

Funeral, Theocracy, & Religious Capital

Observations & Thoughts After a Comrade's Death

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An accident. An accident tore a family apart. An accident took a brave and kind comrade from us. We will remember the date. It was December 2023.

Death will come for us all. But, for now, we must put our shattered hearts back together. We need to organize. We need to fight. We need to grieve. Yet, we are not free to grieve, the same way we are not free to be. Not free to love. Not free to live. Countless surviving families and friends were vultured in one of their most vulnerable times. Countless victims of patriarchal honor killings were buried by their murderers. Countless brave individuals were buried covertly in the middle of the night by their murderous state, giving the families not even a grave, a place to grieve, a place to rest. Countless grieving families were harassed and coerced into silence, into forgiving their loved ones' murderers. Countless become the sole survivor, the last bearer of memories, yet have no time to grieve as they have to struggle for survival, to keep memories alive, at least for one more day. There are countless stories, each with its distinct tune, agglomerating into a symphony of misery. The experience of grieving our comrades is but just one of these tunes.

Hierarchies and exploitation brought forth have touched all aspects of our lives, including our times of mourning: Funeral. The capitalist exploitation of mourning customs is familiar to all. The tiered pricing of graves and gravestones. The multi-level graves in the middle of a desert for the poor and destitute. The tiered cosmetic restoration services. Fees for the morgue and death certificate. Bribery, or 'premium service,' as it is called by some enterprising capitalists and petite bourgeois, for decent and expedient funeral services. But what about religious exploitation? The religious sabotage and appropriation of funeral customs seem so ubiquitous, so engrained in our cultural zeitgeist that we hardly ever notice it. Yet, Power reveals. Within theocratic societies, with their priestly ruling class, religious exploitation becomes starkly visible.

Just days after birth, we are initiated into the religion. Criticizing it, we are blasphemous. Leaving it, we are apostates. In non-theocratic societies, apostasy and blasphemy would not mean much, but in theocratic ones, they may result in death. So, believers and non-believers are bound by religious creeds, even after death. Our late comrade hated Mullahs, hated mosques, hated Islam, and religion, an increasingly common sight in societies suffering from theocratic states. Yet, we had to hold a small ceremony at a mosque, hire a mullah to conduct the funeral ceremony, and follow Islamic burial rites. None of these rituals follow our comrades' wishes. They are also highly

detrimental to the family's grieving. Yet, changing or excluding these religious rites demands more bribes, and more money for the Mullah and the system in which they are the primary beneficiaries themselves, let alone the ostracization and oppression the family would receive from the neighbors, the community, and the state. When in Rome, act like Romans. But Rome has always been exploitative and corrupt.

Here, the faithful would protest. 'There is no compulsion in religion,' 'these exploitations are the result of individual selfish actions of some powerful and zealous religious folk,' 'rare happenstances of history,' 'experiences not representative of true religion,' they say ad nauseam. This is an understandable sentiment; The believers feel no compulsion from religion. The faithful labor, fret, chastise, and compel themselves, first and foremost, to follow their faith to the best of their abilities. This results from decades, centuries, and millennia of religion's social engineering to manufacture consent. There is no need for further compulsion for the enchanted, the obedient. Compulsion, coercion, and violence are only for those falling out of the bounds of religion, deemed sacrilegious, unworthy, and guilty. Those deemed unworthy can be anyone, belonging to the wrong race, wrong ethnicity, wrong region, wrong gender, wrong sexual orientation, wrong age, wrong ailment, wrong mood, wrong faith, and wrong sect. The list of worthy is short. The list of unworthy is long. How fortunate for the privileged few not being deemed unworthy, not experiencing religious violence, especially in theocratic societies where the priestly class monopolizes the state's organized violence. It is as if the pious folk constitute a separate and distinct social class in which their interests and experiences are not aligned or shared with those deemed unworthy by their religion, the sacrilegious, the wretched, and the condemned.

Listening to the pious folk gets us nowhere. Nothing to learn. No path to walk. No action to take. So what if religious exploitation is more than a rare chance occurrence? What if they are collective and deliberate actions of a class of people for their own interests? What if it is systematic exploitation? Then, how did such a system come to be? What are its mechanisms of exploitation? To address religious exploitation systematically, Mohammad-Reza Nikfar treads off the beaten path, practically forging a new one. In the book "Political Economy of Religion¹," Nikfar utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's form of capital as a template and proposes Religious capital, embodying cultural, social, and symbolic capital. On the other hand, capital is power, the confidence of the rulers in obedience of the ruled, and religion demands nothing more of us than our obedience, our servitude, to gods, ancestors, customs, rituals, and whatever else fabricated and twisted to religion's benefit. Our faith, after all, gets measured as the degree of our obedience. The concept of religious capital seems to touch on something important, illuminating all previously hidden in the shadows of obscurity and ambiguity.

Digging into religious capital, it turns out that the clergy are seasoned merchants selling religion. This crowd sold themselves as wise sages, privileged to prescribe how the rest of us should live our lives, meddling in our affairs from conception to birth to putting our remains to rest and consoling the living after our death at the funeral while their only informative life experience is either reciting and memorizing some obtuse scriptures or imagining themselves as protagonists of epic adventure to be canonized into some dull scripture to be recited and memorized by the other stuffy and bland crowd. These merchants of religion each issue their own tokens, currencies of faith, lacking any value other than our cultural belief in the knowledge, skill,

¹ [REDACTED] " [REDACTED] " [REDACTED] by [REDACTED], [REDACTED] In Persian language, No known translation available, cdn.zandiq.com/books/Nikfar_Eghtesade_Siasie_Din.pdf

and competence of these supposed gurus, their cultural capital. They are constantly scurrying around to increase their value and devalue competing brands. Just like businesses, religions have different accommodations; some tolerant, some bigoted, some fanciful, some humble, some with grand customs and community, some with more harmonious community, some with better music, some with better food, each attracting and catering to different patrons. Meanwhile, all their creeds devalue, admonish, and criminalize life, painting the world as mundane, a testing ground, a place of suffering and pain, alienating us from our labor to supposedly be rewarded later in an unknown and mysterious way or place, chop up the systematic problems they created to individual failures with individualized solutions, just be more pious, more hard-working, more trusting, more obedient. Then, we are left becoming passive consumers of their faith, speculating on their tokens, wagering on this or that religion, this or that denomination, this or that sect, this or that cult leader, to win a good and fulfilling life now, eternal bliss in the afterlife, or a good karma for the next reincarnation. All the cognitive trappings of capitalism are also here, the echos of “Pascal’s wager” reverberating through our beings while stuck in the swamp of loss aversion and the fear of missing out.

Appearance is also essential to all merchants and devoted consumers, especially religious ones. How else would they display their faith, flaunt it, sell it, and benefit from its privileges? So they wear their funny hats and dated customs, have their own self-important titles, speak their inside lingo, and perform their vain rituals. Excess always accompanies appearance: Building lavish and extravagant shrines and mosques, constructing thousands of fake shrines for fake descendants of Imams, calloused foreheads with searing hot spoons displayed as prayer mohr brands, holding extravagant celebrations upon completing Hajj, holding grand events for the birth and death of major and minor religious characters every year, honor-killing, imprisoning and executing blasphemers and apostates, mangling yours and your infant child’s head with a machete during Ashura, giving large Nazri, charitable food donations for poor and hungry, while their prestige is measured by the numbers of wealthy patron’s luxury cars lining up for free food, and so many other large and small instances of religious excess in Iran, just to display faith. Ordinary worshippers must perform arduous labor with grotesque and ruthless punishment at the slightest failure to appear as pious. Meanwhile, clerics crafted piety into a commodity, a premium tantalizing merchandise exclusive to the rich and powerful, accomplished by vilifying and suppressing all secular and religious competitors, gate-keeping their markets, and nurturing obedient fanatical followers ready to protect establishments or destroy them at the order of their religious leader. All these benefits would be within one’s grasp as long as dues are paid, no matter how unscrupulous the individuals and establishments, as religion would conveniently purify and sanctify them, forgive, legitimize, and recognize their wealth and actions henceforth as just. The more severe the requirements for piety and the more savage the punishment is for the faithful and unfaithful, the more valuable the priesthood and their services. What bountiful feasting ground, cannibalizing on their fellow humans. We will end up in the early grave after all this religious decadence and excess, but we are told not to worry as the clerics sure would hold a beautiful and tear-jerking ceremony for us all. Even death doesn’t deter this crowd, spreading false stories of repentance and redemption of notable personalities just before being grasped by death. The living are unenlightened, and the dead can’t speak but, apparently and conveniently, to the same privileged priestly riffraffs.

Then, for something stated repeatedly as a private matter, we are constantly socialized into religion, as if they are afraid their faith would lose its relevancy, to be forgotten, the accumu-

lated faith spoiled. From ascetics praying in solitude to high priests known and adored by millions, believers ceaselessly display their faith like peacocks in heat, forming their own cliques, clubs, gangs, guilds, syndicates, and factions. Yet, a stark divide exists between a faith's high and low-rung members. The social circles of aristocratic priests and lower-rung believers are wholly different. The privileged go on solitary retreats or trips once and come back as prophets, gurus, saints, Buddhas, imams, or any other self-important titles, while the lower-rung clerics and worshippers alike, enduring the loneliness & hardship every day remain unknown, invisible, indistinguishable, replaceable servants to the faith. Lower-rung priests and ordinary believers, their servitude, dedication, labor, and proselytizing make their faith more renowned and influential, benefitting all believers with more preferential treatment and favor from fellow believers and savvy merchants. And yet, reminiscent of celebrity capitalists, the high priests reap the majority of the benefits, the more renown, influence, favor, and acquaintance with other noble and influential crowds, further bolstering their show of competence and prominence. All religious leaders have rubbed shoulders with the sovereigns of their times, but since when has meeting the ruling class been easy? This propheteering crowd is either born privileged or accumulated such vast notoriety, prestige, and influence to be considered powerful, someone worthy of attention. Just like politicians noticed by the ruling elites, their lower-class followers garner clerics no more fame and influence, their source of social capital changes, their power base and priorities shift, becoming unaccountable to their followers.

Then, we reach here, the intersection of capital and power where religion is not only entangled but their primary driver. The first Iranian mythological kingly figure, Jamshid, was a propheteering, later a god-king, dividing the society into four castes with a priestly ruling stratum. The same figure, cast down from divinity among Iranic people, kept its godhood in the Indian subcontinent as Yama², the god of death, the debt collector. The Hindu Brahmins and later Jainism and Buddhism constructed doctrines that the very human existence is debt³, a form of debt that even death can't redeem, burdening us incarnation after incarnation, justifying the caste system and the fortune of the privileged strata, a life of suffering, justifying the structures of authority, their religious patriarchal authority. Back to the Iranian plateau, priests have been busy reforming the old decrepit remnants of Jamshid's cult, innovating new religious doctrines, later adopted by many creeds worldwide. Immanent monotheistic god, dualistic principles of good and evil at times manifesting as angels and demons, free will, messianism, and judgment after death to be rewarded or punished in transcendental places like heaven and hell are the legacy of these innovations, all of which alienate us from fruits of our labor, destroys all tangible accountability systems, pacify and disempower collective action anticipating some messiah, make us individually complicit in systematic failures of religions' making as if we freely consented to any of it. No wonder so many religions embraced these ideals. To the west in Mesopotamia, the first cities appeared as religious centers for the Sumerian merchants where elites became the intermediary between the divine and human world. With the Uruk's state authority, religious cults grew more impressive and spectacular as time marched on, providing the ideological justification for work and acting as the first managerial class, the first job-creators manifesting the first job by the exploitation of

² Etymologically, Jamshid means "Yama the Brilliant/Majestic." Yama and Jamshid are the same mythological figures, with some discrepancies between the stories that the author suggests are caused by different degrees of proximity and involvement in overthrowing and banishing the cult of Jamshid and branching of cultures and histories.

³ "Debt, The First 5000 Years" by David Graeber, theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-debt; Wikipedia on the Buddha, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/The_Buddha

women, sex work, with the populace becoming subservient under the new ideology of patriarchy as the elite women wore hijabs as a show of status and modesty, and the first capitalists investing interest-bearing loans to finance caravan trades, socially-engineering and controlling the society through debt and debt-forgiveness⁴. A bit further west, the ruling strata and priesthood were deeply intertwined among some descendants of ancient Canaanite civilization. Later, Yehud became a theocracy ruled by a hereditary line of Jewish high priests, once more with another creed of gods entrapping humanity into eternal debt. Christianity, one of the reformation cults of Judaism supposed to redeem humanity from this original debt, yet sank it further into even more debt. In the Arabian peninsula to the south, the Quraysh tribe enriched itself by collecting taxes from Ka'ba pilgrims and performing religious services, accumulating enough capital to become a commerce powerhouse, priests becoming merchants, or perhaps more accurately just merchants changing business. Islam was conceived against this backdrop by a wealthy Quraysh merchant, exploiting Arabia's old commercial conventions, developing markets in tandem with mosques, forgoing regulation of prices by declaring "Prices are in the hand of God," driving a wedge in commerce by introducing tax treaties favoring Muslims, and thus paving the way for capitalism later on⁵. These are just faiths the majority of humanity nowadays believe, for the examples are far more numerous and widespread. All of these are no surprise when we consider it was the clergy class that formulated debt as synonymous with a moral failing and sin, demanding apt sacrifices as a tribute for the mediation of the sacred and profane realms, for money everywhere emerging as those apt tributes to the gods, and establishing the sacred as the first forms of private property.

Now we can see the situation more clearly. The clerics are a property-owning class with the most exclusive property of them all: The Sacred. Sacred can be anything: land, knowledge, craft, custom, ritual, thought, feeling. Anything. The rest of us, the followers, the servants of the faith, just need to toil away to bring the clerics' vision of the sacred into reality. We have a befitting name for the property-owning merchant class: Capitalists. Still, religious capitalists are more nimble and resourceful than their more contemporary peers. The consumers in the secular countries of the imperialist core have some paltry protection against conventional capitalists for faulty commodities. In religion, the commodity is divinity, ever flawless and infallible. Every failure, harm, and disinterest always remains the fault of believers. When the contradictions add up and the institutional religions inevitably start to crumble, there is either endless turning bibs and bobs dealers of religion, cranking gears, to reform and remold its festering body, or it shatters into thousand pieces, ushering the era of spiritualism where everyone is their own religious entrepreneur, hustling and bustling to sell their own petite, boutique, cozy, modular, curated, rebellious, trendy, choose-your-own-adventure sacred commodities. Each of these religious establishments craves capital, never-ending capital. Either one is already privileged, hardly an inexhaustible source of funding, directly exploiting their followers, a risky yet common venture for startups, or attracts the fancy of prominent and influential folks, displaying their wares as premium yet accommodating to these prospective patrons. Since religions deal with power

⁴ "Debt, The First 5000 Years" by David Graeber, theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-debt; "The Sociology of Freedom: Manifesto of the Democratic Civilization" Volumes I & II by Abdullah Ocalan; Wikipedia on Uruk Period, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uruk_period

⁵ "Debt, The First 5000 Years" by David Graeber, theanarchistlibrary.org/library/david-graeber-debt; "Early Islam and the Birth of Capitalism" by Benedikt Koehler; Wikipedia on Quraysh, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quraysh

and servitude, dogma and conformity, persuasion and coercion, charity and philanthropy, each exploits depending on religions capability and communities' resilience to their power.

We just need to take a step back from the mayhem and look around, then we realize religion produces nothing of value. Religions are now so entrenched in our societies that we wouldn't evaluate their worth by their competence or capability but by how catastrophic their collapse would be, one more way to be like businesses: too big to fail. Just like capitalism, religion just sabotages, controls, appropriates, corrupts, steals, and takes. It takes everything, more wantonly and brazenly than capitalism, not in a mere few centuries but many millennia. Ramadan and similar fasting traditions likely were originally communal collective actions in periodic times of drought and hardship for the survival of everyone in their communities. Or funerals. Funerals are perhaps the only voluntary, informal, communal, and pragmatic way for a community to inform the death of their members, rally support for the surviving family members in need, and reach a general consensus about future plans without our departed community members. We can barely trace a glimmer of this history from the present religious observance of these traditions, which is as fleeting and ethereal as illusions and myths. All our traditions are now twisted, their communal origin forgotten, hollowed out, just another host to reproduce religion.

In the end, we are fighting every single day for liberation, a better future free of hierarchy, coercion, domination, subservience, and power. In our struggle, we get hurt, comrades get hurt, and often only death awaits us on our path. Our grieving is cut short by the cruel reality manifested by priesthood throughout many millennia. No respite, no time to heal. So, every day we kill a tiny piece of ourselves, just numb enough to continue, yet surprised we are still alive, we still care, we still love. I am not a picky person; Free societies of the future can take many self-contradictory shapes. But, I have one demand: these free societies must survive for at least a century, enough time for my bones to rot and wither away so I couldn't roll in my damned grave once they fail. Would we finally be free? and would it last for centuries? I do not know. What I do know is that the institution of religion can't continue to fester, corroding and eroding our values and imagination if we ever hope to achieve our aspirations.

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