Picking a Path Among the Fatwas

Scientists in Iran find themselves challenged by true believers; some are trying to negotiate a peaceful compromise

TEHRAN—Scientists and philosophers mingled with clerics in robes and turbans here at a recent gathering in Iran’s cavernous new international conference center. They had come to discuss science and religion—specifically, to seek common ground between Western science and the tenets of Islam. The Iranian intellectuals who helped organize the meeting “are hoping for a kind of détente that will help Iranian scholarship blossom. They were encouraged at the outset by Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, president of the Iranian parliament, who offered the contingent of foreign academics a warm welcome. But 2 days into the meeting, a chill filtered through the halls. Iran’s government-controlled newspapers announced that a prominent Iranian sociologist, Ramin Jahanbegloo, had been arrested at the airport on his way to a conference in Belgium. His crime, according to the reported comments of Iranian Minister of Information Mohsen Ejei, amounted to “contacts with foreigners.” Another state-controlled paper described Jahanbegloo as “an element of the United States who is part of the plot to overthrow the regime under the guise of intellectual work by peaceful means.” No other charges have been cited. As Science went to press, Jahanbegloo was still being held without legal council in a prison notorious for torture. Hundreds of academics around the world have signed a letter to the Iranian government calling for his release.

The foreigners who were aware of the arrest left the meeting uncertain about the government’s intentions for Iranian academia. Iranians are often confused, too. Interpreting the leadership’s signals can be difficult in a country where scientific achievement is revered but where the Koran—and a small group of clerics who interpret it—has the final say in all matters. And it can be disastrous to read the signals incorrectly.

Iran is investing heavily in science now, after decades of neglect (Science, 16 September 2005, p. 1802). Even the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a fatwa, or edict, calling on researchers to

Dangerous questions
A glance at the evolution exhibit at Tehran’s museum of natural history reveals the tension below the surface. Wave after wave of schoolgirls in matching headscarves file past a row of glass cases containing meticulously arranged fossils. A label next to a trilobite, for example, says that the specimen, discovered in the nearby Alborz mountains, came from the Devonian, a period 400 million years ago when those sediments were submerged in a shallow sea. Along the opposite wall, a diorama chronicles the evolution of life on earth. Painted scenes of ancient life look as if they’ve been copied directly from the latest biology textbooks. But the exhibit takes a sharp detour from science in the final display case where evolution is summed up. In an open tome representing the Koran, phrases in calligraphy proclaim that “God willed an atmosphere created from gases” and “God created man from water.” Above that is a poster—published by the Creation Evidence Museum in Glen Rose, Texas—describing how Earth was created in a few days by an omnipotent being.

“We do not allow our scientists to make propaganda against Islam.”
—Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel
President, Iranian Parliament

Open encounter. Clerics met with scientists and philosophers in Tehran in search of common ground. secure Iran’s position as the “leader in science” in the Middle East over the next 20 years. But at the same time, discussing ideas that displease the religious elite can land you in jail. As Haddad-Adel told Science, “We do not allow our scientists to make propaganda against Islam.” Exactly what might constitute such propaganda is unclear, and Haddad-Adel declined to specify.

Many Iranian academicians argue that science and Islam are compatible and that the challenge for each is to adapt to the other. “Iran is the world’s only laboratory for bringing science and religion together,” says Haddad-Adel, who was an academic philosopher before becoming one of Iran’s most powerful politicians. But what this might mean in practical terms for Iran’s scientists is uncertain. Some see any dialogue with the ruling clerics as helpful. “Most of the conflicts [between science and religion] are due to misunderstanding,” says Jamshid Darvish, an evolutionary biologist at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad. But others are wary; they fear that more entanglement with Iran’s religious conservatives will only lead to tighter controls over academia.

TEHRAN—Scientists and philosophers mingled with clerics in robes and turbans here at a recent gathering in Iran’s cavernous new international conference center. They had come to discuss science and religion—specifically, to seek common ground between Western science and the tenets of Islam. The Iranian intellectuals who helped organize the meeting “are hoping for a kind of détente that will help Iranian scholarship blossom. They were encouraged at the outset by Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, president of the Iranian parliament, who offered the contingent of foreign academics a warm welcome. But 2 days into the meeting, a chill filtered through the halls. Iran’s government-controlled newspapers announced that a prominent Iranian sociologist, Ramin Jahanbegloo, had been arrested at the airport on his way to a conference in Belgium. His crime, according to the reported comments of Iranian Minister of Information Mohsen Ejei, amounted to “contacts with foreigners.” Another state-controlled paper described Jahanbegloo as “an element of the United States who is part of the plot to overthrow the regime under the guise of intellectual work by peaceful means.” No other charges have been cited. As Science went to press, Jahanbegloo was still being held without legal council in a prison notorious for torture. Hundreds of academics around the world have signed a letter to the Iranian government calling for his release.

The foreigners who were aware of the arrest left the meeting uncertain about the government’s intentions for Iranian academia. Iranians are often confused, too. Interpreting the leadership’s signals can be difficult in a country where scientific achievement is revered but where the Koran—and a small group of clerics who interpret it—has the final say in all matters. And it can be disastrous to read the signals incorrectly.

Iran is investing heavily in science now, after decades of neglect (Science, 16 September 2005, p. 1802). Even the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a fatwa, or edict, calling on researchers to

Dangerous questions
A glance at the evolution exhibit at Tehran’s museum of natural history reveals the tension below the surface. Wave after wave of schoolgirls in matching headscarves file past a row of glass cases containing meticulously arranged fossils. A label next to a trilobite, for example, says that the specimen, discovered in the nearby Alborz mountains, came from the Devonian, a period 400 million years ago when those sediments were submerged in a shallow sea. Along the opposite wall, a diorama chronicles the evolution of life on earth. Painted scenes of ancient life look as if they’ve been copied directly from the latest biology textbooks. But the exhibit takes a sharp detour from science in the final display case where evolution is summed up. In an open tome representing the Koran, phrases in calligraphy proclaim that “God willed an atmosphere created from gases” and “God created man from water.” Above that is a poster—published by the Creation Evidence Museum in Glen Rose, Texas—describing how Earth was created in a few days by an omnipotent being.

“We do not allow our scientists to make propaganda against Islam.”
—Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel
President, Iranian Parliament

Open encounter. Clerics met with scientists and philosophers in Tehran in search of common ground. secure Iran’s position as the “leader in science” in the Middle East over the next 20 years. But at the same time, discussing ideas that displease the religious elite can land you in jail. As Haddad-Adel told Science, “We do not allow our scientists to make propaganda against Islam.” Exactly what might constitute such propaganda is unclear, and Haddad-Adel declined to specify.

Many Iranian academicians argue that science and Islam are compatible and that the challenge for each is to adapt to the other. “Iran is the world’s only laboratory for bringing science and religion together,” says Haddad-Adel, who was an academic philosopher before becoming one of Iran’s most powerful politicians. But what this might mean in practical terms for Iran’s scientists is uncertain. Some see any dialogue with the ruling clerics as helpful. “Most of the conflicts [between science and religion] are due to misunderstanding,” says Jamshid Darvish, an evolutionary biologist at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad. But others are wary; they fear that more entanglement with Iran’s religious conservatives will only lead to tighter controls over academia.

The foreigners who were aware of the arrest left the meeting uncertain about the government’s intentions for Iranian academia. Iranians are often confused, too. Interpreting the leadership’s signals can be difficult in a country where scientific achievement is revered but where the Koran—and a small group of clerics who interpret it—has the final say in all matters. And it can be disastrous to read the signals incorrectly.

Iran is investing heavily in science now, after decades of neglect (Science, 16 September 2005, p. 1802). Even the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has issued a fatwa, or edict, calling on researchers to

Dangerous questions
A glance at the evolution exhibit at Tehran’s museum of natural history reveals the tension below the surface. Wave after wave of schoolgirls in matching headscarves file past a row of glass cases containing meticulously arranged fossils. A label next to a trilobite, for example, says that the specimen, discovered in the nearby Alborz mountains, came from the Devonian, a period 400 million years ago when those sediments were submerged in a shallow sea. Along the opposite wall, a diorama chronicles the evolution of life on earth. Painted scenes of ancient life look as if they’ve been copied directly from the latest biology textbooks. But the exhibit takes a sharp detour from science in the final display case where evolution is summed up. In an open tome representing the Koran, phrases in calligraphy proclaim that “God willed an atmosphere created from gases” and “God created man from water.” Above that is a poster—published by the Creation Evidence Museum in Glen Rose, Texas—describing how Earth was created in a few days by an omnipotent being.
If this exhibit leaves you wondering what the curator actually believes, then that is probably by design. Under today’s Iranian theocracy, “you are forbidden to deny the existence of god,” explains Eghbal Taheri, a pharmacologist at the Tehran University of Medical Sciences. “You can do your science,” she says, “but in the end you must choose your words carefully.” For example, “you cannot say that the amazing cells in the eye are nothing more than a product of evolution over millions of years.”

Religious constraints have consequences for academia, says an Iranian philosopher of science who spoke on condition of anonymity. “Censorship, and especially self-censorship, is everywhere,” he says. “In my papers and presentations, I must often change the ending to include some religious aspects, even though I am agnostic, which of course I can never admit.” The clerics ignore most of the sciences, he says. But potential hotspots in addition to evolutionary biology include psychology and neuroscience; researchers in these fields often take care to leave room for the existence of a soul, he says. “But most of all,” he adds, “there’s sociology,” where the benefits of theocracy are questioned at a researcher’s peril. This is the widely assumed motivation for arresting Jahanbegloo, although the Sorbonne-trained sociologist is not known for activism.

There is no consensus among Iranian scientists, however, on whether religious constraints are doing harm. Taheri acknowledges that censorship exists but says, “I do not think it inhibits our work.” The chancellor of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Bagher Larijani, brother of Iran’s nuclear conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, disagrees. “It is a problem,” he says. “We scientists must approach [the religious leaders] very quietly and humbly to explain ourselves.” Larijani, an endocrinologist and researcher’s peril. This is the widely assumed motivation for arresting Jahanbegloo, although the Sorbonne-trained sociologist is not known for activism.

There is no consensus among Iranian scientists, however, on whether religious constraints are doing harm. Taheri acknowledges that censorship exists but says, “I do not think it inhibits our work.” The chancellor of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Bagher Larijani, brother of Iran’s nuclear conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, disagrees. “It is a problem,” he says. “We scientists must approach [the religious leaders] very quietly and humbly to explain ourselves.” Larijani, an endocrinologist and researcher’s peril. This is the widely assumed motivation for arresting Jahanbegloo, although the Sorbonne-trained sociologist is not known for activism.

There is no consensus among Iranian scientists, however, on whether religious constraints are doing harm. Taheri acknowledges that censorship exists but says, “I do not think it inhibits our work.” The chancellor of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Bagher Larijani, brother of Iran’s nuclear conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, disagrees. “It is a problem,” he says. “We scientists must approach [the religious leaders] very quietly and humbly to explain ourselves.” Larijani, an endocrinologist and researcher’s peril. This is the widely assumed motivation for arresting Jahanbegloo, although the Sorbonne-trained sociologist is not known for activism.

There is no consensus among Iranian scientists, however, on whether religious constraints are doing harm. Taheri acknowledges that censorship exists but says, “I do not think it inhibits our work.” The chancellor of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Bagher Larijani, brother of Iran’s nuclear conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, disagrees. “It is a problem,” he says. “We scientists must approach [the religious leaders] very quietly and humbly to explain ourselves.” Larijani, an endocrinologist and researcher’s peril. This is the widely assumed motivation for arresting Jahanbegloo, although the Sorbonne-trained sociologist is not known for activism.

There is no consensus among Iranian scientists, however, on whether religious constraints are doing harm. Taheri acknowledges that censorship exists but says, “I do not think it inhibits our work.” The chancellor of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Bagher Larijani, brother of Iran’s nuclear conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, disagrees. “It is a problem,” he says. “We scientists must approach [the religious leaders] very quietly and humbly to explain ourselves.” Larijani, an endocrinologist and researcher’s peril. This is the widely assumed motivation for arresting Jahanbegloo, although the Sorbonne-trained sociologist is not known for activism.

There is no consensus among Iranian scientists, however, on whether religious constraints are doing harm. Taheri acknowledges that censorship exists but says, “I do not think it inhibits our work.” The chancellor of the Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Bagher Larijani, brother of Iran’s nuclear conservative president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, disagrees. “It is a problem,” he says. “We scientists must approach [the religious leaders] very quietly and humbly to explain ourselves.” Larijani, an endocrinologist and researcher’s peril. This is the widely assumed motivation for arresting Jahanbegloo, although the Sorbonne-trained sociologist is not known for activism.