

**“That Nature Which Contemns Its Origin”:  
A Controversial Teachers’ Examination Sheds  
Light on Transformations in Iranian Islam<sup>1</sup>**

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**Reanimation**

Mature religious systems tend to break more easily than they bend. Centuries of ideological and institutional crystallization considerably reduce the prospects of further internal evolution, and in extreme cases revolution and secession become the more feasible alternatives. The Pauline break with Pharisaism, the Buddhist split from Hinduism, the Manichaean heresy within Zoroastrianism, the Protestant disengagement from the Roman Catholic Church, the Hasidic (and later Reform) rift with traditional Judaism: these and numerous other ruptures of their comparatively instantaneous ilk are far easier to put one’s finger on than the gradual, intraconfessional processes that have subtly altered the structure and content of well-seasoned faiths over time (which is why examples of the latter category come less readily to mind).

Certain developments in postrevolutionary Iran constitute an important exception to this proposition. Although the 1979 overthrow of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was accomplished largely under the auspices of traditional Shi‘ism and was unaccompanied by any doctrinal shifts profound enough to precipitate a religious rift,<sup>2</sup> the momentous experience of *political* revolution managed to jump-start the ideological engine of Iranian Islam and propel its theology and jurisprudence in new directions, effecting genuine internal and evolutionary changes—albeit telescoped into the period of a quarter of a century.<sup>3</sup>

This article looks at one of these unsung metamorphoses in the outlook of contemporary Iranian Shi‘ism—that concerning the image of and role assigned to the Prophet Muhammad. It analyzes an intriguing episode in the recent history of the Islamic Republic that passed unnoticed in the Western press—the enraged protests that emanated simulta-

neously from many different segments of the Iranian population against questions on an education ministry examination that were seen as insulting to Allah's Apostle. Although instances of Iranian Muslim outrage (of both the public-spontaneous and official-choreographed variety) in the face of perceived affronts against hallowed Islamic institutions have not been lacking since the revolution, this is the first time that an arm of the state has been accused of blaspheming Islam. The ensuing crisis has thrown elements into relief that are important for understanding some of the novel religious attitudes that are prevalent in Iran today.

The opening section of this discussion looks at the extent and nature of the protest, drawing on evidence from sources such as the Iranian media, the opposition press, and private blogs. The second part translates and annotates the test questions and attempts what has yet to be attempted—to provide the correct answers. The third section seeks to elucidate the entire phenomenon further by placing the contents of the examination and the fierce reactions that they generated into a historical and philosophical context.<sup>4</sup>

## Copenhagen . . . in Tehran?

On February 21, 2007, as the second United Nations Security Council deadline passed and the international media buzzed with reports of Iran's continued refusal to halt its uranium-enrichment program, the newspapers, websites, and airwaves of the Islamic Republic were engrossed in a crisis of a different order. The *majles* was up in arms, the *howzehs* of Qom reverberated with indignation, radio and television commentators mourned the state of the nation, and the education minister offered a public apology and summarily dismissed thirteen employees.<sup>5</sup> Demands for the establishment of an official, government-sponsored investigative committee emerged from all quarters.

The cause of what Iran's Radio Ma'āref later referred to as "this nationwide uproar" (*in dād-o-bīdād-e-sartāsārī*)—a bipartisan outcry emanating from "reformists" (*eṣlāḥ ṭalabān*), "fundamentalists" (*oṣūl garāyān*), advocates of "alternative thinking" (*andīshe-ye-dīgar*), and dyed-in-the-wool "conservatives" (*mohaḥezeḥ kārān*)—was the appearance on the Islamic Republic's annually administered Interim Teachers' Examination of items that were considered "offensive to the sanctity of the Holy Prophet." The test in question is taken simultaneously in cities across the country by tens of thousands of educators each February and

covers materials that are both secular and religious. One of the subdivisions of the exam’s religious section is devoted entirely to Muhammad’s biography (Arabic: *al-sīra al-nabawiyya*; Persian: *sīre-ye nabaviyyeh*). This year (if reports that emerged from unofficial sources on the Iranian blogosphere are to be believed), test centers in city after city witnessed scenes in which examinees reached that subdivision and squirmed, murmured, gasped, gesticulated, stood up, ripped their answer books to shreds (some accompanying this act with cries of *Allāhu akbar* and even the *shahāda*, the Muslim creed), and stormed out of the examination hall.<sup>6</sup>

It did not take long for news of the “insolent questions” (*so’ālāt-e-mowhen*) to spread, and by the end of the week they were the lead topic in the press, pulpit, and parliament. Online headlines screamed “Hard to believe!,” “Consternation and stupefaction over impertinence to the Prophet!,” and “The Islamic Republic of . . . Denmark?!”<sup>7</sup> The mass circulation daily *Ettelā’āt* fumed:

If this heinous act was committed on purpose and with foreknowledge [*az rū-ye-‘amd va bā ‘elm o ettelā’*], then it is a crime of almost incredible proportions designed to undermine the foundations of the blessed revolution and shake the pillars of the Islamic *umma* at large. If it was committed out of ignorance and foolishness [*az rū-ye-jehālat va-ḥemāqat*], then it indicates that a horrific wave of folly and intellectual petrification has inundated the nation’s educational system. . . . Either way—whether with malice aforethought to deliver a blow to the prestige of Islam and the revolution or unwittingly as a result of a superficial grasp of the principles of our faith—this development must be addressed with all due seriousness, as a threat far more dire than an American attack.<sup>8</sup>

The Iranian Student’s News Agency (ISNA), which seems to have broken the story in the first place, editorialized:

The inclusion of questions that are offensive to the sacred presence and august dignity of the noble Messenger on the Interim Teachers’ Examination takes place in the middle of the year proclaimed by the Leader of the Revolution as “The Year of the Great Prophet” [*sāl-e-payāambar-e-‘azīm*] and at a time when the Western media have launched a fierce attack on Islam and its venerable founder. This ac-

cursed trend has continually spread its tentacles until it has now finally penetrated Iran's domestic institutions.<sup>9</sup>

An unsigned article on the site of the celebrated *Bāztāb* news service (which was suspended, or domestically “filtered,” in late January of 2007 and reinstated two months later) called for a flood of demonstrations, *madrassa* closings, and new government regulations. It advanced for these purposes a stronger argument:

In the year 1379 [2000], one of the issues of the college publication *Mowj*, put out by students of Amīr-e-Kabīr University in Tehran, carried an imaginary story about the encounter of a university student with the Hidden Imam (may God hasten his advent). . . . This story produced such a wave of outrage and protest that teachers and students abandoned their classes, workers walked off their jobs, private institutions and government agencies strongly condemned [the publication], and the media covered the affair so intensely that soon the entire country was engulfed in a frenzy of denunciation, to such a degree that only after the writers had been arrested and the Supreme Leader had decreed an end to the matter did tempers die down. . . .

Well, how much graver is the insult of these questions [on the teachers' examination] than that of the story in that publication [*mowhen būdan-e-īn so'ālāt kojā va dāstān-e-īn nashriyeh kojā*]? If any transgression merits a response of such vigor and force, in which the schools empty out and the people pour into the streets, it is this one. . . .

[Serious action must be taken] to avoid having elements among the reformists begin to ask: “Were all those protests back then [against *Mowj* for publishing the controversial story] politically motivated and geared solely toward incriminating the government of the time (headed by Khatami)? . . . At any rate, the minimum demand of [Iranian] society is that (leaving all politicking aside) any element that occasions the weakening of Islam or gives offense to the person of the noble Prophet, may God's peace and prayers be upon him and his family, or insults the immaculate Imams, on whom be peace, must be dealt with in the severest manner.<sup>10</sup>

Comparisons to the past came just as easily to members of the *majles*, teachers in the *howzehs*, and preachers in the mosques. ‘Emād-e-Afrūgh, chair of the parliamentary education committee, asked sim-

ply: “What difference is there between these exam questions and the caricatures [of Muhammad] published two years ago in Denmark?”<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere the same legislator is quoted to the effect that “His Eminence the Imam [Khomeini], may God have mercy on his soul, would confront cases of this sort, and even those of a less serious nature, in the most decisive and forceful manner.”<sup>12</sup> As if to illustrate Afrūgh’s point, one complainant reminisced:

I remember one day, during the blessed time when the late Imam was still alive, the radio or television broadcasted an interview with a certain woman, and she said that her model for life was [Japanese artist Maruyama] Oshin. Somehow this came to the attention of the Imam, who became so incensed that the woman had publicly preferred this Oshin as a life model to [the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter] Holy Fāṭemeh that he had a proclamation published in his name to that effect and saw to it that those responsible for releasing the broadcast were arrested. Now, the distribution of a test document containing such vicious, obscene, and shameless questions concerning the Prophet himself is unquestionably a great deal more brazen [*besiyār jesārat-āmīztar*] than what that woman did, so. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Another author referenced a better-known incident to urge the authorities into action, reminding his readers that “this disgrace takes place on the anniversary of the historic promulgation by his Eminence Imam Khomeini of the decree concerning the apostasy of Salman Rushdie, the traitorous author of the book *The Satanic Verses* who dared to offend the Apostle’s honor, and this [chronological coincidence] adds further weight to the matter.”<sup>14</sup> The executive director of the League of Combatant Clergy (*majma‘-e-rūḥāniyūn-e-mobārez*), Hojjatolislam ‘Abdolvāhed-e-Mūsavī-Lārī, recalled a case during the term of the previous government of

a minor journal, whose circulation did not even reach a thousand, which, as a result of the publication of a caricature which some considered disrespectful to a certain cleric, was closed down and its editors severely punished; the pious subsequently took to the streets wearing shrouds and chanting slogans. In the present instance, it is not a cleric but the dignity of our noble Prophet (God’s peace and prayers be on him and his family) that has been trounced: shall we not explode?<sup>15</sup>

Other even higher-level clerics weighed in with vigorous denunciations and expressions of dismay. Grand Ayatollah Nūrī-ye-Hamadānī, while defending education minister Farshīdī as a “religious and revolutionary man” (*mard-e-motadeyyen va enqelābī*), declared that “the dismissal of some officials and a public apology on the part of the minister is insufficient. Only a thorough investigation that exposes the roots of this affair can begin to erase the effects of this terrible deed.”<sup>16</sup> Grand Ayatollah Javādī-ye-Āmolī insisted that “the perpetrators of this outrage be punished to the full extent of the law,”<sup>17</sup> and his colleague Ayatollah Makārem-e-Shīrāzī opined that “these questions would be offensive if they were asked about the average person—let alone about the holy Prophet!”<sup>18</sup>

Although many bloggers suggested that the inclusion of such unthinkable material on the Teachers’ Examination was part of a deliberate plot to blacken the face of the current government (some even saw the hand of the United States or Israel behind the deed), many others placed the blame squarely on President Ahmadinejad himself, whose “inordinate focus on the Holocaust and issues of international relations has come at the expense of tending to the cultural and religious health of his own country and society.”<sup>19</sup> In general, however, the chatrooms and other Persian Internet fora in Iran and abroad were even less restrained than the Islamic Republic’s official organs and clergy. Internet users demanded that the individuals who were responsible for formulating and approving the test questions be bludgeoned (*bā chomāq zadan*), given stripes (*shallāq zadan*), whipped on the soles of their feet (*chūb o falak zadan*), or simply executed.

The country’s politicians also held forth on this subject with much intensity. M. P. ‘Alīrezā-ye-Zākānī, a member of the parliamentary education commission, stated that “the roots of this awful tragedy must be uncovered and dried up at the source” and that “no quarter must be given in this matter.”<sup>20</sup> M. P. Taymūr ‘Alī-ye-‘Asgarī<sup>21</sup> demanded that Maḥmūd-e-Farshīdī ask forgiveness of the entire Islamic world:

If the esteemed [education] minister does not apologize officially to the august presence of the Messenger of God, to the Muslim and revolutionary people [of Iran], to the families of the martyrs and to the pure spirits of the martyrs themselves, to the spirit of the Imam [Khomeini], and to all believers across the globe, then he may expect to be reprimanded by this body or even forced to resign.<sup>22</sup>

‘Alī-ye-Zādsar, representative of the province of Jiroft, told a press conference that “the formulator of these criminal questions is either a witting enemy or a foolish friend [*yā doshman-e-dānā yā dūst-e-nādān*]” and added that “in the event that education minister Farshidi himself is seen to make light of the matter, he will become an accessory to the crime and will have to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”<sup>23</sup> Parliamentarian Hojjatolislam v’al-Moslemīn Moḥammad Ḥasan-e-Abū Turābī summed up the general sentiment: “If a Muslim, as a result of the zealous rage that took hold of him after viewing these questions, were to burn up with fever and die, no one could find fault with him.”<sup>24</sup>

## Crying Foul

What in the questions on the February 2007 Interim Teachers’ Examination set off such a furor in the media, *majles*, *madrassas*, mosques, and individual minds of men and women in Iran? In search of an answer, we now turn to the questions.

The objectionable questions were initially unavailable. Speakers in Parliament, clerics in interviews, and the official press refrained from citing any examples of the examination’s problematic portions. Waving a paper in his hand, representative Afrūgh exclaimed, “I am too embarrassed even to *read out* any of these questions!” and Ayatollah Makārem-e-Shīrāzī urged that the examination’s contents never be revealed so that they would not “place a sword in the hands of the enemies of Iran and the Shi’a.”<sup>25</sup>

Not long after the exam date, however, an organization called the Iranian Teachers’ Association (*sāzmān-e-mo’allemān-e-irān*) put out a broadside containing what it considered to be “the most egregious and shocking” questions on the test.<sup>26</sup> The document was immediately picked up and transmitted, in whole or in part, by an increasing number of Internet sites. Other electronic sources posted what they purported to be additional material from the examination, and after much sifting and cross-referencing, I have compiled and translated the following representative list, adding clarifications where necessary.<sup>27</sup>

As no one else has attempted to furnish the correct answers to these questions, I have tried my hand at this. With several exceptions, I wait until after presenting the entire list to discuss why these interrogatives enraged Iranians.

1. Which portion of the meat of the sheep did the Messenger of God (ﷺ)<sup>28</sup> like best?
  - a. front shank and shoulder (forequarter) (*māhīcheh—sardast*)
  - b. rear shank and shoulder (hindquarter) (*rān—sardast*)
  - c. thigh and liver (*rān—jegar*)
  - d. liver and kidneys (*jegar—qolveh*)

**Answer/Comment:** During the siege of the Arabian-Jewish fortress town of Khaybar by Muslim forces (6 AH / 628 CE), the father, husband, and son of a Jewish woman named Zaynab bint al-Ḥārith were killed, and she sought vengeance. The earliest extant biography of the Prophet Muhammad, compiled by Ibn Ishāq (d. 150 AH / 767 CE) and preserved by Ibn Hishām (d. 218 AH / 833 CE), relates the following:

When the Apostle of Allah had rested, Zaynab b. al-Ḥārith, the wife of Sallām b. Mishkam, prepared for him a roast mutton, having first inquired what portion the Messenger of God liked best [*wa-qad sa'alat ayya 'uḍw min al-shāh aḥabbu ilā rasūl Allāh*]. She was told: the forequarter [*al-dhirā'*], so she put a lot of poison in that portion and proceeded to poison the whole lamb. Then she brought it in and placed it before [Muhammad]. He took hold of the forequarter and chewed a morsel but did not swallow [*fa-lāka minhā muḍgha fa-lam yasighhā*]. Bishr b. al-Barā' b. Ma'rūr, who was with him, also took some, but he swallowed it [and soon died], while the Apostle spat it out saying, "This bone tells me it is poisoned." Then he called for the woman and she confessed.<sup>29</sup>

According to a tradition recorded by Ibn Sa'd, another of the Prophet's most important early biographers,

"Abū Rāfi' told us: I once slew a kid and dressed it. The Messenger of God asked me for the forequarter, and I gave it to him. "Give me another," he said; and I gave him the second. Then he asked for a third. "O Prophet!" I replied. "There are but two forequarters to a kid!" "Nay," said the Messenger of God. "Had you remained silent, you would have handed me as many forequarters as I asked for."<sup>30</sup>

The answer is "a. front shank and shoulder (forequarter)."

Why this question and its various proposed answers should have given offense to test takers and many other Iranians is not readily apparent. The subject involves a simple, straightforward, and seemingly unvalenced fact (the Prophet’s culinary preferences in a particular case), and moreover, it is thoroughly discussed in the most venerated sources. To understand what the trouble is with this particular item and with many of the others, we need to analyze it as part of the whole list. Nevertheless, we may already describe the basic contours of the problem in a single sentence: this tradition portrays the Prophet as too *carnal* (here used in the literal sense of that word) for today’s Muslim tastes.<sup>31</sup>

2. Which of the following characteristics of the rooster is *not* shared by the Prophet (ﷺ)?
  - a. awareness of time and manly zeal<sup>32</sup> (*vaqt shenāsī—ghayrat-e-mardāneh*)
  - b. awareness of time and generosity (*vaqt shenāsī—sekhāvat*)
  - c. courage and frequency of intercourse with his wives (*shojā‘at—kethrat-e-āmīzesh bā hamsar*)
  - d. pecking food off the ground and fast walking (*bar-chīdan-e-ghadhā az zamīn—tond rāh raftan*)

**Comment/Answer:** This question was almost unanimously held up by the various Iranian websites as the most appalling of all. At first glance, it is not difficult to see why:

To compare the Lord of the Two Worlds [*seyyed-e-kawnayn*] and the Bearer of Divine Revelation, the Final Prophet the light of whose guidance has spread throughout the world and whose status [*sha’n*] is loftier than that of any other figure in history *to a rooster?! Certainly the education ministry, which is responsible for the rearing of our revolutionary Muslim youth, has lost its way [rāhesh-rā gom kard], and this is a mighty trial [balā-ye-‘azīm] for the Iranian nation.*<sup>33</sup>

I am a veteran of the Sacred Defense [*defā‘-e-moqaddas*, the Iran-Iraq war], in which I lost a leg and an eye. Would that I had lost *my life*, however [*kāsh jānam-rā az dast dādam*], rather than live to see the day when—in the Islamic Republic that we fought to defend—the noble Prophet of God is portrayed as frequenting his wives in the manner

of a rooster! Shame on the education minister, and shame on the little man who appointed him!<sup>34</sup>

Other reactions to this question from respondents across a broad spectrum of sites included “beyond disgusting,” “the worst thing I have ever seen,” “my rage knows no bounds,” “who dares make a mockery of the august presence of the holy Prophet,” “if this had been written by a foreigner, embassies would burn,” “the adherents of pure Muḥammadan Islam [*modda‘yān-e-Eslām-e-nāb-e-Moḥammadī*] must do everything in their power to see that such an unspeakable disgrace does not pollute our chaste and virtuous nation ever again,” “may the parents of the person who invented such calumny about the noble Messenger burn in hell for raising such a child,” “we will find you, you son of a dog, wherever you try to hide,” and “repent!” Not one voice was raised in favor of moderation or a defense of the culprit.

At first I, too, assumed that the test formulator had taken certain liberties, had made the mistake of trying to be creative, and in gathering various qualities attributed to Muhammad by disparate hadith reports, had noticed their similarities to the predilections of the cock. Roosters, for instance, have functioned as humanity’s alarm clocks for millennia. Allah’s Apostle himself enjoins: “Do not abuse the rooster, for he calls the people to worship,”<sup>35</sup> and the *Dalā’il al-Nubuwwa* literature credits the prophets of all ages with a miraculous ability to gauge the prayer times.<sup>36</sup> Roosters are famously feisty,<sup>37</sup> and Anas b. Mālik (Muhammad’s personal attendant) quoted his master as saying: “I surpass all others in four things: generosity, courage, fierceness, and frequency of intercourse” (*fuḍḍiltu ‘alā’l-nāsi bi-arba‘a: bi’l-sakhā’ wa’l-shajā‘a wa’l-baṭsh wa-kathrat al-jimā’*).<sup>38</sup> Catching a rooster is no mean feat, and similarly “[Muhammad’s] gait has been likened to that of one rapidly descending a hill; when he made haste, it was with difficulty that one kept pace with him.”<sup>39</sup> Although I am not aware that roosters have a reputation for generosity, the Apostle of Allah’s openhandedness is a constant refrain in the medieval sources. In short, my initial assessment was that to make the test more interesting, the formulator had noted these passages and posed a question about the Prophet’s personality and pursuits by comparing them to those of the chanticleer.

A bit of research quickly disabused me of my original notion. As it turns out, the test formulator wasn’t being creative or imaginative. On the contrary, he or she displayed an unswerving loyalty to the sacred texts of the Shī‘ite canon and had not altered them in the least. It was

the eighth *ithna ‘asharī* imam, ‘Alī al-Riḍā, who directly compared his illustrious ancestor the Prophet Muhammad (as well as the long line of prophets who preceded him) to a rooster in all of these specific ways:

Said Imam al-Riḍā, on whom be peace: “The rooster shares five characteristics with the prophets: generosity, courage, temperance, a knowledge of the prayer times, and frequency of intercourse and [manly] zeal” [*fī al-dīk khams khiṣāl min khiṣāl al-anbiyā’: al-sakhā’ wa’l-shajā’a wa’l-qanā’ wa’l-ma’rifa bi-awqāt al-ṣalawāt wa-kathrat al-ṭarūqa wa’l-ghayra*].<sup>40</sup>

Said Imām al-Riḍā, on whom be peace: “The white rooster has five traits in common with the prophets: a knowledge of the prayer times, erotic fervor, generosity, courage, and frequency of intercourse.”<sup>41</sup>

There is certainly much irony in the fact that the greatest hue and cry in this whole affair (a hue and cry that was enthusiastically seconded, if not led, by the upper echelons of the Shī‘ite clerical establishment) was raised against a comparison made by a pure and infallible Shī‘ite imam, whose statement was transmitted by Qommī traditionists. This turn of events speaks volumes about changes that have taken place in modern Shī‘ism, especially since the revolution of 1979 (more on this below). In the meantime, employees of the education ministry have lost their jobs (and stand to lose a great deal more than that) because they dared to include on a teachers’ examination a statement made by the imam-martyr ‘Alī al-Riḍā. Be that as it may, of all the answer options, only “d. pecking food off the ground and fast walking” contains one quality that it is safe to say Muhammad did not exhibit, and this is therefore the correct answer.<sup>42</sup>

3. On which part of the body did the noble Messenger (ﷺ) have his “seal of prophecy”?
  - a. on his face (*rū ṣūratash*)
  - b. on his chest (*rū sīneh’ash*)
  - c. between his shoulders (*miyān-e-shāneh-hā-yash*)
  - d. on his forehead (*rū pīshānī-ash*)

**Answer:** This is an easy one, and there are ample attestations in the early sources to the correct answer. For instance:

Sā'ib b. Yazīd said: My maternal aunt once took me to see the Prophet (ﷺ), and she said to him, "O Messenger of God! My nephew here is in pain." So [the Prophet] stroked my head and called down blessings on me, then he performed the ablution and I drank from his ablution water. Then I stood up behind his back, and I espied the seal of prophecy between his shoulder-blades, and it looked like a little partridge egg [*qumtu khalifa zahrihi fa-naẓartu ilā khātim al-nubuwwa bayna katifayhi mithla zirr al-ḥajala*].<sup>43</sup>

The mole that Muhammad's followers called "the seal of prophecy" was therefore on his back "c. between his shoulders."

4. Can the effects of urination and defecation be cleansed with three stones (*āyā makhraj-e-bowl va ghā'et bā seh sang pāk mīshevad*)
  - a. Both may be cleansed thus. (*har do pāk mīshevad*)
  - b. Neither may be cleansed thus. (*hīch kodām pāk nemīshevad*)
  - c. The effects of urination may be thus cleansed but not the effects of defecation.
  - d. The effects of defecation may be thus cleansed but not the effects of urination.

**Comment/Answer:** This was evidently the question that M. P. 'Emād-e-Afrūgh was "too embarrassed even to read out."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the question formulator himself might have been a bit uncomfortable here because he has sundered the direct connection that exists in the sources between this issue and the Prophet and presented it as an isolated legal conundrum, even though this section of the test concerns Muhammad's biography and not *fiqh* and *shari'a* (jurisprudence and positive law). Answering this question correctly involves first confronting a minor difficulty in its formulation, which is its insistence on the specific number of three stones. In one place, we read that Muhammad said, "If one of you goes to evacuate . . . let him cleanse himself with three stones" (*la-yastanjā bi-thalāthat ahjār*);<sup>45</sup> in another, that he enjoined "let not any of you cleanse himself *without* three stones";<sup>46</sup> and in yet another, that he ordered, "He who wishes to use stones [to cleanse himself], let him use an odd number" (*man istajmara falyūtir*). However, the continuation of this latter dictum is "if he does so, well and good. But if not,

there is no real harm in it.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Muhammad himself is portrayed as employing an even number of stones when out of options:

‘Abd Allāh (b. ‘Umar?) said: The Prophet (ﷺ) went to the privy [*al-ghā’it*, the metonym for defecation], and he commanded me to bring him three stones [*amaranī an ātiyahu bi-thalāthatī ahjār*]. I found two stones and looked for a third but could not find one, so I took some dung and brought it to him, and he took the two stones and threw away the dung, saying: “That is filth.”<sup>48</sup>

Note that something that embarrassed the pious parliamentarian Afrūgh—showing the Apostle answering the call of nature and then cleaning himself—occasions no unease among the hadith compilers who enshrined this anecdote in their sacred texts.

So if we set aside the specification of exactly *three* stones, we are left with a query that is significant (or at least was significant in the past and in certain regions) for practicing Muslims on a daily basis: by the laws of the Islamic ritual purity code, may stones be used to remove the residual impure substance or *‘ayn al-najāsa* of urine (the act of *istibrā’*), of feces (the act of *istinjā’*), of both, or of neither? Even though almost all of the sources that discuss this type of lapidary absterion are connected to defecation and not urination, we nevertheless read in al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Umm*:

Among those who experience defiling events [*ahdāth*] and are consequently required to perform ablutions [*wuḍū’*], none are obligated in cleansing [*istinjā’*] save those from whose body emerges *urine or feces*, and such may cleanse themselves with *stones* or water.<sup>49</sup>

The correct answer to this question is apparently “a. Both [urine and feces] may be cleansed thus [with stones].”

5. The hair on the head of the Messenger of God (ﷺ) was
  - a. black. (*siyāh*)
  - b. white. (*sefid*)
  - c. Except for a few strands, it was entirely black (*juz chand mū baqiyeh siyāh būd*),

- d. At the end of his life, it turned white (*dar ākhar-e-‘omr sefid shod*).

**Answer:** Muhammad permitted, sometimes even encouraged, the dying of hair but specifically excepted dying it black. He advised Abū Bakr’s father to “change the color of your hair and beard” yet added “but avoid black” (*ijtanib al-sawād*). He declared that “those who dye their hoary locks black will never smell the fragrance of paradise.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, since question 5 is a “black-and-white” question (the application of henna, saffron, and so on is of no relevance here), we can safely say that it is concerned with the Prophet’s natural hair color. In his youth, Muhammad’s locks were all black (a problem with the formulation of the question), but the most correct answer is provided once again by the Prophet’s loyal servant Anas b. Mālik:

The Messenger of God was neither taller nor shorter than average, neither very white [of skin] nor deep brown. His hair was somewhere in between curly and straight. God called him to the mission of prophethood when he was forty years old, after which he spent ten years in Mecca and another ten in Medina. Then God took him from us, and there was not among the hairs of his head or beard even ten white hairs [*fa-tawaffāhu Allāh wa-laysa fī ra’sihi wa-liḥyatihi ‘ashrūna sha‘ra bayḍā’*].<sup>51</sup>

The answer appears to be “c. Except for a few strands, it was entirely black.”

6. When it was extremely hot, the Messenger of God would command the muezzin: *abrid, abrid!* By this, he meant
- “Wait until it’s cooler! Wait until it’s cooler!” (*bogdhār havā khonak shavad, bogdhār havā khonak shavad*)
  - “Hurry up! Hurry up!” (*shetāb kon, shetāb kon*)
  - “Go away! Go away!” (*dūr sho, dūr sho*)
  - Both a and b are correct. (*alef va bā ṣaḥīḥ ast*)

**Comment/Answer:** Although some 50 percent of their daily lexicon derives from Arabic, speakers of Indo-European-based Persian are in general no more proficient in Arabic than speakers of Germanic-based English are proficient in French. They are unable to take advantage of

common Semitic roots for purposes of decipherment (a Hebrew speaker who knew no Arabic, for instance, would easily guess the right answer to this question), and if they do not already know the meaning of a word, they have no means of figuring it out or even of venturing an educated guess. Nevertheless, logic should help one to eliminate the final option because a and b cannot both be correct. Of the remaining answers, the first is clearly the test taker’s best bet, especially if he or she is aware of Muhammad’s predilection toward leniency (*rukħša*, *takhfif*, *līn*, etc.). At any rate, a hadīth of Abū Dharr, one of the four proto-Shi’ite Companions, tells us that

The Prophet’s muezzin once called the believers to the noon prayer, but [the Prophet] said, “Wait until it gets cooler! Wait until it gets cooler!” [*abrid*, *abrid*], adding: “Extreme heat is the raging of hellfire [*shiddat al-ħarr min fiħ jahannam*], so if it is extremely hot, then wait [to perform the noon prayer] until it gets cooler [*abridū*] and the shadows of the hillocks appear.<sup>52</sup>

The answer is “a. ‘Wait until it’s cooler! Wait until it’s cooler!’”

7. What amounts of water were used by that Excellency [*ān haḍrat*, the Prophet] in performing the minor and major ablutions [*voḍū’ va għosl*]?
  - a. one *ṣā’* for the minor ablution, one *ṣā’* for the major ablution
  - b. one *mudd*<sup>53</sup> for the minor ablution, one *mudd* for the major ablution
  - c. one *mudd* for the minor ablution, one *ṣā’* for the major ablution
  - d. one *ṣā’* for the minor ablution, one *mudd* for the major ablution

**Answer:** “Anas related: The Messenger of God used to perform *ghuṣl* with anywhere from a *ṣā’* to five *amdād* [plural of *mudd*], and would perform *wuḍū’* with a *mudd*.”<sup>54</sup> The answer is therefore “c. one *mudd* for the minor ablution, one *ṣā’* for the major ablution.”

8. How did the Messenger of God (Ṣ) compare himself to Joseph (on whom be peace)?
  - a. “I am more handsome than Joseph was.” (*man az Yūsef zībātar hastam*)

- b. “Joseph was more handsome than I am.” (*Yūsef az man zībātar būd*)
- c. “I am more handsome than Joseph was, but Joseph was more graceful<sup>55</sup> (*namakīntar*) than I am.”
- d. “Joseph was more handsome than I am, but I am more graceful than he was.”

**Comment/Answer:** The focus in this question on outward, physical beauty and what might easily be construed as prophetic preening or vanity rendered it inappropriate, even abhorrent, to many test takers and others. Several respondents protested that no human being could be described as more attractive than Muhammad, on whom Allah had bestowed “a full measure of beauty.”<sup>56</sup> Joseph is the pretty boy *par excellence* of Muslim classical literature, beginning with an episode in which Egypt’s female socialites cut their hands in consternation after beholding the Hebrew slave’s dazzling pulchritude (Qur’an 12: 30–32) and culminating in the homoerotic fantasies of many a medieval *ghazal*. The Prophet Muhammad is also described as well formed and good looking—though not strikingly so—by a wide variety of sources. This contrasts, for instance, with how ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib is portrayed in early traditions—as short, fat, balding, squinty-eyed, and chicken-legged. Nevertheless, the comparison that offended (at least the vocal section of) the Iranian Shi‘ite public was transmitted by yet another infallible Shi‘ite imam:

Abū ‘Abd Allāh (Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq) said: The Messenger of God (Ṣ) said: “Joseph was handsomer [than I am,] but I am more graceful [than he was]” [*kāna Yūsuf aḥsan wa-lakinnanī amlaḥ*].<sup>57</sup>

The correct answer is thus “d. Joseph was more handsome than I am, but I am more graceful than he was.”

## From Uswa Ḥasana to Insān Kāmil

The Iranian teachers’ examination scandal illustrates the dissonance between the manner that the Prophet Muhammad is perceived in Islam’s traditional sources (both Shi‘i and Sunni) and the way that he is portrayed in the Muslim communities of today, especially Iran. All of the

materials that informed the test questions were taken directly, without revision or manipulation, from the earliest and most revered Islamic texts. The multiple-choice answer options were also, with a lone minor exception (in question 2), derived verbatim from hadith and *sira*. Why would Iranian Muslims react with such vociferous indignation to bona fide excerpts from their own sacred literature?

One explanation is ignorance. The majority of any religion’s adherents cannot be expected to be familiar with all or even most of the material found in their religion’s founding texts, and Muslims are no exception. Hadith and *sira* are vast genres that are composed of thousands of multivolume works, and although the Iranian teachers were provided with a basic text from which to prepare for the exam, that does not mean that each teacher conscientiously studied the book from cover to cover.<sup>58</sup> At any rate, it is clear from the wide array of comments surveyed above that most examinees were unaware that such anecdotes and characterizations of their Prophet existed in the classical corpora (one teacher related that “when I first opened my test booklet and looked at the questions, I was sure that my friend Omīd was playing a practical joke on me” (*moṭma’enn ma ‘enn būdam rafīqam Omīd kolā rū saram mīzāre*).<sup>59</sup> The same may be said with even greater assurance regarding other people (including many politicians) who are not professional educators and who did not study for this exam (beturbaned M. P. Taymūr ‘Alī-ye-‘Asgarī, for example, condemned the world view represented by the test questions as “contrary to the clear moral principles of Islam” (*bar khalāf-e-oṣūl-e-akhlāqī-ye-mobīn-e-Eslām*). “This is the foolishness [*sakhīfī*],” he continued angrily, “with which they seek to train our teachers!”).<sup>60</sup>

The wrathful response of high-level religious scholars, on the other hand, is harder to explain. It is difficult to believe that the Ayatollahs and Hojjatolislams were unaware that ‘Alī al-Riḍā had compared the prophets to roosters, for example, or that Muhammad’s strong carnality and penchant for rule bending (as with the postponement of the *azān* due to heat) were subjects that were freely entertained by the sacred sources.<sup>61</sup> A lone hint intimates that these learned clerics were indeed aware of the pervasive presence of such material in the traditional literature and that they were uncomfortable with the harsh punishments being meted out to the education ministry employees and even more so with the implications of the public outcry against the content of the questions. In the din that followed the publication of parts of the test, only a single voice was raised to make a mildly mitigating statement. The

spokesperson for the Association of Qom Seminary Instructors, Seyyed Moḥammad-e-Gharavī, was quoted as follows at a press conference that was held eight days after the incident:

Although some of the material in these test questions is found in our traditional narrations, nevertheless ignorance of [these types of hadith reports] creates no problem for one's religious observance. [*agarcheh barkhī az mavāred-e-so'alāt dar ravāyāt-e-mā vojūd ast, ammā nadānestan-e-ānhā moshkelī barāye dīndārī ijād nemikonad*]<sup>62</sup>

In other words, mentioning and discussing topics such as Muhammad's culinary preferences, sexual prowess, sleeping habits, or bathroom etiquette are not out of bounds for the Muslim believer. After all (Gharavī admits), at least some of these topics are present and accounted for in "our narrations." Still, such information is not essential to leading a devout life. His intent was probably twofold—(1) that subjects such as the Prophet's favorite foods or personal appearance are not germane to proper Islamic conduct since Muhammad need not be imitated in these areas and (2) that those of the Prophet's practices that *are* relevant to a *shari'a* lifestyle were long ago translated into legal statutes whose ultimate derivation is now immaterial. The subtext of this statement apparently is that the sources that contain such anecdotal information are better left to gather dust on the shelves. They should not have been placed so squarely in the limelight on the teachers' examination. That the Qom seminaries' spokesperson was not entirely comfortable with this rather un-Islamic declaration is clear from the sentence that immediately follows and essentially contradicts it:

The surface of religion also has its traditional reports, which should not be ignored. It is wrong to think that the outward side of Islam has no importance [*saṭḥ-e-dīn nīz āthārī dārad keh nabāyad ānrā nādīdeh gereft. Īntowr nīst keh zāher-e-Eslām bī ahammiyyat bāshad*].

So the questions on the test were not unacceptable after all, even though they dredged up matters that are connected to the outer shell, not the inner kernel, of the Muslim faith. "Traditional reports" that portray Muhammad's manners and preferences about consuetudinary details (such as the amount of water he used in ablutions or how he would cleanse himself after evacuating) "should not be ignored," stresses this mouthpiece of Iran's venerable Focii of Imitation. In other words, the periphery is not to be marginalized. Still, although the top religious au-

thorities knew that there was nothing untoward about the questions on the teachers' exam (*āzemūn-e-farhangiyān*) (indeed, everything was traditional), they dared not say so directly while the nationwide uproar continued.

The above-cited timid but unmistakable defense of the “surface dimension of religion” joins a struggle that has buffeted Iranian Shi‘ism since the 1979 revolution, often pitting those professing loyalty to “Khomeini’s line” (*khaṭṭ-e-Emām*) against more traditional and conservative elements that have always harbored reservations about aspects of the revolutionary philosophy. In this connection, the pervasiveness of postexam rhetoric has decried “this deed and the system that facilitated it, which reflect a sharp departure from the direction that was given the Iranian people by the leader of the Islamic revolution, may God sanctify his secret.”<sup>63</sup>

What in these test questions strongly contraindicates the ideological legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini? No notion was more central to Khomeini’s message than the need to politicize Islam and turn it into the guidebook for confronting contemporary problems. Religion must become relevant, he preached (in this sense sounding like a modernist reformer). It must no longer confine itself, as it had for centuries, to the minute ritual questions that were debated in the gloomy *madrasas* but must be brought into the light of day and recalibrated for purposes of dealing with the pressing political, social, and economic issues of our time. In line with this outlook, Khomeini regularly lambasted those *ulema* who “bury Islam in their books . . . and in their cells in the seminary” and who believe that “all they are supposed to do is offer prayers and give opinions on abstruse questions of religious law.”<sup>64</sup> By propagating this misplaced emphasis on the picayune elements of faith at the expense of its larger and more meaningful concerns, he suggested, the traditional clerics are, wittingly or unwittingly, participating in an imperialist plot:

To make the Muslims, especially the intellectuals and the younger generation, deviate from the path of Islam, foreign agents have constantly insinuated that Islam has nothing to offer, that Islam consists of a few ordinances concerning menstruation and parturition, and that this is the proper field of study for the *ākhūnds* [religious scholars].<sup>65</sup>

Present Islam to the people in its true form, so that our youth do not picture the *ākhūnds* as sitting in some corner in Najaf or Qum studying the questions of menstruation and parturition instead of concern-

ing themselves with politics and draw the conclusion that religion must be separate from politics. This slogan of the separation of religion and politics and the demand that Islamic scholars not intervene in social and political affairs have been formulated and propagated by the imperialists; it is only the irreligious who repeat them.<sup>66</sup>

Once, during the occupation of Iraq, a certain British officer asked: “Is the *azān* I hear being called now from the minaret harmful to British policy?” When he was told that it was harmless, he said: “Then let him call to prayer as much as he wants!” If you do not disturb the policies of the imperialists and consider Islam to be simply the few topics that you are always studying and never go beyond them, then the imperialists will leave you alone. Pray as much as you like. It is your oil that they are after. Why should they worry about your prayers?<sup>67</sup>

The shift in emphasis that was sought by Khomeini required a curtailment of what he claimed (with some justice) to have been the customary Shi‘ite preoccupation with matters of ritual and worship (*‘ibādāt*) in favor of an increased concentration on what he asserted (with somewhat less justice) to be the vast public and practical sphere of Islamic law (*mu‘āmalāt*).<sup>68</sup> The unspoken implication of this new agenda was the marginalization of religious material that did not serve contemporary political or social purposes. Bearing all this in mind, the questions on the teachers’ examination—focusing as they do either on esoteric ritual minutiae or on minor details of the Prophet’s life that bear no relevance to the “current struggle”—may easily have been perceived as signifying a reversion to more traditional, prerevolutionary preferences. M. P. ‘Emād-e-Afrūgh spoke for many others in this regard:

[These test questions] devote attention to only the superficial aspects of the Prophet’s outward behavior and characteristics. We would have expected that [the examination] would give most weight to subjects such as the Prophet’s world view [*jahānbīnī*], his values [*arzes̄h-hā*], the evolution of his ideas, and his grand strategy and vision.<sup>69</sup>

For some, then, the test questions struck a raw nerve because they seemed to adumbrate a counterrevolutionary relapse or even regression back to the casuistic, irrelevant, nonengaged Shi‘ism of old that obsessed about the past instead of fighting for the future.<sup>70</sup> For others who were less ideologically inclined but still raised on the radical reformist

principles of “meaningful religion” that were inculcated by and since the revolution (and deepened, paradoxically, by exposure to the secular West), the test questions appeared shallow, silly, and useless. Still others who had grown up in a society that for generations has taken its notions of propriety from the West found the mention of bodily functions in many of the questions appalling.

A far older transvaluation from the early centuries of Islam had its impetus in Shi‘ism and also underlay many Iranian responses to the *sira* section of the teachers’ examination. The Prophet Muhammad entered onto the stage of Muslim historiography as the *uswa ḥasana*, a Qur’anic designation meaning “excellent exemplar.”<sup>71</sup> His biography owes its existence to the need that was felt by the fledgling Muslim community for a model of conduct whose example could be upheld and imitated in the various spheres of life. The widely scattered hadith reports or “exempla” from which the *sira* literature was cobbled together were preserved (or manufactured) for the primary purpose of edifying Muslim believers and teaching them how to behave in a vast array of quotidian circumstances. Indeed, the very term *sira* seems to betoken (if we accept M. M. Bravmann’s cogent argument) not “biography” or “history” but “exemplary deeds,”<sup>72</sup> much like the title of Ibn Khaldūn’s *magnum opus*, the *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* (Book of Lessons). The Prophet Muhammad’s job description, we might say, was to engage in the daily, mundane pursuits of everyman to demonstrate how they should best be accomplished. Thus Allah’s Apostle had to be depicted in the literature as human in every way and therefore had to be shown eating, drinking, laughing, crying, cooking, sweeping, bathing, depilating, clipping his toenails, putting on his shoes, fasting and breaking the fast (often before he was supposed to), praying, sleeping, oversleeping, cohabiting with his wives, and going to the bathroom. “Your Prophet has taught you everything,” jibed an unidentified interlocutor at Salmān al-Fārisī, “even how to defecate.”<sup>73</sup>

On a more general level, it should be stressed that Muhammad’s unparalleled success as the pristine Focus of Imitation arose in large part from the fact that emulating him did not require believers to transcend or even struggle much against human nature. The Prophet was originally presented as “one of them”—as a human being through and through. He had his favorite foods and was transported (according to manifold traditions) by perfume, female beauty, a good teeth-rubbing (*siwāk*), and a good joke. The willingness of the sacred sources to portray Muhammad as a man like other men—indeed, their strong pen-

chant for doing so—included descriptions of his appearance, from his facial expressions to the color of his hair to the size and shape of the mole on his back. He had to be *alive*, almost tangible, if future generations were to identify with him and recognize their own potential selves in his demeanor and comportment.<sup>74</sup> He had to be close enough to the ground so that reaching for his heights would not seem futile. By definition, the “excellent exemplar” must not be deprived of the many features and even foibles that characterize all people. He must not be perfect.

But few missions are as impossible in a religiohistorical context as maintaining the imperfection of a hero. Islam’s seminal texts had done everything in their power—had done more than any other religious literature in history—to ensure that the Prophet’s down-to-earth, flesh-and-blood, unselfconscious corporeality and carnality would remain unvitiated. Even so, it did not take long for scholastic, mystic, and even orthodox circles—in no small measure responding to Greek, Christian, Gnostic, Neoplatonic, Hindu, and (later) Victorian and other modern Western ideas and criticisms—to initiate the process that would eventually transform Muhammad into the opposite of himself. The “dehumanization” of the Messenger of God proceeded apace throughout the medieval period, ultimately resulting in the creation of an immaculate, not to say sterile, figure—“the perfect man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) whose carnal exploits were no longer a source of pride and whose visceral humanity was increasingly tucked away.<sup>75</sup>

This metamorphosis did not take place to the same degree in all Muslim milieus. Certain elements within Islam were more predisposed to this development than others. Although the doctrine of prophetic infallibility (*‘iṣma*) has long been the property of Islam as a whole, it is significant that its origins are in Shi‘ism as part of that sect’s extraordinary adoration—bordering on apotheosis—of Muhammad’s linear descendants.<sup>76</sup> Semidivine beings have no business engaging in the lowly pursuits appropriate to creatures of flesh and blood, and the “etherealization” of the Prophet’s image accordingly proceeded further in Shi‘ism than it did in Sunnism. It is little wonder that evocations of the human side of Allah’s Apostle receive a less cordial welcome in the Shi‘ite state (Iran) than they do in the Sunni state (Saudi Arabia, where anecdotes regarding even the Prophet’s sexual practices are regularly employed by clerics on television talk shows to support the bits of advice they dole out regarding amorous matters).

The consequences of these transformations in perceptions of the Prophet over the long term (especially in Shi‘ism) and in the Iranian

outlook on the role of Islam since the 1979 revolution are now clearer than ever: a teachers’ examination whose questions are based solely and directly on the most sacred sources of the Islamic faith engenders widespread, passionate protest in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Phenomena such as this should force us to take a second look at the extremely common and often facile descriptions of present-day Iran as a—or even as *the*—flagship of Islamic “fundamentalism.”

## Notes

1. “That nature which contemns its origin / Cannot be border’d certain in itself / She that herself will silver and disbranch / From her material sap, perforce must wither / And come to deadly use.” *King Lear* (act 4, scene 2, lines 32–36).

2. The religiopolitical principle of *velāyat-e-faqīh* or guardianship of the jurist, which was elucidated and promoted (but not invented) by Khomeini, has been the subject of debate since 1979. This debate has in some cases even led to the defrocking of dissenting high-level clerics (such as Sharī’atmadārī) and to their placement under house arrest (for example, Montazerī), but the argument has always remained “in house” and has not precipitated calls in either camp for the establishment of a “new” or “legitimized” Shi’ism.

3. It would be misleading to claim that the beginning of every latter-day intellectual-philosophical process within Shi’ism can be pinpointed at the moment of political revolution. Certain significant transformations that reached their apogee long after 1979 had been brewing for most of the twentieth century. The best guide to these is probably Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London: MacMillan Press, 1982), especially chapter five. Indeed, the subject of this article ultimately represents a hybrid of post-Khomeini and early medieval transformations in the theological outlook of Shi’ite Islam.

4. Unhappy with strictly academic methods of transliterating Persian to English, which for the most part ignore the needs of proper phonetic pronunciation in favor of alphabetical correspondence, I have opted in this article for a system that attempts to navigate between the pitfalls of each. Macrons are employed to indicate long vowels, but *kasras*, for example, are rendered with an “e” (*Eslām, zabān-e-pāk*) because that is how they sound in Persian. Most consonants have been transliterated as from Arabic, but writing *Ridā* instead of *Rezā* seems counterproductive to me, and so I have chosen the latter alternative. Some well-known names, like Khomeini or Ahmadinejad, have been left as they usually appear in the English press.

5. About half of these were subsequently reinstated.

6. This is not a unanimously confirmed description of what happened. Soon after the scandal broke, vague statements were made by persons connected to the education ministry to the effect that the examination had been immediately rescinded after being administered in only a few provinces. Eventually, certain government sources even claimed that the test had never been given at all (e.g., “Sāit-hā’ī nazdik beh dowlat: so’ālāt-e-towhīn-āmīz rā hīch kas nadīdeh būd,” *Aṣr-e-Īrān*, February 28, 2007). This assertion is belied by the early response of the director general of the education ministry itself, Ḥosayn-e-Naqavī, who affirmed that “this examination was taken by teachers in 31 provinces” but in the same breath insisted that “in none of these places did we encounter a problem, save in a single province—and there, during only one of the rounds of testing” (“Āmūzesh o parvareh beh takhallofāt-e-tarāḥ-e-so’ālāt-e-āzemūn-e-ḡemne khedmat-e-farhangiyān residegī mishevad,” *IRNA*, February 27, 2007). A number of respondents on different

blogs offered another, more cynical, interpretation of events: the questions concerning the life of the Prophet on this year's test were so unexpected and difficult that many teachers sought to drown out the fact of their inevitable failure by raising a tumult regarding Muhammad's offended dignity. Still other sources described the mirth that spread among less pious elements when they encountered the test questions.

7. "Bāvaresh sakhte," *Akhbār-e-Amīr'Abbās-e-Nakha'i*, February 25, 2007; "Boht va hayrat az tohīn beh payghambar," *Aftab News* (not to be confused with the newspaper of the same name), February 23, 2007; "Jomhūrī-ye-Eslāmi-ye . . . Dānmārk?!" *Derafsh-e-Abo'l-Faḍl*, February 23, 2007.

8. "Hoshdār-e-Anšārī darbāre-ye-nofūḍ-e-jaryānī khatarnāk dar nezām-e-āmūzesh-e-keshvar," *Eṭṭelā'āt*, February 27, 2007.

9. "Nūrī-e-Hamedānī: Odhr-khwāhī-ye-Farshīdī kāfī nīst," *ISNA*, February 28, 2007.

10. "Az nashriye-ye-Mowj tā so'ālāt-e-mowhen beh payāambar," *Bāztāb*, February 25, 2007.

11. "Gozāresh-e-kāmel-e-e'terāḍ-e-shadīd-majles beh .tarḥ-e-so'ālāt-e-mowhen dar āzemūn-e-ḍemne khedmat-mo'allemān," *Jām-e-jam*, February 28, 2007.

12. "E'terāḍ-e-gostardeb beh vazīr-e-āmūzesh o parvareh," *Rūz*, February 21, 2007.

13. "Towhīn beh Rasūl Allāh dar sāl-e-Rasūl Allāh," *Hosayn-e-Mar'ashī: Yād-dāshtha-ye-shakhshī*, February 25, 2007.

14. "Moḍū'e-dāgh-e-majles va bohrān-e-jeddī barāye āmūzesh o parvareh," *Āftāb*, February 27, 2007. Khomeini's famous fatwā was issued on February 14, 1988.

15. "Mūsavī-Lārī bā eshāreh beh tarḥ-e-so'ālāt-e-mowhen dar āzemūn-e-ḍemne khedmat-e-farhangiyān: bāyad qāṭe'an va 'alanī barkhord shod," *ISNA*, February 24, 2007.

16. "Farshīdī dar Āstāne-ye-estīḍāḥ," *Kayhān*, February 23, 2007.

17. "Vākonesh-e-olamā' va marāje' nesbat beh tarḥ-e-so'ālāt-mowhen," *Hamshahrī*, February 28, 2007.

18. "Marāje'-e-Qom: so'ālāt-e-akhīr-e-āzemūn-e-farhangiyān kārī shayṭānī va-moghreḍāneh hast," *ISNA*, March 2, 2007.

19. "Matn-e-so'ālāt-e-towhīn āmīz beh payāambar-e-akram dar āmūzesh va parvareh," *Entekhāb*, February 3, 2007, responses section. The president has so far refrained from direct comment but did make a point of stressing in a speech in the province of Gilān that "the unity, sovereignty and honor of the Iranian nation stems from its everlasting adherence to the august presence of the beloved Prophet of Islam" ("Sokhanrānī ra'īs-e-jomhūrī beh mardom-e-qadrshenās-e-Gilān," *E'temād-e-Mellī*, March 4, 2007).

20. "Gozāresh-e-kāmel . . .," *Jām-e-jam*, February 28, 2007.

21. This is his name. It is not 'Askarī or Aṣgharī (though it may well be a corruption of the former).

22. "Vākoneshhā-ye-tond dar majles nesbat beh so'ālāt-e-nā-šavāb," *IRNA*, February 22, 2007. The education minister did in fact issue such an apology soon afterward—thrice.

23. "Vozārā-ye-eṭṭelā'āt va āmūzesh o parvareh tarḥ-e-so'ālāt-e-tohīn-āmīz be-payāambar rā barresī konand," *Mehr*, February 28, 2007.

24. "Agar Mosalmān bā ghayratī az dīdan-e-in so'ālāt deq konad va bemīrad, bar ū khordeb nabāyad gereft," *Radio Javān*, March 1, 2007.

25. "Gozāresh-e-kāmel . . .," *Jām-e-jam*, February 28, 2007; "Marāje'-e-Qom," *ISNA*, March 2, 2007.

26. A photograph of the original document, which details a series of complaints against the education ministry and a list of the questions, may be seen at [http://hanif.ir/2007/02/21/post\\_299.shtml#comment-29229](http://hanif.ir/2007/02/21/post_299.shtml#comment-29229). I have not been able to view a copy of the examination itself. It seems safe to say that the order of the questions on the Iranian

Teachers’ Association leaflet is not the same as the original order on the exam. Since publishing the document, the ITA has been subject to a barrage of abuse on the Internet and airwaves. Some have accused it of having ties to the insurgent *mojāhedīn-e-khalq*.

27. In the interests of space, time, and efficiency I have eliminated several questions that were similar in content to others on the list. For example, of two questions about bathroom etiquette, I include only one. I saw no need to analyze both items connected to the Prophet’s hair color, one concerning his head and the other his beard. I cite only one of the three questions regarding Muhammad’s eating habits. One site reproduced what it purported to be a question from the exam that was flagrantly obscene and blasphemous (although bestiality is indeed treated in both Shi’i and Sunni texts, it is never directly connected with the Prophet). This was obviously a “copy-cat crime” carried to the extreme, and I eliminated it. At the other end of the spectrum, I have omitted questions that were so patently inoffensive that they could only have made it onto the list through carelessness (such as a question about the chronological order of Muhammad’s conquests and another one about the contents of the second revelation). From a possible total of about seventeen questions, I have selected eight.

28.  $\text{\$}$  = “May God’s peace and blessings be on him and his family” (*Šallā Allāhu ‘alayhi va ‘alā ālihi va sallam*) and is present in the original.

29. Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Mālik b. Hishām al-Ma’āfirī, *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyya, n.d.), vol. 3, 219. For the many different versions of this story, including some in which the sheep was resurrected long enough to open its mouth and warn the Prophet that it was poisoned and others in which Muhammad’s momentary exposure to this poison led to his demise four years later, see Etan Kohlberg, “Dmut ha-Navi Muhammad ke-Shahid,” in *‘Iyunim ba-Islam ha-Qadum: D’varim she-Ne’emru be-Yom ‘Iyun li-Khvod Me’ir Kister bi-mlo’t lo Tish’im Shana* (Jerusalem: Ha-Aqademia ha-Le’umit ha-Yisra’elit le-Mada’im, 5765/2005), 45–71.

30. Quoted in Sir William Muir, *The Life of Mohammad* (revised edition by T. H. Weir; Edinburgh: John Grant, 1923), 527.

31. A question that appears elsewhere on the exam and may be considered an adjunct to this one asks, “Which food did the Prophet never share with those around him?” The answers include (a) a watermelon, (b) a pomegranate, (c) barley bread, and (d) the forequarter of the sheep. Although I did not investigate, the answer—especially given what has been discussed so far in the context of question one—is probably d.

32. This means either testosterone or zealotry in defending one’s exclusive access to one’s wives and concubines, probably the latter.

33. “Porsesh-hā-ye-ghayr-e-dīnī dar āzemūn-e-farhangiyān,” *Hamīsheh dar Šaḥneh*, February 28, 2007.

34. “Dar āmūzesh o parvareh cheh ettefāq mī-ofteḥ,” *Daftar-e-Sīrūs-e-Golcheh*, March 3, 2007, responses section.

35. Abū al-Ṭayyib Muḥammad Shams al-Ḥaḡ ‘Azīm-Ābādī, *‘Awn al-Ma’būd Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dā’ūd* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol. 14, p. 6: “*lā tasabbu al-dīk fa-innahu yunādī li’l-ṣalāt*.” The rooster is considered to crow not just at dawn but also at the *zawāl*, the beginning of the downward trajectory of the sun at midday that inaugurates the period of the *zuhr* prayer. The rabbinically rooted Jewish morning prayer blesses God for “bestowing on the rooster the wisdom to distinguish between day and night” (*asher natan la-sekhvi bina lehavḥin bayn yom u-vayn layla*).

36. Abū Nu’aym Aḥmad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb Dalā’il al-Nubuwwa* (n.p.: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, n.d.), 86–87. Note that King David, an important Islamic prophet, is said by the Talmud to have hung his harp on the wall over his head at bedtime, and the midnight wind would blow and wake him up for nocturnal devotions (Berakhot, 3b).

37. The Talmud warns scholars “not [to] be found with their wives [as frequently] as cocks [are found with hens]” (*sheh lo yihyu talmidei ḥachamim metzuyim etzel*

*neshotayhem ke-tarnegolim*). Berakhot 22a. Another word for *rooster* in Hebrew is *gever* (the male). One cannot help wondering about the derivation of the English slang usage *cock*.

38. Shams al-Dīn Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zād al-Ma'ād fī Hadyi Khayr al-'Ibād* (Beirut: Ihyā al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), vol. 3, p. 147.

39. Muir, *The Life of Mohammad*, 510.

40. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī (Kulīnī), *al-Kāfī fī 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥikma, 1982), vol. 6, p. 550, *Bāb al-Dīk*, no. 5.

41. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Bābawayh, *Khisāl* (ed. Najaf 1391 / 1971), pp. 271–72, no. 70.

42. The formulator's choice for the trait that the Prophet did *not* have could have been better thought out. After all, the many examinees who got the answer wrong (and even a goodly number of those who got it right) were left by virtue of the very existence of this option with the indecorous picture in their minds of the Prophet bending over and pecking food off of the ground. Still, it appears from most of the forums that were surveyed that the lion's share of fury in connection with this question was trained specifically at the *right* answers.

43. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Taḥārah, Bāb Isti'māl Faql Waḍū' al-Nās*, 4: 40 (190). The meaning of *zīrr al-ḥajala* is not clear.

44. By a different count, it would be the question: “In what state was the Prophet of God never observed?” The possible answers to this were (a) while he had intercourse with his wives (*dar ḥāl-e-mojāme'at bā zanān*), (b) while defecating and urinating, (c) while shopping in the bazaar, and (d) while drinking in a seated position. This one is difficult, and the answer probably depends on the sources consulted. We certainly have descriptions of Muhammad in the marketplace, including one in which he jokingly tries to sell his friend as a slave. Among his recommendations regarding drinking (such as “it is best not to breathe into the vessel” [*lā yatanaffas fī al-inā'*]), we do not find one that encourages the drinker to stand (there are also specific reports that, for instance, Allah's Apostle “sat with [*jhalasa ma'*] Abū 'Ubayd and some bedouin drinking goat's milk”). When Muhammad sought to consummate his marriage with the Jewish Khaybarian captive Ṣafiya, whose husband Kināna he had tortured and killed (not long after another Khaybarian Jewess who had lost loved ones in the campaign had tried to poison him, see above), one of the young Companions reputedly slipped into the room to make sure his master was safe. Even so, chances are that he did not actually watch the proceedings, so the first answer (a) seems to be right. However, we also have direct statements to the effect that Muhammad was never accompanied and always shielded himself when urinating or defecating. These statements are contradicted, at least in the matter of urination, by anecdotes describing Companions who stood next to the Prophet while he relieved himself and especially by the widely syndicated report in which 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥasana describes the following scene: “The Messenger of God came out to us, and he was holding a leather shield [*daraqā*] in his hand. He placed it on the ground and proceeded to squat down and urinate into it. One of those present said: ‘Look at him, he urinates like a woman [*unzurū ilayhi, yabūlu kamā tabūlu al-mar'a!*]’” Even in the matter of defecation, we have the following (not exclusively Sunni) hadith: “From Abū Bakr b. Abī Shayba . . . from 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar, who said: ‘I went up to the roof of my sister Ḥafsa's house [in Madīna], and saw the Messenger of God squatting on two bricks answering the call of nature [*qā'idan li-ḥājatihi 'alā libnatayni*], with his face toward Syria and his back toward the *qibla*.’” Thus, we are at an impasse, and since there is no “none of the above” option, we must fall back on *Allāhu a'lam*.

45. Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, *Kitāb al-Umm* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 36. See the Talmud, tractate Shabbat, 81a: “One may bring three round stones into the outhouse” (*shelosha avanim mequrzalot mutar lehakhnis le-vayt ha-kise'*).

46. Abū Zakarīyā’ Yahyā Muḥyi al-Dīn al-Nawawī, *Al-Minhāj: Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj* (Damascus: Dār al-Khayr, 1994), vol. 1, p. 496.

47. Abū’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. Ḥabīb al-Māwardī, *Al-Ḥāwī al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1994), vol. 1, p. 191.

48. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Ṭahārah, Bāb Lā Yustanjī bi-Rawth*, 4: 51 (152).

49. Shāfi’ī, *Umm*, vol. 1, p. 36. Shāfi’ī’s specific usage of the term *istinjā’*, however, may indicate that the inclusion of urine here was the result of carelessness. How either of these cleansings is exactly accomplished is beyond the scope of this article.

50. These reports appear back to back in *Sunan al-Nasā’ī, Kitāb al-Zīna, Bāb al-Nahy ‘an al-Khiḍāb bi’l-Sawād*, 48: 15 (5077–5078). In his latest video message, Usama bin Ladin appears to have ignored this prophetic injunction.

51. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Manāqib, Bāb Ṣifat al-Nabī*, 61: 22 (2548).

52. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb Mawāqūt al-Ṣalāt, Bāb al-Ibrād fī al-Zuhr fī Shiddat al-Ḥarr*; 9: 9 (535).

53. It is difficult to ascertain the exact magnitude of these measurements at the time, but the *ṣā’* was considerably more voluminous than the *mudd*.

54. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Wuḍū’, Bāb al-Wuḍū’ bi’l-Mudd*, 4: 47 (201).

55. Or “more charming” or “cuter.”

56. Traditions to this effect do exist, and Muhammad is also quoted directly as declaring himself “the most perfect in beauty among mankind.” See traditions cited in D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (London: Putnam’s, 1906), 82.

57. Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib* (Beirut, 1985), vol. 1, p. 218. See also Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Wafā’, 1983), vol. 16, p. 408.

58. Some of those who *did* read far enough to reach passages containing material similar to that found on the test are themselves described as reacting with either ridicule or anger. The text in question is the epitomic *Sunan al-Nabī* by ‘Allāme-ye-Seyyed Moḥammad Ḥosayn-e-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, a revered 20th century Iranian scholar. In his initial response, a flustered Farshīdī could not even recollect the name of the author and tried to avoid responsibility by reminding reporters that this work had been published not by the education ministry but by the Ministry of Guidance (*vezārat-e-ershād*). Several days later, nothing less than a modern-day claim of *tahrīf* (corruption, distortion) would be advanced regarding this text. Ṭabāṭabā’ī had originally written it in Arabic, and there were those who wanted the man who translated it into Persian, Moḥammad Hādī-ye-Feqhī, to take the fall, accusing him of adding much new material from Arabic (read: Sunni) sources that Ṭabāṭabā’ī had presumably rejected. It was from this “outside,” unauthorized material, they asserted, that most of the test questions were derived. No proof was brought to bolster this transparently bogus assertion. I have yet to gain access to Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s book.

59. *Shabake-ye-Āmūzesh*, February 26, 2007.

60. “Towhīn beh rasūl-e-khodā dar āzemūn-e-qemne khedmat,” *ISNA*, February 24, 2007. M. P. Zākānī accused the test formulators and those who approved their work of “making a mockery out of the Prophet’s life and violating his sanctity” (*sakhīf kardan-e-zendegī-ye-payāambar (S) va-hurmat-shekanī ishān*. “Gozāresh-e-kāmel . . .”), *Jām-e-jam*, February 28, 2007. Elsewhere he is quoted as declaring the exam questions to be the result of “ignorance and lack of awareness” (*nādānī va-nā-āgāhī*). “Boht va ḥayrat . . .,” *Āftāb*, February 23, 2007. Whose ignorance, we might ask, is on display here?

61. What are we to do with statements like that of cleric-parliamentarian Hojjatolislam ‘Alī Ḥosayn-e-Abū Turābī, who proclaimed: “These antireligious questions were designed to show the noble Prophet of Islam engaging in behavior that violates the fundamentals [of Islam]” (*raftārhā-ye-khalāf oṣūl*)? “Gozāresh-e-kāmel . . .,” *Jām-e-jam*, February 28, 2007. Politics may have taken its toll on this scholar’s erudition.

62. “Sokhangū-ye-jāme‘e-ye-modārresin-howze-ye ‘elmiye-ye-Qom bā eshāreh beh so‘ālāt-e-āzamūn-ḡemne khedmat-e-farhangiyān: in etefāqāt avāyel-e-enqelāb niz rokh midād,” *Āmūzesh News*, March 1, 2007.

63. “Dād o faryād pīrāmūn-e-so‘ālāt-e-towhīn-āmīz dar emteḡhān-e-mo‘allemān,” *Jām-e-Jam*, March 2, 2007. This was a highly common theme in the commentary.

64. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, ed. and trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 219, 136. This, despite the fact that Khomeini himself, like all other senior ayatollahs, included hundreds of pages of rulings in his *Risalat-i-Tawḡīḡ-i-Masā‘il* on just such “abstruse questions of religious law.”

65. *Ibid.*, 30.

66. *Ibid.*, 38.

67. *Ibid.*, 39. Khomeini was not the first to voice such radical sentiments. In 1962, for instance, Jalāl Āl-e-Aḡmad, author of the celebrated *Gharbzadegī* (“Westoxication”), lashed out acidly at the Shi‘ite *ulema* for “continu[ing] to be wrapped up in the petty details of prayer or the problems of ritual purity, and continu[ing] to be nagged by paralyzing doubts: Did they perform the right number of prostrations or not?” Jalāl Āl-e-Aḡmad, *Gharbzadegī*, trans. Paul Sprachman, *Plagued by the West* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1982), 24.

68. For reasons related to their powerlessness (and to what eventually amounted to their philosophy of powerlessness), Shi‘ites in history devoted even less attention to matters of “public law” than did Sunnis. (The Sunni *ulema* themselves having for the most part carried on their legal deliberations far from the centers of temporal power, Sunni public law also remained relatively underdeveloped. Shi‘i scholars thus tended to focus less on the elucidation of regulations concerning man’s relation to his fellow man (civil law)—this sphere they were prepared (and usually forced) to “render unto Caesar”—and more on the elaboration of precepts concerning man’s relation to God ( ritual law). In general, it may be said that the lion’s share of hadith exempla in any Shi‘i or Sunni compilation concern themselves with ceremonial, as opposed to civil, criminal, or governmental matters.

69. “Gozāresh-e-kāmel . . .,” *Jām-e-jam*, February 28, 2007.

70. The announcement of the representative of the Qom seminaries that was reviewed earlier (in which the test questions were more or less defended) may thus be seen as indicating that at least some clerical circles are reasserting their traditional brand of old-time religion. There is much additional evidence that points to such a trend.

71. “Verily ye have in the Apostle of God a beautiful model for any whose hope is in God and the Last Day” (*la-qad kāna lakum fī rasūl Allāhi uswatun ḡasanatun li-man kāna yarjū Allāha wa‘l-yawm al-ākḡira*) (Qur’an 33: 21). “Say: ‘If you love God, follow me’” (*qul: in kuntum tuḡhibbūna Allāha fa‘ttabi‘ūnī*) (Qur’an 3: 31).

72. M. M. Bravmann, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 73–91.

73. Muslim, *Kitāb al-Ṭahāra, Bāb al-Istinjā‘*, 17: 262 (414): “*qad ‘allamakum nabīyukum kulla shay‘in, ḡattā al-kḡirā‘a.*”

74. Note the everyman theme in the physical description that is cited above (in the context of question five): “The Messenger of God was neither taller nor shorter than average, neither very white [of skin] nor deep brown. His hair was somewhere in between curly and straight.” Muhammad is the mean.

75. The recent resurgence in Western deprecation of Muhammad, from *The Satanic Verses* to the Danish cartoons, has clearly played a role in the unfolding of the test-question crisis by heightening the sensitivity of Iranian Muslims to the issue of *ḡurmat al-nabī* (the Prophet’s sanctity).

76. Another postrevolutionary trend that is significant in this connection is what might be described as the replacement of ‘Ali with Muḡammad as the most frequent ref-

erent in official and public discourse. This phenomenon unquestionably has much to do with Khomeini's ecumenical ambitions of uniting the Muslim world under Iranian leadership and with general Muslim reactions to increased instances of Western denigration of the Prophet, but more than anything I believe that Muhammad has been brought to the fore in the Islamic Republic because he is more of a political figure than 'Alī. He was a resolute, pragmatic man of action who presided over the expansion of a minor theocratic principality into a regional superpower. Whatever the reasons, the Prophet has thus become as sacrosanct in the eyes of many Iranian Sh'ites today as 'Alī, if not more so, and the sensitivity to Muhammad's *hurma* has accordingly been heightened. I am currently preparing a paper on this interesting phenomenon.