

Alireza Doostdar. *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. xiv + 295. ISBN: 978-0691163789. \$29.95.

The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny presents Alireza Doostdar's research on the spiritual landscape of modern Iran. His main argument is that, in the Iranian case since the nineteenth century, occult experimentations have involved epistemological manoeuvres to create and confirm a particular rationalisation of the unseen. Three interrelated processes are highlighted that reveal different types of Iranian "metaphysical" rationality, where the term metaphysical indicates "a modern rationalized form of the unseen and the occult," constituting an epistemological foundation to contemporary practices in Iran as experimenters respond to and depart from scientific legitimacy and state-sponsored "orthodoxy" (8-10). First, challenging the "superstitious" and "irrational" by adopting anti-traditional models and rejecting Islamic occult sciences and its practitioners such as "prayer writers" (*do'anevis*) or rammals. Second, to supplement the first process, a "new" metaphysical language needs to be applied taken from spirit-scientific frameworks that are construed as ideologically neutral, steering away from the spirit/jinn-based modalities of efficaciousness and opting for psycho-energist interpretations (5). Finally, this rationalisation is set toward social and individual holism in which "the metaphysical [is] in the service of attaining pious virtues, achieving health, tranquillity, and joy, or grappling with the problems imagined to be plaguing Iranian society" (5).

"The uncanny" of the book's title is understood as that which elicits "feelings of disorientation and discomfort that in turn become further prompts to rationalization along new pathways" (19-20). In other words, it is that unresolved feeling, an amalgam of curiosity and repulsion which incites inquiry. Doostdar links this to the concept of "wonder" that has historically formed an entire

genre of Islamic literature dedicated to the cultivation of fascination with the unfamiliar as it confronts the frameworks of scientific rationalizations in a certain geographic and chronological context. This tradition is exemplified by the cosmography of Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī (1203–1283), *‘Ajā’ib al-makhlūqāt wa gharā’ib al-manjūdāt* (‘The Wonders of Creation and the Marvels of Existents’).

The book is divided into three main parts. The first focuses on traditional forms of engagement with the metaphysical, centring on the figure of the rammal, who occupies a liminal place as a practitioner of the occult arts and agent of the metaphysical within a more traditionally Islamic framework in terms of practice (geomancy, for example) and ideology (belief in jinn and the magical power of Qur’anic verses). Doostdar juxtaposes the rammal with the figure of the seeker of spiritual-therapeutics whose ideology is characterised by a tension between shunning the traditional for an aetiology of distress (curses) that employs quasi-scientific concepts of energy, frequencies, and inorganic viruses.

The second part largely focuses on the fascinating emergence of Spiritism within the Iranian intellectual milieu in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Francophone Spiritists were precursors to later kinds of “scientized spirituality”; they grounded “their religious cosmologies in what they took to be universal modern science and to tether their moral teachings to what they defended as objective empirical research” (113). They aimed to legitimize these practices in a Eurocentric post-Enlightenment atmosphere that privileged “the scientific” (*‘elmi*), in opposition to superstition (*kehorafā*) (3–4), with the former strongly correlating with modernity and progress. The second part of the book also establishes an epistemological continuity between the Spiritists and members of Cosmic Mysticism, founded by Mohammad ‘Ali Taheri (b. 1956). The latter claims science “as a privileged path to truth but empirical methods are circumvented at crucial points in favour of intuition and mystical unveiling” (155). Cosmic Mysticism was at the height of its popularity during Doostdar’s research in the 1990s.

The third part discusses the spiritual negotiations surrounding the “friends of God” (*awliya*), which refers to spiritual elite who have attained a high level of holiness and piety that often come with extraordinary abilities. Doostdar shows that in Iran, the friends of God are positioned between two poles of tension. First, state-supported Shī’a “orthodoxy” sensitive to violations perceived to be caused by Sufi practices and leanings. Accordingly, the alleged friend of God becomes more akin to fraudsters and rammals, since they all actively seek wonder-work (*karamat*) (224), while the figure of the Howzeh trained scholar-friend of God remains the sanctioned model. The second is the need for promoting “new friends of God” via modern hagiographies since earlier models of piety were no longer attractive to the youth of postwar Iran with its growing institutional stability and capitalist appetite. A new genre of hagiographies emerged which were highly concerned about irreligiousness and the spread of “deviant” forms of spirituality. These forms would include Cosmic Mysticism that detaches itself from both the state’s bureaucratisation of spirituality and traditional expressions of piety and self-discipline (181–83).

Doostdar succeeds in showing how these features of Iranian negotiations with the metaphysical emerge from particular events in Iranian history. These include the institutional reform after the 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution which led to an explicit censure of the occult sciences, calling for enlightened education and attacking superstition under the ancient regime (50); the economic liberalisation post the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 which made available services and products to middle and upper classes, aimed at increasing material and spiritual, psychological and therapeutic prosperity (11); and the birth of the Islamic Republic induced by the 1979 Revolution which heightened anxieties “by disorientations linked to the bureaucratization and instrumentalization of piety” (216). Doostdar links these watershed moments to a historical concern for the reconciliation of religion and science, or Islam and “rationality” – whether it was the nineteenth-century notion of science or medieval Aristotelianism.

These circumstances, in turn, led to traits common to all the spiritual currents discussed in this book: For instance, given that metaphysical agency cannot “be simply denied or straightforwardly embraced,” the discussed currents all embrace caution and ambiguity (54–55). With Islamic jurists, this manifested in many ways, including control over the circulation of occult texts and penalizing “fraud” (59–60), yet validating the learning and practice of the traditional occult sciences such as geomancy and *jafr* under specific conditions (61–63). We can also see caution and ambiguity with one member of Cosmic Mysticism – Lili Bayati – who identifies as being “extremely logical” yet submits to the view that the language of science cannot account for spiritual outcomes (161–63). With God’s friends, and to some extent the Spiritists, caution and ambiguity are evident in strategizing edification through discretion and careful public disclosures (191–98). Other common traits include self-reflexivity, self-discipline, and self-care (116).

Doostdar aptly demonstrates, furthermore, the entanglement of Iranian spirituality with European esoteric currents. For example, in the case of Cosmic Mysticism, it is seen in the popularity of Rhonda Byrne’s 2006 film *The Secret* which “captured the spirit of the ‘success’ (*movaffaqiyyat*) industry of self-help and prosperity literature and seminars that emerged amid economic liberalization and progressive commercialization after the 1980–1988 war with Iraq” (96). In the case of Iranian Spiritists, their engagement led to the “repurposing of Spiritist evidence for Islamic theological polemics” (118–19). Other entangled “western” currents such as the New Age movement, Theosophy, quantum mysticism, etc., are also mentioned (255, footnote 7; 18).

The Iranian Metaphysicals serves as an instructive example of how nineteenth-century notions of science were central to the refashioning of religious stances. As Nile Green notes, this led to the emergence of what he termed the “global occult.”¹ By discussing the Iranian context, Doostdar confirms that esotericism and the occult

1. Nile Green, “The Global Occult: An Introduction,” *History of Religions*, 54, no. 4 (May 2015): 383–93 (386).

are crucial to the development of modern understandings of religion and science. Through their universalism, global networks, and commitment to science and education, groups such as Iranian Spiritists and members of Cosmic Mysticism “joined Freemasons, Baha’is, reformist Sufis, Theosophists, and other innovators while also establishing a new grammar and practice of scientized spirituality that would endure far beyond their own immediate horizons” (113).

Readers from beyond Islamic studies, such as those interested in esoteric movements from a global perspective, would have benefited from a clearer exposition of what constitutes Shī’a “orthodoxy,” posited as the most virulent challenge to new religiosity and a force regulating the practice of the occult sciences (11–12). Such an explanation would have allowed a deeper understanding of the implications of experimenting with the metaphysical within the upper and middle class, as well as the poorer classes.

The Iranian Metaphysicals sheds light on an overlooked aspect to the study of modernity within Islamic cultures; namely, contemporary occult practices and theorisations, and their role in developing new forms that mediate between the local and the global, the community and the individual, and the “rational” and the abstruse. I hope such a study will launch more research in other global Islamic contexts in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, with similar vigour and nuance.

Liana Saif

lianasaif@hotmail.com