

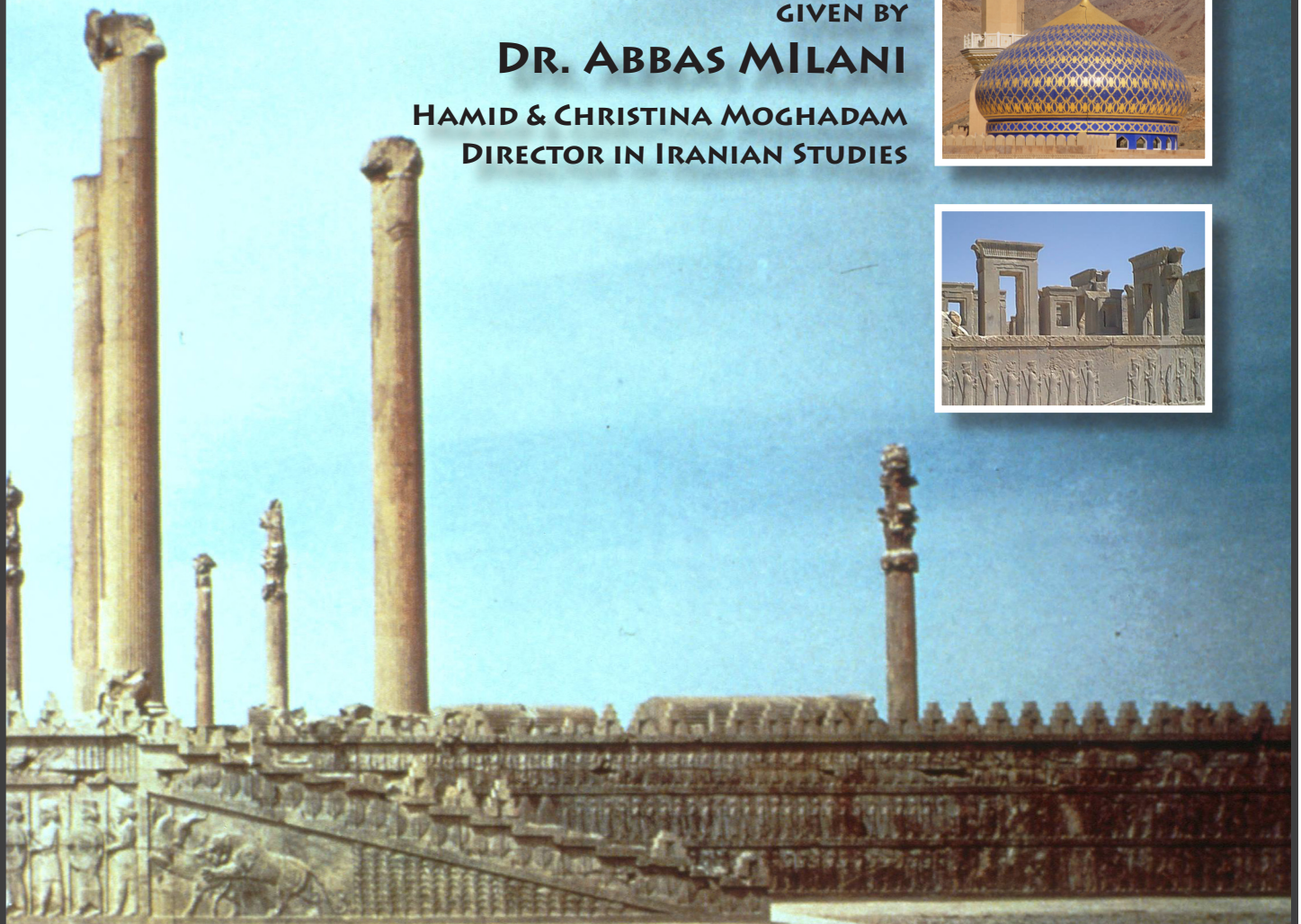
CHRISTINA MOGHADAM LECTURE ON IRAN

"STUDYING THE LAND OF THE SOPHY"

GIVEN BY

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THE STUDY OF IRAN IN THE WEST WAS BORN OF CURIOSITY AND CONFLICT. THE PURPOSE OF HERODOTUS IN HIS HISTORIES, IN ADDITION TO SAVING THE GREAT DEEDS OF GREAT MEN FROM THE OBLIVION OF TIME, WAS TO EXPLICATE THE “CAUSE OF HOSTILITIES”¹ BETWEEN THE GREEKS AND THE PERSIANS. LONG YEARS OF A BEASTLY AND BLOODY WAR HAD CREATED IN HIM THE CURIOSITY TO KNOW THE “OTHER.”



In the Bible, another pivotal part of the Western canon, references to Persia also abound.² In the book of Ezra, the Lord of the Old Testament speaks through the proclamations of Cyrus, the King of Persians, who declares, “The Lord God of Heaven hath given me all the Kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem.”

The house was built; but in the book also roams the ghastly specter of Hamon, of the race of Agog. He was a vizier, and his mind and heart were poisoned by rancor and hate. But fortunately, there was Esther too, the queen of the ruling king, and she thwarted the demonic designs of the vizier and saved her fellow Jews from genocide, giving rise to the feast of Purim.

For over twenty-five hundred years, Iran—or Persia as Herodotus called it—has been, intermittently, the West’s shadow and the face of the “Other,” or its ally and bridge to the enigmas of the Orient. A few years ago, as the world embraced the frenzy of the new millennium, the two aspects of Iran were particularly apparent to discerning eyes. The concept of millennium, and the belief in a thousand year cycle of history, as well as such elemental ideas as heaven and hell, Satan and angels, messiahs and virgin births, resurrection and reckoning, and even the significance of dreams as a window to the will of the divine were gifts of the Persian prophet, *Zartusht* (or Zarathustra), to the common heritage of humanity.³ The pervasive presence of these ideas in all Abrahamic religions, and even in some of the secular cultures of the world, is a powerful reminder of the confluence, not the clash, of civilizations.

But in the same early days of the new century and the new millennium, the West, particularly the United States, grew more and more alarmed about the increasingly assertive foreign policy of

the Islamic regime. If in Iran, memories of British and Russian colonial exploits, and of US support for the fallen Shah, helped fuel the fires of xenophobia, in America the lingering resentment resulting from the hostage crisis, augmented in subsequent years by evidence of the Islamic Republic’s involvement in assaults on the US—from the Beirut barracks to the Kobar towers—made Iran the “darkness palpable” on the horizon.

This duality parallels a schism that splits the soul of Iran. While in Persia’s days of imperial glory, the magnanimity of Cyrus stood in contrast to the malignity of Hamon, since the Arab invasion of the seventh century, Iranians have been torn between the values of their Zoroastrian, Manichean, and Mithraic past, and the new Islamic temperament drawn from the ethos of the Arabian peninsula--what Ibn Khaldun called the desert temperament or *Asabiyah*.⁴ The experience of a Persian kingdom, outwardly full of pomp and power but inwardly frail and corrupt, falling to Islamists armed with little more than their faith took place twice in Iranian history: once in the seventh century, with the Arab invasion of Iran, and then again in 1979, with the Islamic revolution. But old cultures invariably find ways to survive, and thus Shiism arose, according to the French scholar Henry Corbin, as “the Iranian Islam,” the assertive reincarnation of ancient Persian ways and values in an Islamic guise.⁵ The paisley, the most recurring and global of Iranian aesthetic designs, is said to be the metaphor of this duality. It is Zarathustra’s heavenly cedar tree, bent but not broken by the weight of Islam.⁶ It is a metaphor of the defiance and submission, resilience and resistance that have, since the time of Herodotus, been seen as the defining characteristics of Iran, and a key to its historic survival.

Herodotus describes the Persians as a people

known for their extreme fondness for wine,⁷ and for their aversion to lies. For Persians, he tells us, the most “disgraceful thing...is telling lies.”⁸ But Shiite Islam is characterized as much by *tagiyeh* as by its ban on wine. Shiism has been, throughout its history, the faith of a minority, and it has developed at least two self-protective and self-fulfilling concepts. The first is the idea that the pious are invariably a minority, and the second is *tagiyeh*, the art of the white lie to save the pious, of a dissimulation similar to Jesuitical equivocation. As a result of these conflicting cultural forces, finding the real meaning in Iranian discourse is not unlike Freudian dream analysis, where circumlocution, condensation, and conflation, render the narrative densely suggestive, and never direct. And since, as Borges suggests, censorship is the mother of metaphor, years of oppression have added yet another layer of metaphoric sheen to the discursive practices of Iran. In architecture, houses developed a pattern defined by a stark contrast between the *andarun*, and the *birun*, the outer façade and the inner sanctum, while social and linguistic praxis was wrought from contrasting strains of *zاهر* and *bat-en*, the overt and the covert. Even the city of Tehran, for more than two hundred years the capital of the country, is said to owe its name to its practice of stealth. An element of furtiveness, historians tell us, seemed encoded in the very etymology of the word Tehran. Caught in the crosscurrents of history and marauding tribes, in the thirteenth century, the inhabitants of the village known for its rich verdure built their houses underground, and thus the name “Tahran” or “under-grounder.”⁹ Only those trained in the semiotics of the Iranian culture can find “the word within the word” of narratives in Iran.

As the troglodytes of Tehran were building their safe havens, the next phase in the study of Iran experienced its actual emergence as an academic discipline; and it was still characterized by both curiosity and conflict—this time, the conflict of the Crusades. As early as the twelfth century, works of Iranian scholars and thinkers like Farabi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) were rendered into Latin by Gerard of Cremona. Roger Bacon, the earliest herald of modernity, was clearly aware of these thinkers. European scientists were also building on the pioneering work of astronomers such as Biruni. The role of Iranian thinkers in the evolution of the European Renaissance remains to be fully studied.

At the end of the Crusades, the Council of Vienna “recommended that chairs of Oriental languages be established at five European universities.”¹⁰ The tradition of Oriental Studies was thus born and with it the temptation to include Iran in the larger rubric of Oriental or even Islamic studies.

During the Crusades, a character that left an indelible mark on Western consciousness was Hassan Sabah, often called the Old Man of the Mountain. His fortifications lay atop a mountain in Alamut, not far from Tehran. He was the leader of the Isma’ilis, a sect of Shiism, and the fervor of this sect’s faith, hard to fathom even for the Western Crusaders, gave rise to the myth of the Assassins, the Hashashins. Such was their fearlessness, their joyful embrace of death, their celebration of martyrdom, that Westerners concluded, wrongly as scholars have since shown, that the Isma’ilis must have been, in their moments of violent valor, happily hallucinating with the help of hashish. Hundreds of songs, fables, myths, and even operas were dedicated to offering exaggerated, often altogether fabricated accounts of Hassan and his followers’ exploits.¹¹

The singularity of Iran’s role and character as a country of the Islamic Orient became most evident when the West was most endangered by Muslim forces. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Ottoman Turks were triumphantly marching through Europe and had conquered more than half of the continent, it was Safavid Iran—newly and forcefully converted to Shiism—that not only broke ranks with the Islamic world, but in fact opened a second front against the Ottomans, inviting a number of major European nations to establish military bases in the Persian Gulf.

European consciousness during the time of Renaissance was well aware of this important reality. The “most popular secular book in circulation”¹² of its time, *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*,¹³ though controversial in terms of whether its author actually ever traveled outside his village in England, nevertheless demonstrates that there was a sense at the time that Persia, the land of mystery and majesty, had an identity different from the rest of the Muslim Middle East. This awareness is even evident in Shakespeare, where Ottoman Turks present a haunting danger—a danger only Othello, the Moor, could defeat—while Persian invariably refers to something opulent and urbane.¹⁴

The dualism of image and reality reached its zenith in the 19th century, when the advent of colonialism gave rise to a practical disparagement of Iran on the one hand, and the Romantic glorification of the country on the other. If it is true, as Isaiah Berlin argues, that Romanticism caused “the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the world,”¹⁵ and if it is also true that American Transcendentalism—with towering figures like Emerson and Thoreau—was the quintessence of America’s native intelligence, then it would be hard to avoid the extraordinary influence of Iranian culture in that period. From Goethe and Fitzgerald, with their love of Hafez and Khayam, to Emerson and Nietzsche and their affinity for Sa’di and Zarathustra, Persian figures and ideas perpetually percolate to the surface of this rich Romantic tradition.

But Edward Fitzgerald’s famous translation of Khayam’s quatrains, sometimes called one of the greatest feats of translation in history, is an interesting example of how the Romantics redefined Iran to fit their own mold of the exotic East. Khayam was an astronomer, a mathematician, and a philosopher, yet Fitzgerald reduced him to an existentialist *flaneur*. Fortunately, during the same period, along with these poetic interventions, serious scholarship on Iran, from linguistics and philology to archeology and history, began to coalesce into a field of its own. In a few decades, the dualism in perceptions and realities began to manifest itself in an unusual problem of nomenclature.

Persia, with its echoes of past glory and imperial grandeur—a word evoking the sublime aesthetics of Persian art and architecture, of the Persian garden, of *paradis*, the verdant paradise, of feline perfection—competed with Iran, a novice of a name, with a hint of menace. The inhabitants had called their country Iran for twenty five hundred years. But Herodotus called it Persia, and until 1935, that was the name the West used to refer to Iran. Since then, a sometimes tormenting choice has been faced almost daily by Iranians in Diaspora; that choice bedeviled us even in finding a name for our program here at Stanford. Hamid and Christina Moghadam Program in Iranian or Persian Studies?

America was late in joining the scholarly developments in the field of Iranian studies. But as missionaries began to arrive in Iran in the mid-

nineteenth century, and as US interests began to expand globally, scholarly interest in Iran also began to emerge. The first images of America in Iran were shaped by the missionaries, by the Dr. Jordan who created the famous American College, and by a young American who died in the cause of the constitutional revolution of 1905. America was a “city on the hill,” a beacon of hope for the fight against colonialism. From the middle of the nineteenth century, when Amir Kabir, the great reformist prime minister, first established relations between Iran and the US, until 1953, when the US was involved in the overthrow of the populist government of Mossadeq, that early positive image survived. But beginning with the Second World War, the US began to get “entangled” in Iran, and by the mid-seventies, more than fifty thousand Americans lived and worked in Iran. By then, understanding Iran was becoming an exigency. With the Islamic revolution and the rise of tensions between Iran and the US, that necessity has become even more urgent.

Cultural semiotics, or the art and science of decoding the nuances of cultures, is a key to this understanding. It might lack the precision of an empirical science but it is essentially and heuristically valuable in the task of deconstructing each culture’s symbolic universe. Ahamdinejad’s intensely scrutinized recent speech at the UN is a telling example of the interpretive perils that ensue, when such expertise is wanting. The rock-star treatment afforded him by the media simply overlooked the reality of his relatively limited power in the clerically dominated regime in Tehran. Ironically, the treatment he received here helped him consolidate his power at home.

But even if we assume that the attention was deserved, in light of his recent odious pronouncements, the effort to find the person behind the persona was an egregious failure. The most salient aspect of his speech at the UN was overlooked. He offered a glimpse into the fervor of his messianic vision, when he talked of his desire to join the army of the coming messiah. His ascent to power catapulted into the center of political discourse in Iran the hitherto marginal, even esoteric concept of *mahdaviyat*--the rapturous anticipation of the redemptive return of Shiism’s twelfth Imam, now in “occultation” for more than a millennium. More than once, he has suggested that his purpose is to

expedite the return of the *Mahdi*. Like other advocates of the apocalypse in the Judeo-Christian tradition, he too seems bent on forcing the hand of God.

The lesson of interpretive failures about Ahmadinejad and his trip is clear. Policy bereft of cultural and historical scholarship courts calamity, even as scholarship altogether isolated from the world of reality wagers on its own irrelevance. Scholars, particularly when dealing with complex realities like Iran, must have the humility to recognize that the truth they discover is invariably rendered relative by constraints of epistemology, the contingency of human cognition,¹⁶ and the inherent complexity of understanding the “Other.” If ever such truths can be rendered relevant, it is in a place like Stanford.

Academia is where, according to George Steiner, the esoteric meets the scientific, where the eclectic collides with the systemic, and where, finally, Icarus and Prometheus must both find comfort and refuge.¹⁷ In the future of our program then, the arcane, gothic world of Hedayat’s *Blind Owl* must live side by side with inquiries into the messianic proclivity of one ruler, and the hegemonic designs of another. In addition, reality in Iran, or in the rest of the world, never accommodates the neat boundaries of disciplines academia has embraced. Social reality takes shape at the conjunction of psychology and politics, economic and linguistics, theology and aesthetics. Only by a methodology and vision that is equally inter-disciplinary can we hope to come close to explicating the complex web of reality. American academic institutions dealing with Iran have a long way to go before they can forge such a vision. Hamid and Christina Moghadam have taken the first step in facilitating the long odyssey to the Ithaca where such scholars can be trained. In years to come, we hope to prove deserving of their trust and generosity, while encouraging others to help us create a program of Iranian Studies worthy of the great Stanford tradition. Directing such a program at Stanford is for me a singular source of pride, and I must thank Professor Judith Goldstein, whose support and leadership has been instrumental in any success we have had.

Although before the Moghadam endowment, Iranian studies was absent from our campus, Stanford has not been absent on the economic, political, even spiritual horizons of Iran, or of the

Iranian Diaspora. From November 8, 1912, when Abdul Baha, the spiritual leader of the Bahai faith, addressed a great “assembly of students and teachers” at Stanford, through 1961, when Abolhasan Ebtehaj, Iran’s flamboyant chief of economic planning gave an important talk at the Stanford Research Institute (where he criticized the Shah for spending too much money on the military, thus leading to his dismissal¹⁹), much relating to Iran has happened here at Stanford.

During the early fifties, for example, Iran’s foremost woman writer, Simin Daneshvar, visited Stanford and participated in Wallace Stegner’s workshop on creative writing.²⁰ A few years later, two Stanford students, Khodadad Farmanfarmaian and Reza Moghadam—Hamid’s uncle and the first Persian to receive a Ph.D. in economics at Stanford—went back to Iran and became members of the team that masterminded Iran’s rapid economic development in the sixties. Since then, many of the leaders of the Iranian diaspora—from Hamid Moghadam, Behnam Tabrizi and Omid Kordestani to Mohsen Moazami, Nooshin Hashemi and Goli Ameri—have been Stanford alumni, or, as in the case of Esmail Amidhoozour, have been instrumental in launching the Iran Democracy Project at the Hoover Institution. During the days when these eminent Persians were at Stanford, not a single course on Iran was offered here.

We surely have come a long way from those days; yet we have a much longer road ahead of us. We need the support, the good will and the guidance of not just our Stanford colleagues, but of the Iranian-American community, to turn our nascent program, and our limited library holdings, into the pre-eminent center of scholarship that Stanford both demands and deserves.

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