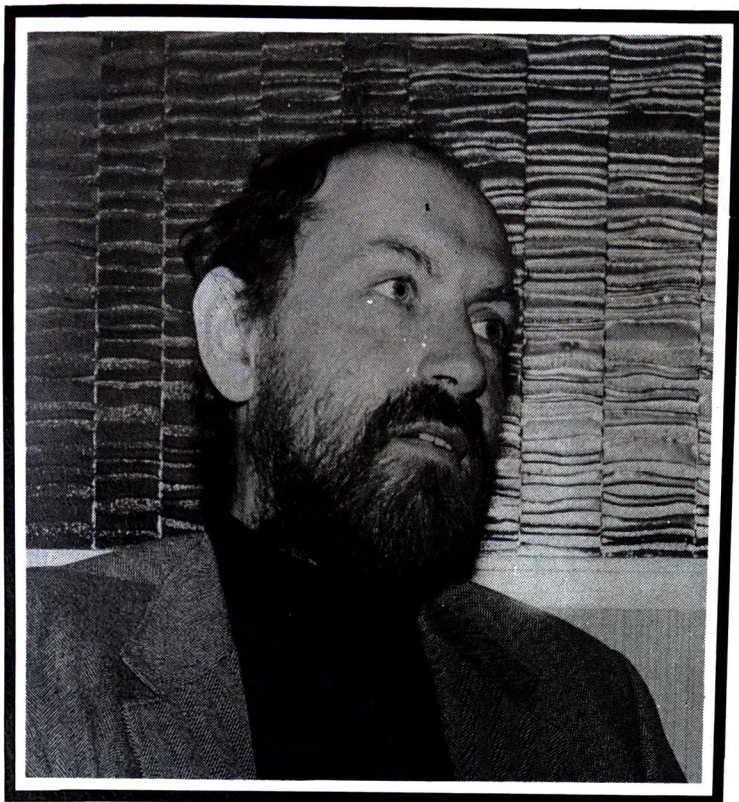


HAMID ALGAR:

Scholar and Mystic



Ahmad Versi introduces Professor Hamid Algar, the British-born Muslim scholar. Professor Algar, who teaches Islamic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Berkley, California, recently visited *Afkār* offices.

AT a conference sponsored by the erstwhile Islamic Council of Europe in April 1976, Hamid Algar stunned his audience by bluntly asking the question "It was very good of Hossein Nasr to describe all these subtleties of Sufi thought...but what is he doing about the 'ulamā' and other Muslims who are being tortured in the prisons of Iran?" Nasr walked out of the conference without replying. This episode faithfully captures the unconventional personality of Hamid Algar, the outstanding scholar and don whose involvement with Islam is intensely personal and a far cry from the perfunctory interest of

the academics. His is the raremost gift of scholarship leavened with social consciousness and personal commitment.

Born in England in 1940, Hamid Algar's interest in Islam was aroused at an early age. In the 50s, when still an undergraduate at Cambridge, Algar decided to learn Arabic and Persian. His encounter with the 'Oriental' languages, however, brought him face to face with the Qur'an. His soul could not have remained unmoved, approached as he did the Glorious Reading in a spirit of sincerity and humility. The spiritual unrest that this meeting fermented in him led him to seek guidance

from the Muslims themselves, especially the ones from the Subcontinent who were at hand at Cambridge. Indian Muslims, nevertheless, could not quench his spiritual thirst and - as by this time Algar was longing, perhaps unconsciously, to make his submission to the Only Lord - he sought contact with other Muslims. Fortunately, he moved on to Brimingham where a Yemeni community helped him understand and decipher the vision of the Qur'an. He was formally converted in 1961.

Algar's conversion, as happens so often, did not lead to withdrawal and

retreat. On the contrary, it was the start of a brilliant academic career, a period of intense creative activity which continues to this day and shows no signs of ebbing. During all this time, Hamid Algar has amply paid back his debt to Islam by enriching, teaching the Muslims as much as learning from them, contemporary Muslim awareness. That he has been able to do so, fulfilling all the fastidious demands of western academic tradition, without making any intellectual as well as emotional compromise with the dictates of his Islamic consciousness, is a tribute to his genius. What is true of his scholarship is also true of his person: his practical involvement with Muslim 'politics' has also been equally bold and uncompromising.

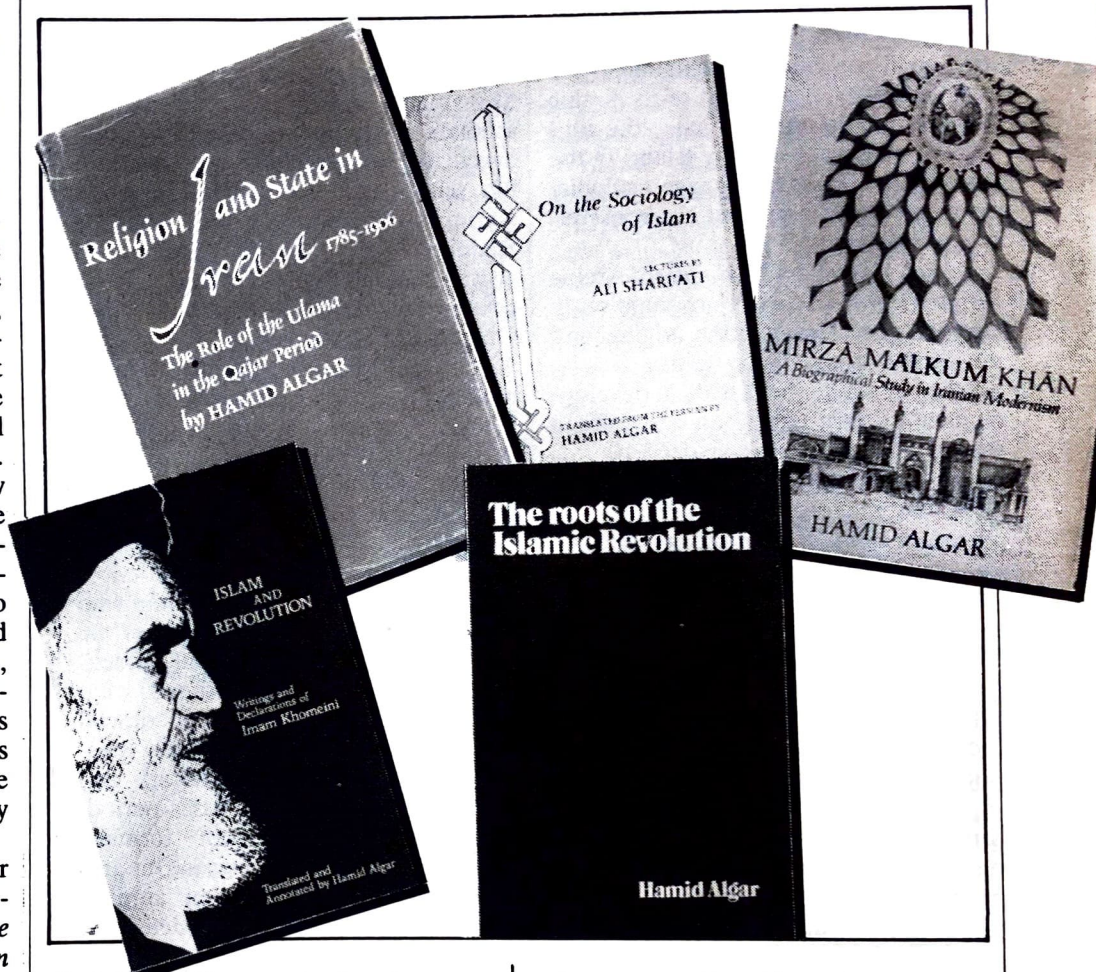
After graduating from Cambridge, Algar proceeded to Tehran in order to collect material for his doctoral dissertation. He was not impressed by what he encountered in Iran. The Shah, the political system, the academic inertia, the student unrest, left him cold. Despite this, he was not only able to collect what he came for, but the stay also gave him the chance to observe the 'clerical system of Shi'i Islam' at close hand. Hamid Algar today is one of the few 'experts' who really understand the complexities of religion-state relationship in Iran. Algar was, for instance, the only western scholar who foresaw the downfall of the Shah and the rise of Imam Khomeini. Perhaps, the only established don to seek audience with the Imam when the latter was still at Neauphle le Chateau, Algar has established a serious rapport with the intellectual leadership of revolutionary Iran.

Coming back to Cambridge, Algar presented his thesis, subsequently published in book form, *The Role of the 'Ulamā' in the Qajar Period - Religion and State in Iran 1785-1906*, and was awarded a PhD. Soon after, Dr Algar took up a teaching post at the Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of California, Berkley, where he is now the Professor of Persian and Islamic Studies. Besides the normal academic courses, Algar also teaches Qur'anic *tafsir*, which says a great deal about his Islamic moorings.

Hamid Algar has written extensively on the religious and political history of modern Islam. In his very first work, Algar emphasised the essential independence of the Shi'i clergy from the state system of Iran. Since the publication of his maiden work, Algar has modified some of his views about the efficacy of the '*ulamā*' against the state. He now believes that the attitude of the '*ulamā*' during the constitutional revolution (1900-1906) was a result of the

historical situation of 19th century Iran and their 'confused' reaction can be understood in terms of a response to the impact of the West and the importation of 'modernist' ideas. An important section of the clergy has clearly analysed the implications of political quietism, Algar argues, and now considers a constitutional limitation on power as the least imperfect form of government during the absence of the twelfth Imam. One may add that with the establishment of Imam Khomeini's *Velāyet-e-*

the Muslim Institute as *The Islamic Revolution in Iran* and again as *The Roots of Islamic Revolution*. Finally, another important work in the academic mold, which shows Algar's uninterrupted preoccupation with the modern history of Iran, namely *Mirza Malkum Khan - a Biographical Study in Iranian Modernism*, also merits attention. Like its predecessor, *The Role of the 'Ulamā' in the Qajar Period*, it is a seminal study of recent Iranian history and has won as much favour as Algar's maiden book.



Faghih, Shi'i constitutionalism has found a workable and authentic solution to the problem of rule.

Among Dr Algar's other works, there is his translation and annotation of Imam Khomeini's speeches and statements (*Islam and Revolution*, California 1981). It is in fact the only serious presentation of Imam's thought in English and contains sizeable excerpts from Imam Khomeini's meditations on the role of the *faqih* in Islamic government. Hamid Algar has won much acclaim on behalf of this presentation. His knowledge of Persian, Islamic history and Shi'i religious thought has few parallels elsewhere in the West. Equally impressive has been Algar's translation of the late Ali Shariati's writings printed as *The Sociology of Islam*. A transcription of the four lectures that Dr Algar gave in London has also been printed by

At present Dr Algar is writing a biography of Imam Khomeini and the history of the Naqshbandiyya - one of the most important contemporary Sufi orders. Algar's relationship to the Naqshbandis may best be summed up in his own words. When asked if he was a practising Naqshbandi, he replied, "If practising means following all aspects of the Order, then no. But if you mean one who has the view of Islam from the view of Naqshbandi, then yes, I am." Though all admirers of Hamid Algar are looking forward to these important works, they will be grieved to know that during his absence, much of the material that Professor Algar had been collecting so patiently perished in a fire which caught his house in California early this year. Let us pray that the loss is not irreparable.

Ahmad Versi