Religion and Media in Iran:
The Imperative of the Market and the Straightjacket of Islamism

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Abstract
As part of an increasing international trend highlighting the 'singularity' of the subject of study and arguing that so-called universal theories of society and culture do not fit, communications have been increasingly conceptualised in terms like 'Asian', 'African' and 'Islamic'. Some researchers have been eager to play up difference between Eastern and Western value systems and experience. Wider considerations and contexts are usually brushed aside to pave the way for a singular 'culturalist' explanation of the media in the global South, and in particular the Middle East. By examining the Iranian media, and the interaction between state ideology and the logic of capital, this article suggests that there is no possibility of a particular theory of communication. The reappearance of the sacred has prompted a number of scholars to question the conventional sociological wisdom that 'Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem'. This return does not indicate the passing of the world that Sociology wanted to understand. In Iran, as elsewhere, much of state's political legitimacy rests on its use of force as the ultimate sanction. The struggle over the monopoly of the means of symbolic violence, namely the attempted Islamicisation of the media, is increasingly important and cannot be separated from the former. States, as the case of Iran demonstrates, are seldom abstract or singular and have many contradictory institutions and units, and individual and institutional differences, policies and interests. The Iranian communication scene is peculiar in that liberalisation and privatisation are the order of the day, but the state is still reluctant to give up ideological control and is thus caught between the web of pragmatism and the imperative of the market, and the straightjacket of 'Islamism'.

Introduction

In the current political climate, it is hard to mention religion (or to be more precise Islam) without bringing to mind the new orthodoxy of the 'clash of civilizations' which tries to explain much of the world's political turmoil in terms of a collision between the secular modernity of the West and Islamic religious tradition. Various commentators have tried to account for the stubbornness of this tradition in many parts of the world, most notably in the Middle East, and the supposed 'backwardness' of Islamic civilization. Some have attempted to discover (Lewis 2002) W*hat went wrong?* earlier in the region's history. Islam is not only treated as a

coherent, self-sealed and self-explanatory culture but is seen as the main obstacle facing Islamic countries seeking full membership of the exclusive club of modernity. Lewis, Huntington and their enthusiastic followers are not alone in this overtly exaggerated assumption of cultural essentialism.

The response in the 'Islamic world' to this vision of historical development has been twofold. Many share the underlying assumptions of Lewis and have begun a process of 'self-examination', mapping religious/cultural traits as the key reason for failure in an engagement with modernity (Matin-Asgari 2004). Others, while challenging the Eurocentrism of 'Islamic Studies' and pointing out the neglect in recording the contribution of 'Islamic Civilization' in science and economics, nevertheless share a similar basic assumption about the 'uniqueness' of 'Islamic' culture and civilization. Yet such a preoccupation with Eurocentrism, as I will explain in more detail, glosses over common trends and conceals the dynamics of the operation of global capital. Despite all the talk about 'Islam' and 'Islamic' countries and values, the very idea of 'Islam' remains problematic.

The aim of this article is to explore the limits and implications of Islamic exceptionalism as related to media and culture in the region. I will try to do this by placing Islamic exceptionalism in dialectical tension with the Eurocentrism of the modernisation school and demonstrate how current debates again revolve around the 'West' and its 'Others'. I intend to do this by a critical examination of a number of texts that have proposed the possibility of a singular 'Islamic' perspective on communication and its fundamental difference from what has been perceived as a singularly 'Western' theory of communication. This article examines the relationship between religion and media in the context of the evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the dynamics of the entanglement between the Iranian state, economy and society.

Modernisation, Cultural Essentialism and 'Islamic Communication'
The 'reappearance' of the sacred has prompted a number of scholars to question the conventional sociological wisdom that 'Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem' (Keenan 2003, 19). The neglect of the 'theological' in sociology spilled over into many of its branches including communication. Cultural Studies, despite its fascination with the 'other', the 'marginalized' and 'deviancy' does not have a particularly good record of critical engagement with religion and the 'ritual'. Graham Murdock in his analysis of what he refers to as 'the re-enchantment of the world' (1997) has blamed Cultural Studies' characterization of religion as 'residual', for paying so little attention to this aspect of social life. Such neglect, he suggests, happened despite the fact that one of Cultural Studies' founding texts, *The Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart 1957), provided evidence of the potential for religion in working

class life. It was again neglected in the next decade or so despite the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' focus on *rituals*. Murdock argues that Williams showed no hesitation in including religion among the 'residues' of previous social formations: 'and because the supporters of the new field had nominated *contemporary* culture as their defining project, "residual" practices held few attractions. Interest focused instead on the "emergent" cultures forming around youth, gender and ethnicity' (Murdock 1997, 89). Williams (1977) of course could not anticipate the return of the residual as 'emergent' (all over the globe), and much less its transformation in Iran into the 'dominant'.

The link between religion, culture and media has always been one of the most fascinating aspects of the dynamics of modernity, and the recent bourgeoning literature in this area is evidence not of a 'return' of the sacred into sociology, but rather sociology's return to one of its original subjects of inquiry. There are many aspects to be explored and among those the possibility of a 'unique' religious theory of the media. Can there be such a particular media theory? Is there an Islamic theory of communication? And how might it differ from a non-Islamic one?

In the first place it is important to point out what is meant by 'Islamic Communication'. It cannot simply refer to media that are owned by people who are Muslims, nor refer to media that are designed for consumption by Muslims. In regard to the first definition, there are many media that are owned or partly owned by individual Muslims. The suppression of certain content (such as scenes of a violent or sexual nature or anything that does not correspond to what is perceived as 'Islamic' culture (Ghaffari-Farhangi 1999, 271) by various broadcasting channels owned by Muslim investors does not in itself make them 'Islamic', in the same way that the banning of certain content by China does not make their media 'Confucian'. Although undoubtedly authoritarian practices are increasingly justified in the name of 'peculiar cultural features', exceptionalist theories are about more than simple acts of censorship, and many of the advocates of 'Islamic communication' are critical of authoritarian practices in the Middle East.

Of the latter definition, again, there is a wide range of media consumed by Muslims. Consumption of a news channel or music channel by Muslims does not make the channel 'Islamic'. What advocates of 'Islamic communication' do offer (despite some clear differences in their emphasis and 'identity') is the binaristic division of the world into two rather neat categories of the god-fearing Islam and the secular west. Many have tried to free 'communication theory' which they argue so far has been captive to 'western' conceptual orientations and concerns, and elaborate an Islamic perspective on communication. In their writings Islam and Islamic countries are perceived as a singular homogenous space where so-called universal theories of media, culture and society do not fit and are therefore not

applicable. Mowlana (1993, 1996) for example, informs us that the concept of the nation-state is alien, indeed diametrically opposed to the fundamental principles and teaching of Islam. In contrast to the nation-state, which is a political state, the Islamic state is a 'god fearing' state founded on the *Quran*, the *Sunnah* (tradition) and the *Sharia* (Islamic law). In this system there is no separation between public and private, religion and politics, spiritual and temporal powers. Unlike the nation-state model, in the Islamic state, sovereignty belongs not to the people but rests in god. The Islamic community also differs from Western notions of community. Here the Islamic community, *Umma* (community of the faithful) is formed on the basis of a shared belief in the unity of god, the universe and nature. In such a community, race, nationality and ethnicity have no relevance. If this is the case, as Mowlana assures us it is, little wonder that modernity came into conflict with Islam, with its faith in Allah, the ultimate source of all meaning and existence. The failure of modernity in Muslim countries indicates the triumph of Islam.

> The 'Passing of traditional society' and the 'modernisation of the Middle East', which Daniel Lerner had predicted two decades earlier, turned out to be the Islamic revolution, which set the seal on Iran's historic referendum designed finally to rest the Western paradigm, and with it, its main agent, the Pahlavi dynasty, which had ruled Iran for over a century. In short, The Iranian case provided empirical evidence of the demise of the model of 'modernisation' through industrialization; however, its most profound impact is the impetus it has given to a number of indigenous developmental strategies and policies not only in Iran but in the Islamic world as a whole (1990, 28, my italics).

According to Mowlana, modernisation and modernity has not led to an erosion of Islamic essence. The historic referendum in Iran is provided as a clear example. Modernity and its associated elements – nation-state, industrialization, secularization and nationalism – is incompatible with Islam. We are also told (Ayish 2003; Mowlana 1994 and 1996) that another key feature of traditional Islamic culture is its oral nature, a feature which distinguishes Islamic from Western communication. Islamic societies are based on a strong oral tradition that finds its best expression in the Quran, Sunna and Hadith. Mowlana in particular believes that for this very reason, civil society that is 'grounded in print and electronic culture and synonymous with such modern concepts as secularism, the nation-state, nationalism, and modern European parliamentary democracy' (1994, 223) have neither use nor meaning in an Islamic society.

All of these arguments are there to indicate the existence of a self-sufficient 'Islamic communication system', in which every single conceivable right, form of communication and even the nature of news were fully predicted, explained and theorized in the Quran, Sunna and Hadith. The purpose of the 'Islamic' in Islamic

communication is to present the perceived sharp contrast between the dominant, technology-dependent and centralized model of the west to that of indigenous, oral, and community-based networks of communication. All, in one way or another, point at the unity of theology, politics, ethics and culture, and how in contrast to a Western model, Islamic communication does not separate the pursuit of knowledge from the pursuit of values (see Sardar 1993; Mowlana 1993; Ayish 2003).

Such arguments over divides in values and principles are based on the false assumption of a unified and ahistorical West as well as a singular East. The 'differences' between West and East and their consequences for liberty, human rights and democracy as well as for the media, lose their significance if we remember that the Western history in the past two centuries has only very partly been a history of liberalism and reason. In the Islamist's narrative the West is reduced to an imperialistic other, while Islam is celebrated as alternative; the repressive homogenous West is condemned while Islam is idealized. In both respects the extension of a single Islamic umbrella over an heterogeneous and complex collection of histories and practices is a highly political one indeed. Benhabib (2002, 36) rightly suggest that such an interpretation of cultures 'as hermetic, sealed, internally self-consistent wholes is untenable and reflects the reductionist sociology of knowledge'.

A Singular Islam and Islamic Communication Theory?
The basic assumption of the 'civilisational oppositionality' advocated by Mowlana, and others as well as Huntington is that one can observe important cultural traits and values in all Muslims and that these cultural traits are different from those of non-Muslims. In this scenario Islam is regarded as more or less coherent within itself, and is significantly different from other civilisations. In this case civilisations are framed and explained in religious terms and religion is regarded as the foundation of civilisation. What is certainly not new is the severe dichotomous thinking which lines up the modern and tradition against each other. In the context of the Middle East there is a misconception that the political and media scene in the region has been no more than a battleground between modernity and tradition, with Islam always firmly placed in the latter camp. This was clearly one of the mis-conceptions and failures of the Modernisation school (Lerner 1958), a failure that has been repeated by advocates of Islamic communication and Muslim cultural theory. The school of Modernisation identified tradition as a collection of values and beliefs which prevented the development of a modern society, which was identified as modern through a new set of beliefs and behaviour and of course a 'modern' personality.

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Modernisation theory paid little attention to institutional interests, which provided room for conflict as well as cooperation between secular and religious actors in the Middle East and elsewhere. The reason for this is the very fact that theories of both Eurocentrism and regional exceptionalism have seen the conflict between state and religion exclusively in terms of competing values and worldviews. Ayish sums up the approach of the Islamists' camp in a most straightforward manner: 'The basic premise of this paper is that the living human experience may be more or less reduced to a communication experience. It is argued here that the human experience is shaped and driven by numerous factors, the most outstanding of which is the worldview' (2003, 80). One can seriously question this 'basic premise' and ask whether one can reduce the realities of 'human experience' in shantytowns across the world, or in occupied Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq to a 'communication experience'.

Islam was, is and will remain a multiplicity in its meanings, interpretations and practices. In comparing Islam with other religions and cultures we need to point out in the clearest possible way what we speak of, and what comparisons we make. The meaning of Islam even when used to denote the religion of Islam is far too general and imprecise to be useful in an analytical argument. Do we mean the collection of material known as the Qur'an and the Sunna? Are we referring to it as the aggregate beliefs of the mass of Muslims in Iran today, or in Egypt five centuries ago? Even if the term is limited to the Qur'an and the Sunna we are still far from a reliable concept for analytical purposes. Modern Islamists refer to the same anthology and come away with quite different, and even conflicting, deductions. One cannot deny, of course, that there is no such thing as the 'religion of Islam', but to use it as a generic term in an analytical argument leads only to ambiguity. According to Al-Azmeh (1993, 1) 'there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it'. It is not the 'worldview' in itself that matters, but the material situations that sustain what is perceived as Islam.

An idealist analysis of Islam fails to take into account the diversity within Islam, and the diversity of its histories, cultures, levels of development, languages and socio-economic realities in countries that are usually presented under the unifying label of Islamic. One of the key neglected areas in discussion of the religion of Islam is its diversity, notably in the historic division between Shia, Sunni and Sufism, as well as various schools, branches and various interpretations of Islamic traditions and histories. Such divisions are not peculiar to Islam. They exist in all religions and their importance should not and cannot be overlooked. They are one of the sources of rivalry between and within nation-states. In the modern context, and especially in the case of political Islam, however, the conclusion that they draw from the holy book and tradition can be rather different. The case of Iran where a specific school of thought (Twelver Ja'fari) is recognized as the official religion

where other schools of thought (Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Yazdi schools) are 'accorded full respect' rather than 'equal rights', provides an interesting example. Ideas of a singular and unified Ummah and Islamic exceptionalism, therefore, crumble before the realities of the Iranian case.

In terms of diversity it is also crucial to remember that there are an estimated 1.2 billion Muslims in the world. Roughly a quarter of the people living on our planet are Muslim. The Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) has 55 member states, and within these states there are a variety of languages, histories and cultural practices. It is difficult to conclude that they are all similar simply because of their Islamic essence. What do Muslims in China have in common with those in Nigeria? Are Chinese Muslims closer to Nigerian Muslims than to their own non-Muslim countrymen and women? Is it possible to argue that Indonesian Muslims have more in common with Iranians than with people from neighbouring countries? No one can claim, surely, that the 'Christian World' does not share a universe of discourses and common heritage. However, it would be impossible to argue that the Christian entities have always taken the same forms and political and social significance in the scattered regions of the Christian World throughout history. To state the undeniably obvious point that 'Bantu messianism and revolutionary Nicaraguan Jesuitism are both Christian' (Al-Azmeh 1993, 139) does not tell us anything about the concrete situations and contexts of these movements. One cannot deny the labels Christian World or Islamic World, but it would absurd to argue that the content of these labels has remained the same throughout history. According to such reasoning, shared by many in the region, culture (Islam) is discussed to the point of stereotype. Islam, as broad, diverse and historical as it is, constitutes a major explanatory variable. In this scenario, Islam is given an independent life, with its content regarded as uniform regardless of history, broader material and demographic changes, the nature of state and politics and locations. How ironic, then, that something which causes so much change (Islam), should itself be, and conveniently so, unchanging. Cultural essentialism of various persuasions is incapable of answering whether it is the existence of strong cultural tradition which prevents economic growth and development, or rather the absence of the later that blocks the adjustment of traditions and values. If the lack of a Protestant ethic is the main reason for the incompatibility of Islam and modernity, then how can we explain the different economic fortunes of various countries in the region? Is it possible to blame Islam for the riches of Qatar and Kuwait, as well as the misery of Afghanistan and Sudan? Could it be that it is not Islam which has influenced Iran or Afghanistan, but the other way around? Otherwise how can we explain the difference between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban?

Another central concept in Mowlana's analysis is the notion of Tablig (propagation). He warns us that Tablig should not be confused with the Western

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concept of propaganda. Tablig throughout the history of Islam has 'provided, for a vast number of people from diverse races, languages, and histories, a common forum for participation in a shared culture' (1996, 119) which is Islam. Tablig, Mowlana notes, has four main principles: Tawhid (monotheism), the doctrine of responsibility, guidance, and action (amr bi al-m'ruf wa nahy'an al munkar), the idea of an Islamic community (Ummah), and finally the principle of Taqwa (piety). Such arguments that open communication to a 'higher' religious purpose are problematic. However, the most immediate question is whether such abstract concepts tell us anything at all about the dynamic media culture in Iran, or any other Islamic country.

The principles that are mentioned by Mowlana are by no means exclusive to Islam. They are narratives common to all religions. Do they fascinate us? Undoubtedly. Do they tell us anything about the conditions that sustain the religious institutions, as well as socio-economic developments and communication modes in a society? The answer must be no. No one can really explain the colonization of what is usually referred to as the Third World and European attempts and adventures in bringing ungodly savages in far away lands in line with the civilized Christian world, by simply looking at the general narrative and the Christian idea of being 'nice to one another'. Such adventures had to do with the quest for gold and spices. There is a widely held view that Buddhism is by far the most peaceful and passive of all religions. This might be the case. However, to what extent can such a claim provide any purchase on the bloody conflict in Sri Lanka? Similarly, there exists within Jewish moral narratives notions such as Tzedek (justice) and Rachmaunt (compassion). Do they tell us anything about what has happened in the land holy to all Abrahamic faiths, in the last few decades?

Islamism is based on an illusion that very much like Third Worldism, tries to gloss over the deep differences that divide members of 'the camp'. Islamism is the Third Worldism of the post cold war, albeit in a hijab. And in the same vein it tries to erase the heterogeneity of its 'members' and the internal conflicts within every one of them. How ironic that the claim to difference can only sustain itself by suppressing difference. Given the undoubted diversity within the Islamic world, Islamic communication theory suffers from exaggerated generalization, and therefore neglects many awkward elements that do not fit in. These elements of generalization are striking and cannot but help give the game away. Consider the differences between two of Mowlana's works. In The Passing of Modernity (1990) and in the spirit of the Islamic Republic of Iran's main slogan, 'Neither East, nor West' (na sharghi, na gharbi) Mowlana engages with both Marxist and Liberal models of society. Indeed there is a long overview and critique of both models and the incompatibility of these with Islam, which is seen as offering an alternative vision. This book was published in 1990, and one can assume that most of it was

written before the wave of democratic revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe. Only three years later the picture was simpler, and the battle was only between an Islamic Society paradigm and an Information Society paradigm (Mowlana 1993). As should be clear, the events and developments of three years had a profound effect on Mowlana's writings, yet we are led to believe that the essence of Islam, Islamic culture as well as Iranian society have remained the same for well over a century.

In Mowlana's view the Information Society paradigm has a number of elements that are evident in the United States as well as a number of other countries. On one level 'the philosophy and theory of information and communication have replaced transcendental discourse as the prime concern of philosophical reflection in the West', while at the practical level it has 'come to portray the ideology of neo-modernism, postmodernism, or post-industrialism without abandoning the capitalist economic and social systems that continues to characterize its core' (Ibid, 131, my emphasis).

If not capitalist economic and social systems, then what characterizes the mode of production and social relations of Islamic Iran, or other 'Islamic' countries? For Mowlana, this is irrelevant, since in an Islamic model 'the central question is not one of economics but of culture, ethics, and tabligh' (Ibid, 126). This is ironic since only in a society 'whose everyday existence seems drained of value could 'culture' come to exclude material reproduction' (Eagleton 2000, 31). By focusing solely on 'worldview' advocates of 'Islamic communication' Mowlana conveniently avoids specifying the economic and political system that the Islamic state would create. Furthermore, there is a failure to provide any clues of how this 'alternative' model compares with the alien western model. It should be clear that this leaves a big gap in an 'Islamic' communication model.

Moreover, if one focuses on a specific culture, surely a substantial analysis of that culture should be the basis of any argument and should take into account its ambiguities both in the past as well the present. Such analysis also needs to provide comprehensive empirical evidence to support the arguments being made. Only Mowlana has tried to present a case by offering the Islamic Republic as a 'true' model. After detailing what he presents as a normative Arab-Islamic perspective, Ayish concedes that 'communication realities in the Arab world seem to defy the applicability of this normative perspective'. Although he mentions that there are 'enduring aspects of media work that strongly reflect this approach' (2003, 90) he fails to provide any examples and how 'peculiar' they might be. Pasha has gone even further by stating that 'contrary to the theoretical model rooted in the Qur'an, most government and power structures in the Muslim world are based on secrecy, exclusion, manipulation, coercion, authoritarianism and tyranny, as many Muslim governments are absolute hereditary monarchies, and many others are personal,

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military or party dictatorships' (1993, 71). Unlike Mowlana who prefers the model of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pasha suggests only Malaysia offers any hope. Yet he fails to provide any detailed account of why this is the case and why the picture in Muslim countries is as bleak as he suggests. Surely we cannot blame the ruling elite in the region for never having read the Qur'an, can we?

Mowlana and co. are as equally at fault as their Western counterparts such as Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis for reproducing the old dichotomies between the West and Islam in terms of the incompatibility of rival conceptions of knowledge. Hundreds of years of history, of domination, colonial expansionism and the relentless march of capitalism are reduced to the Western Experience with the same degree of rationality that Islam is equated with Fundamentalism. Such 'ways of seeing' of course make for an easy read and instant understanding, but are never useful as social scientific explorations. If the Orient has been constructed as essentially other to the West, in Islamism's narrative, the trends have been reversed. Islamism in this respect challenges orientalism by mirroring it, and in this process reproduces what it supposes/promises to dismantle. In reality the choice for Muslims is reduced to a familiar either/or; either a completely alien westernized other or that of a true Muslim in touch with his traditional religion and culture.

The irony is that despite all such claims to difference, there is nothing exceptional about Islamic exceptionalism. And certainly none of the authors critiqued here are alone in asserting the uniqueness, unity and exceptionalism of 'their' society. This is certainly part of an increasingly international trend that aims to point at the singularity of the subject of study (African, Asian, Muslim, and so on), and to indicate how the so-called universal theories of society and culture do not fit in these perceived singular spaces. As a result of this cultural turn, communications have been increasingly conceptualized in terms of Asian, African and Islamic and so on and researchers have been eager to pay attention to differences between cultures and how and why different value systems in the East might and can be different from the Western experience. (see Lee 2001; Tomasseli 2003; Lund 2001)

The Iranian Experience
Contrary to Mowlana's claims, there is nothing unique about Islamic exceptionalism. Cultural nationalism, as Ahmad has argued, usually resonates with tradition and by inverting the tradition/modernity dichotomy of the modernisation school in an indigenous direction, advocates of such views suggest that 'tradition' is for the 'Third World' and 'always better than modernity'. The implication of such reasoning, Ahmad continues, is 'that each "nation" of the "Third World" has a "culture" and "tradition", and that to speak from within that culture and

tradition is itself an act of anti-imperialist resistance' (1992, 9). The case of Iran demonstrates beyond doubt that the formation of the Islamic Republic, rather than being the 'revenge of tradition' and the evidence of the 'passing of modernity', in fact points at the hollow victory of modernisation. Culturalist assumptions about the contemporary world (from China and Singapore to Iran) have effectively provided a non-western alibi for modernisation programmes, rather than de-westernising development or the media. Iran after all has a President ('alien to Islam'), has a national flag, national anthem, and national football team. Then there is the separation of the three powers: the President, the head of the judiciary and all members of parliament have to be Iranian citizens. Add to these, labour laws, press laws, universal suffrage, elections held every four years for various posts, local councils and the Presidency. These all seem to be alien to Islam rather than confirming the incompatibility of Islam with the nation-state.

Undoubtedly a central feature of Islamism as a political movement is the call for the application of Sharia, and Iran as the only country to have witnessed an 'Islamic' revolution, is the most fascinating example in this respect. In his brilliantly detailed study, Schirazi (1998) has suggested that of 1022 bills approved by the Revolutionary Council and the 1385 bills passed by successive Majles (the Iranian parliament) by 1995, the Guardian Council (the Islamic House of Lords, which has the duty of assessing the compatibility of Bills with Islam) has with few exceptions, failed to establish any relationship between bills and the Sharia. Such difficulties have been one of the main sources of conflict between various factions of the regime which have sought to combine 'Sharia with electricity'. It was in response to severe friction emerging between the Guardian Council and the executive branch that Khomeini issued a fatwa authorizing the ratification of the Labour Law by the Majles in 1987. He bypassed its incompatibility with Sharia by subsuming these under the umbrella of the 'expedience of the system'. The very invention of the concept of the 'expediency of the system' (maslahat'e nezam), placing it on par with 'primary commandments' (or even above the latter so as to defend them) and the creation of an Expediency Council to preside over the Majles and the Guardian Council demonstrates that under pressure of the modern world and in many arenas of modern life, Sharia is unenforceable. Further u-turns on taxation, oil, women's role in public life (see Khiabany and Sreberny 2004), family planning and so on have meant that to take what is perceived by the ruling elite as Islamic law seriously in an oil-producing modern capitalist country would have been nothing short of disaster.

The policy of 'self-reliance' (khod kafai) was also made redundant as Iran continued its reliance on exchange and trade with both the West and the East that the Islamic Revolution had come to replace. The most vivid examples are of course linked with the Great Satan himself as the case of Irangate and the more recent flirtacious policy of the 'dialogue of civilizations' demonstrate. Ehteshami's

detailed analysis (1995) shows that even in the 1980s Iran remained among the top OECD markets in the region and there were few consequences flowing from the 'Islamic International' slogan, as the main trading partners remained more or less the same. Turkey remains the only Muslim country that appears on the list of the Islamic Republic's main trading partners. Diplomatic relations with many of the Muslim countries in the region were non-existent for a variety of reasons. Close neighbour Iraq needs no explanation. In the case of Egypt it was for providing refuge for the Shah; as for Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries it was for supporting Iraq and in general for being cagey about the Islamic Republic's ambition to export revolution. These all provide ample evidence against the idea of a unified and transnational Umma.

The opening of the Tehran stock market, the official policy of encouraging foreign investment, inviting the rich, exiled Iranian bourgeoisie back and Iran's continuous dependence on the industrialized West is anything but alternative to modernity (capitalism). Efforts to revive Islam in Iran have been sabotaged by capitalism, and the new ruling elites while trying to crush the ungodly Left, have embraced the very force that has brought Islam into disrepute: capitalism. In this respect the Islamic revolution was not the 'seal on Iran's historic referendum designed finally to rest the Western paradigm', nor was it the revenge of Shi'a tradition on a 'modernisation' project and its 'main agent, the Pahlavi dynasty'. It was a spectacular failure and as such it was not a classic social revolution as it left existing social relations and mode of production intact. It remained a 'passive revolution', a revolution without change.

The later point becomes even more obvious if we look at the Islamic Republic's increased embrace of private capital. The strategy of the Islamic Republic was from the very start based on overcoming domestic difficulties and especially since the end of the war with Iraq to be reinstated to its former position in the international division of labour. The re-Islamization strategy, however, for practical and ideological reasons has failed in a spectacular fashion. The contradictions in the Islamic regime's policies clearly put an end to Islamists' assumptions about the existence of a coherent and comprehensive Islamic thought on all contemporary matters. Many of the views and policies advocated by the Shi'a clergy in Iran before and after the revolution were prompted by immediate and often changing real circumstances. In this respect and as Abrahamian argues, 'Khomeini was no more a political philosopher than Moliere's bourgeois gentilhomme was a literary deconstructionist' (1993: 39). However, and as he convincingly demonstrates, while Khomeini shifted ground on many issues and made a number of u-turns, he remained positively firm on the question of 'private property'. From early on he was adamant that private property was a gift from god and that the respect for private property was more important than 'respect for the dead'. After the

revolution he made this point again and again and called for the authorities to respect people's 'moveable and immovable possessions'. Such an embrace of private capital became even more visible after the end of war with Iraq when the liberalization of the economy became official policy. This policy finally came to its natural conclusion when in 2004 the disputed Article 44 of the Constitution, which limited private ownership and had put radio and television, the postal, telegraph and telephone services in the state sector was finally revised by the Expediency Council. In the same month the same body ruled that up to 65 percent of the shares of major Iranian banks, minor in some exceptions, could be given to the private sector. One of the greatest 'achievements' of the reformist dominated 6th Majlis (2000-2004) was indeed to speed up the process of privatization. According to Iran International (March 2004, 139) privatization of the economy is the only matter of the state which has not been the subject of dispute between different factions of the regime. The Majlis banned the establishment of any new state-run companies and began legislating the transfer of many state-run companies to the private sector. Revision of article 44 of the constitution by the Expediency Council has removed the last legal barriers to the privatization of the major industries in Iran, including the post and communications.

The significance of the communication industries is not lost to private capital. Increasingly since the implementation of post war reconstruction and IMF policies, the expansion and marketization of communication has been the order of the day. Reform and construction is explicitly equated, to some extent, with the marketization and privatization of the communications industry. The reason is not hard to find.

In print, the number of publications, including dailies, has increased rapidly, despite harsh economic realities and political and legal barriers. The number of national television channels has also increased from two to six. During Khatami's presidency alone, from 1997 to 2003, the number of telephone lines increased by 127 per cent, in rural areas by 144 percent. Access to mobile phones has seen one of the sharpest increases; from 135,219 in 1997 to 2.5 millions in 2003, indicating an increase of 1,748 per cent. The number of people using the Internet has expanded similarly, from 2,000 in 1996 to 1,326,000 in 2002. The desire for access to informal channels of communication is reflected in the astonishing rise in the popularity of weblogs, which have become another site of struggle. According to a recent report by Blogcount.com, Persianblog.com was the second largest weblogfarm, behind Blogspot.com, and in terms of ranking, weblogs written in Farsi were outnumbered only by those written in English and French. It should be obvious that in recent years Iran's communications industry has emerged as one of the fastest growing economic sectors and in this process, the state has emerged as the dominant media capitalist.

In this context it is not 'Islam' which regulates access to communicative resources but market mechanisms. Economic crisis, inflation, high levels of unemployment and the escalating prices of essential good have all squeezed the Iranian family's purse further and further. The share of cultural goods in the average households' basket, despite a relative increase in the past decade, still remains very low. In such conditions, cultural activities are necessarily sacrificed and are the first victim.

According to the Statistical Centre of Iran the share of recreation and entertainment (of which the media is only a tiny part) in the urban households' expenditure on non-food commodities and services, is even less than the amount spent on 'personal care and effects', 'restaurants, cafés and hotels' and 'communications'. A quick examination of the actual amount spent per year per household on 'recreation and entertainment' illustrates my point more forcefully. According to the same source the average annual expenditure on 'recreation and entertainment' is 328,045 Rials. Divided by 365, the 'average' Iranian family spends 898 Rials (less than 10 US cents) per day on cultural goods. The average cost of a newspaper is 339 Rials. Satellite receivers (still officially illegal) cost more than $150. The cheapest computer in Iran costs around 4,500,000 Rials or $450.00 and the average cost of Internet access is 350,000 Rials ($35.00) per month. This does not include telephone line rental. For Internet access Iranians pay more than Americans and Europeans, while the 'average' annual urban household income is 25,831,527 Rials ($2,583.00), which equates to around $215 per month. The figure for rural households is 15,200,149 Rials ($1,520.00) or $126 per month. In Iran a computer costs two times the average urban and three times the average rural salary. Such conditions price the media in general out of the reach of the majority and judging by audiences and readerships, the media in general are not (indeed cannot be) the main priority of household expenditure. The share of income/consumption of the poorest 30 per cent in Iran is just 7.1 per cent while the 'share' of the richest 30 per cent is 83.6 (Human Development Report 2001, 284). There is nothing Islamic or exceptional about this divide.

As for the nature and the structure of the media in Iran, again there is clear evidence of the real dilemmas that the Iranian state faces. The shift in regime policy towards the media is clearly visible in the constantly shifting position of Hamid Mowlana who has been the most vocal advocate of Islamic Communication 'theory'. Mowlana claimed (1989 and 1996) proudly that commercial advertising on television was not allowed in Islamic Iran. In another document we are told: 'Commercial advertising is common but subject to specific rules and regulations, including the time framework to prevent the fragmentation of programmes' (1997, 206). In the same article, Mowlana admits—unlike before—that there is 'considerable demand for and interest in' foreign

programmes. And this is despite the fact that satellite is officially declared illegal in Iran.

> One of the major criticisms directed toward television in Iran deals with the lack of entertainment programmes to occupy leisure time. The argument is made that Iranian television should create more attractive and popular cultural activities for leisure time; otherwise, the audiences will turn to foreign satellite television programmes or seek alternative means of entertainment elsewhere. In recent years, satellite piracy and illegal reproduction of international films and video have increased. The expansion of new television channels and increased amount of coverage given to sports, movies, and animated features are among strategies to overcome these problems. Television in Iran thus illustrates a fascinating communication problem for many Islamic countries: how can traditional culture be synthesised with contemporary electronic media, such as television, and how can television be employed in ways that better suit the mode and styles of the country's history' (1997:207-8).

This is far removed from the Islamic Community Paradigm in Mowlana's previous works. Yet he still manages to avoid providing clear explanations as to why this should be the case in Iran after 23 years of Islamic rule. Mowlana racializes politics and culture by asserting some cultural legacies in the whole 'Muslim' world and rejects the centrality of the West by pointing at alternative forms of communications and communicative experience and perception in the Islamic world in general and in Iran in particular. But then the examples that he provides clearly contradict the 'unique' vision of Islamic communication, and rather than highlighting the peculiar and particular experience of the region, he points at global communality in the operation and distribution of programmes and contents. From his analysis it is not clear what is so specifically unique and 'Islamic' in the expansion of television channels and programmes, such as modern animated features, movies and sports, and how, indeed, these developments correspond to the principles of Islamic Tabligh. In his view there are some 'problems' with such developments and content, but he is silent on the nature and origin of such problems and why they exist either in Iran or in other countries in the region. These issues could provide an excellent platform for a more critical assessment of the realities of the media in Iran. However, Mowlana is keen to prove his ideas rather than explore reality and instead raises a number of questions such as: 'Is there a chance for 'traditional culture' in the age of contemporary electronic media?' The contradiction that worries Mowlana is of Islamism as an ideology confronted with the reality of running a modern country. For all the talk of the revenge or revival of tradition, the fact is that for more than a decade the most significant development in the country, has rather been the strong revival of the 'tradition' of enthusiasm for material possessions and the benefits of capitalism, and with it a persistent idea, which blames the existence of 'tradition' for all the ills

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in modern Iran (Khiabany and Sreberny 2001). It is within this context and using the Trojan horse of 'civil society' that private capital has become one of the main challengers to the state monopoly of key major industries, including the cultural industries. The purpose more than anything else was to expand the base of the Islamic state to encompass the private sector and the burgeoning middle classes who have been both the main beneficiaries of state policy and are the prized consumers of the private capital keen to compete with state for providing them with luxury goods and services. Kadivar, one of the frequently mentioned reformist figures, for example, accepts that catering for the interests of the 'new middle class' became the first priority of the reformist cabinet and parliament (2003:26).

It is in this context that the ongoing competition and rivalry between the various factions (known usually as conservatives and reformists) of the Islamic Republic begins to make sense, and the institutional interests of various ministries and agencies come to the fore. Despite embracing privatization, the Iranian state is fearful of giving a free hand to private capital to invest in the media. This fear is twofold. Investment by private companies in the media, especially in television will undoubtedly challenge the dominant position of the state broadcaster and will undermine the unique position that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) occupies (Khiabany 2006). To that effect the state has banned more than 100 newspapers since 2000, has censored and filtered many websites, and IRIB which is under the control of the supreme leader has actively tried to undermine and humiliate dissident voices. The case of broadcasting in Iran which Mowlana has promoted and defended as the role model for 'Islamic Communication' demonstrates the shortcomings of Islamic exceptionalism as applied to the media. One can observe clear elements of continuity rather than a break with the past in the development of broadcasting in Iran, particularly in its failure to create political legitimacy for the new ruling elite. As Baghi suggests, the assumption in the early years of the revolution was that the transfer of the control of broadcasting to the clergy would put an end to all forms of social corruption. But a directly controlled IRIB has not only failed to tackle any of these targeted problems, but has, on the contrary by forging such close links between Islam and a repressive government seriously weakened and undermined religion in Iran. Baghi suggests that the best service to religion in Iran that the IRIB could perform would be to leave it alone altogether (2002:362-63). The continuing popularity of satellite channels, and Mowlana's recognition of the dilemmas posed by the media in general and broadcasting in particular is the clearest indication of the failure of the Islamic Republic to create a viable alternative media system in Iran and the failure of broadcasting to create political legitimacy for the ruling elite.

While it has been common to refer to the 'new' Iranian press as surrogates for others, it is indeed the reality that Iranian broadcasting is the ultimate 'party organ' and the lack of diversity in its content, policy and control, has forced those within the state with different views to resort to launching their own channels of communication. Broadcasting in Iran, despite being the only truly 'national' channel, has failed to reflect the religious, cultural, regional and political diversity of the modern country. Under the banner of Islam and preserving the national interest and security, broadcasting remains the most rigid, repressive and unaccountable institution (after the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council). It is this unholy trinity which has been the subject of much criticism and dispute even within the rank and file of the Islamic state. What hope is there for Islamic communication in Iran, when even the role model of such a system has consistently failed to unify the community of faithful while embracing the very forces that it set out to challenge?

Conclusion
For a long time many have argued that it was only the West and Western civilization that was capable of evolving from pre-modern to modernity. Now this banner (orientalism) has been taken up, like never before, by supposedly neutral academics in the region, trying to provide legitimacy for a form of particularism, that has become increasingly discredited. This is as I have argued, a form of nationalism that tries to justify coercive power and authoritarian practices in terms of culture. I argued that commentators such as Mowlana adhere to the simplistic notion that Muslim societies (and Islamic states) are monolithic and homogenous entities with ideally disciplined sacred structures and clear and irreversible visions. It is the state that imposes unity and coherence on culture and creates a forced unity out of a whole set of complex practices, diversities and inconsistencies. Mowlana, like other proponents of cultural essentialisms, assume the global fault line to be vertical between civilizations, instead of horizontal and between social groups in massively polarized societies. As Bourdieu has argued while it is true that 'cultures' are unifying, the state contributes to 'the unification of the cultural market by unifying all codes, linguistic, and juridical, and by effecting a homogenization of all forms of communication' (1999, 61). Cultures are meaningless without politics, and certainly their elevation into being dominant has everything to do with the state. Without the state, nations are lost. Eagleton writes that 'the nation-state does not unqualifiedly celebrate the idea of culture. On the contrary, any particular national or ethnic culture will come into its own through the unifying principle of the state, not under its own system. Cultures are intrinsically incomplete and need the supplement of the state to become truly themselves' (2000, 59). Contrary to Mowlana's assumptions it is not Islam that gives meaning to the state but rather it is the coercive force of the state that makes the particular 'Islam' what it is in a particular national context. Eagleton suggests

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that it is exactly this assumption about the internal link between culture and politics which has helped to wreak so much havoc in our world. Essentialist thinking about a non-existent singular, homogenous 'Muslim society', cannot provide an adequate explanation of the realities of Iran, or for that matter any 'Islamic' country. Furthermore, disparities in the access to the means of communication in the media market suggests that in Iran, as elsewhere, access to communicative resources is regulated, above all, by disposable income. All such factors, in my view, instead of making media ownership, economy and the state redundant, in Iran and the South generally, instead indicate that ownership does matter. And it is precisely this issue which explains the contradictory nature of the Islamic state, which has tried to embrace privatisation and private capital without losing political control. This is not unique to Iran and neither are the lessons that we might learn from the Iranian experience.

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