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Maurice and the Mullahs: Religion and Politics in the  
Thinking of Maurice Cowling, and in Revolutionary Iran

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## *About the Author*

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# 3

**Question:** You have been accused of cynicism, but a more recent suggestion is that you take the view that, in the face of the transcendence of God, no moral or political system has any authority.

**Answer:** I think one needs to put into that sentence 'No absolute authority', because I obviously don't believe it to be the case that no moral or political system can have authority. One has, I think, to be very mindful of the limits and ignorance of even legitimate government.

When I first saw this exchange a few years ago, I tried it out on two academic colleagues in the field of Iranian studies. When asked to guess who gave the answer in the excerpt, both independently suggested that it might be Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In fact, it was Maurice Cowling, answering a question from Naim Attallah, in an interview that appeared in Attallah's book *Singular Encounters*, published in 1990.<sup>1</sup> I eventually used it as an epigraph to my book *Revolutionary Iran*, published in 2013.

At first I asked the question in a playful spirit, but I came to think that there was more to it; that investigation of the ideas involved might usefully draw out a parallel between aspects of Cowling's thought and some of the features of Shi'ism as applied to politics, and perhaps shed some analytical light on both. This piece is the product of those reflections.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, the attitude displayed in the extract is actually at variance with Khomeini's position in important ways, but one can appreciate as a starting-point why my colleagues took the view they did – the overarching notion of the transcendence of God; the dismissive reference to the limits and ignorance of human governance. The Attallah interview gives a useful introduction to Cowling's views on a range of subjects in a short space. This extract refers back to a statement he made in the first volume of *Religion and Public Doctrine* in 1980,<sup>3</sup> but also echoes Burke, of course.<sup>4</sup>

Maurice Cowling was born in 1926, attended Battersea Grammar School, and served in the British Army from 1944 to 1947, mainly in India, Egypt and Libya. After demobilisation he studied history at Jesus College, Cambridge (where the

teaching ‘reinforced his disdain for liberal-left values’), and after more or less unsatisfactory stints at the Foreign Office, in journalism and as a Conservative Party Parliamentary candidate, he was elected a Fellow of Jesus College in 1961, and then as a Fellow of Peterhouse in 1963. He was made university reader in history in 1975. His books included *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (1961), *Mill and Liberalism* (1963), *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution* (1967), *The Impact of Labour, 1920–1924* (1971), *The Impact of Hitler, 1933–1940* (1975), and then the three volumes of *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (1980, 1985, and 2001). He retired in 1993 and died in 2005.<sup>5</sup>

In his obituary of Cowling, published in 2005, Roger Scruton wrote that although he successfully inoculated several generations of undergraduates against liberal orthodoxy, his own positive opinions were hard to discern through the smokescreen of irony.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless it is possible to give an overview of his core position. Stated briefly, as set out most thoroughly in *Mill and Liberalism*, Cowling’s view was that the underlying error of secular liberalism was an unwarranted epistemological optimism (an

undue faith in geometry, as Burke might have put it); an unsustainable pretension to the authority which properly belonged only to God, which typically led to the shipwreck of projects based upon it. According to Cowling, most political activity was conducted in conditions of ignorance or at best imperfect knowledge. The claims of liberal social scientists and like-minded politicians to powerful insight into the nature of things were untenable, and their projects were usually doomed by the intervention of unintended consequences, and failure. But recognition of the necessary imperfection of political understanding, especially if limited to the maintenance of safe and established patterns of social and political organisation, and maintaining the confidence of the wider population in institutions and the elites that ran them, could at least make possible a degree of what Ian Harris has called “competent direction”.<sup>7</sup>

According to Cowling, the secular liberals’ systems of belief unwittingly duplicated the patterns of the religious systems of belief they had supplanted, but were based on arbitrary and contingent assumptions. Their claims to know better were bogus and belied by continual embarrassing failures in

# 5

practice. It was not that the liberals were masking low motives with high-flown principles, though some might be. It was worse than hypocrisy; it was self-deception, because they were continually pretending to a higher order of certainty than their belief system warranted, or was indeed possible. There is a whiff here of Sartre's concept of *mauvaise foi*; the idea that an inability to face daunting realities makes people flee into convenient and cosy patterns of thought that they nonetheless know, deep down, to be unsound.<sup>8</sup>

*Mill and Liberalism* created a minor stir when it was first published in 1963. One reviewer described it as 'dangerous and unpleasant' and in an introduction to a later edition, Cowling responded that it had been intended to be just that.<sup>9</sup> As Jonathan Parry has said in his article on Cowling for the *Dictionary of National Biography*, *Mill and Liberalism* was less a scholarly study of John Stuart Mill than a polemic against liberalism and the liberal mind; therefore to be seen partly as an adjustment of the attack he made on social science in his first book, *The Nature and Limits of Political Science*.<sup>10</sup> (Cowling later conceded that he had gone wrong in the earlier book by allowing the possibility of objectivity in the study of

history and politics.)<sup>11</sup> Some would say that the negative reactions to *Mill and Liberalism* were natural responses to its pernicious reactionary cynicism; a more sympathetic view would be that they showed the book's pertinence; and that it was only dangerous because it found out the concealed weak points of an overconfident received wisdom.

With his subsequent historical books, on the 1867 Reform Bill, *The Impact of Labour* and *The Impact of Hitler* Cowling followed up with closely researched studies, which all pointed to the way that important politicians handled great events to satisfy short term, contingent, personal and party political necessities rather than the grand schemes of political philosophy, ideology and theory that political scientists and some historians assumed to have been their prime preoccupation. In this emphasis he was the follower of previous historians and thinkers like Namier, Butterfield and Oakeshott; in his scepticism he followed R.G. Collingwood. But his approach also reflected his experience outside the academic world as a soldier, journalist, diplomat and politician (notwithstanding that his time in those roles, especially the latter two, was rather brief). There were also similarities with the world-view of

Evelyn Waugh, of whom Cowling approved.<sup>12</sup>

Although Cowling's critique of liberalism was trenchant and uncompromising, in places he did make some caveats. In *Conservative Essays*, in deference perhaps to Margaret Thatcher, he wrote of political freedom that it was "not only compatible with strength and continuity in government but is essential to them".<sup>13</sup> *Conservative Essays* came out at a time when Cowling and other conservatives were grappling with the fact that Thatcher's instincts were in many respects neoliberal rather than conservative. When Margaret Thatcher spoke at a Conservative gathering at Peterhouse in 1977, she waved aside an intervention from Cowling, saying "we don't want pessimists in our party".<sup>14</sup> It is important for understanding Cowling to understand that although he welcomed Margaret Thatcher's success as a political conservative, he was not a neoliberal.

Ian Harris has stressed the roots of Cowling's epistemological pessimism as running back to original sin and the determinism of St Augustine in Christian theology, and I am sure he is right,<sup>15</sup> but in one intriguing passage in the first volume of *Religion and Public Doctrine* Cowling

hinted at another caveat when he wrote of his younger self –

"There can have been few would-be Christian intellectuals with a smaller sense of sin or a more obviously paradoxical combination of practical pelagianism on the one hand with intellectual belief in original sin in its intellectual form as inherent human imperfection on the other".<sup>16</sup>

At the end of the last volume of the same book, Cowling made another interesting mention of Pelagius –

"Christianity, once liberated from the historical Jesus, has no simple message, preaches no simple gospel and discloses no simple God. It is subtle, pauline and casuistical, it is a counsel of unattainable perfection and is so before it is morally ameliorative. It is neither dazzled by secular virtue and improvement, nor surprised by vanity, depravity or duplicity. It makes an Augustinian acknowledgement of sin and a quasi-Pelagian denial of sin's irreversibility; it is capable of understanding the public world in real-political terms and the soul's private world in the terms of its psychological ambiguity; and it avoids the naïve pieties to which subtlety, casuistry and deviousness are obstacles".<sup>17</sup>

# 7

Extensive sections of Cowling's thought have a heavy Augustinian stamp. But there is more than a whisper of something else, as we might expect from someone with plainly strong antinomian instincts. When discussing Havelock Ellis in volume two of *Religion and Public Doctrine*, Cowling wrote –

“Ellis had no more illusions about the nature of Nietzsche's sexual personality than he had about his own. But he contrasted Christianity's horror with Nietzsche's joy and praised the post-Wagnerian interlude when Nietzsche had liberated himself from ‘every law save that of sincerity’”.<sup>18</sup>

In agreement with Augustine, Cowling was strongly aware of mankind's flawed, fallen nature, disposition to conflict, and tendency to unmake or corrupt even the best-laid plans (his appreciation of Waugh reflected this). But he also had at least some sympathy for those who felt the impulse of human possibility and agency; for those who like Pelagius himself, would revolt at Augustine's supine plea to God “*da quod iubes et iube quod vis*” – “give what you command and command what you wish”.<sup>19</sup>

Aside from its significance in Cowling's own thought, the statement in the Attallah

interview with which we began is also striking for an historian of Iran, because it addresses quite precisely questions of religious and political authority that have been central in Shi'a Muslim discussions, especially before, during and after the Iranian revolution of 1979.

This is not the place for a fully detailed discussion of theories of political authority in Shi'ism,<sup>20</sup> but in order to proceed it is necessary to give a brief overview of them.

In its formative centuries Shi'ism was the faith of a minority within Islam, often a persecuted minority; and as such the ideas of Shi'ism tended to be sceptical about and hostile to government rather than supportive of it. The schism between Sunni and Shi'a began after the death of the Prophet Mohammad in the seventh century, when his friend Abu Bakr succeeded him as leader of Islam, taking the title of caliph. The majority supported Abu Bakr, but the minority that became the Shi'a believed that Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali should have been his successor, and his blood descendants after him. They called Ali and his descendants the Emams, regarding them as the rightful leaders of Islam.



Islam itself had originally begun as a rebel movement in Mecca; for Shi'a Muslims its dissident, oppositional character was reinforced by the experience of the massacre at Karbala in 680 AD, where the Imam Hossein (the Prophet's grandson) and many of his supporters and relatives, rebelling against a caliph they regarded as impious and corrupt, were killed by the troops of that caliph. In the ninth century the twelfth Imam disappeared in mysterious circumstances, and twelver Shi'as have believed since then that he will return at the day of judgement.

The disappearance or occlusion of the Twelfth Imam created a vacuum in Shi'a theories of government, because in his absence no-one else could have legitimate authority (the term for which in Persian is *velayat*; in Arabic *wilaya* – signifying deputyship or guardianship: the guardianship delegated by God to a rightful deputy on earth). This was expressed by the Shi'a jurist Sheikh Morteza Ansari in the mid-nineteenth century as follows –

“In principle no individual, except the Prophet and the Imam, has the authority to exercise *wilaya* over others”.<sup>21</sup>

For the most part this vacuum was not a pressing problem, because the Shi'a were usually a dissident minority within states run by Sunni Muslims, and were therefore excluded from significant political authority in any case. The theory helped to encourage a kind of pious quietism, which in time was reinforced by a sceptical disdain for the brutality and dishonesty that Shi'a intellectuals observed in politics and government as it was practiced. But of course the Shi'a clergy had to acquiesce in the *de facto* operation of everyday government, and indeed recognised the need for political authority, and the chaos and horrors that followed its breakdown. This sceptical and grudging acceptance was the orthodox position in Shi'ism, and the close parallel with the position expressed by Cowling in the extract quoted at the beginning, is apparent.

This was the standard position, but as in any body of intellectuals, there was disagreement. Some clerics, deriving their opinion from their reading of particular religious texts, took the view that the clergy themselves could exercise *velayat*, in limited circumstances; for example in the guardianship of widows and orphans.

# 9

Plainly, there was an element of pragmatism and convenience involved.

But a few, even as early as the seventeenth century,<sup>22</sup> went further, building on other injunctions in Islam such as the Qoranic imperative to enjoin good and forbid evil,<sup>23</sup> to insist on a more active role for the Shi'a, and for the clergy in particular, in worldly matters. In the early 1970s, after he had been sent into exile by the Shah in 1964, Khomeini shifted his own position to take the view that the texts supporting *velayat* for the protection of widows and orphans should be interpreted in a much wider sense; that in the absence of the hidden Imam someone had to exercise political authority, and that since it was a given that authority should be exercised in accordance with Islamic law, the *shari'a*, the only proper people to exercise that authority were the experts in *shari'a* – in other words, the clergy. Khomeini called this principle *velayat-e faqih* – the guardianship of the jurist. This was the principle behind Khomeini's leadership of the revolution of 1979, and it has been the legitimating principle of the Islamic republic since then.

But until the revolution of 1979 almost no other significant clerics supported Khomeini's principle of *velayat-e faqih*,

beyond his own small circle of students and followers. The majority position, exemplified by the most distinguished Shi'a cleric of that period, Abol Qasem Khoei, was the traditional, orthodox, quietist one. Khoei was an Iranian by origin but lived most of his life in the shrine city of Najaf in Iraq, and since 1992 his pupil and successor, Ali Hoseini Sistani (also Iranian by origin) has enjoyed a similar following among Shi'a Muslims, both in Iraq and (in a quieter way) in Iran. Like Khoei, Sistani has generally avoided involvement in politics, except when a serious political crisis has demanded a moral judgement (for example, his June 2014 declaration against the so-called Islamic State). Despite the Islamic revolution, most Shi'as, including Shi'as within Iran, follow traditional-minded clerics known to be opposed to or at least ambivalent about the *velayat-e faqih*, like Sistani, rather than clerics more explicitly aligned with the regime of the Islamic republic.

So the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* developed by Khomeini could be viewed as a subversion of the orthodox Shi'a tradition, a tradition which, I suggest, has manifest Cowlingite and Burkean parallels, based as it is on a judgement that the activity of

politics must be viewed with the grave scepticism, an awareness of the dangers of hubris, and a conviction that true authority can belong only to God. The brutalities and the political repression that followed the Iranian revolution, when viewed in that context, are only to be expected by anyone familiar with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.<sup>24</sup> So too with the eventual apotheosis of *velayat-e faqih* into the more extreme doctrine of *velayat-e motlaq* (absolute guardianship), advanced by Khomeini in 1988, shortly before his death.<sup>25</sup> This new doctrine dictated that the needs of the Islamic Republic (expediency – *maslahat*) took precedence over all other religious injunctions, whether of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage or anything else. More than an echo of St-Just there.

So on this central question of the basis of political authority the real parallel is not between Cowling and Khomeini, but between Cowling and the Shi'a traditionalists; and the Iranian revolution that brought Khomeini to power appears as another example of the hubristic political innovation, leading to similar negative consequences, that Burke and Cowling deplored. This is the central point, and that must be the central conclusion. Cowling was

too much the sceptic ever to support a revolution of the kind Khomeini led, even if he might have been sympathetic to some aspects of its origin and purposes.

And yet, it is not too fanciful to imagine something more than passing interest on Cowling's part at the prospect in Iran of a conservative movement in politics that cleverly drew in all strands of opinion into an unstoppable force that established religion in its proper place at the centre of a State and country dominated by a conservative public doctrine. The Iranian revolution undoubtedly gave the project of secularizing global liberalism what Khomeini would have called a slap in the face. Notwithstanding the fact we have established, that Cowling's conservative position was necessarily in disagreement with Khomeini's, it may be instructive to consider some further points of comparison between Cowling and Khomeini.

One point of comparison<sup>26</sup> would be a certain distrust or scepticism about economics as a political preoccupation. In his introduction to *Conservative Essays* in 1978 Cowling, as ever considering means by which an established social structure could be supported and maintained, wrote of the pursuit of economic growth –

“Growth, however cannot be guaranteed; even when it is achieved, it does not necessarily determine the reactions of sentiment which constitute the basis of political solidarity. There is no reason to believe that long-term reactions of sentiment yield at all readily to fluctuations in economic prosperity, which are much less important in the determination of political opinion than the creative activity of the intelligentsia”.<sup>27</sup>

Compare with Khomeini, speaking the following year, a few months after the success of his revolution, while debates went back and forth over the drafting of a new constitution –

“Those who think about economics and believe that the foundation of everything is economics, they do not know man... They consider man as an animal... For the donkey too, economics is the foundation of everything”.

and -

“Our revolution was for Islam.... Blood was given and young people were lost, families were destroyed... this was for Islam. I cannot accept, no-one can accept, that we gave our blood for cheap melon”.<sup>28</sup>

Since that time, the Islamic Republic has tended to downplay or suppress this aspect of Khomeini’s thinking; an oblique reminder of Cowling’s view that it may sometimes be necessary for conservatives to dissemble their real positions in order to attain their objectives.<sup>29</sup>

Another point of comparison is contrarianism. Both Cowling and Khomeini were contrarians. For many of his students, one of the most exciting things about Cowling’s teaching was the gusto with which he attacked received wisdom, lazy thinking and pious nostrums. In his time Peterhouse felt like a place that was safe for contrarians. Khomeini, as a politician, was a skilful opportunist and was careful, especially before 1979, not to make statements that might divide his followers. But he too was a contrarian and his espousal of *velayat-e faqih* was far from being his only point of difference with the conventional *ulema*, as emerged near the end of his life in 1989, when he wrote an open Letter to the Clergy, from which the following is an extract:

“This old father of yours has suffered more from stupid reactionary mullahs than anyone else. When theology meant no interference in politics, stupidity became a virtue. If a

clergyman was able, and aware of what was going on, they searched for a plot behind it. You were considered more pious if you walked in a clumsy way. Learning foreign languages was blasphemy, philosophy and mysticism were considered to be sin and infidelity ...”<sup>30</sup>

Khomeini was a highly unconventional cleric in several different ways – most importantly for his mystical and philosophical studies. Mysticism and philosophy were barely tolerated by the traditional clergy in the theological schools in Khomeini’s youth, and a young scholar who showed interest in them could risk ostracism and the ruin of his career.<sup>31</sup> The centuries-old Sufi tradition in Islam, from which Khomeini’s mysticism ultimately derived, was often deliberately antinomian and hostile to the law-based tradition of the mainstream professional clergy.

Finally, most importantly, the respect in which both Cowling and Khomeini were most notoriously and stridently contrarian was in their opposition to liberalism. In case anyone feels I have built too much on a single point in the Attallah interview, the one I cited at the outset, here is another extract from it, where Cowling is answering

a question from Attallah about Salman Rushdie and *The Satanic Verses* –

“I’ve read *The Satanic Verses* and I thought it a nasty, sneering, free-thinking book. I’m not in favour of Moslems executing death threats or using violence, and they have to observe the law when they’re here, but I can understand why the book is offensive and it didn’t seem to me to be anything but offensive when I read it. Some thinking Moslems take a view of the nature of religion, and the incompatibility between Islam and liberalism, which runs parallel to what I’m saying in *Mill and Liberalism*, and that’s why I mentioned Rushdie in that way.”

Cowling’s fundamental position in *Mill and Liberalism* was that whatever the window-dressing, liberalism was in fact a substitute religion, a hegemonic ideology that sought to erode and destroy other doctrines in order to achieve dominance. Khomeini may not have been the Muslim thinker that Cowling had in mind in this extract, but the Rushdie context does point to him,<sup>32</sup> and one does not have to look far in Khomeini’s public pronouncements to find statements hostile to liberalism, claiming similarly that, in the guise of extending freedoms, it sought to dominate and control. This extract is taken

from a speech Khomeini gave in August 1979, about two weeks before the one quoted earlier –

“These people who want freedom, who want our youth to be free ... What freedom do they want? ... they want the gambling casinos to remain freely open, the bars to be freely open, they want the fleshpots to remain freely open, they want heroin addicts to be free, opium addicts to be free. [...] this is something by which they want to emasculate our youth, who could stand up to them ... These pseudodemocrats who proclaim that they should be free, that under no circumstances should anything be banned, are inspired by the superpowers, who want to plunder us and keep our youth indifferent”.<sup>33</sup>

Plainly, Khomeini here is speaking at least partly as a politician, at a particular juncture at which he is determined to resist the pressure of Iranian liberals to shape the new constitution of Iran in their favour (he was successful).<sup>34</sup> There is also a nationalist element in what he is saying, of resistance to foreign influences, and especially influence from the United States. But there are also obvious and strong similarities with Cowling’s position.

Both Cowling and Khomeini were inspired, albeit with major differences, by the vision of a conservative polity underpinned by religion. Khomeini like Cowling saw liberalism as one of the prime enemies, if not the prime enemy of such a polity. And it was also characteristic of both that they tended to conflate left-liberalism, with its secularism, its idea that positivist rationality could supply lasting political and social progress, and its anti-clericalism, with the neoliberalism of free market economics and globalisation. From their shared conservative perspective, left-liberalism and neoliberalism were alike both in their secularising tendency to reject religion, and their replacement of religious concerns with utilitarian, materialist objectives.<sup>35</sup> Cowling and Khomeini also shared an analysis of the propensity of liberal capitalism to devour and destroy pre-existing arrangements and institutions in the name of profit and material progress – an analysis that echoes Marx.<sup>36</sup>

Cowling may have retained some residual nostalgia for the ideal of Edwardian or late Victorian England, the England of Lord Salisbury, where religion still functioned to knit together the social classes and reconcile them to necessary and inevitable inequalities

of wealth and status.<sup>37</sup> But much more important in the central body of his thinking was the maintenance of what Cowling called a broad conservatism,<sup>38</sup> and the preservation of inherited institutions in the present –

“[Christian] orthodoxy ... requires the presence of dignified public institutions, including, where possible a Christian State as well as a visible literature and visible schools and universities carrying knowledge of Christian doctrine, practice and sensibility across the centuries”.<sup>39</sup>

Khomeini was also conservative, but unusual in his determination to set aside traditional quietism, to act, and to act radically, to pursue a revolution and establish his form of religious conservative polity. Nonetheless the objective was ultimately the same; to uphold the traditional institutions of religion and their central place in society and politics – “se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi”.<sup>40</sup>

At this point it is necessary to rein back a little and recognise some more major differences between Cowling and Khomeini on the point of religion. Khomeini had a solemnity about him in his public utterances, a sense of what was appropriate for a cleric,

rather the embodiment of an Old Testament prophet, far from Cowling’s “irony, geniality and malice”.<sup>41</sup> Khomeini’s malice, when let rip, was not genial.<sup>42</sup> As Jon Parry says, Cowling had declared “personal lifelong guerrilla warfare against solemnity and earnestness...”<sup>43</sup> Khomeini’s puritanical attitudes were far from Cowling’s more raffish, cavalier disposition. In addition to which, where Khomeini’s religiosity and religious observance were complete and dominant in his life and conduct, Cowling’s religion was somewhat distant, theoretical and instrumental. He was not an avid churchgoer –

“I’m not sure of the depth or reality of my religious conviction. It could well be that it was a polemical conviction against liberalism rather than a real conviction of the truth of Christianity”.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond even his intellectual conviction against liberalism, Cowling’s most urgent drive was probably the reflex to puncture the pomposity of self-righteous liberal intellectuals - a phenomenon that has not dwindled since he wrote in 1980 about the “imperviousness, solemnity and ultimate triviality of the secular, professional academic intelligence”.<sup>45</sup> It was as much a question of tone, and an aversion for

priggishness, and self-righteous self-promotion, as anything else. In more informal terms of course, he referred to such people as “liberal shits”. And again, in conflating left-liberalism and neoliberalism in ways that some would find puzzling and hard to take, Cowling saw a tell-tale zeal and overenthusiasm in both.

As we have seen, Cowling’s position actually has more in common with that of traditional Shi‘a clerics like Khomeini and Sistani than with Khomeini, whose revolutionary radicalism may not have been liberal, but nonetheless went well beyond conservative pessimism into new, dangerous realms of epistemological optimism; in other words, hubris. And Khomeini’s hubris was punished in the traditional way. Those who take it upon themselves to speak for God, as Khomeini did, fly very high. In the 1980s Khomeini claimed to speak for God most fervently in his direction of the war with Iraq; when in the summer of 1988 he had to accept a ceasefire in that war without having achieved the objectives he had avocated, and which he had believed were divinely ordained, he said that doing so was like drinking a chalice of poison; and in fact he was dead within a year.

From Khomeini’s high pitch of religious inspiration the Islamic Republic has descended a few notches since his death in 1989, and his successor, Ali Khamenei, is today a more mundane figure, lacking both Khomeini’s personal charisma and his authority as a religious scholar. But the central problem of the Islamic Republic, the direct or implicit contradiction between religion and political power, between conservatism and revolution, has not gone away. Some of the most effective internal critics of the Islamic Republic in Khamenei’s time have been Iranian clerics, like Mohsen Kadivar and the late Hosein-Ali Montazeri, who have argued for a less forward role for the clergy, more in line with Shi‘a tradition. The way religion continues to operate in Iran as an independent basis for criticism of the regime also points to the merits of religion as a basis for public doctrine, in ways that Cowling might have recognised.

In the writings of another of these critics, Abdolkarim Soroush, there is an echo of Cowling’s idea of religion as a kind of social glue, to restrain the animosity excited by social inequality and party animosities (Soroush’s idea was of a society in which there is a clear division between state and



religious authority - not least to prevent the contamination of religion by politics - but in which both were interdependent).<sup>46</sup> Something like this was in fact the central idea in Cowling's thinking about religion. As we have said, although his religious sensibility was deeply reflective, his conviction that religion was essentially important to the well-being of any nation, but specifically Britain, was based on political insight rather than religious inspiration as such; it was also pessimistic, as he admitted in his Preface to the 1990 edition of *Mill and Liberalism* –

“For Mill and Liberalism the real world was not a liberal world, as the Marxists of the late 1960s were also to point out. It treated Liberalism as an élitist delusion and implied that it was Christianity which should underpin national solidarity. The Christianity it envisaged was Anglican and lacked the liberal appendages with which almost all types of Christianity have come to be lumbered since Pope John XXIII. Even so, the idea of a Christian society was as eccentric as the ideas it was attacking since, by 1963, perhaps even by 1903, a populist Anglican Christianity had become a chimaera”.<sup>47</sup>

This idea of religion as a unifying force to counteract the centrifugal forces created by democratic politics was not new. Notable among its proponents was de Toqueville in his *Democracy in America* (first published 1835-1840, with the disastrous experience of revolutionary France very present in the background), where he suggested that the religion of the founding fathers had been important in permitting them to create and maintain a cohesive and socially egalitarian society and eventually a representative democracy<sup>48</sup> –

“In my opinion, I doubt whether man can ever support at the same time complete religious independence and entire political freedom and am drawn to the thought that if a man is without faith, he must serve someone and if he is free, he must believe.

[...]

It must be acknowledged that equality, which brings great benefits into the world, arouses in men, as I shall demonstrate, very dangerous instincts. It tends to their isolation from each other in order to persuade them to have concern only for their individual selves. It exposes their souls to an excessive love of material enjoyment.

# 17

The greatest advantage religions bring is to inspire quite contrary instincts. Every single religion places the object of man's desire beyond and above possessions of this earth, and by its nature lifts his soul toward those regions which are much above the senses. In addition, they all impose upon each man certain obligations toward the human race or encourage a shared endeavour, sometimes drawing him away from a contemplation of himself ...

Religious nations, therefore, reveal their natural strength at the precise point where democratic nations show their vulnerability, which shows how important it is for men to retain their religion even on achieving equality".<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, President Khatami of Iran, who after being elected with a landslide victory as a reformist served two terms in that office 1997-2005, called in aid de Toqueville's analysis on these points in an important interview he gave to CNN in 1998 (and on other occasions). The interview was a part of his effort to shift Iran's foreign policy into a new path and present a new face of Iran to the world –

“Therefore the approach to religion, which was the foundation of Anglo-American

civilisation, relies on the principle that religion and liberty are consistent and compatible. I believe that if humanity is looking for happiness, it should combine religious spirituality with the virtues of liberty”.<sup>50</sup>

Khatami was trying to show a Western audience that the idea of the interdependence of religion and politics was by no means so unusual as some might think, and certainly not unique to Iran; but his interview also had a message for an Iranian domestic listenership, to whom he wanted (contrary to the hardline Islamic position in Iran at the time) to assert the compatibility of political liberty with religion. His moderate position held in common with Soroush, de Toqueville and Cowling the importance of religion as social glue. Unfortunately, in promoting these ideas and in other respects Khatami's Presidency was largely unsuccessful.

Harking instead back to the time and the thinking of Khomeini, Ali Khamenei and the hardline conservatives in the ruling circle around him in Iran still sustain the principle of religious resistance to the United States, resistance to western influence and political secularism – and resistance to liberalism. That position also has Cowlingite and

Powellite resonances. Cowling notoriously regarded the Second World War as a defeat for Britain, precipitating the winding-up of the Empire and ushering in a new phase of US dominance. Powell commented in 1982:

“A world in which the American myth and the American nightmare go unchallenged by question or by contradiction is not a world as safe or as peaceable as human reason, prudence and realism can make it”.<sup>51</sup>

The processes of globalization, the assertion of neo-liberal economic principles through international institutions and managerial corporatism, and of left-liberal social policies through university social science departments, continue to grind forward. Once we begin to look at such events and phenomena through Cowling’s lens, the Rotherham child abuse and Mid-Staffs hospital scandals in UK domestic politics (for example), or the absurdities of too much education and social policy based on ESRC-funded social science, with their priestly obsessions for ever-greater complexity and measurement, or the reduction by HM Treasury of so many aspects of life to economic transactions and accountancy, look only too human, only too predictable, demonstrating anew of the dangers of

hubris, and the continuing relevance and force of Cowling’s critique of liberalism.

The West’s dispute with Iran can be seen in a similar light. Part of the dispute is about Islamic Republic’s position of hostility to Israel and the United States (and in the US, memories of the 1979-81 hostage crisis),<sup>52</sup> but from the perspective of Iran’s leaders it is also about resistance to globalization, homogenizing western cultural influence and political liberalism, as ever since 1979. They still want to resist the danger of being absorbed into a liberal system that acts as a solvent to the identity and independence that they had a revolution to protect, and fought an eight-year war with Iraq to defend. Other religious conservatives around the world, notably in India, take similar positions. That is really the crux of the matter. Can any State be allowed in our modern world to dispute the hegemony of the US in that way? Are the nations of the world really free, or free only to choose to be part of the US-led, globalised, liberal international system? This is precisely the question that Cowling posed about liberalism. Liberals seem to offer choice, but ultimately the only choice is to join their consensus. Whatever objections one may have to such a perspective, it is also the perspective of many Iranians, and not

just diehard supporters of the Islamic republic.

In conclusion, we should pull back to consider what is really going on here. Liberal principles are in a kind of crisis on several fronts, and Cowling's views have something of value to say about that crisis and its ultimate origin. Those views have an echo in the Islamic Republic (even if the formal position of the Islamic regime on religious authority in government, as set out originally by Khomeini, over-reaches and is as we have seen, incompatible with Cowling's views). In the UK too, as traditional institutions and professional autonomy are eroded; as public policy and the management of public and private institutions lose their way in fashionable jargon and overwhelming, inert processes of baroque absurdity; and cultural, environmental and intellectual activities are valued only for what they can struggle to present as economic benefits, more people may start to share the concern that liberal utilitarianism, whether of right or left, has its limitations, and may end up devouring the things we most value and really make life worth living.

That is an insight that Cowling and the Iranian clerics had some long time ago. But

it could lead to other extremes. Take India as an example. Social conservatism there might be thought to extend to the caste system. If we accept Cowling's analysis, do we also have to accept the daily brutalities involved in that system? Accepting the force of Cowling's ideas need not require that, nor a wholesale endorsement of the traditional order, nor his pessimism. It ought to be possible to moderate what one might call liberal and positivist excesses through the application of Cowlingite, Burkean insight into the value of traditional, informal arrangements in institutions that work (even if aspects of those arrangements appear irrational), the merits of gradual rather than revolutionary change, the folly of overschematised utilitarian innovations, and perhaps, greater caution in the pursuit of military solutions to foreign policy problems.<sup>53</sup>

I hope this piece may give a sense of Cowling's continuing relevance to questions of vital importance. At the risk of an earnestness Cowling himself would have disdained, many contemporary debates would benefit from the wider perspective and deeper political self-awareness that his arguments provide.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Naim Attallah *Singular Encounters*. London: Quartet, 1990, p. 143. Attallah's question appears to have drawn upon Cowling 1980 p. 94 – "...in the face of the transcendence of God, no moral or political system has any authority, and more or less anything will do". See also Ian Harris, "Religion, Authority and Politics: The Thought of Maurice Cowling", in *Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. 26 1997, p. 445.

<sup>2</sup> I delivered an early version of this article as a talk to the Peterhouse History Society in November 2014, and benefited from the comments of several participants there, including Martin Golding (who also commented on the text in more detail at a later stage), Jonathan Parry and Tim Dickens. Separately, Anoush Ehteshami and Jeremy Black also made useful suggestions that I have followed.

<sup>3</sup> See note 1 above.

<sup>4</sup> Cowling's debt to Edmund Burke as the prime figure underpinning the thought of English conservatism is multifarious, but is most obvious in the distaste for liberal rationalism, and a preference for traditional arrangements grounded in incremental development and religious faith over innovation based on fashionable theory (Kenneth Minogue has referred in this context to Burke's contrast between the contented cattle of a society and the quarrelsome self-important grasshoppers – "Liberalism, Conservatism and Oakeshott in Cowling's Account" in Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green and Richard Whiting, eds, *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*, London: I. B. Tauris; 2010, p. 28). But the acute awareness of the need for authority in government is another obvious, shared concern.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Parry, "Cowling, Maurice John (1926-2005)", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online edn, 2009. Accessible online at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-c-95252>.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Scruton, "Maurice Cowling and his achievement", in *OpenDemocracy*, 25 August 2015. Accessible online at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/node/2783>.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Harris, "Religion, Authority and Politics: The Thought of Maurice Cowling", in *Political Science Reviewer*, Vol. 26 1997, p. 438.

<sup>8</sup> In his Introduction to *Conservative Essays* Cowling mentions Sartre first in a short list of thinkers whose ideas could possibly be incorporated by conservatism. See Maurice Cowling, ed, *Conservative Essays*, London: Cassell, 1978, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. xii.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Cowling, *The Nature and the Limits of Political Science*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963.

<sup>11</sup> Cowling cited in Naim Attallah *Singular Encounters*. London: Quartet, 1990, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, Vol. 1, pp. 339-360.

<sup>13</sup> Maurice Cowling, ed, *Conservative Essays*, London: Cassell, 1978, p. 15. Though even there he put the term "freedom" into ironic inverted commas and qualified the statement with a suggestion that its importance was primarily economic – "control by individuals and families over a larger proportion of their earnings".

<sup>14</sup> Michael Bentley, "Prologue", in Michael Bentley (ed), *Public and private doctrine: essays in British history presented to Maurice Cowling*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 288.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Harris, "The Anglican Mind of Maurice Cowling", in Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green and Richard Whiting, eds, *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*, London: I. B. Tauris; 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, Vol. 1, p. 95.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 697-698

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 242. This is also an area where there are echoes of Michael Oakeshott's attitudes, See John Gray's review of Oakeshott's *Notebooks*; *Literary Review*, July 2014 (Issue 422).

<sup>19</sup> BR Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters*, Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY, USA: Boydell Press, 1991, p. 1. According to the standard account, this was the beginning of Pelagius's dispute with Augustine. Interestingly, the

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conflict in Islam between the Mu‘tazilis and their opponents in 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad mirrored many of the points of the argument between Pelagius and Augustine over free will and determinism.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed overview of the subject, see for example Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985; Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Said Amir Arjomand, “Revolution in Shi‘ism”, in William R. Roff, ed, *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning: Comparative Studies of Muslim Discourse*, London: Croom Helm, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> See Jean Chardin, *Voyages du Chevalier Chardin en Perse, et autres lieux de l’Orient* [in French], ed. Langlès, Paris, 1811, vol. 5, p. 216; “Le trône suprême de l’univers n’appartient qu’à un mouchtehéd, ou homme qui possède la sainteté et la science au-dessus du commun des hommes. Il est vrai que comme le mouchetehéd est saint, et par conséquent homme pacifique, il faut qu’il y ait un roi qui porte l’épée pour l’exercice de la justice; mais ce ne doit être que comme son ministre et dépendamment de lui”.

<sup>23</sup> Qoran, chapter 3, verse 104.

<sup>24</sup> Though it is also necessary to note that the body count of the Iranian revolution was considerably lower than the revolutions of 1789-92 in France and 1917-21 in Russia.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, London: Paperback, 2013, pp. 273-274.

<sup>26</sup> Another might be milieu. I have already alluded to the fractious, rather incestuous, fissiparous nature of the Shi‘a ulema as a body. As a body of intellectuals, Peterhouse in the 70s and 80s showed perhaps some similarities.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Cowling, ed, *Conservative Essays*, London: Cassell, 1978, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> These two translated extracts come from a speech made to broadcasting employees in September 1979, available among Khomeini’s collected speeches and statements, Sahifeh Nur, Vol. 9, pp. 449-457, year 58/06/18 (other sources give 17 Shahrivar for the speech; i.e. 8 September rather than 9 September). My translations attempt to convey the sense of Khomeini’s idiosyncratic Persian. A near-full translated version can also be found, at the Federal Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) website - 8 September 1979; “Khomeyni Speech on Nature of Islamic State” – but the first extract I have quoted does not appear in that translation, apparently due to a break at that point in the broadcast on which the translation was based. The translation (and, it seems, the broadcast) included in a summary at the top the words “Imam Khomeyni said: Those talking of the importance of the economy, and who consider the economy as the infrastructure (sic) for everything, know nothing about man”.

<sup>29</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, Vol. 3, p. 699.

<sup>30</sup> Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1999, pp. 275-276.

<sup>31</sup> For this aspect of Khomeini’s youthful studies, see Baqer Moin, 1999, pp. 42-44.

<sup>32</sup> For the Rushdie affair, see Michael Axworthy, 2013, pp. 297-299.

<sup>33</sup> Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Khomeyni Addresses Rally at Feyziyeh Theological School*, 25 August 1979.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, London: Paperback, 2013, pp. 157-173.

<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting also that left-liberalism and neoliberalism, in the UK at least, were brought much closer to each other in the Blair years 1997- 2007; an unholy alliance facilitated by the disillusionment of many on the left with their original ideals, following the electoral defeats of the 80s and early 90s, their advancing years, and their enthusiasm for the opportunities for preferment that came available after 1997. Some of the more egregious failures of the Blair project were set out in Tom Bower’s *Broken Vows*, London 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1996. “The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors’, and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value. And in place of the numberless and feasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers”. Cowling was sometimes accused of being a Conservative Marxist, for his acceptance of a class-based analysis of politics; he was quite relaxed about this (I am grateful, again, to Martin Golding for his comments on this point).

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- <sup>37</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. xi. He wrote elsewhere of earlier “romantic fantasies”, of the virtues of England under the Stuarts and Archbishop Laud, and of English rural society.
- <sup>38</sup> Naim Attallah *Singular Encounters*. London: Quartet, 1990, p. 138.
- <sup>39</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, Vol. 3, p. 699: “in purely formal terms, there are some similarities between the constitution of the Islamic Republic and that of the UK, which few other countries share – notably the establishment of a State religion, with a Head of State as head of that religion. The realities of power in each case are obviously rather different; few monarchs enjoy the kind of power that is at Ali Khamenei’s disposal”.
- <sup>40</sup> The famous nostrum from Guiseppe di Lampedusa’s *il Gattopardo (The Leopard)*[in Italian], 1958.
- <sup>41</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. xxx.
- <sup>42</sup> See for example the account of the prison massacres of 1988 in Michael Axworthy, 2013, pp. 283-291; and Geoffrey Robertson, *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran, 1988: Report of an Inquiry Conducted by Geoffrey Robertson, QC*, Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, 2009. Accessible online at [http://www.iranrights.org/english/attachments/doc\\_1115.pdf](http://www.iranrights.org/english/attachments/doc_1115.pdf).
- <sup>43</sup> Jonathan Parry, “Cowling, Maurice John (1926-2005)”, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, online edn, 2009. Accessible online at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-c-95252>.
- <sup>44</sup> Naim Attallah *Singular Encounters*. London: Quartet, 1990, pp. 129-130.
- <sup>45</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, Vol. 1, p. xvii.
- <sup>46</sup> Ali Ansari *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000, pp. 76-77; Abdolkarim Soroush also discusses de Toqueville’s appreciation of the dependence of democracy on religion in Mahmoud and Ahmad Sadri, ed, trans, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 153.
- <sup>47</sup> Maurice Cowling, *Mill and Liberalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. xi; Ian Harris, “The Anglican Mind of Maurice Cowling”, in Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green and Richard Whiting, eds, *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*, London: I. B. Tauris; 2010, p. 245.
- <sup>48</sup> De Toqueville discussed the obvious caveats about slavery and the treatment of American Indians elsewhere in his book *Democracy in America* (trans. Gerald E. Bevan), London: Penguin 2003.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 512.
- <sup>50</sup> Ali Ansari *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000, pp. 133-137.
- <sup>51</sup> Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998, pp. 861-2-862.
- <sup>52</sup> It is peculiar in some ways that conservatives in the US do not have more understanding for and sympathy with the conservative clerics running Iran – they have many things in common. Being anti-Iran has become a feature of right-wing politics in the US, and to some extent in the UK too, at least partly on the spurious basis that left-liberals are pro-Iranian because they are liberals and therefore, naturally, want to sell out their own country’s national interests. Under Trump this position has reached a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*.
- <sup>53</sup> Michael Grenfell has suggested that there may be less contradiction between a neoliberal position and a Cowlingite position than might be thought; see Michael Grenfell, “Cowling and Liberalism”, in Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green and Richard Whiting, eds, *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*, London: I. B. Tauris; 2010, pp. 77-81a and *passim*.