The Conceptualization of Social Change Through Metaphor

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IN THIS PAPER I wish to present an analysis of the choices and strategies used in religious discourse in Iran. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate that the belief system of Islam is used by the religious leaders (ulama) in Iran as a symbolic backdrop for conceptualizing the processes of social change and modernization.

Theoretical Assumptions

The theoretical assumptions underlying my presentation are two-fold. The first perspective derives from sociolinguistics and literary criticism whereby religion can be seen in a communications framework, specifically as Rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion and religious cosmologies and belief systems are designed, in the last analysis, as rather thorough-going modes of persuasion. As Kenneth Burke, the foremost exponent of this perspective, has stated:

To persuade men towards certain acts, religions would form the kinds of attitude which prepare men for such acts. And in order to plead for such attitudes as persuasively as possible, the religious always ground their exhortations (to themselves and others) in statements of the widest and deepest possible scope, concerning the authorship of men's motives (1970: v).

The second perspective rests on Robin Horton's Neo-Tylorian approach to religion (1968). Horton suggests that religious concepts are really theoretical models or intellectual constructs which are used to account for otherwise incomprehensible phenomena. The purpose of such models is to explain and predict.

It should be clear, however, that the building or use of theoretical models involves the use of metaphors and the development of analogies between one set of phenomena, whose characteristics and relationships are thought to be understood, and another set of phenomena whose characteristics can be explained by the principles thought to underlie the first set. The two sets are not seen as the same but as being like each other and governed by similar rules. The image created by the use of the metaphor may depend not only on the structural analogy being presented but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the analogy of feeling, the emotive dimension. Indeed, it is one
of the primary functions of metaphor to supply an avenue for the expression of emotions since the vocabulary of emotions is comparatively little developed (cf. the interesting paper by Wallace and Carson, 1973). Because of this, metaphor is a useful means of dealing with the area of unnamed experiences. It is also useful for supplying a model or an image on whose lines we can construct our own concept of what the speaker is talking about especially in cases where the speaker externalizes and articulates what it is that others can as yet only feel, strive towards and experience but cannot put into words or translate explicitly into action.

THE RHETORIC OF RELIGION

Order and Disorder

A few years ago the United States’ Agency for International Development (A.I.D.) closed its offices in Iran and publicly declared that Iran was no longer an underdeveloped country and was therefore no longer entitled to American economic aid. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Commerce Department released figures which indicated that with an average annual growth rate of 11.3 percent over the last few years Iran had had one of the highest rates of economic growth in the world.

While these economic advances and accompanying social changes have brought great benefit to Iran they have not been without their cost. There are many people in Iran, as in other developing countries, who are voicing their concern over the rapid pace of social change and modernization. Most Iranians are aware they are living in times of great social upheaval, a period of disorder with a high frequency of random, unplanned, uncontrolled and unpredictable events but they cannot comprehend nor understand the changes taking place around them. Individuals caught up in the complex processes of sociocultural change find themselves in a situation where the traditional norms and values operative in a given situation no longer, as Clifford Geertz has phrased it, “guarantee the truth of things.” The individual experiences the effects of the changes occurring in many ways yet is unable, for the most part, to comprehend the magnitude and complexity of the changes that are slowly or rapidly altering his traditional life style. He feels overwhelmed by the ubiquity of the changes and searches for some explanation that would give some semblance of order to the perceived chaos that surrounds him.

Even under normal social conditions man finds it difficult to comprehend the uncertainties and vagaries of this world. Weber understood this, for he attributed to all men a basic drive toward meaning, toward comprehension of the world as in some way orderly and purposeful. Not only must order be perceived in the universe but social interaction must be orderly, habitual and therefore predictable (see Bateson, quoted by Rappaport 1971: 69 and Kluckhohn 1965: 153). In order for society to function with some degree of efficiency