

Understanding Khomeini and Music

Mushadid Hussain, a Pakistani political writer and currently (1980) director of the Islamic Press Union, charges the Western press with prejudice and narrow nationalistic considerations of Third World events. He cites Ayatollah Khomeini's treatment by the Western press as a classical example of biased reporting. The Western press has, ever since the beginning of the Iranian revolution, portrayed Ayatollah Khomeini as a sort of diabolical "maniac," bent on turning the clock back to Medieval times.

Khomeini is not irrational in either his faith or practice. He is learned in the way of Shari'a (Islamic law). As a Shiite mystic he believes that God tells him directly how to apply the Koran and the Shari'a. So the only just state for himself is one ruled by Islamic theologians, who alone can be trusted to interpret God's commands correctly. Within this context we must understand the stream of edicts (directives) that come from Qum (Iran's holy city) concerned with imposing a strict Islamic way of life for all Iranians. Since Shiism has always emphasized martyrdom as a keystone of the faith, many Iranians are receptive to Khomeini's speech about what a "joy" and "honour" it would be to die in a war with the U.S.

Khomeini wants to have Iran shaped in "the image of Mohammed." To achieve this goal he named a seven-member commission to define "the future cultural policies of the country." The appointment of this committee launched a program that seeks nothing less than a complete revision of values in Iran.

Khomeini denounces Western civilization, root-and-branch, and often makes mention of "music," a seemingly strange reference. Obviously he is not referring to Bach and Beethoven. In an interview with the Italian journalist, Oriana Fallaci, he said that marches were accepted, but other Western music "dulls the mind, because it involves pleasure and ecstasy, similar to drugs." Fallaci asked: "Even the music of Bach, Beethoven, Verdi?" Khomeini replied: "I do not know these names."

In Tehran, mullahs (Muslim religious teachers) have taken their "campaign against sin" right into the shops selling music cassettes. Are they against modern technology? They know the power of cassettes. During the Shah's reign, cassette recordings of Khomeini's revolutionary speeches sold like the proverbial "hotcakes" in bazaars and were played in crowded mosques throughout the country. So cassettes were used to beat the Shah's censorship of the press and radio.

The music Khomeini so often denounces is the pop music which has literally become a universal phenomenon, thanks to the Western and Japanese technological products, the cheap transistor radio and cassette tape recorder. Why is the Ayatollah's wrath aroused by pop music? He is opposed to the lyrics. He sees these songs as undermining Islamic lifestyle. The pop and rock groups are viewed as the true revolutionaries of our times. For what these songs say is that two young people should choose each other, if necessary defying the family.

In eastern societies; two families and not two individuals are involved in the choice of a marriage partner. Individual choice would undermine the family structure and lead to the destruction of a traditional society based on interlocking families. And Islamic leaders are horrified by artists such as John Lydon of punk rock music fame. He even shocked parents of Western teenagers with songs like Anarchy in the U.K. and Belsen was a Gas and his band the Sex Pistols. In an interview, Lydon said: "I can't be bothered to answer any questions. I'm tired of the past and even the future's beginning to be repetitive. I really don't know what to say. I talk crap all of the time. I'm a liar, a hypocrite and a bastard. I shouldn't be tolerated. I'm really surprised at people's gullibility." Islamic leaders are concerned not just about the pop music. They believe that, when impressionable young people listen to it constantly, it will affect their attitudes in social behaviour. They think of such possibilities as drugs, "doing one's own thing," pornographic magazines, secularism and eventually the dismantling of Islamic values. So music has become a symbol of the onslaught of Western U.S., decadent, secular and materialistic culture.

Are Islamic leaders not making too much of something youngsters listen to on the radio? Whatever you may think about the political conditions in Iran, the Muslim leaders have reason to denounce "music." Christians should also be far more concerned about it than they are now. Pop music is a reflection of the sad spiritual shape of our Western society.

Already a decade ago, the late Dr. H. Rookmaker wrote about this revolutionary impact of pop music upon our culture. He said in *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*: "Western culture, as built since the Renaissance and the Reformation, slowly undermined since the Enlightenment, is still there, but as a tottering ruin; while the new culture is coming in. The new emerging art forms are still full of the battle-cry, and make up the revolution in which we are living. The new culture is only slowly evolving. But its shape is already seen."

And he warned about pop music: "... in dismissing some of the exponents of the form we cannot afford to dismiss the message, which is heard by millions, often at a subliminal level and therefore unconsciously brainwashing, from pop radio stations all over the world. We cannot simply stop it, nor is it wise to close our ears. We have to cope with it, and, at least, to understand its message."

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