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Biography of the late Ayatullah Murtadha Mutahhari

Ayatull□h Mur□adh□ Mu□ahhar□, one of the principle architects of the new Isl□mic consciousness in Iran, was born on February 2nd, 1920, in Far□m□n, then a village and now a township about sixty kilometres from Mashhad, the great centre of Sh□`a pilgrimage and learning in Eastern Iran.[1]

His father was Muhammad □usa□n Mu□ahhar□, a renown scholar who studied in Najaf and spent several years in Egypt and the Hij□z before returning to Far□m□n. The elder Mu□ahhar□ was of a different caste of mind then his son, who in any event came to outshine him.

The father was devoted to the works of the celebrated traditionalist, Mull□h Muhammad B□qir Majlis□; whereas the son's great hero among the Sh□`a scholars of the past was the theosophist Mull□ Sadr□.

Nonetheless, □yatull□h Mu□ahhar□ always retained great respect and affection for his father, who was also his first teacher, and he dedicated to him one of his most popular books, Dast□n-e-Rast□n ("The Epic of the Righteous"), first published in 1960, and which was later chosen as book of the year by the Iranian National Commission for UNESCO in 1965.

At the exceptionally early age of twelve, Mu□ahhar□ began his formal religious studies at the teaching institution in Mashhad, which was then in a state of decline, partly because of internal reasons and partly because of the repressive measures directed by Ridh□ Kh□n, the first Pahlav□ autocrat, against all Isl□mic institutions.

But in Mashhad, Mu□ahhar□ discovered his great love for philosophy, theology, and mysticism, a love that remained with him throughout his life and came to shape his entire outlook on religion:

"I can remember that when I began my studies in Mashhad and was still engaged in learning elementary Arabic, the philosophers, mystics, and theologians impressed me far more than other scholars and scientists, such as inventors and explorers. Naturally I was not yet acquainted with their ideas, but I regarded them as heroes on the stage of thought."[2]

Accordingly, the figure in Mashhad who aroused the greatest devotion in Mu□ahhar□ was M□rz□ Mahd□ Shah□d□ Razav□, a teacher of philosophy.

But Razav□ died in 1936, before Mu□ahhar□ was old enough to participate in his classes, and partly because of this reason he left Mashhad the following year to join the growing number of students congregating in the teaching institution in Qum.

Thanks to the skillful stewardship of Shaykh `Abdul Kar□m H□'ir□, Qum was on its way to becoming the spiritual and intellectual capital of Isl□mic Iran, and Mu□ahhar□ was able to benefit there from the instruction of a wide range of scholars.

He studied Fiqh and U□□l – the core subjects of the traditional curriculum – with □yatull□h □ujjat Kuhkamar□, □yatull□h Sayyid Muhammad D□m□d, □yatull□h Sayyid Muhammad Ridh□ Gulp□yag□n□, and □ajj Sayyid □adr al-D□n as-□adr. But more important than all these was □yatull□h Burujerd□, the successor of □□'ir□ as director of the teaching establishment in Qum. Mu□ahhar□ attended his lectures from his arrival in Qum in 1944 until his departure for Tehran in 1952, and he nourished a deep respect for him.

Fervent devotion and close affinity characterized Mu□ahhar□'s relationship with his prime mentor in Qum, □yatull□h R□hull□h Khumayn□. When Mu□ahhar□ arrived in Qum, □yatull□h Khumayn□ was a young lecturer, but he was already marked out from his contemporaries by the profoundness and comprehensiveness of his Isl□mic vision and his ability to convey it to others.

These qualities were manifested in the celebrated lectures on ethics that he began giving in Qum in the early 1930s. The lectures attracted a wide audience from outside as well as inside the religious teaching institution and had a profound impact on all those who attended them. Mu□ahhar□ made his first acquaintance with □yatullah Khumayn□ at these lectures:

"When I migrated to Qum, I found the object of my desire in a personality who possessed all the attributes of M□rz□ Mahd□ (*Shah□d□ Razav□*) *in addition to others that were peculiarly his own. I realized that the thirst of my spirit would be quenched at the pure spring of that personality. Although I had still not completed the preliminary stages of my studies and was not yet qualified to embark on the study of the rational sciences* (*ma`qul□t*)*, the lectures on ethics given by that beloved personality every Thursday and Friday were not restricted to ethics in the dry, academic sense but dealt with gnosis and spiritual wayfaring, and thus, they intoxicated me. I can say without exaggeration that those lectures aroused in me such ecstasy that their effect remained with me until the following Monday or Tuesday. An important part of my intellectual and spiritual personality took shape under the influence of those lectures and the other classes I took over a period of twelve years with that spiritual master* (*ust□d-i ilah□*) [*meaning □yatull□h Khumayn□*]."[3]

In about 1946, □yatull□h Khumayn□ began lecturing to a small group of students that included both Mu□ahhar□ and his roommate at the Fayziya Madressah, □yatull□h Muntazar□, on two key philosophical

texts, the Asfar al-Arba`a of Mull ṣadra and the Sharh-e-Manzuma of Mull Hd Sabzwr. Mu ahhar's participation in this group, which continued to meet until about 1951, enabled him to establish more intimate links with his teacher.

Also in 1946, at the urging of Mu ahhar and Muntazar, the yatull h Khumayn taught his first formal course on Fiqh and U l, taking the chapter on rational proofs from the second volume of Akhund Khur sn 's Kif yatal U l as his teaching text. Mu ahhar followed his course assiduously, while still pursuing his studies of Fiqh with yatull h Bur jerd.

In the first two post-war decades, yatull h Khumayn trained numerous students in Qum who became leaders of the Isl mic Revolution and the Isl mic Republic, such that through them (as well as directly), the imprint of his personality was visible on all the key developments of the past decade.

But none among his students bore to yatull h Khumayn the same relationship of affinity as Mu ahhar, an affinity to which the yatull h Khumayn himself has borne witness to.

The pupil and master shared a profound attachment to all aspects of traditional scholarship, without in any way being its captive; a comprehensive vision of Isl m as a total system of life and belief, with particular importance ascribed to its philosophical and mystical aspects.

An absolute loyalty to the religious institution, tempered by an awareness of the necessity of reform; a desire for comprehensive social and political change, accompanied by a great sense of strategy and timing; and an ability to reach out beyond the circle of the traditionally religious, and gain the attention and loyalty of the secularly educated.

Among the other teachers whose influence Mu ahhar was exposed in Qum, was the great exegete of the Qur'n and philosopher, yatull h Sayyid Muhammad usain ab ' ab '. Mu ahhar participated in both ab ab ' 's classes on the Shif ` of Ab `Al S n from 1950 to 1953, and the Thursday evening meetings that took place under his direction.

The subject of these meetings was materialist philosophy, a remarkable choice for a group of traditional scholars. Mu ahhar himself had first conceived a critical interest in materialist philosophy, especially Marxism, soon after embarking on the formal study of the rational sciences.

According to his own recollections, in about 1946 he began to study the Persian translations of Marxist literature published by the Tudeh party, the major Marxist organization in Iran and at that time an important force in the political scene.

In addition, he read the writings of Taq Ar n, the main theoretician of the Tudeh party, as well as Marxist publications in `Arabic emanating from Egypt.

At first he had some difficulty understanding these texts because he was not acquainted with modern philosophical terminology, but with continued exertion (which included the drawing up of a synopsis of

Georges Pulitzer's Elementary Principles of Philosophy), he came to master the whole subject of materialist philosophy.

This mastery made him an important contributor to ṭabāṭabā'ī's circle and later, after his move to Tehran, an effective combatant in the ideological war against Marxism and Marxist-influenced interpretations of Islām.

Numerous refutations of Marxism have been essayed in the Islāmic world, both in Iran and elsewhere, but almost all of them fail to go beyond the obvious incompatibilities of Marxism with religious belief and the political failures and inconsistencies of Marxist political parties.

Muṭahharī, by contrast, went to the philosophical roots of the matter and demonstrated with rigorous logic the contradictory and arbitrarily hypothetic nature of key principles of Marxism. His polemical writings are characterized more by intellectual than rhetorical or emotional force.

However, for Muṭahharī, philosophy was far more than a polemical tool or intellectual discipline; it was a particular style of religiosity, a way of understanding and formulating Islām. Muṭahharī belongs, in fact, to the tradition of Shī`a philosophical concern that goes back at least as far as Naṣīr ad-Dīn ṭūsī, one of Muṭahharī's personal heroes.

To say that Muṭahharī's view of Islām was philosophical is not to imply that he lacked spirituality or was determined to subordinate revealed dogma to philosophical interpretation and to impose philosophical terminology on all domains of religious concern,

Rather it means that he viewed the attainment of knowledge and understanding as the prime goal and benefit of religion and for that reason assigned to philosophy a certain primacy among the disciplines cultivated in the religious institution.

In this he was at variance with those numerous scholars for whom Fiqh was the be-all and end-all of the curriculum, with modernists for whom philosophy represented a Hellenistic intrusion into the world of Islām, and with all those whom revolutionary ardour had made impatient with careful philosophical thought.[4]

The particular school of philosophy to which Muṭahharī adhered was that of Mullā Ṣadra, the "sublime philosophy" (hikmat-i muta`āliya) that seeks to combine the methods of spiritual insight with those of philosophical deduction.

Muṭahharī was a man of tranquil and serene disposition, both in his general comportment and in his writings. Even when engaged in polemics, he was invariably courteous and usually refrained from emotive and ironical wording.

But such was his devotion to Mullā Ṣadrā that he would passionately defend him even against slight or incidental criticism, and he chose for his first grandchild – as well as for the publishing house in Qum that

put out his books – the name ṣadrā.

Insofar as ṣadrā's school of philosophy attempts to merge the methods of inward illumination and intellectual reflection, it is not surprising that it has been subject to varying interpretations on the part of those more inclined to one method than the other.

To judge from his writings, Muṭahharī belonged to those for whom the intellectual dimension of ṣadrā's school was predominant; there is little of the mystical or markedly spiritual tone found in other exponents of ṣadrā's thought, perhaps because Muṭahharī viewed his own inward experiences as irrelevant to the task of instruction in which he was engaged or even as an intimate secret he should conceal.

More likely, however, this predilection for the strictly philosophical dimension of the "sublime philosophy" was an expression of Muṭahharī's own temperament and genius. In this respect, he differed profoundly from his great mentor, āyatullāh Khumaynī, many of whose political pronouncements continue to be suffused with the language and concerns of mysticism and spirituality.

In 1952, Muṭahharī left Qum for Tehran, where he married the daughter of āyatullāh Rāhnī and began teaching philosophy at the Madressah Marwi, one of the principal institutions of religious learning in the capital.

This was not the beginning of his teaching career, for already in Qum he had begun to teach certain subjects – logic, philosophy, theology, and Fiqh – while still a student himself.

But Muṭahharī seems to have become progressively impatient with the somewhat restricted atmosphere of Qum, with the factionalism prevailing among some of the students and their teachers, and with their remoteness from the concerns of society. His own future prospects in Qum were also uncertain.

In Tehran, Muṭahharī found a broader and more satisfying field of religious, educational, and ultimately political activity. In 1954, he was invited to teach philosophy at the Faculty of Theology and Islāmic Sciences of Tehran University, where he taught for twenty–two years.

First the regularization of his appointment and then his promotion to professor was delayed by the jealousy of mediocre colleagues and by political considerations (for Muṭahharī's closeness to āyatullāh Khumaynī was well known).

But the presence of a figure such as Muṭahharī in the secular university was significant and effective. Many men of Madressah background had come to teach in the universities, and they were often of great erudition.

However, almost without exception they had discarded an Islāmic worldview, together with their turbans and cloaks. Muṭahharī, by contrast, came to the university as an articulate and convinced exponent of Islāmic science and wisdom, almost as an envoy of the religious institution to the secularly educated.

Numerous people responded to him, as the pedagogical powers he had first displayed in Qum now fully unfolded.

In addition to building his reputation as a popular and effective university lecturer, Mu□ahhar□ participated in the activities of the numerous professional Isl□mic associations (anjumanh□) that had come into being under the supervision of Mahd□ B□z□rg□n and □yatull□h Taleq□n□, lecturing to their doctors, engineers, teachers and helping to coordinate their work. A number of Mu□ahhar□'s books in fact consist of the revised transcripts of series of lectures delivered to the Isl□mic associations.

Mu□ahhar□'s wishes for a wider diffusion of religious knowledge in society and a more effective engagement of religious scholars in social affairs led him in 1960 to assume the leadership of a group of Tehran `Ulam□ known as the Anjuman-e-Mah□na-yi D□n□ ("The Monthly Religious Society").

The members of this group, which included the late □yatull□h Behesht□, a fellow-student of Mu□ahhar□ in Qum, organized monthly public lectures designed simultaneously to demonstrate the relevance of Isl□m to contemporary concerns, and to stimulate reformist thinking among the `Ulam□.

The lectures were printed under the title of Guft□r-e-M□h ("Discourse of the Month") and proved very popular, but the government banned them in March 1963 when □yatull□h Khumayn□ began his public denunciation of the Pahlav□ regime.

A far more important venture in 1965 of the same kind was the foundation of the □usayniya-e-Irsh□d, an institution in north Tehran, designed to gain the allegiance of the secularly educated young to Isl□m. Mu□ahhar□ was among the members of the directing board; he also lectured at the □usayniya-e-Irsh□d and edited and contributed to several of its publications.

The institution was able to draw huge crowds to its functions, but this success – which without doubt exceeded the hopes of the founders, was overshadowed by a number of internal problems. One such problem was the political context of the institution's activities, which gave rise to differing opinions on the opportuneness of going beyond reformist lecturing to political confrontation.

The spoken word plays in general a more effective and immediate role in promoting revolutionary change than the written word, and it would be possible to compose an anthology of key sermons, addresses, and lectures that have carried the Isl□mic Revolution of Iran forward.

But the clarification of the ideological content of the revolution and its demarcation from opposing or competing schools of thought have necessarily depended on the written word, on the composition of works that expound Isl□mic doctrine in systematic form, with particular attention to contemporary problems and concerns.

In this area, Mu□ahhar□'s contribution was unique in its volume and scope. Mu□ahhar□ wrote assiduously and continuously, from his student days in Qum up to 1979 the year of his martyrdom.

Much of his output was marked by the same philosophical tone and emphasis already noted, and he probably regarded as his most important work U□□l-e-Falsafa wa Ravish-e-Ri'□lism ("The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism"), the record of □ab□□ab□□'s discourses to the Thursday evening circle in Qum, supplemented with Mu□ahhar□'s comments.

But he did not choose the topics of his books in accordance with personal interest or predilection, but with his perception of need; wherever a book was lacking on some vital topic of contemporary Isl□mic interest, Mu□ahhar□ sought to supply it.

Single handily, he set about constructing the main elements of a contemporary Isl□mic library. Books such as `Adl-e-Il□h□ ("Divine Justice"), Niz□m-e-□uquq-e-Zan dar Isl□m ("The System of Women's Rights in Isl□m"), Mas'ala-yi □ij□b ("The Question of the Veil"), Ashn□'i ba `Ul□m-e-Isl□m□ ("An Introduction to the Isl□mic Sciences"), and Muqaddima bar Jah□nb□n□-yi Isl□mi ("An Introduction to the Worldview of Isl□m") were all intended to fill a need, to contribute to an accurate and systematic understanding of Isl□m and the problems in the Isl□mic society.

These books may well come to be regarded as Mu□ahhar□'s most lasting and important contribution to the rebirth of Isl□mic Iran, but his activity also had a political dimension that admittedly subordinate, should not be overlooked.

While a student and fledgling teacher in Qum, he had sought to instill political consciousness in his contemporaries and was particularly close to those among them who were members of the Fida'iyan-i Isl□m, the Militant Organization founded in 1945 by Nawwab Safaw□.

The Qum headquarters of the Fida'iyan was the Madrasa-yi Fayziya, where Mu□ahhar□ himself resided, and he sought in vain to prevent them from being removed from the Madressah by □yatull□h Bur□jerd□, who was resolutely set against all political confrontation with the Shah's regime.

During the struggle for the nationalization of the Iranian Oil Industry, Mu□ahhar□ sympathized with the efforts of □yatull□h K□sh□n□ and Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq, although he criticized the latter for his adherence to secular nationalism. After his move to Tehran, Mu□ahhar□ collaborated with the Freedom Movement of B□z□rg□n and Taleq□n□, but never became one of the leading figures in the group.

His first serious confrontation with the Shah's regime came during the uprising of Khurdad 15th, 1342/June 6th, 1963, when he showed himself to be politically, as well as intellectually, a follower of □yatull□h Khumayn□ by distributing his declarations and urging support for him in the sermons he gave.[5]

He was accordingly arrested and held for forty-three days. After his release, he participated actively in the various organizations that came into being to maintain the momentum that had been created by the uprising, most importantly the Association of Militant Religious Scholars (Jami`a yi Ruh□niy□t-e-Mub□riz).

In November 1964, ayatullah Khumayni entered on his fourteen years of exile, spent first in Turkey and then in Najaf, and throughout this period Mutahhari remained in touch with ayatullah Khumayni, both directly – by visits to Najaf – and indirectly.

When the Islamic Revolution approached its triumphant climax in the winter of 1978 and ayatullah Khumayni left Najaf for Paris, Mutahhari was among those who travelled to Paris to meet and consult with him. His closeness to ayatullah Khumayni was confirmed by his appointment to the Council of the Islamic Revolution, the existence of which ayatullah Khumayni announced on January 12th, 1979. Mutahhari's services to the Islamic Revolution were brutally curtailed by his assassination on May 1st, 1979. The murder was carried out by a group known as Furqan, which claimed to be the protagonists of a "progressive Islam," one freed from the allegedly distorting influence of the religious scholars.

Although Mutahhari appears to have been chairman of the Council of the Islamic Revolution at the time of his assassination, it was as a thinker and a writer that he was martyred.

In 1972, Mutahhari published a book entitled `Illal–i Girayish ba Maddigari ("Reasons for the Turn to Materialism"), an important work analyzing the historical background of materialism in Europe and Iran.

During the revolution, he wrote an introduction to the eighth edition of this book, attacking distortions of the thought of afiz and Hallaj that had become fashionable in some segments of Iranian society and refuting certain materialistic interpretations of the Qur'an.

The source of the interpretations was the Furqan group, which sought to deny fundamental Qur'anic concepts such as the divine transcendence and the reality of the hereafter.

As always in such cases, Mutahhari's tone was persuasive and solicitous, not angry or condemnatory, and he even invited a response from Furqan and other interested parties to comment on what he had written. Their only response was the gun.

The threat to assassinate all who opposed them was already contained in the publications of Furqan, and after the publication of the new edition of `Illal–e–Girayish ba Maddigari, Mutahhari apparently had some premonition of his martyrdom.

According to the testimony of his son, Mujtabi, a kind of detachment from worldly concerns became visible in him; he augmented his nightly prayers and readings of the Qur'an, and he once dreamed that he was in the presence of the Prophet (S), together with ayatullah Khumayni .

On Tuesday, May 1st, 1979 Mutahhari went to the house of Dr. Yadullah Sahabi, in the company of other members of the Council of the Islamic Revolution. At about 10:30 at night, he and another participant in the meeting, Engineer Katira`i, left Sahabi's house.

Walking by himself to an adjacent alley where the car that was to take him home was parked, Mutahhari suddenly heard an unknown voice call out to him. He looked around to see where the voice

was coming from, and as he did, a bullet struck him in the head, entering beneath the right earlobe and exiting above the left eyebrow.

He died almost instantly, and although he was rushed to a nearby hospital, there was nothing that could be done but mourn for him. The body was left in the hospital the following day, and then on Thursday, amid widespread mourning, it was taken for funeral prayers first to Tehran University and then to Qum for burial, next to the grave of Shaykh `Abdul Karīm Hā'irī .

Āyatullāh Khumaynī wept openly when Muṭahharī was buried in Qum, and he described him as his "dear son," and as "the fruit of my life," and as "a part of my flesh." But in his eulogy Āyatullāh Khumaynī also pointed out that with the murder of Muṭahharī neither his personality was diminished, nor was the course of the revolution interrupted:

"Let the evil-wishers know that with the departure of Muṭahharī – his Islāmic personality, his philosophy and learning, have not left us. Assassinations cannot destroy the Islāmic personality of the great men of Islām...Islām grows through sacrifice and martyrdom of its cherished ones. From the time of its revelation up to the present time, Islām has always been accompanied by martyrdom and heroism."[6]

The personage and legacy of Āyatullāh Muṭahharī have certainly remained unforgotten in the Islāmic Republic, to such a degree that his posthumous presence has been almost as impressive as the attainments of his life. The anniversary of his martyrdom is regularly commemorated, and his portrait is ubiquitous throughout Iran.

Many of his unpublished writings are being printed for the first time, and the whole corpus of his work is now being distributed and studied on a massive scale. In the words of Āyatullāh Khamene'ī, President of the Republic, the works of Muṭahharī have come to constitute "the intellectual infrastructure of the Islāmic Republic."

Efforts are accordingly under way to promote a knowledge of Muṭahharī's writings outside the Persian-speaking world as well, and the Ministry of Islāmic Guidance has sponsored translations of his works into languages as diverse as Spanish and Malay.

In a sense, however, it will be the most fitting memorial to Muṭahharī if revolutionary Iran proves able to construct a polity, society, economy and culture that are authentically and integrally Islāmic. For Muṭahharī's life was oriented to a goal that transcended individual motivation, and his martyrdom was the final expression of that effacement of self.

1. This sketch of the life and works of Āyatullāh Muṭahharī is based chiefly on Muhammad Wa'izzāda Khurāsānī's, "Sayrī dar Zindagi-yi `Ilmī wa Inqilābi-yi Ustad Shahīd Murtadhā Muṭahharī," in Yadnāma-yi Ustād Shahīd Murtadhā Muṭahharī, ed. `Abdul Karīm Surūsh, Tehran, 1360 Sh./1981, pp. 319-380, an article rich in information on many aspects of the recent history of Islāmic Irān. Reference has also been made to Mujtabā Muṭahhari, "Zindagi-yi Pidaram," in Harakat (journal of the students at the Tehran Faculty of Theology), no. 1 (n.d.), pp. 5-16; M. Hoda, In Memory of Martyr

Mu□ahhar□, a pamphlet published by the Ministry of Isl□mic Guidance, Tehran, April, 1982; and □yatull□h Mu□ahhar□'s autobiographical introduction to the eighth edition of `Ilal-i Girayish ba Madd□gar□; Qum, 1357 Sh./1978, pp. 7ff.

2. `Ilal-e-Girayish ba Madd□gar□, Page 9.

3. `Ilal-i Girayish ba Maddigari, Page 9.

4. The authoritative statement of this view was made by Sayyid Qutb in his Khas□'is al-Tasawwur al-Isl□m□ wa Muqawwimatuhu, Cairo, numerous editions, which was translated into Persian and had some influence on views toward philosophy.

5. Muhahhar□'s name comes ninth in a list of clerical detainees prepared by the military prosecutor's office in June, 1963. See facsimile of the list in Dihnavi, Qiyam-e-Khunin-i 15 Khurdad 42 ba Riv□yat-e-Asn□d, Tehran, 1360 Sh./1981, Page 77.

6. Text of □yatull□h Khumayn□'s eulogy in Y□dnama-yi Ust□d-i Shah□d Murtadha Muhahhar□, pp. 3-5.

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