



INTRODUCTION

DEFENSIVE RADIATION

I attended my first exorcism on a chilly Tuesday evening in December 2008. The venue was a condominium on the fourth floor of a newly completed apartment building in a middle-class residential neighborhood in eastern Tehran. There were about thirty people in attendance, roughly two-thirds of them women. Our hosts were a young couple I will call Ahmad and Vida.¹ That night, as well as in the handful of additional sessions I attended at their home, Ahmad busied himself ushering new arrivals into the spacious living room and ensuring that everyone was comfortable. Vida meanwhile oversaw a small group of women in the open-layout kitchen who prepared and served black tea along with Danish pastries at several intervals over the course of around three hours. The atmosphere was welcoming and exuberant, if a bit awkward, like a dinner party where half the guests do not know one another. Most of the participants were students or graduates in a series of underground seminars dubbed “Cosmic Mysticism” (*erfan-e keyhani*). The exorcism session was part of a weekly “therapy” (*darman*) component that also served as an opportunity for socializing. The lead exorcist, Mr. Sheyda, was an instructor or “master” in Cosmic Mysticism whom I had met only a week earlier when I registered for his seminars. Upon hearing about my research, he immediately invited me to take part in the therapy session, assuring me that I would find it both useful and fascinating. He was right.

Eager to get the therapy process under way, Mr. Sheyda walked over to the opposite end of the living room where most of the women were sitting. He looked at one of the guests whom I could not see. “What’s happened?” he asked in a calm but firm tone. There was a moment’s silence. Then the “patient” let out a terrifying scream. A series of moans followed, rising and falling in pitch, then another shriek. Mr. Sheyda shot a few quick glances at some of the young women sitting around the patient. He gave them directions to pin her down and begin to “work” on her. Then he addressed the patient directly: “Detach! Get out!”

A man sitting next to me noticed my enthusiasm to see what was happening, and he encouraged me to step up and take a closer look. I eagerly obliged.

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The patient—a woman in her early thirties named Zeynab—was now lying on her back, four other women holding down her shoulders and knees. She let out one more scream. Mr. Sheyda ordered her to “calm down” and instructed his students to keep her steady. Zeynab was now weeping and saying, “Oh oh oh, I’m suffocating! Please help me! Please help me! I’m suffocating!” Mr. Sheyda asked someone to open the window to let in some fresh air. He instructed the four women to give Zeynab some room so she could stand on her feet. He took her hand himself and helped her up. She breathed heavily, weeping and moaning.

Again Mr. Sheyda addressed Zeynab: “Who are you? Do you want to speak?” Zeynab let out a few angry snorts interspersed with hisses and a harsh, voiceless “*kh*” sound through the sides of her mouth. “Who are you?” demanded Mr. Sheyda, “Who are you? Huh?” She only hissed back. “Are you a jinn? Who sent you here? Who? *Who?*” Zeynab hissed again. “Move away from her!” Mr. Sheyda ordered, “*Positive Two! Out! Out!*” Zeynab swung her arms violently, stomping her foot and swaying like a drunk. Another scream. Mr. Sheyda looked around for more students. He asked three to step up and transmit “defensive radiation” to Zeynab. He approached her himself and stared her in the eye. Her chest was heaving, hair sweaty and tangled, eyes crossed, lips contorted. “What do you want with Zeynab?” Mr. Sheyda demanded. She growled, then doubled over and made a gagging motion, as if to vomit. But nothing came out. Mr. Sheyda commanded again: “You will leave Zeynab!” She moaned, swaying from side to side. “*Positive Two!*” he ordered. A student asked for clarification as to what kind of radiation she should be emitting. “Injection,” said Mr. Sheyda.

Zeynab’s condition seemed to be deteriorating. She was now kicking and hurling punches, attacking anyone within her reach. She howled and screamed. Mr. Sheyda was unfazed. “*Defensive Four,*” he said calmly. Zeynab shrieked as if in pain. Her moaning was now lower-pitched, verging on a male voice. Another woman, pointing both hands at Zeynab, uttered “*Positive Two.*” Zeynab screamed again. Two of the students closed in on her once more, grabbing her arms to subdue her. Zeynab’s white shawl flew off her hair. Two more students stepped in and clutched her ankles. The four of them pushed her to the ground as gently as they could. She squirmed and moaned, trying to break free. Another shawl, a black one this time, fell off a student-healer’s head.

Mr. Sheyda leaned over her: “She purchased you herself, didn’t she?” Zeynab coughed out loud, as if wanting to vomit. “Leave her,” Mr. Sheyda demanded. Taking a moment’s break, he walked over to me to explain what was going on while his students continued their work. “Zeynab Khanum had consulted a prayer writer and bought a jinn from him to assault her ex-husband. Now the jinn won’t let go of her.” He said he had been working on Zeynab for three weeks. “You should’ve seen her the first day,” he said. “She was in terrible

shape. She was running on the tips of the headrests on these chairs. It was an incredible sight. You wouldn't believe it!"

The master returned to Zeynab once again, leaning over her. "Good," he said, "you must leave Zeynab now." Her breathing was again loud and heavy. "Positive Two," shouted Mr. Sheyda, clapping his hands, "Out! Toward the light! Leave her! Detach! It's time to go." Her moaning was louder. "You can't stay!" Mr. Sheyda insisted. "I'll help you. I'll help you. It's time for help. God's mercy has embraced you. Detach. One... Two... It's over! Detach! Out! Out! Out! Out! Out! Out!" He turned to the rest of us. "It's separating." Zeynab gave off a loud orgasmic "aaah," then a burp, followed by a rapidly descending moan. "It's gone," Mr. Sheyda announced. "Thank God," one of the student-healers exhaled. They helped Zeynab up and walked her over to a couch adjacent to the wall. Vida handed her a glass of ice water, which she pressed to her forehead as she relaxed. Another woman fanned her with a shawl.

RATIONALIZING THE UNSEEN

Zeynab's exorcism was one of dozens I observed among participants in Cosmic Mysticism, an Iranian spiritual-therapeutic movement that was at the height of its popularity during my research. These Cosmic Mystics in turn represent only a portion of a much broader landscape of spiritual seeking, therapeutic experimentalism, and occult exploration. The chapters that follow chart this terrain in contemporary Iran. I examine encounters with occult specialists, séances with the souls of the dead, new forms of exorcism and healing, and appeals to marvelous mystical powers. For my interlocutors, a phenomenon like Zeynab's possession by jinn exceeded ordinary experience and expectation, and therefore warranted being labeled "metaphysical" (*mavara'i* or *metafiziki*). Even so, there was widespread agreement that such phenomena were best approached by steering clear of superstitions (*khorafat*) and carefully deploying the powers of intellect (*'aql*) and science (*'elm*), with the latter including systematic observation and manipulation. My interlocutors saw their practices as resolutely rational (*'aqlani*). Yet the specters of superstition proved elusive, evading attempts to exorcise them from reasoned inquiries and sneaking back to haunt them at every turn.

Appeals to science and reason notwithstanding, the practices that I study in this book often provoked elite consternation. Religious leaders, intellectuals, journalists, and statesmen criticized engagements with the occult as irrational and downright dangerous. Those elites committed to the more conservative strains of Islamic Republican ideology condemned spiritual experiments like Cosmic Mysticism as so many "deviant" (*monharef*) incarnations of "pseudomysticism" (*shebh-e 'erfan*) fomented by foreign enemies in order to corrupt

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Iranian society from within. Opposition intellectuals likewise criticized occult practices as superstitious, but they placed the blame at the foot of the Iranian state itself. For some of these elites, the proliferation of irrationality was a result of the state's failure to provide economic and social stability. With rational solutions out of reach, they argued, the desperate had no recourse but to turn to irrational means for assuaging their anxieties. Others saw spiritual experimentalism as a form of resistance, an escape from the state's inflexible imposition of Islamic norms. Still others accused state officials of deliberately propagating superstition as a way of ensuring their own continued domination. The latter position has even found support in English-language scholarship on contemporary Iranian politics.²

Their many differences aside, the elite detractors of occult experimentation shared a crucial assumption: that the metaphysical engagements they condemned were fundamentally unlike their own intellectual pursuits; that is, they supposedly lacked commitment to reasoned scientific inquiry and were therefore mired in superstition and unreason. This book argues the exact opposite. I show that the metaphysical inquiries of occult experimentalists and spiritual explorers like the Cosmic Mystics are best understood in terms of attempts to rationalize the "unseen" (*gheyb*)—that is, to grasp phenomena like sorcery and jinn possession in reasoned, scientific, nonsuperstitious terms. Furthermore, the commitments to science and rationality that my interlocutors shared with their elite critics were not mere matters of formal similarity or mimicry. An overarching argument of this book is that metaphysical inquiries have constituted a fundamental aspect of modern Iranian thought since the late nineteenth century. Indeed, they have consistently pushed the boundaries of established norms in ways that have rendered such inquiries edgy and avant-garde. This heritage of inquiry and experimentation has been almost entirely ignored and its epistemic consequences overlooked. In brief, my contention is that we cannot understand contemporary religion in Iran, including its intellectualist and orthodox manifestations, without adequately attending to the metaphysical inquiries of occultists and spiritual explorers.

When I speak of the rationalization of the unseen, I refer primarily to three interrelated processes that have been under way since the late nineteenth century. The first of these is the effort to cleanse metaphysical knowledge of superstition. As I understand it, "superstition," and cognate terms like "nonsense" and "irrationality," are discursive constructs with no independent substance outside of attempts to identify, demarcate, and eradicate them. For groups like the Cosmic Mystics, combating superstition meant staying away from dangerous "prayer writers" (*do'anevis*) or *rammals* and sifting credible knowledge from hearsay. In the exorcism account above, for example, Mr. Sheyda claimed to be counteracting the nefarious work of a prayer writer who had sold a jinn to Zeynab that now took possession of her. In his seminars, he took pains to distinguish the true metaphysical knowledge of Cosmic Mysti-

cism from wrongheaded ideas propagated by prayer writers and their ignorant clients.

The second aspect of rationalization with which I am concerned is the attempt to formulate scientific concepts, methods, and models for grasping metaphysical phenomena. The Cosmic Mystics did so by developing an experimental practice of exorcism that they called “psymetology” or “defensive radiation,” which was aimed at expunging “inorganic viruses” like jinn and the souls of the deceased. When an exorcist uttered phrases like “Defensive Four” or “Positive Two,” she tapped into an elaborate body of knowledge-practice that was disseminated in Cosmic Mysticism seminars, published in books and articles, and even articulated in the form of scientific conference papers and patent applications.

The third rationalization process I analyze in this book has to do with systematizing and disciplining individual dealings with the metaphysical in the service of attaining pious virtues, achieving health, tranquillity, and joy, or grappling with the problems imagined to be plaguing Iranian society. In Cosmic Mysticism, such attempts amounted, on the one hand, to the development of alternative forms of therapeutic spirituality, which included the practice of exorcism. On the other hand, Mr. Sheyda and his colleagues considered their mission to consist in the dissemination of a totalizing worldview (*binesh*) with its attending prescriptions for everyday behavior that they claimed would eventually solve society’s ills. As a sustained project for spiritual and moral reform, Cosmic Mysticism ran up against competing discourses that articulated their own reformist visions through engagements with the metaphysical realm, while deriding the teachings of the Cosmic Mystics as irrational or deviant.

In all three processes, the rationalization of the unseen unfolds with explicit reference to conceptions of reason, intellect, and science, while the substance of these notions is itself up for debate. Even so, rationalization is not merely an intellectual activity but a complex process tightly connected to the emergence and consolidation of the modern state. Superstition is a problem for law enforcement and public order. Science pertains to mass education and the production and policing of legitimate knowledge. And therapeutic and disciplinary reason is entangled with the instrumental logics of bureaucratic classification, evaluation, and decision making. In the past two decades, these reasons of state have found expression in theorizations of “Shi‘i rationality” (*‘aqlaniyyat-e shi‘eh*), a concept favored by state-allied intellectuals and religious leaders who are concerned with critiquing and elaborating the epistemic foundations of an Islamic civilizational alternative to the secular West. Under the rubric of Shi‘i rationality, a wide swath of topics have come under critical scrutiny and turned into objects of state planning. These include intellectual disciplines (jurisprudence, theology, mysticism, political theory, social science, and so on), structures of governance (the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* or “guard-

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ianship of the jurist” and its institutional trappings, including those pertaining to education, cultural planning, and policing), normative modes of pious attachment (such as passionate love for the household of the prophet Muhammad and zeal for martyrdom), and ritual behavior (worship, spiritual wayfaring, and mourning for the family of the Prophet).

In focusing on rationalization since the late nineteenth century, and especially under the Islamic Republic, I am not claiming that earlier approaches to the unseen were irrational or indifferent to reason. Muslim thinkers have been concerned with identifying and eradicating superstition for centuries. Theologians have formulated sophisticated theoretical positions toward the unseen for just as long. And premodern philosophers, scientists, occultists, and mystics of various stripes have attempted ambitious syntheses of knowledge to bring human understandings of material and immaterial reality into grand totalities. These efforts have moreover intertwined in complex ways with conceptions of political order, the legitimation of divine kingship, and practices of governance. Modern rationalization, that is, should be understood not as an altogether unprecedented process but rather as a distinctive modality both continuous and discontinuous with the past.³ Its distinctiveness has to do with the particularities of the modern bureaucratic state, and with the defensive position in which the proponents of metaphysical inquiries found themselves from roughly the turn of the twentieth century onward. Their attempts to cleanse metaphysical knowledge of superstition and to bring it in-line with modern scientific discovery participated in a larger theater in which Iranians encountered Europeans on unequal terms and resolved to catch up, although this meant adopting the latter’s criteria for evaluating their own progress. Even the contemporary proponents of Shi’i rationality with their strident civilizational ambitions have been unable to completely break free of this legacy.

My interlocutors in this book could be thought of as model subjects of the modern state’s rationalizing projects, even if their commitments to reason do not always match those of state institutions and their allied authority figures. All of the women and men whom I came to know over the course of my research had completed high school. Most had gone on to obtain university degrees. They included graduate students, engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, *howzeh* scholars, university professors, businessmen, artists, writers, journalists, and housewives. Reading was an activity in which they engaged as a matter of course, and they were as conversant with books and periodicals as with websites and other digital media (sometimes in English and Arabic as well as Persian). Concepts like “reason,” “rationality,” and “science” were fundamental in their articulations of their identities. When explaining their orientations toward metaphysical questions, they frequently deployed such concepts and made it plain that they considered it crucial to justify their thoughts, commitments, and activities in rational terms.

Theological reason looms large in the various facets of the rationalization of the unseen that I examine in this book. This is a predominantly Islamic reason that draws on a centuries-old Shi'i tradition of philosophical, theological, and jurisprudential inquiry. It grants a privileged place to the intellect (*'aql*), whose dominion, capacities, and limitations have been extensively debated and elaborated.⁴ The tradition's rationality consists in its systematicity and coherence, as well as its self-conscious attempts to define the limits of respectable inquiry and to exclude "nonsense" or "superstition" (*khorafeh*). Since the late nineteenth century, its rationality has also consisted in attempts to formulate coherent positions toward newly emerging rival modes of intellection, primarily those of the modern empirical sciences, post-Enlightenment Western philosophy, and new religious and philosophical currents within Iran.

The rationalization of theology pertains to the full range of these endeavors, whether involving accommodation, absorption, rejection, or modification of the positions and approaches of various rivals. But its scope is not restricted to that of orthodox Shi'i Islam. The Cosmic Mystics with whom I opened this introduction have a complicated and ambivalent relationship to Islam, but their outlook is no less theological and their speculations no less rationalist. Their development as an occult-mystico-therapeutic movement is rooted in engagements with and borrowings from Islamic orthodoxy and myriad Iranian heterodox currents, as well as a decades-long history of experimentation with modern European and American esoteric and "metaphysical" traditions, from mesmerism, Spiritism, and Theosophy to New Age–inflected Eastern spirituality, Native American shamanism, and Scientology. The theological projects that characterize these movements are, like their orthodox Shi'i counterparts, centrally concerned with the repudiation of superstition and the elaboration of rational positions, the latter often rooted in some conception of empirical science.

Modern scientific reason also plays a significant role in this book. I focus on its power to adjudicate metaphysical truth, but this power cannot be separated from the broader esteem that Iranians accord the modern empirical disciplines. State officials appeal to science's prestige to justify national projects (the nuclear energy program being one of the more notable examples), experts resort to its authority to support or question government policies, young people compete over its mastery in hopes of securing better jobs and more prosperous futures, and countless others invest it with fantasies—of progress, power, precision, speed, longevity, and other desires.

The power that science wields is a historical achievement, the effect of decades—if not centuries—of human effort. Its history is not one of uniform progress but of convergences and divergences among many different kinds of practice over a long stretch of time and in the face of myriad forms of contestation. These practices have included small-scale acts of discourse—translation and instruction, oral and textual disputation, learned exchange and popular

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entertainment—but also large-scale biopolitical projects, such as hygiene, eugenics, psychiatry, pedagogy, and so on. They have been implicated in the rise of new classes of professionals—scientists, engineers, technicians, bureaucrats, and educators—and also the building of new institutions and the undermining of old ones. No less important, these practices have been deeply entangled with the state’s powers of legislation, disciplining, and coercion.⁵

Just as the history of the rise of modern science cannot be reduced to a tale of unilinear progress, so the actors involved should not be caricatured as secular progressive modernists battling reactionary traditionalists. For one thing, commitment to Islamic tradition has translated to a spectrum of attitudes to modern science, including enthusiastic adoption and appropriation.⁶ On the other hand, if many “traditionalists” over the past century have embraced modern science, many of the Iranian proponents of science typically imagined as “secularists” have been committed to explicitly religious projects. Scientific rationality, that is, has become intertwined with more than one form of theological reason.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, theological and scientific rationalities have converged in the formation of Iranian state policy.⁷ The bureaucracy, meanwhile, has been elaborated in the service of state interests publicly justified in terms of Shi‘i orthodoxy. Two of these interests are significant for the arguments of this book: the inculcation of pious virtues among the citizenry, which includes combating “deviant” spiritualities, and the verification of these virtues in the process of vetting candidates for state employment. In both cases, the disciplinary rationalities that guide individual and communal practices of ethical self-care run up against, or become entangled with, the governmental logics through which the state makes Islamic piety an object of knowledge, cultivation, and evaluation. The metaphysical realm plays a significant role here both as a resource for moral reformers (including those embedded within state institutions) who use stories of divine marvels to bolster specific modes of virtue, and as a refuge for ordinary pious aspirants attempting to come to grips with the moral uncertainties of a society they deem to have fallen into hypocrisy and greed.

FROM OCCULT TO METAPHYSICAL

In speaking of the rationalization of practices that involve spiritual healing, sorcery, jinn possession, dream visions, saintly marvels, and so on, I have thus far used the concepts of “occult,” “unseen,” and “metaphysical” as though they were interchangeable. Slippages between these concepts do occur, both in ordinary conversation and in some texts. But they are the products of different histories and may be used to refer to very different constellations of phenomena. For this reason, I treat them as distinct concepts both to clarify my ana-

lytical arguments and to lay the groundwork for explaining a number of significant religious and intellectual shifts in contemporary Iran. In brief, the metaphysical in this book refers to a modern rationalized form of the unseen and the occult. Even though the unseen and the occult can both become objects of intellectual speculation and rational-ethical conduct, there is a specific sense in which the metaphysical takes on a rationalized character that is lacking in the other two concepts. Just what, then, do the unseen and the occult signify, and what does it mean to rationalize them?

The “unseen” or *gheyb* (Arabic *al-ghayb*) is a Qur’anic term and a key concept in Islamic theology. As such, it is centrally implicated in the human relationship with the divine, as well as with prophecy, theodicy, and eschatology. The unseen brings with it a set of normative associations and prescriptions for ethical attachment. Perhaps this is most clearly demonstrated in the Qur’anic valorization of those who have “trusting belief” (*iman*) in the unseen—that is, those who invest in a world beyond that which is immediately perceptible through the material senses: God and the hierarchy of angels who do his bidding, divine mechanisms of revelation and inspiration, the final judgment and eternal life in the hereafter.⁸

With the term “occult,” I primarily refer to those forms of knowledge and power that Iranians consider within the purview of the centuries-old tradition of *‘olum-e gharibeh*, which has usually been translated as “occult sciences.” *Gharib* has the sense of “occult,” which we associate with magic and sorcery, but it also means “strange,” “alien,” “uncanny,” and “exotic.”⁹ The Islamic occult sciences are sometimes also rendered as *‘olum-e khafiyeh* or “hidden sciences,” which again returns us to the occult in its evocation of concealment and obscurity. The occult, therefore, usually brings to mind a specific tradition of esoteric sciences, even if Iranians sometimes use it in relation to practices that they associate only loosely with that tradition.

In contrast with the unseen and the occult, “metaphysical” is a concept that has come into popular use more recently and with less technical specificity. The Persian term I am invoking is *mavara*, which is a truncated form of the Arabic phrase *ma wara’ al-tabi’a*. The latter means “that which lies beyond the natural” and is the technical philosophical equivalent of “metaphysics.” In Aristotelian philosophy, including its Islamic branch, metaphysics treats a range of topics, the most important of which is the study of “being qua being.”¹⁰ But *mavara* as it is used by Iranians today has little to do with this concept, even though their inquiries into metaphysical phenomena do often lead them to metaphysical speculation in the philosophical sense. In their usage, *mavara* refers to what we typically understand by the word “supernatural” in English. When Iranians deploy the word, however, they are not necessarily positing a neat separation from the world of material nature (which we understand to be graspable through the methods of modern science) but may also refer to extraordinary, paranormal, or uncanny phenomena that are fully natural but

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lie beyond our ordinary knowledge and experience. It is this *beyondness* that I want to emphasize in the metaphysical, rather than excluding nature or materiality per se.

There is, furthermore, a historical connection between the rise of the concept of *mavara* and what Catherine Albanese has identified as “metaphysical” forms of religious experimentation in America; that is, those practices and ideas that privilege mental powers, intuition, imagination, clairvoyance, and magic, usually in close concert with commitments to reason and scientific empiricism.¹¹ This connection is most directly captured in a linguistic equivalence in Persian vernacular between *mavara* and *metafizik*, such that the latter can at once stand for the “immaterial” (or beyond the physical), the extraordinary and paranormal, as well as the forms of knowledge associated with imported European and American forms of “scientific” spirituality and alternative therapy. It is telling that although esoteric traditions like Spiritism and Theosophy entered Iran from Europe in the early twentieth century, *metafizik* in the sense I have described did not, as far as I know, become a commonly used term until much later in the twentieth century when translations of American New Age materials became widespread.

Mavara and *metafizik* can be further distinguished from the occult and the unseen to the extent that the former lack any necessary connection to Islamic ethics and theology. To refer to an entity or phenomenon as metaphysical is only to indicate its quality as uncanny and as lying beyond ordinary knowledge and power. As an example, Iranian film critics often discuss Hollywood fantasies or supernatural thrillers as imaginative renderings of phenomena pertaining to *mavara* but never to *gheyb* (or for that matter, the occult). Normative or ethical considerations (Islamic or otherwise) are not essential to the metaphysical as a category, although *specific* metaphysical encounters may become sites for the enactment and development of particular ethical sensibilities.

In sum, the category of the metaphysical as I am using it encompasses those phenomena that might be deemed occult or unseen. In invoking specific Islamic traditions, however (no matter how loosely), the occult and the unseen bring with them certain theological and ethical considerations about which the person using the term “metaphysical” need not be concerned. Practitioners of the occult sciences, and those who engage with them in one way or another, need to reckon with these considerations, even if they ultimately dismiss them. The metaphysical, on the other hand, allows people to think comparatively (even scientifically) about the nature of the uncanny, strange, and extraordinary without being bound to the terms of specific theological or ethical arguments. It also enables conceptualizations of the epistemic and ethical stakes of particular encounters without being restricted to the Islamic occult tradition. It is in these senses that I say the metaphysical is *rationalized*: those who

adopt the term usually consider it to be a more general category than either unseen or occult, therefore allowing for comparative statements of the sort that they expect from empirical science and philosophical speculation. Yet the metaphysical represents only one channel along which the unseen and the occult may be rationalized. Both the unseen and the occult are sometimes retained in modern rationalizations, especially where reflection on their ethical entailments or the Islamic theological tradition within which they are grounded is deemed significant.

A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

The prevalence of the category of the metaphysical and its associated practices in Iran should be understood in relation to specific historical circumstances. I examine these conditions in various parts of this book, with attention to developments from the early twentieth century onward. However, as I collected all of the ethnographic materials for my research after 2005, some general notes are appropriate here for understanding the economic, social, religious, and intellectual shifts that set the stage for the most recent forms of metaphysical experimentation.

At the end of the devastating eight-year war with Iraq in 1988, the Iranian state initiated a number of policies that promoted economic liberalization, reversing some of the key components of a war economy shaped by revolutionary commitments to state centralization, protectionism, and redistribution. The changing economic environment both provided opportunities for increasing prosperity for the middle and upper classes and heightened anxieties about being left out of the promises for a better life. Pyramid schemes, antique treasure hunting, and appeals to occult specialists proliferated alongside seminars by motivational speakers preaching positive thinking as means for acquiring fabulous wealth. Meanwhile, new spiritual entrepreneurs emerged to promote psychological proficiencies like “concentration” and “peace of mind,” which would ensure survival and prosperity in increasingly unsettling socioeconomic conditions. Many of these proponents of alternative spirituality drew on scientific models of metaphysics as the ontological ground of their therapeutic teachings.

The end of the war with Iraq in 1988, the death of the Islamic Republic’s founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini the following year, and the ensuing power struggle between various Islamist factions of the revolution also bred an ideological crisis with an important counterpart in the realm of religiosity. This crisis, which remains unresolved to this day, has been focused on the problem of conceptualizing economic reform in relation to other areas of state planning, policy, and control. One crude way to articulate the problem is:

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Should the opening of the economy be accompanied by an opening in politics and culture? Put differently, how is the Islamic Republic to continue to foster a certain set of values and ideals while at the same time promoting consumptive practices that—like it or not—lead parts of the citizenry to make lifestyle choices at odds with those values and ideals?¹² One of the more visible symptoms of this ideological crisis has been a nagging anxiety about youthful defiance of dominant norms. State officials and some of their critics have often expressed concern about “flight from religion” (*din-gorizi*) and moral decline among the youth. And while they have disagreed in their diagnoses of the problem, their solutions have shared certain features.

The most influential critical discourse about state-enforced religiosity to have emerged after the late 1980s is that of the “religious intellectuals” (*row-shanfekran-e dini*).¹³ Influenced by liberal reformers in Europe and North America, these intellectuals have increasingly emphasized “religious experience” (*tajrobeh-ye dini*) as the most authentic ground for spirituality. What causes youthful flight from religion, in their view, is that the state has monopolized control over Islam and emphasizes outward compliance at the expense of inner faith. Their contention that religious truth is apprehended most authentically at the level of individual experience has lent support—if often indirect—for the bewildering range of spiritual experiments that have accompanied economic prosperity after the late 1980s. The heyday of religious intellectual influence can be traced to the liberalizing administrations of Presidents ‘Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–97) and Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005).

A very different solution to the youth’s perceived turn away from religion has been advocated by some thinkers and activists allied with the state’s projects of inculcating Islamic values. This solution has involved the publication of hagiographies of largely apolitical Shi‘i mystics or “friends of God”—figures whose pious lives can be held up as exemplars for the youth without bearing the taint of association with politics. Even though these texts do not, for the most part, adopt the language of “religious experience,” they do valorize mystical vision and direct intuition of the divine as the highest forms of communion with God. Hence, these hagiographies should be understood as part of a larger nexus within which the rationalization of metaphysical inquiries has been made both thinkable and practicable.

The year 2005 was a watershed in Iranian politics, but we can look to that year as a signpost for important religious shifts as well. This was the year when the populist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seized the presidency after defeating former president Rafsanjani and a handful of reformist and conservative rivals. Ahmadinejad was favored by a number of right-wing factions, the powerful Basij militia, and various other critics of economic and cultural liberalization in the preceding sixteen years. His victory signaled a repudiation

of politics-as-usual and strengthened voices calling for a return to the values of the Islamic Revolution, including its promises for economic redistribution. But even before Ahmadinejad ran for office, President Khatami's reformist allies were already widely unpopular for failing to deliver on a range of promises: strengthening the rule of law against abuses of power and influence, promoting freedom of speech, and relaxing social restrictions, not to mention their neglect of the more vulnerable segments of society as they pushed for liberalization.

The failure of liberal-style reform overlapped with a sense among some educated Iranians that the religious intellectualist project had reached a dead end. It is this collapse of the reformist synthesis, the attempt to offer a cohesive vision of liberal politics, market-oriented economics, and privatized religiosity that further loosened the centripetal forces restraining a middle-class spiritual free-for-all. Occult experimentation, spiritual seeking, and therapeutic exploration took on a breadth and magnitude unseen since at least the 1970s, if not much earlier, as evidenced in the proliferation of publications, seminars, and critical commentary on these topics. The defenders of state-oriented orthodoxy, meanwhile, found themselves once again resorting to the sorts of polemics that had once occupied their best minds in the 1960s in the intellectual fight against communism. This time, however, they had much more firepower in the way of finances and media infrastructure, as well as a full range of state coercive instruments with which they would attempt to break and intimidate any heterodox movement that grew too popular.

Although the rationalization of metaphysical inquiries in this book unfolds against the backdrop of orthodox anxiety over spiritual deviance and irreligion, we should be cautious about reducing the metaphysical scene to one more instance of the much-vaunted Iranian "underground," those spaces where the subjugated find the freedom to don revealing Western attire, drink alcohol, smoke hashish and pop ecstasy pills, play heavy metal music, and engage in unsanctioned sex. That is, people who participate in metaphysical experimentation are not necessarily trying to escape the dictates of an oppressive state-sanctioned Shi'i Islam. This is not to say that there is always a comfortable relationship between these experiments and Islamic authority. Far from it. But our understanding of metaphysical inquiries will be seriously impoverished if we begin and end with an opposition between state paternalism on one side and popular practice on the other, where the former coerces and dominates and the latter evades and resists.¹⁴ To attend to the centrality of metaphysical inquiries in contemporary Iran is to recognize that such inquiries cannot be reduced to heterodox or counterhegemonic practices. In other words, it compels us to notice the ways in which what we think of as orthodox Shi'i Islam has also been shaped by the modern processes through which the unseen has been rationalized.

ANTHROPOLOGY, RATIONALITY, AND THE UNSEEN

Rationality has long been a central analytic concern for anthropologists, philosophers, and scholars of religion. As ethnographic descriptions of non-Western societies became more complex and nuanced in the twentieth century, a question that began to challenge scholars was how notions of rationality could serve cross-cultural comparison.¹⁵ Were there universal standards by which beliefs held by different groups could be compared? Or was rationality internal to specific phenomenological lifeworlds and the diverse language games that people played? How were scholars to make sense of what Dan Sperber called “apparently irrational beliefs”?¹⁶ Should the phrases spoken in magical rituals, for example, be treated as straightforward propositions about reality, or instead as symbolic, expressive, or performative utterances that could not be judged true or false? For decades such questions pitted universalists against relativists, intellectualists versus symbolists and phenomenologists.¹⁷ While these debates were formative for the discipline of anthropology, however, scholars eventually decided to move on, convinced that the terms of the discussion had been too restricted or that it had missed the point entirely. As far as their various points of departure concerns the study of metaphysical encounters, “moving on” has opened a number of possibilities. I will focus on only three here with the intention of clarifying my own conceptual orientations.

One approach advocated by Bruce Kapferer and others has consisted of treating sorcery and magic as practices apart from or outside of reason, as “imaginative irruptions” with their own distinct “phantasmagoric spaces” that fuse, connect, and transgress different forms of reasoning and diverse registers of meaning.¹⁸ By focusing on phantasmagorias and their “virtuality,” Kapferer proposes that we can attend to the fundamental role of the imaginary in constructing reality, a possibility that is impoverished when we put too strong an emphasis on questions of reason and truth or falsity.¹⁹ This approach has echoes among some anthropologists of Islam who have similarly called for attention to the imaginal as a space that transcends the problems thrown up by modern Western reason, although they are not always in direct conversation with scholars like Kapferer who study sorcery and magic outside the Islamic tradition.²⁰

A second approach is that of Tanya Luhrmann in her work on ceremonial magic in England.²¹ Luhrmann makes the incisive critique that the various sides in the earlier rationality debates took it for granted that “beliefs” were reducible to “propositional commitments held consciously and claimed consistently and in a logical relationship to other such commitments.”²² As a result, when judging apparently irrational beliefs, these scholars were either forced

to argue that such beliefs rested on theories about the world (the intellectualists), or that they did not involve theories at all but were instead styles of performative poesis (the symbolists). Luhrmann argues that beliefs are much more complex, that they are often formed through “interpretive drift” and post hoc rationalization or justification of experiences that are found compelling or satisfying. The task of the anthropologist is therefore to attend to both experience and the interpretation of experience (including acts of rationalization) in their full psychological complexity. To the extent that she understands rationalization as the strategic justification of rewarding experience, Luhrmann’s approach has resonances with the work of scholars of the New Age who devote attention to the “epistemological strategies” by which practitioners attempt to legitimize their practices.²³

The third theoretical trajectory for circumventing the problems of the rationality debates has been formulated by proponents of what has come to be called the “ontological turn” (OT).²⁴ If Luhrmann faulted earlier anthropologists for holding too simplistic a notion of belief, some OT scholars argue that belief (and other such “epistemological” concepts) should be altogether abandoned. This is because they claim that these concepts betray a lingering imperialistic self-certainty that while we in the West can *know* reality through our superior and universally reliable science, others only *believe* through their culturally contained perspectives. OT scholars therefore call for moving away from epistemological questions so that we can open ourselves up to our interlocutors’ radically different “ontologies” and be potentially transformed by them as well. In other words, what anthropologists (including Luhrmann) used to call “apparently irrational beliefs” should really be understood as alternative realities with as much legitimacy as the reality that modern Western science purports to describe.

Each of the approaches that I have outlined all too schematically here consists of nuanced contributions to thorny problems, and they have helped significantly clarify the terms of our arguments while opening up productive opportunities for research and analysis. For my purposes, what I see as a common element among all three is a determination to bracket rationality as a concept, a move that Kapferer justifies by asserting that the insistence on continually studying questions of rationality and reason may mire scholars in the “endless repetition of the same insights.”²⁵ But this bracketing relies on an assumption that rationality matters more to the analyst than to her interlocutors. What do we make of situations where rationality and affiliated notions like reason, intellect, science, evidence, and so on appear as reflexive emic concepts tied to specific practices? Far from producing endless repetitions of older insights, circumstances like these can provide rich opportunities for comparative anthropologies of epistemology—or, in other words, for understanding how people know things and how the conditions of their knowing undergo shifts through time. This form of inquiry is central to my book, and

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it has long been of fundamental importance for anthropologists, historians, and philosophers.²⁶

Considered in relation to Luhrmann's arguments, my approach does not discount the crucial insight that people do not always act according to coherent theories, or that they often draw on the intellectual resources provided by their environments to justify activities they have come to value and enjoy. But I also consider it untenable to argue that this is all there is to the relationship between belief and practice. If such were the case, moral philosophy would be rendered a fruitless pursuit, and our very conception of ourselves as agents who do things for reasons would be reduced to nonsense. Of course, this is not what Luhrmann was proposing, and it could be that the manner in which she framed her inquiry—understanding why apparently rational people held apparently irrational beliefs—compelled her to limit the scope of rationality to post hoc rationalization. In doing so, however, she also closed her analysis off to the prospect of discovering genuine intellectual creativity in her interlocutors' accounts, precisely the sorts of possibility that scholars of esotericism and the New Age have identified in earlier periods of European and American history.²⁷

What of the call by proponents of the ontological turn to abandon the project of epistemology in favor of recognizing ontological multiplicity? The ontological turn is characterized by an ethical and political imperative to grant radical alterity its due. In this book I am less concerned with alterity (even less of the radical kind) than with historical connection and contingency. The metaphysical experimenters with whom I worked drew on several strands of an intellectual genealogy shared between what we have come to call the "West" and the "Islamic world." This included the Islamic scholastic tradition that has roots in Greek philosophy; the modern empirical sciences whose history similarly comprises centuries of exchange, translation, and dialogue; and new forms of scientized spirituality that have intermingled for more than a century with Iranian and Islamic forms of religious experimentation and speculation. My interlocutors went so far as to view my anthropological project as compatible with their own inquiries into metaphysical phenomena. They would have found it bewildering if I had suggested to them that we somehow inhabited different realities.²⁸

In contradistinction to the anthropological approaches I have outlined, then, I view rationality neither as an ahistorical universal metric, nor as a yardstick condemned to relativistic incommensurability between culturally constituted particulars, nor as reducible to discursive strategies for justifying psychologically satisfying forms of experience, and still less as a standard embedded within ontologically distinct realities. Instead, I understand *rationalities*—in the plural—to be modes of reflexivity bound to specific histories of action, argumentation, and change. Some historical forms of rationality (for example, those of contemporary Shi'i jurisprudence and theology) are embed-

ded in particular traditions of inquiry with their distinctive epistemic structures, styles of reasoning, and conceptions of time (that is, ways of relating to the past, present, and future).²⁹ Others borrow explicitly or unselfconsciously from multiple traditions, constructing eclectic amalgams that may be refined over time (Cosmic Mysticism, for example, draws on Islamic theological reason, as well as post-Enlightenment empiricism and traditions of psychologistic spirituality). As a malleable historical object available for public discussion and contestation, rationality both gives shape to individuals' self-conscious practices and is in turn reshaped by those very practices.

I further define *rationalization* as a reflexive mechanism through which actors recreate their world—bringing new social and cultural forms into being, reinforcing old ones, or charging them with renewed intensities—as they attempt to ensure conformity between their practices and their commitments to reason. This process is fraught and contested: the very definition of reason, the judgment as to who is authorized to evaluate the rationality of a statement or practice, and the criteria by which such evaluations should proceed, are all up for grabs, themselves subject to the rationalization process as I have defined it. In short, rationalization is an engine of transformation, a process through which to understand the emergence of qualitative shifts in the social and material worlds that people inhabit and in the ways in which they orient themselves toward these worlds, where these shifts are in some significant way attached to reflexive understandings of reason.³⁰

There is a further fundamental point: Although rationalization is a reflexive process, I do not imply that every change it brings about is the result of intellection and deliberate planning. The shifts that come about through rationalization are sometimes unintended and may go unnoticed. They may at some point enter into people's consciousness and thereby become objects of direct reasoning. But they may also persist in interstitial spaces between various discursive formations, or as immanent aspects of practices that remain invisible to the normative discourses (theological, ethical, scientific, and so on) to which they are nonetheless connected.

This book's approach to rationality as a historically contingent form of reflexivity that is connected to dynamic traditions of inquiry converges with some extant anthropological scholarship on Islam and diverges from others. My emphasis on historical continuities and discontinuities within styles of reasoning resonates with the work of scholars studying Islamic practices of learning, argument, and virtuous striving, and the ways in which these practices have changed under pressure of modernization.³¹ In bringing rationality to bear on the metaphysical, however, I move away from scholarship on the unseen that is concerned with resistance, arational excess, or counterhegemonic formations undermining dominant rationalist discourses (whether those of secular modernists, Islamic traditionalists, or Salafi reformers).³² Janice Boddy, for example, has argued that zar spirit possession ceremonies in

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Northern Sudan enabled women to connect with the world outside their limited community and reflect on the circumstances of their gendered subordination.³³ Naveeda Khan has shown how a centuries-old jinn mediated a Pakistani family's access to the prophet Muhammad's pious example while providing a "line of flight" for their young daughter to temporarily escape the confines of her social life.³⁴ And in a richly nuanced study of Islamic practices of dream interpretation, Amira Mittermaier has argued that dream-visions allow Egyptians access to a space of "in-betweenness" that undermines the illusion of rational, autonomous selfhood and opens dreamers to the ethical possibilities of the imaginary and the emergent.³⁵ In these scholars' work, the unseen takes on the quality of the different, the other, the indeterminate, the emergent, the excessive, the remainder—in short, that which is recalcitrant in the face of rational ordering.

My book asks, conversely, what do we learn if we view the metaphysical in terms hospitable to rational inquiry? Put differently, I seek to shift away from viewing the unseen as a constitutive externality in order to understand how metaphysical inquiries are *internally* constitutive of modern rationalist subjectivity. This is an approach that has been rarely adopted by anthropologists of Islam but has proved immensely fruitful in scholarship on Western esotericism.³⁶ Historians of mesmerism, Spiritualism/Spiritism, Theosophy, occultism, modern alchemy, psychical research, parapsychology, ufology, and the New Age have highlighted the avant-garde quality of these movements as forms of experimentation that range from the philosophical and the literary to the scientific, the sexual, and the political.³⁷ In these studies, encounters with the metaphysical do not serve as zones of exclusion or refuge from rationalist modernity but instead as windows onto the edges of European and North American life, those limit-spaces of respectable inquiry that have become sites for the emergence of new intellectual, social, and cultural forms.

In treating metaphysical inquiries as forms of reasoning with specific styles and distinctive epistemic structures, my approach also differs from recent scholarship on the "magicality" of modernity.³⁸ A number of anthropologists have made the powerful argument that the stubborn persistence of the occult into the twenty-first century should finally lay to rest the wrongheaded idea that as societies modernize—as market liberalism extends its reach, science and technology become further entrenched, and bureaucratic rationality proliferates—the world becomes increasingly disenchanting, banishing mystical conceptions to the rubbish heap of history. On the contrary, these scholars claim that modern occult discourses and practices can help illuminate the magicality, mystification, and murkiness of modernity itself—especially those dimensions of modern life that we consider most characteristically rational: the market, science and technology, and the state.

My work departs from this scholarship in two ways. First, I am less interested in the enchantment of the putatively rational than the rationality of the

supposedly enchanted; that is, my book questions the automatic association of the occult or metaphysical with “enchantment” and all its connotations of mystification and arationality (if not irrationality). This means that I think metaphysical experimentation can be constitutive of rational modernity without necessarily having to take the extra step of arguing for the magicity of the modern. Second, I take metaphysical inquiries seriously in themselves rather than gazing through occult discourse to see how the rest of the world (society, politics, economics, and so on) might be refracted. The latter point is all the more pressing, as so much of the literature on the magic of modernity is premised on reading metaphorical significations into occult practices in analytic moves that bring to mind the hermeneutics of Clifford Geertz or the symbolic analysis of Victor Turner.³⁹ Attending to metaphysical inquiries as complex practices intertwined with particular forms of reasoning and reflexivity renders such interpretive moves unnecessary.

These critiques notwithstanding, scholars are certainly right to situate the modern occult in relation to transformations in the material realities that shape people’s lives. I follow them by examining how economic liberalization, the dominance of modern technoscience, and the increasing bureaucratization of life under the Islamic Republic weigh upon metaphysical experimentation. But I also argue that we cannot understand metaphysical inquiries apart from powerful intellectual discourses that have grappled with the appropriate relationship between the material and the spiritual since the late nineteenth century. Historians and sociologists of modern Iran have studied some of these discourses under the rubric of intellectual encounters with modernity, negotiations of the relationship between modernity and tradition, and conceptualizations of the proper connections between religion and politics.⁴⁰ I emphasize the relationship between the material and the spiritual in these discourses both to highlight the intellectual backdrop against which ordinary people engage in metaphysical inquiries and to show how these more elaborate intellectual discourses are themselves contiguous with ordinary metaphysical questioning. That is, this book is at one level a challenge to Iranian intellectual and political historians to take more seriously the landscape of Iranian metaphysical inquiry, not only as an effect but also as a ground for the emergence of some of the most important intellectual movements in the modern period.

UNCANNY REASON

The rationalization processes that I describe in this book are never completely successful in bringing people’s understandings of the metaphysical into straightforward conformity with their commitments to reason. Such processes often produce feelings of disorientation and discomfort that in turn become further prompts to rationalization along new pathways. My analysis of this

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dynamic draws on Katherine Withy's reading of the uncanny affect in the work of Sigmund Freud and the German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch.⁴¹ Withy describes several situations in which feelings of uncanniness may emerge. Drawing on Jentsch, she argues that the first of these scenarios is characterized by an irresolvable uncertainty about how to categorize a certain phenomenon.⁴² Ghosts, for example, are ambiguously alive and dead, past and present, and this may be why they inspire dread. Such anomalous entities reveal to us that the categories by which we come to know things are not always adequate.⁴³ The second situation is more pervasive and has to do with the fact that the very structure of familiarity that mediates our experience of reality is constituted by a fundamental irresolvable unfamiliarity. This unfamiliarity is ordinarily concealed from us and only occasionally bursts into the open as recalcitrant and perplexing, thereby producing uncanniness.⁴⁴

Freud builds on this understanding of the uncanny by directing his attention to temporality.⁴⁵ He argues that uncanniness is not simply—or not even necessarily—about an uncertainty in how to categorize something anomalous. At stake instead is a conflict between our current, seemingly confident way of understanding a phenomenon, and an earlier, seemingly superseded and “repressed” orientation that threatens to reemerge and confound us. For example, lifelike dolls may be uncanny, according to Freud, because we harbor unconscious traces of childish or “primitive” animistic beliefs that have been repressed through socialization and normal psychic development but that may reemerge to disrupt our conviction that dolls, after all, cannot be alive. The encounter with an ambiguously animate doll, then, produces a “conflict of judgment,” a disquieting intuition that our old and discarded beliefs may in fact have been truer than our new ideas. In other situations, the repressed that returns may not be a “belief” at all but instead an infantile complex—like fear of castration—that reemerges as an uncanny feeling through association with some seemingly unrelated phenomenon (in Freud's analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, this phenomenon is the theft or blinding of eyes). In either case, the uncanny encounter is characterized by a play of familiarity and strangeness—what was once familiar and homely has become strange and unhomely or *unheimlich*. The return of the familiar-as-strange renders it uncanny.⁴⁶

How does this conceptualization of the uncanny help us understand metaphysical inquiry and its rationalization? It will certainly not do so by taking us to the world of “primitive beliefs” and infantile complexes invoked by Freud. Considerations of temporality and conflicts of judgment are, however, crucial. Through rationalization, new orientations toward metaphysical phenomena come to replace old ones—as when rationalist discourses disparage those who consult with occult specialists as superstitious. But this substitution seems never to be complete, and there are situations in which traces of older ideas and attachments reassert themselves, producing feelings of uncanniness. A science-minded person who consults an occult specialist “for fun,” for example,

may encounter inexplicable phenomena that lead to disorientation and the experience of fear and disquiet.

The effects of uncanniness need not be limited to the production of disorientation. In this book, I examine uncanny moments also for the opportunities they open up for new pathways of questioning and rationalized activity, propelling practitioners forward in ways that push against and expand individual and collective horizons. One way to theorize these moments is to probe the uncanny feeling's affinity with wonder and the latter's connection to curiosity. In Persian psychoanalytic literature, *unheimlich* has been translated as *ashna-gharibi*, or "familiar-strangeness," where "strangeness" is denoted using the same term (*gharib*) that also refers to the occult. *Gharib* commonly appears in conjunction with a twin concept, *'ajib*, which means "strange" or "wondrous." In the premodern period, the conjunction *'ajib va gharib* often appeared in manuals dedicated to the "wonders of creation," a genre of texts similar to the European *mirabilia*.⁴⁷ Muslim theorists of the wondrous understood the emotion of wonder (*ta'ajjub*) as the starting point of knowledge, a view consistent with the Greek understanding of the same emotion as the origin of philosophy.⁴⁸ Some set themselves the task of cultivating wonder in their readers in order to draw attention to the magnificent order of God's cosmos.⁴⁹

Could the uncanny be similarly thought as an incitement to inquiry? Historians of witchcraft, demon-possession, and spiritual manifestations in Europe and North America—all of which have unmistakable uncanny qualities to them—have shown how these phenomena provided occasions for scientific experimentation and questioning.⁵⁰ Anthropologists studying similar subjects have also argued that the uncanny can become a prod to knowledge.⁵¹ Even so, when the uncanny feeling enters into anthropological analysis, it is too often collapsed into discussions of witchcraft, usually in the context of suspicion, accusation, and cancellation.⁵² I probe instead the ways in which the uncanny arouses curiosity, even (or perhaps especially) as it instills a sense of dread.⁵³ This approach allows me to examine metaphysical inquiries as avant-garde practices that lie at the forefront of societal shifts and provide useful diagnostics of larger transformations.

The uncanniness of rationalization takes a different form in each of the three parts in this book. In part 1, we read about encounters with *rammals*, occult specialists who led an inconspicuous and relatively unproblematic existence before the twentieth century but whom modern rationalization relegated to the margins of respectable inquiry, disparaging them as charlatans and purveyors of superstitious nonsense. Yet this rationalization has only been partially successful, and those who encounter *rammals* sometimes face the uncanny feeling that the latter may genuinely possess incredible powers, throwing their grasp of what truly counts as reasonable or superstitious into turmoil.

Part 2 focuses on attempts since the early twentieth century to formulate scientific concepts, models, and methods through which to understand the

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metaphysical in ways that are hospitable to modern reason. These rationalizing moves have in part responded to accusations by secularist and materialist intellectuals that metaphysical conceptions amount to so much baseless speculation. But again, they have only partially succeeded. Those who subscribe to scientific models of the metaphysical are forced to contend with skeptical discourses that similarly appeal to the authority of science, producing the uncomfortable feeling that metaphysical pursuits may not be so easily justified.

In part 3, I shift attention to attempts after the 1980–88 war with Iraq to formulate new exemplars for pious discipline, just as Iranian society began to undergo widespread social transformations keyed to economic liberalization. These changes produced anxieties among some segments of the pious population about the viability of a form of life that would accord with God's commands, something they imagined had been more or less realized in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution and in the ensuing eight-year war. The new pious models, recently deceased "friends of God" renowned for their feats of asceticism and spectacular marvels, were introduced partially as substitutes for revolutionaries and war martyrs, whose activist example was more suited for social circumstances now relegated to the past. But these models, too, have generated their share of disorientation and alienation, as pious seekers attempt to reconcile the imperative toward moral self-cultivation with the instability they perceive in forms of moral verification that have become increasingly entangled with bureaucratic power. No less an entity than the pious conscience has been rendered uncanny.

In all of these instances, uncanny disruptions have not so much put an end to projects of rationalization as opened up new paths along which such projects may be pursued. What makes metaphysical experiments uncanny, that is, also grants them an edginess or avant-garde quality that pushes the envelopes of existing norms and produces new forms of sociality. These possibilities include allowing oneself to be thrilled and entertained in the indeterminacy of an occult encounter (chapters 8 and 9), the justification of metaphysical inquiries in terms of personal experience or the pursuit of psychological calm (chapters 17 and 18), and the technologization of self-knowledge to overcome the radical unreliability of the pious conscience (chapter 24). The picture that comes into focus as the chapters proceed is therefore not one of unilinear rationalistic progress but of the increasing multiplicity of rationalized possibilities.

APPROACHING THE METAPHYSICAL

I was forced to come to grips with the uncanny very early in my research. In 2007, while still in the initial stages of my dissertation project, a Turkish graduate student warned me to be cautious, as the subject of my research could drive me to madness. This was something I had heard repeatedly in early in-

interviews in Tehran, but I was taken aback when the same warning came to haunt me in Cambridge. Late at night some time later, I was chatting with my younger brother online when he sent me video clips of the newly released Tim Burton horror musical, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. I reminded him that I had a phobia of movie scenes depicting the slitting of throats, especially in the setting of a barbershop, and that I imagined this had something to do with an assassination scene in a historical drama I had viewed on Iranian television as a child. My brother prodded me to watch the scenes and I finally obliged, finding them altogether as horrid as I had expected.

I went to sleep a few minutes afterward and was immediately tormented by nightmares. At one point I found myself in a state between sleep and wakefulness, staring at the curtains as they gently danced in the ghostly moonlight. It then seemed to me that the window behind the curtains was creeping open of its own accord. My home had suddenly become unhomey. Still half-asleep, I surprised myself by asking aloud, “Am I being possessed by jinn?” As if on cue, three ominous figures strode into my bedroom and stood next to my bed. I climbed out to face them and recognized the person in the middle, a Canadian friend with whom I often chatted online. The two large beings flanking her sides were dark and menacing but featureless. Still distressed by my half-dreams, I mumbled to my friend that I thought I might be possessed. She stomped toward me like a giant reptile, clutched my two shoulders with her large hands, and proceeded to lick my nose like a snake. I awoke with a scream.

The next morning, I told myself that my research would prove very difficult if I were to lose my mental composure as a result of uncanny encounters of the sort I had endured overnight. My solution was to actively deny the reality of anything occult or supernatural, to keep my topic of study at arm’s length as an anthropological object rather than as something that could trouble the boundaries of my understanding of reality. During fieldwork the following year, my interlocutors would occasionally ask me a version of this question: “Now that you have done all this research, what have you seen that you would consider *really* metaphysical?” My answer was always a standard anthropological one that would inevitably disappoint them. The point of my research, I said, was not to definitively distinguish real from unreal but rather to identify the criteria and procedures by which people made such distinctions. It was only toward the end of my research that I made the realization that my active denial of metaphysical phenomena was preventing me from understanding that I had been engaged in a metaphysical inquiry just like my interlocutors. The chief difference between us was that I deliberately structured my inquiry through a particular affective discipline (of distance and denial) that most of my interlocutors did not share, even if their inquiries were also shot through with both disciplined and undisciplined affects (virtuous caution being one of them).⁵⁴

As a result of deliberate choices that I made early on in my research and sustained for the most part through my fieldwork, the materials I collected for this book are drawn from extensive observations and interviews but are rarely based on anything that could count as direct “experiential” evidence of metaphysical phenomena (my nightmarish experience after viewing Tim Burton’s throat-slitting movie scenes being an exception). Even when I actively participated in my interlocutors’ practices—among them exorcisms with the Cosmic Mystics and an occasion in which I helped a self-described witch write a spell to make trouble for her ex-boyfriend⁵⁵—I did so with the consciousness that I was just playing along. A proponent of the ontological turn in anthropology could justifiably accuse me of failing to open myself up to my interlocutors’ “alternative realities,” although I would respond that a stance of cautious distance and even denial and ridicule was not foreign to them. While my interlocutors sometimes argued that denial would close me off to witnessing or understanding some phenomena, they did not consider such a stance to mark the boundaries of a different reality. Some of them practiced very similar distancing moves, as we will see.

Regardless of what one thinks of my choices about how to conduct my research, I can acknowledge that a different researcher more amenable to an experiential style of ethnography would have produced a very different text from the present one. On the other hand, my practiced self-distancing allowed me to explore things that I would not have otherwise been able to observe had I been continually tormented by nightmares, or worse, descended into madness as my interlocutors had warned. My cautious but deliberate “anthropological atheism” was the very condition of possibility for researching this book.⁵⁶

The research that grounds my arguments includes not only ethnographic and interview data but also textual and archival materials. I spent about two years in Tehran—including a continuous fourteen-month stretch in 2008 and 2009—meeting occult practitioners and their clients, attending seminars teaching new forms of spirituality, participating in occultist web forums, visiting gatherings of devotees of friends of God, and tracking news reports, commentaries, and published research on these subjects. Even though the bulk of my material is gleaned from observations and interviews in 2006 and later, I have drawn on older historical sources in two ways. First, I conducted archival and textual research on trends in the century before the 1979 revolution, particularly on the reception of French Spiritism but also the legal mechanisms through which the modern Iranian state attempted to tackle what it saw as a problem of superstition. Second, I have drawn on scholarship on the premodern Islamic world on such matters as the delimitation of nonsense, the development of the occult sciences, the place of wonder in pedagogy and entertainment, and the rise of Shi‘i mysticism. For most of this premodern material, I have relied on the scholarship of others, including some excellent work that began to be published just as I was completing my own research. In some

instances I have abandoned caution and overstepped my disciplinary training to engage with the premodern primary sources myself.

Each of the three parts that follows begins with a chapter consisting of a single extended narrative recounted to me by one of my interlocutors. The rest of the chapters progressively unpack the most important issues raised in these inaugurating stories, usually by drawing on additional ethnographic and historical material. I do not attempt a fully exhaustive treatment of the opening chapters, however, preferring to leave the reader with a sense of the messiness of ordinary life and its recalcitrance before any authorial effort to provide an all-encompassing, cogent, intellectual explanation. In the conclusion, I return to the problem of the rationalization of metaphysical inquiries and their relationship with Shi'ī Islamic reason.