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Originally published in Review of international studies, 28 (1), pp. 75-92
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You may cite this version as:

Dalacoura, Katerina (2002). A critique of communitarianism with
reference to post-revolutionary Iran [online]. London: LSE Research
Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/00000749>

Available online: May 2006

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A critique of communitarianism with reference to post-revolutionary Iran

KATERINA DALACOURA*

Abstract. How do the terms ‘community’ and ‘communitarianism’ apply in non-Western contexts? How useful are they as social science terms in understanding Iranian and, generally, Middle Eastern politics? What is the impact of communitarianism as a political project in one of the few countries where it has been tried, namely Iran after the Revolution of 1979? This article seeks answers to these questions as a way of modestly advancing the liberal–communitarian debate in international relations theory. Its argument, built on limited but precise evidence, is that the concept of ‘community’ suffers from irremediable conceptual problems and ambiguities and that the project of communitarianism has pernicious political implications. The critique is in three parts. The first points to the inapplicability of the term ‘community’ to national society and its superfluousness as a social science term, using Iran and the Middle East as testing grounds. The second part develops the anti-essentialist argument on Islam and culture as a way of refuting the essence of ‘community’. The third part is an exposition of the links between ‘community’ as a political project in Iran with ideology, hierarchy and corruption.

Introduction

Confusion surrounds the notions of ‘community’ and ‘communitarianism’ and what they mean for political and international theory. This article will argue that the terms being employed in an inconsistent manner in the literature is not accidental. It is so because they are inherently impossible to clarify. The article will also address the pernicious impact that the principles underlying communitarianism can have on political freedom but also on culture itself, by highlighting the necessary links of ‘community’ as a political project with ideological, hierarchical and corrupt politics.

Examples from the Islamic Republic of Iran and, when appropriate, from the Middle East more widely, will substantiate the arguments and provide a novel perspective on communitarianism. Although this is, strictly speaking, a limited exercise—a critique from one particular angle—it has some general relevance to the debate on communitarianism, whose points of reference have hitherto been implicitly Western. Iran and the Middle East, of which it is part, are highly appropriate for the study of community and culture, because both are central in social and political life there and because the country and the region as a whole are mosaics of

* The research for this article was made possible by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust during the academic year 1997–98. My very special thanks go to Fred Halliday for his support and comments on an earlier draft. For their help with the research and publication of this article, I am also grateful to Karin Wermester; Chris Hill; the staff of the Greek Embassy of Tehran; and the editors and anonymous referees of the *Review of International Studies*.

different ethnic and religious groups. Although predominantly Muslim, they contain Christian and Jewish minorities. Within Islam, there are divisions between Sunnis, Shias, Ismailis, and various other denominations. Ethnically the Middle East is predominantly Arab, except for Iran and Turkey, but in all countries the existence of ethnic minorities is the rule rather than the exception; Berbers, Kurds, Armenians, Arab minorities in non-Arab countries, Turkic minorities in Arab countries and in Iran, and so on.

Providing an empirical dimension to the meanings of community and communitarianism, albeit quite narrow, will hopefully advance the liberal–communitarian debate in international relations theory, a debate which has intensified recently because of interest in the role of culture and religion in international affairs.¹ This debate is between those who see human nature, and therefore human values, as fundamentally universal (despite superficial differences) and those who see them as culturally and historically distinct. Liberals argue that human beings can, through rational debate, eventually agree on what is right and wrong by appealing to a moral standard within themselves. Communitarians insist that no such inherent standard exists and that our sense of right and wrong is determined by the communities in which we are born.² Charles Taylor and Michael Walzer would defend the communitarian view by adding that morality and our sense of self cannot be built in a vacuum but only through the historical experience of our society and that liberalism impoverishes us by homogenizing our experience.³

Is communitarianism nothing more than the old wine of cultural relativism in a new bottle? To some extent yes, this is an old problem in a new guise. However, there could be two differences. First, some communitarians would deny that they are relativists. Hegelians for example would argue that ‘Reason’ as manifested in particular historical communities is an emanation of a universal *Geist* (an argument which may be comprehensible theoretically but whose implications for ethical judgement and action are obscure.) Second, there is something more to communitarianism than cultural relativism because the unit of analysis is ‘community’, not ‘culture’ (culture is an ingredient of community but not the only one).

The liberal–communitarian debate, as it is being conducted in the international relations literature at present, has become somewhat stagnant and dull because its terms—the liberal, that the individual is prior to his/her ends and the communitarian, that the individual is constituted by his/her ends—are taken as stark opposites. These statements are then endlessly discussed without ever being finally settled. One way, however, that the debate can be nudged forward is to move beyond these assertions to their implications for ethics and politics, as illustrations of what they really mean. Perusing the edifice, not the foundations, is the task of this article.

¹ See, for example, R. P. Anand (ed.), *Cultural Factors in International Relations* (Honolulu, Hawaii: Abhinav Publications, 1981); William Zimmerman and Harold K. Jacobson (eds), *Behavior, Culture and Conflict in World Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Janna Thompson, *Justice and World Order: A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1992); Scott Thomas, ‘The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Study of World Politics’, in *Millennium, Journal of International Studies*, 24:2 (1995), pp. 289–99.

² This is one understanding of communitarianism, as the next section will show, but it is the one most commonly discussed in international relations theory.

³ See for example, Michael Walzer, ‘The Moral Standing of States: A Response to Four Critics’, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 9:3 (1979–80) and Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Although my liberal sympathies must be declared at the outset, they will not be justified philosophically.⁴ Nor will the article engage at any length with the ideas of the communitarian philosophers of our time on a theoretical level. Instead it will draw their implications for political *practice*. This is not to simplify or caricature thinkers such as Michael Walzer and Charles Taylor. It simply offers a different perspective on their texts and their ideas by asking what they could mean at the implementation stage.

Conceptual problems: Iran and the Middle East as testing grounds

The first part of this article's three-sided critique of 'community' and 'communitarianism' is that they are unsatisfactory terms, firstly because they are inherently inconsistent, and secondly, because they are superfluous as social science terms. The difficulty of pinpointing what community means makes it a concept of limited use in enhancing our understanding of the workings of politics and society. Although definitions of key concepts in social science are often disputed, in our case there seems to be no workable agreement on the core meaning of the term at all.

This is because 'communitarianism' is used in at least two very different, if not contradictory ways. In the first place, it refers to the movement, or inclination, to promote small face-to-face communities—such as the neighbourhood, the village, the town—by encouraging co-operation and self-help among its members. The impulse for this is either suspicion of 'big government' or a nostalgia for the lost safety of a protected world or a concern for social justice. In other words, it can be both of the right and of the left. It can also be a half-way house between the two, a third option between government- and individual-centred solutions, as is the contemporary trend. Communitarianism on the 'small scale' does demand more concern for our fellow citizens and giving more time and resources to common affairs. But it has nothing to do with particularist values, which communitarianism in its second meaning does.⁵

In this second meaning, the community is wider. The familiarity of face-to-face contact is replaced by the familiarity engendered by common cultural bonds which can coincide with a common language and possibly with belonging to a common political entity. Individuals do not simply belong to such a community, they are also 'constituted' by it. Furthermore, they are not encouraged to act for the benefit of the community, it is assumed (implicitly) that they do so simply because they are part of

⁴ I have tried to do so, however, in *Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights: Implications for International Relations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), ch. 1.

⁵ One principal exponent of communitarianism in the sense described here is the British Labour government voted into office in April 1997; see Tony Blair, *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century* (London: The Fabian Society, 1998). On the various meanings of communitarianism, see Rhoda Howard, 'Human Rights and the Search for Community', in *Journal of Peace Research*, 32:1 (1995), pp. 1–8. Another source of confusion with definitions is that 'community' at the local level can be used to describe what is sometimes called 'civil society'; Terry Nardin, 'Private and Public Roles in Civil Society', in Michael Walzer (ed.), *Toward a Global Civil Society* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995), p. 29.

it.⁶ (The communitarian–liberal debate in international relations theory refers mostly to communitarianism in this second meaning.)

The term ‘community’ is used in both the above senses, because they are seen as sharing fundamental common characteristics. But, despite similarities, these are two different categories for a number of reasons, the first being that the creation of political community—the modern state in our case—rests on the break-up of small-scale communities. (Presumably this is why some communitarians are suspicious of the state⁷). State-formation, if it is to be successful, must cause the individualization of society. In the Middle East, to be sure, the small-scale and large-scale political communities are of inverse strength.⁸

The second reason why the two categories—small, face-to-face communities and larger cultural or political communities—are dissimilar is their ambiguous relation to liberal values. In the case of the former, liberal values are not necessarily denied and authors who encourage the strengthening of small-scale community are often nothing but liberals with a strong social conscience. In the case of the latter, larger-scale communities, however, liberal values are denied. If one sees the world as divided into cultural or political communities, each of which is the source of particularist values, one cannot also be a liberal.

Michael Walzer has attempted to resolve this problem by arguing that despite the existence of a ‘thick’ morality, particular to each culture and society, we all share a ‘thin’ sense of it.⁹ He argues that we are all concerned with values such as ‘justice’ and ‘liberty’ which are universal, but we give them discrete ‘thick’ particularist meanings in each community. This picture, however, conceals the reality of profound clashes between values and cultures. Some contemporary ‘Islamic human rights’ discourses are a good example. Using the liberal injunction for ‘mutual respect’ among cultures, Islamist conservatives argue that human rights have their own meaning in Islam, equally as valid as the ‘Western’ meaning. The conservative ‘Islamic human rights’ rest on ‘protecting’ women and non-Muslims and include amputations and stonings as punishments. Therefore, not defining the key terms leads to the inability to differentiate between Islamist liberals and Islamist conservatives, these who achieve a *genuine* reconciliation between Islam and human rights principles and these who do not.¹⁰

⁶ Michael J. Sandel, ‘Justice and the Good’, in Michael J. Sandel (ed.), *Liberalism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 166.

⁷ Andrew Vincent, ‘Liberal Nationalism and Communitarianism: An Ambiguous Association’, in *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 34:1 (1997), p. 20 and Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Communitarianism, Freedom, and the Nation-State’, in *Critical Review*, 9:4 (1995), p. 548.

⁸ Weak and undeveloped states in the Middle East (such as Yemen) allow traditional communities to remain powerful. Note however that an overly strong and repressive state can have a similar effect because, even though it may have succeeded in breaking up traditional communities, it causes the resurgence of reconstituted traditional groups or loyalties as a way of protection against it (the Algerian case is an example). A strong state is not repressive or oversized but one that has evolved in a gradual manner, integral with society, and has led to the individualization of society. No such states exist in the Middle East but its closest approximations are the Turkish, Egyptian and Tunisian states, with Iran being an interesting mixture, to be examined below.

⁹ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Contrast the conservative schemes on Islam and human rights discussed in Ann Elizabeth Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics* (Boulder CO and London: Westview Press and Pinter, 1991) with Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

The confusion in the literature on communitarianism has increased because of the description of some liberal thinkers, such as John Stuart Mill, as communitarians.¹¹ The rationale behind this description is that Mill, and others like him, recognize that community is important and that humanity is indeed divided into collective entities. But to say that this is not a liberal position is to give in to a caricature of liberalism, a liberalism which pictures the individual existing in a vacuum. Liberals are, and have always been, concerned with community and society, although of course they do not ascribe to it a similar role as communitarians do. They are also concerned with self-determination in the collective or national sense.¹²

The complaint here is that, ultimately, there is no consistency in the literature as to what communitarianism means. If it is simply a variant of liberalism, an attempt to reform it, it is one thing; if it is its antithesis, it is quite another.¹³ It certainly cannot be both, since we cannot have a little of two contradictory positions in the same scheme, unless we assume that all cultures contain a core set of liberal values, which is not so.

The third reason why it is inappropriate to substitute community in the small scale for community in the large scale is highlighted very well by the Middle East. It is safe to generalize that an anti-individualistic ethic predominates in Middle Eastern social life. The community is valued more than the individual. People's lives are immersed in one another's. Furthermore, there has been a resurgence of Islam and cultural politics over the last three decades. The message from the region seems loud and clear: our values are particular to us, different from the West's.

At first sight there would seem to be no contradiction here. The pre-eminence of community over the individual in the Middle East is powerful on the small-scale, in the extended family, the urban neighbourhood, the tribe or possibly the village. But belonging to an ethnic group, a nation, a religion (of the majority or the minority) or a culture is equally powerful. This is evident in the deeply personalized way in which insults to these entities are experienced, which is a characteristic of transposing the sense of family to the wider group. It is typical of the region that 'public affairs' are internalized as personal or family affairs writ-large and that there is no sharp boundary between the public and private domains.

But the paradox is that the Middle East is also characterized by a deeply-embedded atomism and a lack of social conscience. This is a common observation of its students and a regular complaint of its inhabitants. Community in the larger-scale—in the sense of any collective entity beyond that bound by direct physical contact, in other words the city, the region, the country, the Middle East as a whole, the Islamic world—is characterized by the fanfare of brotherhood and harmony and the bitter reality of division, selfishness, hypocrisy and betrayal. This phenomenon is especially poignant in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the rhetoric of unity and the metaphor of familial relations by the country's leaders¹⁴ masks a political and social system where corrupt and self-seeking practices run wild.

¹¹ Chris Brown, *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 73–5.

¹² Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹³ Amitai Etzioni, for example, is ambiguous about liberalism. See Amitai Etzioni, 'Positive Aspects of Community and the Dangers of Fragmentation' in *Development and Change*, 27:2 (1996), pp. 302–13.

¹⁴ See, for example, the speech by the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, on 22 April 1998 in *Summary of World Broadcasts*, ME/3209MED/1–4, 24 April 1998 and his speech of 4 March 1998, in *Summary of World Broadcasts*, ME/3168MED/2–3, 6 March 1998.

The point is that we cannot substitute the small for the large-scale community because common religious, cultural and ethnic bonds do not replace the bonds of personal love and care, intimacy and common interest, despite the appearance to the contrary. This is so because a religion, a nation or a culture are conceived as separate from and usually as higher and above the people that comprise it. Reverence for religion, nation and culture, and a strong sense of belonging to them, do not translate into caring for the fellow human beings who also belong to them. They—people—are seen as vehicles or servants of these higher ideals, to be used or discarded according to the supposed ‘requirements’ of these ideals. It is for this reason that cultural, religious or ethnic politics are anti-humanistic and also why using the word ‘community’ to describe the large-scale entity is not helpful.¹⁵

Let us move to a further issue with the term ‘community’, in the second sense of the large-scale entity, which is that the terms already available—state, society, nation, minority, religion, culture—are more than adequate for the purpose of understanding social and political reality. ‘Community’ can refer to any of the terms. It is a catch-all word. This is its strength in common parlance, but its weakness as a tool for social and political analysis.

Individuals belong to many communities, not just one. They also have multiple identities, not only through the course of a lifetime but simultaneously and depending on circumstance and context. In the Middle East, for example, a person might be said to belong to their family, neighbourhood or tribe; to an ethnic group; to be a citizen of a state; a member of the Islamic or of any other faith. In Iran, specifically, which is a multi-ethnic country of many religious denominations, people find themselves belonging to various groups simultaneously. Iran is dominated by an Indo-European ethnic group which is also Shiite Muslim. But one may be a Shiite yet also part of the Azeri minority; a Sunni Kurd; an Armenian yet Iranian; or a Bakhtiari, in other words originally belonging to the Bakhtiar tribe. The multiplicity of identities is confusing but because it is the norm, everywhere, we need precise categories to make sense of it.

Introducing the category ‘community’ does not serve this purpose because there is nothing in the literature on communitarianism to help us decide *which* of these entities, to which an individual belongs, must predominate over the others as his or her ‘community’.¹⁶ Any of these ‘communities’ to which a person belongs can have an equally strong claim to his or her loyalty. Any of them can be said to ‘constitute’ an individual, with their interests, values, inclinations and loyalties. To deny that there is a problem here is to not acknowledge that these different entities may have contradictory claims on your loyalty (imagine being a persecuted Bahai in Iran). Because of its very generality, the term ‘community’—in the second sense—loses any instrumentality and the term ‘communitarianism’ is shown to lack explanatory power or ethical content.

Should we therefore discard the terms ‘community’ and ‘communitarianism’ as superfluous? On the basis of evidence from Iran and the Middle East, we probably

¹⁵ A sceptic would argue that the bonds of love, care and so on, do not even hold for the small-scale community. In this case, the implication is that the term ‘community’, with its benign connotations, should be ejected from our vocabulary altogether because it is totally mythical!

¹⁶ Vincent, ‘Liberal Nationalism and Communitarianism’, pp. 21–2.

should. The terms nationalism, ethnicity, religious or cultural particularism or relativism, state and society, are more than adequate. If anything, the terms ‘community’ and ‘communitarianism’ can be retained in the small-scale sense—which is how it is used in common parlance and, nowadays, in Western domestic political discourse—but while clarifying that communitarianism in this sense is not the antithesis of liberalism but an attempt to reform it by giving it a greater social conscience.

Against cultural essentialism: the transformations of Islam

Whatever the conceptual problems with the term ‘community’, it is undeniable that the world is made up of collective entities with particular characteristics. My argument up to now has not disputed this, but has been that the term ‘community’ and therefore ‘communitarianism’ are inappropriate (because we cannot transpose the characteristics of a small-scale to a large-scale community) and a very weak tool of analysis (because the term ‘community’ is too general and does not differentiate between different types of collective identities).

If the human race is indeed divided into discrete collectivities, which it is, they are distinguishable both culturally and politically. The relation between cultural and political community is elaborate as the next section will show. But, for the moment, let us look at the former and at the central communitarian proposition that a community is defined by its culture.

‘Culture’ has many definitions, but in this context I use it in the widest possible sense, comprising attitudes towards political authority and political relations, social relations and metaphysical views about life and death. (If this seems too broad, it is the way in which ‘culture’ is used in international political theory and it is not nearly as bad as ‘civilization’.) This definition is to be distinguished from the two other narrower meanings of culture, as the habits, likes and dislikes, the cuisine, dress, rituals, gestures and expressions of a people, on the one hand; and, as poetry, literature, music, the arts, on the other.

I will argue that ‘culture’, in the first broad sense, is not static but is constantly being reformulated under the influence of material conditions.¹⁷ One could retort that communitarianism does not deny this and that to say that culture is in flux does not mean that cultural specificity does not exist.¹⁸ However, this retort is deceptive. The *necessary* implication of the communitarian proposition is that there is such a thing as ‘cultural authenticity’ which can be discovered. If cultural authenticity did not exist, nothing fundamental would differentiate people belonging to different

¹⁷ There is a parallel between the argument on culture I am developing here and the view on ethnicity and conflict developed by Dominique Jacquin-Berdal, in ‘Ethnic Wars and International Intervention’ in *Millennium, Journal of International Studies*, 27:1 (1998), pp. 127–39.

¹⁸ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, p. 68.

cultures, and we would revert to the liberal position which is that a common human nature is expressed in a multiplicity of cultural ways.¹⁹

The Middle East and especially Iran illustrate the malleability of culture very well. Their social and political life has been marked by a preoccupation (one could say, obsession) with cultural questions and with the need for protection against the perceived cultural onslaught from the West. Middle Easterners more often than not identify cultural questions with religion, especially Islam. The preoccupation with religion has been about identity in the collective sense, otherwise we would have witnessed a simple resurgence of religiosity on the private level in the Middle East, which is not what has happened. For this reason, and despite its problems, religion (Islam) and culture will be used interchangeably in the argument that follows.

A lively debate has been taking place among inhabitants and students of the Middle East in recent years about Islam and its impact on public life. The debate is between two divergent positions, cultural essentialism and anti-essentialism. The former is that the precepts of Islam have always been immutable and must be seen as an independent force in social and political life. The latter position views Islam as subject to reinterpretation under economic, social and political circumstances and therefore denies that it is an independent variable.²⁰

The essentialist explanation of the rise of political Islam (or Islamism)²¹ over the last three decades in the Middle East is that this was just something waiting to happen. The argument goes that Islam has always been the uppermost object of loyalty of ‘the people’. After a period of eclipse in which foreign-influenced elites tried to impose alien (that is Western, either liberal, socialist or nationalist) values on the people, cultural authenticity—Islam—came inevitably back to the fore. Indeed the discussion on authenticity is very intense in the Middle East.²²

The counter-argument is that political Islam became increasingly popular in the Arab Middle East only after the defeat of 1967 by Israel which symbolized—and was partly caused by—economic deadlock and the failure of Arab nationalism and socialism in the region, especially in Egypt (Iran’s trajectory was different, as we shall see). What this means is that the rise of Islamism was caused by the discredit and abandonment of alternative ideologies and that it was not inevitable. It is interesting to note that, except for one or two cases such as Algeria, there is no evidence that Islamism would be the choice of the majority in most Arab countries and that, however popular, the appeal of Islamism has not surpassed that of Arab

¹⁹ David Luban correctly points out that, according to Walzer, ‘without “direct experience” a member of one culture cannot, ultimately, know what it is really like to be a member of another’. This is the implication of believing in the existence of cultural authenticity. David Luban, ‘The Romance of the Nation-State’, in Charles R. Beitz, Marshall Cohen, Thomas Scanlon, and A. John Simmons (eds.), *International Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 241. Fred Halliday argues in ‘The Middle East and the “Law of Peoples”’ that the core *implicit* assumption of communitarian thinking is that cultures are unitary, static and discrete. See Fred Halliday, *Religion and Nationalism in the Middle East* (London: Al Saqi Books, forthcoming).

²⁰ Compare, for example, the cultural essentialism of Elie Kedourie with the views of Fred Halliday: Elie Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1995).

²¹ The terms ‘Islamism’ and ‘political Islam’ refer to the movement seeking to make Islam part of the political system. Not all Islamists are fundamentalists, however, and some of them can be Islamist liberals.

²² Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).

nationalism which was a predominantly secular ideology. It is also important to point out that the sense of horror which grips people in the West at Islamic fundamentalist violence is widely shared in the Middle East.²³

The anti-essentialist argument also holds that the conceptualization of political Islam—be it liberal, moderate, fundamentalist—is not predetermined but is influenced by social, economic and political circumstances in Muslim countries. The evidence for this is that there are considerable variations in the interpretation of Islam across history and among states and regions. The questions we have to ask with regard to the interpretation of Islam in any given time and place are not unique to Muslim societies. They are questions about state-formation, capitalism, class, and configurations of power. These, not what the Koran says, explain the role of Islam in the political process and the interpretation of Islam that prevails in any historical moment.

The above counter-essentialist argument is quite powerful, although not always fully persuasive. There seems to be no discoverable cultural or religious ‘essence’ in the Middle East or the Islamic world waiting to surface when given the opportunity. This does not mean that the search for identity is not important. The belief that the Islamist phenomenon has purely secular economic roots, emerging from the combined Islamist promise of economic redistribution for the poor and of the sanctity of private property for the middling classes—offering something to everyone, that is—is one-sided.²⁴ Without wanting to underestimate the serious problems facing many economies in the Middle East, the other important reason for the appeal of Islamism is that it is perceived as the solution to an identity crisis whose causes are not only economic deadlock but a general disillusionment with society and politics.²⁵

The Iranian Revolution of 1978–79 and the subsequent creation of the Islamic Republic illustrate all the above anti-essentialist arguments. The first point to note is that ‘Islam’ had been only one of the many sources of opposition against the regime of the shah. Until 1960, criticism came mainly from socialists and liberals; it was thereafter that the religious discourse became more important, but it often blended with secular ideas rather than erasing them.²⁶ During the revolution, liberal, socialist and even regional/ethnic forces played a role in bringing down the shah and, although Islamist forces eventually predominated, alternatives were not totally eclipsed. The second point is that the ‘Islam’ that predominated was not predetermined—emerging from the collective conscience of the Iranian people—but a

²³ This is especially so in Egypt where there has been public revulsion against fundamentalist violence and a consequent drop in the popularity of Islamism.

²⁴ This seems to be the implication of Ziya Önis, ‘The Political Economy of Islamic Resurgence in Turkey: The Rise of the Welfare Party in Perspective’ in *Third World Quarterly*, 18:4 (1997), pp. 743–66.

²⁵ Here we can see an overlap between the politics of community and culture and the politics of right and left, a point I will take up briefly later.

²⁶ Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 202. ‘We thus arrive at the perhaps startling conclusion that the main lines of Iran’s literature and political thought in the past century have been radically different from the culture most visible in 1981, and even quite different from the complex, and *not* proclerical emphasis of the “anti-Westernists” Al-e Ahmad and Shariati.’

creation of its many ideologues, especially Ali Shariati and Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, and of the political circumstances before and after the revolution.²⁷

The key, though not the single, explanation in understanding the emergence and interpretation of political Islam in Iran was the process of state formation in the country. Despite the longevity of Iran as a political entity, the state was weak in the nineteenth century. It failed to hold society together and to begin the process of modernization, as its Ottoman and Egyptian counterparts did. What then followed was the reverse phenomenon of very rapid centralization and authoritarian modernization, during the reigns of Reza Shah (1926–41) and his son Muhammad Reza Shah (1941–79). The brutality and speed of state formation in the twentieth century led to a serious political and social backlash, as the shahs tried to force massive change down the country's throat. This is the first simple explanation of why there was a revolution in Iran.²⁸

The course of political events and specific social and economic configurations contributed to making Islam the driving force of the revolution. The Revolution of 1905–6 had failed, early on, to impose constitutional restrictions on central authority and, more recently, secular, liberal nationalism was defeated in Iran in 1953, with the overthrow of Muhammad Mossadeq. Constant Russian and British involvement in Iran since the nineteenth century was replaced, after that incident, with heavy American presence in support of the shah's unpopular regime. Islam provided the sharpest means of differentiation from foreign elements. Finally, the alliance between the *bazaar* merchants and the Shiite *mullahs* (clerics) of Iran, who remained the only financially independent forces from the state, provided the revolutionary movement with a most efficient network of mobilization around the mosque and the market.²⁹

But if Islam was the main force behind the revolutionary movement for the reasons mentioned above, the question becomes, which interpretation of Islam and why? The first characteristic of this interpretation was that it combined a religious with a social justice discourse. The explanation is quite straightforward. As Islam developed into a political force in the twenty years or so before the Revolution, it adapted to the social needs of the more disadvantaged sections of the population, those who had lost out as income inequalities widened during Iran's oil-fuelled economic growth. Furthermore, Islam had to provide the mix between identity and economic concerns to substitute the gradually marginalized left-wing ideologies.

The second characteristic of the interpretation of Islam that predominated in the Revolution was that it combined fundamentalism and modernism. Again, the process of state formation provides the best explanation for this interesting phenomenon. The state of Iran had been in existence for thousands of years and large segments of the population were under its tutelage. On the other hand, central

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 8; Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993); on Shariati, see Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 464–73; Ali Reza Sheikholeslami, 'From Religious Accommodation to Religious Revolution: The Transformation of Shi'ism in Iran', in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (eds.), *The State, Religion and Ethnic Politics: Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

²⁸ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution* and Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*; see also Shahroush Akhavi, 'State Formation and Consolidation in Twentieth Century Iran: The Reza Shah Period and the Islamic Republic' in Banuazizi and Weiner (eds.), *The State, Religion and Ethnic Politics*.

²⁹ Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 533.

authority had failed to develop in a mountainous and arid country which did not allow for easy communications and large parts of which retained regional or tribal independence.³⁰ This changed in the twentieth century, but Pahlavi centralization was violent and haphazard and it neglected the provinces of the vast country. The result was a mix of sharply divergent modernized and traditional social elements which combined to create a hybrid Islamic discourse.

With economic transformation and the oil boom, Iranian urban centres mushroomed. The Iranian Revolution has been described as a peasant revolution³¹ (of peasants in the cities) and there is some truth in that, although it was not traditional elements that revolted against the shah but the uprooted migrants in the cities seeking the security of tradition. They provided the backbone for the Islamic movement behind Khomeini, as the Pahlavi regime finally collapsed under economic crisis and gross tactical mistakes. In the year or so after the Revolution, the Islamic movement outmanoeuvred its liberal and socialist competitors and its more fundamentalist trend, then banished the more liberal Islamic interpretations of Mehdi Bazargan and Abolhassan Bani Sadr to the sidelines.³² Nevertheless, the variety of interpretations of Islam have been resurfacing as factional competitors in Iranian politics ever since the Revolution.

Finally, once the Islamic regime became entrenched in power, Islam underwent yet another transformation, as it had to be translated into a political system (because, despite the belief that Islam is a political religion, the Koran's guidelines for politics are skeletal). A series of innovations took place, the crowning one being the creation of *velayat-e-faqih*, a novel position of leader of the revolution that Khomeini created for himself and his successors.³³ What happened after 1979 in Iran was not the predominance of culture and religion but the invention of one. And, as the third section will point out, it is possible that Islam is in the process of being reinvented in Iran once again.

There *are* continuities, of course, in Iranian political culture. But even they can have concrete explanations, which are more useful than ascribing them to 'culture'. One example of a long-standing feature of political life is the widespread prevalence of conspiracy theories. Presumably, this will gradually be eradicated as Iranians begin to acknowledge their responsibility for developments in their own country.

This cursory study of cultural and religious politics in Iran and the Middle East supports the counter-essentialist thesis. It is an irony that, as Middle Eastern studies seem to be finally moving away from generalizations about Islam and Islamic politics, trends in international and political theory are moving in the opposite direction. A short article by Charles Taylor on the Salman Rushdie affair, in which he sharply juxtaposes and treats as uniform 'the Western' and 'Islamic' worlds, is

³⁰ Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 25

³¹ Interview with Jahargir Behrooz, editor of *The Echo of Iran*. I conducted all interviews in Tehran, Iran, in April 1998.

³² On the struggle for and against a theocratic state see Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (London: Unwin, 1986). On the competition between various political strands, see Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran: Politics and the State in the Islamic Republic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997, translated by John O'Kane).

³³ Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993), ch. 1.

indicative of a way of thinking which has impeded the efforts of Islamic liberals to change their societies from within.³⁴

There is a revealing parallel between the arguments on Islam and cultural authenticity and the contemporary debate on 'Asian values', for which the Singapore and Malaysian governments are the self-appointed champions. The 'Asian values' discourse serves a double purpose for these governments, protecting them from outside scrutiny on human rights and ensuring the acquiescence of their people. 'Asian values' consist of emphasis on duty rather than right; on the community and the family; on consensus and solidarity; and on deference to authority. However, it is far-fetched to claim that Asia, containing so many diverse societies, shares a common core of values.³⁵ As Yash Ghai argues, 'the social foundations of Confucianism, structured around agrarian relations, have been altered beyond recognition'; 'Asian values are used to explain economic success, yet Confucianism and Hinduism are both opposed to the profit motive and the accumulation of wealth';³⁶ and 'a duty-based society has traditionally been status-based and hierarchical'.³⁷ The illusion that abuse of power can be checked by the self-restraint, wisdom and prudence of the elite was shattered by the economic and political crisis of 1997–98 in Asia, of which corruption was a major cause.

Political community, ideology, hierarchy and corruption: Iran after the revolution

The argument in the above section was that culture is never static and that 'cultural authenticity' does not exist. This section will introduce questions of political power more directly and examine the consequences of making culture and, in the case of Iran, religion, the source of guidelines for public and political life. The argument is that cultural politics distorts culture and religion and that political community is qualitatively different from cultural community, not its continuation or a complementary entity. Communitarianism, defined as the injunction to incorporate cultural and religious values in public life, leads to a repressive political system because of the necessary link between political community and hierarchy. This is a conclusion from one part of the world, but it may be applicable elsewhere.

One variant of contemporary communitarianism, associated primarily with Michael Walzer, identifies the community with the state. According to this view, cultural norms—attitudes towards outsiders, family relations, attitudes towards political authority, the understanding of the political process, and the metaphysical views underlying these, including religious views—must be incorporated into political life. A cultural community becomes also a political community.³⁸

It is trite to argue that once we make this transition, authoritarian politics is the result. But the following two explanations may be of interest. The first is Burkean—

³⁴ Charles Taylor, 'The Rushdie Controversy', in *Public Culture*, 2:1 (1989), pp. 118–22.

³⁵ Xiaorong Li, "'Asian Values' and the Universality of Human Rights', in *Report from the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy*, 16:2 (1996), p. 19.

³⁶ Yash Ghai, 'Rights, Duties and Responsibilities', in *Human Rights Solidarity*, *AHRC Newsletter*, 7:4 (1997), p. 14. I am grateful to Margo Picken for this reference.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁸ Brown, *International Relations Theory*, pp. 59–67.

ironically so, since Burke defends the value of culture and tradition.³⁹ However, the moment 'culture' begins to provide guidelines for political action, it becomes an ideological blueprint and represents a *break* with tradition, not its continuation. Furthermore, a 'return to tradition' is an oxymoron, a bizarre contradiction of modernity, yet this is what cultural politics demands. The result is not only oppression but a distortion of culture as a living, evolving phenomenon.

The search for authenticity, which cultural politics demands, started with a very modern movement, Romanticism, and continued with nationalism.⁴⁰ We are currently witnessing the growth and spread of its most extreme form, religious fundamentalism. The Muslim variant is part of a worldwide trend of Christian, Hindu and Jewish fundamentalism.⁴¹ Islamic fundamentalism and the popularity of political Islam are not a symptom of the persistence of tradition and traditional politics. The more traditional societies in the Middle East, such as Morocco, Yemen and Jordan, are less fertile breeding grounds for fundamentalist movements.⁴² It is where modernization has been skewed and rapid, where the mix between tradition and modernity has been explosive, for example in Algeria and Iran, that fundamentalism has mushroomed. In those cases traditional formations have not been eclipsed but they are reconstituted for modern political purposes.⁴³

Fundamentalism and political Islam are by definition modern phenomena because they involve the transformation of Islam from a lived tradition into an object and an ideological programme.⁴⁴ The question of the *sharia* (Islamic law) is pertinent here. The central demand of the Islamist movements in the Middle East is the reimposition of Islamic law. But, in many cases, the *sharia* had ceased to function as a coherent body of law in many parts of the Middle East by the nineteenth century. It was, in some cases, taken up at the expense of local customary law and imposed by the British as the only available 'law of the land'; in other words, the *sharia* played a role in the creation of the territorial sovereign state in the Middle East. It also became the symbol on which political Islamists latched as a defence against the West, the only tangible programme for Islamic ideologues who rejected the immediate past in favour of a long-lost glorious history.⁴⁵ The *sharia* was reinstated to satisfy the modern needs for a functioning body of law to run a state and for an ideological blueprint to guide public policy.

³⁹ Michael Walzer, 'The Moral Standing of States', p. 211; Walzer refers to the 'contract, Burkeian in character, among the living, the dead, and those who are yet to be born'.

⁴⁰ Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

⁴¹ Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990).

⁴² Nikki Keddie, 'Ideology, Society and the State in Post-Colonial Muslim Societies', in Fred Halliday and Hamza Alazi, *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 16–17.

⁴³ Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State*, p. 96: '... a familiar feature of political organization and mobilization in many Middle East (and other) countries: modern ideological politics and political parties mobilising support on the basis of "traditional" networks of patronage and primary solidarities'.

⁴⁴ Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 43; Martin Kramer, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996); Zubaida in *Islam, the People and the State*, ch. 1, argues that Khomeini's political ideas are constructed with the implicit assumptions of the modern state and nation.

⁴⁵ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 3 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 386–7.

Iran illustrates the above problems and some of their practical implications. The identification of religion with ideology and political power has led, as many contemporary *mullahs* begin to recognize, to Islam becoming the victim of petty politics.⁴⁶ The mismanagement and incompetence of the Iranian regime are becoming associated in the popular mind with Islam. The second problem is that the cultural richness and dynamism of the country has suffered because, in the need to create a stable political system, Islam becomes a rigid body of rules, despite the often imaginative reinterpretation to which it has been subjected in the past. Iran has not always been an Islamic or Shiite society, and its civilizational richness and diversity owes a lot to pre-Islamic and non-Shiite practices. They are now gradually being lost, especially to the younger generation.⁴⁷

Iran is not solely a Shiite or Indo-European nation even now. Only half of its population are Shiite Persian speakers, the rest being a large collection of ethnic and religious minorities. Turkomans, Arabs, Lurs, Baluchis, Azeris, Kurds, Afghans, are some of the eighteen or so ethnic groups of Iran.⁴⁸ Generally speaking, and relative to other Middle Eastern states, ethnic minorities have not been subject to gross persecution or systematic attempts at assimilation, even under the centralizing Pahlavi regime. Although Azerbaijan and Kurdistan did in the past (notably in 1919–21 and 1945–46) revolt against Tehran, Azeris nowadays are fairly well integrated in Iranian society and Kurds have had fewer problems in Iran than in Turkey or Iraq. But the Iranian state's policy towards the country's ethnic minorities has historically been fairly hands-off only so long as there was no trouble from the minorities themselves, and the dominance of the Persian-speaking Shiite ethnic group is undeniable. The Islamic revolutionary regime has not changed this in any major way (except that it has paid more attention to the infrastructure and material needs of the provinces), despite the regional revolts immediately after the Revolution. It has continued the policy of not recognizing ethnic minorities as such but treating their members as individual citizens.⁴⁹

This is not so for religious minorities, which include Bahais, Ismailis, Sunnis, Greek Orthodox (Armenians), Assyrians, Protestants, Jews and Zoroastrians. After the Revolution, some of these non-Muslims were recognized as separate minorities, and were given representation in the *Majlis* (Iranian Parliament), two seats for Christians, two for Zoroastrians and one for Jews. They were given autonomy in family law and ensured freedom of worship. On the other hand, they became clearly subordinate, second-class citizens, because they were barred from some high official positions and the 'blood money' needed to exonerate their death was set at half of that for a Muslim. Again, what holds is that non-Muslims are safe so long as they do not offend the regime in any way. This is also the case for the Muslim minorities, Sunnis and Ismailis, but not for the Bahais, who are considered Muslim heretics and

⁴⁶ Interview with Daryush Shayegan, former professor of Comparative Philosophy, University of Tehran.

⁴⁷ *Guardians of Thought: Limits on Freedom of Expression in Iran: A Middle East Watch Report* (New York: Human Rights Watch, August 1993), especially pp. 122–4 which emphasize the denial and distortion of the country's history and cultural heritage.

⁴⁸ Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Nikki Keddie, 'Religion, Ethnic Minorities and the State in Iran: An Overview', and Patricia J. Higgins, 'Minority-State Relations in Contemporary Iran', especially pp. 190–1, both in Banuazizi and Weiner (eds.), *The State, Religion and Ethnic Politics*; interview with Sadegh Samii, Chairman, Ketab Sara Co., Publishers.

have been ruthlessly persecuted.⁵⁰ The ‘politics of difference’ in the case of revolutionary Iran is the politics of hierarchy.⁵¹

Hierarchy also characterizes the relationship between man and woman as it was reconstituted by the Revolution. The *chador* (female Islamic dress, which covers the head and body, but not necessarily the face) was the most potent revolutionary symbol of identity against the West and the shah, but it also symbolizes the separate position of women, who are second class citizens. Their status is enshrined in the law which does not allow them, as judges, to pronounce individual decisions;⁵² treats the testimony of one man as equal to two women’s (in criminal, not civil law); deprives them of custody of their children at a very young age (two for boys, seven for girls) unless they can prove that the father is unsuitable; gives them fewer divorce rights; treats their lives as worth half a man’s if they are murdered; gives them half the inheritance of men; and allows polygamy (which had been legal but more controlled before the revolution). It is remarkable, given the crushing legal inequality, that women in Iran are active, dynamic and fairly free to work and move around. This makes the *chador* even more important. It symbolizes the divine order of things and is perceived as the guarantor of social stability. Women are seen as ‘separate but equal’, a description which, as in the case of religious minorities, is about hierarchy, not simple inequality.⁵³

The link of hierarchical with religious or cultural politics is not observable only in the Middle East or in Islam. It is worth repeating that the ‘Asian values’ discourse relies crucially on hierarchy, in the family and in the body politic. In the West the call for ‘family values’ usually implies—although not explicitly—differentiation within the family. The possible exception may be tribal cultures which tend to be egalitarian, although they rely on sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders. That the close link between hierarchy and community is not accidental is, of course, also pointed out by Hegel. Charles Taylor, in his discussion on the relevance of Hegel to modern life, claims that Hegel’s insistence on hierarchy is unacceptable today but that Hegel’s questions and some of his views are still pertinent.⁵⁴ But such selective use of Hegelian reasoning is not convincing if we take the connection between community and hierarchy as a necessary one.

⁵⁰ Interview with Manukian, Archbishop of Armenian Church of Iran; Keddie, ‘Religion, Ethnic Minorities and State in Iran’, and Higgins, ‘Minority–State Relations in Iran’; on Bahai persecution see, for example, ‘Religious Minorities in Iran: The Baha’i Community’ in *The Echo of Iran*, no. 113 (October 1997), pp. 31–42 and *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Prepared by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights, Mr Maurice Copithorne, Pursuant to Commission Resolution 1997/54*, p. 8, pp. 14–15.

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in Amy Gutmann, (ed.) *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 38; see also Anne Phillips, ‘Democracy and Difference: Some Problems for Feminist Theory’, in *Political Quarterly*, 63:1 (1992), pp. 79–90.

⁵² There are legislative moves to modify the law on women judges at present, however.

⁵³ Interviews with Mehranguiz Kar, Attorney at Law; Mahboubeh Abbas-Gholizadeh, editor in chief of *Farzaneh, Journal of Women’s Studies and Research*; Fatemeh Hashemi, Secretary General of the Women’s Solidarity Association of Iran and Chairperson of the International Union of Muslim Women Non-Governmental Organizations, who argued that ‘men have more responsibilities, women more privileges’; Shahla Sherkat, editor of the prominent women’s journal *Zamaan*; Shirin Ebadi, Attorney at Law, Human Rights Watch Monitor, Retired Judge; Sharad Sapra, Representative of United Nations Children’s Fund, Iran; see also ‘Early Marriage or Slavery’ in *Danesh*, (UNICEF), vol. 3, February 1998.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, p. 111.

Nevertheless, there may be those who do not view the reinstatement of hierarchical social and political relations as an unacceptable proposition—many in post-1979 Iran certainly do not—and who would argue that the alternative, as pointed out by Hegel, of the homogenization implicit in modernity is far worse. The powerful statement made by communitarian thinkers is that, without belonging to a cultural group or community that sustains and nourishes, the individual's life is impoverished. They would argue that, despite the problems of defining community, and the fact that culture is continuously in flux, living in a hierarchical and ideological political milieu is not as bad as having to witness the destruction of your culture. Therefore, state power can and should be used to sustain and ensure the survival of this culture and the identity of the community.

The problem is that, in the Middle East (and probably elsewhere too) the state *cannot* play this role, cannot ensure cultural survival, even if the will to do so were there and the motivation most noble. Religious states such as Saudi Arabia have tended to collapse into hypocritical tyrannies, hiding behind the empty shell of the values they purport to uphold. Presumably this has to do with the potential enormity of power and control that the modern state provides. Without appropriate safeguards and guarantees for the individual, accountability and a rational division of powers, such potential power becomes a source of corruption for those who hold it. The assumption that moral values and self-restraint arising from belief in God will play the role of these safeguards has not been validated on a large scale.⁵⁵

In Iran the problems are greatest because cultural and religious politics was accompanied with enormous concentration of economic resources for the purposes of redistribution. Although some economic redistribution has taken place, the feeling in the country is that corruption of the ruling clerical class has undermined the achievements. As the visitor to the country quickly discovers, many of the 'sacred' religious values in the Islamic Republic are for sale, at least for those who can afford the bribes. Dressing 'immodestly' may lead to arrest but not to imprisonment for the wealthy. The prohibition of alcohol, song and dance can be overlooked by paying the appropriate sum to the local security forces.

In short, cultural survival (if we use 'culture' in the first, broadest of the three meanings offered above) cannot be safeguarded by using political power because the culture and the values it represents will be distorted or transformed into something else. Ultimately, a culture can survive only by the efforts of those who feel that it is worthwhile to do so and only from within, not through the patronage of others. (The same argument, on the unsuitability of state power for upholding cultural values, can be made for multicultural states also, a point I will take up in the conclusion.)

On the limited evidence drawn from the Islamic Republic of Iran, what seem to be the prospects for communitarian politics in the future? In Iran the people have reacted to hypocrisy and repression, in no small part because religious politics has meant a collapse of their living standards, despite the country's considerable oil-wealth. The people of Iran want to be able to make ends meet as well as have

⁵⁵ Rajeev Bhargava makes a similar point on religious politics in India. See his, 'Giving Secularism Its Due', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24:28 (9 July, 1994), p. 1785: 'Religion must be separated from politics not because of the inherent deficiencies of religion but because of the coercive character of the state.'

ordinary freedoms to move about, speak their minds and enjoy life. Whereas less than a decade ago human rights was shunned as a Western idea, its popularity is now spreading.⁵⁶ In 1997 69 per cent of the electorate voted for a moderate and liberal president, Muhammad Khatami. In 2001, he returned to power with an even greater part of the vote, 78 per cent, despite his limited achievements hitherto due to conservative opposition. He represents an Islamic liberal trend whose eventual predominance is not certain but which has arisen from *within* Iranian society, as a reaction to cultural and religious politics. He does not fall victim to stereotyping and generalizing about Islamic or Western identity or authenticity. His ideas on Islamic civil society and the rule of law, on freedom of speech and toleration—like those of other Islamic liberals such as Abdelkader Soroush—are not imitations of the West.⁵⁷ They arise from the real experiences and needs of the people of Iran.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Evidence from Iran and the Middle East reveals problems and weaknesses with the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘communitarianism’. Using the term ‘community’ to describe a national society is inappropriate because it does not, in fact, share characteristics with community on the small scale. The term does not help us in political analysis because it does not distinguish which of the collectivities to which people in the Middle East belong is most important. Furthermore, the Islamic culture and religion—central in the definition and ‘constitution’ of community—do not have discoverable ‘essences’. Finally, the Iranian experience shows that making community, culture and religion a political project transforms them into an ideology and critically depends on the reconstitution of hierarchies. It also leads to corruption and repression.

If communitarianism is a weak and problematic concept in Iran and the Middle East, where culture, religion and community are so important, it may be even weaker and more problematic in other parts of the world. The conclusion is not that the liberal–communitarian debate should be abandoned by international relations theorists but that the strengths of communitarianism should not be overestimated. This is an important point at the present juncture where a ‘crisis in Enlightenment values’ is occurring (a crisis which is as old as the Enlightenment itself but which has now reached one of its periodic paroxysms). The suggestion of this article is that

⁵⁶ Interviews with; Mehranguiz Kar; and Sadiq Zibakalam, Lecturer in the Department of Law and Political Sciences, Tehran University; Hooshang Amiirahmadi, ‘Current State of Civil Society in Iran’ in *The Echo of Iran*, no. 98, June 1996, pp. 22–7 and no. 99, July 1996, pp. 19–25.

⁵⁷ Fred Halliday, ‘Mohammed and Mill: What Does Mohammed Khatami Think?’ in *The New Republic* (5 October, 1998), pp. 30–4; interview with Abdolkarim Soroush, Institute for Wisdom and Research, Tehran; interview with Hojjatoleslam Abdolmajid Moadikha, Minister of Guidance 1979–80, who argued that Islam and the Islamic Republic—religion and politics—are two different things, and must be separated; and Khatami’s speeches as reproduced in the Summary of World Broadcasts, for example ME/3236MED/1–4, 26 May 1998, and ME/3103MED/1–4, 16 December 1997.

⁵⁸ In this context we can say that the distinction between the politics of culture and identity and the politics of right and left should not be drawn too sharply because they overlap extensively. On this distinction see Brian Barry, ‘The Limits of Cultural Politics’, in *Review of International Studies*, 24:3 (1998), pp. 307–19 and Vincent Cable, *The World’s New Fissures: Identities in Crisis* (London: Demos, 1994).

'communitarianism' is most useful in the sense it is already being used in domestic Western political discourse, of strengthening the small-scale community.

What are the implications of the argument in this article for the proposed solution of 'multiculturalism' to the conflict between individual rights and culture and community? A state is 'multicultural' when each cultural group has autonomous political power and can bring it to bear to uphold and sustain its cultural values. But this solution is illusory. If we use the first broad definition of culture, as the fundamental political, social and metaphysical attitudes of a group of people, it must be evident that liberalism and multiculturalism are contradictions and a liberal multicultural state is an absurdity. It would mean leaving female genital mutilation in France and the killing of females who 'dishonour' the family in Britain unpunished. The problem would not arise if all cultures were liberal cultures. But, contrary to what seems to be the underlying assumption behind a considerable body of communitarian thinking—probably because it centres on Western societies—they are not.

A liberal multicultural state is not an absurdity if we define culture as a people's habits, preferences, tastes, and so on, or as the arts. Liberal politics does not mean the weakening of or disregard for culture in that more narrow sense. The liberal state could also help sustain a group's cultural heritage, by providing subsidies for its schools, artistic expression or communal activities. A liberal state would not deny cultural rights, but it would draw the line where the exercise of these rights impinges on individual self-determination and it would remove culture from the public sphere, disengaging it from power. But a liberal state does not have the duty to ensure the survival of a minority—or a majority—culture.⁵⁹

The argument of this article on communitarianism also has implications for the study of Middle East politics. It shows that human rights are not irrelevant in the region and that Islamic culture and religion should not be seen as sacrosanct. Middle East politics is not exceptional and Islam is not an independent variable within this politics. Treating culture and religion as part of a political project damages the vitality of culture and religion, as Iran is beginning to demonstrate after twenty years of revolution. These are important points in undermining the appeal of Islamic fundamentalism. If they inform the way in which the West views the Middle East and Islam an improvement in relations may also be facilitated.

⁵⁹ Jürgen Habermas, 'Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State', in Gutmann, (ed.), *Multiculturalism*.