

Crises and Conversions: The Unlikely Avenues of “Italian Shiism”¹

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Minoo Mirshahvalad is an Iranian scholar who completed her PhD in Italy and is currently (2024) a postdoctoral fellow at Copenhagen University. Her dissertation examined the Twelver Shī‘ī identity in a secularist context, specifically referencing Italy. She is fluent in Italian and has spent time in Italy, having the opportunity to be in contact with Shī‘ī communities. *Crises and Conversions* investigates conversion to Shī‘a Islam in Italy. She is the first scholar to have explored this issue with a socio-historical methodology using experiences from very recent history. The target audience is both Muslims—in the Diaspora or born in Europe—and Europeans who have religious concerns.

Attending a conference held by Italian-converted Shī‘īs sparked the author’s curiosity and led her to write this recently published book. Her incentive to take part in the conference stemmed from the question: Why do these Italians convert to Shī‘ism which is a minority in a minority (Islam) in Italy as part of Europe? While Mirshahvalad expected to meet those Shī‘ī converts who were similar to Shī‘ī-borns, she also encountered those who were different either in appearance or thought, the latter being followers of Julius Evola, who introduced the French philosopher René Guénon to Italy.

In her writing, the author examines the pivotal factors that influenced Shī‘ī conversion and the relationship between converts and the Italian context. She investigates how conviction about the crisis of modernity contributes to conversions to the minor branch of Islam in Italy. According to her, the idea of crisis is the common element

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between Guénonian Traditionalists and European convert Muslims. Crisis and traditionalism are the main keywords explored throughout all the chapters of this book.

The author attempts to explain the rise of Traditionalism in Italy through René Guénon who had sought the superiority of Tradition in the East. Propagators in Italy included Reghini, Giorgio, and Evola who developed their Traditionalist views, however, it was Evola who was the main gateway to Guénon's popularity in Italy. All of these propagators were inclined to fascism but since "Evola discarded the possibility of reconciliation between Romanity and Christianity" Mirshahvalad explains, their approaches were not welcomed by Mussolini (28). For Evola, the value of religion was in its being at the service of Tradition; in this regard, he praised Muslims. Evola reviewed Guénon's arguments about the East-West dichotomy and his view only diverged when he stressed the necessity of a Roman revolution of fascism. Unlike Guénon's Sufi-oriented approach, Evola provoked violence and revolt against the crisis in the modern world which contains nihilism, Semitic poison, and democratic evil.

Given Evola's thoughts about Islam, he was interested in the ancient world and its warrior nature. The old religions such as Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, Mazdaism, and Persian Gnosticism in Ancient Persia are praised by Evola because of their spirituality, which was at the service of political activities and war. Unlike Guénon, Evola believed in the Persian roots of Islam which is connected with primordial Tradition, holy war (Jihad), and the potential of esotericism. In this chapter, Mirshahvalad clearly describes how Evola's thoughts attracted converts, regardless of whether his understanding of ancient Persia and Islam was inconsistent with the historical reality or there was a misunderstanding in his deductions.

In the fourth chapter, Mirshahvalad expands on Evola's militant professors and brings the focus to their main concern regarding "Aryan Islam" and the East-West dichotomy. The author notes that "a method of building ties between Shi'ism and Italy has been to explicitly or

implicitly appeal to the nineteenth-century orientalist conviction about Shī‘ism as an Iranian or Aryan Islam” (55). In Italy, the interest in Persia is mainly entertained by French intellectuals. Take Henry Corbin as an example, for him the East was just Iran. “Both Evola and Corbin contributed to the utopianisation of Iran and the esoteric ecumenism” Mirshahvalad explains (57). They highlight the roots of jihad and Shī‘ī messianism in the Aryan culture.

The next imperative figure considered by the author is Pio Filippini-Ronconi, the Italian Orientalist who contributed to Iran’s romantic image and admired the warrior nature. He claims that Shī‘ism adopted several tropes from Zoroastrianism and Christianity such as the element of king-priest that emerged in Shī‘ism as Imams, the sacred bloodline created via the marriage of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī to Sassanid Shahrbanu, the unification of Christianity and Shī‘ism through Narjis, the Christian mother of the hidden Imam and the idea of the hidden Imam as an avatar of Mithra, the Iranian Apollo. All these Iranian elements are expanded by the author in this chapter. Mirshahvalad then represents Roncini’s and Evola’s beliefs about the impact of Persia on the Hellenistic, European-medieval, and Islamic civilisations.

Adriano Romauldi is the third figure who challenges the geographic East-West divide and expands the Persian and Indian civilisations on European Tradition, whilst neo-fascist Claudio Mutti seeks to establish connections between Islam and ancient Rome with Islam announcing the unity of politics and religion through which ancient Rome and its pre-modern greatness would be saved and rebuilt. According to the author, the core of Mutti’s belief is the theory of Eurasia, i.e., that Europe is part of the East and should be de-westernised so that it is not associated with the West in the same way as the United States of America.

The common central belief of all these figures is their adherence to Islam which is considered as the only remedy for the modern world and its spiritual crisis. The question that Mirshahvalad examines in the following chapter is: Why is Twelver Shī‘ism perceived as the best

religion and spirituality for Traditionalists in Italy? According to her, the importance of Evola's ideology of fascism and his promotion of terrorism for Italian Traditionalists affected his followers' political and religious orientation. That is why "they supported pro-Iran Islamic movements in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Hezbollah, and Palestinian exponents" (83). She draws on the Iranian revolution in 1979 to explain the Italian approach to it. In this case, she examines the Italian magazines published during the revolution in Iran. These publications introduced Sunnism as a religion of conformism while calling the leader of the revolution "Imam" and presenting Iran as a paradise of human rights. Mirshahvalad then documents the spiritual aspects of Shī'ism in this chapter showcasing 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib as the symbol of warrior, priest, and king. One of the pivotal beliefs she addresses is that of the Mahdī, the hidden Imam whose Christian mother and messianic resurgence besides Jesus illuminate the unity of Christianity and Islam. The process of the utopianisation of Shī'ī ideology is expanded in great detail.

The sixth chapter is a sociological analysis of converts' public approaches. The most important characteristic of Traditionalists is that they reduce differences between religions to their "external forms." Mirshahvalad explores the self-concept of the converts which is different from Shī'ī borns. Highlighting similarities between religious forms is a solution for Traditionalists to show the oneness of their origin. In other words, although the self is a modern Western case, Italian Shī'īs tend to find their Western way to Islam and in the process introduce new cultural elements to the religious tradition whilst eliminating harmful ones, Mirshahvalad says (104).

The next chapter is dedicated to esotericism. The esoteric Shī'ism is refabricated to correspond to an antithesis of the evils—secularism and rationalisation—of the modern world. Imams are the elite of the natural hierarchies and have the right to access the hidden truth. Besides, "Iran's revolution in 1979 has been portrayed as a utopia, a place where the platonic-Evolian ideals have become flesh" (140). Attacking the reformists of Iran and calling them American puppets, depicting

Ahmadinejad as an honest hero, and referring to Mir-Hossein Mousavi, leader of the Green Path movement as an American agent all suggest that converts seek the ancient wisdom in the ideals of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its resistance against the hegemony of the United States of America and globalisation.

The author's conclusion is summed up in the book's last chapter. "Thanks to the division between religion and culture, Italian Traditionalists can benefit from a religious upgrade but can protect themselves from a cultural downgrade"(158). She concludes that Traditionalists in Italy have different voices ranging from fascist-oriented Traditionalism to anti-church and militant approaches, and that Shi'ism in Italy has led to a Traditionalised secularism.

Mirshavalad's work is important because she traces the chain of Traditionalists and explores their consideration of Persia and Islam. This book is a descriptive analysis that leaves many questions unanswered, serving as an introduction to this subject that raises relevant questions through its investigation of the matter. In this regard, this is a valuable text that opens a window for scholars interested in such issues to further study and explore the issues raised.