

POPULAR AND OFFICIAL ISLAM:
CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO IRAN

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In a small booklet entitled "A difficult choice: the religion of ordinary people"¹ Professor Jacques Kamstra, a specialist in Japanese religions at the University of Amsterdam, distinguishes between two sorts, or rather two levels of religion. On the one hand there is the religion of certain intellectuals, including theologians and some philosophers. This kind of religion is expressed in abstract terms which allow, for instance, Christianity and Islam to be spoken of as two global normative systems claiming universal validity. On the other hand there is the religion of ordinary people who have received much less education. This kind of religion is expressed palpably in lively images and concrete forms which make it possible, for instance, to speak of an immense variety of locally lived ordinary religion within Christianity and Islam.

Professor Kamstra observes that, first of all, current scholarship – by definition a product of intellectual minds – has addressed itself mainly to the first or intellectual kind of religion, neglecting what may be called the concrete religion of ordinary people. And secondly he observes that such scholarship, when dealing with such non-intellectual religion, tends very much to impose its own general ideas and schemes of religion on the available materials instead of describing accurately the experiential realities of that concrete religion of various groups of ordinary people. As a consequence he contends, popular religion, as the living religion of ordinary people, has been neglected by scholarship on

¹ J. H. Kamstra, *Een moeilijke keuze: de godsdienst van gewone mensen*. Bolsward: Het witte boekhuis, 1986 (64 p.). The text was published earlier under the title of "Een moeilijke keuze: de godsdienst van de gewone man" (*Theologisch Tijdschrift*, 1980).

two counts: first because most scholars themselves have been more interested in intellectuals' religion, and second because they have intellectualized ordinary people's religion by enclosing it too soon in a theory instead of describing it first accurately as it presents itself in particular contexts. At the end of his discourse the author calls for renewed efforts to acquire knowledge of this kind of religion of ordinary people.

It is true that the history of religions as it developed during the last hundred years or so, has concentrated especially on the study of texts and the history of religious ideas and practices of a normative and more or less "official" nature. Nevertheless we have a great number of scholarly publications on tales and folklore, on popular religious practices and ideas. It has been, however, less the historians of religions who have worked on these materials than ethnographers and folklorists, local historians and other researchers often not attached to universities who have carried out fieldwork. Much of the recent interest in and research on popular religion has come from the social sciences and one can even speak of a rediscovery of this field of research². One can also object to a certain simplification in the scheme of "ordinary people's" versus "intellectuals'" religion and choose a broader framework for one's analysis, distinguishing for instance "lived" religion (*religion vécue*) from "normative" religion³.

² P. H. Vrijhof and J. Waardenburg (Eds.), *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies*. The Hague: Mouton, 1979. Important from a systematic point of view is Vittorio Lanternari, "La religion populaire. Prospective historique et anthropologique", *Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions* No 53/1 (1982) 121-143. Several colloquia were devoted to the study of popular religion in Québec: *Les religions populaires. Colloque international 1970*. Textes édités par Benoît Lacroix et Pietro Boglioni. Québec: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1972. *Le merveilleux. Deuxième colloque sur les religions populaires 1971*. Textes présentés par Fernand Dumont, Jean-Paul Montminy et Michel Stein. Québec: Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1973. *Recherche et religions populaires. Colloque international 1973*. Textes édités par André Désilets et Guy Laperrière. Montréal: Les Editions Bellarmin, 1976. For a Catholic theological reflection, see for instance *Foi populaire, foi savante*. Actes du Ve Colloque du Centre d'histoire des religions populaires tenu au Collège dominicain de théologie (Ottawa). Paris: Cerf, 1976.

³ "Popular" stands here for actually living and experienced religion of local groups

But Professor Kamstra's appeal to pay more attention to popular religion than has been done by historians of religions in the past is clear, and I would like to take up his challenge in this paper, concentrating on contemporary developments in popular Islam, both popular religion and popular culture in Islam. It is true that Islamicists, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, are intellectuals by their very profession and have tended, inevitably, to pay most attention to the development of ideas in Islam or, when dealing with Muslim societies, to focus on problems already known to them from Western societies. Most studies on present-day Islam have concentrated on trends which are to be found among Muslim intellectuals, including social and political leaders, and in studies of Muslim societies processes of modernization and of rationalization generally have attracted much attention. As a consequence, however, popular Islam has tended to be seen and studied as a kind of folklore surviving on the fringe either of a traditional *šarī'a* Islam or of a modernized, enlightened Islam, and also on the fringe of more or less secular ideologies and more or less secularized societies. It is worth asking what are the real dimensions of popular Islam at the present time⁴.

or larger masses of people, and is opposed to intellectual elaboration of the normative tradition by the *‘ulamā’*, the religious scholars. Differences between official and popular forms of religion have to do but are not identical with differences between elite and popular culture. Between these two forms of culture a separation seems to have occurred in Muslim countries only in the nineteenth century, when western influences and modernization made for a "westernized" elite. Until that time, communication between different classes seems to have remained intact, partly through the influence of the *ṭuruq*, partly through other social channels.

⁴ The present paper is a continuation of J. Waardenburg, "Official and popular religion in Islam", *Social Compass*, Vol. 25, Nr. 3/4 (1978), pp. 315-341, reprinted in the book *Official and Popular Religion*, mentioned in fn. 2.

1. *Popular and Official Islam*

The definition of popular Islam

Our primary interest is the way in which different groups and persons describe and “define” their Islam, what they themselves consider to be “Islamic” and in which situations they express themselves on the subject. In other words, our leading question is what it means when particular Muslims in particular situations appeal to Islam, express their loyalty to Islam, defend Islam or take Islam as a self-evident truth on which life and society should be based.

This is a basically descriptive approach to culture, religion and social reality as a whole, with all kinds of variations according to particular ethnic groups and classes, ways of life and political regimes, with their prevailing traditions from the past, both in the men’s and the women’s world. The ‘*ulamā*’, of course, have one particular way of defining Islam, so to speak professionally, but there are other ways as well.

We may call the lived Islam (*Islam vécu*) of ordinary people, as they define and experience it, “popular” Islam. It has many variations, encompassing both what is called “religion” according to the definition of the ‘*ulamā*’ and what we call “culture” in the broader sense of the word. Popular Islam, then, is part of popular culture and can be studied as such for instance by cultural anthropologists, and at the same time it is part of the religion which prevails in Muslim societies and can be studied as such for instance by students of religion. Consequently, research into popular Islam should be carried out in close cooperation between Islamicists trained in cultural anthropology, and Islamicists trained in science of religion. Contrary to official, normative Islam, popular Islam is experiential by its very nature. It has its own norms and values, and forms specific to particular groups and persons, and these religious forms are always interwoven with other elements of social and individual life⁵.

⁵ This explains why most research on popular religion has been carried out by

Some forms of popular Islam

Many accounts of Muslim societies, especially from the colonial period, make it appear as if there were hardly any relationships between the ordinary, mostly non-literate people and the 'ulamā', between popular and normative Islam. The tendency was to describe them as two different worlds; tensions between them would occur where popular traditions were in clear conflict with the prescriptions of official or normative Islam, for instance in the case of so-called "black" magic which is forbidden by the Qur'ān (S. 113).

The following forms of popular Islam, considered in isolation and rather statically, were mostly described in such accounts:

- 1) celebrations of feasts including rites of passage;
- 2) ideas and practices aimed at healing, promoting fertility and sustaining life in other ways in different kinds of misfortunes;
- 3) veneration of particular charismatic people endowed with a religious quality, in their lifetime or afterwards;
- 4) customs and rites pertaining to the special place and role of women and their purity which represents the honour of the family, as well as specific forms of women's religiosity;
- 5) particular educational practices based on religious traditions, including religious education;

cultural anthropologists describing and interpreting it within its cultural context, and by sociologists studying it in view of the particular societies and groups involved. What they study is exactly "l'islam vécu". Compare two recent collective studies on the subject in Dutch: Willy Jansen (ed.), *Lokale Islam: Geloof en ritueel in Noord-Afrika en Iran* (Local Islam: Belief and ritual in North Africa and Iran). Muiderberg: Dick Coutinho, 1985, and L. B. Venema (ed.) *Islam en macht: Een historisch-antropologisch perspectief* (Islam and power: an historical-anthropological perspective). Assen-Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1987. Important is the contribution of (social) psychology in the following studies about popular religion in Lebanon and Algeria: Mounir Chamoun, *Les superstitions au Liban. Aspects psycho-sociologiques*. (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1973); Aïssa Ouitis, *Possession, magie et prophétie en Algérie. Essai ethnographique*. (Paris: Ed. de l'Arcanère, 1984) and Noureddine Toulbi, *Le sacré ambigu ou des avatars psychologiques du changement social* (Alger: Entreprise Nationale du Livre, 1984).

6) local pilgrimages, in particular to shrines of men and women considered to bestow *baraka* (blessing) on their visitors;

7) various religious practices in the *turuq* (religious brotherhoods of a *sūfī* or derwish nature);

8) so-called "superstitions" bordering on magical beliefs and behaviour with respect to particular objects, for instance Qur'ān leaves used as protection against evil or certain people. In practice this covered anything which testified to the people's credulity, the exotic nature of their culture and the basic irrationality of their religion, at least according to current western views.

Some movement of popular Islam

Besides describing these various forms of popular Islam, accounts of Muslim societies also mention popular movements. As mass movements appealing to Islam and able to mobilize ordinary people, they can be considered as movements of popular Islam, more dynamic than the forms of popular Islam just mentioned.

The following movements of popular Islam, considered in isolation, can be mentioned:

1) mahdist movements of an eschatological orientation, characterized by the fact that a particular leader gathers a following through his claim to be the expected *mahdī* or "Guided One" and to establish a realm of justice as prophesied at the end of time. Other movements of the same kind claim to present a figure preceding the *mahdī*, for instance a Bāb (as the Babi's did) or a Bahā'ullāh (as the Bahai's do);

2) movements of religiously motivated protest against political authorities, reproaching them for failing to apply Islam, in particular in the realm of justice or social order;

3) movements using Islam as a common symbol in order to unite people in situations of tension or conflict with adherents of other religions and ideologies, or to call for defensive or offensive *ḡihād* against peoples perceived as enemies of Islam;

4) movements of a pan-Islamic nature, striving to unite all Muslims under the banner of Islam, even on a popular level, notwithstanding their political, ethnic and other differences;

5) movements of *da'wa* or appeal to increase the religious practice and fervour among Muslims, and to expand Islam among non-Muslims with a view to their conversion to Islam.

Some characteristics of older descriptions of popular Islam⁶

In the older descriptions, in particular in the colonial period, popular Islam was mostly viewed as very different from official Islam, and as a rather static phenomenon, or sum of static phenomena.

Sometimes these descriptions laid much stress on the permanent features of popular Islam. Scholars held that popular Islam would continue because it gave a social cohesion to the people. Similarly, the continuity of official Islam and the official institutions of Islam was stressed. Normative Islam would not be abandoned although it would be less and less observed and consequently would obtain an ever more utopian or ideal character in the course of time.

Other scholars, on the contrary, stressed that, as in Europe, popular forms of religion in Muslim countries would lose their relevance and be relegated to folklore. Proper education would give the people a modern worldview which would replace superstitious views of religion by scientific ones. Economic development would force people to act rationally according to their best interests and use their economic resources to reach maximum productivity. Proper political development would put an end to feudalism and tribalism and it would dissociate religion from political authority. The prevailing idea here was that normative Islam as well as popular Islam would become marginal to the forces of society. The Muslim intelligentsia was expected to emancipate itself both

⁶ Comp. "A note on earlier research on official and popular Islam" in the article mentioned in fn. 4, pp. 334-338. A bibliography of the most important publications on popular Islam is given at the end of that article, pp. 339-341.

from popular ideas and practices and from the traditional religious system, or at least reinterpret this all in a modernist way.

Some corrections of such older descriptions

To the extent that Muslim societies have been able to develop more actively and freely since the achievement of political independence and to the extent that they have become better known thanks to more appropriate and adequate scholarly methods developed in the social sciences, we have been able to obtain more insight into the relationships between popular and official or normative Islam, which turn out to be more complicated than scholars some fifty years ago could imagine.

The domains of the '*ulamā*' and of other religious authorities like *Ṣūfī* shaykhs and holy men have not been as separate from each other as it has seemed. Besides complementarity there have been tensions and even fierce struggles between religious leaders for control over the people. This has in a way always been the case with the '*ulamā*' and the shaykhs, with political authorities keeping tensions under control. But I think that in the twentieth century and sometimes even earlier, with the rise of the modern nation-state and the industrialization of society, the situation has changed fundamentally. On the one hand, industrialization and the rise of new middle classes have made the old forms of popular religion rather obsolete. On the other hand, the modern state with its national ideology has its own interest in demanding the people's loyalty and it wants to control them more tightly than the '*ulamā*' and even the shaykhs were ever able to do. This is becoming clear now that the state has acquired modern forms of power and control and asserted its authority, offering new ideologies which have to be accepted nationwide and which compete with older traditions of both popular and official Islam.

The modern nation-state has in fact changed both popular and official Islam considerably, as well as the relationship between them.

Indeed, the scene of popular and official religion has changed drastically with the rise of republican Turkey and Pahlavi Iran, later transformed into the Islamic Republic of Iran, the creation of Pakistan and

the wave of Islamization there during the Ziya ul-Haqq period, the "fundamentalization" of Islam in a number of Muslim countries and the various government responses to it (as in Egypt and Algeria), and last but not least with the establishment of pantjasila Indonesia instead of an Islamic Indonesian state, not to speak of crucial developments in various socialist countries. Besides the process of technological development which undermines popular religion everywhere, there were two particular forces of opposition to popular Islam to which we must give proper attention.

Opposition to popular Islam

In the colonial period popular Islam did not usually come under direct attack by the colonial powers, since it hardly presented a danger to them if they could win the acquiescence of its leaders by various means. The main attacks on popular religion in Islam came from at least two other quarters, both Muslim and both new: on the one hand the "religious" reformers and revivalists, and on the other hand the "political" nationalists and development experts. For them popular Islam, with its isolation, its static forms and dynamic movements as described above, represented a danger indeed. Let us look somewhat closer at this.

By their very nature the Salafiyya, Wahhābiyya, Iḥwān al-Muslimīn and other movements seeking to revitalize Islam were opposed to popular Islam in its contemporary forms. The Wahhābiyya considered all religious forms which were not explicitly mentioned as permitted in the Qur'ān (such as the belief in *ġinn*) as forms of *širk*. Teachers and enlightened thinkers like Muḥammad 'Abduh and Sayyid Aḥmad Ḥān jettisoned the belief in miracles which was the basis of most forms of popular Islam. Muḥammad Rašīd Riḍā, faithful to an Islam based on Qur'ān and *Sunna* and thoroughly sympathetic to what the Wahhābiyya did in Arabia regarded much in popular Islam as simple idolatry. Ḥasan al-Bannā and his followers up to the present day have recognized clearly that much of popular Islam in its traditional forms is not only in conflict with some basic prescriptions of Qur'ān and *Sunna* but also inappropriate to the modern world in which Muslims

live; it hampers the dynamism which the Muslim community needs. And the *turuq*, under whose wing popular Islam had found shelter earlier, were now themselves equally harrassed. In a word, in religious quarters the sword of scripturalism, puritanism and "fundamentalization" tried to demolish all those forms of religion which were not based on Scripture and whose adherents, often barely literate, in fact rejected modern conditions of life.

The other attack on popular Islam came from the leaders of the new nation-states, with or without a colonial past. Leaving aside the socialist countries, Atatürk's republican Turkey would seem to be the most eloquent example of a state which unilaterally decides that religious authority should be hamstrung, religion should disappear from the public sphere, derwish orders should be disbanded, and a new kind of education should inculcate national loyalty and a form of enlightenment instead of religious loyalty and traditional piety. But paradoxally it is precisely in Turkey that "popular" folk religion has proved to be most complex and powerful and not at all static. Probably precisely because the official religious leadership was reduced to silence and the secularist policies of the state were unacceptable to the religious-minded peasants with their own traditions, popular forms of Islam grew stronger than ever before, unchecked by the corrective action of the '*ulamā*'. Popular forms and movements offered an alternative Islam to those who, for religious reasons, resisted the official secularist policies.

Outside Turkey, the nationalist leaders of former mandated or colonial Muslim countries showed almost as little sympathy as Atatürk did for archaic forms of religious life which obviously opposed the centralization of power, a western type of economic development, and an educational system founded on the principle of national loyalty. In most new nation-states popular forms of religion were laughed at by the authorities; in the public sphere popular Islam was put under certain curbs. Obsolete beliefs and practices were combatted, and not only in words, through the often single permitted official parties.

There have also been considerable changes in the official Islam of the '*ulamā*', in a number of Muslim countries, such as Egypt. Here

again the state was the main agent of change, first by making the *'ulamā'* dependent on it, financially and otherwise, and then by promoting particular versions of Islam which served its own interest. The state gave these versions an official status – in Egypt through the Azhar authorities and the *muftī* – and encouraged the spread of them through the state-controlled media and in other ways. The Islam now brought to the nation, for instance Egypt, was no longer the classical Islam but a modernized “officialized” version which had passed through the reformers’ hands and received the stamp of approval of the state authorities.

*Revitalization of Islam*⁷

A new situation arose when the nationalist and rather secular outlook of the state and its economic and socio-political aims and purposes were challenged by popular and even populist calls for the *ṣarīʿa* to be implemented and by the spread among young men and women, in particular in towns and cities, of a series of ideas and practices which may be characterized roughly as a revitalization of Islam. Once the Islamic tide began to rise, whether in the late sixties or in the seventies, governments had to take notice of it and react.

Partly in response to demands for society and the state to be Islamized, political authorities in a number of Muslim states have been promoting or at least supporting the kind of “officialized” Islam mentioned above, an adaptation of official Islam to the day-to-day needs of society.

⁷ We understand by “revitalization” of a cultural or religious tradition or system a new and meaningful use which is made of certain key elements of such a tradition or system, so that people are again inspired by it. Revitalization processes take regularly place in religions and ideologies and they can take different forms varying from “fundamentalization” (going back to the basic principles or texts) to “universalization” (opening up to a more universal perspective). In present-day Islam, for instance, we can speak of a revitalization with a more political “activist” and a more reflective “fundamentalist” wing. See for instance J. Waardenburg, “Fundamentalismus und Aktivismus in der islamisch-arabischen Welt der Gegenwart”, *Orient* 30 (1989), 39-51. A most interesting question, of course, is to what extent the present-day revitalization of Islam is basically of a religious nature. Comp. J. Waardenburg, *L'Islam: une religion* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1989).

This entails the abandonment of the extremeley nationalist and secular trend which dominated most of the states in the fifties and sixties, and in the case of Iran, Pakistan and Sudan the state itself has gone Islamic.

This encouragement by the state of an "officialized" version of Islam not only reduces the influence of the "ideal" official Islam of the *'ulamā'* but also affects the situation of popular Islam. It is too early yet for a clear picture of what is happening to have emerged, but reports from countries like Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Turkey suggest that local forms of popular Islam are developing as an implicit protest against policies towards Islam promulgated in the capital. Popular Islam then seems to stand for local identities over against central authority. Such local, ethnic forms and movements of popular Islam may be able to express themselves more freely when governments cannot afford to pursue secularist policies any longer.

2. *A special case: Iran*

We shall apply the foregoing considerations to Iran, a country where both official and popular Islam are rich in form and content⁸. First we shall give some examples of different kinds of popular religious behaviour, divided into forms and movements. Whereas forms of behaviour imply the search for direct contact with divine or at least religious realities to obtain blessings of different kinds through experiences where the emotional component is quite strong, movements imply a social mobilization of people for the attainment of earthly goals which, together with their social effects, have a religious meaning for those involved. We shall then discuss some basic aspects of official (Šī'a) Islam in Iran insofar as they are relevant for our understanding of the relationship with popular religion. Then we shall enumerate some forms current in Irani-

⁸ Iran is singled out here among the many Muslim countries, since the pluriformity of Islam as it exists in Iran both in its official and its popular varieties is singularly neglected in present-day publications. There is a tendency to equate Islam in Iran with the neo-Šī'ī doctrines elaborated by Khomeiny and his circle, but this is not correct.

an Islam which can be considered neither as official nor as popular Islam but which enjoy a kind of semi-official recognition. Finally, we shall consider two determining factors for the relationship between official and popular Islam in Iran: specifically Šī'a religion, and the continuity of cultural traditions in Iranian societies dating from the period before Iran was islamized.

Popular forms in Iranian Islam

A first category of popular forms in Iranian Islam are those customs, beliefs and practices which are connected with seasonal feasts and communal rites of passage in the life of the individual. Those forms of religious behavior which respond to unforeseen events and crisis situations in the life of the individual and the community also belong to this group.

A second category of such forms is more particularly related to tenets of the Šī'a⁹: the veneration of the Imāms, including pilgrimages to the holy places of twelver Šī'a, the practices performed during the pilgrimages and at the shrines, popular invocations of the Imāms and traditions about their life and death or disappearance. This category also includes the mourning celebrations (*‘azādārī*) in memory of the events at Kerbela, during the first ten days of Muḥarram, when a passion play (*ta'ziyya*) re-enacting the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn is performed. On these days the *dasta*, a procession of men flagelating themselves through the streets, and a *naql* representing the funeral of Imām Ḥusayn can, or at least could formerly be observed. At this time, but also on other occasions, preachers at a certain place (*takiya, hoseiniye*) recite certain texts

⁹ Peter J. Chelkowski (Ed.), *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979); Davoud Monchi-Zadeh, *Ta'ziya: Das persische Passionsspiel mit teilweiser Übersetzung der von Litten gesammelten Stücke* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967); Shaykh Muḥammad Mahdi Shams al-Dīn, *The Rising of al-Ḥusayn: Its Impact on the Consciousness of Muslim Society* (London: The Muḥammadi Trust, 1985); Gustav Edward Taiss, *Religious Symbolism and Social Change: The Drama of Husain* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Washington University, 1973); Claude Virolleaud, *Le théâtre persan ou le drama de Kerbela* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1950).

(*rawza*) about the Karbela catastrophe which may incite listeners not only to compassion but also to preparation for action against prevailing injustice. These Muharram celebrations are much more than a mere historical commemoration; those who are present participate inwardly in Ḥusayn's struggle against injustice and his sufferings, possibly also expiating the communal responsibility for Ḥusayn's death and the suffering of the innocent generally. All this involves the purification of the participants and their interiorization of these experiences; in any case it encourages a particular sensitivity to suffering. A third category consists of those forms of popular religion in which a typical dualism of good and evil prevails. Such a dualistic symbolism is especially prominent in Iranian Islam. Certain forms of the first and second category also show dualistic features, but in this case we have to do with a fundamental dualism in which true spirituality by its nature is aligned on the side of the good. Other categories comprise features of the *turuq*, customs of particular tribal and ethnic groups and other forms of popular Islam which we also find in Sunnī Muslim societies.

Popular movements in Iranian Islam

We have already mentioned Mahdist movements of an eschatological character in which either the Mahdi himself, or a forerunner of his (Bāb, Bahā'ullāh) is expected or claimed to be present.

A second category is formed by those Šī'a movements which are religiously motivated and owe their allegiance to one particular Šī'ī religious leader to the exclusion of others. The focus is here on the right leadership, religious and otherwise, and the defense of the correct form of twelver Šī'a Islam.

A third category comprises those movements which oppose the current political leadership because it fails to act according to the injunctions of Šī'a Islam. Here the government is quickly identified with Evil as was the case with the Shah's régime in the 1978/79 revolution.

A fourth category is represented by movements which combat foreign and especially non-Muslim enemies, appealing explicitly to Islam, and perhaps calling for *g̃ihād* as a defensive or even aggressive war effort.

Islam may also be used as a "popular" symbol for preserving the Muslims' purity and unity in situations of conflict with adherents of other religions and ideologies. The sense of purity is strongly developed in Iranian Islam, and it is not unconnected with the typical Iranian symbolism of good and evil as two absolute antagonists which has been mentioned above.

These movements of a popular nature and appeal have their own features in Iranian Šī'ā Islam.

Official religion in Iranian Islam

Twelver Šī'ā doctrine has five articles of faith, three of which it shares with Sunnī doctrine: *tawḥīd* (unity of God), *nubuwwiyya* (a series of God-sent prophets with the final prophethood of Muḥammad), and *qiyāma* (resurrection followed by the last Judgment). The Sunnī articles related to the belief in angels and God's *qadar* (decision on man's eternal destiny) are replaced by two other articles, that of belief in the *imāma* (*imāms* from among the descendants of Muḥammad including faith in the continuing guidance of the hidden *imām*) and the 'adl (Justice) of God. Besides these five articles of faith, Twelver Šī'ī's also believe in *gayba* ("hidden reality") which is interpreted in various ways, in the *nūr* (divine light) from which the prophets and *imāms* were created, and in the sinlessness and perfect knowledge of the family of Muḥammad (the *bayt an-nabī*: the "five pure souls" alluded to in Sūra 33:33).

Besides these articles of doctrine, the Twelver Šī'ī's also acknowledge ten religious duties instead of the Sunnī's five: *ṣalāt*, *ṣawm*, *zakāt* (as well as *ḥums* as obligatory taxes), *ḥağğ*, *ğihād*, *al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-n-nahy 'an al-munkar* (command to do what is good and to prohibit what is evil), the defense of those who support the message of God (through the prophet) and of the *Imāms*, hatred of the enemies of the *Imāms*, and of course the *ṣabāda*.

The official Šī'ī religion is represented by the '*ulamā*', the religious leadership, who know and must defend the *šarī'a* and the doctrine of the Šī'ā. They also elaborate Šī'ā political theory and their social thought starts out from the conviction that Islam provides the basis of

a just society. As is well-known, the 'ulamā' managed to enforce their authority and power after a long process of rivalry with the state authority and they succeeded in taking over power after the fall of the Pahlevi dynasty in January 1979.

In contrast to Sunnī Islam, Šī'ā Islam has given the more learned 'ulamā' the right to exercise *iğtibād*, since the victory of the Uşūlī's over the Ahbārīs some two centuries ago. The *muğtabids* thus have a certain freedom of interpretation, that is a certain freedom of thought and action with regard to tradition. Only the *marāğī-i taqlīd*, that is to say exceptionally learned *muğtabids*, have the right to formulate "new" tradition and impose it on their followers; they exercise their authority not only on doctrinal but also on social and political issues.

The greater freedom of the higher Šī'ī 'ulamā' compared to their Sunnī counterparts may be said to correspond in fact to a greater dependency on the part of the ordinary Šī'ī believers compared to those in Sunnī Islam. The present power of the 'ulamā' in Iran presents a structural parallel with the power of the clergy in earlier Sassanid state and may have something to do with Iranian patterns of authority. In the Šī'ā, religious scholarship itself implies some kind of superior knowledge (*irfān*), possibly thanks to the working of the hidden Imām, whereas in Sunnī Islam religious scholarship is based on sound reason (*aql*) applied to the sources of religious knowledge, in particular the Qur'ān and the *Sunna*. Qum and Najaf are therefore surrounded by an aura of blessings due to the presence not only of holy shrines but also of scholars of superior religious insight.

Whereas since the end of the 19th century different new currents of reformism and modernism have gained ground among at least some Sunnī 'ulamā', partly under political pressures, and have brought about changes in the interpretation of Islam on a rational basis, such developments have occurred less among Šī'ī 'ulamā'. Modern interpretations of Islam in Iran have arisen mainly among "laymen" (non-'ulamā') who like their counterparts in for instance Egypt, Turkey and India before partition, can more easily reinterpret Islam in the light of the demands of the present time than the majority of the 'ulamā',

though their interpretations are of course of an unofficial nature. Šī'ā mollahs have been reputed to receive a deficient education and be incapable of independent thinking, which is perhaps due to their allegiance to a higher hierarchy of Šī'ī clergy. The greater freedom of the higher clergy, then, would not seem to be followed by a greater freedom on the lower levels. It remains difficult, however, to draw any definite conclusions from this state of affairs for the relation between official and popular Islam among the Šī'ā as compared with the same relation in Sunnī Islam¹⁰.

Semi-official religion in Iranian Islam

Besides official Iranian Islam there are some spiritual trends which certainly express themselves in too subtle or intellectual a nature to attract a large popular following, and yet which have been very much alive in Iran alongside the religion of the 'ulamā'. They may be called *semi-official* insofar as they are not "popular" and their existence has to be admitted by the 'ulamā'.

The first of these trends is a typical Šī'ī spirituality which offers a kind of esoteric knowledge, founded on a *silsila* (genealogy) going back to one of the Šī'ī Imāms. The adept is concerned with the understanding of deeper hidden realities which can be reached by a special gnosis ('irfān). This gnosis is also applied in the interpretation of Qur'ān and Tradition, and is held to be the basis of a spiritual hierarchy of believers. It has been developed in Iran in a particular kind of "theosophy" on

¹⁰ The relationships between official and popular religion are complex everywhere; often we cannot speak of one "official" religion and mostly there are various "popular religions" at the same time. Each case should be studied within its specific context. We must leave aside here important questions: specific items where official and popular interpretations are in conflict, the desire of religious leaders to get a hold over the masses and the rivalry between them and other authorities to control the masses. In Iran, for instance, there has been a struggle between the 'ulamā' and the state, between the 'ulamā' and the modern intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries, between the 'ulamā' and religious leaders who derive prestige and power from existing forms of popular religion. In practice there has been much symbiosis between official and popular forms of religious expression.

the basis of *ḥikma* (wisdom). In its more popular forms it has admitted the possibility of immediate insight and allowed the search for it.

Secondly, Sūfī spirituality throughout the history of Islam has constituted a sort of alternative religious tradition besides the official one of the 'ulamā'. The Safawids themselves arose from Sūfī circles which held some Šī'ī doctrines, and although the *ṭuruq* were practically eliminated in the 17th century A.D., they have undergone a renaissance since the end of the 18th century, perhaps because the shahs realized their stabilizing function and saw them as a counter-weight to the influence of the 'ulamā'. Within the *ṭuruq*, in Iran and elsewhere, there has been a great variety not only of kinds of spiritual education (from the *perinde ac cadaver* onwards) but also of attitudes toward society. These have varied from indifference to social order and justice to positive commitments to the immediate social group and even the negation of any religious legitimation of the state power.

The third kind of semi-official religion in Iran is much more recent. Certain intellectuals – most of them outside the 'ulamā' hierarchy, the *ṭuruq* or the circles of *irfān* – have made up their minds about the meaning of Islam in the modern world and interpreted it anew with regard to the needs of society. Examples from the sixties and seventies include *Guftār-i Māh*, a periodical which started in 1959, and the printed courses of instruction about Islam which were started by the madrasa *Dār Rab-i Haqq* in Qum in 1966. Certain new religious centers which were founded by private organizations after 1960, like the *Husayniyya-i Iršād* in Teheran, the *Maktab-i Islām* and the *Dār-i Tablīg* in Qum, and the *Kānūn-i Bahṭ va-Intiqād-i Dīnī* in Mashhad also come to mind. A renewal of interest in Islam on an intellectual level has taken place in these groups and private institutions and thinkers such as 'Alī Šarī'atī (1933-1977) have made a continuous effort to combine an Islamic Šī'ī faith with a democratic and socialist ideology. These groups have been distrusted by the orthodox 'ulamā', and of course by the state which was, and is, suspicious of subversive ideology.

In this context it is also important to note the emergence of a new, "officialized" Islam in the Pahlevi period. The government, especially

that of the last Shah, encouraged another modernist version of Islam through the media and through the appointment of 'ulamā' who supported the state policy as for instance imāms of major mosques in the country and teachers at Teheran University's Faculty of Theology¹¹. The stress here was on Islam as a rational religion aligned to development and modernization, without the differences between Islam and the other major religions being unduly emphasized.

Structure of the relationship between popular and official religion in Iran

The question arises whether certain permanent factors have at least in part determined the relationship between popular and official religion in Iran. There is reason to believe that numerous forms of popular religion and piety, sometimes of a loosely structured and unorganized nature, have continued to exist throughout the whole period of Muslim rule in Iran, both before and after Shah Ismā'il's proclamation of Šī'a Islam as the official state religion at the beginning of the 16th century¹². The existence of semi-official kinds of religious interpretation

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that in Iran, besides the "official" government appointed and supported 'ulamā', there always have been a number of "free" 'ulamā' devoting themselves to study and teaching, living from *wagf* income and without links with the state. In nearly all other Muslim countries, 'ulamā' are financially dependent on the state.

¹² Some classical descriptions of popular religion in Islam are: Henri Massé, *Croyances et coutumes persanes, suivies de Contes et chansons populaires* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1938 in two volumes); English translation *Persian Beliefs and Customs* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1954). Much information on "superstitious" beliefs and practices as current among women in Ḥorasān is contained in Bess A. Donaldson, *The Wild Rue: A study of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran* (London: Luzac, 1938). Most famous is Edward Granville Browne, *A year among the Persians: Impressions as to the life, character, and thought of the people of Persia, received during twelve months' residence in that country in the years 1887-1888* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1893; with numerous reeditions). Compare S. G. Wilson, *Persian Life and Customs: With scenes and incidents of residence and travel in the land of the Lion and the Sun* (New York etc.: Fleming H. Revell, 1900). Highly instructive are also Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1982), and Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Learning and Power in Modern Iran* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985). In the late thirties an initiative was taken to make an inventory

of Islam mentioned above – in terms of gnosis, mysticism and wisdom – bears additional witness to this. The religious scene in Muslim Iran appears to have been very varied indeed. In the following we shall focus on two factors in particular which have largely determined the relations between popular and official religion in Iran: on the one hand the Twelver Šīcā form of Islam and on the other hand Iranian cultural traditions.

a) Šīcā religion

There are certain traits of the Šīcā which are relevant for the particular relation between official and popular religion in Islam. They can be enumerated as follows:

1) As a minority in the Islamic world as a whole, Twelver Šīcī's have a particular consciousness of solidarity and belonging together, also beyond the political borders of Iran. Even if there are differences in life style, political orientation and degree of "popular" religious expression, they in no way hamper relations between Twelver Šīcī believers¹³. This is also valid for the Iranian context; whatever the differences between Šīcī ethnic groups, relations between them are not affected by the use of different forms of religious expression. Westernized intellectuals have tended to disdain "superstitions" rather than combat them, and although a number of 'ulamā' may have wanted to "purify" the Šīcā of its popular excesses, until February 1979 their ideas of pure Islam did

of forms of popular culture and to have them on record in Teheran. To what extent the project has been continued until today is not known to me. See *Iransbahr*, Vol. I (1945). Increasingly attention has been given to the continuity of popular religious motifs in present-day Iranian literature. See for instance Girdhari Tikku "Some socio-religious themes in modern Persian fiction", in: *Islam and its Cultural Divergence: Studies in Honor of Gustav E. von Grunebaum*, ed. by Girdhari L. Tikku (Urbana etc.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 165-179. There are numerous studies on oral literature, for instance Jan W. Weryho, "Sistānī-Persian folklore", *Indo-Iranian Journal* V (1962), pp. 276-307.

¹³ Many ancient religious elements survived in sectarian (often Šīcī) groups at less accessible places in the Middle East. See Klaus E. Müller, *Kulturhistorische Studien zur Genese pseudo-islamischer Sektengebilde in Vorderasien*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1967.

not receive much support from the state. The state also wanted to eradicate excesses and took measures, for instance, with regard to the Muḥarram celebrations, but it sought to replace them not with the official rigid religion of the 'ulamā' but rather with an "enlightened" rational frame of mind to be furthered by education and an officialized modernist version of Islam. With the 'ulamā's seizure of power in February 1979 and afterwards, the possibility has arisen for the first time that forms of religion which do not correspond with the present religious leaders' conceptions may be swept aside in the name of religion.

2) The doctrine of the hidden Imām's guidance of the world and his return as Mahdi at the end of time allows for the existence of different kinds of spirituality on different levels, side by side, free of the control of one spiritual authority. The doctrine not only overcomes certain contrasts between official and popular religious expression, but also opens up possibilities for individual and communal inspiration and overall eschatological expectations. It also provides a potential for criticism of the current state of affairs, political and otherwise. If *muḡtahids* claim that the Imām speaks to them, they cannot deny that he may also speak to other, less literate people through more popular forms.

3) The development of the doctrine of *iḡtibād* into that of the great authority of a *marḡā'i-taqlīd* seems at first sight to subordinate popular religion to the rules of official religion. But in fact popular Šī'ī religion can go on just as popular Catholic religion went on after the proclamation of the dogma of Papal infallibility¹⁴. Precisely in a situation where *'irfan* is needed to acquire superior religious knowledge, there may very well be a lenient, if contemptuous attitude towards popular religion as necessary for the uninitiated, rather than a hostile one.

4) The emotionally loaded Muḥarram celebrations may be frowned upon by some 'ulamā' as popular excesses but it is difficult to forbid them in a Šī'ī context. By comparison, for instance, with Yom Kippur

¹⁴ Compare James A. Bill and John Alden Williams, "Šī'ī Islam and Roman Catholicism: An Ecclesial and Political Analysis", in *The Vatican, Islam and the Middle East*. Ed. by Kail C. Ellis, O.S.A. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1987, pp. 69-105.

and Good Friday they have a far more powerful appeal to the masses, and the political scenario of bringing down the Shah in November 1978 was effectively modelled on the religious scenario of Ḥusayn's martyrdom by Yazīd. Popular religion and culture are nourished by these celebrations, thereby acquiring their own autonomous course, and it is far from inconceivable that, if the 'ulamā' seriously abused their authority, they could in turn be denounced on the occasion of the same Muḥarram celebrations which brought them to power with their protest against appalling injustice.

5) The authority of *muḡtabids* and *marāḡī-i-taqlīd* make it possible for the masses to be relatively easily mobilized not only for religious but also for political causes, in particular when foreign powers, heretics and certain groups of non-Muslims are perceived as sources of evil. This authority works powerfully in times of crisis, as is clear from the way Ḥomeinī was able to manipulate the Iranian masses against the regime in 1978 and from a French village at that.

If it is true that Šī'a religion assures a certain bridge between official and popular forms and movements in Iranian Islam, new questions arise. How strong is the loyalty to the official tenets of the Šī'a, "official religion", not only among the mollahs and 'ulamā', but also among the *bāzārī*'s (commercial people), civil servants and the various educated classes, not to speak of the army? And conversely, what has been and is the "popular" religion of the ordinary people nowadays: nomads, semi-nomads and peasants of different regions, workers in industry, and refineries, the millions living in Teheran and other cities? And how much loyalty not only to the official religion but also to the official religious leadership exists among these groups, in particular since the Islamic revolution and the war against Iraq?

b) *Iranian society and cultural traditions*

There are also certain features of Iranian society and cultural traditions which are relevant for the relation between official and popular religion in Iranian Islam. A number of elements of the latter go back themselves to pre-Islamic customs or are linked to ancient social struc-

tures, which are still characteristic of Iranian society up to the present day. Some of them are the following:

- 1) Both the Šīcī and the pre-Islamic Iranian worldviews consider history as the arena in which the struggle for a just society and cosmic order is waged, and they share the expectation of a saviour at the end of time and a state based on a divinely-designated leadership.
- 2) The hierarchical structure of Iranian society has for long given it a certain immobility. For ordinary people in Iran the right Islamic way of life must have seemed unattainable because of the negligence of the "official" religious leaders and state authorities. This has led to occasional outbursts of emotions and unrest in times of crisis. Popular religion, much more than official religion, has been connected with the economic and social situation of more or less underprivileged groups. It may be called an "opium", but it can also be considered as an attempt to transcend a certain extremely difficult situation, and not to succumb to despair.
- 3) The strong, and almost absolute opposition between pure and impure, good and evil, light and dark, God and Satanic forces may be inspired by particular Qur'ānic texts which are referred to. But there is reason to suppose that there are other causes too: since distant times Iranian culture and society have been very sensitive to dualistic schemes, as can be seen in the pre-Islamic Iranian religions.
- 4) In present-day Iranian folk-literature we can find numerous elements and symbols of popular religion and culture dating back to pre-Islamic times, and they even have been finding their way into "official" literature. Perhaps more than other Muslim cultures, the Iranian one sharply distinguishes between elite and popular culture, although there are gradations in between; this is important for the situation of popular religion in Iran¹⁵. There is an urgent need for studies of the connections

¹⁵ In Iran as well as in some other Muslim countries with a long literary tradition, a difference developed a long time ago between recognized "high" literature mostly in written form on the one hand and folk literature which was orally transmitted on the other hand. The latter included folktales, folkpoetry including songs, folkplays, and in

between popular religion in Iran and the infrastructure of society, the Iranian cultural traditions on different levels, and the social history of the various tribal and occupational groups living in the country. The relations of popular religion with official religion and the state authorities should be studied against this background. What do we know about the forms and movements of popular religion in the Qāğār period, apart from the Bābī movement? What changes did the policies of the Pahlevi bring about in popular religion and how did it respond to them over a period of more than fifty years? What attitudes do present-day 'ulamā' take toward popular religion in Iran, and, perhaps most interesting of all, how does Iranian popular religion react to the present-day official religion which is so forcefully asserted?

The impact of recent Iranian history on the relationship between popular and official Islam

The renewed attention given to religion in Iran since the sixties cannot be explained only, and perhaps not at all, in terms of a basic structure of Iranian society and cultural traditions. It is rather to be explained in a precise historical context: as a reaction to the secularizing state policies which moreover resulted from the uncontrolled power of one man, the Shah. It was also a reaction to economic problems which faced the urban masses in particular, especially after rapid inflation had set in after 1973. The renewed attention given to religion, the new interpretations of Ši'a doctrine in terms of social tenets and the ritualization

Iran of course versions of the *tā'zieh*. Like folk religion folk literature expresses current themes of life. It often provides an outlet in the harshness of life, and sometimes is clearly an indirect protest against various forms of oppression; it also may address itself against pretending figures of religious authority, mocking at mollahs etc. It is noteworthy that in "high" culture a certain anticlericalism can be felt, and that not only anti-Arab but also anti-Islam feelings may be ventilated in literary forms, and more recently anti-western feelings. There sometimes is a nostalgia for a truly Iranian way of life as it was before the arrival of the Arab, Turkish and later western invaders. I am indebted here to Prof. Nikki Keddie's paper "Intellectual and Literary Trends to 1960", distributed at the Workshop on History and Politics of Religious Movements in Iran held in Berlin, 5-7 September 1980.

of resistance to the Shah's regime largely explain how, after the departure of the Shah following a republican revolution, a second, "Islamic" revolution could take place, involving the Šī'ī clergy, that is to say the bearers of official religion. During the revolution, however, they were strongly supported by "popular" approval and in the following years, during the war against Iraq, numerous elements of "popular" religion were used by the leaders to induce the people to go in the direction they wanted, which included voluntary martyrdom¹⁶. Precisely during these critical years the Iranian Šī'a showed a singular convergence of popular and official religion, the details of which should still be investigated¹⁷.

¹⁶ It should be remembered that there always has been a great number of uses made of popular religion according to different interests. In some cases one can speak of a straight exploitation of people's naive popular beliefs and practices. In Iran and elsewhere there is the more general problem that leaders, whether motivated religiously or not, are able to arouse the masses by using a religious guise and religious language.

¹⁷ Our analysis of the relationship between official and popular religion in specific cases needs a refinement of concepts. For Islam, for instance, alternative concepts have been suggested. Since "official" suggests both state-supported or state-controlled and also something held to be normative for all Muslims, I suggested in the article mentioned in fn. 4 to speak of *normative* instead of "official" Islam. W. van Binsbergen uses the term *formal* Islam rather than "official". At the Workshop mentioned in fn. 14, W. M. Floor suggested another set of concepts, speaking of *living* religion as opposed to "official" religion, such living religion being subdivided into *literate* and *non-literate*. The latter distinction is important indeed, and it is clearly recognizable like the difference between literate and non-literate peoples and cultures. Over against non-literate religion (commonly called *folk religion*) there is literate religion, either "official" in the sense of normative and ideal, or "living" in the sense of actually experienced and practiced. Terminology serves as a device to arrive at a better knowledge, understanding or explanation, preferably to come to insights which are not reached otherwise. Whatever the technical term chosen, we want to stress that more attention should be given to popular culture and popular religion, as a cultural life substratum of the masses in particular in the Third World, but also elsewhere up to the present time. Official culture and official religion too constitute a general category, which should be filled in concretely when a particular case is studied.

3. Conclusion

Problems

There are many difficulties involved in any serious study of popular religion in present-day Muslim societies, if we understand by this the religion of the ordinary people in the Islamic world. First of all there is a problem of sources: written and printed materials in this domain are scarce, fieldwork in the countries concerned has become more difficult, fieldwork among Muslim immigrants in Europe has only just started¹⁸ and the first generation of migrants who were most familiar with living popular religion in the regions they came from is already passing away.

Second, there is a real problem of particular presuppositions among researchers themselves as to the meaning and function of popular religion in general, and consequently in Muslim societies too.

Third, the term "popular religion" itself, after having been identified for some time with folk religion and devoid of political implications, has recently acquired a political colouring and is then sometimes used in an ideological sense.

Fourth, research in this sensitive area is not facilitated by the various taboos surrounding it, many popular beliefs and customs being ridiculed not only by westerners but also by the indigenous intellectual elite and active islamists.

And fifth, perhaps most important: scholars these days lack direct contact with the ordinary people in the field even more than in the past. Often real obstacles, imposed from above by far from democratic regimes, work against establishing natural personal contacts apart from on ceremonial occasions. The people, for their part, have only a limited

¹⁸ The religion of Muslim immigrants in western Europe is often of a popular nature. Some publications indeed pay attention to this aspect of the Islam of the immigrants, for instance Abdulkadir W. Haas, *Türkische Volksfrömmigkeit* (Frankfurt a. Main: Otto Lembeck, 1986) and Monique Renaerts, *La mort, rites et valeurs dans l'Islam Maghrébin* (Bruxelles: Univ. Libre de Bruxelles, Centre de Sociologie de l'Islam, 1986). Through the guidance by competent imams and education this more "popular" Islam of the first generation of immigrants can move towards a more "official" kind of Islam.

capacity to look detachedly at things which are so much part of life for them and are meaningful in situations which are by definition loaded with emotions and tensions, some of them not even conscious. Precisely because the subject matter is so complex and communication with the people demands considerable efforts, scholars may all too soon be tempted to build up their own constructions of popular culture and religion. They make then an esthetic creation, instead of observing the ordinary people and the popular culture and religion which they call "Islam" and we prefer to describe as "popular Islam".

Current changes

In the course of the twentieth century a wave of devastation appears to have swept over traditional societies and popular religion in Muslim countries as elsewhere. But if numerous forms have disappeared, this does not mean that popular religion as such has. While losing its accepted forms of expression, it may itself have simply been driven underground to manifest itself again later as a collective force in unforeseen ways.

What we have seen of changes in popular Islam during the last decades seems to indicate a recession as far as its more static "superstitious" and miraculous forms are concerned. There is, by contrast, an evident increase in its more dynamic populist movements and here and there local Islamic popular practices around a shrine are even being revived.

With industrialization and urbanization new communal solidarities have arisen and they seem to produce their own popular culture, with not only the continuation of older popular forms of religion but also new kinds of appeals being made to Islam. Development has brought with it both a process of individualization and atomization and a spread of religious symbols among the masses. This has obvious consequences for what may be popular culture and popular religion in the future. We should add that some recent applications of popular religious forms have clearly political implications. Thus, the 'Āšūrā celebrations in Iran in 1978 and in South Lebanon in the early 1980's gave a powerful symbolic expression to the participants' dedication to martyrdom.

In no case can it be proved that popular religion in Muslim societies is about to disappear, that the ordinary people in Muslim societies would no longer have their own kinds of religious expression. It has rather adapted itself to new circumstances and new problems of life, it has to some extent been pruned of excessively irrational elements, and it seems to be withdrawing to sectors of communal life which are not susceptible to control either by cool reason or by the state. The changes occurring in popular expressions of a religious nature can largely be explained in the light of the religious and political forces at work in Muslim societies over the last century and a half.

Renewed vitality of popular religion in Islam

At least four reasons may be put forward for present-day signs of a renewed vitality of popular expressions of Islam:

- 1) popular Islam can be used as a symbolic protest against the state experienced as a self-imposing power, and it is largely through popular religious symbols and symbolic action that people can be mobilized on a large scale;
- 2) in societies where people are living under severe stress, including the pressure of religious or secular ideologies, popular culture and religion provide a kind of protected domain¹⁹. They limit the grasp of the state to some extent: since they originate at the grass roots they offer a basic alternative to all power imposed from above;
- 3) the poor who are deprived of security and who are dependent and consequently oppressed create in their popular religion a universe of their own. If we may believe Professor Gilsenan²⁰, it enables them to wrest some meaning from what is material nothingness and allows them

¹⁹ The "refuge" function of popular religion, and of religion in general, as a separate domain, deserves more attention than has been given to it until now.

²⁰ Michael Gilsenan, "Vroomheid, mystiek en volksgeloof" (Piety, mysticism and popular beliefs) in Jacques Waardenburg (ed.), *Islam: Norm, ideaal and werkelijkheid* (Islam: Norm, Ideal and Reality). Houten: Wereldvenster Publishers, 1984, 1987², 1994³ (Chapter 18).

some scope for communal symbolic action though it appears nonsensical if judged according to the norms of the "official" or "officialized" cultural universe;

4) popular religion can always justify itself as resisting what is foreign or oppressive in Muslim countries, and claim to represent a "home base" of what is felt to be authentic life. In this light popular religion is authentic culture and should be studied as such.

The expressions of popular religion keep alive – so to speak in reserve – a whole set of communal norms and values, hopes and ideals. They may remain beneath the surface in everyday life but they can manifest themselves in festive celebrations and specific religious devotions, in particular in situations of stress and suffering, and in expressing particular common religious, social and political loyalties, often simultaneously. Such norms, values, hopes and ideals are transmitted in the ordinary course of life and give a kind of profound communal dimension to life, conveying what may be called religious meanings to the people.

Popular forms of religion may have a basically conservative character in traditional societies. They can lead, however, to movements which are anything but conservative, as we have been able to see in Iran. In order to explore this further, we shall have to change most current ideas about what popular culture and religion are or should be like, so that we will be able to grasp better than before the human motivations and intentions of "ordinary people" in Muslim societies.