



The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran

Roy Mottahedeh

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Drawn from the first-hand accounts of eyewitnesses, Roy Mottahedeh's account of Islam and politics in revolutionary Iran is widely regarded as one the best records of that turbulent time ever written.

The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran Details

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Tracy says

Mottahedeh does an impressive job of painting the social and religious context of Iran, especially regarding the experience and importance of the mullahs. This book is fascinating, and a really enjoyable read. I'm going to need to read it again sometime.

Carole says

A book full of cultural, religious and political history of Iran. So hard to come by, at least for me. And boy is this a fabulous book. You know a book is good when you are so immersed in the main character's daily growth you feel as if you are right there with him as he experiences everything. Please read, you will not be sorry.

Yorgos says

Mottahedeh uses extensively the personal lives and accounts of real Iranians who lived during the critical era that eventually led to 1979. The book manages to show how Iranian history and thought-life of Iranians developed post WWII.

Its great value is the presentation of the emotional life and struggles of an Iranian mullah, who lived the events of post WWII, leading to 1979.

I would love to see a book, with the same philosophy of presenting issues, that would cover the 1980s and 1990s.

Alison says

If only all countries had a historian of this calibre. This is a sharp and immersive intellectual history of Iran. Mottahedeh starts each chapter with a sort of historical fiction slice of life, following a stock cleric from the 1930s through to the Revolution. After this relatively brief tale, he segues into thematical treatment of Iranian history, culture and theology. Chapters cover secular and Islamic education systems, jurisprudence, Sufism and theology with Shi'ism, passion plays & poetry and much more. The result is a vivid and holistic explanation of Iranian culture, and a sense of how this combines into the heady mix of anti-imperialism and passionate religiosity than underpins the revolution. It is only in the epilogue that Mottahedeh's fury comes through at how Khomeini and his ilk reduced this society of glorious ambiguity built on colour and poetry, sharpened by formal Aristotelian proposition debate techique to a rigidity of black and white and simplicity, and his belief that Iranian culture would inevitably break it down.

I particularly appreciated the explanation of madrasseh history and culture, tracing it's emergence in similar and yet different terms to mediaeval European University cultures. tThe rigor of intellectual training, establishing norms for reason and debate made a lot of other things suddenly make sense - it is a culture

This is powerful introduction to Iran, easy to read but also deals with complex issues, The perspective (from the point of view of a mullah) provides an alternative narrative, since most popular memoirs of the Iranian Revolution - such as "Persepolis" - come from the leftist, urban-intellectual perspective, where the supporters of the Islamic regime are portrayed as bearded hordes imposing a medieval agenda on Iran. "The Mantle of the Prophet" shows how simplistic this conception is and gives us an inside look at the madreseh tradition, as well as into the inner, intellectual life of the seyyeds and mullahs. It suggests that these Iranian "traditionalists" are more dynamic in their attitudes than they get credit for, and the dichotomy of the "intellectuals" versus the "mullahs" isn't as rigid as imagined. After all, the Islamic Revolution started out with a lot of popular support in the traditional areas, and this book gives us a glimpse of why Shi'ism extends such powerful appeal for Iranians.

Matthew Trevithick says

The scope of this book is breathtaking and I am in awe of its treatment of its material. This book is - contrary to the cover explanation - hardly about the revolution explicitly, and anyone looking for a 'blow-by-blow' account of those dates should look to dozens of other excellent books on those times. Instead, it is a sweeping and beautiful examination of the development of Persian / Iranian and Shia identity from its earliest days through 1980, covering everything from Islamic jurisprudence (in a detail I've never seen) to poetry to nationalism and everything in between, with attention paid to the changes in thinking that allowed the revolution to occur. The slow and methodical pace is at first noticeable but quickly becomes enjoyable as you become immersed into an epic tale. Critics are quite right about it at times meandering, but all of it is highly relevant and important.

Jean says

Having spent the last year living in Iran and studying Iranian Studies at the University of Tehran, the book provides a distinctive view of Iran, predominantly during the time between the two revolutions, but there's also extensive discussion on important figures such as Avicenna, Jalale Ahmad. On the one hand, Mottahedeh tells the fictional story of a mullah named Ali, who comes from a prominent sayyed family in Qom, and his journey through the Islamic learning system from Qom to Najaf and to the University of the Tehran from around the 50s until a few years after the revolution. While non-fictional discussions on important figures, movements, ideologies of contemporary Iranian history, including an extensive and very interesting discussion on Sufi Islam. This book sparked my interest in Sufi Islam as well as the marriage between Jalale Ahmad and Ali Shariati, with Ayatollah Khomeini.

Tariq Mahmood says

The great Madrassa of Qom signifies the best in contemporary Islamic education has to offer for Shi'a Islam. It produced the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini who was able to produce an Islamic revolution only in Iran. The madrassa education is deeply influenced by the Persian cultural tradition which precedes Islam by a few thousand years at least. That is why the Islamic revolution of Iran has not been able to export its vision

the author thinks is most relevant to that part of the main character's life. The chapters have no titles, and there is no table of contents.

Despite what some reviewers quoted on my copy say about the author making the subject accessible to the ordinary reader, I feel it is challenging to navigate for someone without much background in the subject (I have a little background in Iranian history, without which I would have been quite lost). Parts of it are interesting, even beautiful, but some parts I found rather tedious. It has a bit too much of the "great man" view of history for my way of thinking. It gave less attention than I would to imperialist intervention and the economic reasons for it (as in oil), or to poverty and the conspicuous consumption of the Shah's regime, as causes of the revolution. It is the nature of intellectual history to be a rather elite subject, which doesn't mean it isn't worth studying. It will be on my shelf to return to if I am looking further into the work of any of the writers discussed in it.

It does give a lot of detail about the educational system in Iran and its evolution, and about the relation of the the clerical class to the legal system and to the government. It is a history of that class of Iranians (the Shiite clerics), as well as of the influential individual writers.

Murtaza says

This is a breathtaking intellectual history of Iran, starting from its pre-Islamic history all the way up the present day, and narrated alongside the story of one man in particular: a mullah trained in modern Iran's Shia seminaries. The scope of the book is really incredible and it would difficult to do it all justice in any summation, but Mottahedeh somehow manages to chart the origins of modern day Iranian thought deep in its ancient history. The descriptions of life in 20th century Qom and Tehran are also beautifully done, and you really come to identify with the pseudonymous mullah as he tells the story of his education and coming of age. Along with the stories of his rigorously logical seminary training, I was particularly moved by the descriptions of his Sufi experiences and the importance of "erfan" in the lives of some of Iran's traditional religious teachers. The author somehow manages to weave the lives of Ferdowsi, Zoroaster, Ayatollah Taleqani, Jalal al-E Ahmed and many others into one durable narrative that continues alongside the life of the mullah. The writing is really captivating and elegant, which makes the potentially dense subject matter a pleasure to deal with.

The book is bracketed by the events of the Iranian Revolution and was published around the time that the revolution occurred. Although it is not about those events per se, it provides a beautifully narrated origin story of how that strange moment came to pass. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of Iran or modern Iranian politics. Hopefully one day the country will open up enough that it will be easier for others to experience it for themselves, but without losing all that makes it so unique.

Wessel says

One of my favorite historical books ever written: its the perfect combination of historical scholarship, a grand well-written narrative with a beginning and a great insight in Iran, Shiism, Islamic philosophy and ultimately human beings.
