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The Word on the Tehran Street

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The Word on the Tehran Street

These three vignettes chronicle the author's impressions of Iran, made during a two week visit as an invited speaker at the First International Conference on Science and Religion, sponsored by Tehran University and the Institute for Philosophy, May 2–4, 2006.

THE TAXI

The taxi drove past a mural of the American flag with skulls where the stars should have been and the words “Death to America!” It was the only *Death to America* sign I’d seen in Iran. But at ten stories tall, it was impressive. “Madam, you German?” the driver asked. I was tempted to say, “Ja, Jawohl!” but sheepishly replied, “No, USA.” “*Amrika? Amrika! We love Amrika!*” Really? The mural and the words of your president could have fooled me. But from Tehran to Shiraz to Isfahan the word on the Iranian street was *We love America*.

I was in Tehran to speak at a conference on the confluence of science and religion. But I was more interested in the more precise issue of what Iranians thought of the confluence of nuclear bombs and Islamic mullahs. Every chance I got I slipped away from the conference and looked for people to talk to. It wasn’t hard. My red hair and blue eyes and the way my headscarf kept sliding off the back of my head marked me as a Westerner and an object of curiosity.

What did they think of a nuclear Iran? Everyone I spoke to said it was a good and necessary plan. But they weren’t thinking of bombs. To the question of why Iran should go nuclear the answer was always, “It’s the economy.”

After a surge in the 90s when oil prices were high, the economy is now limping. Unemployment, officially at 11%, is estimated on the street to be closer to 30%. The oil sector fuels the government, which, directly or indirectly employs 90% of the population. Iran has enough oil and natural gas to fuel itself for a long time to come. Gasoline costs ten cents a liter. But the Iranians are also well aware that, beyond a small market in carpets or pistachios, oil and gas are their only exportable commodities. So the word on the street is, if Iran has nuclear power, it can save the oil for export. More oil for export, more jobs.

What about a bomb? What the Iranians really want is “respect.” As one taxi driver put it, “America treats North Korea better than us. If we had the bomb they’d have

to talk to us.” But others were not so sure. A teacher of the Qur’an to whom I spoke was skeptical: “If we go nuclear and then some terrorists use a bomb, no matter where they got it, Pakistan maybe, we’ll get blamed. Israel will dump everything they have on us.” But everyone was in agreement about one thing: They love America and were delighted to see an American in their country.

THE GUIDES

Amin and Amir are twins. Twenty-two years old, with dark curly hair and laughing brown eyes, they represent the 70% of Iran’s population that is under 30. Fluent in English and Turkish, I couldn’t have asked for more attentive guides while in Tehran.

Like most of the young people in the middle class, both had finished at the university, where enrollment has increased tenfold, going from 30,000 before the Revolution to 300,000 today. Amin had his degree in business management, hoping some day to take over his father’s textile plant, which specialized in winter coats. But business was not booming. “It’s hard to compete with the flood of cheap clothes from China. We used to employ 70 people, now it’s 40, and in the future, who knows?” Who knows indeed? The employment drop at Amin’s father’s factory was indicative of the rest of the country, where unemployment now stands close to 30%. And that number is growing. Each year one million young people join the work force, but jobs await only half of them.

For the lucky ones who are employed, the job they find may have little to do with their educational training. Amir’s friend Reza holds a recent degree in electrical engineering. He works part-time as a flight attendant for the Iranian national airline, and helps Amir and Amin as a guide from time to time. He complained to me that the government was not providing enough opportunities for the young. I asked why he assumed this was the job of the government, not realizing that 60–70% of Iran’s economy is publicly owned. And entrepreneurship is a risky business. Those who recall the Revolution remember shops, papers, schools shut down.

Unemployment and underemployment lead to a restive youth in Iran. There is a second factor in their discontent. I asked each of the young men if he had a girlfriend. Despite their obvious good looks and charm, none did. They assured me that it was easy to meet girls, but when I asked how, could only reply, “Well, in class.” But classes were over for them and prospects seemed to be narrowing to friends of the family or the sisters of friends. In a country where it’s technically illegal for women to be out on the streets alone or with men to whom they are not related, dating was relegated to clandestine meetings in “safe apartments” if one is wealthy, or in the hills above North Tehran, where couples could escape the eyes of the police or the mullahs on a

sunny afternoon. Still, the afternoon I hiked these hills I saw more bands of young men roaming the trail than the few couples who furtively held hands only on the uppermost reaches of the hillside.

“What do you do for fun?” I asked Amin. He replied that he generally got together with his friends in the evening, when he wasn’t working. They would drink sodas (alcohol is illegal) and listen to bootleg CDs. His comment about the CDs made me realize something I had noted only subconsciously. There is no music in Iran’s public spaces. No muzak in the hotel lobby, silent taxi rides. Music was frowned upon after the Revolution as frivolous and un-Islamic. Even the restaurants have no background music, though one or two have recently introduced a floor show of traditional Persian poetry and song. I asked Amin if I could get a CD to hear what the young people were listening to. He said “no problem” and showed up the next day with three homemade disks, for which he refused any payment. He noted that getting the technology to burn CDs was quite easy, and not too expensive. So music circulated quietly among the young.

The same formal ban but informal acceptance could be found in the realm of television. Although illegal, a look out of my hotel room’s fourteenth-floor window showed rooftops bristling with satellite dishes. And no wonder. Official Iranian TV seemed to be little but documentaries, interspersed with earnest looking mullahs. During the conference I was interviewed by Iranian television. To my surprise, all the questions being asked of this western scholar and computer scientist had to do with my understanding of Muhammad, Islam, and the divine nature of the Qur’an.

Officially, everything in Iran begins and ends with religion. Unofficially, Amin and Amir listen to music with a decidedly Euro-beat and dream of a good job and a beautiful girlfriend, both off in a hazy future.

THE CHADOR

Entrepreneurship is indeed risky business in Iran. The conference I was there to attend, the First International Conference on Science and Religion, was organized privately by a small circle of academics at Tehran University and the Institute for Philosophy. That is, until the week before the conference. It was then that the government stepped in, on the pretext that these academics were too disorganized to run an international conference and needed help.

There may have been some truth to that statement. Things, like the printing of the program, did seem to be a bit behind schedule. What was interesting was that the delegation of Americans and British, top researchers in science and religion who had been invited to give the keynote speeches, were suddenly moved into parallel paper sessions,

our time cut from an hour to twenty minutes. The keynote speeches were now to be given by the Speaker of Parliament, the Minister of Health and Education, and so on. I found my paper on Artificial Intelligence now slotted into a session entitled “The Family and Ethics,” in between a paper on Heidegger and one on the Islamic view of the family. I was also listed as co-chair of the session.

It was here that the gender politics of Iran became most clear to me. Oh, I had had an encounter or two on the street, once being turned away from a certain alley because it went by the door of a mosque and I was insufficiently dressed for such proximity. It was hardly fearsome — the guard tapped me on the arm with a feather duster. What was noticeable at the conference was that, except for the formal question session after my paper, no man spoke to me. Several women gathered after the session to make comments or ask questions, but no men. Even my co-chair got up and left without a word.

The conference was well attended by women. As it was now an official state function, all the Iranian women wore the chador, a black garment that falls from head to toe, somewhat like a bed sheet. This was not the case on the streets of Tehran, where the most common garb for women was a headscarf and manteau. The manteaux of the older women were rather shapeless coats that went below the knee, while several young women were pushing the fashion envelope with manteaux that were skin tight and ended mid-thigh. When I mentioned to my young guide that there didn't seem to be much choice in fashion, he replied, “Oh, our women have lots of choice. They can wear the black manteau, or the gray manteau, or the brown manteau. They have lots of choice.” I looked for a sly grin on his face on saying this, but saw none. The women of Iran are ambivalent about the dress code. While I was in Tehran there was a demonstration of women demanding that the chador be made mandatory once again. On the other hand, upon departure, I noticed that all but three Iranian women pulled their headscarf off their head the minute they boarded the KLM plane for Amsterdam.

I tried the chador and found it hot and awkward. Since it has no closure, one must hold it shut with one hand. I saw women on the street with grocery bags in both hands holding their chador closed with their teeth. But it was not till the closing ceremonies of the conference that the true significance of the chador struck me.

In the final session, awards were given in a variety of categories, including best student paper, best student poster, and so forth. Most of the awards won by students or young scholars went to women, perhaps no surprise given that women make up more than 60% of the student body in Iran's universities today. These young women went forward to get their awards, swathed from head to toe in black, one hand grasping the chador under a lowered chin. We could not see their faces or forms — each was a

silent, anonymous black ghost. The Minister of Education, handing out the awards, could not shake their hands. These brilliant young women slunk forward to be congratulated, and then slunk back to their seats. And I wondered how long a society can prosper when its best minds remain hidden from view.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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