



# BOOK ANALYSIS

## *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*

### **Basic book information:**

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Mottahedeh, Roy. *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 1985.

### **Author's bio:**

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Roy Mottahedeh is a professor of pre-modern social and intellectual history of the Islamic Middle East at Harvard University and an expert on Iranian culture. Mottahedeh has published numerous works in his field including *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (1980) and *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (1985). He has won many academic awards which include a Guggenheim and a MacArthur Prize Fellowship.

### **Synopsis:**

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*The Mantle of the Prophet* presents two differing perspectives of Iran. The first is an intimate presentation of Iran through the eyes of a young Shi'a mullah and a sayyed (a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), Ali Hashemi, as he works his way through the complex erudition system of the Shi'a clerical class. The second is a sweeping panoramic view of two thousand years worth of Persian culture and literature. The rich texture of Persian culture is paralleled alongside the progression of Shi'a theology and its merger with the political values of Iran that culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

### **Perspective / Angle:**

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According to Mottahedeh, the richness and strength of Persian culture stem from the ambiguities, or "grey areas," which are allowed to exist within it. It is these ambiguities which have allowed Persian culture to survive centuries of conquests and change. Mottahedeh's perspective is that the merger of politics and religion during the 1979 Revolution has created a theocratic regime in Iran which threatens to squeeze out all ambiguities and subgroups in Iran. This in turn threatens the survival of Persian culture as it has existed and flourished for the last two millennia.

## **How it relates to or supports mutual understanding:**

No group of people can be completely defined by one facet of their lives, be it their politics, religion, or culture. It is a blending of these aspects and others that allows for an accurate and comprehensive portrait of a people. For the people of Iran, Persian culture has been their most defining feature and the unifying force for a large and diverse nation. The religion and politics of modern Iran are not born from its soil, yet both have been so molded and shaped by the unique and ancient nature of Persian culture that they have become inimitably Persian. Thus, it is especially important for us, as outsiders of Iran, to recognize the limits of our ability to comprehend the richness and breadth of Persian culture. What we can strive for is to respect and value a culture which, more often than not, is overshadowed by the politics and religion of Iran, and to present various facets of Persian culture to our Western society.

## **Study guide questions:**

1. According to the author, before the fall of the Shah, Iranian life rested in “grey areas” in all aspects of society; ambiguities existed in education, beliefs, politics, and individual lives. What are some of these ambiguities that Mottahedeh brings attention to in order to make his point?
2. Throughout *The Mantle of the Prophet*, the history and importance of Persian literature are presented. How does understanding this often mystical element of Persian culture help put Iranian life into perspective (especially in contrast to the religious nature of Iran which is most frequently presented to the West)?
3. The complexities of the educational system that aspiring mullahs must work their way through offers an interesting look into the lives and perspectives of a subgroup within Iran rarely glimpsed by outsiders. How has this education affected the overall life of Iran and the Shi’a religion? How does the mullahs’ education compare to Western education?
4. At the end of *The Mantle of the Prophet*, the fall of the Shah and the rise of Khomeini are shown both through the eyes of Ali and the historical perspective. How is Khomeini presented by the author? Also, according to the author, what were the events and changes

in Iran that led to the fall of the Shah?