

A picture of Imam Khomeini's life, work and unique Islamic personality

Professor Hamid Algar begins the main essay of this commemorative collection by highlighting the remarkable fact that ten years after Imam Khomeini's death, and twenty years after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, no serious, comprehensive biography of him has yet been written, in Persian, English or any other language.

In a recent newspaper interview, Professor Algar was quoted as saying that he was considering writing such a biography at some time in the future. Reading this collection of three essays, one hopes and prays that Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala gives him the opportunity and the facilities to do this work, for it is difficult to imagine anyone who might do it better.

Professor Algar, an English-born Muslim who has taught Persian and Islamic history and philosophy at the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, since 1965, has been a student of Iranian Islamic affairs for some 40 years. He wrote on Religion and State in Iran long before the Revolution, and translated and edited *Islam and Revolution*, the definitive English edition of the political writings and statements of Imam Khomeini, which was published shortly after the Revolution. He is presently working on a second volume, which will bring this collection up-to-date, including all Imam Khomeini's political writings up to his death in 1989.

Until he has the opportunity to work on a full biography, however, this slim volume may need to fill the gap on peoples' shelves, and will do so admirably. The main essay is a detailed account of the Imam's life, written in the clear and readable English which is a hallmark of Algar's writing. It is sub-divided into four sections, tracing his childhood and early life, his years at Qum from 1921-1964, his exile, the Islamic Revolution, and the "the first decade of the Islamic Republic, last decade of the Imam's life".

Although much of the Imam's life story is well-known, particular concerning the political events of his later years, Professor Algar has a knack for highlighting the most important and telling events and trends in order to enlighten even a knowledgeable reader. He particularly traces the emergence of the Imam's political awareness which, he shows, was a life-long process which owed much to both his personal qualities and the environment at Qum to which it is often contrasted.

The second essay of the volume, *Imam Khomeini, 1902-1962: The Pre-Revolutionary Years*, appears to have been written some years ago. Inevitably, it duplicates some of the material in the first essay, but its emphasis is more explicitly on the emergence of the Imam's political understanding, and it provides useful and fascinating information, for example about his links with earlier political initiatives by Iranian ulama in the 1930s.

The third essay is entitled *The Fusion of the Gnostic and the Political in the Personality and Life of Imam Khomeini*. This is central to understanding the

Imam's life and work, and is also an area in which Professor Algar has a particular interest. Much of the material here will be difficult for readers without a background in this area to fully understand; but such is Professor Algar's exposition that his meaning will be clear to all but the most dense of readers. (This is a gift which perhaps owes something to his years of teaching American undergraduates.)

Professor Algar particularly highlights the way in which the Imam's spiritual and political personalities and positions were inseparably linked, quoting an episode in the life of the fourth Khalifa Ali alayhi salam: "Once, while advancing to do battle with Mu'awiya, Imam Ali began discoursing on the inner meaning of tauhid. Once of his companions asked him whether the time was suitable for the discussion of such matters. He responded that 'this is the reason that we are fighting Mu'awiya, not for any worldly gain'."

It is this same quality in Imam Khomeini - that everything he did was done for reasons of the principles of faith rather than selfish or pragmatic reasons - that explains both his successes in leading Iran's Islamic movement, and the instinctive respect in which he is held by Muslims of all nationalities and schools of thought, all over the world, and it is difficult to imagine it better expressed.

It is this element of the Imam's example, above all, that the Islamic movements elsewhere must internalize to succeed in their own struggles. If Professor Algar's writings - present and future - on Imam Khomeini can convey this quality to readers across the Muslim world, he will have done the Islamic movement a tremendous service.