

THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC MYSTICISM AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY IN THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI

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Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was one of the most complex political and religious figures of twentieth century. Through a combination of his captivating personal charisma and enunciation of bold revolutionary principles, he became the face of an Iranian revolution that established a theocratic government in a modernized world. The Imam's theory of Islamic jurisprudence, a government based on Islamic law and ruled by a supreme jurist, was a revolutionary political philosophy, both in Muslim and Western society. His theory of a government based on the *sharia*, with the unique twist of a supreme executor, was Khomeini's own brainchild. A majority of the scholarly discussion surrounding Khomeini, both in the West and the Middle East, has been dissecting his theory of *velayat-e faqih* (governance of the jurist) and its roots in the theories of other Islamic writers, both during and before Khomeini's time. In order to fully grapple with Khomeini's theories and understand how he was able to apply them to the modern world, it is important to understand how Khomeini, the lifelong cleric, came to these conclusions. The ideas and thoughts of the early Khomeini are essential to understanding the Imam's principles later in life. Khomeini had an extensive background as a cleric, heavily influenced by the ideas of Islamic mysticism. This paper will argue that one of the principles of Islamic mysticism, known as *Irfan*, was a crucial element in the ideological framework and foundation of Khomeini's thought. Furthermore, this paper will argue that *Irfan*, both in and of itself and Khomeini's use of it, was in turn influenced by Greek philosophy, and that both were among the most influential factors in the development of Khomeini's unique theory of the proper form of theocratic government.

By the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Khomeini was a household name among Iranians and the rest of the politically informed world. But his popularity during the Revolution, which many attribute to his humble lifestyle and mastery of Shi'ite Islam, owed to his background as a lifelong cleric. Hailing from a very small town near Tehran named Khomein, and educated in the seminaries in rural Iran during his formative years, Khomeini eventually moved to the religious capital at Qom, where he was educated by some of the leading Shi'ite clerics of his time. Alexander Knysh, in his article *Irfan Revisited*, states that "these teachers and their masters linked the future ayatollah to the long tradition of learning in Iranian Islam that combined mystical and metaphysical trends" (Knysh, 34).

Khomeini's clerical education led to his keen interest in and eventual mastery of the philosophy of *Irfan*, which author Vanessa Martin, in her *Creating an Islamic State*, describes as "the perception that all creation derives from the One, the eternal truth" (31). This concept may be categorized as a form of Islamic mysticism, as it deals with the spiritual development of oneself in relation to God and the physical world. *Irfan* implies a spiritual perfection in daily life, captured by the idea of "divine essence" and that "man can only attain felicity and flourish to the fullest extent in which full cooperation in pursuit of the common good exists" (34). Essentially, the individual must be mastered in spiritual growth internally as well as externally. In *Irfan*, the internal self is about introspection and tranquility, which reflects externally by means of humility and good deeds. *Irfan* is about progressing towards this personal mastery, which is salvation and closeness to God through the actions and religious knowledge of an individual, as well as the experiential wisdom he achieves. This spiritual development comes in stages and must be guided by someone with grandeur, as cleric Murtaza Mutahhari, Khomeini's student and influential revolutionary figure, vividly articulates in one of his essays:

...all these stages and stations must be passed under the guidance and supervision of a mature and perfect example of humanity who, having traveled this path, is aware of the manners and ways of each station. If not, and there is no perfect human being to guide him on his path, he is in danger of going astray (Mutahhari, 4).

This implies the need for guidance, in this case religious, and a natural hierarchy of understanding. In this very idea alone, it is easy to see that Khomeini's political convictions about societal leadership were rooted in the tradition of *Irfan*. *Irfan* is very much a spiritual concept, but it has practical aspects as well. Mutahhari explains that *Irfan* "describes and explains the relationship and responsibilities the human being bears towards itself, towards the world, and towards God" (5). It is from this practical aspect that the relationship between government and mysticism begins to emerge. However, in the early stages of Khomeini's theological career, he focused on the mystical aspect, while he refrained from an engagement in politics even though he followed them closely.

Irfan influenced Khomeini's lifestyle as well as writings. In his early years as a scholar, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, he taught seminars and commented extensively on writings concerning *Irfan* and Islamic mysticism (Knysh, 632). He also lived very much like a medieval ascetic, depriving himself of material possessions and suppressing physical desires (635). As the revolution drew nearer, he had to abandon his stress on mysticism because of the focus required for the situation in Tehran, but, as Alexander Knysh stresses, "Khomeini never seems to have abandoned his early spiritual and intellectual allegiances" (651).

Irfan and other general tenets of Islamic mysticism are essential in understanding the character and thoughts of Khomeini, but Greek philosophy is just as crucial to his development of *velayat-e faqih*. The ideas and thoughts of Greek philosophers, particularly regarding the relationship among the self, the community, and the divine, had loomed large in the formation of Khomeini's ideas. Knysh observes that, even though Khomeini was "not the first Muslim thinker to come under the influence of the ancient philosopher[s]," his ideas had "heavy reliance" on the ideas of Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus (638). Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, Aristotle's *Ethics*, and a fusion of Plotinus-influenced ideas all had a dramatic influence on Khomeini's principles (Martin, 34). Khomeini sought to synthesize and reconcile the principles of these Greek philosophers with the mystical traditions of *Irfan*. He was "ready to accept non-Islamic theories provided they were sanctioned by the tradition within the contours of which his thought operated" (Knysh, 639). Khomeini recognized that Islamic thought had pre-Islamic roots, and found that Greek philosophy was consistent with Islamic mysticism (639).

Some Islamic scholars do not believe that the Greek philosophers influenced the tradition of *Irfan*. For example, Mutahhari acknowledges there are elements of Greek thought in *Irfan*, but that its "sources of inspiration [are] from Islam itself and from nowhere else" (Mutahhari, 9). It is difficult to gauge Khomeini's specific thoughts on the roots of *Irfan*, but regardless, he saw the similarities to Greek philosophy and used them in conjunction. The evidence, however, linking the principles of *Irfan* to Greek philosophy is quite strong. In fact, Vanessa Martin sees a direct connection in that "from Plotinus *Irfan* inherited the view of the divine intellect that is the origin of all creation and which provides unity to existence" (Martin, 35). Khomeini's thoughts, driven by *Irfan*, also showed the link to these Greek ideas, particularly the Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas of the One and the philosopher-king.

Plotinus, who came after Plato's lifetime, was responsible for the philosophy of Neo-Platonism, which adds the element of the One to Plato's philosopher-king. Knysh and Martin agree that Islamic scholars who applied Greek philosophy did not really distinguish between Plato and Plotinus, so their thought shows traces of both (as they are inherently related). The key is the idea of the perfect man,

which finds roots in both Plato's philosopher-king as well as *Irfan's* perfect spiritual guide, as they both derive from a divine nature. Plato stressed that the philosopher-king had achieved a certain level of spirituality, a sort of oneness with the external world, his internal soul, and that of the divine, which Plotinus represented by the idea of the One. Khomeini incorporated these Greek doctrines in his theology of Islamic mysticism and *Irfan*, eventually applying them to his theory of governance. He saw them through his lens of Islamic education. Knysh believes that Khomeini "reduce[d] the chilling impersonality of the Neo-Platonist notion of the One and replace[d] it with the God of Muslim monotheism" (Knysh, 639 – 640). Khomeini manifested the idea of a philosopher-king through the nature of the perfect man. This person would be in essence the embodiment of Islam, and would have direct connection to the divine through his gnostic and religious practices as well as mastery of the *sharia* (God's law). Khomeini's very own words demonstrated this connection: "Anyone who has the quality of a perfect man, that is the quality of the divine essence, is a caliph in this world as he was in the origins" (Martin, 39). Here, Khomeini displayed a vivid, though indirect, link between Islam and government. Khomeini had successfully mixed Greek philosophy with *Irfan* to create his lifelong ideological convictions that display themselves in his later works on government.

Irfan and Greek philosophy are the backbone of Khomeini's theory of Islamic jurisprudence. Those traditions' stress on spiritual perfection, divine presence, and communal good implies that God must be somehow involved with government, since Khomeini, a devout Muslim, saw God as the true way and path to salvation. No community would then, by this conviction, achieve utopia without direct adherence to the *sharia* since that is God's law. The idea of utopia, derived from both Islamic mysticism and Greek philosophy, is ubiquitous in Khomeini's works (Martin, 35). Thus, the only way to achieve the perfect community would be for the perfect man to lead it, and since the perfect man is endowed with divine essence, the government would automatically be theocratic in some way. Vanessa Martin sums up this derivation by saying that, "Khomeini's background in *Irfan* led him to see the states as being embodied in one wise and virtuous figure, in the tradition of Plato's philosopher ruler" (103). Here Martin demonstrates not only how *Irfan* is directly related to Greek thought and Khomeini's ideas on governance, but also how these made up the ideological framework that Khomeini used. His grounding in Islamic mysticism directly influenced his political theories.

In his book of collected lectures, *Roots of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, renowned Iranian scholar Hamid Algar makes a strong connection between the role of Islamic mysticism and Khomeini's eventual role in politics, both popular and legal. Algar explains that:

All too frequently in the modern Muslim mentality philosophy and mysticism are held to represent a retreat from reality, a total abdication of any kind of political and social role, as if they were merely abstract matters that had no real connection with the existing problems of Muslims and the Islamic world. Imam Khomeini is living proof that these two subjects, correctly conceived and pursued, are on the contrary the mainspring for a form activity that is profoundly correct, guided by a clear insight that is not merely political and strategic (Algar, 52).

Here Algar draws the connection between a numbers of ideas. Firstly, the ascetic quality of Khomeini's life, which was due to his mastery of *Irfan*, was a huge factor in his popularity among Iranians, who were tired of the Shah's imposed westernization and admired Khomeini's humble lifestyle. Secondly, Khomeini's spiritual background underpinned his political convictions and also gave him ease in justifying them. Khomeini, though he was not the highest-ranking cleric of all Iran, represented an Islamic version of the philosopher-king, the perfect man. By virtue of his spiritual idealism and charismatic nature, millions of Iranians adored him and still do (Algar, 53). In his book *Theology of Discontent*, Columbia professor Hamid Dabashi states that the pursuit of "justice", which draws from the idea of

spiritual perfection and utopia found in the traditions of *Irfan* and Greek philosophy, led Khomeini to lead the people through a revolution against the Shah's rule and eventually to secure his place as the Supreme Leader of an Islamic government (Dabashi, 413). Ultimately, Dabashi thinks that Khomeini felt that "people sometimes do not know what is good for them" and that "in the mystical tradition, the path to spiritual perfection (rendered into political truth) is guided by the master" (413). Clearly, there was a demonstrable link between Khomeini's spiritual ideas of perfection, both on a personal and communal level, and his thoughts on how to conduct affairs in the physical world.

Hamid Algar, who has interviewed Khomeini directly, and who is a leading contemporary Iranian scholar, is very assertive about the relationship between Khomeini's mysticism, which this paper has established is directly linked with Greek philosophy, and his thoughts on government in his article *The Fusion of the Gnostic and the Political in the Personality and Life of Imam Khomeini*. He believes it is a grave injustice that the world views Khomeini only as a charismatic leader, failing to recognize his mysticism, his defining trait (Algar, 1). Algar views Khomeini's political convictions later in life to be the surface of his deeper, mystic qualities and that Khomeini's early principles "are the manifest fruit of a powerful, original, and lasting vision" and that "he possessed a vision transcending the political at the very same time that it controlled and embraced it" (1 - 2). Algar, who had personal interaction with Khomeini and knows a lot of respected individuals who did as well, is in a convincing position to make this argument. He also provides evidence from the Imam himself for his claims. Algar cites a 1944 lecture, considered one of Khomeini's first on politics, in which Khomeini opens with a passage from *Manzil al-Sa'irin* (one of the key theological books on Islamic mysticism) dealing with man emerging from darkness. Khomeini then interprets the passage and directly proceeds to discuss the politics in the "lamentable Muslim world" (4). Algar views this direct train of thought, from a passage on Islamic mysticism to a discussion on politics, as a "textual indication of the interconnectedness of the ethical and the gnostic with the political in the worldview of the Imam" (4). This is hard to dispute and it makes sense that Khomeini's principles of *Irfan*, which he spent the majority of his life studying, teaching, and living, would be omnipresent in his political philosophy.

There is some scholarly disagreement, however, concerning the strength of these claims. For example, Knysh, who strongly acknowledges that Khomeini never lost his convictions concerning *Irfan* and Greek philosophy¹, nonetheless believes that the connection between Khomeini's spirituality and his political thought is subtle and too unclear to make a scholarly claim about. Knysh calls for more thorough analysis, but his tone essentially conveys his belief in the connection, but he cannot say definitively that it exists. Even with further study, Knysh sees these relationships as too "personal to yield to even the most competent scholarly analysis" (652).

Obviously, it would be impossible to know completely what Khomeini thought. But the evidence that Algar cited in his article, together with the shared philosophical heritage of *Irfan*, Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, and *velayat-e faqih*, is too compelling to ignore. Khomeini opened a chapter in his most famous work, *Islamic Government*, by calling for a government based on the *sharia* and also saying, perhaps more importantly, that, "in order for law to ensure the reform and happiness of man, there must be an executive power and an executor" (Khomeini, 40). Where then would an author like Knysh claim that Khomeini got the principle of this idea from? Khomeini's whole life was dedicated to *Irfan* and to deny its influence on his ideological thoughts on an Islamic state would be to misapprehend the true nature of Khomeini's principles. Hamid Algar is probably in the best position to make this claim, as his

¹ Knysh cites a letter from Khomeini to Soviet president Gorbachev, during the Communist collapse, where he heavily displayed his knowledge on "esoteric philosophy" and invites Russian leaders to Qom to "acquire the knowledge for the construction of a new society based on truth and justice" (Knysh, 652).

closeness with Iran, Khomeini, and Islam gives him great perspective. Even if one were to disagree with the direct link between Khomeini's background and his *velayat-e faqih*, one must recognize, at the very least, that, as Vanessa Martin vividly articulates:

Irfan is important for understanding how Khomeini constructed himself as a leader, the philosophic and cultural traditions he drew upon, the objectives he gave his followers, his relationship with them, and his vision, particularly in terms of authority, of the relationship between the leader and the community (Martin, 35 – 36).

Though it may be difficult, as Knysh pointed out, to make a direct textual connection between *Irfan*, Greek philosophy, and Khomeini's theories of Islamic government, the scholarly interpretations of all three demonstrate an ideological consistency. Khomeini's thoughts were a blend of a variety of ideas, and with his extensive knowledge on Islamic mysticism and Greek philosophy, it is definitely a safe assumption that both directly influenced his theory of Islamic theocracy. Knysh promotes a safe scholarly view, but when it comes to the ideological convictions of a historical figure, reasonable conclusions based on Khomeini's own writings, contemporaries, teachers, and influences, both intellectual and spiritual, are essential to understanding the roots of his theories. The philosopher-king of the Greeks, the Islamic spiritual guide of *Irfan*, and the supreme jurist of *velayat-e faqih* are three variations on the idea of leadership, and Khomeini blended all three in his beliefs. The historical, philosophical, and theoretical connection surrounding these three traditions seem to be related as well, as orchestrated and expressed through the complex personality of the Imam and his views.

This paper sought to demonstrate that the ideas of *Irfan* and Greek philosophy, particularly Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, were crucial in the life of Ayatollah Khomeini and his ideas on Islamic theocracy. Furthermore, this paper presented a case that *Irfan* and Greek philosophy are inherently linked, and that Khomeini blended both to form his ideological convictions on life and government, and that ignorance of this connection hinders a full understanding Khomeini's complex character. Though not dissecting the Khomeini's *velayat-e faqi*, this paper argued that his overall principle, a government based on the *sharia* and administered by a supreme jurist, was firmly rooted in the early years of Khomeini's clerical experience.

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