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# Love that Tames: Anti-Heroes, Power and Islamic Reform Reflected in Two Iranian Films

## **Abstract**

This paper is an exploration of two Iranian films that draw upon spiritual, artistic and literary roots in Islamic history, while at the same time engaging in critiques of knowledge and power in contemporary Muslim societies. These films offer a chance to explore ways in which culture (as distinct from theological discourse) deals with problems of reform in Muslim societies. This article juxtaposes the films with the trickster archetype in folklore, Sufi thought about leadership, and beliefs about the figure of the Mahdi (“the guided one” mentioned in Prophetic hadith as preceding the second coming of Jesus).

## **Keywords**

mysticism, leadership, Sufism, Islam, trickster, archetype, reform

## **Author Notes**

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## INTRODUCTION

Outside observers often overlook the diversity of views within the Muslim world, as do many Muslims as well. Understanding artistic expressions from unfamiliar religious worlds usually demands a struggle. It would take mastery of languages and much historical study for outsiders to comprehend poetic and other literary traditions in their full context, since they have emerged from deep roots over time. While we can debate about Islam by seeking to interpret texts and media headlines, we should not miss the opportunities provided by contemporary film. Film allows diverse visions of Islam to reach us across difficult boundaries.

The reform of Muslim societies has been a topic of controversy for centuries, generating long-lived questions. Are modernity and Islam mutually exclusive? Is it necessary to leave religion behind in order to improve Muslim societies? Does critical self-examination negate traditions of faith and spirituality? Countless intellectuals and ideologues within and outside the *ummah* have debated these topics. I contend that some Muslim film-makers have made unique contributions that offer useful answers and reveal a sophisticated unofficial channel for reformist thought latent within culture.

One might presume that critical perspectives are strictly modern. The Islamic impulse toward reform (*islah*) is often thought of as a historical reaction to the challenges of European colonialism and subsequent modern crises. But ample evidence of reformist thought presents itself in folklore, poetic and other

literary expressions in Islamic history stretching back for centuries, and now in film. A recurring theme within them can be put in the form of a question: how can spiritual authority (coming from God) take its rightful role in human affairs when raw political authority (a regime or ideological movement) by its nature constantly seeks to coopt and subordinate it? Will coercive power succeed in dominating subtler forms of power? Put another way, does the inner power of love, though often concealed and unnoticed, stand a chance of transforming the world?

In this article, I will examine two very different Iranian films for a look at their filmic arguments about power, love, leadership and Islamic reform. The first film, *The Lizard* (2004), directed by Kamal Tabrizi, draws upon a comedic trickster archetype in Islamic folklore. The second, *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), by Bahman Ghobadi, is a dramatic work of realism depicting the life of orphaned Kurdish children in a dangerous border region. While these two films differ widely in genre, setting, and atmosphere, they each center around an anti-heroic figure, and in diverse ways, each suggests subtle visions of the meaning of leadership.

#### **THE TRUE LEADER AND THE TRICKSTER MULLAH**

*The Lizard* is about a thief who escapes prison in the robes of a mullah (a *shi'i* Islamic scholar) and in this assumed role becomes an accepted, and even quite

popular, figure. How do we begin to understand this ironic scenario beyond its obvious comedic surface? First, it is helpful to explore some background on religious authority in Islamic history.

In any religious worldview, the true leader is one whose worldly authority somehow derives from or otherwise combines with spiritual authority. For Muslims the Prophet Muhammad exemplified the balance of political and spiritual authority. However, after he died, disputes arose about the nature of the authority of his successors. Those who came to be known as Sunnis generally hold that the authority of Muslim rulers could only be political, since spiritual authority resided in the Prophet and his *sunnah* or personal example, preserved in texts and communal memory. Those who came to be known as Shi'ites, on the other hand, hold that both political and spiritual authority are preserved in the family of the Prophet and particularly those Imams who descended from his daughter Fatima. The mystical tradition in Islam, which is not tied strictly to either Shi'a or Sunni positions, is often referred to by the term Sufism. Sufis tend to focus on the preservation of spiritual authority in lines of teachers. In Sufi language, only a rare person is the *insan al-kamil* (the complete human being), who is the "meeting of the two seas"<sup>1</sup>, the one who brings inner and outer sides of religion together: the "night" of intuition, imagination and mercy, joined with the "day" of reason and justice. Such a person may combine what we call soft and hard power, but often does not lay claim to any political authority over others.

An archetypal Qur'anic story gives context to debates on true leadership within the Muslim *ummah*. In the Surah of the Cave (18:60-82), the figure of Moses, though already a prophet conveying divine law, is searching for a spiritual guide. He wanders through the desert with his servant seeking “the meeting of the two seas.” In a miraculous moment, Moses encounters his guide, the mysterious, saintly figure known as Khidr, and begins traveling with him. Khidr tests the open-mindedness of even this honored prophet through a series of seemingly outrageous acts with which Moses, who has sworn obedience to Khidr, cannot have patience. This story exemplifies why over the centuries, the Sufis for the most part have been content with spiritual guides who laid no claim to political power. It is also why Muslims at large, none moreso than the Shi'a, have been awaiting the promised guide, the Mahdi (the “guided one”) who, according to tradition, will return near the end of time to unite the Muslim community and bring spiritual and political leadership together.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime, Muslims have also been telling jokes. The paradoxes of spiritual authority were discussed in humorous tales among the masses, as well as in poetry.<sup>3</sup> They appear throughout the Muslim world in jokes about the ubiquitous “Mullah Nasruddin” character. Mullah Nasruddin is every bit the classical trickster figure: while secure in his title (and turbaned appearance) as a mullah, or appointed religious scholar, he is simultaneously a wise-cracker, fraud,

prankster, thief and fool. Yet in spite of his tricks, he reveals aspects of truth that can only be described indirectly.<sup>4</sup>

Reza, the hero, or rather the anti-hero of Tabrizi's film *The Lizard* seems to connect directly with the Mulla Nasruddin figure. The trickster is an archetypal character who, despite all of society's idealistic messages about "life as it should be", reconnects us with "life as it is": not predictable, not ideal, not black-and-white. Trickster myths are found in every culture because their irony is essential to the survival of culture itself. As Lewis Hyde puts it, "the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on."<sup>5</sup> According to Hyde, trickster myths play an essential role in the well-being of society by allowing renewal of its core values, which have been otherwise routinized. As funny and ambiguous, even rude, as he seems (and tricksters are most often male), the trickster is held as a sacred figure. Trickster myths bring up the hidden hypocrisies of socio-religious systems that have been weakened by their own idealism. In doing so, they enable a reconnection to original core truths.<sup>6</sup>

As often as Mullah Nasruddin succeeds in tricking others with his clothes and turban, he is also himself tricked and made the butt of jokes. He knows how to expose hypocrites, because he is one himself. The enduring popularity of Mullah Nasruddin indicates the power of his archetypal nature in Muslim cultures. He imparts a kind of wisdom that cannot be directly shared from the pulpit, because it reverses the top-down piety of mainstream religion. Yet

paradoxically, this wisdom is seen as ultimately validating and renewing the original spirit of religion.

In the following lines I will argue that in these two films, visions of Islamic reform, and ultimately perhaps even the leadership of the Mahdi, are hinted at through two unlikely characters: a robber disguised as a mullah, and a developmentally disabled child. In divergent ways, both of these anti-heroic central characters focus the audience upon the radical and transformative, though hidden, power of love.

#### **ANTI-HEROES IN THE FILMS**

*The Lizard* is a hugely popular comedic film coming from the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is structured around the question of reform. On one level it questions whether there is hope for transformation in a central character and those around him. Would it be possible for a dyed-in-the-wool criminal like Reza to change his ways? On a deeper level, the film asks what happens if authority is given to one who is disinterested in it.

Reza is nicknamed “the Lizard” because of his uncanny ability to climb walls, making him a talented second-story man and escape artist. At the start of the film, he has just begun a life sentence in prison. Reforming Reza is the stated goal of the prison warden, whose name, Mojaver, recalls that of the relentless police inspector in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. In that story, Inspector Javert

ferociously pursues justice against the hero, who is also a former convict. In Hugo's story, Javert cruelly denies the possibility of Jean Valjean's reform, while in *The Lizard*, Warden Mojaver insists with cruel smugness that Reza *will* reform, and upon Mojaver's terms.

Mojaver tells Reza that the prison is a "spiritual clinic" for reforming people like him. Accordingly, Mojaver will put Reza on a "spiritual regime." Coolly eyeing Reza, he offers the mission of a religious state, "I will send you to heaven, even if I have to use force."

Underlying messages in the film must be viewed in the context of a film industry with a state censorship board. Sophisticated film-makers have learned to match wits with government censors, who evidently cannot always understand the levels of meaning within a film. *The Lizard* was initially cleared by the censors, only to be banned two weeks after its release for its presumed anti-clerical stance. The film became a sensation during its short run in Iranian theaters, and the ban only served to increase its popularity.

It is not hard for viewers to draw a parallel between Mojaver's "spiritual regime" and the religious regime in control of the country. In both cases, the coercive power of the authority figure sees itself as benevolent. It has convinced itself that it is bent on true reform, and is acting on behalf of those who cannot or will not reform themselves. The helplessness of the individual being reformed is essential, because the regime by its own definition knows and represents God's

will. Reza's resentment of his treatment may mirror a level of popular dissatisfaction with the clerical authorities.

The film *A Time for Drunken Horses*, by Bahman Ghobadi, focuses on another unusual character that suggests connection to the Mahdi, first and foremost because his name happens to be "Mahdi".<sup>7</sup> He is one of five children barely surviving in a Kurdish village on the Iran-Iraq border. Mahdi is developmentally disabled and in need of regular injections and pills, administered by a travelling doctor. Though he is in his teens, Mahdi appears to be much younger, can only walk a few steps with difficulty, and is usually carried around by his siblings.

Mahdi's character may seem almost diametrically opposite to that of Reza the Lizard, but if the films are interpreted in terms of Islamic symbolism, they share much in common. They are both almost complete anti-heroes. Mahdi is helpless, and yet the whole story revolves around him. Enormous effort by his family is put out on his behalf, all hopeless, because the operation will only prolong his life for a few months.

The character of Mahdi's younger brother Ayoub is an additional anti-hero. As the oldest able-bodied male among his siblings, and the would-be breadwinner, he is nevertheless near the bottom of a social order devastated by war. He is helpless to affect the decisions of adults around him. His orphaned status, youth and poverty, along with the hardness of attitude in his uncle and other grown-ups, offer severe trials that test and initiate him. Although his

initiation is not dealt with symbolically as it is in *The Lizard*, the death of his father thrusts him into fresh suffering and a new role.

#### **INITIATION AND “TAMING”**

Early in both films, the central characters are put into situations of extreme difficulty. Such traumatic events lay the path for hopelessness and depression to follow, yet in the stories they act as catalysts for the process of “taming” which could be taken as the core concern in both films. The mystical initiation of Sufis is even suggested through some of the films’ symbolism.

In *A Time for Drunken Horses*, after their father is killed doing the treacherous work of hauling goods through the mountains on muleback, Mahdi’s younger brother Ayoub tries to take on the role of principal caretaker for the children. The doctor warns Ayoub that Mahdi will not survive more than a few weeks without an operation, for which he must be taken across the border to Iraq. Ayoub is determined to earn the money necessary for the operation, and so quits school to work the mule trails like his father. This is in spite of the fact that the doctor further explained that even a successful operation would not prolong Mahdi’s life more than seven or eight months.

The film brings the audience into the daily lives of Mahdi, Ayoub and their siblings. They live in a world where children must labor to help their families survive, and a notebook and pencil are treasured gifts because schooling

is far from guaranteed. The adults in this world are too preoccupied with their worries and the survival of their own children to spare much care for orphans. To carry, on top of such a struggle, the responsibility for a disabled brother is difficult for most to imagine. Yet as Ayoub and his sisters take it on, the film shows the power of their love for their brother, and asks its central question. Will their love succeed in taming such a world, or will this world destroy them?

In *The Lizard*, after a botched brush with suicide, Reza finds himself in a prison hospital next to another man, also named Reza, with whom he immediately bonds. The fact that both men are named Reza could be a mere coincidence or a plot device, but in the language of film it can also be considered a signal. Reza was the nickname of the eighth Imam, or spiritual master descended within the family lineage of the Prophet Muhammad. Within Shi'a as well as many Sufi circles, the Twelve Imams represent the deserving leadership of the Muslim community, though they were systematically repressed, jailed or killed by the dominant political powers of the day. The final Imam, the twelfth one, is believed to have gone into occultation, and is expected to return near the end of the world.

After a friendly conversation the two Rezas shake hands. The camera gives a close-up on their hands, and the extra gravity this imparts suggests a connection to the Sufi ritual of initiation with a spiritual guide, which usually involves a clasping of hands. Since Reza the thief had just been spouting abuse of the mullahs, he is shocked to find that his new friend is in fact a mullah, who was admitted to the prison hospital for an illness while visiting the inmates. In

response, the mullah simply states “there are good and bad ones among mullahs, too.” Reza’s embarrassment turns to wonder, as this strange man, rather than seeking to reform him, tells him not to be hopeless, because “there are as many ways to God as there are people.”

Western as well as Eastern audiences may be surprised to hear this coming from a representative Muslim scholar, though in the history of Sufi discourse, it is not an unfamiliar idea. Rather than preaching with scripture, the man quotes a passage from de Saint-Exupery’s *The Little Prince*. “If you want a friend, tame me...[Tame me means] make me love you. And this is something that is totally forgotten nowadays.” Hearing this, Reza the Lizard looks stunned, perhaps because these words come from a Western book that he would not have expected a mullah to be reading. “So they have preachers all over the world then?” That the mullah replies, “Yes, my dear brother” shows that he is no ordinary mullah. One of the underlying messages of the film thus appears to be that the true nature of reform is not to be found in conventional morality, nor in a single religion or way of interpreting religion.

Later, this theme will be repeated when a televised mullah surprises Reza again by offering a discussion of “salvation in ultimate darkness through Tarantino’s film *Pulp Fiction*.” Such moments show a side of the “mullah” image that the audience may not expect, due in part to popular presentations of Iranian culture. Rather than insisting on a single perspective of righteousness and virtue, the film-makers suggest that religious guidance can shift in a more diverse and

open-ended direction. This reflects a trend of thought that audience members may associate with certain liberal mullahs and other intellectuals in Iran, including the former president Muhammad Khatami.<sup>8</sup>

As Reza is about to return from the prison hospital to his cell, the mullah says he intends to take a shower and leaves his religious garb neatly folded on the bed. Rather than showering, however, he leans against the wall of the shower room and appears to say words of prayer. Meanwhile, Reza the thief eyes the clothes and forms his idea for escape. If, as it seems, the robes have been intentionally bestowed by the mullah upon Reza, then another symbol of initiation has been transacted. In Sufi tradition, this is the bestowal of the *khirqā* (patched robe) by the spiritual master upon his disciple.<sup>9</sup> Reza takes the clothes and leaves the prison dressed as a mullah himself.

As each film moves toward its climax, it develops ironic images that show a reversal of the established order.

### **TURNING THE TABLES**

A small but significant scene in *Drunken Horses* shows Mahdi sitting in front of a somber man who wishes to marry his sister. The child plays a game, pretending to hide an object in his fist and fool the man. The man humorlessly plays along and picks the wrong hand. On the surface, this is an unremarkable scene, but it offers an image of concealment, and thus a signal that Mahdi is perhaps more than

he appears to be. As we shall see, in spite of his adversity and the total disregard for him by some in the world, he remains uplifted by the love of those who are truly devoted to him, and, in a way, comes out on top.

In *The Lizard*, Reza has escaped in his friend's garb and is now fully playing the trickster role of a Mullah Nasruddin-like character. Once in the robes and turban, he is able to dissimulate and pose easily, navigating through the expectations (low or high) that people have about mullahs. (Generally, the reception depends on whether he is in the capital or in the more provincial regions.) In the city, he is frequently disrespected, especially by the young. Much of the humor of the film occurs as people engage in the rituals of polite repartee or *ta'arouf*, which sometimes goes to theatrical degrees of self-deprecation.<sup>10</sup> In one scene, after Reza thanks a driver for stopping to give him a ride, the young man offers mock surprise and says "we owe you much more than this." As it turns out, the driver was simply trying to use the mullah's official status to help him drive through a restricted area. Soon the self-serving driver pretends to have misunderstood Reza's destination and dumps him politely on the roadside. (Reza has expertly turned the tables on him, however, by stealing the young man's wallet.) Eventually, Reza finds his way onto a train that will take him to a provincial town close to the border, where he hopes to cross with a false passport that his underworld connections arrange for him, and complete his getaway.

When the train arrives, however, Reza finds himself mistaken for a newly arriving, government-appointed mullah (presumably the Mullah Reza whose clothes he stole). He is welcomed and ushered to his quarters in the village mosque. When he is asked to lead prayers, he goes through the motions and mumbles to fake his way through. The few who attend the mosque remark sadly that nowadays the prayers suffer from lack of attendance. Asked by the small group of mosque-goers to give his first sermon, he awkwardly searches for something to say, then falls back on the phrase heard from the real Mullah Reza back at the prison: “there are as many ways to God as there are people.” This becomes the focus of his “message” throughout the film, and is as unexpected to his devout audience as it was to him when he first heard it<sup>11</sup>.

While Reza plays the role of a mullah as best he can, he discreetly maneuvers to obtain a false passport and make his escape. He is annoyed by two young men from the village who fawn on him, pestering him with questions at every opportunity. One of them obsessively jots down every word he says in a notebook. They ask inane questions about proper prayer times in the North Pole and the laws of ritual ablution for astronauts in space. (These notions are not fictionally created for the movie, but examples of jokes widely told in the Muslim world ridiculing the extremes to which legalistic concerns can be taken.) Reza’s curt responses are a poke at the image of the scholar who is obsessed with codifying and preaching the fine points of law, but has little in the way of fresh or relevant help to offer the community.

Though undertaken as a pretense, everything Reza does somehow appears holy to those around him. Yet his view of himself as thoroughly unreligious and as a criminal doesn't change. For example, he is strongly attracted to a pious and beautiful young woman in the village. Their dialogue is full of double entendre. In a moment of temptation when they are riding in the back of a pickup truck, he gets stuck in his robe and falls over. "These clothes! You can't make a move in them!" A central trope throughout the film is that, in spite of the faults of individual wearers the clothes of a mullah have dignity and blessing about them. Their dignity survives the corruption of the person wearing them, and may even reform that person. Why then are some mullahs corrupt? The answer, hinted in various ways throughout the film, seems to be that corruption stems from the ego's attachment to its own importance and authority.

Gholamali, one of the village youths, the son of a strict religious father, is training to become a mullah. He is in crisis about his life's direction. As he talks with Reza, it becomes clear that Gholamali feels he cannot live up to the expectations of his parents, and the role models in his life, including Hajji Reza<sup>12</sup>. He cannot be a mullah. "My heart isn't pure Hajji... I'm not a true believer! When I say my prayers my mind wanders off... Damn me, when bad things are mentioned I get tempted... Even God doesn't want me to be a clergy!" Reza replies,

You sap! Don't blame God for your stupidity. Look at me! You are a man and all human beings are attracted to mischief. It's human nature. God is not as strict as they say. If he was totally against these things, He wouldn't give us the tools for mischief. Go live your life.

He later says to the boy's father, "You can't force people into heaven, dear brother! You are pushing so hard that they might fall off the other side into hell."

Having been installed in the mosque, Hajji Reza takes every opportunity to visit a poor neighborhood in a nearby town. There he hopes to obtain a forged passport and make his getaway, but his trips are assumed by the villagers to be charity missions. They don't question why the mullah seems to be sneaking, because he is "doing good deeds in private." Reaching out to the poor is one of the main tenets of reform efforts in Islam, and it is also one of the indications of a saint. One of the villagers exclaims that the saintly Reza is the answer to their prayers. The fact that Reza has no such actual intention, and that his private deeds have been none too good, adds to his ambiguous status as a trickster.

The focus throughout the film is the tension between ideals and realities, and between outward appearance and inner intention. Following Reza's ruse/example, soon many people in the village become enthusiastic about helping the poor. After a joint mission to distribute alms, Gholamali is chided by his father for neglecting his Qur'an studies, saying "You fell behind in your main

duty.” The boy replies, “What is my main duty, helping people or memorizing the Qur’an?” The father becomes angry and says, “Stop shouting slogans, kid! You are not here to serve people!” Taken in context of the film’s subtext, this is a deeply ironic line. The implication of the father’s words is that the main role of religious scholars is something other than helping people. Rather, even among the pious, success means raising one’s own status or level. That it is a level “with God” or “in the sight of God” makes no difference; one is still concerned primarily with oneself. In essence, the film asks whether the pious father’s framework is much different from that of Reza to the extent that Reza is a self-serving man. What makes Reza unique is that he carries the words and the clothes of a holy man, without seeing himself as holy.

The film’s take on sex is daring for an erstwhile officially-approved Iranian film. Not only does it acknowledge the temptations of Reza as humorous and normal, but shows him bringing people back from the edge of blind moralism, the kind that outlaws even chaste interest and affection between unmarried youths of opposite genders. Just as in classical Islamic literature, wherever divine love and human love are artificially kept apart, the art forms of poetry, music and film are conspiring to bring them back together. When he advises Gholamali to “go live your life”, Reza’s only warning is “don’t commit *israf*”, meaning waste or extravagance. Thus the importance of sexual morality is not in itself dismissed; Reza has instead removed it from the dominant realm of external rule-enforcement, showing a shift from outer rules to inner morality.

Turning now to *A Time for Drunken Horses*, toward the end of the film, Mahdi's oldest sister agrees to marry a man she does not know, on the condition that his family will care for Mahdi and fund the needed operation. However, when the bride arrives among her new in-laws, after a chilly trek through the snow, the in-laws refuse to acknowledge this agreement. They are a large family, and simply outnumber Mahdi's. He watches shivering in the snow while a faceless matriarch shouts her rejection of him, and the crowd of adults argue over who is to take him. Finally, a mule is given to his uncle as compensation. None of Mahdi's siblings has the power to stop this.

His family having been defeated and further broken up, Ayoub is now the only one left who can care for his brother, and he decides to make the dangerous border-crossing on his own to take Mahdi for treatment in Iraq. So he must cross the national borders that have been imposed by outside forces but have nothing to do with the lives of the people trying to survive on either side. When the rest of their group of smugglers flee an attack by bandits, Ayoub trudges through deep snow with Mahdi on his shoulders, climbing up a steep ridge before crossing an unexpectedly easy barbed-wire fence into unknown territory. This scene ends the film.

The director, Ghobadi, is known for his passionate desire to tell the stories of the Kurdish people. His films tend to be populated by "dislocated and isolated characters, whose position and physical location is contingent upon larger, unseen political forces".<sup>13</sup> A sense of melancholy is unmistakable, along with an

acceptance of the difficult struggle for survival. In this light, it does not seem that the film offers tangible hope. Yet neither is it a tragedy, in which Mahdi could stand in as a sacrificial victim to indict the cruel forces of the world. In the context of cultural and religious history, Mahdi's name may not be a mere coincidence. Although everything up to this point in the story has evoked only further depths of suffering, Mahdi has not been sacrificed but has triumphed at the end, having been buoyed over hopeless obstacles by his brother's love. Though "occulted" in one sense by his disability, the love he inspires has made him more powerful than any other character in the film.

#### **POWER IN THE GUISE OF WEAKNESS**

For the most part a voiceless and seemingly passive character, Mahdi might be expected to play a small part, but is the absolute center of the film. He manifests a very real power: to inspire fervent, self-sacrificing love in his siblings. In the outward political and economic struggle that the film depicts, the community deals with crime, corruption, poverty, landmines and other legacies of war and oppression. The name of the film's central character seems to suggest, however, that power is not all a matter of what appears on the surface, creating an endless trail of suffering. Human love itself has been revealed as power, and "proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world."<sup>14</sup>

The two films seem to converge on this point. Mahdi's dearth of physical strength is like Reza's lack of "real" clerical authority. Viewers are enticed in several ways to contemplate power through each figure. In one scene in *Drunken Horses*, Ayoub buys a poster in a tea shop and brings it to Mahdi as a present. After the poster is nailed to the wall, the camera watches the tiny Mahdi sitting on the floor gazing silently at the photo of a western body-builder, who grins as he flexes oiled muscles. The contrast is shocking: such apparent physical power is something that Mahdi will never have. As developed through the elements of the film, Mahdi's power is something else entirely.

How might the film character Mahdi be tied to the messianic figure of the Mahdi in Islamic lore?<sup>15</sup> He has the ability to inspire love that is not interested in power, yet outlasts his enemies. As suggested in numerous Sufi and Shi'ite readings of Islamic history, such love is found within the Prophet's family. The love of his siblings for the film character Mahdi suggests the meaning of "*ahl al-bayt*", the "people of the household", who figure so prominently as spiritually gifted leaders in Sufi and Shi'i perspectives. According to this way of thinking, love cannot be a public institution or a matter of indoctrination, but exists "in the house" among people who have nourished each other through stages of helplessness, and who love each other without a power struggle. It can't be forced or bought. Symbolically, a synthesis emerges between religious obedience and love, epitomized by the love of kin, love that is involuntary. In Sufi thought,

this synthesis is what makes for the true leadership, the *khilafa* (vicegerency) of the Islamic lexicon.

#### **LEADERSHIP IN THE GUISE OF THE TRICKSTER**

Near the end of *The Lizard*, Warden Mojaver begins to close in on his escapee. Meanwhile, miracles are being ascribed to “Mullah” Reza among the people. A groundswell of fervor surrounds him, and as a result, large numbers are coming to the mosque. A politician by the name of Engineer Shojayi (played by an actor with a more than superficial resemblance to the then-current Iranian president), is in the heat of an aggressive election campaign. He hears of the Mullah’s reputation, and immediately tries to coopt him for a photo opportunity.

Over his own anxious objections, Reza is hustled to the local prison to give a sermon attended by Shojayi and other notables, including the Warden Mojaver, who has come to the provincial town on Reza’s trail. Trying to keep his composure and remain incognito, Reza finds himself sitting in front of his nemesis. Yet after he begins to talk in the guise of Mullah to the prisoners, he appears to lapse into the powerful role of a guide. He seems strongly affected by their situation and his own, and by the words that begin to come to his lips. Addressing them as “my dear inmate friends”, he states,

God doesn't only belong to good people! ...And it is only God who doesn't look upon people differently... Taming means creating love and that's the only way leading to God.

Saying this, he wipes away tears; the words (planted by his own guide, the mullah whose clothes he stole in the beginning) clearly have their effect on Reza, in spite of himself.

Following the theory of the trickster archetype, it is only when sacred and secular aspects of the person and the culture merge that reform can come from within. True reform is not imposed. It doesn't simply happen when some "pure" person comes and tells others what to do. In the context of classical Islamic and Sufi poetry<sup>16</sup>, *The Lizard* suggests that reform only takes place when human and divine love are mixed and become one. That is, when loving other people is understood to be loving God, and when loving God is understood to be loving people.

Near the film's end, the Warden Mojaver confronts Reza and takes him into custody. The final scene shows a large crowd awaiting Mullah Reza at the mosque at the same time that Reza is being captured and taken away in a police car. A man stands by the pulpit and sings a plaintive song that evokes the archetypal expected guide.

I have sprinkled water in the streets  
so there is no dust when the savior comes  
So he comes and goes in such a way that  
Realizing his presence needs no words.  
He has gone and I am left alone!  
He whose beauty is unmatched!  
I have lit the samovar and ...  
added sugar cubes to my tea and...  
I'm waiting...

As the police car drives away, the refrain continues: "I'm waiting." The large congregation of men all turns to look expectantly, and at that instant, the film ends. What does such an ending imply? Given the life stories of the Imams as well as that of the Prophet Yusuf (Joseph), who was thrown in a well and spent years in jail, Muslim audiences may be saddened but not shocked at Reza's return to prison. The veiling of the true leader is a motif going back not only into the Islamic past but into the great epic traditions of the world.<sup>17</sup> He is neither destroyed by the powers that be, nor does he become one of them; rather, he is hidden away.

## REFORM VS. CONVERSION

Reza's "reform" does not fit our expectations of a conversion experience.

Conventional conversion narratives often imply that one's previous, ordinary, "sinful" life is over and spiritual life has begun. If we assume that reform must follow this pattern, we judge that there is a move from the impure to the pure, from the profane to the sacred. Ambiguity is left behind, and the ego can latch onto a new identity as a "good person," in this case a "good Muslim."

Yet the film offers a different view of reform, in which transformation cannot be real if it is just a matter of trying to "be good" (let alone force goodness on others, as typified by the Warden in the film). Would Reza have been able to touch people with his words if he had not had them transmitted to him by the original mullah? His teacher's words, "there are as many ways to God as there are people," were successfully cultivated, even though, or perhaps because, Reza was just looking for something to say to make his ruse successful. The teaching took root with him without his conscious effort. In Sufi terms, it was like the *baraka* (blessing, spiritual power) of a saint.

Classical Sufi hagiography has at least one great *wali* or "friend of God" starting out life as a criminal. Back in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE, the legend of Fozail Ibn Iyaz holds that he was a practicing highwayman. He passionately loved a woman, to whom he brought his stolen treasures. He eventually became a saint, in whose

presence even the great ruler of his day, Harun Al-Rashid, was abashed and meek.<sup>18</sup>

Yet perhaps there is more to it than this. People like the Warden and the politician in the film appear to be extremely attached to their positions of power, while Reza never wished for it. In a *hadith* (narrated saying), the Prophet Muhammad states, “We do not appoint to [a position of rule] one who asks for it nor anyone who is covetous for the same.”<sup>19</sup> *The Lizard*, then, far from just the light comedy it seems to be, draws upon currents of political and spiritual thought often overlooked in the Islamic tradition.

By the film’s end, it seems that Reza deserves the leadership that he was pretending to. His actions as a sham leader were nevertheless successful, and he was not seeking a position of authority for himself. But inevitably that is the moment he is carted off to jail. Before being taken away, he gives his robes and turban to a small boy, who has appeared silently, like a mirror to Reza’s soul, throughout the film. He tells the boy, “These clothes have to tame people.” Here again, initiation is transmitted through the clothing. Like the patched robe of the Sufi, it carries blessing, or *baraka*.

The trickster archetype suggests that humans are all walking paradoxes. Our roles and our clothing provide us with a persona that must stay “on message”, while on the inside we are immersed in “life as it is”: the reality of our incompleteness. The masses may be taken in by a huckster who is faking a role.

Leaders in general also play a role, albeit an unconscious one, in which they reinforce a moral message that often they cannot live up to.

As Reza states in his final prison sermon, love is what tames. I understand this to mean that it allows uncoerced ties of affection to form between people. The longing for Reza among the people will still go unfulfilled, as he takes his place in the prison once again, but these feelings are the “taming” that has been created. (Of course, the film is not a work of realism, and does not look at the likely aftermath, when the villagers would discover that they had been deceived.)

*The Lizard* shows the collapsing of conventional attitudes about religion, where finally a man preaching to prisoners doesn’t distinguish himself from them; he is one of them literally and figuratively, whatever his robes say. He is a liar who tells the truth to himself. The medium has become the message. Of course, this does not mean that in any literal sense, the movie identifies the Lizard with the expected Mahdi. Rather, it suggests an overturning of the kind in which spiritual leadership could appear. Instead of being one who can simply call down a triumphant amount of energy to beat opponents, the film suggests the true leader is one whose word is not separate from his existential situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This discussion relates to the precarious situation of the present moment, in which waves of misunderstanding and anger seem to flow back and forth across

the world. If, within poetry and film, Islamic culture has been imagining such heroes as I believe these films do, it is imperative to recognize such hidden and unexpected visions. How are humans going to recover qualities of decency, compassion and truth-telling when we are seeking to establish ourselves (whoever we are), or “our side,” in power, and eliminate the “evil-doers”? Such a recipe for “peace and stability” has ever failed.

This is why it is so important to recognize that such films are being made and widely enjoyed, not merely as comedy or drama, but as subtle expressions that in various ways may step us back both from extremist ideologies and from our atavistic reactions towards the “Other.”

If we do not understand the underlying arguments reflected in the films, and as importantly, if we do not understand them as part of Muslim culture and discourse, we may perpetuate the denial on all sides. The expressions of the nocturnal side of Muslim consciousness, through creative and imaginative mediums like poetry, music, folklore and film, should be given their due. They show a society’s long-term, earnest contemplation of the nature of power. Cinema’s ability to expand and deepen this contemplation is potentially world-renewing, and should not be underestimated.

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase comes from the Qur’an, verse 18:60. A medieval scholar interprets the “meeting of the two seas” as the complete human being, or *insan al-kamil*, who “combines the ocean of knowledge of the *shari’ah* [divine law] and the ocean of the secret of *haqiqah* [infinite reality]”.

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Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-'Arabi's Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 1998), 495.

<sup>2</sup> According to much of Sufi and Shi'a thought, the figure of the Mahdi is a historical individual, a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, who went into mystical occultation or concealment late in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century CE. While there is no explicit reference to the Mahdi in the Qur'an, the trope of the expected leader has remained strong in the collective imagination through subsequent eras. As a vivid example of messianic feeling, in mid-14<sup>th</sup>-Century Iran, "a caprisioned horse was brought to the city gates twice a day in expectation of the appearance of the Mahdi." Later, the Safavid empire "kept a stable for the Mahdi, and permanently had harnessed two horses, one for him and another for Jesus." See Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., Ltd., 2001), 202.

<sup>3</sup> A classical early example of literature that prominently features a trickster figure is the "assemblies" or *maqamat* of al-Hariri. See Thomas Chenery, trans., *The Assemblies of Al-Hariri* (Westmead, UK: Gregg International Publishers Ltd., 1969).

<sup>4</sup> For a variety of such tales, see Ilhan Basgoz, trans., "Selected Nasreddin Hoca Stories," in *An Anthology of Turkish Literature*, ed. Kemal Silah, (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Turkish Studies, 1996), 76-86. An introduction to sufi story-telling can be found in Es-Seyyid Es-Shaykh Taner Ansari, *What About My Wood! 101 Sufi Stories* (Nassau, NY: Ansari Publications, 2006). Djuha is a common name for the trickster in the Arabic-speaking world. For Arab versions of the tales, see Inea Bushnaq, trans., *Arab Folktales* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1986), 249-253.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>6</sup> As Hyde says, "Beware the social system that cannot laugh at itself, that responds to those who do not know their place by building a string of prisons." *Trickster Makes This World*, 188.

<sup>7</sup> Ghobadi's method in several of his films is to draw non-professional actors from the local setting he has chosen. Mahdi Ekhtiar-dini (spelled "Madi" in the subtitles and in the English language cast list) is the real name of the actor playing Mahdi. It is possible that the character's name was not consciously chosen for any symbolic purpose by the director. Nevertheless, the name is a common one in the Muslim world, and is attached to a collective body of meaning. Therefore, I consider it to be relevant to the film as a cultural expression.

<sup>8</sup> Before he was president, Khatami was Iran's culture minister, and the film industry was encouraged to take new directions under his leadership. See Richard Tapper, ed., *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 8.

<sup>9</sup> See J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 102.

<sup>10</sup> See Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox of Modern Iran* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 107-109.

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<sup>11</sup> This notion is not at all alien to the classical Islamic tradition as interpreted by pivotal authors such as Ibn al-‘Arabi. He wrote that, though there is only one God, there are as many “Lords” as there are creatures, because the quality or name of “Lord” emerges uniquely from the relationship between God and each creature. For God to be “Lord” (*rabb*) requires someone to be the Lord of. Thus God is never referred to in the Qur’an as “the Lord”, but rather as “her Lord”, “their Lord”, “the Lord of Moses” and so on. Each person supplicates different qualities or names of God depending on his or her needs. The endless manifestations of divine qualities through creation bring each creature back in a return to God through a unique path. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 110-115.

<sup>12</sup> “Hajji” is an honorific title denoting someone who has completed the pilgrimage to Makkah.

<sup>13</sup> Rahul Hamid, “The Cinema of a Stateless Nation: An Interview with Bahman Ghobadi,” *Cineaste*, 30(3) (Summer 2005): 42.

<sup>14</sup> This is a statement from the great Russian film director Tarkovsky, whose work has been influential among Iranian directors and who reflects that this theme of “love as proof” underlies all of his films. Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 199.

<sup>15</sup> The prophesied apocalyptic role of the Mahdi is often (though not always) interpreted to include the public use of power, including military power. Yet it is the paradoxical and difficult relation between inward and outward power that I believe is evoked by the symbolism in these films.

<sup>16</sup> There are too many examples of this to note here, and numerous excellent studies of Islamic poetry will supply interested readers. Examples include Lourdes Maria Alvarez, trans., *Abu al-Hasan al-Shushitari: Songs of Love and Devotion* (NY: Paulist Press, 2009), and the classic by Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975). The singing of this simultaneously sacred and secular love poetry in Muslim Spain influenced Christian singers in medieval Europe, leading to the traditions of the troubadours, a name coming from the Arabic word *tarab* (meaning joy and musical rapture). See Robert S. Briffault, *The Troubadours* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1965), 24-79.

<sup>17</sup> See Dick Davis’ introduction to his translation of the Persian epic, *Shahnameh*. Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (NY: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> See the story of Al-Fozail ibn Iyaz in Farid Al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya’ (Memorial of the Saints)*, trans. A. J. Arberry, (NY: Penguin/Arkana, 1966), 52-61.

<sup>19</sup> “It has been narrated by Abu Musa who said: Two of my cousins and I entered the apartment of the Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him). One of them said: Messenger of Allah, appoint us rulers of some lands that the Almighty and Glorious God has entrusted to thy care. The other also said something similar. He said: We do not appoint to this position one who asks for it nor anyone who is covetous for the same.” A chapter in the classic *hadith* collection *Sahih Muslim* is entitled “Prohibition of desire for a position of authority and covetousness thereof.” See “*Sahih Muslim* (Book 20, Hadith 4489).” <http://www.hadithcollection.com/sahihmuslim/148-Sahih Muslim Book 20. On Government/13053-sahih-muslim-book-020-hadith-number-4489.html>.

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