

REITH LECTURES 1993: Representations of an Intellectual

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Lecture 6: Gods That Always Fail

TRANSMISSION: 28 July 1993 - BBC Radio 4

He was a brilliantly eloquent and charismatic Iranian intellectual whom I had first met in the West some time in the middle of 1978. A writer and teacher of considerable accomplishment and learning, he played a significant role in spreading knowledge of the Shah's unpopular rule and, later that year, of the new figures who were soon to come to power in Tehran. He spoke respectfully of Imam Khomeini at the time, and was soon to become visibly associated with the relatively young men around Khomeini, who were of course Muslim but assuredly not militant Islamists: men like Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, who became President, and Sadegh Ghotbzadeh who became Foreign Minister.

Within a few weeks after the Islamic revolution of Iran had consolidated power inside the country, my acquaintance (who had gone back to Iran for the new government's installation) returned to the West as an ambassador to an important metropolitan centre. I recall attending and once or twice participating with him in panels on the Middle East after the Shah's fall. I saw him during the time of the very long hostage crisis, as it was called in America, and he regularly expressed anguish and even anger at the ruffians who had engineered the embassy takeover and the subsequent holding of 50 or so civilian hostages. The unmistakable impression I had of him was of a very decent man who had committed himself to the new order and had gone as far as defending and even serving it as a loyal emissary abroad. I knew him as an observant Muslim, but by no means a fanatic. He was skilful at fending off scepticism and attacks on his government; this he did, I thought, with conviction and appropriate discrimination, but he left no one in doubt - certainly not me, at any rate - that although he disagreed with some of his colleagues in the Iranian government, and that he saw things at this level as very much in flux, Imam Khomeini was, and ought to have been, the authority in Iran.

I think it must have been a few months before the hostages were released in early 1981 that he resigned his ambassadorial post and returned to Iran, this time as special assistant to President Bani-Sadr. The antagonistic lines between President and Imam, however, were already well-drawn, and of course the President lost. Shortly after he was sacked or deposed by Khomeini, Bani-Sadr went into exile and my friend did, too, although he had a difficult time actually getting out of Iran. A year or thereabouts later he had become a vociferous public critic of Khomeini's Iran, attacking the government and man he had once served from the very same platforms in New York and London from which he had once defended them both. He had not lost his critical sense of the American role, however, and consistently spoke about United States imperialism: his earlier memories of the Shah's regime and American support for it were seared into his being.

I therefore felt an even greater sadness when, a few months after the Gulf war in

1991, I heard him speak about the war, this time as a defender of the American war against Iraq. Like a number of European left intellectuals, he said that in a conflict between imperialism and fascism one should always pick imperialism. I was surprised that none of the formulators of this, in my opinion, unnecessarily attenuated set of choices had grasped that it would have been quite possible, and indeed desirable, on both intellectual and political grounds, to reject both fascism and imperialism.

In any event, this little story encapsulates one of the dilemmas facing a contemporary intellectual whose interest in what I have been calling the public sphere is not merely theoretical or academic, but also involves direct participation. How far should an intellectual go in getting involved? Should one join a party, serve an idea as it is embodied in actual political processes, personalities, jobs, and therefore become a true believer? Or, on the other hand, is there some more discreet but no less serious and involved way of joining up without suffering the pain of later betrayal and disillusionment? How far should one's loyalty to a cause take one in being consistently faithful to it? Can one retain independence of mind and, at the same time, not go through the agonies of public recantation and confession?

It is not completely coincidental that the story of my Iranian friend's pilgrimage back to Islamic theocracy, and out of it, is about a quasi-religious conversion followed by what appeared to be a very dramatic reversal in belief and a counter-conversion. For whether I saw him as an advocate of Islamic revolution, and subsequently as an intellectual soldier in its rank, or as an outspoken critic, someone who had left it in an almost shattered disgust, I never doubted my friend's sincerity; not did I lose my feelings of friendship for him. He was as fully convincing in the first as in the second role: passionate, fluent, blazingly effective as a debater.

I should not here pretend that I was a detached outsider throughout my friend's ordeal. As a Palestinian nationalist during the Seventies, he and I made common cause against the ponderously interfering role played by the United States, which to our way of thinking propped up the Shah and placated and supported Israel unjustly and anachronistically. We saw both our peoples as victims of cruelly insensitive policies: suppression, dispossession, impoverishment. We were both exiles, of course, although I must confess that even then I had resigned myself to remaining one for the rest of my life. When my friend's team won, so to speak, I was jubilant, and not only because at last he could go home.

Ever since the Arab defeat of 1967 the successful Iranian revolution - which was made by an improbable alliance of clergy and common people that had completely confounded even the most sophisticated Marxist Middle East experts - was the first major blow to Western hegemony in the region. Both of us saw it as a victory. Yet for me, as a perhaps stupidly stubborn secular intellectual, I was never particularly taken with Khomeini himself, even before he revealed his darkly tyrannical and unyielding personality as supreme ruler.

Not being a joiner or party member by nature, I had never formally enlisted in service. I had certainly got used to being peripheral, outside the circle of power; and perhaps because I had no talent for a position inside the charmed circle, I rationalised the virtues of outsider-hood. I could never completely believe in the men and women - for that is what they were after all, just men and women - who commanded forces, led

parties and countries, wielded basically unchallenged authority. Hero-worship, and even the notion of heroism itself when applied to most political leaders, has always left me cold. As I watched my friend join, then abandon and then rejoin sides, often with great ceremonies of bonding and rejection, I was strangely glad that being a Palestinian with American citizenship was likely to be my only fate, with no more attractive alternatives to cosy up to for the rest of my life.

For 14 years I served as an independent member of the Palestinian parliament in exile, the Palestine National Council, the total number of whose meetings, insofar as I attended them at all, amounted to about a week altogether. I stayed in the council as an act of solidarity, even of defiance, because in the West I felt it was symbolically important to expose oneself as a Palestinian in that way, as someone who associated himself publicly with the struggle to resist Israeli policies and to win self-determination.

I refused all offers that were made to me to occupy official positions; I never joined any party or faction. When, during the third year of the intifada, I was disturbed by official Palestinian policies in the United States, I made my views widely known in Arabic forums. I never abandoned the struggle, nor obviously did I join the Israeli or American side, refusing to collaborate with the powers that I still see as the chief authors of our people's woes. Similarly, I never endorsed the policies of, or even accepted official invitations from, Arab states.

I am perfectly prepared to admit that these perhaps too protestant positions of mine are extensions of the essentially impossible and generally losing results of being Palestinian today: we lack territorial sovereignty and have only tiny victories and little enough room to celebrate them in. Perhaps also they rationalise my unwillingness to go as far as many others have in committing myself completely to a cause or party, going all the way in conviction and engagement. I simply have not been able to do it, preferring to retain both the outsider and sceptic's autonomy over the, to me, vaguely religious quality communicated by the convert's and true believer's enthusiasm. Yet the Iranian experiences I have recounted bear some direct comparison with other episodes of conversion and public recantation that dot the 20th century intellectual experience. And it is those, both in the Western and Middle Eastern worlds, that I know best, that I'd like to consider here.

I do not want to equivocate or allow myself very much ambiguity at the outset. I am against conversion to, and belief in, a political god of any sort. I consider both things as behaviour unfitting the intellectual. This does not mean that the intellectual should remain at the edge of the water, occasionally dipping a toe in, most of the time remaining dry. Nor does it mean that, once in, the intellectual should not change opinions.

Everything I have said in these lectures underlines the importance of the intellectual, of passionate engagement, risk, exposure, commitment to principles, vulnerability in debating and being involved and worldly causes. For example, the difference I drew earlier between a professional and amateur intellectual rests precisely on this: that the professional claims detachment on the basis of a profession and pretends to objectivity; whereas the amateur is moved neither by rewards, nor by the fulfilment of an immediate career plan, but by a committed engagement with ideas and values in

the public sphere.

The intellectual over time naturally turns towards the political world, partly because - unlike the academy or the laboratory - that world is animated by considerations of power and interest writ large that drive a whole society or a nation that, as Marx so faithfully said, take the intellectual from relatively discreet questions of interpretation to much more significant ones of social change and transformation.

Every intellectual whose metier is articulating and representing specific views, ideas, ideologies, logically aspires to making them work in a society. The intellectual who claims only to write for him or herself, or for the sake of pure learning or abstract science, is not to be, and must not be believed. As the great 20th century writer Jean Genet once said, the moment you publish essays in a society you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political, do not write essays.

The heart of the conversion phenomenon is joining up, not simply in alignment, but in service and, though one hates to use the word, collaboration. There has rarely been a more discrediting and unpleasant instance of this sort of thing in the West generally, and in the United States in particular, than during the Cold War, when legions of intellectuals joined what was considered to be the battle for the hearts and minds of people all over the world. An extremely famous book edited by Richard Crossman in 1949 was entitled *The God That Failed*; the phrase and its explicitly religious cachet lived on well past anyone's actual memory of the book's contents, but those do deserve brief summary here.

Intended as a testimonial to the gullibility of prominent Western intellectuals - who included Andre Gide, Arthur Koestler and Stephen Spender among others - *The God That Failed* allowed each of them to recount his experiences of the road to Moscow, the inevitable disenchantment that followed, the subsequent re-embrace of non-Communist faith. Crossman concludes his introduction to the volume by saying, in emphatic theological terms: "The Devil once lived in Heaven, and those who have not met him are unlikely to recognise an angel when they see one." This of course is not politics, but a morality play. The battle for the intellect has been transformed into a battle for the soul, with implications for intellectual life that have been horrendous. That was certainly the case in the Soviet Union and its satellites, where show trials, mass purges and a massive penitentiary system exemplified the horrors of the ordeal on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

In the West, many of the former comrades were required often to do public penance - bad enough when it involved celebrities like the ones collected in *The God That Failed*; a great deal worse when (and the United States is an especially egregious instance) it induced mass hysteria and, to someone like myself who came from the Middle East to the US as a schoolboy in the 1950s when McCarthyism was in full course, it shaped a mystifyingly bloody-minded intelligentsia, to this day hung up on Communism, which was never a real internal or external menace to Americans; it was all a dispiritingly self-induced crisis, signifying the triumph of unthinking Manichaeism over rational as well as self-critical analysis.

Whole careers were built not upon intellectual achievement, but upon proving the evils of Communism or repentance, or informing on friends or colleagues, or

collaborating once again with the enemies of former friends. Whole systems of discourse derived from anti-Communism, from the supposed pragmatism of the end of ideology school to its inheritor in the past few years, the end of history school. Far from being a passive defence of freedom, organised anti-Communism in the US led aggressively to covert support by the CIA for otherwise unexceptionable groups such as the Congress of Cultural Freedom, which was involved not only in the worldwide distribution of *The God That Failed*, but in subsidising magazines such as *Encounter*. The CIA was also behind the infiltration of labour unions, student organisations, churches, and universities.

Obviously many of the less harmful things done in the name of anti-Communism have been chronicled by its supporters as a movement. Other less admirable features are, however, first the corruption of open intellectual discussion and a thriving cultural debate, by means of a system of evangelical and finally irrational do's and don'ts; and, second, certain forms of self-flagellation in public that go on to this day. Both these things have gone side by side with despicable habits of collecting rewards and privileges from one team, only for the same individual to switch sides, then collect rewards from a new patron. I will discuss this in a moment. For the time being, I want to underline the particularly unpleasant aesthetics of conversion and recantation - how, for the individual involved, the public display of assent and subsequent apostasy produces a kind of narcissism and exhibitionism in the intellectual that has lost touch with the people and processes supposedly being served. I have said several times in these lectures that ideally the intellectual represents emancipation and enlightenment, but never as abstractions or as bloodless and distant gods to be served. The intellectual's representations, what he or she represents and how those ideas are represented, are always tied to and ought to remain an organic part of an ongoing experience in society - of the poor, the disadvantaged, the voiceless, the unrepresented, the powerless. These are equally concrete and ongoing; they cannot survive being transfigured and then frozen into creeds, religious declarations, professional methods. For one, such transfigurations sever the living connection between the intellectual and the movement or process of which he or she is a part. For another, there is the appalling danger of thinking of oneself, one's views, one's rectitudes, one's stated position as all important.

To read over a *God That Failed* testimonial is, for me, a depressing thing. I want to ask: why, as an intellectual, did you believe in a god anyway? And, besides, who gave you the right to imagine that your early belief and later disenchantment were so important? In and of itself, religious belief is to me both understandable and deeply personal: it is rather when a total dogmatic system - in which one side is innocently good, the other irreducibly evil - is substituted for the process, the give-and-take of vital interchange, that the secular intellectual feels the unwelcome and inappropriate encroachment of one realm on another. Politics becomes religious enthusiasm - as is the case today in former Yugoslavia - with results in ethnic cleansing, mass slaughter

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promotion has called itself Second Thoughts, the idea being that first thoughts during the heady decade of the 1960s were both radical and wrong. In a matter of months during the late 1980s, Second Thoughts aspired to become a movement, alarmingly well-funded by right-wing foundations. The specific impresarios were David Horowitz and Peter Collier, from whose pen a stream of books, one rather like the other, flowed, most of them the revelations of former radicals who had seen the light and had become, in the words of one of them, vigorously pro-American and anti-Communist.

If Sixties radicals, with their anti-Vietnam and anti-American (American was always spelt with a “k”) polemics, were assertive and self-dramatising in their beliefs, the Second Thoughts were equally loud and assertive. The only problem, of course, was that there was no Communist world now, no empire of evil, although there seemed to be no limit to the self-bowdlerising and pious recitation of penitent formulas about the past that ensued. At bottom, though, it was the passage from one god to a new one that was really being celebrated. What had once been a movement based in part on enthusiastic idealism and dissatisfaction with the status quo was simplified and refashioned retrospectively by the Second Thoughts as little more than abasement before the enemies of America and a criminal blindness to Communist brutality. In the Arab world, the brave, if airy and destructive, pan-Arab nationalism of the Nasser period, which abated during the 1970s, has been replaced with a set of local and regional creeds, most of them administered harshly by unpopular, uninspired minority regimes. They are now threatened by a whole array of Islamic movements. There has remained, however, a secular, cultural opposition in each Arab country; the most gifted writers, artists, political commentators, intellectuals are generally a part of it, although they constitute a minority, many of whom have been hounded into silence or exile.

A more ominous phenomenon is the new power and wealth of the oil-rich states. A lot of the sensational Western media attention paid to the Baathi regimes of Iraq and Syria has tended to overlook the quieter and insidious pressure to conform exerted by governments who have a lot of money to spend and offer academics, writers and artists munificent patronage.

This pressure was particularly in evidence during the Gulf crisis and war. Before the crisis, Arabism had been supported and defended uncritically by progressive intellectuals, who believed themselves to be furthering the cause of Nasserism and the anti-imperialist pro-independence impulse of the 1955 Bandung Conference, which established the non-aligned movement. In the immediate aftermath of Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, a dramatic re-alignment of Arab intellectuals took place, some of whom went even further than before in supporting Iraq, others in switching to its enemies. It has been suggested that whole departments of the Egyptian publishing industry, along with many journalists, did an about-face. Former Arab nationalists suddenly began to sing the praises of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, hated enemies of the past, new friends and patrons now.

Lucrative rewards were probably offered to cause the about-face to happen, but the Arab Second Thoughts suddenly discovered their passionate feelings about Islam, as well as the singular virtues of one or another ruling Gulf dynasty. Only a scant year or two before, many of them (including Gulf regimes who had subsidised Saddam

Hussein) sponsored paeans and festivals to Iraq as it fought off Arabism's ancient foes, "the Persians". The language of those earlier days was uncritical, bombastic, emotional, and it reeked of hero-worship and quasi-religious effusion. Yet when Saudi Arabia invited in George Bush and his armies, some voices were converted. This time they installed a rejection of Arab nationalism (which they turned into a crude pastiche), fed now by an uncritical support of the current rulers.

For some Arab intellectuals matters have been further complicated by the new prominence of the United States as the major outside force in the Middle East today. What had once been an automatic and unthinking anti-Americanism - dogmatic, cliché-ridden, ludicrously simple - changed into pro-Americanism by fiat. In many newspapers and magazines throughout the Arab world, but especially those well-known to be receiving the ever-handy governmental subsidy, criticism of the United States was somewhat scaled down, sometimes eliminated; this went along with the usual prohibitions against criticising the regime, which was practically deified. A very small handful of Arab intellectuals suddenly discovered a new role for themselves in Europe and the US. They had once been militant Marxists, often Trotskyists, and supporters of the Palestinian movement. After the Iranian revolution, some had become Islamists. As the gods fled or were driven away, these intellectuals first went mute; then there was some calculated probing here and there as they searched for new gods to serve.

Now everyone knows that to try to say something in the mainstream American media that is critical of US policy or Israel is extremely difficult; conversely, to say things that are hostile to the Arabs as a people and culture, or Islam as a religion, is laughably easy. For, in effect, there is a cultural war between self-appointed spokespersons for the West and those of the Muslim and Arab world. In so inflamed a situation, the hardest thing to do as an intellectual is to be critical and selective. But if, as an Arab intellectual, you passionately, even slavishly support US policy, you attack its critics and, if they happen to be Arabs, you invent evidence to show their villainy; if they are American, you confect stories and situations that prove their duplicity; you spin out stories concerning Arabs and Muslims that defame their tradition, deface their history, accentuate their weaknesses, of which of course there are plenty; if you do all of that, you have a new role to play. And of course this earns you the expected accolades: you are characterised as courageous, you are outspoken and passionate, and on and on. The new god, of course, is America. Arabs, you say, should try to be more like America, should regard it as a source and a reference point. Gone is the history of what America actually did. Gone are the Gulf war's destructive results. We Arabs are the sick ones, our problems are our own, totally self-inflicted. A number of things stand out about this sort of performance. In the first place, there is no universalism here at all. Because you serve a god uncritically, all the devils are always on the other side: this was as true when you were an Arab nationalist or Marxist as it is now when you are a recanting Arab nationalist or Marxist. You do not think of politics in terms of inter-relationships or of common histories, such as, for instance, the long and complicated dynamic that has bound the Arabs to the West and vice versa. Real intellectual analysis forbids calling one side innocent, the other evil. Indeed the notion of a side is, where politics are at issue, highly problematic, since most cultures are not watertight little packages, all homogeneous, and all either good or evil. But if your eye is on your patron, you cannot think as an intellectual, but only as a disciple or acolyte. In the back of your mind there is the thought that you must

please, and not displease.

In the second place, your own history of service to previous masters is trampled on or demonised of course, but it doesn't provoke in you very much self-doubt, doesn't stimulate in you much desire to question the premise of loudly serving a god, then lurching impulsively to do the same for a new god. Far from it: as you had careened from one god to another in the past, you continue to do the same thing in the present, a bit more cynically, it is true, but in the end it has the same effect.

By contrast, the true intellectual is a secular, less unconditionally enthusiastic being. However much intellectuals pretend that their representations are of higher things or ultimate values, morality begins with their activity in this secular world of ours - where it takes place, whose interests it serves, how it corresponds to a consistent and universalist ethic, how it discriminates between power and justice, what it reveals of one's choices and priorities. Those gods that always fail demand from the intellectual in the end a kind of absolute certainty and a total, seamless view of reality that recognises only disciples or enemies.

What strikes me as much more interesting is how to keep a space in the mind open for doubt and for the play of an alert, sceptical irony (preferably also self-irony). Yes, you have convictions and you make judgements, but they are arrived at by work, and by a sense of association with others - other intellectuals, a grassroots movement, a continuing history, a set of lived lives. As for abstractions or orthodoxies, the trouble with them is that they are patrons who need placating and stroking all the time. The morality and principles of an intellectual should not constitute a sort of sealed gearbox that drives thought and action in one direction powered by an engine with only one source of fuel. The intellectual has to walk around, has to have the space in which to stand and talk back to authority, since unquestioning subservience to authority in today's world is one of the greatest threats to an active, and moral, intellectual life. It is difficult to face that threat on one's own, and even more difficult to find a way to be consistent with your beliefs and at the same time remain free enough to grow, change your mind, discover new things, or rediscover what you had once put aside. The hardest aspect of being an intellectual is to represent what you profess through your work and interventions, without hardening into an institution or a kind of automaton acting at the behest of a system or method. Anyone who has felt the exhilaration of being successful at that, and also successful at keeping alert and solid, will appreciate how rare the achievement is. But the only way of ever achieving it is to keep reminding yourself that, as an intellectual, you are the one who can choose between actively representing the truth to the best of your ability, or passively allowing a patron or an authority to direct you. For the secular intellectual, those gods always fail.