PART ONE

FROM SHAYKHISM TO BABISM
A STUDY IN CHARISMATIC RENEWAL IN SHI’I ISLAM
INTRODUCTION

Recent events [as of 1979] have vividly demonstrated the continuing power of religion as a force to be reckoned with in the life of the Iranian people. Economic frustrations, social disadvantage, and political oppression may, as always, have been major spurs goading the masses to revolution, but it was in devotion to Shi'i Islam and enthusiasm for the religious leadership (the learned or 'ulamā') who led them that they found a rallying-point and an effective means of channeling their demands for change. More than that, religious feelings of outrage at modernization, moral decline, and loss of religio-national identity, coupled with the fervor produced in the Shi'i mind by the themes of martyrdom and suffering, proved perhaps the most important elements in driving men and women onto the streets. It is the fundamentally religious character of the Iranian Revolution which has excited the most comment and caused the most mystification abroad.

The role of religion as a catalyst in revolutionary movements is well known,¹ not least in Iran, yet it is surprising how many otherwise perceptive commentators failed, even at the eleventh hour, to appreciate fully how critical a factor traditional Shi'ism might become among the forces of opposition to the Pahlavi regime.² Now that the revolution has taken place—however long it may survive in a world its leaders seem little fit to cope with—the eyes of scholars and journalists alike are turned towards Qum and the newly-powerful ranks of the Shi'i ulama; but it may be much to hope that sharp vision will replace short-sightedness overnight and that those unfamiliar with the dynamics of Shi'i piety and political messianism will readily grasp the principles and forces involved in this most medieval of all modern revolutions. Doubtless the secular forces present throughout this period of upheaval—those most amenable to study by Western political scientists and commentators—shall be subjected to searching and

² Notice, for example, the scant space devoted to the religious element in the chapter on opposition in Fred Halliday, Iran: Dictatorship and Development (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1979.