Religion and Revolution: Spiritual and Political Islam in Ernesto Cardenal

John Andrew Morrow
Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. hbk. 339 pages.

In his *Religion and Revolution: Spiritual and Political Islam in Ernesto Cardenal*, John Morrow has manifested his years-of-research incorporated knowledge in Hispanic, Native American, and Arabic-Islamic studies to shed light on two poorly understood themes – both in the East and, particularly, in the West – via a specific narrative. The themes are, broadly speaking, those of Sufism and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The narrative is the story of Reverend Father Ernesto Cardenal, a Nicaraguan revolutionary Christian priest who had progressively acquired some spiritual and revolutionary interests in Islam after visiting certain Middle Eastern countries, especially Iran.

Whether Cardenal is seen as merely a medium for Morrow to express his own findings on Sufism and Iran or as an end in itself is up to the reader. Either way, Morrows' on-the-whole impartial and unbiased interpretation of Islam, Sufism, and Iran, indirectly through the personality and writings of Cardenal, constitutes a calibre of work rarely seen or read in the western media and literature. This is mostly due to its seemingly close, albeit academic, sympathy with elements of Iran's right "conservative" and "hardline" elite. Perhaps that is why, at times, one feels that the author has stepped up his defence a shadow too much. The manner he has raised and evaluated some of the data he presents, as well as some of the rumours – against Sufism and especially Iran – he refutes, clearly demonstrates that he has explored and gained access to (1) the pristine image of Sufism and notable Sufis and

(2) the fabric of Iranian society during the revolution's early years. And yet he is neither Sufi nor Iranian.

In chapter 1, Morrow tries to show that Cardenal was well informed in relation to Islamic gnosticism (Sufism). He does this by establishing Sufi influences on Thomas Merton, who was Cardenal's Catholic mentor for two years and who updated him, thereafter, with his "intellectual and spiritual interests through 131 items of correspondence amounting to 217 pages in total." After analyzing the Sufi influences upon Merton, the people with whom he had been and still was in contact, and perusing through examples of the 217 pages, it may be slightly pushing it to expect the reader to regard Cardenal as one with strong or even intermediate Sufi tendencies.

In chapter 2, one observes how Morrow meticulously and so finely traces many of the priest's poems to Sufi sources. It is here that the author's comprehensive understanding and awareness of Sufism manifests itself most. Not only does he trace some of the poems to Sufi poems that were, at times, not even referenced by Cardenal himself, but, and more importantly, he provides commentaries for those poems, which are a breath of fresh air for novices and intermediaries in Sufism. By way of example, interpreting Rumi and buttressing one's findings through the writings of Ibn al-Arabi, al-Ghazzali, Khomeini, and others is not an easy task. Another prominent point is how the author defended many statements of the Sufis that have been poorly misunderstood down the centuries– both in the East and West – by those not well-versed in Sufism, leading the latter to make hasty conclusions.

Chapter 3 briefly mentions Cardenal's visits to Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, and Syria in his capacity as the Sandinistas' cultural and revolutionary representative. Here one sees the leftist similarities between the reverend father (a Christian-Marxist figure) and the various figures and organizations he had met in these countries. The spiritual similarities, however, were to grow upon his entrance into Iran. In chapter 4, the events – as seen by Cardenal – at the start of Iran's revolution were described in a positive and glorious setting, depicting it as a revolution that was religious in nature and supported by the masses. The mystery leftist man who was his guide in Iran was regarded as one reason behind some of Cardenal's misunderstandings vis-à-vis Islam and Iran. Morrow explores the identity of such a figure – maybe a bit too much – and then corrects some of the priest's acquired misunderstandings. One of these is the notion of jihad, which Morrow interprets esoterically and comprehensively, instead of limiting it to the exoteric dimension of physical war and battle.

In chapter 5, Cardenal provides a positive image of the Islamic dress code for women rarely encountered in the West by non-Muslims. It may not be a sufficient elaboration on the hijab, but to have come from a non-Muslim revolutionary priest, it offers a new angle especially to those in the West. One jurisprudential error attributed to the author is his statement that the feet need not be covered, which is not in accordance with Shi'i jurisprudence (another inaccurate claim made was in chapter 2 in relation to the permission of non-Muslims entering mosques – at least from a Shi'i perspective).

Chapter 6 may be subdivided into three almost mutually exclusive parts – save for the fact that it defends Islamic Iran from the baseless and unfair attacks it has received since the revolution from different religious and socio-political spheres. In the first part, Cardenal's visits with Ayatullahs Khomeini, Shari'atmadari, Ruhani, and Taleghani are mentioned. His impressions were concise, but Morrow expanded, intensively researched, and disclosed Shari'atmadari and Ruhani's anti-revolutionary, and at times anti-Khomeini, tendencies as well as very astutely and delicately manifested a couple of Taleghani's "ideological flaws." Next, he defends Iran's theocratic system of governance – pivoted by the role of the "guardianship of the jurist" – by methodically and succinctly refuting claims of fascism and dictatorship. The rest of the chapter shows how different political figures in the Iranian government of the time, as well as those accompanying Cardenal during his visits, were "soon to surface as counter-revolutionary insurgents."

Chapter 7 starts off by raising several similarities between Khomeini and Cardenal, but then heavily enters into the rift that resides between the political quietist and revolutionaries among the ayatullahs, sometimes raising unreferenced subtle and sensitive points that show Morrow was either directly or indirectly in close touch with the goings on of certain well-known religious families. In chapter 8, he provides a historico-political contemporary analysis of how ties were forged between Iran and Latin American countries in the decades following the revolution. Comparing the red, revolutionary, anti-American, pro-independence, and pro-resistance trends between personalities (viz., Che Guevara and Mostafa Chamran) from both camps, he highlights the God-less commonalities while simultaneously arguing against the erroneous claims made against them.

In chapter 9, Morrow delicately describes (in a manner different to chapter 4's format) three forms of weaknesses or traps that the ayatullahs and their followers have fallen into since the revolution. They include, in order of ascending "failure," Ayatullahs Taleghani, Muntazari, and Shari'atmadari. At the end of the chapter, the author politely expresses Cardenal's deficiencies

in Islamic history and refutes his claims against the Messenger of Islam. Chapter 10 alludes to the parameters that have contributed to his solidarity with the Muslim world, namely, the oppression that the forces of imperialism and especially Zionism have played in more recent times in Latin America. In chapter 11, Cardenal's diversion from Catholic orthodoxy is illustrated in the domains of politics, ideology, and method of presenting ideas. These inconsistencies need not make one oblivious to the "sublime" goal toward which the revolutionary priest was pointing.

F. B. Sekaleshfar
Qom, Iran