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Sabrina Mervin

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### Transnational Intellectual Debates

Iranian intellectual debates resonate far beyond Iran. An elite of Shi'a clerics, religious intellectuals and militants carefully pays attention to what is said, thought and written in Qom, Tehran and Mashhad. The "Islamic sphere" (*al-hala al-islamiyya*) in which they move has no borders and exists wherever individuals meet, exchange information and news they picked up elsewhere, reminisce, discuss and debate. Students of the religious sciences from all corners of the Shi'a worlds visit Qom for a while, then leave again, taking with them knowledge and a certain idea of Islamic modernity which they will transmit to others. For several years they study together, then lose sight of each other, only to meet again by chance during a pilgrimage, a pious visit or any other voyage, in the *majlis* of a sheikh, the offices of a magazine or publishing house, a research centre, a library, an Islamic foundation... The connections are closest among men who have been circulating for a long time between Persian and Arabic Shi'ism, between Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia.

Many of this elite have passed through the *hawza*, others have studied at universities and more and more numerous are those who completed a double education. Some are autodidacts, others are teachers, students and among them are also women whose numbers and importance are growing. All share the same references to a religious Shi'a culture, a corpus of classical texts and the founding texts of the Shi'a Islamic movement but also of Sunnism.

Nevertheless, they do not necessarily hold the same opinions, each using these shared references to develop a personal point of view, always prone to nuances, re-examinations and pragmatic readjustments in accordance with events occurring and new theories emerging. Should we see in this a characteristic of Shi'ism, where the ultimate aim of religious studies is to practice *ijtihad*, to forge one's own opinion and defend it, and where the individual, the *mujtahid*, prevails over the institution? Nothing is more difficult than tracking currents and tendencies, constructing categories that enable us to develop a structured representation of this Islamic sphere.

Actors and observers distinguish between islamists and liberals, activists and quietists, supporters of the regime and its opponents.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the fault lines are sometimes subtle and difficult to determine and supporters of the Iranian Islamic regime have also been influenced by the arguments of reformists, if only to refute them. A good example is the ideas of Soroush, which everybody knows directly or indirectly. While he was the religious intellectual of the Islamic Republic at the time of the reformists, preaching for the individualisation of the faith, Shari'ati has become an authority even within the Islamic movements by advocating the declericalisation of society. These are not contradictions perturbing an otherwise coherent system, but phenomena proper to the Islamic sphere, which is to be understood as a dynamic field in constant movement, crisscrossed by subtle divisions which resist systematic categorisation. Thus, the Shia "Islamic sphere" in Beirut includes milieus that are more or less close to Hezbollah and others that overtly distance themselves from the party. Each side has its own ties to Iran, depending on the positions it takes. They are distributed over both sides of the 'line of the Imam' (*khatt al-imam*), which Hezbollah adheres to and which is mainly based on the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* as conceived by Khomeini. But here too, nuances should be made, because a distinction is made between the theory and its application after the Revolution, and many are those who cherish the dream of a return to the purity of Khomeini's intentions – seen as diluted through the exercise of power – in order to reconnect with the ideal which remains the Islamic utopia.

#### Common History, Shared References

The 'mechanical solidarities' that link the clerical milieus and specifically the elites are still operative today, although newcomers not belonging to the great families "of science" have transformed the landscape. Organic ties, moreover, connect the militants of political parties and other politico-religious formations. But the Islamic sphere also includes individuals with disparate profiles and individual intellectual trajectories who are not affiliated to any established group. The factor which preserves internal cohesion and ensures that every person can recognise the other as

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<sup>1</sup> The term "quietist" is to be understood here in the sense given to it by Nikki Keddie in *Religion and Politics in Iran*, namely "withdrawn from political engagement". Cf. Yann Richard, *L'Iran. Naissance d'une république islamique*, p. 258, note 13. About the neo-conservatives, see Farhad Khosrokhavar, 'Neo-conservative intellectuals in Iran'; about the reformists, see the references in the part 'Iran and its Debates'.

an interlocutor is the common history of the Shia movement, which has produced the references each and every one of them shares.

This history has deep-seated roots and spans a centuries-long elaboration of the religious doctrine, with its division between usulism and akhbarism and the victory of the former over the latter. More recent are the premises of the Islamic constitutional movement in Iran (1906-1911) and the debates between the great Shia *mujtahid* of Qom and Najaf.<sup>2</sup> This is the history of the Shia movement which began in the late fifties and early sixties, as a reaction to the revolution of the Free Officers and General Qasim in Iraq in 1958 and the white revolution of Mohammad Reza Shah in Iran in 1963. Agricultural reforms and the elaboration of a new family code particularly affected the ulemas, whose position had already been undermined by the secularisation of the institutions, the decrease of their income and the slow decline of their religious schools. Moreover, students were tempted by the Marxist ideas that spread in the holy cities and many are those who arrived to study the religious sciences but left without a turban and instead became communists.<sup>3</sup> In answer to these threats, the clerics, the *marja'* at their head, emerged from their wait-and-see attitude and threw themselves into this worldly battle. In Iran, they had until then opted for a policy of accommodation with the Shah, whereas in Iraq they had remained silent in the mid-1920s, except for Mahdi al-Khalisi.<sup>4</sup>

Borujerdi (1875-1961) reorganised the *hozeh* of Qom and attempted to consolidate the religious institutions, which he did so well that the number of students increased again.<sup>5</sup> Muhsin al-Hakim (deceased in 1970) pursued the same objectives in Najaf and gave an impulse to the creation of the Association of Ulemas in 1960 which brought together clerics from different generations and nationalities<sup>6</sup>. However, the two grand *marja'* were soon overtaken by young, more active clerics less timid to participate in politics, with whom they had an ambiguous relationship. In Qom there was Ruhollah Khomeini, and later his disciple Mortaza Motahhari and in Najaf Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, surrounded by some others.<sup>7</sup> They became the pillars and ideologues of the

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<sup>2</sup> Abdul-Hadi Hairi, *Shi'ism and Constitutionalism in Iran*; Vanessa Martin, *Islam and Modernism: The Iranian Revolution of 1906*.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Naef, 'Shi'i-shuyu'i or: How to become a Communist in a Holy City'.

<sup>4</sup> For his biography in French, see Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La vie de l'ayatollah Mahdi al-Khalisi*.

<sup>5</sup> Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, pp. 50-56.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Faleh Abdul-Jabar, *The Shi'ite movement in Iraq*, pp. 110-113.

<sup>7</sup> Such as Muhammad Bahr al-'Ulum, Murtada al-'Askari, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who later founded SCIRII, Muhammad al-Sadr (father of Muqtada) and two Lebanese, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din.

Shia movement for which their works are still the main references.

Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was in the first place a *faqih*. Teaching at the *hawza*, he engaged in the reform of Islamic jurisdiction, more specifically the *usul*, in order to make it more accessible to his students. His publications on the matter are today widely used manuals.<sup>8</sup> He is moreover known for two books that aim at countering Western philosophy and Marxism and thus introduced these subjects in the domain of the *hawza*; "*Our Philosophy*" and "*Our Economy*"<sup>9</sup> became important reference works in Islamic circles. However, he was not the only one to try and lay the foundation of an Islamic economy as a third way next to socialism and capitalism. As far back as the 1940s, Sayyid Qutb had dealt with the question of social justice in Islam, and on the Shia side Mahmud Taleqani had studied the issue of property. But thanks to his knowledge of Marxist terminology, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr initiated a new way of dealing with Western materialism, which he held had to be better known so as to be more efficiently refuted. His influence in this matter first spread to his close companions and his contemporaries, starting with his cousin Musa al-Sadr, who wrote articles on economy in the journal *Maktab-e islam*, published in Qom, focusing on the question of redistribution, a subject given much attention by Muhammad Baqir.<sup>10</sup> Note that Musa al-Sadr was equally in contact with Mohammad Beheshti, who also published on Islamic economy and particularly on the banking system.<sup>11</sup>

On the political level, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr developed an original conception of the Islamic state, a conception which evolved significantly between the 1960s and the late 1970s. His theory is different from Khomeini's and advocates militantism and the institutionalisation of the clergy, but also the separation of powers which he divides between the nation and the clergy, with both remaining subjected to the constitution and the law. It can thus be considered a "liberal hierocracy" or a "semi-

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<sup>8</sup> Notably *al-Ma'alim al-jadida*, a very clear introduction to the *usul*, and *Durus fi 'ilm al-usul*, a more difficult work translated into English by Roy Mottahedeh. Cf. Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, *Lessons in Islamic Jurisprudence*.

<sup>9</sup> *Falsafatuna* (1959) and *Iqtisaduna* (1961) are regularly reprinted in Arabic and at least partially translated by Islamic publishers. About these works, see Chibli Mallat, *The Renewal of Islamic Law*; and John J. Donohue, 'Notre économie'.

<sup>10</sup> Faleh Abdul-Jabar, *The Shi'ite movement in Iraq*, pp. 296-305, gives an overview of the theory of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr on redistribution. See also Houchang E. Chehabi, *Distant Relations*, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> See Muhammad Beheshti, *al-Iqtisad al-Islami* and *Sira wa Hayat*, p. 36-37. Mohammad Beheshti, a student of Khomeini, later played a major role in the establishment of the Islamic Republic. He died in a bomb explosion at the headquarters of the Party of the Islamic Republic in Tehran in June 1981. Jean-Pierre Digard, Bernard Hourcade and Yann Richard, *L'Iran au XXe siècle*, p. 184.

liberal populist system".<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who was a prolific author, also published a journal, *al-Adwa'* (the Lights) in close collaboration with the young Lebanese clerics Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din.<sup>13</sup> He furthermore played a role in the Islamic movement, as he inspired the al-Da'wa party, although up to the present moment little is known about his exact relationship to the party. Shortly after the Iranian revolution, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr had become too dangerous in the eyes of the baathist regime. He was executed in April 1980 and members of al-Da'wa were prosecuted. This caused them to disperse geographically and diverge in their political choices, leading to a ramification of the party into different branches. Nevertheless, the experience of al-Da'wa and the ideas of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr constitute the basis of the current movement, especially for the Arab Shia. Almost every party refers to him in some fashion or another.

The doctrines of Ruhollah Khomeini are another element of these foundations. He partly fits into the tradition of Islamic utopias which also includes Farabi, Ibn 'Arabi and Molla Sadra Shirazi, who themselves were inspired by the concept of the virtuous wise man who governs the *polis* in Plato's *Republic*. Indeed, Khomeini was not only the Islamic law expert and politician for which he became famous, he was also a gnostic, a fact which is reflected in his writings on Islamic government.<sup>14</sup> He taught mystic philosophy (*'erfan*) in Qom from 1940 onwards, at a time when this was frowned upon in clerical circles. Today he is credited for the reintroduction of this discipline in the *hozeh*. The principal contribution of Khomeini therefore lies in the way he combined mystical philosophy, *feqh* and political vision, which inspired his theories of Islamic government and *velayat-e faqih*. He propagated these theories during his exile in Najaf, conferring the powers of the hidden Imam on the theologian-jurist, thus elevating him to the position of guide of the community on the spiritual but also on the political level. This theory, in an adapted version, would later form the basis for the Islamic regime of Iran – as well as a subject of debate among the ulemas.

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<sup>12</sup> Terms used by Faleh Abdul-Jabar in *The Shi'ite movement in Iraq*, p. 281, in his presentation of the political theory of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. See also pp. 280-287. The Iranian philosopher Mohsen Kadivar, in his study of theories on the state in Shia jurisdiction, classifies the ideas of Sadr under the theories of the elected (*intikhabi*) Islamic state. Muhsin Kadivar, *Nazariyyat al-dawla*, p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> Faleh Abdul-Jabar, *The Shi'ite movement in Iraq*, p. 114 and following.

<sup>14</sup> Vanessa Martin, *Islam and Modernism*, pp. 31-47. For the gnostic aspects of Khomeini's ideas, see also Yahya Cristian Bonaud, *L'imam Khomeiny*.

While Khomeini was a mystic theorist who would turn into a pragmatic politician when he came to power, his disciple Motahhari was the real ideologue of the Islamic regime, which would honour him with the title 'Teacher of the Revolution' (*mo'alleme enqelab*) and annually commemorate his assassination.<sup>15</sup> Motahhari developed the thought system which the regime drew on to define, organise and mobilise society. He was a theosophist like his master and shared with him a certain vision of the world. However, he was more interested in social issues and was more of a reformist cleric than a revolutionary militant. He vilified the conservative clerics, specifically for their reluctance to engage in politics, and had the ambition to modernise the religious institutions.<sup>16</sup> In his readiness to change society in order to make it more just, Motahhari entered into competition with those in 1970s Iran who were influenced by leninism and anti-colonialism - that is the ideas imported from the West which Motahhari wanted to ban. He therefore engaged in a systematic criticism of Marxism, although only after studying it attentively with all means available to him, and of the Islamic socialism of Shari'ati, which he vehemently resisted. Any movement of secularisation, as well as any attempt to integrate foreign concepts into Islamic doctrines, was in his eyes a conspiracy against Islam. His ideology, like Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's, aimed to be an alternative and a barrier to the influence of Western materialist thought. Nevertheless, and again like al-Sadr and other Islamic thinkers, Motahhari ended up constructing a hybrid system influenced by the ideas which he opposed. He was a prolific author who left many varied and often reprinted works.<sup>17</sup>

Today, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Mortaza Motahhari are often named by actors in the Islamic sphere as the founding fathers of Shia Islamic ideology although other authors have adopted and adapted their ideas and developed and refined them in order to create their own movements. What is particular to Shiism is that its ideologues, with the exception of some Iranian "religious intellectuals" such as Shari'ati, are all high-ranking clerics in the religious hierarchy. The ideologies they

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<sup>15</sup> Amir Nikpey, *Politique et religion en Iran*, p. 221. Motahhari was killed in May 1979 by a member of the Forqan group.

<sup>16</sup> About his reform programme for the clerical institutions, cf. Linda Walbridge, *The most Learned of the Shi'a*, pp. 161-182, which includes Motahhari's text 'The fundamental problem in the Clerical Establishment', with an introduction by Hamid Dabashi.

<sup>17</sup> Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, chapter IV: 'Motahhari: Towards an Islamic Ideology and the Battle for Control of Political Islam'; Amir Nikpey, *Politique et religion en Iran*, pp. 218-230. About the attacks against Shari'ati, see Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian*, chapter XVI and XVII.

construct, aim in the first place at rejecting the process of secularisation affecting Islamic societies, as well as the Western influence which is perceived as an effect of imperialism. Thus they devote major efforts to the modernisation of their institutions (*marjayat* and *hozeh*) and struggle to overcome the inertia of clerical milieus. They fulminate against materialist philosophies, countering them with Shia messianism and a mixture of rationalist, reformist, modernist and even mystical theories, reconsidered in the light of anti-colonial ideals. For them, Islam should be turned into an all-encompassing system which can respond to all social problems. The quietist attitude, the *taqiyya* of old, should be rejected and replaced by activism rather than a mere passive awaiting of the return of the Mahdi.

These imperatives were taken from the Qur'an. The fight between good and evil, between the oppressed and the oppressor, was thus described in terms which opposed the downtrodden (*mustad'afun*)<sup>18</sup> to the arrogant of this world (*mustakbarun*). The masses are mobilised during religious celebrations, particularly Ashura, with slogans that are chanted every year again without losing their evocative power. Thus, during the celebrations following the July war against Israel, the Lebanese Hezbollah proclaimed 'the victory of the oppressed' (*intisar al-mazlum*), referring to the paradigm of Husayn, the martyr of Karbala. In doing this, the party gave a new sense to the paradigm, since it was no longer a symbolic or moral but a real victory they claimed.

While the concepts of traditional Shi'ism underwent an ideological reinterpretation, the organisational methods characteristic of leninist parties, such as a pyramidal structure and a cult of secrecy, were freely borrowed to enhance the efficiency of activism. Yet both the concepts which were developed and the forms and methods of mobilisation used always had as their aim to produce and promote an ideology upholding Islamic modernity. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Islamic societies – and their clerics – have in effect been confronted with a modernity imposed by a conquering and hegemonic West, and have been searching for an appropriate response.<sup>19</sup> The "revolutionary" Shia movements, with Iran at their head since 1979, have been offering their versions too.

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<sup>18</sup> In Lebanon, Musa al-Sadr used the term *mahrum*, traditionally translated as 'disinherited': he was the initiator of the Harakat al-mahrumin, the Movement of the Disinherited.

<sup>19</sup> The representations in the media of a 'retrograde' or 'medieval' Iranian regime have wiped out the notion that the regime resulted from a rupture with the classic doctrines and an attempt to construct an endogenous modernity. On this point see the chapter "The Modernity of Theocracy" in Juan Cole's *Sacred Space and Holy War*.



Nevertheless a more discrete current that predates the revolution has been making its way and offering alternative answers, unfolding a vision of an Islam more humanist than political, and without the wholesale rejection of either the ideas imported from Europe or the secularisation affecting Muslim societies. Two different types of actors, clerics and religious intellectuals, were the carriers of this movement, which is often qualified as reformist. We must here again note the difficulty we mentioned earlier of classifying people and their ideas. The clerics involved in this movement became better informed about worldly affairs and an elite among them was well-versed in the profane sciences as well as Christian theology. We can mention here, as an example, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, who directed the Islamic Centre in Hamburg, founded on the initiative of Borujerdi in 1969. "Doctor ayatollah Beheshti" was his predecessor in this position and Mohammad Khatami his successor.<sup>20</sup> Shabestari stayed in Hamburg for almost a decade, studying Christian philosophy and theology before returning to Tehran just before the Revolution, by which time he spoke Arabic, English and German.<sup>21</sup> In a parallel movement intellectuals, most of them with university degrees in various specialisations, studied the religious sciences, following the example of Soroush. And like academics taught at the *hozeh*, especially in reformed schools, religious clerics offered courses at universities, mostly in the philosophy departments (as for example Shabestari and Kadivar). Some of them, like Malekian, even though they were integrated in the system of the *hozeh*, never wore the turban.

While this phenomenon can today be observed throughout the *hala islamiyya*, notably in Iraq and Lebanon, it is still less common there than in Iran, where it was generalised by the 'cultural revolution' (*enqelab-e farhangi*). In 1980, after the closure of the universities, Khomeini put in place several organs charged with integrating the *hozeh* and the universities, bringing together intellectuals and men of religion. After months of discussing and introducing certain 'islamised' subjects in their curriculums, certain university functionaries participating in the reform project considered that they could not go any further.<sup>22</sup> Others, on the contrary, especially

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<sup>20</sup> In the 1960s Beheshti, who read German and English, was an exception. The large majority of clerics hadn't completed their secondary education. Yann Richard, 'Le rôle du clergé', p. 14. Note that his companion Musa al-Sadr, who established himself in Lebanon, had also enjoyed a double education.

<sup>21</sup> Katajun Amirpur, 'Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari'; Muhammad Rida Wasifi, *al-Fikr al-islami*, p. 315.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Gholamabbas Tavasoli, university of Teheran, 07/04/2004.

clerics, wanted to proceed towards a complete islamisation of the social sciences and establish a system of lasting cross-overs connecting the university and the *hozeh*, and they continued their efforts in this direction with the support of the government. Sheikh Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, for example, organised exchanges within the framework of the Hozeh o daneshgah (*hozeh* and university) Committee, sponsoring the initiation of about a hundred academics in the Islamic sciences with the objective of bringing them to criticise the social sciences from an Islamic perspective. Upon their return to the university, they were meant to become the pillars of the cultural revolution. This particular project was never brought to an end, but the radical sheikh continued to push for co-operation between the two institutions and the adoption of an Islamic point of view in the social sciences, both in his writings and in the educational institution in Qom which he directed.<sup>23</sup> The activities of the Hozeh o daneshgah Committee have become more important over the last ten years, especially through the publication of books aiming to islamise the social sciences.<sup>24</sup>

The Iranian experience in the matter is often considered a model, as in Lebanon where the *hawza* milieus wish to establish links with the universities in order to obtain equivalent diplomas for their students. Nevertheless, the same experience is also criticised, both inside and outside Iran, and not only by intellectuals but by reformist clerics. Schematically speaking, the matter comes down to the question whether one wants to islamise modernity or modernise Islam. The proponents of the latter option tend to draw upon the social sciences, accepted as universal, in order to develop their comprehension of the doctrines.

### A New Theology

In reformist circles in the Persian and Arabic worlds, scholars talk about a new or modern theology (*'ilm al-kalam al-jadid*), which is to be distinguished from the ancient science of *kalam* in both its methods and its object. New questions are addressed that are treated in the classic *kalam*, and the tools used in this effort transcend the Islamic sciences to incorporate human sciences as they are practised today. Furthermore, this new theology does not aim to defend religion but rather to

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Qom, 19/08/2003. An illustration of his method can be found in his work *Usul al-ma'rif al-insaniyya*, that presents in Arabic the lectures he has given in Beirut.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Sayyed 'Arabi, Qom, 01/01/2004. Information can be found on the website of this institution, which later became a research centre affiliated to the *hozeh* of Qom in 1990: <<http://www.hawzeh.ac.ir>>.

understand it. In Iran, the cleric best representing this current, having become the main name in the field, is Mohammad Mojtabeh Shabestari. For some, he has become a model, others have attacked him, but like Soroush he became part of the cognitive landscape and those who are interested in the subject cannot ignore him. He has written relatively little as he prefers to concentrate on teaching and on his research for an Islamic encyclopaedia<sup>25</sup>, but he has marked an entire generation. His status as a cleric and his education at the *hozeh* of Qom, where he studied from 1950 until 1968, also give him credibility in religious circles. He was close to Beheshti and part of the editorial board of *Maktab-e eslam*, a journal on social and political issues. Shabestari also has substantial knowledge of Catholic and Protestant theological matters, acquired during his decade-long stay in Hamburg. He is both *mojtahed* and doctor in philosophy and the influence he exerts clearly shows this fact.

Shabestari bases himself on the writings of "Allama" Tabataba'i (d. 1981), meaning he refers to the Islamic philosophical tradition in its most contemporary forms. Tabataba'i was not only a famous exegete but also popularised the ideas of Molla Sadra Shirazi, which he introduced to the *hozeh*, teaching from the *Book of Four Journeys*.<sup>26</sup> For Shabestari, the spiritual journey does not lead to the annihilation in God, as is the case for the ideologues Motahhari, Khomeini and even Shari'ati, but to the consciousness of the self and the affirmation of man and his freedom. That is to say he has a different approach to the *'erfan*, which he does not associate with Islam as an all-encompassing system capable of providing the answer to all the problems posed by modernity.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, when Shabestari takes up his metaphysical hypotheses he notes the incapability of classic philosophies, such as the *feqh*, to renew its comprehension of the world. It is therefore necessary to draw on modern sciences to build up those sciences that are missing in Islam, like the philosophy of law, morality, politics and economics.<sup>28</sup>

The contribution of Shabestari lies in his demonstration of the fact that religious knowledge, even though it is declared to be eternal, is limited and changing, and this is what he has in common with Soroush. It is therefore the task of thinkers to adapt to the age and develop an adequate approach and a critical apparatus, which is

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<sup>25</sup> *Da'erat-e bozorg-e eslami*, in Teheran.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, chapter V and Lloyd Ridgeon, *Religion and Politics*, chapter VIII.

<sup>27</sup> Farzin Vahdat, 'Post-revolutionary Discourse', pp. 41-43.

<sup>28</sup> Id. p. 39 and Mahmood Sadri, 'Sacral Defense of Secularism', p. 261.

something he applied himself to in his *Hermeneutics of the Qur'an and the Sunna* (1996), one of his main works, together with his work on freedom and faith and his *Critique of the Official Reading of Religion* (2000). Mojtabeh Shabestari also took part in the public debate in Iran by writing articles for different journals.

The ideas of Shabestari and other Iranian thinkers travelled beyond the Iranian borders. In 1995, the journal *al-Muntalaq* published an interview with him in which he announced with pride, after explaining that this new theology was still in its infancy, the existence of a "nucleus" and expressed his hope to see an increase in contributions and debates.<sup>29</sup> *Al-Muntalaq* is the archetypal magazine of the Lebanese Islamic sphere, whose history has partly been written in its own pages over the years. It was created in Beirut in September 1977 by the Lebanese Union of Muslim Students, an organisation sponsored by Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, who made the magazine his forum in the 1980s.<sup>30</sup> It subsequently opened its pages to the debates taking place within the Shia movement of Lebanon. From the second half of the 1990s onwards, its editor-in-chief Hasan Jabir used it to spread the ideas of Iranian thinkers. In 1998 he published a special issue on 'the renewal of theology', with four articles translated from Persian offering different perspectives on the matter.<sup>31</sup> For several years, a kind of euphoria reigned: this new approach opened fields which hadn't received attention in classic Shiism and allowed the discussion of issues grounded in reality and experience, including the experience of Islamic government in Iran and its limits. "Before, we would think about the relations between God and his servant, now we think about the problems of man in society, and about politics (*shura* and democracy), and this implies an accommodation and renewal in all religious sciences."<sup>32</sup> Hasan Jabir himself prefers to reflect on the philosophy of *fiqh* and is interested in the values underlying the norms.<sup>33</sup> Today he continues in this direction and, as a university graduate, has started to teach the new theology in a *hawza*.<sup>34</sup>

Enthusiasm for the new theology quickly spread;<sup>35</sup> in Qom, it reached the circles of non-Iranian students and teachers at the *hozeh* who had access to the Persian texts. Iraqi, Lebanese and Gulf Shia joined in informal discussion circles. In 1994 one of

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<sup>29</sup> Hasan Jabir, 'al-Tajdid wa al-taqid', p. 46.

<sup>30</sup> Jamal Sankari, *Fadlallah. The making of a Radical*.

<sup>31</sup> *Al-Muntalaq*, nr 119, Autumn-Winter 1997-1998.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Hasan Jabir, Beirut, 28/12/2001.

<sup>33</sup> Hasan Jabir, *al-Maqasid al-kulliyah*.

<sup>34</sup> Interview in Beirut, 13/04/2003.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa'i, Qom, 28/08/2003.

them, ‘Abd al-Jabbar Rifa‘i, founded a journal that would form a true bridge between the intellectual fields of Iran and the Arab world and, even more, a transnational forum for Shia and Sunni thinkers: *Qadaya islamiyya mu‘asira* (Contemporary Islamic Issues).<sup>36</sup> ‘Abd al-Jabbar Rifa‘i was a prolific writer, and his intellectual trajectory deserves a closer look. He was born in a peasant family in a village close to Nasiriyyah and attended the primary school which was opened there after the revolution of 1958. Then he started a journey that brought him first to Baghdad, where he completed a course in agronomy, and then to the *hawza* of Najaf, where he studied from 1978 till 1980. The regime's repression forced him to leave Iraq and in 1984 he arrived in Qom. He describes himself as always ‘in search of science’ and to this day teaches at the *hozeh* and the university. Although he does not wear the turban, he is a ‘sheikh’. He received a classic education and tried out all the possibilities offered by the freedom of choice that characterises education at the *hozeh*, before formulating his critique of the system in order to "modernise it and open it to the century".

#### *Qadaya*... and her sisters

His project entailed a real reconstruction of the religious sciences and the representation of the divine, and this was the topic of his journal, which also gave a platform to a group of students and clerics at the *hozeh* who, as Rifa‘i puts it, "had no voice before".<sup>37</sup> Virtually without assistance, ‘Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa‘i published in Arabic not only philosophers like Shayegan and reformist thinkers like Soroush, Shabestari or Malekian, but also authors that opposed their ideas.

"*Qadaya* did not try to establish a certain position as the right line, but to expose the reader to various opinions," Rifa‘i explained. "What is important is opening breaches to trigger reflection, and this can only be done by raising questions, because the history of thought is the history of raising important questions."<sup>38</sup>

The articles published therefore sometimes sharply contrast with each other, although - as is common in this type of publications - the tone and certain formulations soften the discourse. Some ulemas of Qom have written in *Qadaya*, such

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<sup>36</sup> The journal first carried the name *Qadaya islamiyya*, under which the first five issues were published from 1994 till 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with ‘Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa‘i, Qom, 28/08/2003.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with ‘Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa‘i published in the newspaper al-Ayam (Bahrain), 26/01/2004, available on <[www.islamonline.net/Arabic/arts/2004/01/article17.shtml](http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/arts/2004/01/article17.shtml)>.

as Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, Ja'far Sobhani and Naser Makarem Shirazi. Lebanese reformists including Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Muhammad Hasan al-Amin or Hani Fahs have encouraged the publisher of *Qadaya*, which is printed in Beirut and distributed throughout the Arab world, especially in Egypt and Morocco, where it has found an audience. It also publishes texts by the Egyptian Hasan Hanafi, "discussing ideology rather than epistemology"<sup>39</sup> and by Maghrebi authors. 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa'i states that the thinkers from the Maghreb, contrary to the Iranians, are outside of the Islamic sphere, but stresses the closeness of their thought, mentioning Mohammed Talbi, 'Abd al-Majid Chafri, Abdou Filali-Ansary,... and most of all Mohammed Arkoun, whom he considers the most remarkable among them.

Apart from authors' texts and interviews translated from Persian to Arabic, *Qadaya* also offers reports on the debates and round tables which it organises itself or takes over from Persian journals such as *Naqd o nazar*, which is connected to the *hozeh* of Qom. Its publisher grasps every opportunity to bring thinkers together and record their exchanges. The themes *Qadaya Islamiyya mu'asira* has broached since 1998 are a good illustration of the evolution of the questions that are debated today. There are special issues on Shia political thought (nrs. 1 and 2, 1998), contemporary Islamic thought and its new orientations (nr. 5, 1999), Qur'anic exegesis (nr. 4, 1998), which includes the translation of Shabestari's work on hermeneutics (nr. 6, 1999), the philosophy of Islamic jurisdiction and a new interpretation of the approach of the *maqasid* (nrs. 7 and 8, 1999; nr. 13, 2000), the doctrine of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (nrs. 11 and 12, 2000), the new theology (nr. 14, 2001), liberalism (nr. 24-25, 2003), tolerance (nrs. 27 and 28-29, 2004), 'living together' and religious and cultural pluralism (nr. 31-32, 2006). The latter issue publishes authors representing various currents, including Daryush Shayegan, Mojtabeh Shabestari and a debate between John Hick and Hossein Nasr in Istanbul. The table of contents shows that the journal is sensitive to the questions raised by the current political situation in the region, notably in Iraq, where the editor has tried to re-establish himself after 2003, which explains the irregularity of its publication.

Although he lives in Qom most of the time, 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa'i has founded a centre in Baghdad, the Centre for the Study of the Philosophy of Religion and the

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<sup>39</sup> In the words of 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa'i.

New Theology, which co-publishes books about scientific approaches to Islam, such as a collective volume on the anthropology of Islam<sup>40</sup> and a work by ‘Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa‘i, in which he exposes in a very didactic way what modern theology is and which important questions it has dealt with since the time of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani.<sup>41</sup> Its journal is moreover reprinted in Damascus and Beirut in the form of volumes that form several series.<sup>42</sup> We will take a closer look at two of these publications which directly concern new theology. The first, *Theological Ijtihad*, contains several interviews with the Egyptians Hasan Hanafi and Muhammad Imara and the Iranians Mojtaba Shabestari, Mostafa Malekian and Ahmad Qaramelki, as well as Sadeq Larijani, renowned for offering the best critique of Soroush from the conservative side, explaining his position on the issue. The second, *New Theology and the Philosophy of Religions*, contains interviews with several of the same authors as well as others, and includes moreover the texts of a round table on religious rationality and theology attended by Iranian clerics and philosophers.<sup>43</sup> We observe both a variety of perspectives and opinions and a diversity of authors, offering a glimpse on the richness of the Iranian intellectual arena.

The journal *Qadaya islamiyya mu‘asira* has contributed a wealth of reflections on the modernisation of Islam by giving a voice to authors ranging from the most reformist to the most conservative. It brings together actors from the *hozeh* and from the university, including Shia from Iran, Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf as well as Sunnis, in particular the leading figures of various magazines published in Beirut and of the *Prologues* in Casablanca. This small world can gather and debate the issues during the pilgrimage to Mecca as well as at a conference in Rabat. *Qadaya islamiyya* is today the best known journal in its field and the most widely distributed, but it is not the only one published in Shia circles who consider themselves enlightened.

In Damascus a disciple of Rifa‘i publishes *al-Wa‘i al-mu‘asir* (Modern Consciousness). In Beirut, *al-Muntalaq al-jadid* succeeds *al-Muntalaq* and continues in the same current under the direction of a woman, Zaynab Shurba. *Al-Kalima* (The Word) is published since the 1990s by a Saudi Shia cleric, Zaki al-Milad, author of a

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<sup>40</sup> Abu Bakr A. Baqadir, *Anthrubulujjiya al-islam*. This volume contains Arabic translations of articles of Jacques Waardenburg, Eric Wolf and Clifford Geertz.

<sup>41</sup> Abd al-Jabbar Rifa‘i, *Muqaddima fi al-su‘al*, 2005

<sup>42</sup> In Damascus, the books are published by Dar al-Fikr and in Beirut by Dar al-Hadi and Dar al-Fikr al-Mu‘asir.

<sup>43</sup> Abd al-Jabbar Rifa‘i, *‘Ilm al-kalam* and *al-Ijtihad al-kalami*.

dozen of books on contemporary Shia thought.<sup>44</sup> He is one of the new, ‘islamo-liberal’ reformists<sup>45</sup> who, after returning to Saudi Arabia and rejecting their revolutionary ideals, want to make their voices heard in a dialogue with the political constituents of the country. Two other journals of a similar type are published at educational institutions. *Al-Hayat al-tayyiba* is published by the *hawza* Ma‘had Rasul al-Akram, which we will meet again later in this essay, and whose chief editor is the *hawza’s* former director, the Iranian cleric Najafali Mirza‘i. The journal, created in 1998, mainly focuses on the modernisation of religious education and has gradually become an eclectic debating forum, as much because of the choice of authors as through the selection of themes. This pluralism is also reflected in the composition of its editing board<sup>46</sup> and shows that there is room for manoeuvre even for institutions that depend on the Iranian clerical establishment: the journal and the *hawza* are both financed by the organ which co-ordinates Iranian schools abroad. It also confirms the importance of the individual in relation to the institution; in this case, because it is the chief editor who sets the tone. *Al-Mahajja* is a journal published by an institute that offers courses in Islamic philosophy in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Its focus is therefore on philosophical questions but in many ways it also resembles the other journals mentioned, often publishing the same authors and sometimes even the same articles. The particularity of *al-Mahajja* lies in the fact that it also publishes articles by Christian theologians and Lebanese authors such as philosopher and theologian Paul Khoury, who are in touch with the institute, whose director is also editor-in-chief of the journal.

More recently, *Nusus mu‘asira* (Contemporary Texts) was established; its offices are in Beirut but those in charge of it reside more often in Qom or in the Gulf, which is hardly surprising, as one of them teaches in Qom while the direction is in the hands of ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Fadili, a Saudi cleric and former companion of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr in Najaf, who returned to Saudi Arabia a few years ago. Published by the Centre for Contemporary Research (Markaz al-buhuth al-mu‘asira), the journal claims to specialise in "the translation of texts that deal with women's issues, modernity, dialogue, openness towards the other, philosophy of *fiqh*, modern theology, the

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<sup>44</sup> Zaki Al-Milad, *al-Fikr al-islami*.

<sup>45</sup> See Stéphane Lacroix, ‘Between Islamist and Liberals’, pp. 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> Including clerics who are known as broad-minded, such as Muhammad Hasan al-Amin and the "neo-conservative" Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, clerics and intellectuals, Shia and Sunnis (for example Ridwan al-Sayyid, founder of the journal *al-Ijtihad*, and today leading the journal *al-Tasamuh*).



plurality of interpretations, etc." To this purpose, it affirms its willingness to "benefit from the contemporary intellectual experience of the Iranian cultural arena" and offers texts of interest to the Islamic sphere in Arabic translation. Its objectives are clearly stated in the well-made electronic version of the journal.<sup>47</sup> It offers the same type of debates as published in *Qadaya*, bringing for example a new translation of *Qazb va bast* by Soroush. It justifies this by arguing that the previous translation was marred by omissions and lack of precision and that the text and the polemics it incited are too important not to remedy this situation.<sup>48</sup> As for reformist options, although *Nusus mu'asira* offers more conservative analyses, its articles do often deal with reform (*islah*) and renewal (*tajdid*), like the other journals. Not all authors attach the same importance to these notions, depending on their point of view, but the aim remains to find modalities to accommodate Islamic thought in the modern world, whether or not in articulation with a political vision of Islam. Meanwhile we should not forget that these journals only interest a small elite. Najafali Mirza'i, the Iranian cultural consul, estimates that "some journals sell five hundred copies per issue; their readership is very limited in Lebanon although it is larger in Morocco and Egypt."<sup>49</sup> *Qadaya islamiyya mu'asira* has the largest readership as it is the oldest journal and definitely the one most in touch with the reformist debates.

#### A Predilection for Philosophy

If we have to draw a distinction between Arab and Persian Shi'ism, the predilection of the latter for mysticism, gnosis (*'erfan*) and philosophy must definitely be mentioned. This was also the view of Henry Corbin, who describes the phenomenon very well.<sup>50</sup> We find in Persia mystic orders that are absent in Arab Shi'ism and theosophists unparalleled there. Although the *hawza* of Najaf has also started teaching philosophy again, to Qom philosophy is one of its specific characteristics, and it is in the field of philosophy that the opposing camps of conservative supporters of the regime and reformists paradoxically meet each other, even if they do not understand the subject in the same manner. For the former, gnosis and philosophy serve a worldview that proposes an all-encompassing Islam, an Islamic utopia, while for the latter, the same

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<sup>47</sup> <[www.nosos.net](http://www.nosos.net)>. See notably '*Li-madha nusos mu'asira?*' (Why *Nusus mu'asira*), by Haydar Hubb Allah, chief editor of the journal.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *Nusus mu'asira*, 5, Winter 2006, p. 136.

<sup>49</sup> Interview at the Iranian Cultural Centre in Beirut (Bir Hasan), 21/12/2006.

<sup>50</sup> Henry Corbin, *En islam iranien*.

elements instead are the vectors for the individualisation of religion.

In Lebanon, a generation of clerics trained after the revolution have returned imbued with a knowledge that was not shared by their elders, who were moulded by the ideas current in 1960s Najaf. They transmitted these ideas in their turn to others. Thus, in 1999 sheikh Shafiq Jaradeh founded the institute of theosophy for religious and philosophical studies (Ma‘had al-ma‘arif al-hikmiyya li-l-dirasat al-diniyya wa al-falsafiyya) in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The evening courses there are organised in two sections: one is reserved for enrolled students who are required to succeed in a certain number of philosophy courses - *‘irfan*, fundamental beliefs (*‘aqida*), theology, morality, etc. - to obtain their degree, which is not recognised by the state. The other, open to all, offers courses of methodology, sufism and *‘irfan*. The aim is not so much to educate specialists but to ‘broaden the cultural horizon’ of *hawza* or university students in these disciplines and guide their researches by offering them a method. The registration fee is relatively modest, aiming mostly to shift out non-serious applicants, since the institute is financially supported by the *‘marja‘iyya khums*, that is by ‘Ali Khamenei. Shafiq Jaradeh originally started out by teaching a classic work of *‘irfan*<sup>51</sup>, as well as the work of ‘Allama Tabataba‘i, who is considered the founding father of the philosophical milieu in Qom.<sup>52</sup> Later he widened his interest, notably including the history of philosophy and Christian theology. "John Hick has influenced Iranian thought and I think he should be read like other Christian theologians, to benefit from their experience," he declares. Moreover, Muslims and Christians regularly gather at the institute for debates where all share their views on issues faced by all religions. Thus, the institute maintains a permanent dialogue with Paul Houry, "who plays the role of John Hick in Lebanon", Bishop Georges Khodr and father Mouchir Aoun, from the *Université du Saint-Esprit* in Kaslik.<sup>53</sup> "If we don't discuss the questions that affect us in a religious framework transcending Islam, we will not develop", considers Shafiq Jaradeh. "And if God is for all of us, how can I monopolise Him? We need to have a dialogue and consider the points on which we

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<sup>51</sup> Mahdi Bahr al-‘Ulum, *al-Sayr wa al-suluk*. This is a treaty of practical gnosis, describing methods for the adoration of God (*dhikr*, contemplation, etc.).

<sup>52</sup> Abd al-Jabbar Rifa‘i, *Tatawwur al-dars al-falsafi*, chapter IV.

<sup>53</sup> Paul Houry is a theologian and philosopher at the Institut Saint-Paul de Philosophie et de Théologie in Harissa. Georges Khodr is the bishop of the Greek Orthodox Church for Mount Lebanon and has been very engaged in the renewal of the Church. Mouchir Aoun teaches philosophy and intercultural dialogue at the faculty of theology at the *Université du Saint-Esprit* in Kaslik.

agree and acknowledge those on which we differ."<sup>54</sup> This discourse resonates with a certain public in the southern suburbs, where the youth is a demanding party for a new approach to Shiism, different from the daily worship with its rules, and sometimes even for spirituality. Philosophy and *'irfan* also attract militant students or sympathisers of Hezbollah; they find here an intellectual content to sustain their commitment. Besides, Shafiq Jaradeh is known to be close to the party. Women are also present at the institute and are even in the majority at the Institute of Oriental Philosophy (Ma'had al-ishraq) directed by the cleric Muhammad al-Hajj, a kind of cultural centre also located in the southern suburbs, where people come in the evenings to submerge themselves in metaphysics and theosophy.

The transcendental philosophy of Molla Sadra Shirazi has also made its way into the Lebanese *hawza*, like other newly formed disciplines aiming at the modernisation of education in the religious sciences. These schools are in fact reformed institutes which do not follow the system of the classic 'free' *hawza*, where every student can choose his teachers and his courses, instead following the university model.<sup>55</sup> In Lebanon, the most modernist among them are directed by young clerics and placed under the religious authority of either Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah or 'Ali Khamenei.<sup>56</sup> In addition to the secular social sciences (sociology, psychology, pedagogy), new disciplines of the Islamic religious sciences have been introduced. While it has become common to offer courses in Islamic jurisdiction with a comparative approach between the Shia and Sunni schools, it is a more recent phenomenon to have courses relating Islamic law to positive law. The general subject of *fiqh* has various branches: its history and practice, its social aspects, the norms (*ahkam*), the fatwas, etc. are studied in separate courses. The philosophy of *fiqh*, a discipline that first appeared in the journals, has made its entry in educational programs, as has the new theology. Eventually, the debates between ulemas and religious intellectuals find their practical application in the introduction of new programs.

The institute al-Rasul al-Akram and its female branch, al-Zahra' are considered the vanguard of religious schools in the Islamic sphere. Its voluminous 'catalogue' 2003-

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Shafiq Jaradeh, Beirut, 16/05/2006.

<sup>55</sup> About the reform of the *hawza*, see Sabrina Mervin, 'La *hawza* à l'épreuve du siècle'.

<sup>56</sup> Namely *al-Ma'had al-shar'i al-islami* and *Ma'had al-rasul al-akram*, both situated in the Southern suburbs of Beirut. Sabrina Mervin, 'La *hawza* à l'épreuve du siècle'.

2004<sup>57</sup>, which lists the courses year by year, reveals a concern with a new categorisation of the disciplines, a willingness to structure the teaching and an openness to social science literature produced abroad. All of it is presented in a clear and elegant form. The director, well-informed about the issues that occupy the religious circles, explains his objective in the introduction: to modernise the *hawza* without taking away its depth.<sup>58</sup> We could be tempted to see this as the influence of Iran with its experience in founding and administrating this type of establishment, especially since the school follows the *marja'iyya* of 'Ali Khamenei. But in fact it should also be seen as the marks of individual initiatives – as always in Shia institutions, who have difficulty to ensure their continuity in its own name, rather than in reference to a founder. The institute has been under the direction of Najafali Mirza'i, a cleric who is very taken by the contemporary debates and editor-in-chief of a journal which publicises them, *al-Hayat al-tayyiba*.<sup>59</sup> He has since also founded a research institute in Beirut whose efforts are directed towards introducing the Arabic and Iranian civilisations to each other (Markaz al-hadara li-l-dirasat al-iraniyya al-'arabiyya), and which focuses mainly on the different currents in contemporary thinking.<sup>60</sup>

### The Iranian Fingerprint?

When we ask him whether his taste for philosophy and new theology is an effect of the Iranian influence, Najafali Mirza'i seems to think it is not. "People study Molla Sadra Shirazi because he is a Shia, not because he is Iranian." He goes even further, "Great thinkers are universal. Ibn 'Arabi, for example, wasn't "Sunni and Arabic", he belonged to everybody."<sup>61</sup> The same is true today for Soroush or Shayegan, they are not Iranian thinkers...". To the same question, Muhammad al-Hajj answers rather humourously, "Our association does not follow Iran, it follows the ideas of Shiraz. Here we are not interested in ideology but in metaphysics."<sup>62</sup> Shafiq Jaradeh declares

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<sup>57</sup> *Dalil Ma'had al-rasul al-akram*, 2003-2004, 471 pages.

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile he has founded a research centre in Qom and has returned to Lebanon as cultural council.

<sup>60</sup> The centre translates books into both languages on subjects ranging from contemporary poetry to the philosophy of *fiqh*, women's rights and the theoretical foundations of the Islamic Republic. Interview, Beirut, 21/12/2006.

<sup>61</sup> Note that Ibn 'Arabi occupies an important position in the theoretical Shia *'erfan* because his theories have been adopted by Molla Sadra, which shows the pertinence of the example.

<sup>62</sup> Interview, Beirut, January 2002.

that, as the history of philosophy wasn't being taught, he tried to teach it the "Iranian way", although adding Arabic authors.

Concerning the "new theology", if we are to believe some, it is not that new. Its critics consider, albeit slightly in bad faith, that it is an ancient discipline in a new jacket and that only the formulation has changed. Its proponents, for their part, write its history. Abd al-Jabbar Rifa'i traces its origin back to the Indian scholar Shibli No'mani (d. 1914), author of a work entitled *The New Theology*. He further mentions the famous Egyptian reformist Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and his *Risalat al-tawhid* (Treaty of Oneness) and finally Mohammad Iqbal (d. 1938) who, more than the above-mentioned, truly nourished the project of the reconstruction of religious sciences in Islam.<sup>63</sup> The next step is constituted by the writings of Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i, his disciple Mortaza Motahhari and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.<sup>64</sup> After that, the force of Iran lay, for him, in the production of intellectuals who were not only trained in the classic system of the *hozeh*, but also enjoyed a modern, scientific academic education.<sup>65</sup> They were therefore able to think about Islam with the intellectual tools of their time. A large number of proponents of the new theology draw a parallel between the openness of contemporary thinkers towards western social sciences and the movement of translation of Greek philosophy in the ninth century, which lay at the origin of the development of the *falsafa*. "However", adds Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, "in the time of Ma'mun, Muslims dominated the world and translated, while now they borrow ideas that they think are universal."

Modern Islamic theology may be the outcome of a historical process, but it is not limited to Iran. The existence of the Islamic Republic certainly raised questions that encouraged its development but, according to Shabestari, it is also developed elsewhere in the Muslim world. The writings of the Egyptian Nasr Abu Zayd, for example, or the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur, even if they are part of Qur'anic exegesis, also belong to the new theology, Shabestari thinks, because they promote a new vision of Islam. He moreover considers Mohammed Arkoun and Mohammad 'Abed al-Jabiri as modern theologians too.<sup>66</sup> Hasan Jabir agrees, mentioning the same names and adding the Lebanese 'Ali Harb. The historicity of the sacred text has been

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Mohammed Iqbal, *Reconstruire la pensée religieuse*.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. the introduction by Rifa'i to Shabestari, *Madkhal ila 'ilm al-kalam*, p. 7-8. See also the comparison he draws between Abduh and Iqbal in Abd al-Jabbar Rifa'i, *Muhammad Abduh wa Muhammad Iqbal*'.

<sup>65</sup> Interview in Qom, 28/08/2003.

<sup>66</sup> Interview in Teheran, 16/08/2003.

studied by Arab authors before Soroush, "his reading was therefore a shock for the Iranians but not for us", he states.<sup>67</sup> If some years ago, one could hear in the "Islamic sphere" remarks such as "we do as in Qom" or "this comes from Iran", this is no longer so prevalent today. More than a merely political reason, we should see in this the effect of a habit and an expression of attachment to Arabic culture. Furthermore, the reformist thinkers who claim to be open towards the world, are also open towards the Islamic worlds and are consciously attempting to transcend identity constructions of 'belonging' and take only intellectual affinities into consideration. Finally, let us not forget the personalities on the local religious and intellectual scenes, who do not refer to Iran and do not consider themselves influenced by its thinkers, even if they read them. This holds true for the Lebanese Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, who follows his own road as *marja'* and applies a reformism that is more practical than theoretical, as well as for another Lebanese, Muhammad Hasan al-Amin, who is rooted in his society and in the local Arabic Shiism.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Interview in Beirut, 03/01/2007.

<sup>68</sup> On Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah see his website: <[www.bayynat.org](http://www.bayynat.org)>; for Muhammad Hasan al-Amin, we refer to his book, *al-Ijtima' al-'arabi*.

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