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Religions and State Authority: Shiism, Clergy, and Governance in Iran

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Introduction

This book examines how a distinctive religious tradition—Twelver Shiism—has been translated into the language of statecraft in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It asks a fundamental question: how do doctrines forged around the concepts of Imamate, justice, and lawful leadership shape institutions that legislate, adjudicate, and govern? To answer this, the chapters trace the genealogy of clerical authority from classical jurisprudence to modern constitutional design, showing how theology does not merely sanctify power but organizes it. The resulting portrait reveals a complex system in which scriptural interpretation, legal methodology, and institutional engineering converge to produce a state that claims religious legitimacy even as it negotiates the practical demands of rule.

At the center of this story stands the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*—the guardianship of the jurist—articulated most famously by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and embedded in Iran’s post-revolutionary constitution. Yet *velayat-e faqih* should not be read as a sudden innovation. It emerges from older debates about authority during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, the scope of juristic discretion, and the distribution of responsibilities between scholars and lay rulers. By situating the modern doctrine within these longer conversations, the book highlights continuities and ruptures that are often obscured by the drama of revolution and the intensity of contemporary politics.

Clerical authority in Iran is neither monolithic nor static. The *marja’iyya*—networks of senior jurists and their students—spans seminaries in Qom and Najaf, institutions with shared texts but distinct pedagogies, patronage structures, and political orientations. Within these circles, arguments unfold over the reach of state power, the ethics of coercion, the role of public interest (*maslahat*), and the legitimacy of popular participation. These doctrinal debates are not abstractions; they shape how the Guardian Council vets candidates, how the Assembly of Experts interprets leadership, how the judiciary applies Islamic criminal law, and how Friday sermons align moral discourse with policy priorities.

The constitutional order of the Islamic Republic reflects an attempt to harmonize competing imperatives: divine sovereignty and popular will, juristic supervision and elected representation, revolutionary ideals and administrative necessities. Institutions such as the Guardian Council and Expediency Council arbitrate conflicts between sharia and statute, while the Assembly of Experts institutionalizes oversight of the Supreme Leader. Around and within these bodies operate organizations that fuse moral claims with coercive capacity—the IRGC and Basij—as well as economic actors like bonyads and religious endowments that sustain a political economy of piety.

Together, they constitute a layered architecture of governance whose durability and tensions are best understood through its theological foundations.

This study also explores how religion-state interactions reach into everyday life. School curricula, state media, and sermon networks socialize citizens into a vocabulary of sacrifice, justice, and resistance, while legal regimes in family law and public morality render theology administratively tangible. At the same time, social change—demographic shifts, higher education, global communication, and new religious sensibilities—presses upon inherited doctrines, prompting internal reformist and conservative responses. Elections and public debates become sites where clerical supervision and popular aspirations intersect, sometimes productively, sometimes contentiously.

Methodologically, the book combines textual analysis of doctrinal sources with institutional and historical study. It engages classical jurisprudence and constitutional texts, while reading them alongside the practices of bodies that interpret, implement, or contest those texts. Rather than presuming coherence or condemning inconsistency, the chapters ask how authority is constructed, claimed, and constrained across arenas of law, politics, economy, and culture. This approach allows us to see both the principled architecture that gives the system its legitimacy and the pragmatic adaptations that make governance possible.

Finally, the chapters proceed in a roughly chronological and thematic sequence: from the theological roots of Shiite authority, through Iran's encounters with imperial rule and constitutionalism, to the revolutionary reconfiguration of state institutions and the ongoing debates within the clerical establishment. The concluding chapters examine transnational dimensions of Shiism and consider future trajectories for religious authority in Iran—whether oriented to reform, resilience, or reconfiguration. By the end, readers should have a clear account of how Shiism, the clergy, and the state have been woven into a distinctive, evolving pattern of governance.

CHAPTER ONE: Shiism and the Question of Political Authority

The map of authority in Twelver Shiism has always been drawn with invisible ink. For much of its history, the tradition cultivated an ethic of withdrawal from power while simultaneously preparing the terms by which power could be judged. This paradox—renouncing office in the name of higher legitimacy—did not arise from indifference but from a carefully calibrated theology of leadership that elevated knowledge, justice, and inherited proximity to the Prophet over swords, crowns, and ballots. The result was a community that learned to live alongside states without surrendering to them, preserving a juridical conscience that could sleep for centuries and wake with startling ambitions.

Shiism entered the world as a question about succession. After the Prophet Muhammad's death, a faction of his followers insisted that leadership belonged to his family, beginning with his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and then to a designated line of descendants. For these partisans of Ali, rule was not merely an administrative task but a hermeneutic one: the leader had to know God's will as revealed in scripture and interpret it without deflection. Political authority, in this view, was inseparable from spiritual insight, and any arrangement that severed that bond risked reducing governance to mere politics. The doctrine of Imamate would eventually systematize this claim, casting the Imam as an infallible guide whose authority flowed from divine designation rather than popular acclamation or tribal consensus.

Yet designation did not guarantee duration. Over time, the line of Imams came to be seen as fixed and final, ending with the twelfth figure in the chain, who disappeared from ordinary sight in the ninth century. From that moment, the community confronted a problem that has never fully left it: how to organize collective life when the ultimate authority is present in principle but absent in practice. The period of the Lesser Occultation allowed for some mediation through designated agents, but when that conduit closed, the community was left with silence. This silence was not a void, however; it became a laboratory for reasoning about how to act in the name of a law whose author was hidden. The result was a jurisprudence that placed the scholar at the center of communal obligation, able to derive rules from texts and precedents while awaiting the return of the Imam.

Classical jurists thus became the temporary architects of order, drafting blueprints for ritual purity, commercial fairness, and penal severity while insisting that their authority was borrowed, not owned. They reasoned that in the absence of the Imam, the qualified jurist must assume enough responsibility to keep the law alive: collecting

religious taxes, appointing judges, and defending borders if necessary. But this competence came with a leash. Most jurists understood their role as custodial, not proprietary, carefully avoiding the trappings of monarchy while cultivating an aura of moral sovereignty. The state, meanwhile, belonged to others—Sunni caliphs, Mongol khans, Timurid warlords—who could be obeyed, negotiated with, or endured, provided the essentials of faith were preserved.

This arrangement gave rise to a dualism that would shape Iranian political culture for centuries. On one side stood the throne, with its armies, taxes, and hunger for prestige; on the other, the seminary, with its texts, rituals, and claim to interpretive truth. Neither side fully trusted the other, yet each needed the other. Rulers required clerical blessing to secure popular acquiescence; jurists required rulers to provide security and administrative muscle. The resulting bargains were rarely tidy. Patronage flowed from court to mosque, but sermons could also unsettle courts, reminding listeners that legitimacy was not the same as control. This uneasy reciprocity allowed Shiism to survive empires without being dissolved by them.

By the sixteenth century, the Safavid dynasty gave this relationship a new institutional color. Seeking to distinguish their realm from Ottoman Sunnism, Safavid shahs imported Twelver jurists, endowed seminaries, and imported shrines, effectively wedding the throne to a clerical class that could certify its Islamic credentials. In return, clerics gained wealth, legal jurisdiction, and a state apparatus that could enforce religious norms. Yet the alliance remained lopsided. While the shah held the sword, the jurist held the pen, and the pen could write limits as well as permissions. The tension between these powers played out in edicts, property disputes, and the occasional uprising, revealing a system in which authority was shared but never settled.

The Safavid experiment bequeathed to later centuries a template of clerical authority that was both institutional and contested. The state learned that it could mobilize religion for legitimacy, but also that religious figures could mobilize publics for protest. As the dynasty weakened, clerical families carved out positions of local influence, administering endowments, adjudicating disputes, and collecting alms. These gains were modest compared to sovereign power, but they created a base from which clerics could speak as something more than chaplains of convenience. When the Safavids fell, their successors inherited not only a kingdom but also a clerical estate that expected to be consulted, accommodated, and at times challenged.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought new pressures. European empires expanded their commercial and military reach into Iran, introducing technologies and ideas that unsettled old bargains. Clerics debated whether to adopt, resist, or reform these intrusions, aware that every concession risked diluting religious authority while every refusal risked marginalizing it. Some argued that the state must modernize in order to survive; others warned that survival meant nothing if faith was compromised.

These debates were not abstract; they concerned tariffs, conscription, legal codes, and the reach of foreign capitulations, all of which forced clerics to clarify what they meant by political authority in a world where power was increasingly measured in railways and rifles.

The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 provided a stage for these arguments to be dramatized. For the first time in Iran, a written charter claimed to derive legitimacy from popular will, and clerics found themselves divided about whether this innovation could be reconciled with sharia. Some supported the parliament as a mechanism for justice, a notion resonant with Shiite ethics; others feared it would subordinate divine law to shifting opinion. The resulting alliance between clergy and constitutionalists was tense, tactical, and temporary. Clerics lent sermons and signatures to the cause, but when parliamentary decisions clashed with religious sensibilities, they withdrew, exposing the limits of clerical confidence in purely political remedies.

This period also revealed that clerical authority was not a single voice but a choir with many registers. Senior jurists differed over how to balance tradition and change, and these differences were amplified by networks of students, patrons, and publications. Some clerics cultivated ties to merchants and urban notables; others remained close to seminaries and shrines. These alignments were not yet parties, but they were orientations that would later solidify under the pressures of revolution and state formation. The lesson was that authority in Shiism was always relational, emerging from debate as much as from doctrine.

By the mid-twentieth century, the Pahlavi state attempted to compress clerical power in the name of modernization. Land reforms, educational expansion, and legal centralization challenged the economic and judicial roles that clerics had long exercised. In response, clerical figures sharpened their critique of a regime they saw as intoxicated by foreign models and contemptuous of local piety. The rhetoric of resistance drew explicitly on Shiite themes of martyrdom, justice, and resistance to tyranny, giving protesters a language that resonated beyond the mosque. The state could exile or imprison clerics, but it could not exile the memory of Karbala, nor could it easily confiscate the moral vocabulary that Shiism had woven into daily life.

Out of this confrontation emerged a figure who would reframe the question of political authority with unprecedented boldness. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini argued that clerical restraint had gone too far, that the jurist was not merely a custodian of law in the Imam's absence but its rightful executor. He claimed that justice required a state that embodied divine will, and that such a state could only be built under clerical supervision. This was not a return to the quietist tradition but a reconfiguration of it, transforming the jurist from an interpreter into a sovereign. The argument shocked many within the clerical world, but it also galvanized lay activists who saw in it a path to power that bypassed both monarchy and parliament.

Khomeini's innovation drew selectively from the past. He invoked the jurist's right to defend Islam, collect religious taxes, and appoint judges, but extended these into full political sovereignty. He argued that the interests of Islam required a strong state, and that only a knowledgeable jurist could guarantee that the state remained Islamic. Critics within the clergy warned that this leap risked identifying religion with a particular regime, but proponents countered that the alternative was chaos, secularism, or foreign domination. The debate was not merely theological; it was strategic, shaped by exile, repression, and the opportunity presented by a crumbling monarchy.

When the 1979 revolution succeeded, it installed a system that put Khomeini's theory into practice. The constitution drafted that year enshrined the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, making the jurist the supreme arbiter of state and sharia. Clerics moved from the seminary to the ministries, from the pulpit to the barracks, from property deeds to foreign policy. The revolution did not, however, end debate; it relocated it. Questions about the scope of clerical power, the role of elections, and the limits of coercion became institutionalized within the state itself, argued out in councils, courts, and Friday pulpits.

This opening chapter does not seek to resolve those debates but to show where they came from. Shiism's political authority has always been a moving target, shaped by texts, crises, and the personalities who interpreted them. The tradition began with a question—who should lead after the Prophet—and has spent centuries refining the answer without ever settling it. This unsettled quality is not a flaw; it is what allows Shiism to generate both quietist scholars and revolutionary jurists, to sanctify existing power and to condemn it. Understanding this duality is essential for understanding what happened when Shiism and the state fused in twentieth-century Iran.

The chapters that follow will trace how this fusion was engineered, challenged, and sustained. They will examine how clerical hierarchy, legal reasoning, and constitutional engineering combined to create a state that claims divine authority while navigating mundane conflicts. They will also explore how other clerics, both inside and outside Iran, have contested that authority, proposing alternatives grounded in the same texts but different emphases. The goal is not to judge these positions but to show how they are possible, and why they matter for the shape of governance in Iran and beyond.

Before turning to those institutional mechanics, it helps to recognize that Shiism's political imagination was always larger than the state. Rituals of mourning, pilgrimage to shrines, and the ethics of daily life sustained a religious community that could endure under hostile rule and outlive the states that claimed to rule it. This resilience gave clerics credibility when they spoke of justice, because they had embodied it in spaces where power was absent. When the state finally invited clerics in, it was this

reservoir of moral capital that made their presence transformative, for better or worse.

The notion that clerics could govern was therefore not born in 1979 but incubated across centuries of juristic reasoning and political experience. It emerged from the logic of Imamate, the discipline of jurisprudence, and the pragmatism of survival. It was reforged in encounters with modernity, nationalism, and revolution. The result is a system in which theology and administration constantly negotiate, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes explosively. To understand that system, one must begin not with constitutions or councils but with the quieter, deeper world of doctrine and debate that made them imaginable.

This book will move between those worlds, showing how ideas become institutions and how institutions strain to contain the ideas that birthed them. Along the way, readers will encounter clerics who saw the state as a necessary evil and others who saw it as a religious duty. They will encounter laypeople who trusted clerics with their souls but not with their votes, and leaders who tried to balance both. The story is not a simple rise or fall of religious power but a continual reconfiguration, as doctrines adapt to new tools and new temptations.

Shiism's political authority, in the end, is less a fixed office than an ongoing argument. The chapters that follow aim to document that argument with enough clarity to show its stakes, its contradictions, and its staying power. The first step is to recognize that the question of authority has never been answered, only reformulated—and that reformulation is the engine of Shiite political life. In Iran, it became the architecture of the state.

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