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Review

The Iranian Metaphysicals

Alireza Doostdar. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.
312pp.

Elise K. Burton*

Anthropologist Alireza Doostdar's first book, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*, is a well-written and theoretically sophisticated contribution to scholarship on modern Iranian history and society. Combining vividly portrayed ethnography with archival research and textual analysis, he offers an unprecedented account of Iranians' experiences with and beliefs about the supernatural. The term 'metaphysical' emerges directly from his Iranian interlocutors, who use the Persian equivalents *metafiziki* or *mavara'i* to describe paranormal practices and phenomena ranging from sorcery and traditional occult sciences, to spirit possession and séances, to clairvoyance and teleportation. Although many elite Iranians, secularist and orthodox Shi'i alike, have condemned interest in the occult as superstitious and irrational, Doostdar's primary contention is that such interest actually undergirds modern notions of rational thought and scientific empiricism. This premise is convincingly supported by his detailed analyses of how Iranians, past and present, have attempted to render observations of the supernatural in rational terms. The men and women

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whom Doostdar designates “metaphysical experimenters” are well read and well educated, including university students and professors, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and journalists. He builds on the psychoanalytic concept of the “uncanny” to explain how Iranians from these social and professional backgrounds reconcile their metaphysical experiences with their expressed commitments to science and reason. As shown in Doostdar’s interviews, the uncanny affect appears as the surprise, dread, disorientation, and even pleasure produced by encounters that seem to defy rational expectations. Doostdar argues that this uncanny sensibility drives intellectual wonder and curiosity, resulting in the development of avant-garde practices of rational inquiry that have driven Iranian intellectual and religious movements since the late nineteenth century.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which skillfully interweaves ethnographical anecdotes with historical genealogies of relevant metaphysical concepts and social practices. The sections focus on three archetypal figures—Rammal, Scientist, and Friend of God—to explore how each has contributed to discourses of metaphysical knowledge and scientific reasoning in Iranian society. The first and longest section examines the *rammal*, which colloquially refers to a practitioner of any “traditional” occult science, such as astrology, palm reading, fortune telling, arithmancy, or geomancy. Those Doostdar encounters often produce talismans and compose supplicatory prayers in addition to performing services like exorcisms, healing rituals, and similar varieties of sorcery requested by their clients. For centuries, rammals had practiced their professions freely within Muslim societies, though religious scholars occasionally wrote warnings against imposters who duped their clients. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the rammal came to represent the enemy of modernist reformers, and the profession was legally censured. Both secular materialists and Muslim clerics (including Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini) denounced rammals as charlatans and peddlers of superstition and advocated for different, rational approaches to metaphysical questions such as the existence of spirits and effects of sorcery.

In the context of the Islamic Republic, Doostdar shows how rammals practice at the fringes of society, approached by everyday Iranians through two prevalent modes of skepticism: virtuous caution and playful experimentation. He recounts the story of a pious police chief who regarded the occult sciences as dangerous and arrested rammals accused of fraud and theft. Yet, the same police chief had sometimes, with expressed reluctance, used the assistance of rammals to crack difficult and urgent cases. This character embodies

a modern religious rationalism that cannot outright deny the existence of spirits and sorcery (as this would contradict the infallibility of the Qur'an), but urges believers to avoid the occult and approach its practitioners with cautious skepticism. Doostdar then turns to two women, one a teacher, the other a psychologist, who profess not to believe in sorcery yet nonetheless participate in the occult economy: the former by visiting a rammal, the latter by practicing as a type of rammal herself. He explains how the women present themselves as committed to science and reason and justify their activities as a form of entertainment or provision of psychological placebo effects. In this regard, they do not greatly differ from educated individuals in the West who dabble in astrology or New Age esotericism.

The second section, "Scientist," begins with the historical background of French Spiritism and psychical research in Iran to show its profound, and hitherto largely forgotten, effects on modern Iranian thought. By "scientist," Doostdar invokes not exclusively a university-trained professional, but rather a looser self-identification dedicated to empiricism and experimentation. Early in the twentieth century, Iranian intellectuals educated in France brought home the precepts of Allan Kardec's positivist Spiritism as well as other contemporary European ideas and practices involving reincarnation, hypnotism, and contact with the dead through séances. Séances and hypnotist gatherings seemed to allow spectators direct empirical observation of the supernatural, thus offering "scientific" evidence for the existence of immaterial beings. Iranian clerics responded to these developments in a variety of ways. Khomeini, for example, embraced the "scientific testimonies" of Spiritists as physical evidence for the permanence of the soul expounded by Qur'anic revelation and Islamic philosophical reason. Other theologians set out to debunk the Spiritists by attending séances and meticulously documenting the fraudulent tricks of supposed spirit mediums. In any case, Doostdar contends that for all of these thinkers, scientific reasoning became a key feature of moral reform and religious virtue.

He uses this historical analysis to contextualize the emergence and popularity of Cosmic Mysticism, a homegrown spiritual movement bringing together elements of Scientology with New Age discourses on energy fields, universal consciousness, and the authority of individual experience. Cosmic Mysticism was established in the mid-2000s by Mohammad Ali Taheri, a man with an engineering background who developed a system of spiritual therapy expressed through abundant analogies to computer science. Taheri claimed that his methods, unlike conventional psychiatric treatments for mental conditions

(like medication or psychotherapy), could resolve the true causes of such conditions—jinn and other spirits—which he designates “inorganic viruses.” Through a network of seminars and therapy clinics, the Cosmic Mystics gained a major following, and Doostdar recounts several dramatic spirit exorcisms he witnessed during “defensive radiation sessions.” Although the movement’s leaders attempted to gain some scientific credibility through conferences and publications, Doostdar shows that the loyalty of its followers stems not from solid convictions about its scientific legitimacy but rather from the personal satisfaction they achieved from Cosmic therapies. The popularity of Cosmic Mysticism, however, aroused consternation within the Iranian government. Clearly regarding Taheri’s following as a potential political threat, state-run media attacked his “deviant mysticism” beginning in 2008, and he was eventually arrested on a series of charges ranging from apostasy and blasphemy to illegitimate acquisition of wealth. In 2015, Taheri was sentenced to death (reduced in 2018 to prison time) for the crime of “corruption on earth,” a serious charge normally used to indict militant groups.

Doostdar examines the forms of religious mysticism acceptable to the Islamic Republic in the book’s final section, “Friend of God,” which focuses on hagiographic literature documenting the metaphysical powers of saintly Shi‘i men. This section largely diverges from the themes of rationality versus superstition and metaphysical experimentation that animate the rest of the book. Here, Doostdar emphasizes the “instrumentalization of the metaphysical” by authors inside and outside the government to promote orthodox Shi‘i religiosity. In a trend originating in the 1990s and intensifying through the 2000s, several recently deceased men of various backgrounds became the subjects of popular hagiographies, identified as rare “friends of God” whose piety had endowed them with supernatural powers like clairvoyance, teleportation, and spiritual healing. Doostdar shows how agents of the Islamic Republic and like-minded authors promoted these men as models of spiritual fulfillment for the Iranian public to follow, in contrast to “deviant” alternatives like Sufism, Cosmic Mysticism or the occult sciences. However, he argues, these hagiographies captured the public imagination not solely because their subjects offered examples of moral uprightness, but also because of their alleged clairvoyance. The visible trappings of Islam imposed by the state upon its citizens have created a widespread cynicism about the inner sincerity of any individual’s religiosity. As a result, Doostdar explains, a number of his interlocutors became interested in attaining some form of saintly clairvoyance in order to perceive their own and others’ true moral

character. The argumentation in this section remains articulate and persuasive, but the necessary emphasis on textual material over ethnography means that the immediacy of metaphysical experience, along with individual processes of rationalizing supernatural phenomena, fade into the background. For this reason, the final section stands out a bit awkwardly from the otherwise seamless narrative arc of the book.

The Iranian Metaphysicals is an important challenge to conventional Western views of the Islamic Republic, which have tended to conflate the theocratic ideology of its government with medieval superstition and accordingly deem its politics to be fundamentally irrational. The Iranian government's own campaigns against rammals and other "deviant spiritualities" in the name of eradicating superstition show that it regards modern ideas of rationality as deeply intertwined with the particular virtues of orthodox Shi'i Islam that it wishes to promote. The book's major strengths, both in terms of scholarly innovation and literary narrative, are highlighted in the first two sections, especially in those chapters where Doostdar traces Iranians' participation in and appreciation for worldwide trends of metaphysical experimentation ranging from early twentieth-century Spiritism to New Age esotericism and Hollywood science fiction. By engaging with these transnational connections, *The Iranian Metaphysicals* provides valuable insights not only to scholars of Iran or Islamic studies, but also to those interested in global and comparative approaches to the politics of religion, cultural studies, and histories of the occult. Additionally, the quality of the writing would make the book a compelling and pleasurable read for students in graduate or advanced undergraduate courses on such topics.