. She acknowledged that women were her primary customers. But her explanation was decidedly social and historical:

"Iranian society is patriarchal (*mard-salar*). Actually every society in the world is patriarchal. You know why? It's because of religions. Have you ever heard of a female prophet? All societies are patriarchal because in every religious book, the prophets have always been men. They would enslave women or say that the women were to obey their

husbands and men. Every society is patriarchal; especially third world countries where women haven't gained power. And wherever they've wanted to become equal with men, it has ended up to their disadvantage. Because men always want to exploit women. Let's say in Iran, a woman wants to work, and gets a job as a receptionist. She first has to consent to a lower salary. Then the man who hires her wants to flirt with her and exploit her sexually and emotionally. It's only on the surface that she is working and making money. Most places where women work, they either fall in love with their male superiors, or they commit suicide, or they stand in front of the mirror for hours every morning making themselves up for the benefit of the man they work for. Some of this is due to women's internal senses. Women like to be the centers of attention, wherever they are, and they make every effort to be the favorite (*sogoli*). So she tries to win the man there. She does like to work, but she also likes to win the man and be the favorite in the office. So she's forced to use her own sexual and emotional allure. She ends up providing more services than she's paid to do, and she comes out the loser. So in the third world, the women are always after getting a man to support them financially. Most people who come [to me] are trying to get a husband or a man. They always want a man to support them. I've had cases, like one yesterday, where a woman had come and was asking me for help with finding a husband. I asked her what she had been doing. She said she'd been friends with a man for fourteen years. He paid her rent and an allowance, and supported her like that. So she had to be nice to him, speak to him on the phone at night, tell him where she'd gone and what she'd done. I told her, why do you do that? Rather than dedicating this time to him so that he'll support you, go out and work for yourself.

It was a lesson that she had learned through experience:

Look at me for example. I live alone. I have another apartment and I live by myself. I pay rent at two places. I have my own expenses and I spend very liberally when I have the money. One time a client asked me, why don't you try to gain the financial support of a man? I said, you're right! Let me try to do that. I have the looks, so why don't I get a man to support me, rather than supporting myself all the time. So I got a boyfriend. I looked for a super rich person (*khar-pool*). And it doesn't take me that long to find someone. I wanted to find someone with a Mercedes Elegance. So I had friends who worked in a car dealership, and I asked them to let me know if they ever had a young customer who wanted to buy an expensive, recent model Mercedes Elegance, so that I could get him. So they did. But I realized [soon afterward] that the time I was devoting to talking to this guy on the phone, and going out with him so that he'd support me, I could have used that time to work myself. Why shouldn't I do that? Every time I wanted to work, the phone would go drrrrrrrr. And he'd ask me if I wanted to go out. After a while I told him I didn't have time. And I figured, I'd have to worry all the time whether he'd give me money or not. I can work and make my own money.

Mersedeh clearly understood witchcraft as a means to power. She herself had used it for years to advance her interests, whether it was to threaten her sister's irritating suitor, to win the heart of a desirable man, to prevent that man from falling into the hands of other women, or to strike at men and women who had been a nuisance to her. But she also recognized witchcraft as a somewhat archaic tool of the weak, better suited for her clients than herself. She preferred it when she was able to exert power through other means:

It's true that witchcraft and prayer have effects. They're not ineffectual. But for every person there's a weak spot that you can exploit. Maybe witchcraft belonged to a time when, if someone wouldn't come to me, I would have had to resort to it to bring him toward me somehow. But right now there are telephones. For every person there's a point, a word, a need, or a weak spot that you can use to tame them, calm them. If you put your finger on that and use it to get to them, it's the best witchcraft.

Later she told me that she thought it was "illogical (*bi-mantegh*) people" who went after witchcraft to solve their problems. Logical people go after logical means. Sometimes a friend would tell her that she had learned a new style of fortune-telling and wanted to try it out on her, and she would agree to it just so that she wouldn't break the friend's heart. But she didn't really like it. I asked her why that was. She said it was because "it all comes from our weakness." Our need for fortune-telling, for spells, for prayer, is rooted in weakness. "When I know that everything is only one step away from my grasp, and that we ourselves are the greatest power, why do I need to waste my time with this sort of thing?"

## **Conclusion**

For those who are intrigued by the occult and yet care to position themselves favorably toward the dominant web of science and rationality, the danger of the superstitious label is one with

which to reckon seriously. They perform rationality to properly distance themselves from the gullibility that is the mark of the superstitious, and their performance often reiterates the same values and relationships that are affirmed in public denunciations of the rammal. But through these performances, they also open up possibilities that fly in the face of what public discourse finds acceptable: Shokufeh's thrilling experience with the rammal was both heightened and rendered safe (sanitary?) by her declarations that she did not believe in witchcraft. Nafiseh's distrust of the charlatanry of the rammal propelled her on a spiritual journey that transformed her vision of the world. And Mersedeh's denigration of the superstitions of ignorant, drug-addicted darvishes allowed her to market her own professional service as modern, hip, and scientific.

### Chapter 3 – Fluid Engagements

If superstition represents, in the eyes of contemporary Shi‘i officialdom, one cluster of misguided and dangerous engagements with the putatively supernatural, the other, more sinister category of beliefs and practices that has attracted overwhelming attention in recent years is the diverse plurality glossed as “deviant mysticisms” (*erfan-haye enherafi*). This chapter is dedicated to one such mysticism, known to its followers as “Mysticism of the Ring” (*erfan-e halqeh*) or “Cosmic Mysticism” (*erfan-e kayhani*). More importantly, the chapter attends to the diverse ways in which those who have sought this group’s teachings fashion their own orientations toward it. I argue that notwithstanding the purist and totalistic aspirations of the group’s leaders, and the equally purist and totalistic terms in which Shi‘i authorities allied with the state have condemned them, those people who actually participate in the group’s meetings and are inspired by its teachings often do so in fluid ways that cannot be captured by any of the foregoing dogmatisms.

Cosmic Mysticism made one of its first appearances in what would lead to a mounting salvo of negative depictions in the official media in February 2008. *Kazh-raheh* (crooked path), a 64-page special edition of the Jam-e Jam daily owned by the state radio and television organization, was dedicated entirely to the theme of newly emerging “deviant” and “pseudo” mysticisms. A column on page 11 focused on Cosmic Mysticism, which I partially translate below:

**Cosmic Consciousness, Mr. Engineer’s Prescription for Bringing the Dead back to Life!!**

There is no end to strange and outlandish claims, and some claimants [*modda ‘iyan*], in order to influence their audience, attempt to insinuate seemingly scientific thoughts and worldviews that mostly have no basis or foundation.

Energy therapy, meta-therapy, cosmic therapy, word therapy, etc have seen increasing growth in the past few years and it suffices to visit the book market to witness books with other strange and outlandish content as well.

Another topic having to do with the claimants, but of an enlightened intellectual [*roshanfekran*] variety, is related to cosmic consciousness. In one of the meetings in which a group have gathered to use cosmic consciousness to do what they call meta-therapy, an individual who considers himself a claimant and undisputed master of the topic and discovery of cosmic consciousness claims that by learning the methods of meta-therapy and by relying on cosmic consciousness, one can even bring the dead back to life.<sup>58</sup> He then refers to Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) and says: He too brought the dead to life by employing cosmic consciousness!

[...]

In a general view, one can conclude that the presence of an extensive gathering of enthusiasts in the classes of this claimant who pay 50 thousand tomans in tuition will have at least added a few zeros to the bank accounts of Mr. Engineer, even if it has not brought any benefits upon these enthusiasts themselves.

The claimant “Mr. Engineer” the author refers to is Mohammad Ali Taheri, the founder of Cosmic Mysticism who, at the peak of his career in 2008, oversaw an impressive network of seminars and informal “therapy clinics” spread across urban centers in Iran and beyond. Taheri was arrested in early May 2011, and is still in prison at the time of this writing. The charges against him are unclear, and a trial has yet to be set, although various official announcements confirm that his prosecution has to do with his propagation of deviant ideas through his teaching of Cosmic Mysticism. There are rumors that prosecutors will charge him with apostasy and seek the death penalty. His vast organization is in disarray: His official website has called on all masters to cease teaching and other activity, but there is no way to ascertain that this has in fact happened.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> This sentence may seem awkward in translation. The reason is not that I have mistranslated it, but that it is awkwardly constructed in Persian. Most of this special edition of Jam-e Jam suffers from bad writing, a condition not entirely unique in contemporary Iranian journalism.

<sup>59</sup> I heard from some former students that their classes had been suspended. Others told me that their masters were keeping a low profile, waiting for the crisis to subside so that they could resume their operations.

The severity of action against Taheri mirrors the strength of his appeal. Accurate numbers of his followers are impossible to determine. But there are various hints of the group's widespread popularity. For example, "*Ensan az manzari digar*" (The human being from a different perspective), one of the founding texts of Cosmic Mysticism, went into eight reprints between 2007 and 2009, for a total of 90,000 prints (Kashi 2009:72). A simple experiment I conducted during my fieldwork can also provide a general idea of the group's appeal. I had many occasions to speak about my fieldwork – as it was unfolding – to various gatherings of friends and relatives. Often I would be asked to recount strange and interesting things I had witnessed or experienced firsthand. Stories of therapy sessions dubbed "defensive radiation" that I had attended with one of the masters of Cosmic Mysticism would never fail to arouse fascination and glee, and so I was always prepared to relate a few anecdotes about them. In one of the first gatherings where I described such a session, a guest responded with excitement that his sister had been going to Cosmic Mysticism classes and was training to do defensive radiation. On the next occasion that I told the story, at a dinner party this time, a young woman explained that her cousin had been attending similar meetings. After these two encounters, I made a point of recounting a few things about Cosmic Mysticism whenever I was present in a gathering of middle class individuals who had not already heard my stories. Almost without fail, there would be someone present who had either attended classes or treatment sessions in person, or was intimately familiar with someone else who had done so.

Soon, I began to hear reports about Cosmic Mysticism seminars in other cities. My mother told me about an old friend who had been attending treatment sessions in Babol, in the northern Mazandaran province. I heard from Iranian friends in Malaysia that classes were held in Kuala Lumpur. At the time of this writing, an official fan website devoted to Cosmic Mysticism

lists contact information for representatives in Karaj, Hamedan, Kerman, and Tabriz, as well as Ankara, Chicago, Dubai, Frankfurt, Istanbul, La Jolla, Melbourne, Nottingham, Sydney, Toronto, Vancouver, Vienna, and Zurich.<sup>60</sup>

Cosmic Mysticism consists principally of two therapeutic systems, *faradarmani* (or “meta-therapy”) and *psymetology* (a term Taheri has coined to describe a “meta-holistic science of the mind and psyche” – *zahn-ravanshenasi-ye fara-kol negar*. See Taheri 2011a), as well as a cosmological structure and mystical philosophy that gives them coherence. Taheri claims that he “received” his knowledge of Cosmic Mysticism in 1978, in response to profound questions that had occupied him since childhood:

“This discipline was created due to my encounter... with the realities and truths of existence, which attracted my intense attention since childhood; contemplation about ‘Where have we come from? Why have we come? Where are we going? Who is the Creator? Why has he created? What is the result of this creation? Who is the human? What are the ways for approaching and knowing him? How is his potential power activated? What are life and death? And so on...’ That is, I had an extreme enthusiasm to understand the world of existence and discover the secret of creation; such that these thoughts would not leave me for a moment. Finally, on November 1 1978, all-at-once I encountered inspirations and mental receptions after which certain aspects of existence and the human became clear to me” (Taheri 2011a:4).

The parallel between this reception and the divine revelations sent to the prophets is clear. Although as far as I have seen, Taheri has avoided making a direct link between his receptions and the divine revelations of the prophets, nothing in his writing or his teachings warrant making a distinction between the two. Some of his followers, as we shall see, consider him to be nothing less than a prophet.

The cosmology of Cosmic Mysticism rests on a tripartite differentiation of existence:

There is matter and energy; but above all, there is consciousness (*shu ‘ur* or *agahi*).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> There are, no doubt, many more representatives scattered around Iran who prefer not to list their contact information, for fear of state harassment. For example, the master I trained with is not listed.



Consciousness creates matter and energy in the following way: Matter and energy are “waves” with various degrees of density. Since waves are made of “movement” (*harekat*), matter and energy are also made of movement. For example, an atom is constructed from the movement of electrons around protons and neutrons; without movement, the atom would collapse upon itself and become something else. To the extent that everything consists of movement, it is only apparent and virtual (*majazi*) – that is, there is no existential “truth” (*haqiqat*) to it, even though it has existential “reality” (*vaqe’iyat*). Now any movement requires a mover. The universal mover is consciousness. Therefore Consciousness creates movement, which creates matter and energy.

The smallest fragment in the world of existence consists of the three elements of matter, energy, and consciousness. But there is also a network-like Universal Consciousness (*shu’ur-e kol*) or Universal Intelligence (*hushmandi-ye kol*), which contains the information of all the tiny consciousnesses, while also being contained by them (this is a derivation of the classic Neoplatonic equivalence between macrocosm and microcosm).<sup>62</sup> This Universal Consciousness is created by God, but it is not God himself. It is the system that organizes and rules over all of existence, mediating their connection with God, who lies at a deistic remove. Muslims call this Universal Consciousness *Jibra’il* (Gabriel), and Christians call it the Holy Spirit.

According to Taheri, the practical recognition of Universal Consciousness, this “wondrous divine phenomenon,” leads to an appreciation of the unity (*vahdat*) of existence and elevates human thought to the level of “the world of existence” (Taheri 2007:222-223). Taheri

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<sup>61</sup> My treatment of Cosmic Mysticism’s cosmology here will, by necessity, be brief. For a more detailed study, see Fezzeh Kashi’s M.A. thesis in sociology at the University of Tehran (Kashi 2009).

<sup>62</sup> As Mr. Sheyda, the master with whom I studied, explained to me, “The world of being is a sea of intelligence, where the details of the greatest structures – the macrocosm – exist in the smallest of elements – the microcosm.”

defines this as becoming “interuniversal.” The concept implies three things: First, universalism – that is, thinking beyond ethnic, tribal, national, racial, religious,<sup>63</sup> and “even international” boundaries (ibid:223). Second, holistic thinking and avoiding getting trapped in useless discussion of particulars, especially when they do not help to further an understanding of existential unity.<sup>64</sup> And third, staying away from religious eclecticism, especially when it leads to contradiction.

While claiming interuniversality, Taheri notes that in promoting Cosmic Mysticism, he is attempting to promote “Iran’s Mysticism” (*erfan-e Iran*), demonstrating that “Iran is a capable base for world mysticism (*erfan-e donya*) and that it can still decode and unveil hidden knowledges that are its national spiritual capital, and thereby acquire global esteem (*e’tebar* – literally “credit”)” (ibid:18). Moreover, “To those who have been attracted to the mysticism and pseudo-mystical movements of other nations and peoples,” his book “sends the following message: ‘For years, my heart sought the Cup of Jamshid<sup>65</sup> from me – And what it possessed, it entreated from strangers.’ (Hafez)” (ibid). That is, people should not be seeking mystical knowledge in imported systems, since Taheri’s Cosmic Mysticism already offers something superior. His interuniversality is fundamentally nationalist, even as it disavows nationalism.

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<sup>63</sup> Taheri does not explicitly mention the need to transcend religious differences in his books. However, the argument was made openly in his seminars, as well as those of his students. Mr. Sheyda told me that this problem of “worldview” (*binesh*) was what eventually led to Taheri’s seminars being shut down by the government.

<sup>64</sup> According to Taheri, “The experience of centuries of grappling with specifics and getting drowned in them, has shown that humankind has lost its golden opportunities and has failed to reach any reliable measure [*dast’aviz-e motma’en*], because the information [it has acquired] has not been adapted to the knowledge of perfection and the Universal Reason; therefore, humankind has been futilely circling around itself” (ibid:227).

<sup>65</sup> *Jam-e Jam* or Jam’s wine cup was a magical device owned by the mythical Persian king Jamshid. It became a staple of Persian Sufi poetry around the middle of the twelfth century, functioning as a metaphor for the heart and soul, or the divine tablet that contains everything in writing. In the myths about Jamshid, the king was said to have been able to see the unseen and forecast the future by glancing into his cup, thereby gaining dominion over the entire world. See Omidasalar (2008). The Iranian state radio and television network is often referred to as “Jam-e Jam,” which is also the name of its official newspaper and several of its satellite channels.

Thus, Taheri's system is ostensibly premised on three exclusions: An exclusion of religious (as well as ethnic, racial, and national) particularism in favor of universalism; an exclusion of imported mystical systems in favor of an Iranian mysticism; and an exclusion of eclectic borrowing and mixture of spiritual systems, in favor of internal consistency. Each of these supposed exclusions could be critiqued and various inconsistencies pointed out with regard to Taheri's actual cosmology and mystical practice, but I do not intend to do so here. Instead, I will try to explain these exclusions and Taheri's particular stance toward them in relation to the rise of alternative mystical systems in Iran since the early 1990s.

### **Post-War Alternative Spiritualities**

The rise of Cosmic Mysticism should be understood in the context of the widespread proliferation of alternative spiritualities in the two decades following the end of the war with Iraq (1980-88). Paul Heelas' image of the New Age movement in Europe and North America of the 1990s could with very slight modification be applied to the terrain of Iranian alternative spirituality in the mid 2000s:

“One's initial impression is of an eclectic hotch-potch of beliefs, practices, and ways of life. Esoteric or mystical Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism enter the picture. So do elements from 'pagan' teachings including Celtic, Druidic, Mayan and Native American Indian. An exceedingly wide range of practices – Zen meditations, Wiccan rituals, enlightenment intensive seminars, management trainings, shamanic activities, wilderness events, spiritual therapies, forms of positive thinking – fall under the rubric.” (Heelas 1996:1)

For Heelas, what provides coherence to this hodge-podge is “self-spirituality,” the notion that the Self is sacred, and that the fundamental task is to “shift from our contaminated mode of being – what we are by virtue of socialization – to that realm which constitutes our authentic nature,”

which is to say, the “spirituality which lies within the person” (ibid:2). Wouter Hanegraaf has similarly argued that one of the constitutive elements of New Age religion is the “psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology,” for example in privileging individual consciousness or the mind as the site of religious experience and positing a fundamental connection (or even unity) between this mind/consciousness and universal consciousness or the Mind of God (Hanegraaf 1996). A similar shift toward a psychologized spirituality of the self can be witnessed in Iran. But what accounts for this development in the years since the end of the war?

Five related processes have helped shape the economic, social, discursive, and intellectual field in which alternative forms of spirituality emerged – first slowly and in small patches, later accelerated and widened:

One - In 1989, the government of Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani initiated what would lead to sixteen years of haphazard economic liberalization, in addition to progressive commercialization of various aspects of urban life.<sup>66</sup> With liberalization came increased opportunities for the middle and upper classes to accumulate wealth, particularly in a re-emerging private sector weakened in the years of Islamist populism during the revolution and war. While the fortunes of these segments of society improved as a whole, their success was uneven and plagued by uncertainty: the vagaries of the market, fluctuating oil prices, and corruption and rent-seeking ensured that some made spectacular gains while a majority struggled. The desire for success and the opportunities opened up in the private sector gradually enabled the emergence of a lucrative “success” (*movaffaqiyat*) industry, marketing (mostly translated) self-help and prosperity literature and seminars. Some of the most popular authors

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<sup>66</sup> See Behdad and Nomani (2009) for an analysis of state economic policy and its effects on social classes in Iran since the Revolution.

and motivational speakers were those who creatively blended business and financial advice with a spiritual-cum-mystical message or ethos inspired by American power speakers like Wayne Dyer, whose translated works are widely available. One could speak of the rise, during this period, of an “occult economy,” characterized, according to Jean and John Comaroff “[o]n the one hand [by] a perception, authenticated by glimpses of the vast wealth that passes through most postcolonial societies and into the hands of a few of their citizens: that the mysterious mechanisms of the market hold the key to hitherto unimaginable riches; to capital amassed by the ever more rapid, often immaterial flow of value across time and space, and into the intersecting sites where the local meets the global. On the other hand is the dawning sense of chill desperation attendant on being left out of the promise of prosperity, of the telos of liberation” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:283-284).<sup>67</sup>

Two - In the same period, competition increasingly became a part of everyday life and a cultural obsession; not just business rivalry, but competition in sports, admission to good schools and universities, and all manner of contests (religious, literary, cultural, artisanal, professional, and so on) sponsored by state or private entities and covered by the mass media. Fariba Adelkhah has analyzed the rise of the culture of competition in post-war Iran in relation to

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<sup>67</sup> Jean and John Comaroff focus on a resolutely grim image of “occult economies,” one characterized by the appearance of monsters, the proliferation of pyramid schemes and other scams, fears of organ theft, zombie rumors, and ritual murder. Because the workings of the occult economy are mysterious, they “become the object of jealousy and envy and evil dealings” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:284). Such dark dealings can be glimpsed in Iran as well, in the form of pyramid schemes, the (legally fraught) pursuit of buried treasure aided by occult specialists, appeals to jinn for multiplying wealth, and seeking recourse in occult techniques for eliminating competitors. Approaches that explain magical practices as strategies for making sense of and exerting control over areas of murkiness and uncertainty in modern life can also be seen in the work of Michael Taussig (1980) and Laurel Kendall (1996) on capitalism in South America and South Korea, Stanley Tambiah (1984:335-347) on the crisis of legitimacy among Thai elites, and Peter Geschiere (1997) and Harry West (2005) on the opaque workings of political power in Africa. But as Daromir Rudnyckij has argued, such an approach cannot fully capture the range of religious responses to capitalist transformation (and, one might add, other forms of murkiness and uncertainty not reducible to the realm of the economic). He prefers to focus instead on a concept of “spiritual economies,” and the ways in which “economic reform and neoliberal restructuring are conceived of and enacted as matters of religious piety and spiritual virtue” (Rudnyckij 2009).

growing social differentiation and individualization (1999:139-174).<sup>68</sup> The prevailing forms of competition are almost always keyed into processes of commercialization, bureaucratization, and rationalization: Contests are regulated, with rules and structures that are public and predictable, and the prize almost always includes a material aspect – money, consumer commodities, or the promise of future success, wealth, and prestige. As an agent of individualization, competition has encouraged the emergence of self-reflexive calculations and knowledge production aimed at the conduct of life (ibid:149). “Through regulated competitions,” Adelkhah writes, “*Homo Iranicus* builds up his [sic] personality in difference, tries to programme his life, makes an effort to overcome his weaknesses, and finds in knowledge a basis for confidence” (ibid). If the desire for business success enabled the rise of the “success” industry, other forms of competition would, according to Adelkhah, encourage the proliferation of literature and seminars promoting self-care through healthy living, emotional wellbeing, physical beauty, and harmonious relationships.

Three - The end of the war saw renewed interest in professional psychiatry and psychology – after a long period of marginalization – for solving deepening social problems. Initially, the problems to be addressed had to do with war trauma.<sup>69</sup> But as psychiatrists were increasingly called upon to write newspaper and magazine articles, provide expert advice to families on state radio and television, and publish easy-to-understand booklets for a non-specialist audience, it became progressively more common for ordinary people to understand their lives and their difficulties in terms made legible by professional psychiatric and psychological discourse. As this professional discourse circulated, so did texts of popular

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<sup>68</sup> Adelkhah’s analysis is most persuasive when read as an account of social, cultural, and political change against the backdrop of the first decade of the revolution. However, it is likely that many of the elements of commercialization, rationalization, and individualization that she writes about can be traced to the modernization programs of the late Pahlavi era.

<sup>69</sup> Orkideh Behrouzan, personal communication. Behrouzan has written a dissertation on the emergence of “psychiatric selves” after the war with Iraq. Behrouzan, Orkideh. 2010. “Prozàk Diaries: Post-Rupture Subjectivities and Psychiatric Futures.” MIT.

psychology and self-help which met the rising demand for simple, practical guides for understanding and dealing with everyday problems.

Four - In the realm of intellectual production, the post-war period was a time of growing popularity for what has been called “*roshanfekri-ye dini*” (religious intellectualism). While it would be difficult to draw a straight line between this movement and the rise of alternative spiritualities, religious intellectuals did help shape the discursive and intellectual environment that nurtured interest in these spiritualities, particularly among a young, educated, pious public. Moreover, some opponents of alternative spiritualities have singled out religious intellectuals as responsible for contributing to the former’s upsurge (see for example Hamidiyeh 2005). The central figure of religious intellectualism has usually been identified as Abdol-Karim Soroush, a philosopher who came to be recognized as an ideologue of the emerging reform movement and a theorist of religious pluralism and religious democracy (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008; Jahanbakhsh 2001:140-171; Sadri 2001). Other important contributors to this trend include Mohsen Kadivar, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, and Mostafa Malekiyan. I cannot attempt a comprehensive review of religious intellectualism here. Instead, I will focus briefly on two related discussions that have a bearing on the proliferation of alternative spiritualities. First, one of the key normative distinctions upheld by Abdol-Karim Soroush has been that between *iman* (inner faith) and *amal* (outward practice), with the former having priority in his definition of a religious society (Jahanbakhsh 2001:153-155,163). A religious society in which *amal* is emphasized (which, according to Soroush, is the case in contemporary Iran), would give primacy to religious jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the correct performance of rituals. The custodians of this society would be the *fuqaha* (jurisprudents) and their primary concern would be to ensure the maintenance of outward religious observance, using the full range of disciplinary and coercive means available

to them. These custodians, however, cannot rule over people's inner faith, and their obsession with outward practice can damage faith – which Soroush sees as the core of religion – rather than strengthen it. On the other hand, in a society in which *iman* is central (what Iran should become, according to Soroush), people are allowed to choose their faith freely, and the state's responsibility is “restricted merely to providing and facilitating the conditions in which the people can freely pursue the actualization of *iman*” (ibid:155). In a truly religious society where *iman* is emphasized, morality and ethics take precedence over the outward observance of religion. Moreover, law is no longer the outcome merely of the labor of Muslim jurists, but must take account of the “collective intellect” (*'aql-e jam'i*) of society, thus becoming democratic (ibid:160). This focus on inner faith on the one hand, and collective reason on the other, has led some of Soroush's critics to accuse him of supporting the secularization of society and personalization of religion, relegating it to the sphere of individual spirituality as has happened in the secular West (ibid:163).

This brings us to the second point, as reflected in the work of the philosopher Mostafa Malekiyan. Malekiyan has argued that as moderns, “traditional religion” is no longer viable for us, and individuals should instead strive to fashion themselves into “spiritual” beings, so as to ensure that they are leading authentic, autonomous lives (Malekiyan 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). For Malekiyan, spirituality (*ma'naviyat*) is the core of religiosity (*tadayyon*). Religions have primarily functioned to alleviate suffering or to at least make it possible for believers to cope by enshrouding suffering in meaning. But in the modern era, individuals can no longer remain “traditionally” (*sonnati*) religious if they are to “act logically” and maintain their coherence. The primary reason for this, according to Malekiyan, is that rationality is central to modernity, but traditional religiosity is based on unquestioning faith and acceptance of others' authority. Hence



moderns must either forego religion altogether (and thus lose the benefits that come with it), or rework their understandings of traditional religion into something that would be compatible with modernity. This reworked religiosity is spirituality: it is rational, skeptical of the historical narratives of major religious traditions, stripped of religion's heavy mythological "burden," oriented toward the here-and-now (which aligns spirituality with secularity, according to Malekiyan), empiricist (that is, its solutions must be testable for each individual, and must provide spiritual benefits – tranquility, liveliness, hope, inner satisfaction, meaning, and so on – in this life, rather than merely making unverifiable promises for the hereafter), egalitarian and opposed to the sacralization of authoritative figures, and shorn of those elements of religion that are specific to a particular time, locale, and culture (spirituality thus strives to be "universal"). The mission of spirituality is to define the fundamental problem or problems facing human beings, and to provide solutions to them. Ultimately, it should aim to answer the human need for inner satisfaction (*rezayat-e baten*), by providing means to peace and tranquility (*aramesh*), joy (*shadi*), and hope (*omid*). Malekiyan acknowledges his understanding of spirituality to be functionalist and psychologistic. He places the historical moment of spirituality's emergence as a self-conscious movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and North America. This "spirituality," Malekiyan argues, is not the same as any of the new religious movements in the world, although it has something in common with all of them.

Five – Finally, the widespread publishing of texts on prosperity, self-help, positive thinking, wellness, psychiatry and pop-psychology would not have been possible without a relaxing of state cultural oversight. Mohammad Khatami oversaw a process of cultural liberalization first during his tenure as Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in the Rafsanjani cabinet and later as President between 1997 and 2005. These same years would

become the heyday of publishing for texts of alternative spirituality – from novels and short stories by Paulo Coelho and Gibran Khalil Gibran to books on Theosophy, New Thought, Eckankar, Buddhism, Hinduism, Gurdjieff, Krishnamurti, Carlos Castaneda, Osho, Scientology, and all manner of New Age titles translated from English or blended into eclectic local systems. By the time religious authorities and conservative politicians took notice of this proliferation of what they have called “deviant” or “false” mysticisms (*erfan-haye enherafi* or *erfan-haye dorughin*), hundreds of such titles had been published (each with thousands of prints), and dozens of seminars had spread in the cities promulgating their teachings.<sup>70,71</sup>

In addition to promoting different versions of self-spirituality, most of the literature in alternative spirituality and the seminars that have cropped up on their basis are concerned – sometimes explicitly and sometimes in more implicit ways – with prosperity and life success on the one hand, and meditation and therapeutic techniques (for treating oneself and others) on the other. Two of the most frequent refrains I heard from individuals who attended such seminars were that they sought *aramesh* (tranquility or peace of mind), or ways to enhance their *tamarkoz*

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<sup>70</sup> The years 2002 and 2005 seem to have been peak-years for publications of alternative spirituality. According to an informal count I made in 2009 using the website of the National Library and Archives of the Islamic Republic of Iran (which is required by law to hold a copy of every book published in Iran), there were, in 2002, at least 31 titles on Eastern spirituality (yoga, Buddhism, Hinduism, and so on), 22 on Eckankar, 20 by Osho, 17 by Gibran Khalil Gibran, 13 by Paulo Coelho, 3 by Krishnamurti, 1 by Carlos Castaneda, and 7 others that I would call New Age. In 2005, these figures were 35 titles for Eastern spirituality, 2 for Eckankar, 2 for Osho, 75 for Gibran Khalil Gibran, 22 for Paulo Coelho, 8 for Krishnamurti, 6 for Carlos Castaneda, and 28 other New Age. These figures include same-year reprints as well as printing by different publishers of the same texts (sometimes translated by different people). After Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became President in 2005 and a conservative Culture Minister was installed, texts on “deviant” mysticism were curbed somewhat, although not completely. For example, books by Paulo Coelho, Gibran Khalil Gibran, and Krishnamurti are still in print at the time of this writing in 2011. Texts by Carlos Castaneda or those promoting Eckankar are no longer published, but a few Iranian authors have published critical (sometimes polemical) texts on these topics. Yoga, pop-psychology and self-help, and a lot of New Age which does not overtly promote religious alternatives to Islam are still published en-mass. For example, in 2010 alone, there were at least 46 translated titles by Wayne Dyer.

<sup>71</sup> The rise of Muslim reading publics and the fragmentation of religious authority caused by increasing “objectification” of religion in the public sphere has been a matter of anthropological interest for some time (see for example Eickelman 1992; Eickelman and Anderson 1997; Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Norton 1995). However, there has been little attention to the reading practices of Muslims, particularly in contexts where the ideas and texts on offer exceed the obviously Islamic. Schielke (forthcoming) is one recent exception.

(concentration or focus). In a very schematic examination of these two motives, one could say that those who seek *tamarkoz* (and similar capacities<sup>72</sup>) are looking for ways of enhancing their potentials and capabilities for success in a competitive, hostile world, while those seeking *aramesh* want to learn to cope with inevitable frustrations, failures, and difficulties over which they have little or no control. Of course, the two often go together. That alternative spirituality should become an explicit resource to be mined for specific psychological needs reveals the pervasiveness of a functionalist approach shared by many of its practitioners according to which the beliefs and practices on offer are not accepted necessarily due to the superiority of their theological and cosmological arguments over other systems, but more importantly because they work. Conversely, the same approach leads many people to experiment with different spiritual systems before settling on one in particular or coming up with their own practical syntheses, rather than decisively converting to one system to the exclusion of all others. For example, Mr. Sheyda, my Cosmic Mysticism teacher, told me that he had taken Sahaj Marg meditation classes before discovering Cosmic Mysticism and eventually training to become a master. Arezoo Salamat, a middle-aged woman who introduced me to Mr. Sheyda and whom we will meet below, was a lapsed Muslim who had considered conversion to Christianity, experimented with Buddhism, read everything she could find by Paul Twitchell (the founder of Eckankar), was profoundly influenced by Mohsen Farshad's "The Quantum Thoughts of Molana [Rumi]," and finally decided that Cosmic Mysticism was the path for her. Zari Khanom, another participant in my Cosmic Mysticism seminars, told me that she was taking concurrent Reiki classes, even though our instructor warned her that this would be destructive.

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<sup>72</sup> Other such capacities might include enhancing memory, "reading" faces to understand others' personalities and motives (see chapter 5), recognizing body language, and "creative visualization" aimed at obtaining one's desires (on the latter, see discussion of Mersedeh's practice of witchcraft in chapter 2).

Mohammadi Ali Taheri's attempt to promote Cosmic Mysticism as a universalist spirituality that transcends particularistic religious difference and yet excludes imported mystical systems as well as religious eclecticism would make sense within this context of experimentalism and a functionalist attitude toward efficacious spiritual practice. Cosmic Mysticism has to compete with a range of alternatives on offer in a spiritual marketplace.<sup>73</sup> Taheri's appeal to nationalist sentiments to promote an Iranian product in this market mimics the strategy of many domestic manufacturers competing against imported commodities. Moreover, his opposition to eclecticism reproduces a purist logic common among the Shi'i opponents of all forms of alternative spirituality, including Cosmic Mysticism, which is regularly denounced as eclectic. That is, these attempts to exclude alternative forms as either imported or eclectic are, on one level, no more than an acknowledgement of a fluid context of experimentation and synthesis which many, perhaps most, enthusiasts of alternative spiritualities inhabit.

When I speak of fluidity and experimentation as the hallmark of many people's orientations toward alternative forms of spirituality, I emphatically do not mean that "anything goes." People have different criteria and different strategies by which to include and exclude elements from the vast array of options available to them, and the task before the researcher is to identify these criteria and strategies. In what follows, I will focus on the narratives of three individuals, all women, with whom I spoke at length about their experience with Cosmic Mysticism.

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<sup>73</sup> This is, quite literally, a market: It involves commodities – books, CDs, and so on – as well as services in the form of seminars with a clear fee structure. Some groups offer further services in return for payment, such as astrological readings and aura imaging. Cosmic Mysticism's therapy sessions are free, and considered "charity" (*khayrieh*) by the masters.

## **Two Glowing Angels and a Tree-Lined Hill**

Arezoo Salamat was the first practitioner of Cosmic Mysticism I met. She welcomed me into her home one early afternoon in December 2008, served me delivery pizza for lunch, and spent three hours explaining the trajectory by which she had arrived at the teachings of Mohammad Ali Taheri. Afterward, she drove me to the office of Mr. Sheyda, a student of Taheri who was now a master himself and taught seminars in which I was subsequently to enroll. Arezoo Khanoom was in her late forties. She lived with her husband (a factory owner) and three sons in Shahrak-e Gharb, an upscale residential and commercial neighborhood in western Tehran. Hers was a large, modern apartment with at least three bedrooms, an open kitchen, and spacious living and dining rooms. Much of the furniture gave off a golden glitter: French-style seats, a display case showing off chinaware and various decorative objects, a Chinese figurine on a small table, an analogue clock, and more. In a corner of the living room, there were several gold and brass-colored Buddha statues, a large sword, and expensive-looking vases. Various photographs and framed *termehs* were hung on the walls. A treadmill and foot massager sat in another corner, and directly across from them, a large projector screen blasted music by Ebi, the Iranian expatriate pop singer. “It’s great for exercise,” Arezoo Khanoom laughed. She had apparently been working out immediately before I rang the bell, expecting that I would arrive later. Even so, she had found enough time to change into a low-cut striped sweater, black capris, and black slippers before welcoming me inside. Her bleached hair was uncovered. “No need to take off your shoes!” she exhorted as I walked in.

Arezoo Khanoom was an eager storyteller, the ideal anthropological informant. She shared with me some of the most intimate details of her life – of stifled dreams and unfulfilled love, of family conflicts and betrayals, and of depression, drug use, and healing. These details

were couched within a narrative of spiritual journeying, of ultimately having attained balance, peace, and power. If I had interviewed her even a year earlier than I did, I would likely not have been able to elicit the same enthusiasm for sharing elements of her life story.

At the time of our meeting, Arezoo Khanoom was eight months into her study of Cosmic Mysticism, having continuously taken classes with Mr. Sheyda, who himself had been one of the first students of Mohammad Ali Taheri. These eight months had been a period of healing and spiritual uplift, following upon years of crisis, illness, and depression. To Arezoo Khanoom, they had been the culmination of various struggles in her life, which she had waged with loving faith in God, a voracious appetite for reading and acquiring “consciousness” and “informed-ness” (*agahi*), and a trust in what her heart told her was the right thing to do.

This journey was punctuated at two critical points by dramatic visions. These grand visions, and multiple lesser ones, had been crucial in forming Arezoo Khanoom’s mystical sensibility, including her orientation toward Cosmic Mysticism. I will structure her narrative around these two visions and the significance she herself accorded them.

The first vision, of two glowing angels, had come to her five years earlier. It was this vision that had launched Arezoo Khanoom on her path of mystical discovery. Before this, she told me, she had always been afraid of getting too close to religion. “At a young age,” she told me, “a book by [Nasser] Makarem Shirazi<sup>74</sup> fell into my hands, and honestly I thought it was idiotic [*ahmaqaneh*]. I thought to myself, is God a tyrant or a savage, to reject someone or burn a woman in the fires of hell because her hair is uncovered?” She was attracted by certain aspects of Islam, but was repelled by others. Most of all, she was concerned that if she were to accept

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<sup>74</sup> Makarem Shirazi is currently one of the leading mujtahids and “models” of emulation in Qom. He was one of the scholars from whom I requested legal opinions on the occult sciences (see chapter 1). Before he became a model, he spent many years as a writer for Islamic magazines, attempting to popularize a contemporary, socially responsible understanding of Shi‘i Islam that was hospitable to modern science and reason. In the next chapter, I discuss his polemical engagement with Spiritism.

certain things – for example if she were to begin to pray regularly – she would have to commit to other things (for example, the hijab), for which she was not prepared. “To tell you the truth,” she said, “I just became defensive about religion. Not about Islam per se, but the people who represented it. I thought they were scammers. They were making money off of religion, and they frightened us to keep us around them. This is not religion, and this isn’t God.”

There had been a different form of religiosity that she had been acquainted with since childhood, and that she looked back upon with wistful nostalgia. This had been her father’s Sufism. A military man in the Pahlavi regime, her father had frequented a Ne‘matollahi Sufi lodge, and often took Arezoo Khanoom along with him. The contrast between the unassuming, tranquil, and rather casual Sufism of her father, and the strident, demanding, and domineering Shi‘ism of the post-revolutionary years was, for her, reproduced in the political realm. “It’s not what they say,” she told me, “that everyone in the previous regime was corrupt.” If anything, she thought the revolution had been a bad idea, but perhaps an opportunity for the Iranian people’s growth through adversity and calamity.

The same went for her personal life. She had experienced plenty of hardship, but they had been causes for growth and for “building up” her soul. For example, her husband had been a wealthy factory owner from the time they had married, but he had had a penchant for disappointing Arezoo Khanoom’s material desires. “He would buy me jewelry, which I would pick out myself,” she said, “but then if he needed money, he would sell them without asking my permission.” After repeated disappointments, she had acquired a “spiritual satiety,” a lack of desire or interest in material possessions. At first this had been accompanied by bitterness, but eventually, with “intellectual development,” it had aided her spiritual growth. Years later, after having borne three children, she had had to contend with a different kind of difficulty, this time

in her love life. She had fallen in love with a married man with whom her family had friendly relations. The man was pious and upright, “a gentleman, noble, with character, not a cheap dirty man.” They had not attempted an affair. They did not even announce their love to one another. But Arezoo Khanoom knew that the emotion had been there. Once, the two families had traveled as part of a larger group to the forest of Sisangan in northern Iran. While hiking in the forest, the secret lovers’ eyes had connected. “Suddenly there was something like a spark,” Arezoo Khanoom said, “And God is my witness, I saw the spark in the air, like a sparkling star. And my heart sank. I’m sure he also felt the same thing. After that, we never spoke again, nor even came face-to-face, even when we were at the same gathering.” Arezoo Khanoom attributed this deliberate separation to her own restraint. She had recognized what calamity might have befallen both families if they had so much as attempted to act on their love. It had taken her two or three years to overcome her emotional attachment. But the restraint had borne spiritual fruit. The “earthly love” for the married man, she told me, had led to divine love. Her refusal to satisfy that love had helped her to overcome her self (*nafs*), strengthening her soul.

It was after this that she had seen the glowing angels. She had been vacationing with her husband and children at an orchard they owned in the north. At night, with everyone in bed, she had stayed up to read in the light of a bedside lamp. At around 3 AM, she began to hear the song of a reed in the distance. “God is my witness,” she said, “I thought to myself, there’s no one around us. Who’s playing the reed in the middle of the forest, in the middle of the night?” After about a half hour, she had fallen asleep. Then she woke up again, startled. Arezoo Khanoom lit a cigarette as she described to me what she had seen:

I can tell you that at certain parts of the day, the frequencies of the body change. It could be that when I woke up, my frequencies had changed and so I was able to see what I saw. Or perhaps they had a message for me. I don’t know. I woke up startled. I wasn’t asleep, and I wasn’t half asleep. I suddenly saw two angels in front of my eyes. God is my



witness. It wasn't a hallucination. It wasn't my imagination. I had never even imagined what an angel might look like; that it might be total and pure light. I just hadn't thought about it. Sure, when I was a child I had seen little figurines of angels that looked like children, but that was it. I saw two angels, with wings, made only of light. They had no bodies or volume. And they were small. They had no faces, but I could see their laughter. They were looking at me and laughing. One of them was positioned higher. It flapped its wings and flew away. The other was sitting on something like a prayer-mat of light and looking at me. I was afraid. I wanted to say *Ya Abolfazl, Ya Hazrat-e Ali*, the kind of reactions that I had been accustomed to since childhood.<sup>75</sup> But I had become mute. Mute. It would laugh and look at me. And I had gone mute. A few minutes passed. I can't say if it was five minutes, two minutes, or three minutes. Then suddenly my tongue opened up, and I voiced *Ya Abolfazl*. So I saw this scene. And my reaction was initially one of fear. I thought what is this? What if I'm supposed to die and that's why I'm seeing these things.

Arezoo Khanoom had become interested in reading books about religion and metaphysics after seeing the two angels. She had begun with Buddhism, buying any book on the topic she could find, and practicing meditation. She had been enamored particularly with Baird T. Spalding's "Life and Teaching of the Masters of the Far East," published first in 1924 and translated to Persian as "The Temple of Silence" (*ma'bad-e sokut*) in 1997. It is an "awe-inspiring book," Arezoo Khanoom told me, "It's like the Qur'an for me. Anywhere you open the book, you learn something." Later, she had read about Christianity, and even considered conversion after repeated viewings of a Persian Christian satellite channel. She had read other spiritual literature as well. Paul Twitchell's "The Tiger's Fang" had been her introduction to Eckankar. She had realized the power of ECK after receiving several visions while reading the book. Even so, she had decided that it would not be the path for her. "These books don't make my heart happy, with their talk of all kinds of different gods, and levels and levels of gods," she said. "It's not that I'm a particularly rigid religious person. I can't even read the Qur'an properly. But I feel like it's not my path. I still felt that I needed to understand it though, to study and understand." Intellectual

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<sup>75</sup> These are invocations of Shi'i holy figures, the Imam Ali, and his son Abul Fazl, sometimes uttered in moments of fear or apprehension.

understanding aside, her heart would ultimately be her guide: “I really believe in listening to the call of my heart,” she said. “There have been times when my heart has told me not to do something, and I’ve done it and regretted it later.”

These studies would gradually set the stage for Arezoo Khanoom’s embrace of Cosmic Mysticism. In particular, she would be primed by her familiarity with various formulations of ideas about a “cosmic mind” or “cosmic intelligence” that ostensibly ruled the entire universe, as well as notions of ubiquitous “cosmic radiation” or “power” understood in terms of physics, especially quantum physics. She insisted to me that she would not have “just picked a path with my eyes closed.” She listened to her heart, yes, but she also conducted research, and eventually settled with a mystical system whose claims most closely matched those she had already found compelling.

Science was to play a crucial role in this. When describing Baird Spalding’s book, Arezoo Khanoom made much of the fact that the book had been based on research a hundred and thirty years ago, by American scientists who had set out to collect the wisdom and discoveries of other nations. It was ventures like theirs, she said, that had contributed to America’s contemporary might. For example, American scientists were conducting research on stem cells now, but Spalding’s book already spoke of stem cells over a century ago, which suggested that the discovery had been inspired by, or even taken from, the knowledge of Himalayan sages. More important was Spalding’s discussion of cosmic rays, attributed to the soul of Jesus Christ, with whom the American researchers had spoken at length. Arezoo Khanoom read a passage to me from the translated book, which I quote here from the English original:

“It will soon be known that these cosmic rays have such tremendous penetrating power that they penetrate through all mass, shattering as it were, the very heart or nucleus of a so-called atom, transmuting it into atoms of other substance and thereby creating other

elements of higher order; and in this way, creation advances into a higher emanation of pure light or life itself.” (Spalding 1935: 134-135)

Arezoo Khanoom saw here intimations of nuclear energy and atomic weapons. But more important was the prediction that “cosmic rays” would soon be discovered and known.

Mohammad Ali Taheri was the one who had made this discovery, or at least formulated it in the compelling form of Cosmic Mysticism and its therapeutic systems. She had found confirmation of other elements of her newfound mystical path in books like “The Holographic Universe” by Michael Talbot, and “The Quantum Thoughts of Molana [Rumi]” (*andishe-haye quantomi-ye molana*) by Mohsen Farshad, both of which she had read prior to discovering Taheri’s teachings.

Between the vision of the two angels and her enrollment in Mr. Sheyda’s Cosmic Mysticism classes, there had been a period of five years of study. But this had also been a time of intense physical and emotional anguish. For much of this period, Arezoo Khanoom had suffered from bloated intestines, sluggishness and lack of energy during the day, and oversleeping during the night. The easiest tasks had seemed to her like enormous burdens. She had visited many doctors to find a cure, but had obtained few results. One doctor had diagnosed her with irritable bowel syndrome triggered by stress. A psychiatrist had diagnosed her with depression. She had taken American-made antidepressants for several months, to no avail. “The pills made me fat,” she said, “I gained fifteen kilograms, but they didn’t have the slightest effect.” Meanwhile, she had visited two or three do‘anevises, who had told her she had been bewitched. There had been an array of suspects to consider: From her mother-in-law who she knew had been deeply engaged in witchcraft from many years earlier, to a brother-in-law who had divorced and then reconciled with her sister, to the wretched wife of her former unconsummated love interest. Whether or not witchcraft had been involved, the do‘anevises’ prescriptions had not helped, partly because she had not been able to muster the will to properly carry them out.

Toward the end of this period, a second dramatic vision came to her. Her many troubles had included a rocky relationship with her older son, who was in his early twenties. She had suspected that he was up to no good, and this suspicion had aggravated her anxieties. Finally, she had confronted him. “I was worried that he was taking drugs,” she said, “So I pleaded with him not to do it. I was also very depressed and weary. Maybe it was my own anxiety that was causing him to fall into error, by sending him powerful negative energy.” Her son had admitted that he had been smoking grass, but had argued that there was nothing wrong with that. He had even suggested that Arezoo Khanoom should try it herself. She had responded by admonishing him further, telling him that nothing was more precious than his health, that he was young, and that grass and hashish destroy brain cells. “But just so that he would listen and accompany me,” she said, “and because he had already promised that he wouldn’t do it anymore, I said ok, I’ll do it once.”

Arezoo Khanoom had sat down with her son and smoked two joints with him. She had already been familiar with the mystical uses of narcotics, from Shams Tabrizi’s criticism of the hashish-smoking darvishes of his time to Carlos Castaneda’s hallucinogenic-laced adventures with Don Juan Matus. But she had never experienced it for herself:

So I smoked the hashish. And sir, what a visionary journey I went on! [*aqā ajab seyr-o soluki kardim!*]. I don’t know if it was hallucination, or what it was. I know all these consciousnesses [*agahi-ha*] already exist in our minds. But they’re locked and we have no permission to access them. That’s why we have control over only 5% of our brain, and even that was only the case with Einstein. But I think this consciousness is inside us already, and by smoking the grass, and because I had no experience and my brain had contracted somewhat with age, the grass had opened up my brain and those consciousnesses had started coming back. That’s how I explain it for myself.

You have no idea the kinds of things I saw. I realized that in this world, the beginning is the same as the end, and the end is the same as the beginning. Maybe it was the case that the kind of thing that Molana realized through his *sama*’ [the Sufi ritual of ecstatic dance while uttering a *zikr*], I realized by smoking grass. I had become a philosopher. Any

question I asked, I would receive an answer. My brain would go out and get the response and return, as though it was cruising across the sky. If you were to ask, for instance, what part of the body sugar is bad for [she pointed at sugar cubes on the table], I would be able to demonstrate the answer for you with proof and argument and philosophy and logic. I had become a genius physician, a genius philosopher. Now I regret it and wish there had been someone next to me who would write down what I was saying, all these consciousnesses streaming out.

She lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply as she continued to describe what she had seen:

So anyway, I smoked the grass, and I saw a steep hill dotted with cedar trees, each about one meter tall. At the top of the hill was paradise. It was as though my soul was flying overhead and I could see these things, and someone was telling me, or the consciousness was inside me [describing what I was seeing]. There were many cedar trees at the foot of the hill, and they got fewer the more you ascended on the slope. It was a similitude for humans, that humans are like these cedars, growing toward paradise. This was a time when I had been considering becoming a Christian. So in that state, the question crossed my mind: which of the prophets is the legitimate [*bar haq*] one? Then it was shown to me that among these one-meter cedar trees, there were a few three-meter trees, scattered on different parts of the hill. These were the prophets, all of them messengers of God in their own time and place. It was shown to me that Christ, Muhammad, Buddha, Jesus, Moses, all of them, are messengers for their own time and place. The bloodthirsty savage Arabs who would not abide by any law needed to be set straight with force and fear. And it's true that Muhammad was chosen, but he took the first step himself. Jesus took the first step himself. And we too can become a Muhammad or a Christ, if we take a step.

Her visions had also opened her up to scientific truths, particularly in the realm of quantum physics. "I didn't even know what physics was before this," she said, "But now I can understand if two physicists sit here and talk to one another. Not that I've become a know-it-all [*aql-e kol*]. But I've understood what quantum physics is, for instance, without anyone explaining it to me. What it talks about, what it relates to. I've felt it without having studied it, that everything, every cell, every moment, is different from the one before it. Every state is different from the one before it and after it." She realized, moreover, that there was an outward, apparent aspect (*zاهر*) to quantum physics, having to do with materials and bodies, as well as an internal spiritual aspect (*باطن*).

The sum of these consciousnesses had transformed Arezoo Khanoom into a new person. It was as though her long-desired path had suddenly been revealed to her. For many years, she had prayed to God to illuminate her heart, to show her the path, and now her prayer had been answered, and the love of God had been on her side. Cosmic Mysticism had been this path. All of her physical and psychological ailments had been miraculously cured through meta-therapy treatments. Her emotional relationships, particularly with her sons and other family members, were drastically improved. She had found Mohammad Ali Taheri's books and CDs to be works of tremendous mystical insight. The man himself, she said, was no less than a prophet.

These teachings did not detract from the importance of her personal visions or understandings. If anything, they magnified them. At times, there was a tension that Arezoo Khanoom felt between her own knowledge and the knowledge imparted by Mr. Sheyda. She attributed the difference to experience:

Mr. Sheyda is very knowledgeable in meta-therapy and so on. But he's traveled on a closed path. He's very informed. He might be very powerful in terms of mysticism. But in practice, his knowledge and experience and his reading [*motale'eh*], I don't want to suggest... He's young too in any case... even though he's been one of the seven first students of Taheri. But the questions that I ask him, the kinds of analysis that I do myself, based on my own experience and reading, he maybe hasn't reached that level yet. When you ask him a few questions from here or there, he will twist the answers to get out of a proper response. Or he'll say things that are wrong.

The most significant of Mr. Sheyda's errors had to do with his interpretation of Arezoo Khanoom's vision of the two glowing angels. Following a standard line argued by Mr. Taheri, Mr. Sheyda had said that angels are neither anthropomorphic nor do they take visible form. In fact, he had said, Arezoo Khanoom may have seen inorganic viruses – demons – a suggestion she found completely unacceptable:

When my heart says they were light, and light only comes from God... how could it have been a demon? He was seeing this from his own perspective.

She would grant the possibility that Mr. Sheyda's perspective may also have been correct inasmuch as it was based on his own experience. She mentioned having read in a book that no two mystics would have the same visionary journeys. And yet, there had been something superior in her visions, which Mr. Sheyda had not been able to grasp and had therefore reduced to the demonic – visual implantations of the “negative network.” Arezoo Khanoom's sense of the superiority of her own mystical knowledge had resulted in equal measure from her advanced mystical experience and the studies she had carried out on her own. And even though she would not argue that her knowledge was superior even to that of the founder of Cosmic Mysticism (after all, she had not met him in person and had not been able to ask him about the angels directly, even though had she had that opportunity, she would have likely received a similar response), she seemed to me confident enough about her mystical knowledge to have argued precisely that.

### **The Lock of Reason**

Most of the students of Cosmic Mysticism with whom I had the opportunity to speak shared Arezoo Khanoom's universalist attitude toward spirituality. Her cedar-covered hill could have been a vision of Taheri's *interuniversality*, an understanding that others also found appealing in one form or another. Dr. Farah Adibi, a middle-aged assistant professor of communication at a university in Tehran, described her understanding of this universality in terms of globalization. On a visit to India, she had picked up a copy of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's “Celebrating Silence,” whose title had attracted her. Waiting at the airport on her way back to Tehran, she had initiated a conversation with an Indian university professor about the book, and their shared understanding of deep spiritual concepts had confirmed her belief in their universality. “When

some individuals reach certain heights,” she told me, “there’s a universality that takes shape. I think those who talk about globalization are misled. It’s not about everyone following America. Globalization is when you read Shakespeare saying something at a spiritual height, and you see the same thing in Dante, and you see the same in Hafez. This is globalization. It’s a lofty doctrine.”

I had met Dr. Adibi through a mutual acquaintance working at her university, who took me along to dinner at her house in an affluent neighborhood of northern Tehran. Dr. Adibi’s husband was a mid-level municipal manager working in the same district where they lived. They were a pious couple: Dr. Adibi wore a multicolored headscarf with a dark blue dotted cotton chador over it (outside she would wear a black chador), and her husband sported an agate ring and a neatly trimmed gray beard. They welcomed me warmly and immediately inquired about my research over servings of tea and fruit. As I began to explain that I was interested in Shi‘i mysticism and occult science, my eyes glided over a few framed pictures on the living room walls. There were two watercolor paintings of flowers which, Dr. Adibi would explain, had been painted by her older sister. A small Chinese-looking miniature was positioned above the sofa on which my hosts were seated. Overlooking the front entrance, there was a framed deerskin with the Fig chapter of the Qur’an etched onto it. Dr. Adibi laughingly told me that “the Fig chapter is supposed to bring wealth.” Of more immediate interest, there was a large, letter-sized version of the intricate “Ali” amulet by Dr. Nabati hanging on the wall opposite the dining table.<sup>76</sup>

Naturally, I was curious about how they had acquired the amulet. Dr. Adibi explained that it had been a gift from a friend, “a very religious and shari‘a-abiding man.” She suggested that she did not believe in its power, even though she thought it was blessed (*motebarrek*). Noticing my surprise at the apparent contradiction, she explained that the frame was blessed because it came

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<sup>76</sup> See the introduction for a description of this amulet.



from someone religious and pious who himself believed in it. Concluding that I likewise believed in the amulet (why else would I be conducting research about it?) both husband and wife exclaimed in unison that I should take it. They would not hear of any protest (I assured them that I already owned multiple copies): “You believe in it and appreciate it. It’s yours.”

Dr. Adibi then told me that she thinks about “these things” in a rational fashion. She is constricted, she continued, by a “lock of reason” (*qofl-e ‘aql*). “I really mean it when I say it’s a lock,” she insisted. “There are those who have transcended all such locks, like the hidden mystics from whom one might be able to obtain grace (*fayz*).” I asked her to elaborate on her notion of the lock. She responded that when considering anything pertaining to such matters, she relies on a single criterion (*melak*): “Is it compatible with the Qur’an and with reliable hadith?” If she is convinced that there is compatibility, “it becomes etched into my heart.” Otherwise – she made a swift waving motion with her hand – “I automatically reject it and purge it from my mind.” It was an approach that she saw rooted in the Qur’an itself, particularly verses 17 and 18 of chapter 39, The Groups: “So announce the good news to my servants; Those who listen to the word, and follow the best in it. Those are the ones whom God has guided, and those are the ones endowed with understanding.”

In the mid-1990s, Dr. Adibi had found occasion to deploy her Qur’anic criterion while attending yoga classes. She would go for the exercise, she said, “but other things would happen there as well.” For example, during relaxation exercises, the participants would be asked to close their eyes and focus their imaginations on the words of the teacher – “You are lying next to the ocean, now you are swimming, and so on” – while calming music played in the background. Dr. Adibi had felt ambivalent:

It wasn’t bad. But after doing it two or three times, I thought to myself: ‘I’m not really where they are telling me I am [lying on the beach, swimming in the ocean, etc]. What if

these visualizations they are creating should become so powerful as to impact my soul and change it into something else from what it is now?" I immediately pull the hand-breaks on myself. I don't allow myself to move past a certain limit, to fall prey to certain things. But some other people found great benefits in it. They would be helped, and would turn into stronger people.

Dr. Adibi felt that she was strong and confident enough in relation to the condition of her own soul not to need such potentially problematic interventions. But others were not as strong, and perhaps these exercises benefited them.

There were also meditation exercises, usually focused on a single idea or phrase, which the teacher would announce in class and would ask the participants to meditate on for the duration of the week leading up to their next meeting. "Many of these were good phrases," Dr. Adibi said, "and I have written some of them down." She read about a dozen to me from a small notebook. Here is a selection, along with her running commentary:

"Spring water flows forth from the heart of the earth and passes through the cracks of hard rocks. Its channels are not blocked by mud. When you do anything, remember the boiling and determination of the spring. Push the obstacles aside to attain calm [*aramesh*]." We would meditate on phrases like this. These were good. They weren't bad.

"Work doesn't come of words. Be the servant of action. The wayfarers of the path of truth have closed their lips to boastful claims." They mean, the wayfarers don't talk much.

Here's another one: "Meditate on making your heart and tongue one. To what extent do you speak more than you should? To what extent do you have more silences than you should have? Write them down and bring them to class."

Another one: "On the edges of the ocean, there is more turmoil than there are in the deeper regions." This is useful for people who are in constant turmoil, the way you see a lot of people in the West. You live with each of these phrases for a week, meditating on them twice a day, once in the morning, and once in the afternoon. Gradually some of them sink in and become second nature.

In considering these phrases, Dr. Adibi said she would “automatically reject” anything that she found incompatible with the Qur’an, and would record others that had “references,” that could be related to the Qur’an and the words of the Prophet and Imams: “When Imam Ali’s name comes up in a phrase, or when they cite a Qur’anic phrase, my mind switches on.”

One of the central ways in which she made use of these phrases was in her teaching. She conceived of her classes not only as places for transferring information, but as opportunities for imparting life lessons. “My classes are never ordinary,” she said:

I sometimes have students coming into my classes who have been turned into nihilists after studying with other professors, the poor things. They read Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, or [Sadegh Hedayat’s] *The Blind Owl*, and so on. But in my class they read other things. They acquire a certain vivacity for life [*neshat-e zendegi*]. They find good friends. They become intimate with one another. Their lives are strengthened. They improve their relationships with their parents. They solve their problems with their children. They become firm [*mohkam*] in life. If you grow even a little apart from these things, you will be constantly pulled this way and that. It’s a shame. How many years are we alive anyway? How many years has God placed us in the position to know Him? If we miss one moment, it’s a loss.

The meditation phrases from her yoga classes, especially the ones with proper Qur’anic references, thus provided Dr. Adibi with ample instruments with which to help her students transform their lives:

The years that I was taking yoga classes, I would use their teachings to teach my own students knowledge of God and self-knowledge. It’s possible that [the yoga teacher] said other things too, but I used the teachings in the way I was supposed to. And their lives would be transformed. They would write such dramatic letters to me later on. One of them is now in Canada. She had strange problems, which are, thank God, resolved now. She has become a very strong person in her own right and is a person others rely on. Not that I did anything; I would just show them small things and they would find their way on their own. God himself casts his caring eyes upon them.

About a decade after her experience with yoga, Dr. Adibi would enroll in Mohammad Ali Taheri’s Cosmic Mysticism seminars. She had been introduced by her sister (who was already a

devotee of Taheri), as well as a colleague at the university who had worked closely with the master. Initially motivated by curiosity, she went through the entire eight-term program. It was late 2007 when she began, and Taheri's seminars would be packed with hundreds of students, many of them "women who did not wear proper hijab." She had been enthusiastic in her participation, but also maintained the caution with which she had approached yoga – her lack of reason.

Dr. Adibi had been selective with regard to Taheri's teaching. "Their topics can be divided into two parts," she said. On the one hand, there are the "fundamental ideas" or "principles," those pertaining to Cosmic Mysticism's cosmology and anthropology. On the other hand, there are the therapeutic methods, meta-therapy and defensive radiation (or psychometry). She focused her interest on the former, but ignored the latter to the extent that she could:

I put aside meta-therapy, the concept of delegation of rings, and so on. Whether or not these things are important or efficacious, whether or not they actually occur in the realm of nature, these are entirely separate issues. It's the same with defensive radiation. On the other hand, the parts in which many things are explained, about the foundations of creation for instance, are really useful. Many of these things are the same as what we have in the Qur'an, only told in a different language. When it comes to these issues, I wouldn't say 100% of them, but I do make use of them. They are good, as long as they do not contradict the Qur'an. I've taken it for granted that the Qur'an has the final say. I believe in it, for various reasons. If I feel that something is confirmed by it, I accept it. This is one method. There are as many paths to God as there are hearts.

What Dr. Adibi had appreciated most about Taheri's classes had been his focus on ethics. While attending the seminars, she had felt for a while that she had become a better person, and that she had established a closer connection with God. "There are many beautiful things they say," she told me, like encouraging students to pray for everyone in the world when they leave their house; telling them to ask for good things for everyone, even the cab driver that they don't know; suggesting that they purify and elevate their intentions (*niyyat*), and so on. "There is a lot of

growth that can come out of this for the individual, even for you and me,” she said. She had also been impressed with Taheri’s rejection of what he called “power mysticism” (*erfan-e qodrat*), the kind of spiritual exercise that led to acquisition of supernatural powers like mind-reading and instrumental control of “inorganic beings” (*mowjudat-e ghayr-e organic*. See Taheri 2011b).<sup>77</sup> There were certain other topics about which she had initially been ambivalent, but had later accepted them. For example, she said the notion of intelligence or consciousness (*hushmandi*), which Taheri equates with the archangel Gabriel as a manager of the affairs of the world, is correct, even though she doubted the concept at first, worrying – she explained with laughter – that the classes may be turning her into an idolater. A similar concern had arisen when she had heard Taheri speak about the “righteous servants of God” (*ebad-ellah al-salehin*):

Taheri says that a righteous servant of God is a person who is at peace with himself, with God, and with the people. I hear this and think: “it is very nice.” But I have to check it in the Qur’an and hadith. I have to have some kind of reference in this world. Now, right or wrong, my reference is somewhere else, and I am intensely loyal to it, for now, until something opposite forms in me that makes me abandon it. And this is why I pray “Our Lord! Let not our hearts deviate now after you have guided us” [Qur’an, 3:8] so that God willing we always stay on the right path.

These ambivalences aside, there were other aspects of Taheri’s teachings, both in style and substance, that Dr. Adibi criticized with certainty. “When you listen to Taheri,” she told me, “you will start to notice certain points on which he is somewhat off.” She qualified this by saying that the problem was not necessarily always with the doctrine, but sometimes with the man

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<sup>77</sup> The term “inorganic beings” is a creation of Carlos Castaneda. It appears first in his 1984 book “The Fire from Within,” which was translated to Persian in 1986 and reprinted multiple times in the following two decades. For Castaneda, inorganic beings are creatures that “have the emanations of awareness in them and characteristics of life other than reproduction and metabolism,” such as “emotional dependency, sadness, joy, wrath, and... love; a kind of love man can’t even conceive.” Seers can employ these beings as “allies,” with which they can attain marvelous power and work wonders (the concept of the “ally” goes back to Castaneda’s very first work on shamanism, “The Teachings of Don Juan” (1968) but it was not equated with “inorganic beings” until “The Fire from Within” (1984)). In Iran, the term “inorganic beings” has been adopted by a wide range of practitioners of alternative spirituality and enthusiasts of the occult, with varying degrees of faithfulness to Castaneda’s original usage. Usually, the term overlaps with the Islamic notion of *jinn* and is employed as a technical or scientific rendition of the latter concept. In some systems, including Cosmic Mysticism, “inorganic beings” include jinn but are not limited to them.

himself. There were people among Taheri's followers that she considered more credible than the teacher, primarily due to their piety and their expertise in matters of theology and Qur'anic exegesis. These were areas in which Taheri himself lacked. For one thing, Dr. Adibi said that his knowledge of the Qur'an was deficient:

One of the problems I have with Mr. Taheri is that he doesn't know the Qur'an. From his outwardly recitation of the Qur'an, to his interpretation, to his understanding of the Arabic, and so on and so forth. When he talks, I've seen this, I've felt it in his classes, when he reaches the Qur'anic verses, he treats them, how do I say this, as if he's reciting something "cheap" [she uses the English word]. As if he's saying it just to get it over with. He recites the verses in a loose way. I don't like it this way. Inversely, when he reaches the poetry of Molana [Rumi], he references it as though it is the main reference in the world of the cosmos, and there is no problem in the poetry whatsoever.

She acknowledged that this attitude on Taheri's part may actually account partly for his popularity, particularly among people who are "not so much in the realm of religion" or have "turned away from the clerics." "If I were to look at it optimistically," she said, "I would say that he is saying what religion says or what is necessary for human perfection, but without appealing too much to religion, so that he will be able to attract people who have a pessimistic view of religion. But I don't think this is the case. I think his own mind is like this."

Other problems had to do with points of doctrine. For example, Dr. Adibi said that Taheri absolutely rejected the concept of intercession (*shafa'at* and *tavassol*) of the Imams. "They are shy to admit it though," she said, "because if they do, people won't gather around them, I think." Moreover, she could not accept the idea that the "rings" by which people were supposedly connected to "Cosmic Consciousness" (that is, Gabriel), had to be delegated by Taheri. "Why does he have to delegate the ring?" she asked, "Why can't I get it directly from God? I don't like to get into this ring nonsense."

Eventually, these problems had led Dr. Adibi to break with Cosmic Mysticism. She had completed the entire program, but unlike many other participants, she would not register for repeated sessions, nor did she continue to read the literature published by Taheri and some of his followers. In fact, she thought that the closure of Taheri's classes by the government had been a blessing in disguise. She had discussed this with her colleague, a devoted follower of Taheri:

I told her that she and others should take advantage of this opportunity. You should teach him proper understanding of the Qur'an. Teach him the Arabic. Instruct him in recitation. Instruct him so that at least when he references a verse, he will do so with firmness and respect. Teach him about intercession. Our mosques are empty and he is attracting all these people. He is saying good things. We all need guidance, from the top to the bottom, and he is not an exception. There is no end to perfection.

### **Bearing Witness**

Dr. Adibi had mentioned to me that while she had studied Cosmic Mysticism she had preferred to stay away from meta-therapy and defensive radiation. In the early days of her participation in the group, the discussions around defensive radiation had even frightened her. Whether or not there was any truth to "these things," she had told me, it was best to leave them alone. For Arezoo Khanoom on the other hand, meta-therapy had become an integral part of her mystical practice. Others I spoke to had found defensive radiation one of the more attractive and intriguing aspects of the seminars. But even among the most enthusiastic participants, doubt often lurked only slightly beneath the surface of conviction.

Both meta-therapy and defensive radiation (or psymentology) consist of connections to what Mohammad Ali Taheri calls "cosmic rings," circuits that string followers together and plug them into the Universal Consciousness. Taheri insists that neither of these therapies involve any sort of technique. The therapist merely connects the patient to the Universal Consciousness

through the appropriate rings, and the latter does all the work. In the case of meta-therapy, Taheri explains its mechanism in terms of an analogy with the internet. As a “cosmic internet,” Universal Consciousness makes it possible for human beings to access information about their existence by connecting directly to their “manufacturer’s website;” in other words, God. Just as the users’ manuals of various consumer products are available on their manufacturers’ websites, human “existential manuals” are also available through the cosmic internet. By studying these manuals, human beings can better manage themselves, activate their dormant potentials, and avoid the numerous problems that they usually face and that sometimes lead them to conflict with their Creator. Moreover, by connecting to the manufacturer’s website, human beings can update their “software” and activate various “advanced programs” that have been pre-installed in them but have not been activated:

“The human being thus has a cosmic internet (the network of cosmic consciousness) and a manufacturer’s website (the sublime Creator). He is ignorant of many of his capabilities, and he therefore must enter into a connection with his manufacturer in order to better know himself and activate the infinite number of programs that have been allocated to him even though he is ignorant of their existence. In reality, the human being is a part (like a website) that has meaning only in relation to a whole (like the internet) and he must connect to this whole in order to discover his meaning, find his capabilities, and reveal them” (Taheri 2010:8).

By connecting to the same “website,” people can cure their own or others’ illnesses. Everything is done automatically, from the execution of “troubleshooting software,” to improvement and repair of cells and organs, all of whose information is available in the cosmic internet. This treatment method can even be extended to animals, plants, and microorganisms (ibid:9). All that is required is for the therapist to will a connection between herself, the patient, and Universal Consciousness. This “willing” can occur through a silent utterance, or just by directing one’s



intention to the matter. A connection is established immediately, and the healing process gets underway, affecting both therapist and patient concurrently.

Psymentology is a much more involved science-practice than meta-therapy. Taheri explains that the main objective of psymentology is to “understand the human and his existential software programs, and diagnose and treat unknown problems and mental-psychic disorders” (Taheri 2011a:4). Therapy occurs by means of “software” and without any “hardware intervention,” by which Taheri means any kind of treatment that includes a physical component (drugs, surgery, physical therapy, massage, and so on). Furthermore, psymentology does not employ any of the common “software-oriented techniques” such as psychoanalysis and psychotherapy; in fact, it does not rely on any techniques at all. And since psymentology is “meta-holistic,” diagnosis cannot happen by a human agent. Only the Universal Consciousness has a total view of the human and his infinite connections within the cosmic ecosystem. Therefore, Universal Consciousness alone does the scanning, diagnosis, and treatment. However, as we shall see, the human therapists are the ones who “announce” the cosmic radiations through which both scanning and treatments occur. They need to be able to read the signs exhibited by the patient throughout the therapeutic process in order to proceed with the proper radiations. Psymentology is therefore not as technique-free as Taheri would submit.

In Taheri’s system, humans are made up of an infinite number of existential components. The influence of New Age thought in this aspect of Cosmic Mysticism is in clear evidence: Humans are comprised of various bodies (the physical body, the mental body, the psychic body, the astral body, and so on), chakras and energy channels, energy fields, different software sections, molecular frequency, and cell consciousness. For our purposes, we need only focus on the mental body and the psychic body, or more simply, the mind and psyche. The mind (*zahn*) is

in charge of “software management” of all of the human being’s existence (ibid:7). This includes everything from the operations of individual cells to memory, recall, learning, and most importantly, cognition. The mind, according to Taheri, is not localized in the brain. Rather, it exceeds the confines of the brain and manages its operations. Moreover, the mind is the only part of the human that lives on after death. The psyche (*ravan*), on the other hand, is the seat of emotions. Its job is to translate cognitive information that it receives from the mind into emotional reactions. The physical body, mental body, and psychic body are in constant interaction. When the physical body is struck by an object, for example, the resulting pain impacts the cognitive operations of the mental body. In turn, the psychic body reacts with emotional output. On the other hand, the person’s mental orientation toward pain can affect her emotional response, and thereby the intensity of the pain itself.

Illnesses come about as a result of any kind of imbalance in the totality of human existence and her connections with the cosmic ecosystem. The illnesses that psymentology attends to most directly are those that are caused by what Taheri calls “inorganic viruses” (*virus-haye ghayr-e organik*) or “inorganic beings” (*mowjudat-e ghayr-e organik*). These are living, sentient creatures that are devoid of any organic or even material composition. “Given their unknown composition,” Taheri writes, “the world of science is not able to identify and track [these beings]; rather, one can recognize their existence with the help of certain empirical signs, and cleanse them to alleviate disorder” (ibid:10). Although scientists have not yet discovered inorganic viruses, Taheri believes they will do so soon. He compares his discovery to those of Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur: “The subject [of inorganic viruses] might seem strange and unbelievable at first, just as it seemed ridiculous and laughable when Koch and Pasteur first spoke of the existence of ‘microbes,’ but their existence was gradually proven” (ibid). As if to

push the mainstream scientific community toward quicker recognition, Taheri has recruited groups of medical doctors and psychiatrists to help formulate the ideas of psymentology in terms more familiar to science, and has encouraged the publishing of empirical articles in scientific journals. One example is a special edition of *Danesh-e Pezeshki* (Medical Knowledge)<sup>78</sup> devoted entirely to psymentology, which includes an introduction by Taheri (2011a), an interview with a psychiatrist and practicing psymentologist, and several “case reports” about patients suffering from psychiatric disorders who allegedly showed marked improvement after undergoing defensive radiation.

Inorganic beings come in two varieties: Jinn, and mental bodies (Taheri 2011b). Taheri defines jinn as “divine agents” that are assigned missions in the order of existence but have free will and may refuse to carry out their responsibilities (ibid:12). Some jinn are appointed as security guards of the material world. They attack humans that disrespect the sanctity of nature or other human beings. Others are tasked with testing or punishing humans. Still others are available to be possessed by humans for various tasks, or are attached to magical talismans. As a whole, the jinn aid human evolution and maturity by creating obstacles, doling out punishment, and spreading disorder. The second group of inorganic beings, “mental bodies” (*kalbod-e zehni*), are the surviving elements of dead humans. When a human individual dies, his mental body is invited by his “guiding soul” (*ruh-e hadi*) to proceed to the next stage in his life. But worldly

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<sup>78</sup> This special issue presents somewhat of an enigma. On the inside cover, *Danesh-e Pezeshki* is introduced as a journal belonging to The Medical Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran (MCIRI), a large and prestigious NGO that organizes and oversees private medical practice in Iran. Dr. Shahaboddin Sadr, who is director of the MCIRI, is listed as the journal’s editor. However, MCIRI’s official journal is called the “Journal of the Medical Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” and Sadr is its editor. I have not been able to find a single issue of *Danesh-e Pezeshki* that has been published in the past ten years, other than the special edition on psymentology and a few others on meta-therapy published in the same year. Moreover, my repeated calls to MCIRI to ask about *Danesh-e Pezeshki* were fruitless; no one seemed to know anything about the journal. I also asked several experienced doctors among my acquaintances (a urologist, a psychiatrist, and an orthopedist) about the journal, but none of them knew about it. I am not able to verify this issue now, but my hypothesis is that even if *Danesh-e Pezeshki* once existed and was published by MCIRI, it is now defunct, and Taheri probably made a deal with its publishing house (whose secretary acknowledged to me that they had published the special issue) to print the special editions.

dependencies sometimes weigh the mental body down. In such cases, the mental body seeks a living human who has some sort of affinity with his own former wants and dependencies, and attaches himself to the host by occupying and taking control of the latter's mental body.

When an inorganic virus occupies an individual's mental body or attaches itself to some other part of the person (the chakras or energy canals for example), various problems arise. These viruses feed on human energy like parasites. More ominously, they disrupt their host's thought processes, insinuating their own thoughts and inclinations, and implanting sounds, images, and other sense-data that the host experiences in the form of what are normally known as hallucinations. They can thus induce phobias, obsessions, sleep disorders, somnambulism, multiple personality disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, as well as abnormal inclinations like suicidal thoughts, sadomasochism, unnatural passions and hatreds, and homosexuality (ibid:50-51). Taheri acknowledges that these problems are ordinarily considered to fall within the province of psychiatry. But psychiatrists have been misdiagnosing the source of the problem. Psychiatric medications only succeed in numbing the senses or inhibiting the transfer of information between brain neurons. The inorganic viruses that have caused the illness, however, remain undisturbed by psychiatric intervention.

The only solution to mental-psychic disorders is defensive radiation. Like meta-therapy, defensive radiation involves direct connection to the Universal Consciousness. But whereas the former consists of only one connecting ring, defensive radiation involves multiple rings, each serving a unique purpose in the therapeutic process. I will briefly enumerate a few of these rings below:

- *Defensive radiation (near and far)*: This is the simplest form of radiation. It is emitted in order to exert pressure on the inorganic virus and make it

uncomfortable for it to stay attached to the human host. It can be emitted at a patient nearby or at a distance, even on the other side of the globe. It has four levels of intensity (one, two, three, and four), which the therapist chooses at her discretion depending on the physical strength of the patient and the stubbornness of the virus.

- *Injected defensive radiation*: This is similar to the simple form of radiation above, but it is emitted through the direct touch of the hand, which calms the patient.
- *Anti-sight defensive radiation (near and far)*: Reduces the virus' influence over the patient by blocking disturbing visual images that the virus transmits to its victim.
- *Cleansing defensive radiation for spaces (public or private, near and far)*: Cleanses enclosed private or public spaces from inorganic viruses that are plaguing an individual.
- *Negative one radiation control*: Detaches chains that have bound the inorganic being to its victim by way of talismans and witchcraft, in order to aid its departure.

In the course of each therapy session, the therapist unleashes one or more of these radiations on a patient. There is usually some verbal communication involved as well – between the therapist and the inorganic being – but this is primarily aimed at helping the creature leave. Mr. Sheyda told my class that we should not engage in conversation too much, since these tended to be distracting and were exploited by the inorganic being to dissuade the therapist from the exorcism.<sup>79</sup> The aim, finally, is to expunge the virus. Sometimes, especially in the earlier stages

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<sup>79</sup> There may be some variation between different teachers' styles. Mr. Sheyda himself obviously found pleasure in some of the communications and thought they were fascinating. Mohammad Ali Taheri, who was Mr. Sheyda's

of therapy, there may be no discernable change at the end of a session. Multiple sessions may be required, over the course of days or weeks or even months, to get just one virus removed.<sup>80</sup>

When the virus does finally leave, it often does so without drama. The departure may be experienced as a sneeze, a cough, or even just a slight buzz in the ear. But in some cases (Mr. Sheyda told me that it occurred in about ten to fifteen percent of patients), there are severe “breakouts” (*birunrizi*). These high-drama exorcisms were the highlight of defensive radiation meetings.

I had the opportunity to witness several defensive radiation sessions (each involving as many as two dozen exorcisms) during my research, and even participated in some of the exorcisms when I was certified by Mr. Sheyda to transmit level one radiation. Most of these took place in the sitting area of a two-bedroom apartment owned by a young couple who were students of Mr. Sheyda. There were between forty and fifty attendees each time, about two-thirds of them women. A soft spatial division of genders usually occurred, with the men mostly sitting on the carpet across from the kitchen and near the front entrance, and the women gathered in the opposite end of the living room and on the couches. All of the women wore headscarves, in different styles that indicated a spectrum of religious observance. Our hostess, Vida Khanoom, would usually serve tea and pastries with help from several other attendees.

Shortly after the arrival of Mr. Sheyda, the therapy proceedings would get underway. The following is a partial description of one session based on my field notes on December 2, 2008:

Eager to get the therapy process underway, Mr. Sheyda walked over to the opposite end of the living room, where the women were sitting. He looked at one of the women, whom

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teacher, does not seem to have any problem with prolonged conversations, and only cuts them off when there is a large lineup of patients and not enough time to spend in idle conversation with jinn and mental bodies (I am basing this on audio recordings of his lectures on defensive radiation in which some therapy also occurs).

<sup>80</sup> The initial sessions in which no noticeable change occurs is sometimes said to have made the virus “wet” (*khis khordan*), so that it becomes more easily detachable in future sittings.

I could not see. “What’s happened?” he asked in a calm but firm tone. There was a moment’s silence. Then the woman screamed. She let out a series of moans, rising and falling in pitch, then screamed again. Mr. Sheyda shot a few quick glances at some of the young women sitting around the patient. He gave them directions to pin her down and begin to “work” on her. Then he addressed the patient directly: “Detach! Get out!” A man sitting next to me noticed my enthusiasm to see what was happening, and he encouraged me to step up and take a closer look. I gleefully obliged. The patient – a woman in her early thirties named Zaynab – was lying on her back, and four other women were holding down her shoulders and knees. Zaynab let out another scream. Mr. Sheyda ordered her to “calm down,” and instructed his students to keep her steady. Zaynab was now weeping “Vaay vaay I am suffocating! Please help me! Please help me! I’m suffocating!” Mr. Sheyda asked someone to open the window to let in some fresh air. He instructed the four women to give Zaynab some room so she could stand on her feet. He took her hand and helped her get up. She was breathing heavily, moaning and weeping.

Again, Mr. Sheyda addressed Zaynab: “Who are you? Do you want to speak?” Zaynab started making angry snorting noises, interspersed with hisses and a harsh voiceless velar fricative “*kh*” sound through the sides of her mouth. “Who are you?” demanded Mr. Sheyda. “Who are you? Huh?” She hissed. “Are you a *movakkel*? Who sent you here? Who? WHO?” Zaynab hissed again. “Move away from her!” Mr. Sheyda ordered, “POSITIVE TWO! Out! OUT!” Zaynab swung her arms violently, stomping her foot and swaying like a drunk. Another scream. Mr. Sheyda looked around for more students. He asked three to step up and transmit defensive radiation to Zaynab. He approached her himself and stared her in the eye. Her chest was heaving, her hair sweaty and tangled, her eyes crossed, her lips contorted. “What do you want with Zaynab?” Mr. Sheyda demanded. She growled, then doubled over and made a gagging motion, as if to vomit. But nothing came out. Mr. Sheyda commanded again: “You will leave Zaynab!” She moaned, swaying from side to side. “Positive Two!” Mr. Sheyda ordered. One of the students asked for clarification as to what kind of radiation she should be emitting. “Injection,” said Mr. Sheyda.

Zaynab’s condition seemed to be deteriorating. She was now kicking and hurling punches, attacking anyone within her reach. She howled and screamed. Mr. Sheyda was unfazed. “Defensive Four,” he said calmly. Zaynab shrieked, as if in pain. Her moaning was now lower-pitched, verging on a male voice. Another woman, pointing both hands at Zaynab, emitted a “Positive Two.” Zaynab screamed again. Two of the students closed in on her once more, grabbing her arms to subdue her. Zaynab’s white scarf flew off her hair. Two more students stepped in and clutched her ankles. The four of them pushed her to the ground, as gently as they could. She squirmed and moaned, trying to break free. Another shawl, a black one this time, fell off a student-healer’s head.

Mr. Sheyda leaned over her: “She bought you herself didn’t she? She herself asked you to come to her?” Zaynab coughed out loud, as if she wanted to vomit. “Leave her,” Mr. Sheyda demanded. Taking a momentary break, he walked over to me to explain what was going on. “Zaynab Khanoom had consulted a do‘anevis and purchased a jinn from him to hurt her ex-husband,” she explained. “Now the jinn won’t let go of her.” Mr. Sheyda said he had been working on Zaynab for three weeks. “You should’ve seen her the first day,” he said. “She was in terrible shape. She was running on the tips of the headrests on these chairs. It was an incredible sight. You wouldn’t believe it.”

The Master returned to Zaynab once again, leaning over her. “Good,” he said, “you must leave Zaynab now.” Her breathing was again loud and heavy. “Positive Two,” shouted Mr. Sheyda, “OUT! Toward the light! Leave her! Detach! It’s time to go.” Her moaning was louder. “You can’t stay!” Mr. Sheyda insisted. “I’ll help you. I’ll help you. It’s time for help. God’s mercy has embraced you. Detach. One... Two... It’s over! Detach! Out! Out! Out! Out! Out!” He turned to the rest of us. “It’s separating,” he said. Zaynab gave off a loud orgasmic “Aaah.” Then a burp, followed by a rapidly descending moan. “It’s gone,” Mr. Sheyda announced. “Thank God,” one of the women uttered. They helped her up and walked her to one of the couches. Vida handed her a glass of cold water, which she pressed to her forehead as she relaxed. Another one of the women fanned her with a shawl.

Normally, before students were allowed to participate in defensive radiation sessions, they would be required to enroll in the defensive radiation seminar where they would learn the theoretical basis of psymentology and receive the rings through which they could perform exorcisms. In part, Mr. Sheyda would use these classes to describe and classify inorganic viruses. He was sensitive to the possibility of skepticism, and often asked newcomers who had witnessed the exorcisms whether they thought the afflicted had been acting. He asked me this question several times, and each time I gave a somewhat cryptic response, in effect conceding that the possessions were genuine, but that the explanation did not have to involve supernatural beings. In expressing such veiled skepticism, I was in fact more circumspect than certain other participants. One young woman, for example, a master’s student in women’s studies, argued at length with Mr. Sheyda, dismissing his description of jinn and demons as myth, legend, and



folklore (she continued to participate in the classes, however, and even took part in the exorcisms, although when I contacted her a year afterward, I learned that she had left the group).

At one of the defensive radiation sessions, I met Lili Bayati, a twenty-four year-old master's student in child psychology who had been attending Cosmic Mysticism classes along with her mother. She had taken classes with both Mr. Sheyda and another master, and was trying to register for a "theory" course with Mr. Taheri himself. Initially, she had approached the exorcisms with skepticism, but had been gradually converted when she had seen its effects on herself. Before I had a chance to speak with her the first time, I saw her sitting cross-legged in a corner of the apartment, with her eyes closed and her right arm extended, pointing to the empty space in front of her. She wept uncontrollably as three or four other students transmitted radiation at her. The virus usually left her without too much struggle. Her headscarf never came off, and she never roamed about or screamed the way some of the other possessed participants did. The treatments seemed to be as effective in her case as in the most dramatic exorcisms.

Later that evening, Mr. Sheyda introduced me to Lili and we spoke for about an hour about my research and her experience with Cosmic Mysticism. She was curious what I thought about the exorcisms. I explained that I would not dismiss their efficacy, but that I nonetheless found a neuropsychological notion of "dissociation" (Luhrman 2005; Seligman and Kirmayer 2008) more convincing in understanding what had been going on. She argued with me, saying that she herself had initially dismissed the idea of inorganic viruses, but had eventually accepted them after having seen and experienced things that seemed to confirm their reality. We made an appointment to meet again over lunch in two weeks, and continued our conversation for another three hours.

Before meeting Lili, I had largely concealed my skepticism, expressing it only in contexts that seemed appropriate, when other participants themselves voiced doubt and asked me pointed questions about my views. Lili was clearly interested in learning what I thought and whether or not I believed in the inorganic beings that were supposedly being exorcised a few meters away from us. I began by explaining that my research was not about discovering the existence or non-existence of these beings, and that I was rather more interested in how people themselves decided what was and what was not real, how they sifted truth from untruth, and so on. But as I offered this response, I could not avoid voicing my own opinion: That inorganic beings probably did not exist, that possession was a dissociative phenomenon, and that the exorcisms were efficacious as social curing practices involving a “meaning response” (Moerman 2002) and communal mechanisms for constructing meaning and prescribing moral action to deal with experiences of illness and suffering. As a master’s student in psychology, Lili was familiar with the placebo effect, if not with the medical anthropological critique of the concept (see *ibid*). My other arguments were not foreign to her either. She had entertained a version of some, and could critically and intelligently engage with others. That is, she would not have viewed my skepticism as a strange, foreign, or offensive attitude. It was, more than anything, a challenge not unlike others she had faced in coming to grips with Cosmic Mysticism, and she rose to the occasion by engaging me in argument. I decided, therefore, that I would fully inhabit the skeptical position, not to prove that she was wrong, but to push her as far as I could so that I would understand as many nuances as possible in her reasoning.

Lili began by explaining that she was “extremely logical” and had never pursued “metaphysics.” Nor had such topics ever been brought up within her family. When she had first seen Mr. Sheyda’s exorcisms, she had explained them away in terms of the suggestibility of the

afflicted. But she had also been open to the possibility that there may be truths beyond that which she found acceptable. This was an approach that she said was in line with the notion of “bearing witness” (*shahed shodan*) in Mr. Taheri’s system. To be a witness, she said, meant being “impartial” (*bitaraf*). “It means neither denying nor acknowledging that something exists,” she continued, “because you haven’t experienced anything yet.”

Her mother had been the first to take part in Cosmic Mysticism seminars. When she had described her experience to Lili and her older brother, they had expressed surprise and disbelief. Even when their mother had practiced meta-therapy on them, they had not believed it. But then something strange had happened. For some years, Lili had had chronic wrist pain from a handball injury. The pain had sometimes been so severe that it would wake her up in the middle of the night if she happened to roll over her hand. She had seen multiple doctors, had taken X-rays and MRIs, and would continually take pain killers. But doctors had assured her that her wrist was fine, and that the pain was stress-related. Then her mother had decided to try meta-therapy:

My mom would work on me while I was asleep and she was in her own room. I would feel as though a liquid had been injected into my hand. So for a while my wrist pain flared up and became very intense. I would be walking around the living room and crying from pain, and I was taking pain killers too, but they wouldn’t work. Now though, I don’t have that problem anymore. I don’t take pain killers at all, and the pain is 80% better. I don’t have the sleeping problems anymore either, even if I sleep on my hand.

Contrary to what I had argued about the meaning response, Lili claimed that meta-therapy had cured her wrist without requiring her belief, nor even depending on her awareness that treatment was underway. It was something in which she had not believed, and yet work had been done on her and she had seen the effect. As she put it, “It’s like they say that even if you don’t believe in it, [Universal] Consciousness [*hushmandi*] does its own work. All that matters is that you don’t constantly say I deny it.” That is, the only requirement is that you be impartial, a witness.

It was the same with defensive radiation. The first time she had witnessed an exorcism, she had been unable to sleep all night. This was not due to fear, but puzzlement, as she said she had never seen or seriously thought about anything like it. Over time, certain signs had convinced her that there had been some truth to those events. At first these signs had been rather indirect. For example, her mother had tried to take Mostafa, her youngest son, to defensive radiation to treat his epilepsy, which Mr. Sheyda claimed was caused by inorganic viruses. Mostafa had been disturbed by the sessions and had refused to go again after one or two visits. But he had continued to exhibit anxious behavior whenever Lili and her mother would return from radiation sessions on Tuesday evenings. “There would always be some conflict with Mostafa when we returned,” Lili explained. “He would either ignore us and go to bed as soon as we got home, or he would leave the house. If he stayed, there would be some sort of conflict. It was as though he was looking for trouble.” For Lili, this had been a sign that there was a connection between Mostafa’s condition and the defensive radiation sessions. If, as Mr. Sheyda had claimed, he was afflicted with inorganic beings, those beings would be disturbed by the possibility that they would be hauled before an exorcist.

The decisive evidence of the existence of inorganic beings had arrived for Lili when she herself had been exorcised of the “mental body” of her best friend. It had begun in a completely involuntary fashion. She had been aiding several others in transmitting defensive radiation to a young handsome volleyball player named Peyman. Suddenly, Lili had felt the intense urge to cry. Her eyes had welled up with tears. She had sat down on the edge of a couch, and had wept out loud. She had felt her face and body twitching, and her arm, of its own accord, had risen up to point in front of her. It was as though some force had lifted her arm and kept it suspended for

ten or fifteen minutes. “They say that when a mental body wants to leave you, your arm might come up, or there might be some other upward movement,” she explained.

That mental body belonged to her best friend Setareh, who had died a year earlier. The two had been college friends. They did everything together, spending as many as five days a week with one another. “We shared many things and were very similar. We did things and enjoyed things together,” Lili said. “Then she got breast cancer and died. When she died, I grieved for a very long time and with impatience. But I also felt her presence sometimes.” Once, around six months after Setareh had died, Lili was at home studying for the master’s level university entrance exam. At around 2 AM, she and her older brother Mehran were the only people awake in her house:

Something happened and I started recounting something about Setareh to my brother. My eyes welled up with tears. Mehran asked me what had happened, and I said I just miss her very much, and I can’t visit her grave because I have to study. A minute or two afterward, I went into my own bedroom, and there was a really fantastic scent that had spread in my room. What I’m telling you are logical things. I’m not a person who believes many of these things. What I’m describing was a very strange thing for me. This was before I had started coming to these classes.

There was a very powerful perfume. These [inorganic] beings can reduce their frequencies so that you sense their scent or notice other things, like moving a curtain, or shutting a door, and so on, so that we can feel them. I had not put on any perfume. My closet was open so I thought maybe the scent was coming from my clothes. I stuck my head in my closet but I didn’t notice any scent. I asked Mehran if he had put on perfume. He said are you crazy? Why would I put on women’s perfume? So for a few moments, I could sense this scent. And I very distinctly remember thinking: This is Setareh. You know? I had a very strong realization that she had come.

Some months later, Lili had felt Setareh’s presence once more, this time through touch. She had been thinking intensely about her on her way home from the university. In the subway station, her eyes had inadvertently fallen on a spot where she and Setareh had waited for the train many times before. “I thought of the things we used to say to one another,” Lili said, “and I became

very sad, thinking what good times we had had together, and how happy we had been.” By the time she had arrived home, she had been so dejected and exhausted that she had taken to her bed for a nap:

While I was sleeping, it was very interesting... only my brother and I were home. While sleeping, I felt her, physically. I couldn't see her, but I felt her. I felt that someone was kissing my cheek. And it was like I knew, I felt, that this was Setareh. And then I wept. I wept and my cheek was kissed once more. When I woke up, I noticed that my face was wet with tears. I asked my brother if he had tried to wake me up. He said he hadn't come near me at all. I asked him: “You didn't come into my room? You didn't kiss me?” He said no.

By this time, Lili had been attending the Cosmic Mysticism seminars. Her teacher had told her that she had felt these things because Setareh's mental body was with her, inside her. It was because Lili was intensely dependent on her. She had not been able to bring herself to erase Setareh's phone number from her cell phone's memory. She had kept her text messages. Her photographs were still stored on her phone. As a result, Setareh's mental body had comfortably settled in, while Lili was in constant turmoil and anguish.

Two or three days later, Lili had participated in the exorcism which had driven her to weep uncontrollably. Her arm had been lifted up, and as other participants had stepped up to transmit radiation to her, she had experienced an “exit” (*khорuj*). That night, she had finally felt at ease. “It was as though that dependence had been cut,” Lili explained. “You know what I'm saying? I deleted her text messages and her phone number, things I had not been able to do over the past year. I'm a lot more at ease now. I'm not as dependent. When I think about her, my heart no longer burns so much. I don't miss her as much as I used to.”

Lili insisted that she had been a witness throughout this process. She had seen and felt things, and only then had believed. She suggested that if I likewise were to witness and start experiencing, I might accept some of these things. The explanations I had been giving,

dismissing inorganic beings and other such phenomena, were those of “the language of science.” I found this criticism interesting, given the amount of emphasis that Taheri and his followers routinely placed on scientific explanations. But this reliance on science was an ambivalent one, paralleling modern esotericist and New Age criticisms of materialistic science which nonetheless posit a holistic, spiritual science that is to eventually replace it.<sup>81</sup> Lili herself understood this

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<sup>81</sup> Olav Hammer has argued that modern esotericists in Europe and North America attempted to “re-enchant” the world by constructing a spiritualized science, drawing on the concepts, models, and terminology of the mainstream sciences of their own time (Hammer 2001:323). Hammer calls their approach a “scientific *bricolage*,” in which “a specific view of the world is clothed in scientific terminology and expressed by means of carefully selected bits and pieces of science” (ibid:329-330). “In an age where science carries an enormous rhetorical weight, but is devoid of fundamentally appealing qualities such as goal, meaning and purpose,” he writes, “it remains tempting to claim scientific status for what are essentially religious beliefs” (ibid:330). In Hammer’s analysis, the rhetorical weight of science has allowed the proponents of modern esotericism – from Franz Mesmer in the 18<sup>th</sup> century through Spiritualism and Theosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the way to 20<sup>th</sup> century parapsychology and New Age – to differentiate their claims from the “superstitions” of institutional religion and other rivals. Thus,

“Successive generations of spokespersons could create their own versions of healing praxis and theory, on the existence of an afterlife or on supernatural phenomena, not according to traditional schismatic ‘holier/more authentic/more traditional-than-thou’ lines, but by employing a new strategy: they could claim to be, in some sense, more scientific and less irrational than their negative Others. Spiritualists tended to understand their own project as a scientific investigation of the afterlife. Parapsychologists distanced themselves from their spiritualist roots by attempting to define themselves as more scientific” (ibid:217).

We could thus say that modern esoteric systems, including those that we call New Age, appeal to spiritualized science in order to situate themselves between two poles: On the one hand, they distinguish themselves from Christianity and other religious systems (including other modern esoteric ones they consider outmoded) by claiming that their beliefs, explanatory theories, and practices are more scientific. In this way, they align themselves with Enlightenment attacks on established religion. On the other hand, they claim distinction from rationalist, materialistic science by arguing that they uphold a superior science that is holistic and spiritual, has roots in ancient civilization, and will one day soon re-emerge and grow to replace the fragmented, reductionistic, and destructive science of today (This historicization of “spiritual science” – from dominance in ancient times, to decline and neglect in modern times, to re-emergence and ascendance in the near future – constitutes what Hammer calls a “U-shaped time-line” (ibid:233)). Their position is thus also a critique of Enlightenment rationality.

In their Iranian manifestations, New Age claims to science follow comparable dynamics, but also depart from them in significant ways. For one thing, even though the proponents of alternative spirituality usually enunciate the standard New Age critiques of mainstream materialistic science, this criticism is not voiced as vociferously as in the West. One reason for this is that a systematic Iranian discourse of rationalist debunking of New Age “pseudoscience” has been largely absent, even though plenty of scientists and engineers will privately sneer at New Age claims and brush them off as so much mumbo jumbo and charlatanism. This might have to do with the fact that traditions of rationalist debunking – both in Iran and in the West (see for example Hess 1993 and Denzler 2001) – have made equal targets of established religion and alternative beliefs, including New Age (in Iran, Ahmad Kasravi is probably the most prominent representative of this position, as we shall see in Chapter 4). For obvious reasons, skeptical scientists cannot afford open attacks on established religion in the Islamic Republic, and it is possible that having only half a target available to them, they do not care to attack at all. On the other hand, it may be that those scientific skeptics who are opposed equally to “bad” Islamic and New Age science worry about strengthening the dominant Islamic discourse by attacking alternative views that are already subject to official suspicion. Finally, the matter of New Age “pseudoscience” might not have gained the same kind of urgency among Iranian scientists as it has in Europe and North America simply because the former have not had occasion to

ambivalent relationship in temporal terms: There are claims that Taheri makes that are “metaphysical” now, because they have yet to be grasped by science. In a few years, when scientific discovery is able to catch up with the receptions of mystics, these same claims will become scientific, or physical. In Lili’s class, Taheri had cited the example of “auras” (*haleh*). Years ago, auras had been the subject of parapsychology and metaphysics, as no one had been able to see or prove them. But now there were imaging devices such as the Kirlian camera that could photograph auras, thus bringing them into the realm of science.

In the course of our conversation, I challenged Lili on this and other assertions. I argued that Kirlian cameras and auras were not accepted by mainstream scientists, or at least they were not accorded the significance that esotericists and New Agers attached to them. On the exorcisms in which we had both participated, I suggested the hypothesis that the possessed were learning from one another and from Hollywood movies like “The Exorcist” and “Constantine” (which they shared among themselves and spoke about regularly) and were being disciplined and subdued through a kind of collective ritual. How else could we explain the similarity between Hollywood exorcisms and those that we had seen in the defensive radiation seminars, when possessions in other parts of the world, including in rural regions of Iran itself, looked very different?

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consider these claims as anything but metaphysical, and their appropriations of science as anything except metaphorical constructions. Conversely, New Age proponents seem to feel more confident in staking their claims to science without having to invest too much in an explicit demarcation of borders with normal science.

Alternative spiritual groups have had a more fraught relationship with Shi‘i authorities, particularly since around 2007 when both polemical attacks and state-led coercive-disciplinary action against various forms of “deviant mysticism” began in earnest. One of their strategies in avoiding conflict has been to appeal to science: not to claim that their arguments are somehow more rational than those of established Shi‘ism (such an argument would be fatal and may only emerge in more private settings); but rather that by virtue of being scientific, their metaphysics lie outside the purview of religion, and are therefore consonant with all the great religious traditions (see also Rudnyckij 2009:121). Just as the earth is round whether one is Muslim or Jewish or Zoroastrian, the organization and working of the chakras in the body has nothing to do with religious affiliation. What this strategic positioning leaves unstated, of course, is the implication that whereas the “scientific metaphysics” of a specific alternative spiritual system are universal, Islamic metaphysical statements about the same topics can only be partial, parochial, or worst of all, wrong.



Lili was not prepared to concede the argument, although she did admit that there had been “unanswered questions,” which she had also discussed with her older brother. Here she showed signs of wavering from the position of witness. That is, she acknowledged that certain claims Taheri and others had made were difficult to sustain, but she had decided to consciously believe in them despite her doubts, because they brought her calm:

Let’s say, as you do, that we don’t care whether or not this is true, whether what they’re doing is really correct or not. But at least what they’re giving us is very easy, and they give us something that requires no effort, no struggle, and there is a peace and calm [*aramesh*] that results from it. You’re saying that the Buddhist or the Hindu will do certain exercises, ascetic practices, to attain certain things. But [Taheri and his students] say that it requires neither ascetic exercise nor practice nor hardship.

Later, reminiscing about her own doubts, she recounted a conversation with her brother Mehran:

I asked Mehran, what are we supposed to believe among the things they tell us? And he said Lili, at least, believing it is a lot better than not believing it. I’m talking about the totality of the issue, not just the matter of the inorganic beings. He was saying that when you accept and believe it, at least you have tranquility [*aramesh*] in your life that you wouldn’t have without the system. You are always in conflict with yourself. Why have I come here [into this world]? So what? We are in conflict with God, asking what the point was in bringing us into this world so that we would suffer. Because we always thought that sickness and calamity are tests. Everything is a trial and a test. And we would ask, so what? God brought us into this world to run some tests on us and then send us off? And then we would go to hell and burn. That’s what it was supposed to be after all. It was meaningless wasn’t it? But now I see that it’s not like that at all. They’ve given us some new viewpoints with which we can easily derive pleasure from life and being in our own Tehran and our own Iran. Before this, we would maybe say there is nothing, and we should get up and leave this place.

Cosmic Mysticism had brought Lili tranquility after anguish. It had helped her come to terms with her best friend’s death. It had cured her wrist injury. And it had furnished accounts of cosmology and theodicy that she found more logical and rational than the meaningless ideas she had been taught in religious textbooks in school and in mosques. More than anything, it had

brought her calm, a “spiritual and internal tranquility” that she thought was perhaps the element that drew many people to the mystical system.

A week later, Lili called me to give me the name of a book she had read on communication with the souls of the dead over a decade earlier. Then she told me that after having spoken to me over lunch, she had gone home with “a head full of questions” once again. For the first time in a long while, she had felt anxious and sad for no apparent reason, to the point that she had felt she was once again being exposed to the negative network. She repeated, as she had done over lunch, that she had found tranquility in Cosmic Mysticism, and her worldview (*binesh*) had also changed as a result of the seminars. But the doubts and criticisms that I had raised had destabilized her progress. She had wept, again for no apparent reason. She told me that she believed the differences of interpretation between various knowledge systems, as for example between psychiatry and Cosmic Mysticism, were akin to those between different theories in psychology, where behaviorist, cognitive, and psychoanalytic theories provide competing explanations for similar phenomena. But this uncertainty between different systems and the questions that they raised brought her more turmoil than calm. In the end, Lili had decided that “even if what I’m doing is false, I am happy with it, because it brings me peace.”

## **Conclusion**

Polemicists arguing against deviant mysticisms deploy theological reasoning to discredit a wide range of spiritual alternatives competing for the attention of urban middle class Iranians. The purveyors of these alternative spiritualities in turn position themselves in opposition to their competitors, arguing variously that the other systems are wrong, or are fully encompassed and therefore superseded by what they offer. All such arguments presume a reading (and seminar-

attending) public for whom religion has been “objectified” (Eickelman 1992; Eickelman and Anderson 1997) and who have access to a range of alternatives. They take as their objective, moreover, a full and unequivocal conversion, where one religio-mystical system is adopted, ideally through a process of reasoned contemplation, to the absolute exclusion of all others. In practice, as I have tried to show in this chapter, such ideal conversions are rare. An enthusiastic participant in Cosmic Mysticism like Arezoo Salamat may not be prepared to abandon her own visions and understandings, drawn from both intuition (her “heart”) and “study,” even if they contradict the teachings of the doctrine to which she claims to adhere. Those who have abandoned Cosmic Mysticism, as Dr. Adibi did, may still see value in its teachings, as long as they pass the test of her lock of reason. And others, like Lili Bayati, who care to rationally consider the terms on offer in a system like Cosmic Mysticism, may decide to believe consciously so as to reap the psychological benefits of participation, even in the face of the possibility that they have been deceived. These outcomes depend on diverging forms of reasoning, and different desires, anxieties, and commitments articulated as reasons for or against participation in a group. The competing polemics that circulate in the media and in face-to-face conversations in seminars and private encounters provide structure to these articulations, but they never succeed in fully colonizing them, nor do they exhaust their possibilities.

## Chapter 4 – The Scientific Imaginary

در یک دنیای فرضی روی تخیلات علمی می خواهیم پرواز کنیم.

We want to take flight in a hypothetical world  
on the wings of scientific imagination.

Mehdi Bazargan (1998:393)

**One** - In June 2008, shortly after I had arrived in Tehran for fieldwork, I had a conversation with Hadi, a senior in mechanical engineering who had taken an interest in my research and introduced me to various people for interviews. Hadi had told me that he was fascinated with extraordinary phenomena, particularly divinations and premonitions. But he had never had the time to seriously pursue such matters, and furthermore, he feared they might cause misfortunes (*nahsi*). Still, what little experience he had acquired had given him invaluable insights.

Hadi spoke with precision and took care to weigh his arguments with logic. He was careful to distinguish those things that he had personally witnessed from those he had heard from others. If he was uncertain about something recounted to him, he would say so. Even when describing something uncanny that he had seen with his own eyes, he was careful to mention alternative explanations, to rule them out if necessary, and to provide logical arguments as to why the supernatural explanation should be more favorable or probable.

His examples were simple and undramatic. In his grandparents' village in the northwestern province of Ardabil, a custodian for an orchard owned by his grandmother had a large, flat stone, about thirty centimeters in diameter, that seemed to have divinatory properties. He explained the process as follows: One person would lower the stone onto two others' hands, each of whom were to use only their thumbs and index fingers to balance the stone. When the

stone was balanced and still, they could ask it a question. The stone would then make a very slight, circular motion in response, indicating “yes” or “no” depending on the direction of its spin. It was possible, he said, that the stone’s slight movement could be caused by the motion of fingers adjusting to its weight. But he had tested it enough times to conclude that there were other forces at work than mere gravity and the twitching of muscles.

Hadi’s other experiences had to do with premonitions. He had paid the most attention to intuitions he felt while watching football matches, but also in relation to car accidents and the death of loved ones. Had he the requisite time, he said, he would study and experiment with his own premonitions to come up with a “theory for predicting reality” (*te’ori-ye pishbini-ye vaqe’iyat*). To do so, he said, he would have to focus on the feelings and carefully analyze them as they occurred: “You try to find out where it has come from and how it might be amplified. You check off your mental factors one by one. You put your different feelings together. If you have a spiritual connection with God, you try to amplify that connection, through prayer, abstaining from lying, and so on. The point is to be able, in the end, to differentiate between different kinds of intuitions.”

After elaborating at greater length about the process whereby he thought premonitions about football incidents occurred, Hadi admitted that his “academic” perspective might be completely misguided. “Maybe,” he said, “because my mind is an engineering mind, it messes things up. People who study medicine have a totally different approach compared to engineers. Maybe it’s better to use their methods. Maybe if you arrange these matters through a different arithmetic (*hesab ketab*), you’ll achieve better results. It’s like with different coordinate systems. Among the polar, Cartesian, cylindrical, and spherical coordinate systems, the easiest and best seems to be the Cartesian system. But sometimes you realize that, wow, if you adopt the

spherical or cylindrical system, your problem becomes so much easier to solve. There are things that might make sense in the Cartesian system, but are completely wrong in the spherical system, for example in the representation of vectors. In the same way, it could be that what we see through an academic lens and think ‘oh this doesn’t work; it’s a counterexample’ would not be a counterexample at all if viewed in a different coordinate system. It could be that the two are really equivalent points.”

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**Two** – A few months later, I paid a visit to the office of Dr. Nader Mahluji, a psychiatrist at a large teaching hospital in Tehran, to interview him about jinn possession, dissociation, and schizophrenia. Dr. Mahluji told me that he believed in jinn because they were mentioned in the Qur’an, but he did not believe that these beings interacted with humans. People who claimed to have been possessed by jinn, he said, were either charlatans, delusional, or had undergone some form of dissociation. Some may be schizophrenics and require medical treatment. As he spoke, I noticed a CD on his desk labeled “The Miracle of Water” (*mo’jezeh-ye ab*). When I asked about it, he explained that it was a gift given to professors such as himself by the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader (*daftar-e namayandegi-ye vali-ye faqih*) at his university. He did not think much of the content, remarking that it was probably “charlatanism.”

I had heard about the “miracle of water” before. It referred to the work of Masaru Emoto, a Japanese author who had performed experiments on water crystals, claiming that human consciousness could alter their molecular structures. In his experiments, Emoto exposed water in containers to various words, music, prayers, or pictures, then froze the water and examined the crystals for their aesthetic qualities. If the water had been exposed to kind and beautiful words,

soothing music, or prayers, the resulting crystals would look beautiful. If it had been exposed to harsh music, curses, or ugly images, the crystals in turn would be badly formed. Emoto has published his ideas in “Messages from Water” and other books, and sells various “Emoto Label” products through his website. At the time of this writing, the National Library and Archives of the Islamic Republic of Iran listed seventeen titles in Persian, published after 2005, that were either direct translations of Emoto’s books or based on his work. Those of my interlocutors who had heard about him usually referred to him as a Japanese scientist or researcher.

In 2004, Hamideh Bitaraf, a high-school student in Tehran, won an award for first prize in chemistry from the prestigious Khwarazmi Festival for Youth, for her project on the “Testimony of Water” (*shahadat-e ab*).<sup>82</sup> Inspired by Emoto’s experiments, with which she became familiar through the internet, Bitaraf tested the effects of various sounds and words on the microscopic structures of ice, mercury, copper sulfate, and a tin alloy. She found for example that ice crystals exposed to “religious texts” like the *Tawhid* chapter of the Qur’an appeared slanted, while texts that carried “good” concepts like love and friendship made the crystals round, and texts with negative concepts like hatred elongated them. In her project abstract, Bitaraf described her work as “an attempt to demonstrate the interactions of the world of spirituality and the corporeal world.” Although this interaction was already obvious in the “manifestation of a soul in the human body,” she wrote that her project demonstrated the “delicate and sensitive microscopic mechanical effects of the environment, arising from the wave-like effects radiating from the spiritual states of the human actor . . . , on another material substance (ice and other metals [sic]), which appears in the form of a new metaphysical

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<sup>82</sup> For the sake of comparison, here are the titles of a few other first and second-place winners in the chemistry division at the Khwarazmi Youth Festival in the same year: “Examining the Properties of Saffron Essence,” “Producing Fuel from Plastic Refuse,” “Automatic Painter,” “Applications of Perlite for Sound and Heat Insulation” and “A New Method for Collecting Oil Spills from the Sea Surface.”

phenomenon.” Her project has been cited numerous times on Persian-language websites and weblogs, as well as in some motivational lectures, usually in conjunction with information about Emoto’s experiments. It has sometimes been invoked as empirical demonstration of the Qur’anic verse “*Yusabbihu lillahi ma fis-ssamawati wa ma fil-ard*” (Whatever is in the heavens and on earth does declare the Praises and Glory of God [62:1 and 64:1]).

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**Three** – In the summer of 2010, Dr. Amir Movahhed, an electrical engineer and university professor, told me about a set of simple calculations he had conducted to show that it would be possible for a human being’s good and evil deeds to be recorded within a miniscule portion of his or her own bodily substance, in order to be retrieved in the afterlife for the final judgment. The idea had come to him in a gathering at a friend’s house some years earlier, when one of the guests, a staunch materialist, had ridiculed the Islamic idea that there were two angels (known as the *keram al-katebin* or “noble scribes”) appointed for every human being to record every one of his or her deeds in minute detail. Performing a few quick calculations in his head, Dr. Movahhed had responded to the guest that it was completely unnecessary to imagine anthropomorphic scribes sitting on people’s shoulders and writing down their actions. All such deeds could be encoded in numbers and recorded in a tiny fragment of the human body, in its very electrons. Later, he had performed the calculations in greater detail on his computer. He emailed me a Microsoft Excel sheet and explained the numbers to me like this:

Let’s take the typical human lifespan to be eighty years. In microseconds, that would be about  $2.5 \times 10^{15}$ . Now, let’s say that we were to score the person’s behavior or even thought process every microsecond (that is, every millionth of a second), assigning at each moment a numerical value between, let’s say, 0 and 1,000. We would need 10 bits of information to represent each such value. So for a total lifetime, we would need about  $2.5 \times 10^{16}$  bits. To store such data, we could use electrons, with the assumption that the



spin direction of each electron can store one bit of information. That is, we would determine that a spin up would equal a 1, and a spin down would be a 0. To record all the information, we would therefore require  $2.5 \times 10^{16}$  electrons. Using the Avogadro Constant, we know that each microgram of hydrogen has  $6.02 \times 10^{17}$  electrons. So to store a lifetime's worth of information as we've defined it, we would need approximately 0.04 micrograms of hydrogen from the person's body. If we imagine that after death, even only less than a tenth of a microgram of the hydrogen in the individual's body were to survive, we would still have enough to contain information on a lifetime of actions and thoughts.

Dr. Movahhed went further. To be able to match each personal record to an individual identity, we would require a unique number for each person – a kind of identity number. To calculate the number of bits required to store such information, we would first have to know how many humans will have lived on earth before Judgment Day. Estimates for the total number of humans up to the present time range from 100 to 115 billion people. Dr. Movahhed suggested that we could take the final number to be as large as we want. "Let's assume that it were 100 billion times 100 billion, or about  $1 \times 10^{22}$ ." He left it to me to calculate how many bits would be required to represent a unique identity number for one person among so many, but he said that whatever the number, it would only be a negligible addition to the amount of bits we had already set aside for the lifetime's worth of data (he was right: no more than 74 bits would be required for each identity number).

Despite the intricacy of his formulation, Dr. Movahhed emphatically denied that the model represented reality in any way. "All I am saying," he told me, "is that it is possible to conceive of this aspect of the hereafter in a way that makes sense given our current scientific knowledge."

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Hadi's reflections on premonitions, Hamideh Bitaraf's experiments on water crystals, and Dr. Movahhed's subatomic model for the noble scribes might be understood in terms of a historically constituted style of thinking in Iran, one that privileges precision, quantification, objectivity, and empiricism. This is a style inculcated as habitus in the members of a middle class forged historically through the establishment and dissemination of modern scientific knowledge (Schayegh 2009). It is born of a "moral economy" of modern science (Daston 1995), but its dominion has expanded beyond the kinds of phenomena upon which modern science ordinarily passes judgment, thereby intensifying its cultural force (Prakash 2003). As such, this style of thought is better conceived as the effect of what I call a *scientific imaginary*. That is, it is on the one hand the imaginative product of a way of looking at the world that we call scientific. On the other hand, its appropriation of this scientific perspective is often loose, flexible, and experimental, concerned more with imaginative constructions of the plausible than with demonstrating the accuracy of such constructions.<sup>83</sup>

My aim in this chapter is to draw out some of the contours of this scientific imaginary and to explore some of the historical developments in the past century that have enabled its emergence. My central argument is that since the early twentieth century, for believers in the existence of an immaterial world to think scientifically about spirits, angels, the afterlife, and

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<sup>83</sup> On scientific and technoscientific imaginaries, see the collection edited by George Marcus (1995). As Marcus explains, his co-contributors employ a "socially and culturally embedded sense of the imaginary that... looks to the future and future possibility through technoscientific innovation but is equally constrained by the very present conditions of scientific work. The imaginary fills in the cognitive gap and tension that the widespread perceived inadequacy of working practices and concepts create within so many institutions and professions today" (1995:4). This is a notion of the imaginary as "structures of contingency" constituted by social actors "trying to understand the present by borrowing from a cautiously imagined emergent future, filled with volatility, and uncertainty, but in which faith in practices of technoscience become even more complexly and interestingly constructed in new locations of doing science" (ibid). While, as we have already seen in previous chapters, senses of volatility and uncertainty can plausibly be attributed to the people I worked with, as well as the historical subjects I explore in this chapter, the locus of this contingency has less to do with the institutional and professional places within which science is done, than with the politics, sociality, and experience of religion. My use of the notion of a scientific imaginary is further restricted by my emphasis on its epistemological entailments (see further below).

extraordinary phenomena has usually entailed the adoption of one or more of the following epistemological positions normally associated with the practice of modern science: First, the privileging of facts derived from empirical observation and testing; second, the acceptance of statements by Western scientists as authoritative or at least trustworthy; and third, attempting to construct plausible models of presumed metaphysical truths that are internally coherent and draw convincingly on contemporary scientific knowledge and terminology, yet cannot necessarily be shown to represent any external reality (nor, sometimes, even claim to do so). Although all three of these positions depend on an acknowledgement of the authority of modern science, they do not necessarily carry the same implications or engender uniform consequences. As I will show, while some individuals have historically pinned their hopes on empiricism to illuminate the path toward a universal spirituality and ethics that can rise above the multitude of backward, traditional religions and superstitions, others have been able to similarly employ empirical observation to affirm the very cosmological doctrines taught by Shi'i Islam. Scientific knowledge has served in some hands as a weapon against Islam, in other hands as a shield to protect and preserve Islam, and among still others as a means to both defend and remodel the faith.

This appropriation of science is not merely rhetorical, as some textualist readings of New Age doctrine have argued (Hammer 2001; Hanegraaf 1996); nor can it be dismissed simply as irrational dabbling in pseudoscience, as skeptics of various stripes might suggest. Here my development of a notion of a “scientific imaginary” is aimed at highlighting conceptualizations of the supernatural that cannot be adequately captured by a discursive approach, such as Olav Hammer’s “scientism,” which he uses to designate attempts by practitioners of the Modern Esoteric Tradition to position their claims in reference to the “manifestations” of academic

science, such as scientific terminology, mathematical calculations, technological instruments, theoretical models, references, and discursive styles. In Hammer's definition, scientism does not involve the use of methods approved by the mainstream scientific community and its manifestations ultimately fail to find acceptance through normal channels like peer-reviewed publishing in academic journals (Hammer 2001). While such a distinction between "scientism" and "mainstream science" (which Hammer himself acknowledges is heuristic. See *ibid*:207) is useful in illuminating the dissemination of epistemological and discursive styles from one social domain (that of modern science) to another (that of religion), it rests on a perspective that can only emerge after the lines of conflict have been drawn and the "boundary work" has been done (see Hess 1993). By employing the concept of a "scientific imaginary," I intend to capture some of the fluidity and incestuousness of scientific discourse, whether practiced by members of a mainstream scientific community, those resolutely outside their fold, or those who sit uncomfortably on the margins. I am more interested in process and flow than in final outcomes.<sup>84</sup>

### **Hybrids of Science and Spirit**

For modernists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who took it upon themselves to remake Iranian society, there was no instrument as powerful as modern science. As Cyrus Schayegh (2009) has shown, modern science provided the cultural capital that was needed for a new middle class to distinguish itself from the existing social strata. It also furnished the tools required by the modernizers – in collaboration with the state – to reform society at large,

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<sup>84</sup> Brady Brower (2010) and Brenda Denzler (2001) provide two meticulous accounts of ebbs and flows in the constitution of normal science and its delineation from pseudoscience, the former in the case of physical research in France, and the latter in relation to ufology in the United States.

particularly through the spread of modern education and the application of biomedicine (hygiene, genetics, eugenics, psychiatry, and so on).

To ensure that modern scientific knowledge had the credibility and efficacy it required to succeed as a tool of social transformation, modernists needed to carefully distinguish this knowledge from bad, traditional Iranian modes of knowledge. These ranged from the prevailing “Indian-style” literature to the superstitions of the masses and the metaphysical speculations of the clergy. Such retarded knowledge had to be discarded in favor of practical, logical, exact, and socially-useful knowledge: European literary genres, mathematics, and, most important of all, the experimental natural sciences (ibid:33-40). Between the two constellations of knowledge, there could only be an absolute separation. “No gray zone could exist between the two,” Schayegh writes, even though “other groups – merchants, for instance, or the clergy – adopted parts of the modern scientific discourse. It was not important that cultural practices constantly breached the presumed iron wall between traditional knowledge and modern science” (ibid:39).

This modernist purification of knowledge could be viewed in light of what Bruno Latour has called the “Modern Constitution” (1993). According to Latour, the idea of modernity is constituted by, on the one hand, an enforced separation between “nature” and “society,” and on the other hand, a continual traffic between the two presumed realms of existence. Two sets of practices underlie this system: First, practices that by “translation,” create “hybrids of nature and culture.” Second, practices that through “purification,” create an ontological separation between the world of humans and the world of nonhumans. Without hybridization, there would be nothing to purify and no ontological distinction to enforce. Without purification, the proliferation of hybrids would come to a standstill. These practices need to remain distinct, Latour argues, in order to be effective. In fact, the Modern Constitution is premised on an official denial that

hybridization takes place at all. Hence moderns can direct their attention separately at nature and society, science and politics, and condemn their mixtures, even though below their gaze, all they have are endlessly multiplying nature-cultures. Once hybridization and purification are considered simultaneously, Latour says, we will realize not only that we are not modern, but that we have never been modern.

For my purposes, I am less interested in the modernist distinction between nature and society, than in the purported barrier between legitimate scientific knowledge on the one hand, and superstition and useless traditional metaphysics on the other. The very process of purification, through which Iranian modernists marked off the new empirical sciences from older forms of knowledge, encouraged a proliferation of hybrids: the scientific and the spiritual, the rational and the irrational, the experimental and the visionary. The “others” constructed by science in its struggle for dominance, to quote Gyan Prakash, have turned out to be critical to its life while remaining “outside its grasp, and haunt[ing] its dominance” (2003:40).

### **Experimental Spirit Science**

One would be at pains to find a more eminent and colorful representative of such mixture than Dr. Khalil Khan Saqafi (1863-1944), a physician, bureaucrat, diplomat, constitutionalist, essayist, and translator. Khalil Khan was the son of Haj Mirza Abd al-Baqi E‘tehad al-Atebba’, a traditional physician in the court of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1831-1896). He learned traditional mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and theology with various teachers (including his own father) before entering the Dar al-Fonun<sup>85</sup> in 1876 to study modern medicine (Rusta’i 2002).

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<sup>85</sup> The Dar al-Fonun, or “polytechnic college,” was the first institution of modern education in Iran. It was founded in 1851 by Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir. See Gurney and Nabavi (1993).

Four years into his program, he secured teaching assistantships in French and geography, and later, medicine. In 1887, a year before graduating, he was appointed as an official physician with the foreign ministry – the first in a series of government assignments. Shortly thereafter, he was granted a medical teaching position at the Military College (*madreseh-ye nezami*). He may have been the first Iran-trained physician to be called “doctor” (ibid).

In 1895, Naser al-Din Shah’s private physician, the Frenchman Joseph Désirè Tholozan, recommended that Khalil Khan be sent to Paris for further medical training.<sup>86</sup> He was thirty-two at the time. As we shall see below, Paris turned out to exert a formative influence not only on the young doctor’s medical career, but on his spiritual life as well. Four years later, he returned to Tehran and joined the physicians in the employ of the Qajar court. He accompanied the new monarch, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, on some of his European trips, became his personal physician and close confidant, and received the official title of *A’lam al-Dowleh* (the most learned of the state).<sup>87</sup>

When the Constitutional Revolution broke out in 1905, Khalil Khan Saqafi lent the movement his support, and apparently encouraged Mozaffar al-Din Shah to sign a rescript in August 1906 approving the establishment of a national assembly (*majles-e shura-ye melli*) (ibid:63). Upon the Shah’s death in 1907 and the ascension of his son Mohammad Ali to the throne, the latter, a staunch anti-constitutionalist, demanded that Khalil Khan sign a letter stating that the late Shah had been mentally unfit when he issued his rescript in favor of founding the parliament (ibid:68-69; see also Saqafi E’zaz 1967). Khalil Khan refused. Outraged, the Shah

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<sup>86</sup> Medical students from the Dar al-Fonun had been traveling to France for postgraduate training for almost forty years, since 1856. See Mahdavi (2005) for a discussion of the transmission of western medicine to Iran and the role of European physicians and their Iranian students.

<sup>87</sup> On official titles, including during the Qajar period, see Ashraf (1984). See also Amanat (1993) on the role of Qajar physicians as courtiers.

ordered him jailed and his property confiscated. But the doctor went into hiding and escaped to Paris shortly thereafter, remaining there until after constitutionalist forces invaded Tehran and deposed the Shah in July 1909. Khalil Khan returned to Tehran to be appointed the capital's first post-revolution mayor. It was a position he maintained for three years, finally resigning after protests erupted in the Bazaar over his attempts to reduce the price of bread. He was then dispatched to Switzerland to serve as Iran's Consul General and oversee a group of Iranian students there. He returned to Tehran a final time in 1914 and spent his remaining thirty years practicing medicine, writing, and translating, occasionally accepting administrative positions with the government. His translations – all from French to Persian – include Jules Verne's 1881 novel *Le Fils de Monte-Cristo* (an unofficial sequel to Alexandre Dumas' classic), textbooks on modern medicine, agriculture, and industry, and a book on space and time. He also authored original works on chemistry, ethics, and literature, as well as a Persian-French dictionary. Meanwhile, he penned essays on culture, politics, and society for various publications, including *Asr-e Jadid*, which was edited by his ill-fated younger brother Matin al-Saltaneh (see Khaniyan 2009).<sup>88</sup> Finally, it was during these three decades that Khalil Khan did the most to further what he called “experimental spirit science” (*ma' refat al-ruh-e tajrobatī*), his term for Spiritism.

To understand Khalil Khan's fascination with Spiritism and his efforts to propagate the “science” in Iran, we need to return to his four years of graduate medical training in Paris. It was there that he met Dr. Jules Bernard Luys (1828-1897), a renowned neurologist who had made

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<sup>88</sup> Khalil Khan wrote articles for *Asr-e Jadid* throughout the journal's three-year tenure during the First World War, from 1914 to 1917. His brother, Abd al-Hamid Khan Saqafi Matin al-Saltaneh (1879-1917) was an Oxford-educated journalist and politician whose pro-Allied leanings in the journal cost him his life. He was assassinated in his home office by a member of the *Komiteh-ye Mojazat* (Punishment Committee) on May 22, 1917 (Khaniyan 2009; Parvin 1987). Eighteen years later, Khalil Khan collected a hundred and fifty articles he had written for *Asr-e Jadid* and republished them in book form to commemorate his brother (Saqafi A'lam al-Dowleh 1935).



important contributions to the understanding of human brain anatomy and neurological diseases (Parent 2002; Parent and Parent 2011). Luys had begun his medical career at La Salpêtrière in the same year that Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) joined the institution, and he worked in the shadow of the master throughout his professional life (Parent and Parent 2011). In 1876, the two neurologists participated, with Victor Dumont-Pallier (1826-1899), then chief physician at La Charité hospital, in the so-called Burquism Commission. The group was tasked with investigating metallotherapy, a method developed by Victor Burq (1822-1884) to treat neurological illnesses using metal plaques or amulets (ibid). Both Charcot and Luys became fascinated with hysteria and hypnosis following their work in the commission, and both spent much of the latter part of their careers conducting experiments in these fields.<sup>89</sup> But Luys was by far the more eccentric of the two. In 1886, after being named senior physician at La Charité hospital, he created a school on hysteria called *l'École de la Charité*. He appointed the occultist Dr. Gérard Encausse (known also by his esoteric name Mage Papus) chief of his hypnotherapy laboratory (Parent and Parent 2011:132). With Encausse's help, Luys designed experiments in which he hypnotized multiple patients at a time and meticulously documented their emotional reactions to rotating mirrors. His other experiments on hypnotized patients included studies on the effects of medication at a distance, attempts to store cerebral activities in magnetic crowns, and visualizing brain and body emanations (ibid:133-134). Many of Luys' experiments were performed in public, either at La Charité or at his own residence, and they attracted crowds of Parisians curious to see his strange demonstrations firsthand.

By the time Khalil Khan arrived in Paris in 1895, Luys was near the end of his life in the public spotlight. He died only two years later, but his brief acquaintance must have been enough

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<sup>89</sup> A different intellectual connection is suggested by Henri Ellenberger, who notes that Charcot may have become interested in hypnotism under the influence of the physiologist, psychical researcher, and future Nobel Prize winner Charles Richet. See Ellenberger (1970:90).

to launch Khalil Khan into the world of Spiritism and psychical research. It was probably at La Charité<sup>90</sup> or Luys' residence that Khalil Khan became introduced to the vibrant Parisian spiritist scene. In time, he would translate and popularize many spiritist publications, including works by Allan Kardec (1804-1869), Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), Charles Richet (1850-1935), and Gabriel Delanne (1857-1926).

When World War I broke out in 1914, Khalil Khan was already a committed spiritist. He made frequent references to “experimental spirit science” in essays he wrote for *Asr-e Jadid*. More than anything, he was convinced that Spiritism had made a scientific ethics possible: it would render irrelevant the whole cacophony of traditional religious ethics around the world and replace them with a set of universal, empirically-validated ethical norms. For example, in an article decrying the “dark spots” of the “civilized world,” a civilization based primarily on “greed, avarice, and selfishness,” he wrote:

The biggest of stains [on the canvass of civilization] is this current war, which is a result of the current civilization. The current world civilization is a natural civilization which has advanced to very high stages. The bad consequences that have resulted from it are due to the fact that this civilization [of natural science] has not been accompanied by an ethical civilization. Ethical civilization has not advanced to the same degree that natural civilization has progressed, and this is because ethical civilization, or the internal police<sup>91</sup> [*polis-e bateni*], does not have strong, scientific foundations. Up till now, the foundations of ethics have been laid upon various traditional beliefs [*aqayed-e gunagun-e ta'abbodi*] and these beliefs are different in each nation and are at odds with one another. On the other hand, scientific beliefs which have led to the progress of natural civilization are the same in the whole world and there is no variation among them... There is only one truth and there is no difference in that which is real. An internal police which would pertain to all nations would be founded upon scientific beliefs; that is, it should be based on the new discoveries of experimental spirit science. (Saqafi *A'lam al-Dowleh* 1935:54-55)

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<sup>90</sup> Khalil Khan's son Hossein Saqafi E'zaz has claimed that Luys had taken his father to a certain “Institute Charcot” (sic) to learn “the sciences of magnetism, spiritual philosophy, psychology and parapsychology.” However, “Institute Charcot” is probably a misidentification of “La Charité” hospital. See Saqafi E'zaz (1972).

<sup>91</sup> Khalil Khan contrasts the “internal police” of conscience to the “external police” (*polis-e zaheri*) of disciplinary state power.

Elsewhere, Khalil Khan had argued that the problem with the prevailing ethics was that it was not based on “empirical scientific principles” (ibid:23). The model for inventing universal ethical laws, therefore, should be the same as that employed for discovering universal natural laws.

How exactly could empirical science provide the foundations for ethics? The spiritist response was straightforward enough: Human souls are reincarnated in new bodies after death in order to undergo a process of purification. At the end of each lifetime, the soul advances to a higher stage, eventually leaving the earth for life on more exalted planets. When souls are suspended in a disincarnated state between death and a new return, it is possible to make contact with them through the mediation of turning tables, planchettes, or human mediums. These souls are often willing to provide insights about their experience and the knowledge they have gained in their earthly lives. By establishing contact with them, therefore, spiritists are able to obtain empirical truths about the universe, reincarnation, the past lives of famous deceased individuals, and absolute ethical principles.

Spiritists considered their method of communication with disembodied souls to be the fruit of modern scientific discovery. They believed that their séances would lead to “a revolution in both science and religion; that they would bring about a dawn of spiritual science and a faith supported by concrete evidence” (Lachapelle 2011:5).<sup>92</sup> Mahmud Vahid Sa‘d (Vahid al-Dowleh), a close friend and collaborator of Khalil Khan and director of the Knowledge Society of Iran (*jame‘eh-ye ma‘aref-e iran*), understood Spiritism to have emerged at an advanced stage in evolutionary progress in which humanity had passed through savagery and barbarism to reach

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<sup>92</sup> On the uneasy relationship between French spiritists and the custodians of normal science on the one hand, and Catholic orthodoxy on the other, see Brady (2010), Lachapelle (2011), and Sharp (2006).

his day's "incomplete civilization." Thanks to the efforts of "scientists and philosophers," humanity had thus been able to communicate with spirits using scientific methods:

As a result of certain spiritual observations in America [in the late 1840s], most scientists in civilized countries embarked on studies of the "truth of humankind after death." Today it has been proved to most of them not only that the human soul is indestructible and that it survives after death, but that it is possible for mankind to establish contact with the souls of the dead and to conduct research and make discoveries through them. Contact with spirits is possible everywhere and for everyone as long as certain relevant instruments are available, like the instruments of the positive sciences such as physics and chemistry. That is, just as the availability of instruments for generating electric power anywhere in the world makes it possible to employ its heat and light, [communication] with spirits... and even viewing them is possible for anyone anywhere in the world if the relevant instruments are available. (Vahid Sa'd 1929:250)

In the mid 1920s, Khalil Khan founded the "Society of Experimental Spirit Science" (*anjoman-e ma'refat al-ruh-e tajrobati*) in Tehran, to create a venue for regular communication with spirits.

The society met weekly, first at the personal residence of Colonel Mohammad Baqer Khan Nakhjavan, and later at the house of Colonel Mohammad Khan Razmara (Modarresi Chahardehi 2008:60; Saqafi E'zaz 1972:105). Both men had served in the Cossack Brigade and were the fathers of prominent military men who also took part in the Spirit Society's meetings (Saqafi E'zaz 1972:101).<sup>93</sup> Within a year or two, the meetings were moved to the house of Mahmud Vahid Sa'd. According to Khalil Khan's son, all of the "eminent and enlightened members" of the society believed in telepathy and clairvoyance, which "have been scientifically proven." However, there were at first a few "newcomers" who had not yet grasped experimental spirit science and instead retained their "superstitious beliefs" in "coffee divination, sleight of hand, palmistry, and the like" (ibid:102). Clearly, in the eyes of the society's members, a distinction

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<sup>93</sup> Mohammad Nakhjavan Amir Movassaq, the son of Mohammad Baqer Khan, served variously as Army Chief of Staff, War Minister, Senator, and Governor of Khuzestan between 1927 and 1952. Haji Ali Razmara, the son of Mohammad Khan Razmara, served as Army Chief of Staff several times between 1943 and 1948. He was appointed Prime Minister in June 1950 but was assassinated only nine months later on March 7, 1951.

needed to be made between superstitious beliefs in the supernatural and scientific beliefs in disincarnate souls.

The staple event each week was a séance. If a suitable medium – usually a young, frail woman – was available, she would be hypnotized by Khalil Khan in order to enter a trance state and communicate with the spirits. Once contact was established, the medium would write down the spirits’ messages, or speak them out loud. This was the mode of contact the Spirit Society considered ideal. But mediums were not always available. In their absence, members would sit around a wooden table and a white sheet of paper would be placed in the center, with the letters of the Persian and French alphabets, “yes,” and “no,” and a few other words written on it. On the sheet, they would place a wooden cigar box fitted with a small, arrow-shaped piece of paper.<sup>94</sup> Khalil Khan would then instruct the members to gently place their index fingers on the cigar box and concentrate on establishing contact with the spirit world. All but one light in the room would be extinguished and one person would sit near the only illuminated lamp to write down the spirits’ messages. In a loud voice, Khalil Khan would address the spirits and ask them to enter into contact with the attendees by moving the cigar box. After a few moments, the box would begin to skid and slide around the table. It would announce the spirit’s name “telegraphically” by pointing at the relevant letters of the alphabet. Khalil Khan would validate each letter by asking the spirit “Is such and such letter correct?” and the spirit would confirm or deny by moving the cigar box onto “yes” or “no.” Once the spirit’s name had been established, Khalil Khan would address him or her accordingly and ask a few questions. The responses would be compiled at the end of the séance and the attendees would discuss the details of the communication.

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<sup>94</sup> Later, Vahid Sa’d brought a number of planchettes from Glasgow, Scotland, while on a visit there to take part in spiritist meetings. These were flat pieces of wood with a narrow front and a metallic indicator that would point at letters and numbers on the table to signify spirits’ messages. Four ball bearing runners were installed underneath each planchette to allow smooth and friction-less movement (Saqafi E’zaz 1972:100).

The Society of Experimental Spirit Science hosted séances with some of the most renowned souls in history. They included statesmen (Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir, Karim Khan Zand, Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, Józef Piłsudski), scientists (Ibn Sina, Camille Flammarion), and poets (Hafez, Sa‘di, Khayyam). The souls reported on their circumstances in the “fourth dimension,” on the good and evil deeds they had committed during their lifetimes, and on the workings of the cosmos and reincarnation. The loftier the souls, the richer their insights. For example, Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir (1807-1852), Naser al-Din Shah’s famous Prime Minister and the founder of Dar al-Fonun, told Khalil Khan and his friends that he was on the “first level” of the spirit world. He had been so good in his lifetime as Amir Kabir that he did not require any additional returns to earth. The reason, as he explained it, was that:

On earth, I did nothing but good. I always tried to do good for people. I was never selfish, and I never wanted anyone to be harmed. I never desired to do anything out of ostentation. And this is why I am very comfortable.

When Khalil Khan asked the former Prime Minister what he was doing in the spirit world, Amir Kabir had this to say:

I am busy studying nature and the vastness of creation. It is truly bewildering. In the corporeal world, we understood nothing. The situation of the world and of creation is entirely other than what you in the corporeal world imagine. We have duties here, and if we perform them, we succeed in becoming promoted. Otherwise we return to the corporeal world, and there is no torture for the soul greater than corporeality. And it is strange that in your world, people have extraordinary love for their coarse lives. Death seems very difficult in their eyes, but they are in complete ignorance. The corporeal world is nothing but the very Hell that all religions mention. It is not difficult for us to perform our duties. We can perform our duties with the utmost ease. Whenever we desire to understand something, we immediately will it and we learn that subject... We have many recreations here, of which you don’t even have one percent in your corporeal world. We enjoy extraordinary pleasures which you cannot even imagine in your corporeal world. (Saqafi A‘lam al-Dowleh 1929:288-290)

Other souls were not as fortunate. Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya confessed that he had been wicked in all two thousand and fifty-nine of his lives. In his most recent life, he had been a depraved menial worker in Africa (ibid:306-307). Omar Khayyam had been a “materialist” who had composed much nonsense in his poetry (ibid:303). Hafez had wasted his life away in debauchery and drinking (ibid:308). And Ibn Sina had been an arrogant opportunist who had read all he could of the Khwarazmshahi library before torching the building to prevent others from benefitting from the vast knowledge contained within (ibid:309). These revelations were not mere fodder for casual conversation and amusement. They provided raw, experiential material for ethical reflection, debate, and self-scrutiny among the Spirit Society’s members. As Brady Brower has argued in the case of French Spiritism, the souls of these cultural elites provided “models for self-improvement by demonstrating the durable social value and individual pleasure afforded by a cultivated self,” (2010:14) and, one might add, the dismay and torment of an uncultivated self doomed to repeat the corporeal anguish of earthly existence.

### **The Spiritist Legacy**

Hypnotism and séances with the souls of the dead very quickly overcame the confines of Khalil Khan’s spiritist society. This may have been what Khalil Khan had hoped for when he began to popularize Spiritism in his essays and in his society’s meetings. But as séances propagated, adherence to the doctrine of reincarnation and spiritist teachings on the progression of souls became dispensable. It helped that other authors had also been writing on hypnotism, telepathy, communication with spirits, and other “spiritual sciences” (*olum-e ruhi*).<sup>95</sup> For example,

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<sup>95</sup> In addition to Persian publications, Iranians were familiar with Arabic texts on hypnotism and spirit communication, for example in the Egyptian magazines *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Muqtataf*.

Heshmatollah Dowlatshahi (1904-1980), who founded a religious movement that he called “The New Universal Unity” (*vahdat-e novin-e jahani*), incorporated hypnotism, telepathy, and communication with souls into his group’s spiritual practice, without accepting spiritist reincarnation (Modarresi Chahardehi 2010:271-273). Mohammad Anqa (1887-1962), a bureaucrat who founded the *Ovaysi* Sufi order, also dabbled in hypnotism and communicated with spirits following years of association with Khalil Khan’s spiritist society (Bos 2002:80-81; Modarresi Chahardehi 2010:315). And in what was perhaps the most mainstream of Sufi appropriations of hypnotism, Soltan-Hossein Tabandeh Gonabadi Reza-Alishah (1914-1992), the future pole (*qotb*) of the Ne‘matollahi Soltan-Alishahi order, wrote an essay in 1939 on “magnetic sleep” (hypnotism) to be appended to his great grandfather’s treatise on sleep and dreaming (Bidokhti Gonabadi 2006). In the essay, he suggested that Western research into hypnotism may have been informed by the works of Indian ascetics, Muslim mystics, and “spiritual occult science” (Tabandeh Gonabadi 2006:98). As with natural sleep, Tabandeh wrote, the “artificial sleep” induced by hypnotism proved the immateriality of the soul (*tajarrod-e ruh*) and the existence of a realm beyond the material.

As hypnotism and other European spiritual sciences were thought to have been modern scientific achievements, such proliferations extended the influence of science itself as an authority that could be invoked not only in the service of materialism, but in promoting religious ideas as well. There were two dimensions to this new form of scientific authority: First, the study of souls and other immaterial phenomena was partially brought under the purview of empirical investigation. Second, a whole new class of experts – that is, Western scientists – were added to the existing authorities (God, the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams, jurists, hadith scholars,



theologians, philosophers, and Sufi shaykhs) whose pronouncements on matters related to the unseen could be marshaled in formulating metaphysical arguments.

Let us begin with the matter of empiricism. The spiritists' chief advantage over their opponents was the claim that their science of souls was founded upon empirical observation, not on outmoded religious dogma. To counter their ideas, whether religious or scientific, the spiritists' adversaries also relied on empirical arguments. Ahmad Kasravi, for example, lumped "communication with the dead" together with other "superstitions" (*pendarha*) like fortune-telling, astrology, witchcraft, and belief in luck (1943:40-45. See also Fischer 2003:130-133). This particular superstition, he wrote, was new and had originated in Europe: "There was an era when priests boasted of speaking with gods. Then the time came for exorcists to speak to jinn and fairies. Now, in the era of the sciences, the worshippers of superstition have opened another door and converse with the spirits of the dead" (ibid:40). While Kasravi mostly formulated his arguments through appeals to his readers' commonsense to realize the absurdity of various spiritist claims, he also drew on his own dramatic experience at a séance to demonstrate that communication with the dead could not be anything but "baseless" (*bipa*). The séance occurred in Tehran at the house of Sa'd al-Dowleh, a friend. Kasravi noticed that a few guests were sitting around a turning table, each engrossed in their activity. Every so often, the tabletop would turn and some words would be exchanged. He asked what the guests were doing and heard that they were communicating with a spirit:

It was the first time I had encountered such a device. I had seen many articles about it in the Egyptian *Al-Hilal* and *Al-Muqtataf* monthlies, but had not read any of them. I only knew that many famous scientists supported it and wrote about it in their books, and so I did not have any negative thoughts about it and never suspected that it could be this baseless. (ibid:43)

As the men prepared for a new séance, Kasravi accepted their invitation to join. They sat around the table and rested their palms on top, concentrating. After a few moments the table began to turn: They were in the presence of a spirit. It turned out to be the ghost of a woman Kasravi had known, the mother of a friend who had died in a battle in the northwest several years earlier. Kasravi spoke to her, and then to the spirit of her son, whom she fetched. He asked question after question, and received responses. He was deeply moved by the exchange:

When we left the table, the veins in my body were trembling. It was as though I had been with that young man, in the same room, and was about to part from him. When I went home, I could not sleep until near dawn. I tossed and turned, struggling with different emotions and thoughts. Sometimes I would say: What a pity! All this time there has been such an easy path for companionship with the dead; why haven't I known about it and taken to it? Again I would think: I only asked questions to which I already knew the answers. I should have asked of things I did not know. I passed the night with such anxieties.

The next day he wrote to his brother in Tabriz to ask why he had not been informed of the death of his friend's mother. He heard back after a week that the old lady, in fact, was alive and well. Kasravi was shocked. He realized that his conversations with his dead friend and his ostensibly dead mother had all originated from within himself:

It was here that the curtain was raised from baseless superstitions and I understood the mechanism of that device. I went to Sa'd al-Dowleh's house two or three times afterward and performed more experiments. The result from all of them was that there is no spirit involved. All that happens comes from those sitting around the table. And I thank God that I discovered the truth so easily (ibid:44).

Kasravi concludes by asking how it could be possible for such an unfounded issue to receive so much support from "thousands of professors and scientists." "I realized," he writes, "how deceivable humankind is. I realized that the sciences by themselves cannot prevent the worship

of superstition, and that if some superstitions are eliminated, other superstitions can appear” (ibid).

Almost three decades later, Spiritism found a new and energetic advocate in Abol-Qasem Farzaneh, an essayist for the popular weekly *Ettela'at-e Haftegi*. Farzaneh wrote stories about communication with the souls of the dead, explicated the doctrine of reincarnation and the progression of souls, and instructed his readers on simple methods for holding séances. Soon thereafter, “summoning spirits” (*ehzar-e arvah*) had become a common household pastime. Critics called it an “epidemic” (*epidemi*) and a “fad” (*mod*). In January 1969, the religious monthly *Dars-hayi az Maktab-e Eslam* (Lessons from the School of Islam) decided to respond. Naser Makarem Shirazi, who was to become a prominent *marja'-e taqlid* in a few decades, wrote a series of critical essays over the span of a year, first arguing against the doctrine of reincarnation, and later examining the séance as a site of alleged communication with the souls of the dead. Contrary to Kasravi, Makarem did not reject the possibility of contact with spirits outright. Rather, he investigated the specific circumstances in which Iranian spiritists operated to show that they could not withstand scrutiny:

No one can deny the existence of the soul... because the philosophical, sensual and empirical reasons that have been provided for proving the existence of the soul are too numerous to be ignored. Moreover, given the ample evidence that exists, one cannot deny the possibility of contact with spirits through appropriate scientific means for those experienced individuals who have truly worked and struggled on this path. And as we shall see, the possibility of this issue can be ascertained from the words of the great leaders of Islam. But no logic or reason can accept a condition in which such an important matter is belittled to the point that anyone can construct a turning table for fun and entertainment and gather a bunch of men and women and young and old around it, one night to summon the soul of Ibn Sina and another night to bother al-Razi, and a third night to menace Einstein... and to make anything and everything into a topic of discussion – from the due date of Mrs. X to the truth or falsity of religions and sects and philosophical schools (Makarem Shirazi 1969a:70).

Even so, the magazine invited readers to submit evidence from “sense-data and observation” (*hes va moshahedeh*) to “practically demonstrate the possibility of contact [with spirits],” saying it would be open to publishing the results, no matter what, to complement the discussion (Makarem Shirazi 1969c:17).

Makarem conducted his empirical investigation in the city of Sabzevar in Khorasan province. “I had heard from friends in Mashhad,” he wrote, “that [Sabzevar] was one of the centers of ‘roundtables’ and ‘contact with spirits.’” The phenomenon had enjoyed a recent boom and had turned into a “fad,” providing a form of entertainment for some, and a means for others to reach “certainty about the existence of a world beyond the senses” (Makarem Shirazi 1969b:7). Makarem had decided to observe “the circumstances of these meetings” from up close, so that he would be able to build, with “more discernment [*basirat*]” (ibid:8), upon the arguments he had been developing on the topic for several months. “I confess,” Makarem added, “that participation in these meetings might not be appropriate for ordinary people, but for those who have a duty to conduct research or provide guidance to others, it sometimes gains an aspect of necessity” (ibid).

In the span of three short essays, Makarem provides a wonderfully detailed ethnographic description of a séance that he attended in Sabzevar, along with a more general discussion of the technology of the table, the procedures for establishing contact with spirits and interpreting their messages, the beliefs and opinions of different practitioners and participants about the process, and the social and historical context of the recent “fad” (1969b;1969c;1969d). The particular séance that Makarem attended was led by a young man, who also doubled as a medium. A private meeting of only a few men was convened at around 11 PM, which, he was told, was the ideal time for communicating with the spirit world. The young man used a small but relatively

heavy square-shaped table for contact, even though a round table was available in the house as well. He sat on a chair such that he had full control over the table, and placed both palms on the surface. He recited a *hamd va sureh*<sup>96</sup> and asked the participants to do the same, then stared at the table and asked the spirits, in a quiet but deliberate tone, to establish contact. After a few moments, the wooden planks in the table made a slight noise. The young medium again entreated the spirits to enter into communication with him: “please I ask you to establish stronger contact.” All of a sudden, the front side of the table rose about ten or twenty centimeters from the ground. Makarem notes that one of the participants thought the table had risen as a result of the medium’s manual pressure, “and it was indeed something to suspect!” but the idea was that the movement was caused by the spirits, not by manual force.

Having established contact, the medium asked the spirit to introduce itself. He recited the alphabet from the beginning, and whenever the table would rise, two participants would jot down the letter at which the movement had taken place. The table would then fall back to the ground, and the medium would start the alphabet from the beginning. “Soon it became apparent,” Makarem writes, “that the spirit who had established contact with us was ‘B-O-R-U-J-E-R-D-I,’ that is, the late Ayatollah [Hosayn] Borujerdi.”<sup>97</sup> He had a message in Arabic for the gathering, which the men recorded as follows: “qala ’llah ta’ala qulu la ilaha illa ’llah tuflihu” (God Almighty said: Say there is no god but God, [so that] you will succeed). But when the participants carefully examined the disjointed letters that they had connected to form the sentence, they realized first that there were several discrepancies (an extra letter here, a missing letter there). Second, there were spelling errors that were “improbable to have been committed

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<sup>96</sup> *Hamd va Sureh* is the first chapter of the Qur’an (Al-Fatiha) followed by another short chapter, usually Al-Ikhlās (surah 112). The combination is often recited silently as a prayer for the dead.

<sup>97</sup> Ayatollah Hosayn Tabataba’i Borujerdi (1875-1961) was director of the Qom *hawzah* for seventeen years and the only *marja’-e taqlid* of the Shi’a world for the last fifteen years of his life (Algar 1989).

by the late Ayatollah Borujerdi,” as he had been a master of Arabic literature. But if these were negligible issues, there was an even more important matter: the famous saying the spirit had quoted came from the Prophet Muhammad, not God: “This error by the soul of Ayatollah Borujerdi could not be ignored! And it gave us the right to doubt the veracity of the contact.”

At this point, Makarem was asked if he wanted to put any questions to the spirit of Ayatollah Borujerdi. He said he wanted to know what would become of the hawzah in Qom, since this was an issue that had worried many hawzah scholars at the time. The spirit gave a “general response, which we all knew.” Unsatisfied, Makarem asked the medium to request that the spirit provide a “sign” pertaining to the relationship between Ayatollah Borujerdi and his students (including Makarem) who lived in Qom during his lifetime. This needed to be a private sign, something of which others had not been aware. Alternatively, Makarem suggested that he could ask the spirit a question and request that he respond in Arabic. Or he could think of something and ask the spirit to read his mind, since the medium and others had claimed that spirits could read minds. At least one of these items would be required to convince Makarem that they had in fact been communicating with the spirit of his teacher. At this point, the contact broke off for “unknown reasons,” and the spirit left the gathering. The medium attempted to re-establish communication, but other spirits made themselves available in Ayatollah Borujerdi’s stead. Each offered some rather uninteresting statements. But Makarem wanted to speak only to Borujerdi and insisted on receiving his private sign. “The point in all of this was,” he writes, “that we should not accept something without examination. Reason would not allow us to yield with our eyes and ears closed, and God would not be satisfied either.” However, such a sign was not forthcoming. One spirit launched into a tirade against Makarem for his skepticism. Another said that he would make himself manifest, but then appeared only to the medium. Makarem

concludes that “the issue of the round and long tables” is more of a game than reality, and the messages that are communicated are the products of the medium’s unconscious rather than the intervention of any spirits (Makarem Shirazi 1969e).

So far we have seen how Spiritism’s claims to experimental validity not only introduced an aspect of modern scientific imagination into some forms of religious thinking, but also drew empirical observation into the field of religious polemic. Both Kasravi and Makarem were able to draw on their experiments with séances to condemn claims to a certain form of metaphysical truth. For Kasravi, the primary concern was to confront all forms of “superstition” that somehow asserted exceptions to the natural order of the universe as discovered by science and reason. It made no difference whether these exceptions appeared in the guise of fortune-telling, belief in jinn, or communication with the dead. Makarem on the other hand was worried about a condition of epistemological anarchy in which anyone with a talent for the “game” of table-turning could not only make claims about religion, philosophy, and the order of the universe, but attract a following as well. His concern was particularly acute in an era of uncertainty about the future of Shi‘i religious leadership and the role of the hawzah after the death of Ayatollah Borujerdi. It was only fitting that his one experience with a séance should turn into a showdown over who had the right to inherit the authority of – indeed speak for – the great marja‘: his qualified student, or a young provincial medium.

But if through the introduction of empiricism to metaphysics, spiritists could be said to have handed their strongest weapon over to their opponents, they also passed on something of more ambiguous consequence: The authority of Western scientific judgment. Kasravi and Makarem differed over the involvement of Western scientists in spirit communication, and more broadly about the possibility of contact with the dead. Kasravi’s conclusion had been that

science, by itself, could not prevent superstition. Even scientists could be duped. Makarem, on the other hand, was convinced that a distinction could be made between the superstitions of the Iranian table-turners and the scientific practice of Western spiritists. He seemed to be completely unaware of Khalil Khan Saqafi's Society of Experimental Spirit Science, who reproduced the very same scientific methods of European spiritists a few decades before his time.

For his views on the Western science of Spiritism, Makarem relies on the encyclopedia by Egyptian author Muhammad Farid Wajdi (1875-1954), *Da'irat ma'arif al-qarn al-rabi' 'ashar, al-'ishrin* (Encyclopedia of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century A.H., 20<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.). He writes:

In the fourth volume of his book, under the 'spirit' entry, [Wajdi] provides a table with the names of famous scientists who have attested to the reality of this science [of Spiritism]. In this table, he lists forty-seven of the great scientists of France, England, Italy, Germany, and America, including De Morgan (the director of the Mathematical Society of England), William Crookes the President of the British Royal Society for science, Russell Wallace the greatest English physiologist of his time and a close friend of Darwin, Farley the engineering director of telegraph companies [this is probably a misspelling of the name of physicist Michael Faraday]... Camille Flammarion the famous French astronomer and mathematician, Victor Hugo the famous French author and scientist, Lombroso one of the most famous scientists of criminology... Lord Balfour the famous English politician, and other prominent scientists, literary figures, and politicians of recent centuries (Makarem Shirazi 1969f).

The sheer weight of so many renowned men of science leads Makarem to accept without question the claim that the scientific spiritists went to extreme lengths to eliminate any possibility of fraud or intervention by the mediums in the spiritual phenomena they observed.<sup>98</sup> These scientists would "tightly bind the medium to a chair, and sometimes even confine him or her to an iron cage, lock the door of the room in which the experiment was taking place, and attach electric wires to the medium's hands to detect any movement, no matter how slight or

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<sup>98</sup> The last surviving scientist among these men, Camille Flammarion, had died in 1925, more than four decades before Makarem wrote his essays.



quick... in order to ascertain that these [extraordinary] actions were related to spirits, not the person of the medium” (ibid:11-12). He concludes that “one can accept that Spiritism... has passed the threshold of theoretical interest to become an empirical science based on sense-data,” but this scientific endeavor has been misappropriated by charlatans and the naïve who think that they can “establish contact with spirits great and small without any scientific information and merely using a turning table or a cup on a page full of letters” (Makarem Shirazi 1970:60).

### **Islam and Modern Science**

By placing his full trust in the testimony of Western scientific spiritists, Makarem conveniently ignores overwhelming opposition to Spiritism from the community of scientists, which would have been known in Iran long before his time (see for example Tabrizi 1912). But his failure to take stock of such opposition probably has less to do with willful neglect of dominant scientific opinion than an overenthusiastic confidence in the positive judgment of those Western scientists who happened to approve – on the strength of empirical observation – a staple of Shi‘i Islamic philosophy, theology, and mysticism – that is, the existence of an immaterial soul. But why should Makarem care for such approval in the first place? To understand his and other similar positions, we need to look back to the development of Islamic responses to the expansionism of scientific modernity since the nineteenth century.

Several moments can be identified in the relationship between Muslim thinkers in Iran and modern science, although my characterization will necessarily be schematic for the sake of brevity. As early a thinker as Jamal al-Din Asadabadi (al-Afghani) (1838-1897) promoted the idea that true Islam was identical to universal reason and favorable to modern science, and moreover, that the *ulama* needed to drop their opposition to the new sciences if the Muslim

world was to regain its past glory (Keddie 1968. See also Euben 2003). Although Asadabadi was born and raised in Iran, his views left a stronger mark on religious modernist thought in Egypt, India, and the Ottoman Empire than in Iran itself. Meanwhile, as Iranian secular modernists in the early twentieth century attacked the Shi‘i ulama as obstacles to progress and a hindrance to the spread of genuine, useful scientific knowledge, some among them argued that Islam itself, as an aspect of an authentic Iranian past, favored science. This was, as Cyrus Schayegh has shown, part of a strategy by the modern middle class to distinguish itself both from the Shi‘i clergy and the colonial West (2009:47-52). At the same time, some writers with religious concerns and connections to the ulama in Qom also adopted the position that Islam encouraged logical thinking and scientific discovery. From this early period, some of these thinkers attempted to find scientific justifications for Islamic ethical mores and legal injunctions, including for example those about purity, pollution, and so on.<sup>99</sup>

In spite of these preliminary efforts, religious modernism did not develop into a serious intellectual force in Iran before the 1940s. When it did finally emerge, much of its impetus came from a perceived threat from Communism and Baha’ism, which were thought to be corrupting the minds of Iranian youth (Chehabi 1990:30). Two broad strands might be identified within this current. First, from among the ranks of the Shi‘i ulama, there arose a strong philosophical concern with reassessing the role of reason within religious thought. The central figure was Allameh Seyyed Mohammad Hosayn Tabataba’i (1892-1981) and his circle of students, including Morteza Motahhari and Naser Makarem Shirazi (see Algar 2006; Millward 1973). To this day, Tabataba’i’s students continue to enjoy considerable influence over the philosophical climate of the hawzah in Qom. Although these thinkers employed, each in their own way, the

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<sup>99</sup> An example is Abul-Fazl Tahmasebi’s “Ostovar” newspaper published in Qom, and his monthly “Sho‘ar-e Eslam.”

findings of modern science in their works on theology (*kalam*), ethics (*akhlaq*), and Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsir*), they maintained their footing within an intellectual universe shaped by the hawzah system. This meant that they believed scientific evidence and empirical arguments should be kept on a short leash by a rigorous application of traditional philosophical, juristic, and exegetical thought. Perhaps most importantly, they were critical of the excesses of “scientific exegesis” (*tafsir-e ‘elmi*) of the Qur’an, even as they thought it legitimate to practice such exegesis in moderation.<sup>100</sup>

As a representative of this current writing in a popular monthly journal, Makarem employed the authority of modern science to bolster traditional Shi‘i views. Thus he would be able to invoke Western scientists in support of the possibility of communication with souls, while suggesting elsewhere that the marvelous order that science had discovered in nature proved the existence of God. He could praise the computer as a wondrous achievement of human innovation, only to argue that the human brain was far more complex and powerful than a computer, thus pointing to the creativity of a designer infinitely superior to humankind. Likewise, he could write in admiration of a computer’s ability to perform complex mathematical operations, but in the context of introducing the work of an Egyptian scientist who had used a computer to discover a miraculous mathematical order in the Qur’an.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> For Allameh Tabataba’i’s approach to scientific exegesis, see Hedayatzadeh (2001) and Lotfi (2009). For his views on the relationship between science and religion, see Bahrami (1997). For critical appraisals by Shi‘i Iranian authors of scientific exegeses of the Qur’an, including studies of “scientific miracles” in the holy text, see Aram (2006), Bahrami (1996), Hosseini (1996), Kazemi (2004), Ma’aref (2006), Maturi (1996), Parsa (1996), Reza’i Esfahani (2006; 2009), and Zakavati Qaragozlu (1993). For views from outside Iran treating analogous approaches primarily in the Sunni world, see Dallal (2011) and Guessoum (2008).

<sup>101</sup> The scientist was Rashad Khalifa, an Egyptian-American biochemist. Makarem wrote an essay summarizing his findings on a mathematical “code” in the Qur’an in 1973. Several years later, Khalifa claimed to be a Messenger of God (*rasul*) and a purifier of the Qur’an. He denounced two verses in the Qur’an as later human additions, because they disrupted his mathematical code. He was murdered in Tucson, Arizona in 1990. His followers call themselves the “United Submitters International.”

The second group took a more liberal approach to the relationship between science and religion. They were lay intellectuals with allies among the clergy who were concerned with reconciling Islam with modern science and liberal politics. The key figures within this movement were Mehdi Bazargan (1907-1995), a French-trained thermodynamics engineer and future Prime Minister, Mahmud Taleqani (1911-1979), a cleric, and Yadollah Sahabi (1905-2002), a geologist also trained in France. In 1961, they founded the Liberation Movement of Iran (*Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran*) which went on to become one of the central forces of the Islamic Revolution and formed the interim government, before falling from favor and becoming an opposition group. Both Bazargan and Sahabi were concerned with proving the compatibility of Islam with modern scientific precepts. They wrote in defense of evolutionary theory, arguing that support for evolution (even of humans) could be found in the Qur'an, and that God's purposeful design of the universe involved the creation of biological evolution as a process (Bazargan 1957; Sahabi 1967. See also Chehabi 1990:52). Sahabi argued on the basis of modern geological findings that Noah's great flood as described in the Qur'an (but, significantly, not the "exaggerated" and "irrational" stories recounted in the Torah and repeated by many Muslims) was scientifically plausible (Sahabi 1971). These men's intellectual orientations were shaped both by their training in modern science and engineering and their pious upbringing. On the other hand, they were writing primarily for a young urban audience that had received a modern technical education and was being courted by myriad political ideologies and philosophical systems, with materialism and Communism at the forefront. As they found themselves battling a powerful materialist current that was armed with logical and scientific arguments, they decided to harness science to fashion an alternative ideology. In the process, they created an appealing Islamic worldview shot through with a scientific imagination.

## Plausible Fictions

One of Bazargan's approaches was to use contemporary scientific knowledge to rethink classical Islamic teachings. Thermodynamics, the subject of his university training, furnished him with his favorite models.<sup>102</sup> The idea for a book on the topic came to him while he was incarcerated in a military prison in the Spring of 1955. "Thankfully," Bazargan wrote, "reading and writing was not forbidden. So my main preoccupation... was leafing through books. A few novels and books of legends, that is, love stories, and a few religious books including prayers and biographies and discussions of matters of belief, that is, books whose end is worship of the Eternal Essence... In addition, I had asked [my family] to bring me my industrial thermodynamics book from home, so that I could use the available opportunity to think through a topic about the similarity between [industrial thermodynamics] and chemical reactions" (1998:249). He called the resulting book "Love and Worship, or Human Thermodynamics" (*Eshq va Parastesh, ya Termodinamik-e Ensan*). It was, he admitted in good humor, "a difficult-to-digest confection" which, "good or bad," should be credited to those who were responsible for his idleness in captivity (ibid).

In his book, Bazargan brought the first and second laws of thermodynamics to bear on a full range of human phenomena: the individual life-cycle with its biological, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions; the dynamics of societies and economic structures; the development and functioning of moral systems; life after death; and worship of the divine. He believed that any system in which some kind of energy was produced and transformed could be analyzed through the laws of thermodynamics. "In life," he wrote, "there is heat, and there is activity. Therefore there are thermodynamics as well" (ibid:269):

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<sup>102</sup> See Lotfalian (2004:31-54) for an alternative discussion of Bazargan's deployment of thermodynamic models and their place within his peculiar "technoscientific identity."

This is not the first time that thermodynamics has intruded upon the terrain of other sciences so that, by sniffing that which exudes [from its objects], it would be able to figure out their workings, take the theorems and laws that they have deduced after years of experience and explained in complex and involved language, and return them as simple mathematical formulas that can be used for further inference. It has done this in thermoelectrics, in the melting and extraction of metals, in thermal radiation, and in chemical reactions. What should keep it from experimenting with biology, and even with human economic, moral, and religious activities? Thermodynamics is a young science. There is no blame upon the youth for entertaining wishes! [*arezu bar javanan eyb nist!*]

And so Bazargan produced mathematical equations and curves for various human systems and processes, treating them as so many thermodynamic systems and “Carnot heat engines,” defining in each case variables like heat, pressure, volume, energy, entropy, and so on. In footnotes, he supplemented his scientific analyses with Qur’anic verses and hadith from the prophet and imams. Like a good scientist, he saw his work as a form of modeling: it could very well be flawed, but should invite critique, fine-tuning, and improvement.

Bazargan was most self-conscious about his method when writing about the hereafter. Here he was treading completely speculative ground, writing of things that could not be empirically tested or verified. But there was still a scientific logic to his imaginative enterprise. He said that if one were to begin with the assumption that another world and another life existed after death, thermodynamics would help explain the processes and the conditions under which such life would come to be. This would only be “extremely approximate and incomplete, in the form of specters and speculation” (ibid:389). But perhaps more importantly, such a model would help us judge the signs provided to us by the prophets:

This [method] is a means by which we can judge the acceptability of those signs that the prophets have given us about the other world, assuming they will occur. If the collection of reports that have been given about resurrection and heaven and hell turn out to be reasonable and coherent, and if contemporary science also to some extent bears witness to its logicity, it will become apparent that the basis [of these reports] has not been

delusive and imaginary. The issue of the hereafter is so far from fantasy and reason and so inaccessible to humankind that, should someone tell a story about it, it will inevitably have to be either one hundred percent meaningless and irrelevant, or, if there is some evidence for some parts of it, it should be taken seriously as a whole (ibid:389fn4).

Thus, thermodynamics cannot prove the existence of the hereafter, but it can help us judge whether a hereafter is scientifically plausible; and if so, whether its attributes – as determined by thermodynamics – match those descriptions that have been handed down to us by the prophets. It is clear where Bazargan himself stood on this issue: He wrote his book partially as a refutation of materialism after all. But he saw his effort as an imaginative exercise, albeit one fortified by the rigors of science: He wanted to “fly in a hypothetical world on the wings of scientific imagination” (ibid:393).

Like many other Islamic appropriations of modern science, Bazargan’s construction of plausible fictions about the hereafter was a fundamentally defensive project. It was because a traditional Islamic cosmology had been attacked as illogical and superstitious that a scientific model of that cosmology needed to be attempted in the first place. If some science fiction literature makes it possible for us to imagine space-times radically different from our own by building and populating compelling, internally coherent technological worlds, Bazargan’s plausible fictions likewise rendered the eternal hereafter *thinkable* for an audience that had an easier time conceptualizing thermodynamic laws than the order of angels and jinn.

## **Conclusion**

In the three decades following the Islamic Revolution, intellectual concerns with the relationship between science and religion have evolved in several directions. Among the students of Allameh

Tabataba'i and a new generation of scholars that they in turn have trained, there is a growing current concerned with identifying and critiquing the metaphysical foundations of modern science, and attempting to formulate an Islamic philosophical system that could undergird a new Islamic science. On the other hand, the liberal experiments of Bazargan and his colleagues have given way to a more radical rethinking of revelation as "prophetic experience" that, although divine in origin, receives a definite shape in a particular cultural and linguistic milieu and is even molded by the prophet's individual psychology (the key thinkers here are Abdol-Karim Soroush and Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari).

However, if one were to peer outside the confines of professional philosophical circles and publications, one would find that perspectives that were born at the beginning of the twentieth century and developed through the ensuing seven decades have lost little traction among the middle class. The large-scale translation of books of popular psychology and alternative spirituality that I described in the previous chapter has only magnified older trends and cast them into updated forms. Thus, few people today have heard of Bazargan's "Human Thermodynamics," but best-selling self-help and New Age titles that draw on quantum physics abound: "The Secret," "The Quantum Thoughts of Molana [Rumi]," and "The Holographic Universe" are three examples already discussed in previous chapters. On the other hand, while Spiritism still maintains small and scattered pockets of followers, numerous other religious movements have in different ways taken up its banner of a scientific metaphysics. And as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, ostensibly empirical understandings of the immaterial world are still persuasive enough to garner a high-school student a prestigious scientific honor.

I have argued that such perspectives reflect the dominance of a scientific imaginary among a middle class educated in the modern sciences and comfortable with its epistemological



assumptions. For such individuals, a scientific understanding of the immaterial world is one that privileges empirical truths, places trust in perspectives to which Western scientists have attached their names, or constructs metaphysical systems made plausible through the deployment of contemporary scientific models and terminology (if not necessarily the claim that such models are accurate). In the next chapter, I will explore another aspect of this scientific imaginary, in terms of a techno-scientific objectivity sought by individuals unsure of the inner moral truth of their own beings.

## Chapter 5 - Proof of the Eye

قل هل يستوى الأعمى والبصير أفلا تتفكرون

Say: "can the blind be held equal to the seeing?"  
Will ye then consider not?

The Qur'an, 6:50

اللهم أرني الأشياء كما هي

Oh God, show me things as they are.

Prayer attributed to Prophet Muhammad

May 26, 2009. I arrived at around 7 PM at *Park-e Goftegoo* ("Dialogue" or "Conversation" Park), a fourteen-hectare wedge of green resting lazily between, on one side, the eastern slopes of Tehran's bustling *Gisha* neighborhood, and on the other, Tehran University's northern campus and the Atomic Energy Organization. *Chamran* highway slices a severe strip across the eastern border of the park, and the arrogant *Borj-e Milad* ("Birthday" Tower) looms not too far to the northeast. The park always reminds me of Mohammad Khatami, who was still president when it was founded in 2003: It is as though city planners were paying him tribute by designing a miniature utopia of Islamic modernity – Not just through naming ("Dialogue" is no doubt meant to evoke "Civilizations"<sup>103</sup>); but by self-consciously erecting and juxtaposing as many elements of the Islamic, the Iranian, and the modern as possible: Mosque, library, conference center, water fountains, playground, mechanical exercise machines, roller-skating rink, and at least three garden designs: "Iranian," "British," and "Italian."

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<sup>103</sup> In 1998, the United Nations took up a proposal by Khatami to proclaim the year 2001 as the year of "Dialogue among Civilizations" (*goftegoo-ye tamaddon-ha*).

Before long, I found the group I was there to meet, huddled together near the entrance to the Italian garden. Only three days earlier, Salman Reza'i, a 26-year-old industrial engineer and founder of the online discussion forum *Asrar* (“secrets”) – a website dedicated to Shi‘a mysticism and the occult sciences – had emailed the more than two thousand registered members of his community<sup>104</sup> to announce a face-to-face gathering. When I arrived at our rendezvous point, Salman was there with three other young men and two women: I already knew Behnam, the cheerful owner of a struggling internet café whose son Ali had been born only the previous month. I had also met Amin “Nazem” (the “Moderator”) during another face-to-face gathering of the online forum several months earlier. He was a chubby 23-year-old seminary student with a passion for the occult and a penchant for picking reckless fights online. Hamidreza was new: He was a clean-shaven 25-year-old college-graduate who designed advertisements for the Cultural Heritage Organization. He told me that he had joined the website a few weeks earlier and had only been reading others’ posts, without contributing entries of his own. Among the two women, both of whom wore black chadors, the elder was a middle-aged seminary student in Qom. I did not get a chance to speak to the younger.

The majority of our meeting time was spent away with idle, aimless, conversation. Amin the Moderator told us with gleeful panache of the way a rival metaphysics discussion forum – the less overtly Islamic *Haleh* (“aura”) – had been shut down, presumably under government pressure. Behnam joked that *Asrar* could be doomed to the same fate if someone would just post a recent interview between opposition presidential candidate Mehdi Karrubi and the underground rap sensation Sasy Mankan. Hamidreza quietly inquired about my research and asked if I had

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<sup>104</sup> As of October 18 2010, the website had 2,296 members. It consisted of an active core of more than 160 users (who have contributed at least ten posts each over the past five years, with the most active members having posted hundreds or thousands of entries). The remaining registered users are either silent readers of others’ contributions, or they are inactive. Unregistered users can also browse the content but cannot post their own.

met anyone with authentic occult powers (I told him I had met many people who claimed to possess occult power but I was skeptical about whether any were authentic, and anyway my goal wasn't to find out).

Then, a new member joined our group and the mood took an immediate turn for the serious. Mr. Makeri, a tall, forty-something-year-old businessman with a thin moustache and a wry smile, told us that he had been a member of *Asrar* for about two years. For this entire time, he had been searching for the answer to one question, and this was why he had joined us this evening, leaving his wife and children to relax and play in a separate corner of the park. He was hoping that Salman, *Asrar*'s founder, who had never returned any of his emails, may be persuaded to provide a satisfying response in person. He added, moreover, that his question was one that he shared with a circle of around one hundred friends and acquaintances. They had taken their problem to every Shi'a mystic (*'aref*) and philosopher (*filsof*) they could find, including Ayatollah Hassanzadeh Amoli, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, and the great Ayatollah Bahjat who had died only nine days earlier. None had provided a solution.

The question was this: "Is there an instrument (*abzar*) that one can employ to determine whether one is a good servant of God? Is it possible, in the same way that one checks a car's oil by inspecting a dipstick (*gayj* from English "gauge"), for a believing Shi'a Muslim to assess his status before God?" He continued: "There are various hadith that indicate that Satan is stronger than mankind, because he was at one point very close to God due to his many years of worship. Satan is able to cast a beautiful appearance over the errant paths that lead to him, so that we might believe we are on the path of serving God (*rah-e bandegi*) [when we are actually serving Satan]."

I was taken aback by this question, and Salman and the others appeared to be perplexed as well. We offered a few standard off-the-cuff responses. Amin rejected the notion that Satan is stronger than man<sup>105</sup> (“How can man be the noblest of God’s creation then?”). Salman said that he had seen a hadith from Imam Sadegh, which he had posted that same day on Asrar, saying that the criteria for being good servants of God were neither the performance of prayer, fasting, nor even good deeds. They consisted simply of two things: Good speech (*hosn ol-hadis*), and trustworthiness (*hosn ol-amanat*). But Mr. Makeri was unimpressed. “You have misunderstood my question,” he said. “I want to know if there is some tool, like a dipstick, with which one can self-determine the status of one’s servant-hood with God, in the same way that a dipstick can tell you whether the car is healthy by checking its oil. It can’t be an instrument that someone else reads or examines either. Because if the diagnosis is made by someone else, it will be polluted by that person’s thoughts. Can I pull out such a dipstick from my thoughts and, with the power of discernment (*tashkhis*) that God has given me thus far, determine if I’ve been a good servant or not?”

I offered that the instrument Mr. Makeri was looking for might be our conscience (*vojdān*): “Doesn’t Imam Ali say,” I asked, “that every night, before going to bed, we should call ourselves to account, to consider the things we have said or done during the day, and ask whether they were right or wrong? Isn’t our conscience the tool you are looking for? It is true that we might find self-serving justifications or excuses for incorrect actions; our conscience might itself become muddied. But in the same way, any dipstick might be tainted.” But Mr. Makeri gently waved this solution away, suggesting that it was too simple. “I’ve been asking about for a solution to this problem for two years,” he said. “As I mentioned, my friends and I have asked

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<sup>105</sup> In Persian, the word for “human” is *ensan*. This term is not overtly male in the same way as the English “man,” and is regularly used to refer to both male and female members of the human race, as well as the race in its entirety.

Ayatollah Bahjat, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, and other distinguished persons. None of them gave us a satisfying response. I don't want to say that this question has no answer. I am sure that Ayatollah Bahjat, Ayatollah Hassanzadeh, and Ayatollah Javadi Amoli know. Maybe when they looked at me, the questioner, they didn't see in my face the capacity to own such a gauge, or to properly employ it. Isn't it true that they have divine sight? (*chashm-e ladonni*) When we repeatedly pleaded with Ayatollah Hassanzadeh, kissed his hands, and pressured some of his students to seek an answer, he wrote us a one-line response saying that 'The discernment of this path is only possible after at least fifty years of worship.'"

Finally, in a wistful tone, Mr. Makeri said "I insist that there is a solution to this. Maybe we will reach a point when we'll know that if we recite, say, the *Hashr* chapter of the Qur'an along with a certain supplication – let's say the *'Adileh* prayer – or if we repeat the *Tawhid* chapter of the Qur'an five hundred times, that in one moment, we will attain a point where we can evaluate all of our actions up to that instant – in my case a life of forty-some years."

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Mr. Makeri's stubborn search for an infallible gauge of his status in the eyes of God calls to mind Max Weber's discussion of Calvinists' anxieties for discovering whether or not they were favored with God's grace (Weber 1992:65-66). In Weber's account, a psychological need for this knowledge was effected among the ordinary masses by the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, the absolute elimination of all means to salvation (ibid:61), and the mystery of God's list of His elect. For Mr. Makeri, however, the problem was neither predestination, nor the impossibility of salvation, nor even the opacity of divine judgment. Instead, the difficulty lay with the unreliability of any subjective human meter of self-worth. If the very powers of discernment in

reason (*'aql*) (Boer and Rahman 2010) and the “blaming self” (*al-nafs al-lawwama*) of conscience (Homerin 2010) are at Satan’s mercy to pollute or twist into any shape or form, how can one ever tell whether one is traveling on the straight path of salvation?

Weber’s Calvinists knew, as a matter of doctrine, that they could never know whether they were among the elect. To minimize the inevitable suffering that ensued, they were advised to engage in arduous “worldly activity” and to ignore, as “temptations of the devil,” all doubts about being chosen (1992:66-67). Mr. Makeri, on the other hand, was convinced that a technical solution existed to the problem of the fallibility of human discernment. This was a solution, he thought, that leading mystics like Ayatollah Bahjat already possessed but kept secret. A time would come, perhaps, when ordinary Muslims like Mr. Makeri would also discover this instrument, which, like a password on an encrypted computer file, would reveal the hidden divine assessment of the individual for his full perusal and understanding.<sup>106</sup> Finally, Mr. Makeri saw no paradox in the fact that ultimately, even an external, objective, technically-accessed assessment would have to be read by the individual himself, with his tainted powers of discernment. Whatever faculty of judgment God had bestowed upon the individual up to the moment of his opening his file would have to suffice in mediating his understanding of the objective report of his own state of affairs.

At first glance, Mr. Makeri’s question might be seen as an attempt toward refining a kind of pious reflexivity. It would fit within a paradigm in the anthropology of Islam that takes pious self-formation as its object, examining the deliberate cultivation of ethical sensibilities and dispositions seen to be necessary to living virtuous lives (Deeb 2006; Hirschkind 2006;

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<sup>106</sup> That this solution would take a form analogous to a password was clear in Mr. Makeri’s suggestion that it may consist of some felicitous combination of Qur’anic verses and prayers, to be recited an exact number of times.

Mahmood 2005). This attention to the ethical life has taken the concept of “tradition” as a central concern. Inspired by the influential work of Talal Asad (who himself draws on Alasdair MacIntyre), these studies view Islam as a “discursive tradition” concerned with establishing correct performances of authorized practices. A key element of traditions thus conceived is their concern with *coherence*. To quote Asad, “Although Islamic traditions are not homogeneous, they aspire to coherence, in the way that all discursive traditions do. That they do not always attain it is due as much to the constraints of political and economic conditions in which the traditions are placed, as to their inherent limitations” (1986:16-17). For Asad, the anthropology of Islam should concern itself with uncovering the “historical conditions” enabling particular discursive traditions to be produced, maintained, and transformed, and examining the ways in which practitioners attempt to “achieve coherence.”

The program that Asad has charted for the study of Islam has proved immensely fruitful, inspiring some of the most insightful and innovative research in anthropology in the past two decades. But it also has its limitations. The emphasis on coherence, for instance, has been critiqued by some scholars who point out that ethical practice is often marked by fragmentation and contradiction. Anand Pandian for example, has written of a “fragmented tradition of moral virtue” in South India, which, although lacking coherence, serves effectively in orienting everyday ethical life (Pandian 2008). I want to extend this critique in this chapter by arguing that processes of ethical self-formation should be studied with an eye toward the possibility that unpredictable and contradictory orientations and practices will emerge through the very attempts at producing coherent traditions and putting them into circulation. One way to do this would be to attend to problems of doubt and uncertainty within religious practice, but also indeterminacies within the broader currents of social and cultural life as they impinge upon the concerns and



anxieties of the pious. The point is not to discard the concept of “tradition,” but rather to make the notion hospitable to indeterminacy and contradiction.

In examining practices of ethical self-formation that appear at odds with the discursive traditions that have enabled them, I have found it helpful to draw on recent anthropological formulations of the *imagination* as a space of indeterminacy in social and cultural life. By attending to the conditions in which indeterminate outcomes emerge, and the *technologies* that enable imaginative effects, I want to focus on the lacunae in the dissemination and reproduction of tradition: Those inchoate spaces carved out by pious practices that are incongruous without necessarily being heretical, and are full of hesitation and uncertainty without bearing the mark of unbelief.

In the course of my research, I encountered other people – including on Asrar – with a pious interest in some means by which to discover the truth of their own inner being. Where did this interest – in some cases an anxiety – come from? Why would anyone think it possible to know exactly what was inside their soul? And why should this imagined possibility take the form of a technical, or even technological, fantasy? The explanation, I suggest, lies partially in the imaginative effects (Sneath et al. 2009) occasioned by the mass production and circulation of hagiographies of Shi‘a mystics in the past eighteen years. Among the various marvels (*karamat*) of mystics that have, through these circulations, become popular among a largely young pious public, the extrasensory mystical vision known as *chashm-e basirat* (eye of insight) or *chashm-e barzakhi* (isthmus eye) has pride of place. Regarded as a miraculous ability to *see things as they truly are*, this eye gives mystics the power to perceive people in their true form, which often means seeing hideous animals that represent their most salient sins – liars might appear as monkeys for example. In the imaginations of some people, the eye of insight has become a

detachable object or an explicitly definable and isolable power that can be known, desired, and obtained through purposive struggle. Ethical practices among these men are often indebted to the discursive traditions of Islam, particularly as embodied in the hagiographies, even while they run afoul of some of their terms. In particular, I focus on the ways in which these ethical practices are *refigured* by anxieties about the sincerity of others' visible piety, and uncertainties over the lines that distinguish moral virtue from wickedness. These uncertainties, I argue, fuel a longing for assurance untainted by ordinary human intervention and mischief. In some imaginative formulations, such desires find their object in a fusion of the transcendental truth of divine knowledge with the mechanical objectivity of science – the eye of God as an oil gauge for example. The extraordinary vision of the mystic turns into an instrument to be acquired, both to ensure a reliable diagnosis of the sinful self, and to facilitate virtuous self-cultivation. In its mass circulating incarnation through hagiographic texts and other media, the appearance-penetrating gaze of the mystic aids imaginings of society as a collection of human-looking animals (with the rare genuine human among them) whose inner truths are available for discovery by superior technical-spiritual means. Furthermore, as a tool of spiritual assessment and pedagogy between a mystic master and his pupils (*ostad va shagerd*), the eye has become available to some pious imaginations as an instrument to internalize in order to gaze upon oneself and see one's true form, therefore providing positive knowledge with which to reform the self.

The desire for extrasensory insight into the truth of the soul cannot be separated from the regimes of technological visibility and objectivity within which ordinary urban Iranians dwell. On the one hand, internal truths about individuals' physiological or psychological conditions are available through tests that run the gamut from cheap, amateur self-evaluations to expensive, high-technology imaging systems operated and interpreted by medical experts (brain scans, x-

rays, and so on) (c.f. Dumit 2004. See also Fischer 2009). On the other hand, the illumination of such truths often depends on the ability to give visual form to that which is invisible to the ordinary eye.<sup>107</sup> For those people who are persuaded – by philosophical arguments, narrative hagiographies, television serials, Hollywood movies and so on – that an extrasensory power of sight exists and that some people possess it, it is not too much of a leap to imagine this sight in techno-visual terms, and its manner of acquisition as a matter of technical process and mastery.

### **The New Mystics and their Hagiographies**

To properly appreciate the pursuit of mystical vision among some of my interlocutors, we need to understand the recent proliferation of mystics' hagiographies in Iran. Hagiographies have a long and venerable tradition within Islam (Renard 2008), but they also have a very particular history in contemporary Iran that is directly related to specific social and political processes in the past three decades. For Iranians, the most widely available hagiographies are those detailing the lives, sayings, and deeds of Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and the eleven Imams from their progeny. Then there are the stories of famous Sufi masters of old: Hallaj, Bayazid Bistami, Rumi, Hafez, and so on. Some are included in hagiographic compilations that are known and loved not just for their accounts of saintly lives, but for their literary genius. Such is Farid al-Din 'Attar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* (Remembrance of God's Friends) from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century C.E., some of whose stories are still enacted in theatrical plays and included in school textbooks. Much less common (though not entirely absent) are hagiographies of contemporary Sufi Shaykhs; that is, figures associated with the

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<sup>107</sup> For studies of the relationship between occult vision and the development of technologies for visualizing the invisible see Henderson (1988) and Nadis (2005).

important Iranian Sufi orders (*tariqat*) – the Ne‘matollahis, the Dhahabis, the Qaderis, the Naqshbandis, and so on. The scarcity of such hagiographies is a partial index of the embattled condition of Sufi orders as minority communities frequently accused of heresy or deviance, particularly after the Islamic Revolution which reinvigorated (although not always consistently or systematically) a long history of persecution against Sufis (Bos 2002; Lewisohn 1999).<sup>108</sup>

Shortly after the 1979 Revolution and especially during the 1980-88 war with Iraq, hagiographical fragments emerged in printed memoirs, testaments, biographies, and commemorative collections dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution and war. As part of a state-promoted mystical discourse (Bos 2002:134-163),<sup>109</sup> these texts aided the production of exemplars on the model of the “Friends of God” of old, but in the mould of modern, pious, revolutionary activism. Ayatollah Khomeini himself joined the ranks of venerated mystics shortly after his death, even gaining the sobriquet *Imam al-‘Arefin* (Imam of the mystics). This was hastened by the discovery and publication of a range of philosophical-mystical treatises and mystical poetry that he had composed at various points during his lifetime (Knysh 1992. See also Fischer 1983; Fischer and Abedi 1990:451-54; and Mottahedeh 2000, especially pp. 183-87 and 242-43). With the end of the war, the hagiographic fragments gradually coalesced into full-fledged book-length hagiographies of Khomeini and many of the martyr-commanders of the war.

Beginning in the early 1990s, a new series of hagiographies entered into public circulation, and, within a few years, they were dominating the genre. These books focused on

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<sup>108</sup> Bos and Lewisohn detail both Shi‘a “traditionalist” (and “fundamentalist”) and secular “modernist” attacks on Sufism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran. For the views of Ahmad Kasravi, one of Iranian secular nationalism’s most ardent enemies of Sufism, see Ridgeon (2006).

<sup>109</sup> Bos incorrectly places the beginnings of “state mysticism” after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s death in 1989. Although there is a marked increase in state mystical discourse in the 1990s, all of its ingredients existed long beforehand. See for example Seyed-Gohrab (2011) and Varzi (2006:76-105).

previously little-known Shi‘a mystics of the twentieth century; jurists, preachers, philosophers, and laymen who were known as mystic masters only to limited circles of students and devotees.<sup>110</sup> With rare exceptions, their lives were a far cry from the revolutionary leaders and martyrs of the previous two decades. They largely led obscure lives of asceticism, spiritual teaching, and (sometimes) scholarship, away from the hubbub of politics, revolution, and war. They became exemplars not as socially and politically engaged revolutionaries and fighters, but as ordinary men, humble and pious, who had gained mastery over their selves through arduous spiritual exercise.<sup>111</sup>

What explains the rise of these new hagiographies? A strong hint can be found in the words of some of the authors of the texts themselves. One is Mohammad Reyshahri, the first intelligence minister in the Islamic Republic who published a book in 1997 (substantially revised in 1999) about Shaykh Rajab Ali Khayyat, a humble tailor and a purported giant of mysticism. As he explained in the preface to his book and in a subsequent interview (Parvinzad 2004), he had wanted to introduce the tailor to Iranian society as a “superior example.” “The youth,” he said, “are in dire need of the tailor’s words”; words that can be used to spread profound secrets about spiritual wayfaring and self-construction (Parvinzad 2004:8). In his preface to the revised edition of the hagiography, he writes that the book is not meant as mere “commemoration” or “prescription,” but actual “medicine for the heart” which works as an “impetus for self-improvement, guiding the spiritual seeker toward the station of the righteous and the truth-seeker

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<sup>110</sup> I know of one woman who is revered alongside what is otherwise an entirely male assembly. Sayyedah Nosrat Beygom Amin (1891-1983) was a famous jurist, hadith scholar, and mojtahed.

<sup>111</sup> Although I do not have the space to develop this point at any length in this chapter, most of the mystics revered in contemporary Iran (with notable exceptions like Khomeini) seem to share the post-Enlightenment, Protestant features emphasized by earlier comparative studies of mysticism in the West that, in the words of Omid Safi, “relegate it to a privatized realm [of] ... ‘mystical experience’” at the expense of the mystics’ social and institutional roles (Safi 2000).

by means of the Holy Qur‘an and traditions of the infallible Imams.”<sup>112</sup> The book was meant, in other words, as what Michel Foucault would call a “technology of the self” (1988), a means by which readers could work on themselves to transform their beings according to an idealized model.<sup>113</sup>

Other authors have expressed similar objectives for their work. For example, there is the private cultural institute “Shams al-Shomus,” an organization founded in 2000 by a group of male university students in Tehran and devoted to propagating information about the lives and spiritual states of contemporary and near-contemporary Shi‘a mystics.<sup>114</sup> The institute has published about a dozen books and several DVDs thus far, and has hosted annual and biannual seminars in Tehran to celebrate mystics’ lives since 2002, with thousands of people attending each time. On its official website, the group states its objectives in bullet point:

- Familiarizing society, especially the youth, with the beauties of religious spirituality
- Introducing contemporary spiritual models
- Explicating authentic spiritual values against inauthentic values<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> From the online English translation of the book at <<http://www.al-islam.org/elixiroflove/1.htm>>, with slight modification.

<sup>113</sup> Reyshahri’s book – though explicitly supported by state bodies like the Culture Ministry and National Radio and Television (IRIB) – has received some criticism. One author, for example, devoted an entire book to attacking his hagiography as promoting a fraud. The book is titled “Manufacturing Mystics, Burning Knowledge: A Critique of the Claims of Rajab Ali Khayat” (Kiyani 2008).

<sup>114</sup> In my interviews with some of Shams al-Shomus’ members, I learned that they are engaged in a delicate balancing act to strike an independent path while avoiding the threat of government censorship. The state should presumably be interested in supporting their vision (indeed, they do receive government support; for example, most of their seminars take place in the state-of-the-art conference center at the Interior Ministry, and the institute sometimes collaborates with state bodies for cultural projects), but on the other hand, the institute’s founders are aware that not all Shi‘a mystics were on the best of terms with the Islamic Republic or its leaders, and so they feel the need to self-censor or to tone down their praise of the more controversial mystics in order to be able to continue to operate freely.

<sup>115</sup> *Selsele hamayesh-ha-ye ba aflakiyan-e khakneshin* [The seminar series “With the Earth-dwelling Celestial Beings”] [http://www.shsh.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=9&Itemid=14](http://www.shsh.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=9&Itemid=14)

- [Added later] Introducing some of the prevalent pathologies (asib) and explaining solutions and ways to avoid them

Elsewhere, the founders of the institute note that they had initially come together to aid families of material need in their neighborhoods, but soon realized that “solely distributing bread will not cure society’s pains. We are afflicted by cultural poverty [*faqr-e farhangi*], in addition to material poverty.” They then defined their mission as follows:

- Familiarizing human beings with their God, and reconciling them with religion, by:
- Propagating religion through a new language
  - Explicating the Islamic model of life; the good life [*hayat-e tayyebah*]
  - Attempting to make society more ethical (reducing any kind of darkness and corruption)<sup>116</sup>

Behind these statements of intent, there lies a palpable sense that religious and spiritual models that had been propagated prior to those of the mystics, particularly those that emphasized radical political activism, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom, are unsuited to a post-war context marked by growing institutional stability and opportunities for accumulation of wealth. This sense, sometimes an anxiety, has existed at least since the end of the war with Iraq, with religious authorities expressing growing concern about what they call “flight from religion,” and “spiritual deviance,” particularly among the youth. A cursory glance at Iranian publications over the past two decades reveals a plethora of material debating the existence and sociological, moral, and political roots of youthful straying from Shi‘i orthodoxy, analyzing the implications of the phenomenon, and recommending solutions.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> *Darbare-ye ma* [About us] [http://www.shsh.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=2](http://www.shsh.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=2)

<sup>117</sup> See for example Bahrami (2004), Editorial (2001), Isfahani (2003), Rabbani Khorasgani & Qasemi (2002), Shoja‘i Zand et al (2006).

In the course of my research, I spoke to many young men who were avid readers of mystics' hagiographies. Some of them participated in online discussion forums like Asrar to share stories they had read, or to seek further details about the mystics' lives and deeds. They usually looked to these men as moral exemplars, in much the same way as the authors of their hagiographies intended. But among my interlocutors, there was little sign of a weakening of religious passion in the way the notion of "flight from religion" might imply. These were for the most part pious, God-fearing individuals who were concerned about living their lives the way God had commanded. Instead of a diminishing commitment toward religion, what I heard most often in their narratives about their religiosity was an anxiety about the murkiness of moral standards, the blurring of boundaries between right and wrong, the spread of hypocrisy, and the difficulty in distinguishing true "friends of God" from charlatans and impostors. When Mr. Makeri spoke of the unreliability of individual conscience, its susceptibility to satanic insinuation, he was giving voice to this very concern.

This sense of the ambiguity of morals and the difficulty of distinguishing the virtuous from the wicked is one that I found to be widespread. It was a complaint that I heard expressed repeatedly in taxicab conversations, in gatherings of friends around the dinner table, and among participants in online discussion forums. Recently, the theme has found its way into multiple television serials and movies. Amir, a friend I referred to in the introduction, captured the feeling in very simple terms when he asked me rhetorically: "How can you distinguish a good person from a bad person these days? Everything is mixed up. Hypocrisy has really filled every space. In the old days, it wasn't like that. If someone was good, they were good, and if someone was bad, they were bad. The boundaries were very clear." On the one hand, this is an uncertainty that plagues everyday decision-making among the pious: Decisions about how to conduct themselves



in their relationships with others, how to engage in business, how to regulate their desires and passions, and so on. On the other hand, it reflects a pervasive distrust of external signs of piety: A frustrating inability to judge moral character on the basis of appearances and observable behavior.

As far as everyday decision-making is concerned, some people resolve their uncertainties by seeking *fatwas* (religious opinions) from jurists. But for many others, the moral legitimacy of the fatwa-givers has itself become a matter of uncertainty. In part, this has to do with disillusionment with politicized Islam, of which the jurist is the representative par excellence. But it also has to do with a perceived disjuncture between the demands and values of a post-war liberalizing economy marked by competition and wealth accumulation, and ethical sensibilities that remain rooted in the social structure of the traditional marketplace. The issue is compounded by the particular relationship that has been established since the Islamic Revolution between Islamic law and state-legitimated practices, and the contradictions that arise from attempts to provide Islamic sanction to apparently un-Islamic behavior. Usury, for example, is a matter of universal prohibition. And yet state banks engage in high-interest lending. While some jurists condemn the practice as forbidden, others make allowance for it in the service of expedience (*maslahat*), or protecting the interests of the Islamic state. Still others engage in jurisprudential acrobatics of various sorts to find justification for lending with interest within the Islamic legal tradition. For the ordinary Muslim individual, this provides a confusing array of options when facing an everyday decision like whether or not to invest in a particular bank, or whether or not to engage the services of a money-lender outside of the institutional structure of the state. The boundary between legitimate practice and religious sleight-of-hand (or what is known as *kolah-e shar'i*) begins to evaporate.

While some pious Iranians find it increasingly challenging to live their lives ethically, there is also a common complaint that trustworthy people are hard to come by, and that visible signs of piety can mislead rather than indicating inner virtue and integrity. Hypocrites, charlatans, and crooks, one is told, often adopt the markers of piety in order to deceive others and get ahead. This sense of social mistrust is by no means new. Much of the Western scholarship on Iranian society in the 1960s and 70s underscored uncertainty, insecurity, and mistrust as prevailing aspects of social life and interpersonal relations (Baldwin 1967:16; Binder 1962:258; Westwood 1965; Zonis 1971; and others cited in Beeman 1986:22,32). William Beeman long ago criticized the tendency in this scholarship to psychologize mistrust and uncertainty, instead arguing for an overarching Iranian pattern of communicative pragmatics in which “obscurity and multiple meaning are highly valued” (ibid:33).

Within this structure of interpersonal relations, Beeman argued, the most successful individuals are “clever dissimulators” (*zerang*) who are able to “[thwart] direct interpretation of [their] own actions or deliberately [lead] others to erroneous interpretation of those actions while being able to successfully interpret the actions of others” (ibid:27). What Western analysts called mistrust, he argued, should be understood as “an index of relative communicative maladroitness;” that is, those individuals that social scientists have read as mistrustful are the ones who are least capable of interpreting the behavior of others in a satisfactory fashion (ibid:32).

Socially adroit and maladroit individuals have always existed. Certainly, in this respect at least, not much has changed in Iran from the 1960s through the time of Beeman’s fieldwork in the 70s and into the present. But one significant change that has occurred since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 is that pious appearances and conduct are now positively valued from the

perspective of the state; so that adroit individuals need to adapt to these codes in certain contexts of interaction in order to succeed. Moreover, preexisting modes of communal regulation and surveillance, based on face-to-face relationships and cooperative hierarchies, are in decline, increasingly giving way to impersonal, coercive mechanisms centered in state institutions.<sup>118</sup> The Islamic Republic has standardized and bureaucratized pious signs, even as it has attempted to inculcate authentic Islamic subjectivities among the populace. Modest dress for men and women, beards and long-sleeve shirts for men, chadors and the avoidance of makeup, have either been legislated as dress code or promoted as ideals. Nowhere has this been more salient than in the interview process for government jobs, known as *gozinesh* (selection). Jokes abound about the shallow and hypocritical piety for which one is tested in a *gozinesh* interview. The common wisdom is that even the least pious men and women would feign piety to secure government positions. Candidates are asked about all aspects of their religious beliefs and even political convictions, and simple tactics like adopting chadors and sporting beards may improve one's chances of success. Often interviewers inquire about the candidates with references in their former workplace, school, or neighborhood. The need for maintaining outward appearances of piety, then, sometimes extends beyond the interview time and space and into those more intimate places where such discrepancies between inside and outside can incite suspicion and ridicule. These apparent duplicities can also extend to other matters like winning business contracts and currying official favors.

Those pious individuals who decry the hypocrisy of crooks and charlatans sporting beards or donning chadors usually complain that outward signs of piety can no longer be relied

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<sup>118</sup> See Keshavarzian (2007) for an examination of this shift in the specific context of the Tehran bazaar.

upon as indicators of sincere religiosity.<sup>119</sup> Pious appearance may still signify a pious interior, but it could also be deployed hypocritically to deceive, or pragmatically to get ahead. In the past, communal mechanisms existed for ascertaining the trustworthiness of the sign as well as the patterns of its variation based on context, particularly through assigning reputations and histories to individuals. Small face-to-face communities and tightly woven commercial networks provided plenty such means through connections of kin, friendship, longtime business relationships, recognition as co-congregants at the same mosque, and so on. But such communities have grown increasingly fragmented, and communal hierarchies replaced by coercive ones, so that face-to-face connections are felt to be less reliable than they have ever been.

For many of my interlocutors who participated in the Asrar discussion board, the problem of moral uncertainty and the unreliability of pious signs threatened to lay waste to the fabric of religion and leave them stranded in a world of duplicity. In March 2010, the founder and administrator of the forum invited participants to comment on a poignant phrase he had heard someone utter: “Religion,” went the phrase, “was a harsh prank that my environment played on me. I was religious for many years but had no god.” He proceeded to comment the following:

In my humble opinion, this phrase is a good description of our present condition. Our religion has become a matter of peripheral issues. Our god has become money, power, and those who sit at desks [bureaucrats and politicians]. Our Ahl-e Bayt [family of the prophet] have been reduced to worthless ceremonies, replete with hypocrisy. Our belief has become appearance and beards and imitation rather than action... Our work and business have become deceit, theft, and shar‘i fraud [that is, fraudulent practice clothed in the legitimizing language of shari‘at].

Many other users contributed responses and several distinct themes developed in the conversation, but hypocrisy remained the most heated topic. One participant wrote:

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<sup>119</sup> See Deeb’s discussion of the relationship between veiling and inner piety among Shi‘i Lebanese “pious moderns” (2006:115).

Everything has become a plaything. Grow a beard and your work will go through anywhere you want. It has become as facile as drinking water to call others “haji” and “sayyed” now... I’m not that old but I’ve heard that in the past it wasn’t so easy for everyone to travel to the house of God [Mecca] and become a haji... Unfortunately, people now go to hajj to make a name for themselves... Unfortunately in our times if you grow a beard and wear two agate rings and hold a rosary in your hand, you’re set...

Another participant blamed the widespread hunger for power and wealth:

Perhaps the biggest damage that Islam and the ummah have suffered has come from those who are consumed by power and wealth... There are some people who become so insanely and passionately attached to power and wealth that nothing but the love of these two things can satisfy them... They hide their power-hungry faces behind facades of apparent virtue and keep their inner truth [*baten*] concealed with hypocrisy and duplicity.

As the conversation continued, one brief post by another user caught my attention:

In this world that is full of human-looking creatures [*mojudat-e ensan-nama*], oh dear God, do not let go of my hand for one moment, and do not leave me to myself, as you have innumerable servants, but I have only one God...

It is into this context of uncertainty and distrust, this fear of “human-looking animals,” that the hagiography of the contemporary mystic enters as a “technology of the self.” The mystic is a paragon of moral perfection and spiritual certainty. He lives humbly among the sinful of the earth, and yet his eyes are raised toward the heavenly abode of the angels. He is able to traverse this formidable chasm through the rigorous practice of virtue; and we, the readers of his hagiography, are invited to do the same. His outward appearance and internal truth are in perfect symmetry. He exudes light from his face, his eyes, and his forehead – light that shines forth from a pure heart. He thus embodies the Qur’anic description of the companions of the Prophet:

تَرَاهُمْ رُكَّعًا سُجَّدًا يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا سِيمَاهُمْ فِي وُجُوهِهِمْ مِنْ أَثَرِ السُّجُودِ

“Thou wilt see them bow and prostrate themselves in prayer, seeking Grace from God and His Good Pleasure. On their faces are their marks, the traces of their prostration” [48:29].

## The Eye of Insight

If the light of the mystic's visage were not enough, we are convinced of his lofty spiritual status through the evidence of his marvels or *karamat*: extraordinary abilities that gesture to the existence of a realm beyond and superior to the mundane world – more lofty, more solid, more certain, if also less likely to be revealed to the perception of ordinary human beings. Accounts of prophetic miracles (*mu'jizat*) and saintly marvels (*karamat*) are ubiquitous in Islamic textual hagiography (Renard 2008:91), as well as in oral anecdotes through which information about these extraordinary human beings circulates (Gilsenan 1973:20-35; Millie 2008).<sup>120</sup> Thus Ali Aqa Qazi is said to have had the ability of teleportation (*tayy al-arz*). Shaykh Rajab Ali Khayyat possessed the “eye of insight” (*chashm-e basirat*) which allowed him to see sinners in animal form. Hasan Ali Nokhodaki could cure the sick with peas that he had blessed with his breath. In recounting these marvels through the remembrance of eye witnesses – usually intimate friends and devotees of the mystic – the hagiographies highlight the ways in which a small number of people of exceptional spirit penetrate into another realm and bring its fruits to their everyday existence. These extraordinary fruits are a “heartwarming sign” to the mystic, as well as to his devotees seeking an anchor of stability beyond the infirmities of the mundane.

This focus on extraordinary powers has its critics, with marvel-centric hagiographies being dubbed just that: *karamat-mehvar*. The danger, critics point out, is that readers may look

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<sup>120</sup> The distinction between prophetic miracles and saintly marvels has troubled Muslim authors and theologians for centuries (see for example Renard 2008:267-275). One commonly argued difference is that prophetic miracles have “evidentiary” value in persuading a public or refuting nonbelievers about the prophet's divine mission, whereas saintly marvels can only be proof of the authenticity of the saint, and secondarily confirmation of the prophet whose message he or she lives and preaches (but never confirmation of some unique message brought by the saint). In a recent book on Shi'i Islamic views on witchcraft, Mohammad Salari distinguishes *karamat* and prophetic miracles only in terms of their agents: prophets possess miracles whereas Imams and saints possess *karamat* (2003). Both are given by the grace of God (they are not learned), and they owe their efficacy only to His authorization. The intention to deploy them is pure and based on truthfulness (*sedāqat*) and guidance (*hedāyat*), but never deception or harm.

for karamat as proof of spiritual stature at the expense of other criteria, with the result that they may be duped by any charlatan feigning wonder-work.<sup>121</sup> The website *Salehin* (The Righteous), the largest online collection of mystics' hagiographies in the Persian language, balances its presentation of karamat reports with recognition of these criticisms. On their website, the administrators of Salehin warn against exaggerating the importance of karamat (all emphasis mine):

The wayfarer (*salek*) must know that the true mystic and master is one who moves solely on the path of Islam's *shari'at* and who never commits any violation of shar' [that is, strict adherence to the shari'at is a condition for the plausibility of wondrous feats as karamat], otherwise his fall is certain, *even if, in appearance, he has karamat, visions (mokashefat) and dreams, as these things can be inspired by Satan and his armies and delusions and satanic fantasies as well.*

... Given that mokashefat and karamat have an appearance (*zاهر*) and an inside (*باطن*), and we hear of the appearance and have no information about the inside, we cannot rely on them as principles or references. *Our intention in reporting these matters on this website is only a reminder that we should know and believe that there are truths and an inside to this world and if people are to act in accordance with the holy shari'at of Islam, they can attain a place where they see nothing but God, and extraordinary feats may issue from them, or they might have visions; however, these states are only a heart-warming [sign] for the wayfarer and they are not the main principle. The objective is to grow close to God the compassionate by way of serving Him.*<sup>122</sup>

Whether as proof of spiritual stature or as heart-warming signs, stories of marvels abound. As technologies of the self, hagiographies invite their pious readers to embark on lives of ethical cultivation, with an eye toward the minute possibility that they may receive a marvelous gift somewhere in the process. The narratives model the virtuous endeavors of the mystics as struggles that culminate in marvels, which in turn stamp those struggles with a divine seal of

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<sup>121</sup> See note 11 above about a critic who specifically attacks the hagiographies of Shaykh Khayyat.

<sup>122</sup> *Osul, ahdaf, va ravesh-ha-ye saayt-e salehin* (Principles, Objectives, and Methods of the Salehin Website) [http://www.salehin.com/fa/fa\\_pages/manshor.htm](http://www.salehin.com/fa/fa_pages/manshor.htm)

approval. When the mystic's eye of insight, for example, opens up to truths to which he had previously been blind, he is confirmed in his trajectory as a spiritual wayfarer. In the hagiography about Rajab Ali Khayyat, the tailor, we read that at the age of twenty-three, he once found himself cornered by a beautiful girl from among his relatives who had been pursuing him for some time. Face-to-face with the seductress in a quiet house, with all the conditions for sin ready before him, the tailor tells himself: "Rajab Ali! God can test you all your life, why don't you test Him for once? Forego this available and pleasurable sin for God." He then addresses himself directly to his Lord: "Oh God! I forsake this sin for you," he says, "so you, cultivate me for yourself!" Much like the Prophet Joseph whom he adopts as his model, Shaykh Khayyat makes a daring escape from his trap of sin.<sup>123</sup> His pious feat, his refusal to engage in adultery with the young woman, wins him insight (*basirat*) and vision (*binayi*). He begins to see what is invisible to others around him. One day, while walking along the northern fringe of the bazaar, the tailor sees every passerby in animal form, each taking on the shape of their most prominent sin. Only one man appears to him with a human face.

The eye of insight, the sense that allows friends of God to see things as they truly are, not as they appear to the material eye, has been a staple of Sufi tradition.<sup>124</sup> In Persian, this sense is known as *basirat* (insight), *chashm-e basirat* (the eye of insight) or *chashm-e del* (the heart's eye). In everyday usage, none of these terms need be limited in sense to the actual formation of images in one's mind of some external being. They often have to do with an acute ability to perceive, decode, comprehend, or understand the nuances and complexities of things, those matters beyond "what meets the eye." Iranians like to quote the Sufi poet Nezami Ganjavi (1141-

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<sup>123</sup> Such explicit comparisons between a saint's marvels and similar prophetic miracles are common in hagiographies. See Renard (2008:95-98).

<sup>124</sup> On hagiographic accounts of the gift of clairvoyance among friends of God, see Renard (2008:112-115). On theological debates about clairvoyance, visions, and dreams, see idem (275-77).



1209) who, speaking through the mad lover Majnun, wrote: “You see the hair, I see the hair’s curls. You see the eyebrow, I see the eyebrow’s gestures.”<sup>125</sup> A female taxi driver once quoted this verse to me in Tehran while explaining that she understood the economic situation better than me, and hence was right to raise her cab fare even if I, judging by mere appearances, thought she was wrong. *Basirat* might also refer to enlightened wisdom and a perceptiveness born of age and experience. Recently, the term has been used by right-wing politicians and commentators to refer to political insight – which they accuse opposition leaders of lacking. Since 1998, ideological and political training programs required for all members of the Basij paramilitary forces have included a series dubbed “Insight” (Golkar 2010). And after the controversial presidential election of 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, repeatedly emphasized the importance of insight for navigating the turbulent political waters and distinguishing truth from falsehood. Furthermore, he accused opposition elites of “lacking insight” for alleging that the elections had been fraudulent (see for example Kayhan 2010).

There is, however, a more restricted sense to these terms, having to do with the visual perception of things unseen to the physical organ of sight. The eye of insight or the heart’s eye is that inner sight with which the Virgin Mary and Prophet Muhammad both saw the angel Gabriel in human form. It is the same sight that allows mystics to literally peer into secrets laid bare before them. To understand this more restricted sense of the eye of insight, we need to know something of Islamic philosophy in the Illuminationist (*ishraqi*) tradition of Shahabuddin Suhrawardi (1151-1191) and the Transcendent Wisdom (*al-hikmat al-muta’aliya*) of Mulla Sadra (1571-1641) – the two philosopher-mystics who have towered over Iranian-Islamic philosophy

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<sup>125</sup> Majnun spoke these words in response to a naysayer who thought there were many women more beautiful than Layli, the one woman whose love had driven Majnun mad. But Majnun could see things that were invisible to others around him who could not understand his obsession.

for centuries and continue to do so. The concept of extrasensory vision, as developed through these philosophical traditions, circulates through philosophical journals, the sermons of preachers, newspapers, books, websites, and radio and television programs. Simplified versions circulate through many of the same media alongside the more subtle philosophical formulations, and together they inform people's conceptions of the subject.

According to the traditions of Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, the world of being is multiple and consists of three layers (Hosseinzadeh 2006:77): The lowest is the sensible, corporeal world of nature with which we are most familiar. The highest is the world of intellects and immaterial souls, which we might in the simplest terms call the abode of angels – what Suhrawardi called the “dominant lights” (*al-anwar al-qahira*) (Ebrahimi Dinani 2006:177). The intermediary layer – the most important for our present purposes – is the world of *mithal*, the imaginal realm or, as Suhrawardi called it, the world of “separate imagination” (*al-khayal al-munfasil*). This is the world of “suspended images,” of dreams and miracles, and of occult wonders (Walbridge 2000:26). The imaginal realm is not completely opposed to either the natural world or the world of the immaterial intellects. On the one hand, the beings in this world have forms, and are therefore similar to beings of the natural world. On the other hand, to the extent that they are immaterial, they are similar to the beings of the world of intellects. They have shape and quantity, but not matter or duration (Ebrahimi Dinani 2006:177). It is, perhaps, due to this dual nature of the imaginal realm, its partaking in worlds both material and immaterial, that it is also known as *barzakh*, or isthmus.

In the imaginal realm, it is possible for immaterial intellects or souls – such as angels or the divine attributes – to take on perceptible forms, just as it is possible for material things to become soul-like and travel from the world of nature to the imaginal realm (Hosseinzadeh

2006:77). Images from this realm can also become material – through the miraculous acts of a prophet or the occult techniques of a witch for example.

One way in which beings from the material world may wind up in the image realm is through what is called the “embodiment of works” (*tajassom-e a‘mal*), a controversial concept developed by Mulla Sadra (Keshavarz 2004; Shokr 2007). According to this formulation, every action, intention, and thought that humans produce, whether good or evil, have specific visual manifestations. With repetition, these “accidents” (*‘arad*, pl. *a‘rad*) gradually sediment into enduring dispositions (*malekeh*) in the soul. They may then exist in the image world as independent forms, or they may become the principle of the visual form of the actor’s soul him or herself, so that they transform the actor’s imaginal form for good or evil. Good deeds beautify the soul and shower it in light, or may appear as paradisiacal gardens, streams, *huris*, and so on. Bad deeds corrupt or transmogrify it into animal shapes,<sup>126</sup> or appear as hellfire and other chastisements.

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<sup>126</sup> This notion of a descent into animality through sin rests on a cosmic hierarchy already present in the Qur’an (see Foltz 2006:15-17), that places non-human animals at the bottom, humans above them, and God at the summit. Following Aristotle, Muslim philosophers assimilated this hierarchy to a “great chain of being” that started with inanimate matter at the bottom and moved upward through plants, animals, humans, angels, and finally God (ibid:49; Nasr 2006:77. Also see Fischer 2009). In Islamic philosophical psychology, the soul has often been divided into powers according to a scheme that corresponds to this same cosmic hierarchy: the lowest power is the “nutritive” or “vegetative” soul that furnishes basic life functions. It is followed by the “sensitive” or “animal” soul that produces sense perceptions and emotions. Finally, there is the “rational” or “intellective” soul responsible for thought and speech (Black 2005; Haque 2004). All living bodies possess the vegetative soul. Animals and humans have the additional sensitive soul. But humans alone possess the rational soul.

A different set of Qur’anic concepts deployed primarily in the ethical and mystical literature distinguishes the soul that is *ammara bi ‘l-su’* (commanding to evil) from the soul that is *lawwama* (upbraiding, blaming), and finally, the soul that is *mutma’inna* (tranquil). In the mystical path of purification, the wayfarer struggles against the base soul that commands to evil, so as to attain the condition of the tranquil soul (Schimmel 1975:112). The Sufis have compared the base soul to an arrogant Pharaoh or a disobedient seductress. But they have also likened this soul to various animals: a black dog searching for food, a fox, a mouse, a restive horse or mule, an unruly camel, a pig, or a snake (ibid:112-113). These comparisons do not emphasize particular vices as much as a more general characteristic of the lower soul as disobedient and prone to excess. To the extent that human beings are able to reign in their lower soul, they ascend toward the angelic abode and God. Those who persist in satisfying their lower soul descend into animality.

Humans may also take on animal qualities through a more literal process of metamorphosis (*maskh*). Qur’anic verses recalling God’s chastisement of the disobedient by transforming them into pigs and monkeys have

For the mystic equipped with the proper power of sight – that is, the heart’s eye or eye of insight – any and all of these forms in the imaginal realm may be perceptible, both in dream states and in wakeful life. The way this works is much like ordinary sight, except that the sense organ involved is not the physical eye. There are, as Hosseinzadeh puts it (2006:78), isthmus versions of the five senses, with which imaginal forms may be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. The forms that are ultimately perceived, however, are much like the forms of sensible things in the material world. The cogitative faculty with which perception of sensible and imaginal forms occurs is also the same, whether one is to place this faculty within the brain, the heart, or the soul – as has been done by various thinkers from the Greeks through the Muslim philosophers. Only the sense organ is different. This is why for the mystic, an image from the isthmus realm is as real, if not more so, as anything he sees with his physical eyes.

Morteza Aqa Tehrani, a jurist and philosopher with a Ph.D. from Binghamton University who was once renowned as the morality teacher (*ostad-e akhlaq*) of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s cabinet, writes on his website that different sins have different visual manifestations in the imaginal realm.<sup>127</sup> People who constantly deceive others appear as monkeys. Hypocrites have two tongues, one of which emerges from the back of their heads. The arrogant are ants: they are

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provided grist for much theological commentary (Pellat 2012a, 2012b). Metamorphoses also appear in legends and folklore. They are a persistent motif, for example, in the *Thousand and One Nights* (Foltz 2006:71-72) although they are usually cited there in relation to sorcery rather than divine retribution. In the 1920s, the French orientalist Henri Massé recorded beliefs in animal metamorphosis among urban Iranians. These included retributive transformations such as the metamorphosis of Shimr, the murderer of Imam Husayn, into a thirsty, four-eyed dog, and that of the second caliph Umar into a wandering owl (Massé 1954[1938]:182-183). But there were other metamorphoses that could not as easily be related to sin, such as that of the woman who hid under the lid of a kneading trough in order to avoid the Prophet Muhammad, but found the lid transformed into a tortoise shell (ibid:183). Metamorphoses may even come in the form of divine aid. For example, the hoopoe, writes Massé, was in some accounts a good woman who implored God to rescue her from an abusive husband (ibid:184). Unfortunately, Massé does not discuss the contexts within which such accounts were narrated, and as they no longer circulate among urban Iranians (at least, as far as I am aware), it is difficult to assess what significance they may have had in influencing contemporary understandings of the relation between sin and animality.

<sup>127</sup> *Surat-e barzakhi-ye a‘mal* [the isthmus form of actions] <http://aghatehrani.com/data.asp?Id=285>

smaller than everyone else and scurry about under others' feet in the hereafter. Lechers are swine. The verbally abusive are scorpions. The usurpers of orphans' wealth eat fire, and those whose sustenance is haram, devour filth. Perhaps our mystic-tailor Shaykh Khayyat saw some of these animals that day many years ago when he was walking along the edge of the Tehran bazaar, after having escaped the snare of his seductress.

### **Oh Concealer of Faults**

July 20, 2008. I went to visit a merchant I had befriended in the Tajrish bazaar in northern Tehran. Ali ran a shop with his younger brother, on an alley just around the corner from the Imamzadeh Saleh shrine. They specialized in religious commodities: prayer rugs, prayer books, beads, compasses showing the direction of Mecca (called *qebleh-nama*), agate rings and other jewelry with spiritual significance, posters, protective amulets (*ta'viz*), talismans (they preferred to call them "prayers," *do'a*), and a few religious CDs. It was one of my favorite spots in the bazaar, and I made sure to buy a few items every time I visited.

On this visit, as Ali was showing me some of his laminated prayer cards, Mr. Hamidi, another merchant and friend of Ali, struck up a conversation with me. A short, bald man in his forties, clean-shaven and wearing a striped t-shirt, he stood very close to me in the cramped shop, tilting this head backward to look at me, and periodically tapping my forearm as he spoke. It was an awkward position, and I had to look down at him as if I were speaking to a child. Nevertheless, we managed to maintain the pose for some time, as Mr. Hamidi passionately offered his thoughts on my research topic.

One of the first things he suggested was that I should acquaint myself with “Doctor” Nabati, a well-known mystic and healer living in the Dezashib neighborhood, about half a mile east of the Tajrish bazaar. I had visited his *Darl al-Shafa* (house of healing) in 2006 when I was conducting preliminary fieldwork. His name was Haj Hossein Qanbari Qa‘em, but he was nicknamed Dr. Nabati for giving visitors and patients tiny pieces of crystallized sugar (*nabat*) upon which he silently breathed his special prayers. According to Mr. Hamidi, Dr. Nabati was “connected” (*vasl*) to God. One sign of this was that he was able to recognize the *na-mahram*, that is, the “non-intimate” people who were spiritually unfit to be in the sanctified presence of God or to partake in His secrets. His isthmus eye (*chashm-e barzakhi*) was completely open, he said. Once, Mr. Hamidi had heard, Dr. Nabati had gone to a company for a business transaction of some sort, and had noticed that everyone in the company had hooves rather than human feet. Only one man, a simple worker, had shoes on, and he had dissuaded him from conducting business there. “These are not superstitions [*khorafat*],” insisted Mr. Hamidi; “They are real. Often, people like Dr. Nabati can recognize people’s inner states simply by looking at their faces.”

Then he spoke about Ayatollah Bahjat. A 92-year-old *marja‘-e taqlid* (source of emulation) living in Qom, Ayatollah Bahjat was the one living man I heard mentioned most frequently as an exemplary mystic, before he passed away in 2009. Young people snatched up videos of his moving communal prayers and shared them on CDs and on the internet. Some had framed photographs of him in their rooms. Many tried to see his illuminated visage (*chehre-ye nurani*) at least once, if only from a distance, in his favored mosque in Qom. Mr. Hamidi told me that his isthmus eyes, too, were wide open:

Ayatollah Bahjat is from Fuman [a small town in the northern province of Gilan]. He does not interfere at all in politics. A person I know had a lot of problems, and he went to see him. Ayatollah Bahjat wouldn't look at him. He doesn't look at you because he has wide-open isthmus eyes. When you visit him, you'll stand there and cover yourself [Mr. Hamidi stood in front of me covering his crotch] and say *ya sattar al-uyub* [Oh Concealer of faults] so that God will protect you from being exposed. Ayatollah Bahjat told the man I know, 'Go pray for forgiveness,' in order for your problems to be solved.

I heard and read this supplication – “Oh Concealer of faults” – invoked very frequently in relation to some mystic or other's ability to see people in their true form. The prayer is uttered by people who encounter mystics thought to possess the eye of insight, and it is also reportedly uttered by the mystics themselves in order that God will conceal the hideous forms of other people from them. The short blog post below, by a seminary student in Qom, refers wistfully to both kinds of supplication. It is titled “Concealer of Faults”:

As a new student in the *Hawzeh-ye elmiyeh* of Qom, the first location that comes to my mind as a place to pray the morning prayer communally is the Fatemiyeh mosque where Mr. Bahjat prays.

I wait for Mr. Bahjat [at the entrance] so that I might see him.

And since I've heard that Mr. Bahjat possesses isthmus eyes, I continually repeat the zekr “Oh Concealer of faults.”

From afar, I see the old man approaching, walking-stick in hand. When he reaches me, he smiles at me and says “Oh Concealer of faults.”<sup>128,129</sup>

As with Rajab Ali Khayyat, the isthmus eye was the marvel that defined Ayatollah Bahjat for many of my interlocutors. Kamran, a master's student in mechanical engineering in Tehran who was critical of this widespread tendency to define Bahjat by his marvels, told me the following story:

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<sup>128</sup> I never heard anyone suggest that Ayatollah Bahjat, who frequently uttered “Oh Concealer of faults,” may have been asking God to conceal his own faults from others, rather than covering others' faults from him.

<sup>129</sup> *Sattar al-uyub* [Concealer of Faults], from *Adamha-ye khub-e shahr* [The good people of the city]. < [http://adamhaye-khoob.blogspot.com/2006/10/blog-post\\_18.html](http://adamhaye-khoob.blogspot.com/2006/10/blog-post_18.html)>. Published on October 18, 2006.

Once Mr. Bahjat had gone to the shrine [of Fatima Ma‘suma in Qom]. All of a sudden, he turned around at the entrance and went back. Rumors immediately spread that he had seen a bad scene [with his isthmus eyes] or that Imam Mahdi had forbidden him from going, and that sort of thing. The rumor was circulating with intensity. Then at night, his [Mr. Bahjat’s] bodyguard went to the mosque and said “What is this nonsense you’re saying? The man had to pee. He returned to go to the bathroom, and he decided against worshipping at the shrine!”

If the dominant quality by which a mystic like Ayatollah Bahjat is recognized is his eye of insight, then for many people, the principle mode of being that governs their encounters with him (imagined, anticipated, or real) is to worry about his penetrating gaze, and to entreat God to conceal their hideous internal states from him. This has potential disciplinary significance: If I am worried that the sins I commit will be revealed in the presence of the mystic, I might take care not to commit those sins. Michael Gilson describes precisely such a condition in a village in North Lebanon where he conducted fieldwork (1990:118-19):

[T]he real sheikh knew when you were in an impure condition, both in the sense that you had failed a ritual duty of ablutions and more specifically that you had masturbated or had sexual relations with someone, or that you were indulging in some illicit sexual relationship. It would be courting disaster to be in the holy man’s presence or to join the prayer or a zikr ritual if you were in such a state because some form of discomfiture was sure to follow.

Similar anxieties about being exposed in the mystic’s gaze are evident in an interview with Dr. Hamid Farzam, a prominent professor of literature and former devotee of Shaykh Rajab Ali Khayyat, the tailor (Kayhan-e Farhangi 2004:20):

Kayhan: Mr. Farzam! When you would go visit his eminence the Shaykh, given what you said about his ability to see inside individuals [*baten-e afrad*], were you not upset that he would know your affairs and realize your weaknesses and sins?

Dr. Farzam: Yes, we knew this, and for this reason we more or less restrained ourselves [*khoddari mikardim*]. But he would still know and sometimes he would tell a friend: “You have to close your eyes again.” Or “don’t look at just anybody.” Or “don’t look at the *na-mahram* [unrelated women].” One of his eminence the Shaykh’s devotees used to



say: One day I was going to visit him. On my way a sinful thought occurred to me. When I came face-to-face with the Shaykh, he told me: “What do I see in your face?” I realized what his eminence the Shaykh was saying, so I said in my heart “Oh Concealer of faults!” God willed it and focused the Shaykh’s mind on something else. The Shaykh laughed and looked at me again and said: “What did you do? I was seeing something just now and it disappeared.” You know that God is *sattar al-uyub* (the Concealer of faults). If you take refuge in Him, He will give you refuge. Yes, his eminence the Shaykh really saw things.

In contexts like this, then, the mystic’s gaze can function as a tool of pious reflexivity outside of the subject (Mahmood 2005:151), while the mystic himself functions as exemplar. In a discussion pertinent to our understanding of the mystic’s penetrating vision, Katherine Ewing examines the disciplinary power of the Sufi Shaykh’s gaze as an instrument in the formation of a particular historical subject in Pakistan (1997:254). Through the formalization and institutionalization of a relationship between Sufi pir and disciple, a “discourse of desire” was created that “constituted a subject positioned within a specific social order”:

Buttressed by an elaborated discourse of “inner” experience, the subject was located within a hierarchical series in which one’s status was determined by one’s level of spiritual development. The level of spiritual development could be known only by one who was more spiritually developed and who was attributed with the power of a unidirectional gaze. In this asymmetrical relationship the master had the power to recognize the subject but could not be completely seen in return. (ibid)

In the context of urban Tehran, among ordinary Shi‘as like my interlocutors – none of whom were members of any Sufi orders – the relationship between mystic master and disciple is not formalized or institutionalized in the way that either Ewing or Gilsenan describe. The vast majority are not attached to any mystics in a master-disciple bond (*pir-moridi*), even though many desperately desire precisely such a relationship, and even though they may periodically come within the range of one or another such mystic’s gaze. But even with those people who do inhabit a master-disciple position, such as Dr. Farzam quoted in the interview above, there seems

to be a limit to the mystic's disciplinary power over them, as marked by the utterance "Oh Concealer of faults." The utterance indexically constitutes two gazes, one inferior and the other superior: The inferior gaze is that of the mystic, from whom the fault needs to be concealed. The superior gaze is that of the Concealer, God, whose vision is all-encompassing and all-penetrating, and who uniquely has the power to deny the vision of that which He sees to anyone He chooses, including the mystic whom He himself has granted extrasensory vision. The supplication also indexically constitutes the speaking subject as sinner – one with faults to be concealed. His sin is potentially available for visual perception to the mystic, in the form of a hideous animal – a pig, a wolf, a monkey, a scorpion, or whatever. But by appealing to a higher gaze, that of God-the-Concealer, the sinner can momentarily obstruct the mystic's vision, cordoning himself off to account for his sin alone, under the ultimate, unidirectional, inescapable, panoptic gaze (Foucault 1979) of his Creator.

By uttering "Oh Concealer of faults," does one then render the mystic's gaze irrelevant? No. Because it is in the encounter – imagined, anticipated, or real – with the mystic's gaze that God's superior vision is invoked. To that extent, God's vision has something of the mystic's gaze in it: He already sees His sinning creatures in the form of pigs, wolves, monkeys, scorpions, and so on, though He may choose to close off that vision to the mystics. It is in simultaneously recognizing and averting the mystic's gaze, then, that the imagination of a God's-eye-view image of myself-as-animal becomes possible.

## **The Eye Internalized**

Through pious self-cultivation and correct moral practice, the mystic brings about an equivalence between his interior state and his exterior conduct. For achieving this sincerity, he is gifted true insight, with which he is able to peer through the dissimulations of others. This invitation of the hagiography to view the relationship between ethical practice and marvelous gift as mutually reinforcing, where one follows from and confirms the other, is taken up by many readers. For example, Kamran, the mechanical engineering student I referred to earlier, told me that for him, the opening up of the mystic's eye of insight showed that by protecting himself from sin, it may be possible to see that which is ordinarily invisible, and thereby receive confirmation in his heart of the truth toward which he had struggled to orient himself by abstaining from sin in the first place.

This is what we might call an “orthodox” reading of the mystic's hagiography. It is articulated as such by the authors, confirmed by many readers, and sometimes formulated as polemic. But as complex narratives, these texts also make possible other readings that, while usually becoming harnessed to projects of pious self-fashioning, do not always do so in ways endorsed or anticipated by their authors. For example, for some readers, mystical vision becomes an instrument for overcoming religious doubts and performing moral duties with certainty. For others, it becomes a tool by which to discover the truth of one's own inner, sinful, being. In both cases, the acquisition of extraordinary vision may be seen as a matter of technical procedure that circumvents the need for sincerity rather than addressing it.

I want to speak of these alternative readings as what David Sneath, Martin Holbraad, and Morten Pedersen have called “imaginative effects” (2009). For these authors, the imagination is

a space of indeterminacy in social and cultural life. Imaginations are “precipitated” by certain technologies – be they material, institutional, symbolic, discursive, or combinations thereof – but never in a conclusive, determinate, or predictable fashion. To put it differently, certain processes – or “technologies” – may be imaginatively adapted to new situations, giving rise to new practices and cultural forms which, nonetheless, are not *necessary* outcomes of those processes.

Hence, as a technology of the imagination, the hagiography of a contemporary mystic makes possible certain unforeseen pious imaginings and ethical practices. These are not orthodox practices in the sense of having been authorized explicitly through the production of a legitimizing discourse. But they have avoided being condemned as heretical, as they have, so far at least, remained relatively obscure and subdued, fashioning subjectivities and affects without being publicly formulated into doctrinal statements or collective ritual. Their position within the discursive tradition of Islam, one could say, is problematic without having been problematized.

These unorthodox practices all depend on an objectification of the mystic’s extraordinary vision: as a capability, instrument, or medium that is detachable from the person of the mystic himself. This objectification takes place by way of collapsing the intimate master-disciple relationship represented in most hagiographies. Most of the readers I spoke to desired to enter into a relationship with a mystic teacher. But very few people succeed in locating such teachers, or securing their agreement to adopt them as students. Instead, they read hagiography after hagiography, sharing notes among friends, and contributing to discussions online, perhaps as a way of living the devotee life vicariously through the recounted experiences of actual devotees of formerly living mystics. But in addition – and this is where the imaginative readings emerge – they sometimes refigure the narrative elements of the texts in ways that suit their own particular desires and anxieties. In part, this involves separating the mystic’s eye of insight as a tool to be

acquired for specific purposes, to be able to see things as they “truly are,” rather than as they appear to ordinary perception.

In the first of these alternative readings, doubt about the unseen plays a much more prominent role than what we saw with the orthodox interpretation. If extraordinary vision can confirm the truth of a realm beyond material existence, perhaps one can attempt to obtain this vision in order to alleviate one’s doubts and embark on the pious path with assurance. Here, the causal relationship between pious practice and extraordinary vision is inverted: Piety is no longer seen as a prerequisite for obtaining vision. Rather, vision calms one’s uncertainties so that one may confidently reform oneself. This reading was expressed by a contributor to the Asrar forum in May 2009, in a discussion thread about the eye of insight:

The smallest effect of the opening of the eye of insight is that it delivers man to certainty in distancing himself from sin and performing his [religious] duties. For example, if people pour colored poison into someone’s water vessel, he will refrain from drinking it. But if it is colorless, he will drink it and be destroyed. Moreover, [the eye of insight] will be a resolute response to the whispers of Satan about the futility of worship. It will give the person a high level of immunity in the face of sins whose consequences he has seen with his own eyes. This way, he will have visible proof [*hojjat-e ‘eyni*] for all of his religious actions to the end of his life.<sup>130</sup>

If successful avoidance of sin and performance of religious duties can hinge on the kind of certainty provided by the eye of insight, how might the eye itself be obtained? For some enthusiasts of mystic’s hagiographies, the solution no longer lies exclusively in struggles for moral self-perfection, but takes on a decidedly technical dimension.

We can see evidence of this interest in requests for how-to instructions on acquiring the eye of insight. Such is, for example, the following question and answer from the official website

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<sup>130</sup> <http://loghman.info/forum/index.php?topic=8659.0>

of the Institute Representing the Supreme Leader in Universities (*nahad-e namayandegi-ye maqam-e mo'azzam-e rahbari dar daneshgahha*):<sup>131</sup>

Question: What can one do to open one's isthmus eye so that one can see what others cannot see, and hear what others cannot hear?

Answer: First one must know that in the idiom of philosophy, theology, and mysticism, the isthmus world is a realm beyond the mundane world. Therefore to the extent that we distance ourselves from dependence and attachment upon materials in the mundane world, we will gain access to the world above it. According to narrations [from the Prophet and Imams], performing the *vajibat* [those works made obligatory by God, such as prayer, fasting, giving of alms, and so forth] and abandoning the *moharramat* [those actions forbidden by God] bring one [spiritual] health and wellbeing, distance one from Hell, and prepare one for entry into Paradise. But if in addition [to these actions] we succeed in performing supererogatory works and practicing piety more than what is ordinary, we will attain to more than what others have gained in spiritual terms. This is what is called the isthmus eye, with which one can see truths beyond reality.

The hadith of *Qurb al-Nawafil* [Drawing near with supererogatory works]: "It was narrated from the Prophet that God said: My servant cannot express love for me by anything more lovely than what I have made obligatory for him. He expresses love for me with supererogatory works, until I too love him. And when I love him, I become his hearing when he hears, and his sight when he sees, and his tongue when he speaks, and his hand when he strikes, and his foot when he walks. When he prays to me, I answer him and when he asks of me, I grant him [what he asks]."

According to this particular authoritative response, the isthmus eye may be opened through supererogatory works, that is, those prayers and acts of piety that extend beyond the limited set of pious obligations determined by God. Similarly, Hosseinzadeh states that the soul's receptivity to images from the world of imagination increases the more it turns away from the external world and its sensory data (2006:79). This detachment from the material world is achieved in three ways – through death, sleep, and ascetic exercise.

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<sup>131</sup> The website includes an extensive list of questions and answers on various ideological, religious, social, cultural, and historical matters. Questions are accepted through an online form and responses are posted to an archive. The primary intended audience are university students and responses are normally detailed and lengthy.

Another popular response to the same question, although one that is much more specific and therefore operationalizable as technique, is the repetition of a supplication known as the *zeker-e yunusieh*. This *zeker* consists of an excerpt from verse 87 of the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Qur‘an, The Prophets: “And remember the man of the fish [Jonah], when he departed in wrath: he imagined that We had no power over him! But he cried through the depths of darkness,” and this is the supplication, (لا اله الا انت سبحانك انى كنت من الظالمين) “There is no god but thou: glory to thee: I was indeed wrong!” A repetition of four hundred times a night in a state of prostration, preferably in darkness, for a total of one year, is supposed to help open the eye of insight.

As knowledge and speculation about the eye of insight has proliferated through hagiographies and other media, some have looked to sources *outside* the Islamic tradition for further understanding, as well as for additional techniques for activating the potential within themselves. One result is that some enthusiasts of the occult and so-called metaphysical sciences (*metafizik* or *mavara al-tabi‘eh*) equate the eye of insight with the “third eye” or “ajna” chakra of Hinduism, with which they have become familiar primarily through New Age formulations. This view has frequently surfaced on Asrar. In a thread discussing the eye of insight in April 2009, one of the forum administrators wrote the following:

My dear ones, the eye of insight, or “ajna” or “third eye” in the language of the science of metaphysics, is a condition that is given to the sincere. God endows some people with this gift after they have purified their souls for years and cleansed it of wicked attributes and gained spiritual strength. However, there have also been individuals who have attained this condition in one night, like Rajab Ali the tailor, whose tale is lengthy.

Other threads go into great detail about the chakras (of which the third eye or ajna chakra is only one), meditation techniques for activating them, and information about the auras, colors, and other forms that are perceived by the third eye.

The eye of insight acquired through technical means may have uses beyond that of resolving religious uncertainty or strengthening moral resolve. It could, for example, aid in ascertaining the inner truth of *other* human beings, particularly those whom one suspects of hypocrisy and malice. The mystic, with his power to see sinners in their true animal forms, is uniquely capable of penetrating the surface of illusory human appearances and distinguishing honest people from hypocrites. To become like the mystic, therefore, would be to become similarly discerning.

Few people I spoke to admitted to me that they were interested in the eye of insight for this particular purpose. But that the eye afforded such a possibility was considered obvious. Nafiseh, the aspiring pop singer and occult enthusiast whom I introduced in Chapter 2, told me that the eye can give you insight into the “real me” as opposed to the “fake me” on the surface. If you see the “real me,” she said, you may refuse to appear anywhere within a hundred meters of me. The mystic’s extraordinary vision, therefore, may function as a kind of x-ray device providing insights into the inner states of others, without relying on social aptitudes for discernment which are imperfect and vulnerable to deception.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> There is a broader context for such a reading of the mystic’s power, having to do with the proliferation of various self-improvement seminars in urban centers over the past decade (see Chapter 3). Modeled after Western self-help seminars, the classes teach the power of positive thinking and a wide variety of skills and strategies for overcoming the challenges of modern urban life. These range from enhancing memory, improving concentration, and developing effective study habits, to methods of relaxation and self-healing, telepathy, physiognomy, and reading body language. As an example, I’ll just briefly refer to Hamid, a young customer service manager working at a power plant outside Tehran. Hamid had taken part in the seminars of Master Seyda, the so-called “Iranian Man of Memory.” I had asked him particularly about Master Seyda’s teachings in physiognomy and how Hamid had made use of them. Hamid responded that the techniques he had learned in Master Seyda’s seminars had equipped him for dealing with various social situations both at home and at the office, by identifying people’s inner states based on their looks. For example, he said: “When I am meeting with my boss, I can guess based on his appearance whether or not he is prepared to listen to me and hear my requests. If I determine that his appearance is suitable, I will voice my request, and if things are unsuitable, I postpone my request to another time. People’s gestures and postures have also taught me to determine what they are thinking about. Can I help them, or should I leave them alone in their own world?”



We can see a similar imagination at work in a television serial broadcast during the month of Ramadan in 2006. “The Final Sin” (*akharin gonah*) depicted the adventures of Farhad, a young orthopedist who unexpectedly gains the eye of insight. One of Farhad’s medical school instructors was an ophthalmologist known among his friends and students as a great mystic. Shortly before his death, the mystic writes in his will that his cornea should be gifted to one of his patients, an old man with a serious eye condition that he had failed to cure. But Farhad, who also suffers from an eye disease and is in need of a cornea transplant, becomes the unwitting recipient of his mystic teacher’s organ through the complicated schemes of the mystic’s daughter, who also happens to be Farhad’s fiancée. The cornea gives Farhad the ability to see people in their true forms – as hideous animals, or enshrouded in dazzling light, depending on their actions. The drama follows his exploits as he tries desperately to come to grips with his new-found marvelous ability and the moral dilemma of having acquired a cornea that belongs rightfully to someone else. Gradually, he descends into vengeful madness (though not irredeemably) as the images of others’ sins prove too much for him to bear and he contemplates murdering some of the more shameless sinners he encounters.

Nicknamed “The Isthmus Eye” (*chashm-e barzakhi*), the drama was panned by critics for its weak narrative structure, poor acting, and amateur special effects. But commentators also critiqued its depiction of the eye of insight as a power localized in a biological organ. While some critics defended this portrayal as dramatic license in the service of a broader moral and spiritual message, the criticism highlights a larger tension within television dramas of this sort between the exigencies of cinematic storytelling and fidelity to authoritative theological notions

as part of the dramas' self-conscious mission of providing spiritually edifying entertainment.<sup>133</sup>

This tension aside, nowhere in the criticisms of “The Final Sin” did any commentator that I am aware of suggest that the objectification of the eye of insight, its detachment from the person and gaze of the mystic, was a problem. It was only *biological* objectification – in the tissue of a cornea that can be transplanted from one eye to another – that was deemed to be inaccurate.

In “The Final Sin,” Farhad’s extraordinary cornea implant gives him much more than the ability to perceive sinners in animal form and the virtuous in a brilliant glow. His new bio-spiritual prosthesis functions also as an invisible-vision monocle, a lie detector, and a mystical x-ray. It allows him to see the souls of the dead and communicate with them, most notably his teacher the ophthalmologist mystic. When his fiancée lies to him, a menacing black smoke appears behind her figure. And in one scene, after he breaks into the warehouse of a corrupt businessman smuggling illegal or expired medicine, he fixes his gaze upon an innocuous-looking box of pills, only to realize that it contains abortifacient drugs after receiving a terrifying vision of a barren field littered by screaming, dying fetuses.

The extrasensory vision monocle, lie detector, and mystical x-ray are not incredible science fiction fantasies. Urban Iranians already encounter similar instruments in their everyday lives or are familiar with them from the news and the realist genres of documentary television, popular science magazines, books, and so on. X-ray devices are some of the most commonplace tools of extrasensory vision, available in any hospital or airport security checkpoint. Polygraphs are by now ancient technology. And although goggles for viewing the ghost world are not in wide use, many of my interlocutors were familiar with Kirlian cameras (for displaying the

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<sup>133</sup> Recent Ramadan dramas in the supernatural *ma'nagara* or “spiritual” genre almost always employ a “religious specialist” – *karshenas-e mazhabi* – named in the beginning or end credits.

colored auras that surround the body<sup>134</sup>) and had read about spirit photography or referred to it as a matter of course (see Gunning 1995).

In her book “Time Travels,” Elizabeth Grosz discusses a kind of human relationship to the material world that involves the incorporation of “prosthetic objects” (2005:145-52). “Living bodies,” she writes, “tend toward prostheses: they acquire and utilize supplementary objects through a kind of incorporation that enables them to function as if they were bodily organs” (ibid:146-47). In this she includes any “external, inert objects, prosthetic extensions, organs artificially or culturally acquired rather than organically evolved” (ibid:145). She suggests that the division between the body’s inside and outside is not clear-cut, and that prostheses may include “other living beings, cultural institutions, [and] social practices” – even language (ibid:151). For my purposes here, it is helpful to think of familiar technologies of detection and objective visualization – x-rays, polygraphs, and Kirlian cameras, but also home video intercom systems, digital cameras, camcorders, and so on – as prosthetic devices that have been adopted to meet specific needs or deficiencies of the body, but that when employed, lead to “unexpected and unplanned-for emergence of new properties and abilities” (ibid:148). In the case of my interlocutors, this emergence takes place in the form of a series of imaginative effects, combining technologies of visualization with the extrasensory eye of insight to imagine a tool with which one may be able to see the invisible in visual form.

If the eye of insight can provide reliable knowledge of the interior states of others, what if one were to turn its gaze upon oneself? In the intimate relationship between mystic master and disciple, the eye of insight can function as a *disciplinary* instrument, as a tool of pious reflexivity as it were. If I am worried that the sins I commit will be revealed in the presence of the mystic, I

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<sup>134</sup> I know of at least one clinic in Tehran that uses such a camera for diagnosis.

might take care not to commit those sins. But in the absence of such a master, might it be possible to appropriate his vision for a similar purpose? Here we come full circle to the story with which I began. In our gathering at the park, Mr. Makeri had asked whether it was possible to use some instrument, like a car's oil gauge, to accurately assess one's own status in the eyes of God. The proliferation of moral uncertainties has rendered suspect the discernment provided by one's own individual conscience. The spread of hypocrisy, the duplicitous deployment of pious signs and pious behavior, has heightened anxieties that one's own self may be concealing sinful intentions, impossible to detect in the everyday flow of seemingly moral behavior. God clearly knows the truth: He knows both that which I conceal and that which I reveal. But the mystic, if I should come within the range of his gaze, also knows. He can see me as the true animal that I have become, by committing sins of which even I am not fully cognizant. If only I were able to see what he sees, to obtain the accurate diagnosis produced by his vision, perhaps I could set myself back onto the straight path.

By itself, and separated from the person of the mystic-teacher and his eye, the yearning for a snapshot of the soul is a desire for the certainty of spiritual self-constitution. Kamran told me the following about his anxieties about his spiritual condition, when he was a student of no more than nineteen years:

I never pursued occult sciences, he said, and I was never after instructions for opening my eye of insight. But you know, the mystical atmosphere is such that it pulls you by itself. For example you read a book about Mr. Bahjat, which says he possesses twenty marvels, including the ability to see from the back of his head, or you go visit [Ayatollah] Hassanzadeh, and fear envelops you that he might see you in the form of a pig. This feeling of need had automatically been created in me. I didn't care about seeing others [with the eye]. It was important for me that I see myself. I once saw myself in the form of a disgusting white mouse. Really disgusting. It was a series of dreams, either in the month of Ramadan or Muharram. After I saw myself as the mouse, I worked on myself for a while and tried to reform myself. In the next dream, my soul detached itself from

my body. I traveled to Najaf and Samara [these are important pilgrimage sites in Iraq]. But I wasn't allowed into Karbala, because I was told that I wasn't worthy. The next time, after I had worked on myself some more, I was allowed to enter Karbala.

When my soul left my body, a green halo enveloped me from my waist all the way up to my shoulders. And then it carried me with speed to Karbala. In the next dream, I saw Imam Mahdi, who gave me tidings of his return. And in the final dream, I was one of his soldiers.

At the time, I took these dreams seriously. Why? Because Mr. Bahjat also dreamed. Because so-and-so described others' dreams to me from the preacher's pulpit.

Kamran had been granted the eye of insight in his dreams. There, he had seen his grotesque inner reality, and he had therefore resolved to reform himself. With each subsequent dream, he had been able to gauge his progress, both through shifts in his inner appearance, and through proximity to holy Shi'i shrines. At length he had been transformed from a dirty mouse to a soldier of the Imam Mahdi; from a reject of the saintly shrines, to a pilgrim welcome in their sanctuary.<sup>135</sup>

A similar anxiety about a hideous moral interior can be glimpsed in the following selection from a blog post by a young pious Basij activist in Tehran on November 1, 2008. It is titled "Oh Concealer of faults, Oh Concealer of faults, Oh Concealer of faults...":

A friend of mine was extremely sharp-tongued and foul-mouthed until recently. Everything we did to get him to abandon this one bad trait was useless. Even though he was aware of his own ugly quality and really intended to reform himself, he had gotten used to it. He would get infuriated instantly and would involuntarily quarrel with others.

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<sup>135</sup> Few of my interlocutors candidly described to me their desire for seeing their own isthmus image like Kamran, partly because, I think, the desire can reveal one as deeply vulnerable. Even Kamran provided the caveat that he no longer believed the way he did when he was a teenager (that is, about five years prior to my interview with him), and he now believes his dream was probably just the result of suggestion from the books he had read and sermons he had heard. As we saw in his quote about Ayatollah Bahjat's botched visit to the shrine earlier, he was generally derisive of the popular interest in mystic's marvels.

Then we realized that his conduct had all of a sudden changed. Everyone was surprised. I was close to him and insisted that he tell me what had led to this transformation. Finally he told me this story:

“I had become so harsh and aggressive that I felt like I’d become like a wild dog. On Thursday night last week, around 2 or 3 past midnight, I suddenly woke up. I thought to myself, Thursday night is the time for praying and keeping the night alive. I got up to perform the night prayer. I went to the bathroom to perform ablutions, but when I cupped my hand full of water and looked into the mirror to wash my face, I froze. I saw my own face in the form of a dog with a huge, foaming snout. I don’t know if it was a dog or a wolf. I ran out of the bathroom, breathing heavily, as though I was about to have a heart attack. But the dog was still with me. I recalled my own actions and remembered that a foul-mouthed person is like a savage animal. I raised my hand to touch my face, but before I could reach my face, my hand hit a snout and a set of sharp canines. It was as though the dog, which was me myself, wanted to tear me to shreds too. I called God’s name until it calmed down.

I began to beg God for forgiveness, saying ‘Oh Forgiver of sins, and Oh Concealer of sins, and Oh Concealer of sins,’ begging God to help me straighten up [*adam besham* – lit. “that I may become human”], until I fell asleep. When I woke up for the morning prayer, there were no more signs of that savage animal. But I am still afraid of myself, my own nature, even my own face.”

I tried a lot to console my friend after this incident. I told him that I had never heard nor read anywhere that a sinner may be able to see his own isthmus face [*surat-e barzakhi*]. People who have the isthmus eye are always pure, sinless individuals. Maybe you had watched a scary werewolf movie beforehand. It was dark and you were alone. Maybe a shadow had been cast in the mirror and you were frightened and the rest was produced by your creative mind. It was a good thing that happened nonetheless, and it created a good change.

But even I couldn’t reject what had happened. His face still gets contorted with fright and anxiety whenever he hears the bark of a dog or sees a wild animal.

I wish that I could also see my true face. And perhaps my true face is so horrible that I will die instantly from seeing it, and rid a world from my existence.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> <http://heyatonline.blogfa.com/8708.aspx>

Through the stories that circulate about the lives and marvels of the mystics, then, the reader knows that true knowledge of the sinner's inner state is possible. Through everyday interactions with sinful others, and through pious self-examination that is an elementary step on the path of moral self-formation, the reader also knows that he himself is a sinner. And yet, perhaps in the same way that he suspects seemingly virtuous others to be concealing hideous interiors, he is concerned that behind his own practices of apparent virtue lies a sinister reality of which even he is unaware. He desires true knowledge of this inner reality, because he wants to be able to reform his self. But no mystic of the caliber promoted in hagiographic lore is willing to adopt him as a student, to train and cultivate him through the discipline of his gaze. And hence his desire may be directed toward the gaze itself as an instrument of self-knowledge and self-certainty, to be acquired through pious practice, or technical procedure.

## **Conclusion**

In April 1956, the literary scholar Mohammad Parvin Gonabadi wrote a short article in the respected literary and historical monthly *Yaghma*, ruminating about the advances of Western civilization, its spirit of “enlightenment” (*roshangari*), invention, and discovery, and the bewildered reaction of Eastern nations, particularly that of Iran, to its progress (Parvin Gonabadi 1956). Parvin lamented that a group of shallow people in Iran were deluded to believe that the new civilization was nothing but “the worship of materialism, and drowning in desires and pleasures.” As a result, they had forgotten about Iran's own glorious achievements of the past and had engaged in blind mimicry of every European custom and tradition, losing their ancient heritage while failing to learn the “true” civilization of the West, the “enlightenment” of its scientists. Then he wondered:

But isn't this famed enlightenment, discovery, and invention of the westerners in material and scientific matters similar to the prodigious spirit that existed, in the name of vision [*kashf*] and marvel [*karamat*], among many of our country's great Sufis and authentic holy men? And if we, like the holy men of old, pursue pure truth on the way to acquiring knowledge and art, and abstain from personal wants and desires, and refrain from making knowledge into an instrument for status and wealth, and learn science only for the sake of science, will we not then attain a prodigious and dazzling enlightenment that is similar to visions and marvels?

He proceeds to enumerate, with frustration, the ills and vices that plague Iranian society – cheating and lying among merchants, bribery in the bureaucracies, corruption in every aspect of social life, the weakening of friendships, and the ubiquity of deceit, hypocrisy, and profiteering. In such circumstances, he asks, if someone were to remain pure and chaste, respect and love others, work for the good of society, refrain from lying, cheating, and duplicity, and prefer spiritual pleasures like purity and truth over bodily pleasures, would not such a person be engaged in ascetic exercise? It is clear, he says, that such asceticism (*riyazat*) will pay off:

Its result will be a purity of mind, an integrity of thought, and a miraculous enlightenment with which he will be able to read the thoughts of anybody with one gaze, and become conscious of his inner intentions... Because this person is pure of any envy and improper love and hatred, he does not view the truths of this world through the window of lowly desires, but rather sees everything the way it is.

Parvin was writing more than a half century ago, and much has changed in Iran in the intervening decades. But then his somber diagnosis of the ills of contemporary society might very well have been spoken, with only the slightest variation, by an ordinary Tehrani today. His call, furthermore, to remember and learn from the holy men of old has been heeded and updated to include a new crop of mystics. The men whose hagiographies have grown popular since the 1990s are set apart from the imagined corrupt majority through their exemplary ascetic purity, selfless love of others, and total devotion to truth. Their spiritual purity has won them marvelous



abilities, like peering beyond the surfaces of display and deceit and into the souls of other people, to see them as they are, in their true form.

If Parvin thought the marvels of the mystics of old had something in common with the enlightenment of modern western scientists, something like his analogy animates the enthusiasts of contemporary mystics' hagiographies as well. The mystics gaze into the universe of God's creation, into their own souls, and into the souls of others. What they see is truth in images; images that have their own separate ontological existence in an imaginal (*mithali*), isthmus (*barzakhi*), realm. But if the images have a being independent of the mystics' gaze, what actualizes them as image can only be the higher, the ultimate, gaze of God. The scientist, on the other hand, also peers into the universe of creation, into the bodies and psyches of others, and perhaps into himself. His gaze is a technoscientific one, and the images it produces have, like those of the mystic, their own independent existence. They are representations of reality that are impartial and accurate, actualized not by the mind of the scientist, but by the laws of nature and the workings of technology.

We can finally return to Mr. Makeri's search for a dipstick with which to gauge his soul's status in the eyes of God. That evening in the park, he told me and the other members of the Asrar discussion forum that he thought Ayatollah Bahjat and other mystics knew what such a gauge might be. But "maybe," he said, "when they looked at me, the questioner, they didn't see in my face the capacity to own such a gauge, or to properly employ it. Isn't it true that they have divine sight?" But the mystics' divine sight is already the gauge. If I am a sinner, which I know I am (and thus I beseech God to conceal my faults), then Ayatollah Bahjat can see exactly what kind of sinner I am with his gaze/gauge. And the fact that I have to utter "Oh Concealer of faults" in his presence makes it all the more necessary that I own that gaze/gauge to be able to

peer into myself to see in vivid image form just what it is that I have to conceal. Ayatollah Bahjat, judging by his gaze, may think I cannot handle this gauge. But God's gaze is higher, he created the gauge, as well as the method to activate it, and so to Him I appeal.

If we consider the mystical hagiographies as texts in an authoritative tradition whose authors and readers strive to make coherent, the pursuit of mystical vision presents a contrary ripple within such attempts. In orthodox formulations, the eye of insight is to be viewed as a gift from God, a reward for arduous spiritual exercise, and for heroic acts of piety. It is a heart-warming sign that encourages the mystic to continue striving. But it should not become an object of desire in itself, as it can distract the spiritual wayfarer, preoccupying him with minor achievements when the real prize – unity with God – lies ahead. Moreover, piety is the *pre-condition* for obtaining the eye, not the reverse. Nevertheless, as we have seen, in the imaginative interpretations of some of the readers of these texts, the same eye of insight can become an instrument of certainty, cutting through the mists of religious doubt, social duplicity, and moral hesitation. It becomes a tool that makes piety possible.

This view of the eye-of-insight-as-instrument is contrary to the authoritative tradition. But having escaped condemnation, it is not yet heretical. If we constrain our study of pious practice to only those instances in which coherence is produced and maintained, we will miss the emergence of imaginative practices that fall somewhere between orthodoxy and heresy – practices that embody pious desires, concerns, and anxieties without remaining fully within the limits set by tradition. It may in fact be that examining the not-quite-heretical is crucial for improving our understanding of wider processes of religious change, such as conversion, disillusionment, transformations of orthodoxy, and sectarian differentiation.

## Conclusion

At a dinner party in Tehran in June 2011, I met Mehdi, the cousin of an old friend who had recently completed a master's degree in electrical engineering and worked at a private technology firm. He had heard about my research from his cousin and was curious to find out what I had discovered in the course of my studies. "What did you see?" he asked me with a wide smile, "Did you manage to find anything that was really supernatural? Where does *physics* end and *metaphysics* begin?" I explained, as I had always done in response to such questions, that I was not concerned about what was or was not supernatural, but about how people made the distinction themselves. Moreover, I said, I was not in a position to pass absolute judgment on anything I had seen, to rule what had been true and what had been false. Rather, I aimed to understand how those people for whom such phenomena mattered distinguished real from fake, rational from superstitious, the authentic mystic from the charlatan, and so on. As in previous conversations in which I had received this question, I felt that my response had been disappointing. Why waste so many months conducting research, I imagined my friend's cousin asking, if you cannot even distinguish the real from the illusory?

On my way home, I wondered why it was that I had received this exact question so many times. Something about Mehdi's formulation of the question – "Where does *physics* end and *metaphysics* begin?" – suddenly struck a chord of understanding. My response had always missed the mark: This *was* the important question to consider. It was what most of my interlocutors had wanted to know, and somehow I had always ignored this fact. The question itself mattered.

I prepared myself to provide a better response the next time I was probed on the same topic. Luckily, it happened less than a week later, and the questioner was my own research assistant, Hamid, a recent graduate in sociology. “You did all this research,” he began, “So what did you finally find? Did you see anything that you could confirm as supernatural?” I turned the question back on him: “I’ve received this question so many times that I suspect there is something socially significant about it. I wonder, why do people ask? And I have a hypothesis that I want you to comment on. I suspect the reason some people want to know the answer to this question is that they doubt that anything supernatural exists at all. Perhaps they are grappling with religious doubt and are on the verge of losing their belief in God, the afterlife, and so on. By asking about the supernatural, they are actually asking about God. If something supernatural exists – say witchcraft, or a marvelous power possessed by a mystic, or a true dream – then perhaps God too can exist.” Hamid was excited: “That is exactly what it is. You have nailed it. And it’s not just me. I have a lot of friends who have the same issue.”

I cannot claim, of course, that the pursuit of the supernatural in contemporary Iran is always a matter of religious doubt. That is certainly not the response I would provide to the next person who asks me the question. Following my conversation with my research assistant, I even posed the same hypothesis to another friend, Morteza, whom I mention in the Introduction, and received a very different reaction. “No I don’t doubt God,” Morteza said, “I’m just curious about specific manifestations of the supernatural. I’m curious to know of existing examples.” If the question cannot be reduced to a matter of pervasive religious skepticism, then how can it be explained?

If my dissertation has helped to clarify a solution to this problem, it would have to be that *questioning* itself is a dominant aspect of religious experience among middle class Iranians.

Sometimes this questioning is a matter of religious doubt. At other times, it has to do with ambivalence over the social propriety of a particular practice or belief – is it rational? Is it religiously permissible? In still other cases, it is related to uncertainties about the nature of a seemingly supernatural encounter – is it true? Is it sleight of hand? Is it a psychotic delusion?

Such questioning probably exists in some form or other in every religious tradition and across time and space. But its pervasiveness in Iran would indicate the effect of broader social and historical transformations. Equivocations among the upholders of rationality over the precise boundaries between the rational and the superstitious – which I discussed in Chapter 1 – hint at tensions that have emerged in the past three decades through the continued fusion of Shi‘i jurisprudential authority with centralizing state power. As I showed in Chapter 3, the reading public for whom Islam has been objectified and placed within a comparative framework that includes other religions as well as modern esoteric and New Age traditions cannot always satisfy itself with unequivocal responses from the clergy who act as guardians of Shi‘a orthodoxy. And Chapter 5 has shown that even one’s own internal moral truth may become a site of murkiness as familiar structures of trust and reputation-checking have been undercut by increasing urbanization and the bureaucratization of pious appearance and conduct.

Mehdi’s question then, “Where does *physics* end and *metaphysics* begin?” could only be answered today through a multiplication: Where is the line between virtuous and wicked action? Where and how can the state delineate the boundary between the rational and the irrational? Where does the moral self end, and the afflicted self (psychotic or possessed) begin? How is textual truth to be verified? And no less important, who is to decide?

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