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From Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr via Feuerbach to Darwin – Aḥmad al-Qabānjī's Self-Criticism of Shiʿite Islam

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Introduction

The attitude of Muslim theologians and jurists towards differences of opinion has always been ambivalent. The idea of a plurality of approaches was – at best – grudgingly accepted in specific areas such as the existence of various schools of law, but not with regard to the path towards salvation proper.[1] On the contrary, the Prophet himself is said to have predicted that the Muslim community would split into 73 groups (just like the Christians into 72 and the Jews into 71), all of which save for one would be destined to hellfire. It was precisely this *ḥadīth* that gave birth to a long tradition of heresiography that has permeated Islamic intellectual (and more often than not political) history ever since.[2] In the twentieth century in particular, and notwithstanding all previous scant endeavours to reach an ecumenical understanding, it seems that Sunnite-Shiʿite sectarianism in its most implacable form has once again gained the upper hand after the Iranian revolution in 1979. In all this, the conflict was never restricted to purely scholarly circles: during the Iraqi civil war in 2006, one could read newspaper articles to the effect that many people had their first names changed from easily attributable ones, like ʿUmar or ʿUthmān among Sunnites and Ḥusayn or ʿAbbās among Shiʿites, to less conspicuous ones, like Aḥmad or Muḥammad, in order to gain a better chance for survival at the checkpoints.[3]

It comes as no surprise therefore that the great majority of debates about religiously motivated sectarianism in the modern and contemporary Muslim world – as well as of Western

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[1] See for instance Rudi Paret, "Innerislamischer Pluralismus", in Ulrich Haarmann / Peter Bachmann (ed.), *Die islamische Welt zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Festschrift für Hans Robert Roemer zum 65. Geburtstag*, Beirut / Wiesbaden 1979, 523-29, on the often-quoted crypto-*ḥadīth* "the difference of my community is a blessing" (*ikhtilāf ummatī raḥma*). On the tension between consensus (*ijmāʿ*) and dissension (*ikhtilāf*) in early Islam see Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra. Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, Berlin, New York 1991-97, IV/654-60.

[2] For an overview of the pre-modern history of Muslim heresiography which takes this hadith as a point of departure see Josef van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere. Beobachtungen an islamischen häresiographischen Texten*, I-II, Berlin, New York 2011.

[3] "To Stay Alive, Iraqis Change Their Names", *The New York Times*, 6 September 2006; for the history of ecumenical efforts (and their failure) in modern times, see Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumen-*

research on this topic – tend to focus on the antagonism between Sunnites and Shiʿites and the plethora of mutual polemical writings that are widespread and easily accessible. By contrast, dissenting voices, speaking from *within* the respective religious camps, were often considered as mainly motivated by an opposition against prevailing political notions and regimes. To a certain degree, this is true when we look, for instance, at the critical echo that was initially caused within Shiʿism by Khomeini's political theory of "the guardianship of the jurist" (*wilāyat al-faqīh*). Most of his religious peers who rejected his ideas did so only because they were opposed to this specific interpretation of the political role of the Shiʿite clergy, not because they harboured fundamental doubts about Shiʿite doctrines or acts of faith.[4] Things started to become more ambiguous when reform debates set in within post-revolutionary Iran, roughly from the 1990s on and initially also motivated by political circumstances. Gradually, lay intellectuals such as ʿAbd ol-Karīm Sorūsh, but also trained religious scholars such as Moḥammad Mojtahed Shabestarī, Moḥsen Kadīvar, Ḥasan Yūsefī Eshkevarī, and others, started thinking about religious reform in more general terms that were no longer restricted to the role of Shiʿism in modern politics, let alone the traditional sectarian polemics of the past.[5] While they concentrate for the most part on questions of new hermeneutical approaches to the scriptures, or on the compatibility of Islamic thought and Western concepts such as human rights or democracy, there are also a few authors who go one step further and strike at the roots of Shiʿite identity, namely the question of the imamate, the Imams' distinctive features and their reports on which everything is based. As a kind of counterpart to the proselytizing efforts of new converts to Shiʿism who coined their own literature in the twentieth century,[6] these Shiʿite critics of Shiʿism remind the reader sometimes of the dissidents in the former Eastern bloc who also became apostates of their previous convictions without, however, completely breaking with their intellectual origins. It is one such contemporary dissident author, the Iraqī Aḥmad al-Qabānjī, who is in the centre of the following pages.

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ism in the 20th century. The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint, Leiden 2004.

[4] Mariella Ourghi, "Shiite Criticism of the *Welāyat-e Faqīh*", *Asiatische Studien* 59 (2005), 831-44; Katajun Amirpur, "Aktuelle Aushandlungsprozesse des Verhältnisses von Religion, Staat und Politik: Eine Positionsbestimmung der heutigen Gegner und Befürworter der *velāyat-e faqīh* in Iran und im Irak", *Asiatische Studien* 66 (2012), 521-64.

[5] For an overview and analysis of new theological approaches in recent decades both in Sunnite and Shiʿite islam, see now Constance Arminjon Hachem, *Vers une nouvelle théologie en islam. Pour une histoire polyphonique*, Paris 2022, esp. 137-81 (on Sorūsh, Shabestarī, Kadīvar, and Moṣṭafā Malekiyān); Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontents. Political Thought and Reform in Iran*, Cambridge 2019; for a selection and annotated translation of some texts of key thinkers (Shabestarī, Kadīvar, Eshkevarī) see Katajun Amirpur (ed.), *Unterwegs zu einem anderen Islam. Texte iranischer Denker*, Freiburg 2009.

[6] Rainer Brunner, "'Then I was Guided' – Some Remarks on Inner-Islamic Conversions in the 20th and 21st Centuries", *Orient* 50:4 (2009), 6-15.

Shiʿite dissidents in the twentieth century – a brief (and incomplete) overview

Before delving into the details of al-Qabānjī's biography and thought, however, some words on the intellectual tradition he ought to be situated in seem to be in order, in view of the fact that there has been, since the second half of the nineteenth century, a small, yet audible group of (mostly Iranian) Shiʿite writers whose treatment of religion went beyond the usual degree of theological dissension. Most of these early clashes were triggered off by the debates about the (in)compatibility of the latest discoveries in the natural sciences with Islamic articles of faith, and these period debates were by no means limited to Shiʿite circles.[7] It may be because of the general scope of the problem that the questions authors from a Shiʿite background asked and the answers they proposed were not yet of a particularly Shiʿite nature.[8]

The first modern Shiʿite cleric who caused a major stir by rejecting a precise element of Shiʿite religious practice was Muḥsin al-Amīn (1867-1952) who was born in Jabal ʿĀmil (today's South Lebanon) and became the spiritual leader of the Shiʿite community in Damascus from 1901 on. In a small treatise that he published in 1927/28, he condemned some popular Muḥarram ceremonies in commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Imam, Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī, at Karbalāʾ in 680, deeming above all the processions of the self-flagellators unlawful innovations (*bidaʿ*). This immediately resulted in a vehement polemical reaction by a number of Shiʿite authors, backed by the tacit or explicit approval of several high-ranking scholars who defended these bloody rituals. Al-Amīn did not have in mind to abolish the mourning of the Imam's death altogether, but only aimed at doing away with some controversial rituals which were, after all, a recent phenomenon that was imported from the Caucasus and Azarbayjan to Iraq and Iran only in the nineteenth century.[9] Nevertheless, he was cursed and labelled by his opponents as an "Umayyad", i.e. an arch-enemy of the Shiʿites, and the whole affair went down in modern Shiʿite history as the *fitna* (sedition) – which is the well-known

[7] For an excellent overview of these debates in the wider Muslim world and their background see Anke von Kügelgen (ed.), *Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion – Religionskritische Positionen um 1900* (…), Berlin 2017, especially her long introduction (30-120).

[8] This holds true for most authors who were driven by secular or nationalist motives, such as Fatḥ ʿAlī Ākhūndzādeh (1812-78, on whom see von Kügelgen (ed.), *Wissenschaft*, 49-54 and 121-95), Āghā Khān Kermānī (1853-96; see ibid., 70-72 and 202-07), Hādī Najmābādī (1834-1902; see Reza Hajatpour, *Islamische Geistlichkeit zwischen Utopie und Realismus. Zum Diskurs über Herrschafts- und Staatsdenken im 20. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden 2002, 137-47), Ḥasan Taqīzādeh (1878-1970; see Tim Epkenhans, *Moral und Disziplin. Seyyed Ḥasan Taqīzāde und die Konstruktion eines "progressiven Selbst" in der frühen iranischen Moderne*, Berlin 2005, esp. 189-95), or Ḥosayn Kāẓemzādeh (1884-1962; see Ata Anzali, "From Ethnic Nationalism to Cosmopolitan Mysticism: The Life and Works of Hossein Kazemzadeh Iranshahr (1884–1962)", *Iranian Studies* 55 (2022), 61-112).

[9] Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of *ʿāshūrāʾ*", *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1933), 161-81, here 175f.

common designation for the first civil war in Islam between ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya.[10] Although al-Amīn's case cannot serve as a first-rate example of Shiʿite dissident literature, this affair is telling in the sense that it served subsequent critics as a warning: even on a comparatively rather modest scale, criticism of Shiʿite pieces of identity came at a price.[11]

Mīrzā Reżāqolī Sangalajī, commonly called Sharīʿat Sangalajī (1891-1944) paid this price, too. But unlike Muḥsin al-Amīn, whose career as a respected scholar and authority was not impaired by his opponents' attacks in the *fitna*, Sangalajī's memory nearly completely paled for many decades after his death. This is somewhat astonishing, as during his lifetime he was an active teacher and promotor of his reformist ideas who even ran his own school (called *Dār ot-Tablīgh-e Eslamī*) with an annexed mosque which drew a substantial number of students.[12] His criticism went beyond al-Amīn's condemnation of the self-flagellations in Muḥarram and aimed at some core convictions of Shiʿism. In particular, Sangalajī demanded that the Qurʾan (whose protection against any sort of falsification he emphasized) should be the sole source of authority in all religious matters. This implied by necessity a dramatic diminution of the role of the Imams whose intercession (*shafāʿa*) on behalf of the dead he strongly rejected as idolatry and running counter to the Islamic insistence on *tawḥīd*, i.e. exclusive monotheism. For this reason, he also disapproved of all forms of cult of saints, or of wide-spread funerary practices such as erecting tombs and praying on tombs, as signs of sheer superstition.[13] Since this puritanism brought him dangerously close to the Wahhābī attitude to these matters, and was moreover an undisguised attack on the social function and spiritual authority of the Shiʿite clerics, the criticism of his peers was hardly surprising. It was the

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[10] On this polemical exchange and its background, see in detail Werner Ende, The Flagellations of Muḥarram and the Shiʿite ʿUlamāʾ", *Der Islam* 55 (1978), 19-36; Sabrina Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite. Ulémas et lettrés du Ǧabal ʿĀmil (actuel Liban-Sud) de la fin de l'Empire ottoman à l'indépendance du Liban*, Paris/Beirut/Damascus 2000, 250-74. For more recent inner-Shiʿite debates on this issue, see Oliver Scharbrodt, "Contesting ritual practices in Twelver Shiism: modernism, sectarianism and the politics of self-flagellation (*taṭbīr*)", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2022), online <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2022.2057279>.

[11] Another example of a Shiʿite scholar who was severely attacked by his peers for seemingly deviationist views is the Iraqī Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Mahdī al-Khāliṣī (1890-1963) and his view on the controversial issue of a Shiʿite addition to the call for prayer; for details see Werner Ende, "*Bidʿa* or *sirr al-īmān*? Modern Shiʿi controversies over the third *shahāda* in the *adhān*", in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Meir M. Bar-Asher, Simon Hopkins (eds.), *Le shiisme imamite quarante ans après. Hommage à Etan Kohlberg*, Turnhout 2009, 203-17.

[12] For the life and career of Sharīʿat Sangalajī, see Yann Richard, "Sharī'at Sangalajī: A Reformist Theologian of the Riḍā Shāh Period", in Said Amir Arjomand (ed.), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, New York 1988, 159-77, and now the monograph by Ali Rahnema, *Shi'i Reformation in Iran. The Life and Theology of Shari'at Sangelaji*, London, New York 2015, 11-30 (life) and passim (thought).

[13] Richard, "Sharī'at Sangalajī", 166-71; on Sangalajī's attitude towards the Qurʾan and the problem of its falsification (*taḥrīf*), see Rainer Brunner, *Die Schia und die Koranfälschung*, Würzburg 2001, 79.

young and at the time of writing still unknown Rūḥollāh Khomeynī who set the tone for Sangalajī's posthumous reception in his book "The Unveiling of the Secrets" (*Kashf al-asrār*) in which he portrayed him as a clerical deviant with Wahhābī leanings and with a too close proximity to Reżā Shāh Pahlavī whose secular and autocratic rule was anathema to the Shiʿite clerics.[14]

Sangalajī, however, was only a side issue for Khomeynī, because his main thrust was directed against ʿAlī Akbar Ḥakamīzādeh (ca. 1897-1987/88) who may with good reason be considered to be the earliest Shiʿite dissident in a stricter sense of the word. He hailed from a notable clerical family in Qom and first wore the clerical garb himself, but already in his capacity as editor of the short-lived journal *Homāyūn* (1934/35) – which also served as a mouthpiece of the reform-minded currents at the seminary (*ḥowze*) in Qom under the leadership of Āyatollāh ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Ḥāʾirī (1859-1937) – he published articles that dealt with the *ḥadīth* corpus in a critical way.[15] In the following years, his views on Shiʿism became more and more radical, and around 1943, having left his clerical origins behind, he published the treatise "Secrets of a thousand years" (*Asrār-e hezār sāle*) in which he settled accounts with Shiʿite theological convictions and social practices in all relevant realms: the image of God and popular rituals like seeking refuge in oracles (*istikhāra*), the Imamate and its alleged superiority over prophethood, the role and pretensions of the clerics to keep the believers in the state of an immature flock, the political aspirations of the clerical estate, the rejection of non-religious law, and the ḥadīth corpus which in his eyes was full of irrational, unscientific, contradictory and untruthful traditions. He ended his booklet by challenging "the intelligent people" (*ahl-e eṭṭelāʿ*) to come up with answers to thirteen questions which were a kind of summary of his previous accusations.[16] It was the intransigence of Ḥakamīzādeh's attacks which in the first place propelled his former peer Khomeynī to write his counter-attack which was not only a refutation of his opponent's charges, but also the first instance of Khomeynī's discussion of the clerical role in the state, and which may therefore be read as the first step on

[14] Rahnema, *Shiʻi Reformation in Iran*, 37-43; on Khomeynī's book see below, note 17.

[15] Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism. The Changing Discourse in Iran*, Austin 2007, 60-65; Janet Afary, "Foundations for Religious Reform in the First Pahlavi Era", *Iran Nameh* 30:3 (2015), 46-87, esp. 70-74; Rasūl Jaʿfariyān, *ʿAlī Akbar Ḥakamīzādeh dar chahār parde*, 1398sh/2019, 63-106 (accessible at https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2020/04/16/0/3427767.pdf). On al-Ḥāʾirī see Hajatpour, *Islamische Geistlichkeit*, 234-304 and Hamid Algar, "Ḥāʾerī, ʿAbd-al-Karīm Yazdī", *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online* < http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_2594>.

[16] ʿAlī Akbar Ḥakamīzādeh, *Asrār-e hezār sāle*, n.p. 1394sh/2016, esp. 29-87 (accessible at https://mihantv.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/asrar-hezar-saleh-PDF.pdf); an Arabic translation entitled *Asrār alf ʿāmm* can also be found online: https://sunnahorshiah.com/upload/pages/6d5a02cd85789cd0f13a37573a1df648.pdf; Jaʿfariyān, *ʿAlī Akbar Ḥakamīzādeh*, 107-14; the final questions are concisely summarized by Richard, "Sharīʻat Sangalajī", 160.

a path that would lead him, more than two decades later, to his political theory of the "guardianship of the jurist" (*velāyat-e faqīh*).[17] As to Ḥakamīzādeh, this was his last footprint in debates and polemics about religion; he withdrew completely from public life and spent the rest of his life forgotten by his former friends and foes, apparently working as a poultry farmer.[18]

One reason for this complete withdrawal may have been the fact that his mentor, Aḥmad Kasravī, paid the highest price possible for religious deviationism. Born in Tabriz in 1890, he was also trained to become a mullah, when the sight of Halley's comet and reading about it in the Egyptian magazine *al-Muqtaṭaf* had a kind of reversed conversion effect on him and made him become the probably most scathing critic of Shiʿism in the twentieth century. He made a name for himself as the author of a number of books on linguistics and literature and a journalist, as a historian of the Persian Constitutional Revolution and, especially from 1941 on, as an unrelenting polemicist against Sufism, the Bahāʾīs, and Shiʿism. In the latter capacity, he was, besides Sangalajī and Ḥakamīzādeh, the third target of Khomeynī's *Kashf al-asrār*, although he was (like Ḥakamīzādeh) not explicitly named in the book. In spring 1945, Kasravī's life became increasingly endangered; he barely survived a first assassination attempt, was charged with blasphemy, and in March 1946 was murdered, during a court hearing inside the Palace of Justice, by members of the *Fedāʾiyān-e Eslām*, a Shiʿite islamist group established by Navvāb-e Ṣafavī at the instigation of some clerics, among them Khomeynī. None of the assassins and their backers was ever called to account.[19]

Kasravī put forward his most severe criticism in his book *Shīʿī-garī* which was first published in 1943. In it, he summarized his stance in thirteen detailed points which refer mainly

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[17] For details, see Vanessa Martin, "Religion and State in Khumainī's 'Kashf al-asrār'", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 56 (1993), 34-45; eadem, *Creating an Islamic State. Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, London, New York 2000, 100-28; Nura Hossainzadeh, "Democratic and constitutionalist elements in Khomeini's Unveiling of Secrets and Islamic Government", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21 (2016), 26-44. There are varying dates as to when exactly the book was published between 1942 and 1945, since the first edition appeared without a indication of the publisher or the year of publication.

[18] Jaʿfariyān, *ʿAlī Akbar Ḥakamīzādeh*, 155-200.

[19] On Kasravī's life and career, see in detail Ali Reżā Manafzadeh et al., "Kasravi, Aḥmad", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 16/87-105 and online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_11056>; Mohammad Ali Jazayery, "Kasravi, Iconoclastic Thinker of Twentieth-Century Iran", in Kasravi, On Islam *and* Shiʿism (see the following note), 1-57; Edeltrud Jung, *Aḥmad Kasrawī. Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte Persiens im 20. Jahrhundert*, PhD dissertation, University of Freiburg, 1976; Minoo Ramyar, *Sayyed Ahmad Kasravi. Historian, Language Reformer and Thinker*, PhD dissertation, University of Durham, 1969; Alireza Manafzadeh, *Ahmad Kasravi. L'homme qui voulait sortir l'Iran de l'obscurantisme*, Paris 2004. On the conversion experience in 1910, see also Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet. Religion and Politics in Iran*, New York 1985, 103f. On Navvāb-e Ṣāfavī (the *nom de guerre* de Mojtabā Mīrlawḥī) and his organization, see Sohrab Behdad, "Islamic Utopia in Pre-Revolutionary Iran: Navvab Safavi and the Fad'ian-e Eslam", *Middle Eastern Studies* 33 (1997), 40-65, esp. 43ff.; Farhad Kazemi, "Fedāʾīān-e Eslām", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 9/470-94 and online <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/fedaian-e-eslam-

to the doctrine of the imamate, the veneration and exaltation of the Imams, including the function of the concealed Mahdī, the pilgrimages to the holy shrines in Iran and Iraq, the mourning ceremonies, as well as the cursing of the companions (*ṣaḥāba*) of the Prophet, the permission to dissimulation (*taqiyya*), and the alleged Shiʿite disrespect towards the Qurʾan. All this, he emphatically stressed, had devastating effects on society at large, and he was not at a loss to identify those responsible for this dire state: the clerics and their parasitic double game to whom he devotes the last (and most scornful) chapter.[20] But this is not to say that Kasravī agreed with his fellow dissenters and their approach. As we shall see below[21], he was anything but friendly towards Sharīʿat Sangalajī who did not openly break with Shiʿism, but other than Ḥakamīzādeh, Kasravī cannot be considered as a purely secularist thinker either. For he gradually developed his own sense of mission and propagated his concept of a universal religion which he called *pāk-dīn* ("pure faith") and which he intended to substitute for Islam. In his eyes, the very general and basic claim of Islamic theology that Islam was the last and final religion was meaningless, and his claim to put religion in accord with science and rationality made him assume a position within his movement that came rather close to the function of a new prophet.[22]

It is not without a touch of irony that Kasravī's wholesale criticism of Shiʿism became a source of inspiration for ʿAlī Sharīʿatī (1933-77) whose thought contributed to pave the way for the theoretical underpinning of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Contrary to Kasravī, he did not receive a religious training, although his father, Muḥammad Taqī Sharīʿatī, was a cleric. Instead, he was a sociologist who earned his doctorate at the Sorbonne under the supervision of Gilbert Lazard and the stimulus of Louis Massignon, and he was an activist more concerned with the Algerian War of liberation and Frantz Fanon's writings than with the Battle of the Camel or Karbalāʾ – and yet, he managed to combine the one with the other by transforming Shiʿism into a revolutionary theology of liberation.[23] The cornerstone of his theory was

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[20] Aḥmad Kasravī, *Shīʿī-garī*, ed. and ann. Moḥammad Amīnī, Los Angeles 2011, esp. 81-145 and 213-52; for an English translation see Ahmad Kasravi, On Islam *and* Shiʿism. *Translated from the Persian by M.R. Ghanoonparvar. With an Introductory Essay and Bibliographical Note by M.A. Jazayery*, Costa Mesa 1990, 134-57 and 187-204. These two books are based on the revised version of *Shīʿī-garī* which appeared in 1944 under the title "May they read and judge" (*Bekhʷānand va dāvarī konand*). For Kasravī's approach to religious reform in general, see Chad Kia, "The Scum of Tabriz: Ahmad Kasravi and the Impulse to Reform Islam", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41:4 (2014), 498-516.

[21] See below, note 85.

[22] Jung, *Aḥmad Kasrawī*, 190-207; Jazayery, "Kasravi", 38-44.

[23] On Sharīʿatī, there is now a plethora of literature; the most detailed analyses of his life and thought are Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian. A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*, London, New York 1998 (pp. 7-10 on Kasravī's influence), and Kingshuk Chatterjee, *'Ali Shari'ati and the Shaping of Political Islam in Iran*, New York 2011; among more recent studies, see Rajaee, *Islamism and*

his distinction between two Shiʿisms, so to speak: a pure and original Shiʿism of ʿAlī (*tashayyoʿ-e ʿalavī*) on the one hand, versus a distorted and corrupted Shiʿism of the Safavids (*tashayyoʿ-e ṣafavī*) on the other. Put briefly, the former (also called "red Shiʿism" by Sharīʿatī) was an activist movement, led by revolutionary Imams and intent on building a just and equal society, whereas the latter ("black Shiʿism", in his parlance) constituted a passive and quietist institution where the Imams are revered as detached and super-human beings and where fatalism and acceptance of the status quo reigns over society. Like Kasravī before him, Sharīʿatī readily identified the Shiʿite clerics as those who were guilty of this degeneration, and in a synopsis of some central tenets of Shiʿism, he tried to show how thoroughly they had managed to change the meaning of these doctrines and thus the character of Shiʿism.[24] But unlike Kasravī, he did not call for an abolition of Shiʿism and its replacement by a new ideology, but for a return to its supposedly "original" message – and for a replacement of the (in his eyes despotic and submissive) clergy by a new class of committed "warrior intellectuals" (*rowshanfekr-e mojāhed*).[25] That the reaction of the members of the clerical estate was anything but friendly, is not surprising under these circumstances; he was labelled a "second Kasravī" reminding him of the latter's fate, and attending his lectures or buying his books was prohibited in a number of *fatwā*s.[26] Nevertheless, this re-interpretation of Shiʿism as a politicized ideology (to which also other authors contributed in one way or another)[27] did manage to gain ground within only a few years among a sufficiently large public. He coined the popular slogan "every month of the year is Moharram, every day of the month is Ashura and every piece of land is Karbala", and Khomeynī who had in the meantime drafted his own political theory played it close to the vest and did not join his colleagues' vehement opposition to

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Modernism, 131-41; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontents*, 113-34. Specifically on the relationship between Sharīʿatī and Massignon see Michel Cuypers, "Une rencontre mystique: ʿAlī Sharīʿatī – Louis Massignon", *MIDEO* 21 (1993), 291-330; on Sharīʿatī and Fanon see Arash Davari, "A Return to Which Self? ʿAli Shari'ati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34:1 (2014), 86-105.

[24] ʿAlī Sharīʿatī, *Tashayyoʿ-e ʿalavī va tashayyoʿ-e ṣafavī*, n.p. 1979, 258-62; for an English translation, see Sharough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period*, Albany 1980, 231-33; for an Italian translation, see Alessandro Bausani, "Sciismo 'alide' e sciismo 'safavide' in un libro di ʿAli Shariʿati (m. 1977)", *Oriente Moderno* nuova serie 1 (=62) (1982), 83-88, esp. 88; the notions Sharīʿatī singled out for definition were: guardianship (*veṣāyat*), Imamate (*emāmat*), infallibility (of the Imam, *ʿeṣmat*), the exercise of authority (*welāyat*), intercession (*shafāʿat*), independent reasoning (*ejtehād*), emulation (*taqlīd*), justice (*ʿadl*), waiting (for the return of the imam, *enteẓār*), concealment (of the imam, *ghaybat*).

[25] Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and Its Discontents*, 126.

[26] On "the clerical opposition to Shariʿati" see Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 266-76.

[27] On the recasting of Ḥusayn's martyrdom in Karbalāʾ from a mourning ceremony to a political mode of instruction in the 1960s and 70s, see Kamran Aghaie, "The Karbala Narrative: Shīʿī Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12:2 (2001), 151-76.

Sharīʿatī.[28] As it were, the latter's ideological deviationism served as the stepping stone of the former's revolutionary clericalism. Sharīʿatī himself did not live to see the revolutionary results of his ideology, having died under somewhat unclear circumstances in London in 1977.

The advent of the Iranian Revolution did not lead to a unanimous closing of the ranks within Shiʿism, neither in the short nor in the long term. On the contrary, in a paradoxical way it made it easier for internal critics to raise their voice, as – at any rate, Iranian – Shiʿism was from now on linked to a very specific political regime, administered by a very specific kind of clergy.[29] It is no wonder, then, that even former companions became disillusioned and composed renegade literature. One of these was Mūsā al-Mūsawī (1930-ca. 1998) who before the revolution had praised Khomeynī as an upright fighter against the Shāh, but after it described his book on the *velāyat-e faqīh* as a work of absolute despotism, comparable only to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.[30] In another treatise called *The Shīʿa and the Correction*, he went a step further and presented a refutation of the key doctrines of Shiʿism lock, stock and barrel.[31] By its subtitle, *The Struggle between the Shīʿa and Shiʿism*, he gave to understand that for him, like for Sharīʿatī before him, there were two versions of Shiʿism. But unlike Sharīʿatī, who had called for a revolutionary re-interpretation of the imamate and everything related to it, al-Mūsawī maintained that these central articles of faith were more or less subsequent inventions that ran counter to the original will of Muḥammad. Since there was, in his view, no divine order designating ʿAlī as the successor of the Prophet, Shiʿites would have to change their attitude towards the caliphate and give up their cursing of the first three caliphs. In particular he considered the alleged belief in the sinlessness (*ʿiṣma*) of the Imams and the veneration of their graves to be the outcome of spurious and extremist *ḥadīth*s that were fabricated in the period after the occultation of the twelfth Imam. Being included in the four "canonical books" of Shiʿite traditions, they were then handed down until today. Like most of the dissident authors before him (with the notable exception of Sharīʿatī), Mūsawī was a cleric himself, and he could claim a respectable ancestry, since his grandfather was none other than the *marjaʿ al-taqlīd* Abū l-Ḥasan al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1946), one of the highest Shiʿite authorities in the twentieth century.[32] Moreover, he made a point in stressing that he had received, in 1951/52, his *ijtihād*

[28] Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 275, 315.

[29] See above, notes 4 and 5.

[30] Mūsā al-Mūsawī, *Īrān fī rubʿ qarn*, Baghdad 1972, 82-94, as opposed to his *al-Thawra al-bāʾisa*, n.p., ca. 1985, 49.

[31] Mūsā al-Mūsawī, *al-Shīʿa wa-l-taṣḥīḥ. al-Ṣirāʿ bayn al-shīʿa wa-l-tashayyuʿ*, Cairo 1409/1989; English translation: *Shi'ah. A Critical Revision. The Conflict between Shi'ah (The Belief) & Shi'ites (The People)*, Dearborn Heights 2001; French translation: *Les chiites et la reforme. Du chiisme premier aux pratiques d'aujourd'hui*. Traduction de T. Gaid, Paris 1997.

[32] On him see Hamid Algar, "Abū'l-Ḥasan Eṣfahānī", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 1/302-03 and online <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/abul-hasan-esfahani-

certificate directly from Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn Āl Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ, another revered scholar of the seminary in Najaf.[33] Notwithstanding his emphasis on a honourable Shiʿite scholarly lineage, he proceeded exactly like all his predecessors, without exception, in identifying his peers, the religious scholars, as the main culprits. By upholding dubious political and social practices like dissimulation, temporary marriage or the *ʿāshūrāʾ* flagellations and by assuming enormous economic wealth and political power, they usurped the place of the hidden Imam and secured the blind obedience of the believers.[34]

As may have become clear from this overview of Shiʿite self-critique in the last century[35], these dissidents share a few notable commonalities. They all have a clerical background themselves or (in the case of Sharīʿatī) come from a clerical household, and their criticism is not restricted to doctrinal issues, but goes far beyond to include a devastating and at times sarcastic decrial of the religious ground staff, i.e. the scholars and gatekeepers of the Imams' traditions. More than in Sunnite Islam, criticism of theological tenets among Shiʿite dissidents is invariably combined with criticism of social practices. Aḥmad al-Qabānjī to whom we turn now is not an exception to this rule.

The black sheep of the family

Aḥmad al-Qabānjī was born in Najaf in 1958 into a family of minor clerics who trace their ancestry back to the third Imam, Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī who had been martyred in Karbalāʾ in 680.

COM_4581>; on his role in the Iraqi resistance against British rule after the First World War, see also Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shiʿis of Iraq*, Princeton 1994, 75-88.

[33] On this scholar (1876/77-1954) see Silvia Naef, "Un réformiste chiite – Muḥammad Ḥusayn Âl Kâšif al-Ġiṭâ'", *Die Welt des Orients* 27 (1996), 51-86; Muḥammad Ḥusayn ʿAlī al-Ṣaghīr, *Asāṭīn al-marjaʿiyya al-ʿulyā fī l-Najaf al-ashraf*, Beirut 2011, 173-262.

[34] al-Mūsawī, *al-Shīʿa wa-l-taṣḥīḥ*, 51-59, 65-76, 97-113 and passim. For more detailed references, see Rainer Brunner, "A Shiite Cleric's Criticism of Shiism: Mūsā al-Mūsawī", in idem / Werner Ende (ed.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political History*, Leiden 2001, 178-87; a comprehensive analysis of this book and the counter-polemics that were written against it is Julian Siddons, *"Die Korrektur der Irrtümer". Mūsā al-Mūsawīs Versuch, die schiitische Glaubenslehre zu reformieren*, Würzburg 2005.

[35] Some other names have been proposed in recent years. Aḥmad al-Kātib, for instance, published online a "Shiite manifesto" in 2008 in which he questioned most, if not all, Shiʿite articles of faith; however, it can hardly been located, and the public resonance to it seems to be rather limited; see Elad Giladi, "'The New Shi'a'? A Study of the Writings of Ahmad al-Katib", *The Journal for Interdisciplinary Middle Eastern Studies* 3 (2018), 3-35. As to Abū l-Faḍl al-Burquʿī (1900?-92?) who in recent years has been discovered as a sort of Shiʿite Wahhābi dissident, his fame seems to be entirely posthumous, apart from a very short political affair in 1953 (on which see Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, 65; Hamid Algar, "Borqaʿī", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 4/374-75 and online https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/borqai-COM_7087); his controversial writings, including a refutation of al-Kulaynī's *ḥadīth* collection *al-Kāfī*, entitled *Kasr al-ṣanam*, Beirut 1419/1998, seem to have been published only after his death, some of them (rather tellingly) in Saudi Arabia (see also below, note 54). There is also a trilingual (Persian, Arabic, English) website in his name (http://www.borqei.com/), which seems to be administered by his son.

His father, Ḥasan al-Qabānjī (b. 1907)[36], was active as a preacher in a number of places in Iraq and the Gulf states, and authored fifteen (some of them multi-volume) books on theological topics, the Imams and religious poetry. Apparently, the family was always part of the Shiʿite resistance against the Baʿth regime. Ḥasan al-Qabānjī was abducted and murdered during the Shiʿite uprising in 1991, in the aftermath of the second Gulf War; four of his sons had already been killed before him between 1974 and 1983.[37] Two surviving sons also took up a clerical career: Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qabānjī (b. 1956) became active as the Imam of the Friday mosque in Najaf in the rank of a Ḥujjat al-Islām, as well as a teacher at the *ḥawza* in Najaf, founder of several religious learned institutions and as a leading member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.[38] Besides, he is an even more prolific writer than his father, having published some thirty books so far, about a broad range of political-religious topics related to Shiism in general and the Imams in particular.[39] His younger brother Muḥammad al-Qabānjī (b. 1970) – not to be mistaken for a popular Iraqi singer of the same name[40] – also taught for a while in the Najaf seminary before founding a study centre specialized on the Hidden Imam under the patronage of the *marjaʿiyya* in Najaf.[41]

It is the third of the siblings, Aḥmad Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Qabānjī, who is not true to type and became the black sheep of the family. Biographical details on him are as scarce as in his brothers' cases. According to the autobiographical sketch on his website (which is identical

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[36] Sometimes the name is also rendered as al-Qabānchī or al-Qapānchī; cf. Āghā Bozorg al-Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa ilā taṣānīf al-shīʿa*, Beirut 1983, 20/105 (no. 2130), 23/204f. (no. 8642), 24/116 (no. 598) and 301 (no. 1581), 26/309 (no. 1552).

[37] For Ḥasan al-Qabānjī's biography and list of works, see Ḥasan ʿĪsā al-Ḥakīm, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārīkh al-Najaf al-ashraf*, n.p. (Qum) 1429/2008, 10/247-50; Muḥammad Hādī al-Amīnī, *Muʿjam rijāl al-fikr wa-l-adab fī l-Najaf khilāl alf ʿām*, Najaf [2]1413/1992, 3/970.

[38] This organization was founded in 1982 and originally named "Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq" (*al-Majlis al-aʿlā li-l-thawra al-islāmiyya fī l-ʿIrāq*), in 2007 it was renamed *al-Majlis al-aʿlā al-islāmī al-ʿirāqī*; for details, see International Crisis Group, *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, Middle East Report no. 70, 15 November 2007, online <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/shiite-politics-iraq-role-supreme-council>; Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shiʿism. Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*, Edinburgh 2015, 36-44, 83-92, 133-64; for Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qabānjī's presence in the *Majlis*, see the organisation's (for the most part rather empty) website, in particular <http://www.majlis.sh-alsagheer.com/sport/5>.

[39] For (sparse) biographical details and a bibliography of his books, see <https://m-mahdi.net/sada-almahdi/persons-308>.

[40] On the singer Muḥammad al-Qabānjī (1901-89; also referred to as al-Qubānjī), see Sheherazade Qassim Hassan, "Choix de la musique et de la représentation irakiennes aus Congrès du Caire. Vers une étude de contexte", in Philippe Vigreux (ed.), *Musique arabe. Le Congrès du Caire de 1932*, Cairo 1992, 123-45 and online <https://books.openedition.org/cedej/2067>; Rolf Killius, "Microtones: The Piano and Muhammad Al-Qubanshi – The First Congress of Arabic Music and Early Recordings from Iraq", *Qatar Digital Library* <https://www.qdl.qa/en/microtones-piano-and-muhammad-al-qubanshi-%E2%80%93-first-congress-arabic-music-and-early-recordings-iraq>.

[41] On the *Markaz al-dirāsāt al-takhaṣṣuṣiyya fī l-Imām al-Mahdī* and Muḥammad al-Qabānjī's role, see <https://m-mahdi.net/sada-almahdi/persons-95>.

with the Arabic Wikipedia page on him[42]), he studied *uṣūl al-fiqh* in Najaf from 1974 on, but left Iraq in 1979 for Syria and Lebanon, before moving at some unspecified point in time to Qom. For a while, he also seems to have been active in the armed resistance against the Iraqi regime (or fought on the Iranian side during the First Gulf War in the 1980s), and he then allegedly sustained serious injuries, notably the loss of the use of his right arm.[43] In 2008, he returned to Iraq, where he is to all appearances still based today. For reasons which remained unclear (al-Qabānjī himself claims that he was slandered by an unnamed Iraqi person[44]), he was briefly arrested by the Iranian authorities in February 2013, upon what was described as a family visit to Qom. Although he was accused of spying for Israel, he was released soon afterwards and deported to his home country. In all that, he could not rely on his family ties, as his relatives had publicly broken with him already beforehand for supposedly the same reasons that later led to his arrest. Friday prayer leader Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qabānjī had even issued a *fatwā* to the effect that his brother's views on Shiʿism were a severe deviation from religion that led him outside Islam – i.e. he considered him to be an apostate.[45]

Aḥmad al-Qabānjī has published well over a dozen books eleven of which are readily accessible through his website.[46] In addition, he translated from Persian into Arabic an even greater number of writings authored by prominent representatives of the Iranian reform debates, above all ʿAbd ol-Karīm Sorūsh, Moḥammad Mojtahed Shabestarī, and Moṣṭafā Mālikiyān.[47] In what follows, two of his books will be analyzed in more detail which already by their title give to understand that his programme is anything but a defence of traditional opinions and doctrines of Shiʿism. The first book, titled "The Revision of Shiʿite Traditions" (*Tahdhīb aḥādīth al-shīʿa*) comes across as a slightly conventional evaluation of Shiʿite traditionalism whose implications become apparent only by hindsight. By contrast, the second one, *Tashayyuʿ al-ʿawāmm wa-tashayyuʿ al-khawāṣṣ* (which may be translated as "Plebeian

[42] <http://www.ahmed-algubbanchi.com/resume.php>; <https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%8A>.

[43] Yotam Feldner, "Liberal Iraqi Shi'ite Scholar Sayyed Ahmad Al-Qabbanji Calls For Reason In Islamic Discourse and Jurisprudence", *MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series No.937* (21 February 2013), <https://www.memri.org/reports/liberal-iraqi-shiite-scholar-sayyed-ahmad-al-qabbanji-calls-reason-islamic-discourse-and>. A photograph that shows him and his brother Ṣadr al-Dīn during this period was posted on his youtube channel <https://www.youtube.com/@user-zf5gj7px6m/community>.

[44] See the interview on the German internet portal Qantara in April 2013, i.e. shortly after his release: <https://ar.qantara.de/node/12929>.

[45] Feldner, "Liberal Iraqi Shi'ite Scholar".

[46] <http://www.ahmed-algubbanchi.com/publications.php>; the bibliography in the Wikipedia article (see above, note 42) and the supply on the website are not identical.

[47] Thirteen of these translations are also accessible on his website: <http://www.ahmed-algubbanchi.com/publications.php?cat=2>; see also above, note 5.

Shiism and Elite Shiism") amounts to a fully fledged critique of Shiʿite thought, even to a surprising attack on the very foundations of human conceptions of religion.

Sunnite Deserts, Shiʿite Mountains?

Al-Qabānjī wrote *Tahdhīb aḥādīth al-shīʿa* while he was still residing in Iran, as the preface is dated "January 2005, Qom", and the first edition was also published there.[48] He opens his book with great verve, and the very first pages of his introduction consist of a furious lament over the cultural and intellectual backwardness of the Muslim *umma*, caused, in his eyes, by the blind and uncritical reference to the transmitted religious texts.[49] Their sound as well as sick stories force a kind of intellectual guardianship on the Muslim individuals and alienate them from reality. What is more, in trying to combat this illness, al-Qabānjī emphasizes, one hurts the walls of the spiritual authorities and their arrogated power over the people's minds, because these "selfish shopkeepers from amongst the bishops and theologians"[50], as he calls them, perceive any kind of reform as a threat to their position. Intent on preserving their sinecure, they resist everything that might help overcome this backwardness and entail intellectual progress, and for fear of being ostracized as an apostate, nobody dares to voice criticism of the reigning circumstances. In pursuing his declared aim "to smash this idol that supervises minds and thoughts"[51], he maintains to fulfill the legacy of Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr, who, in the 1970s, allegedly had ordered some of his students – al-Qabānjī being one of them – to compose a book on the "sound traditions" of Shiʿism (*al-ṣaḥīḥ ʿan ahl al-bayt*).[52] This reference to Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr is not insignificant in itself, considering the fact that the latter was one of the highest ranking scholars of the Najaf seminary and, at least in the last months before his execution by the Iraqi regime in April 1980, showed a growing proximity to Khomeynī's political thought.[53] In view of al-Qabānjī's ensuing sweeping attack on tradi-

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[48] al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb aḥādīth al-shīʿa*, Qum (*Thaqāfa islāmiyya muʿāṣira*), ca. 2005, 8; I used the printed book which is available at the University Library Halle (signature 06 SA 263), all references in the present article are from this version; the version which is accessible on al-Qabānjī's website (http://www.ahmed-algubbanchi.com/books/3.pdf) has a different pagination. There is a separate later edition with yet another different pagination published in Beirut and Baghdad in 2009 (by Manshūrāt al-Jamal) which also can be found online (e.g. https://archive.org/details/20200506_20200506_0126).

[49] al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 3-6.

[50] Ibid., 4: "aṣḥāb al-dakākīn wa-l-maṣāliḥ al-dhātiyya min al-aḥbār wa-rijāl al-lāhūt".

[51] Ibid., 5: "wa-hadafī fī kitābat hadhā l-kitāb huwa taḥṭīm hadhā l-ṣanam al-muhaymin ʿalā l-ʿuqūl wa-l-afkār".

[52] Ibid., 6.

[53] On Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (1934/35-80), see Zackery Mirza Heern, "Bāqir al-Ṣadr, Muḥammad", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_25214> and the numerous references given there; on his political thought, see also Oliver Scharbrodt, "Divine Sovereignty and Clerical Authority in Early Shiʿi Islamism: Bāqir al-Ṣadr (1935-80) and Taqī al-Mudarrisī (b. 1945) on the Islamic State", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*,

tional Shiʿite scholarship, it may also be read as a kind of practical and social reinsurance. Since the undertaking envisioned by al-Ṣadr, however, had then to be left unfinished, due to the Iranian Revolution and the decline of security in Najaf, al-Qābānjī sets out to take it into his own hands. In doing so, he claims to follow the footsteps of several previous authors, notably Hāshim Maʿrūf al-Ḥasanī whose book on spurious traditions has allegedly been suppressed by the religious authorities, as well as some Iranian writers who had composed *ḥadīth*-critical works.[54]

Al-Qabānjī then goes on, in the long first chapter of the book[55], to stress the existence and the amount of invented traditions in Shiʿite intellectual history, for which he identifies three main motivations: the pursuit of fame and reputation, the pious lie to win people over for religion, and the material profit, for instance in order to earn a living as a professional reciter of traditions about Imam Ḥusayn's martyrdom. He explicitly singles out four authors whose *ḥadīth* compilations he considers to be particularly harmful, because they proved to have a lasting influence on the Shiʿite worldview in general and jurisprudence in particular: al-Kulaynī (d. ca. 941)[56] and Ibn Bābūya, also known as al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (d. 991)[57], two

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Series 3, 33:2 (2022), 311-32.

[54] Al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 6f., referring to Hāshim Maʿrūf al-Ḥasanī, *al-Mawḍūʿāt fī l-akhbār wa-l-āthār*, Beirut 1407/1987; chapter five of al-Qabānjī's book (pp. 255-323) are a partial verbatim quotation from pp. 173-302 from al-Ḥasanī's book. Al-Ḥasanī (1919-84) was born in Jabal ʿĀmil where he returned to, after his studies in Najaf, in order to work as a judge in Sidon; for his biography and bibliography see al-Amīnī, *Muʿjam rijāl al-fikr*, 1/410; Muḥammad al-Gharawī, *Maʿa ʿulamāʾ al-Najaf al-ashraf*, Beirut 1420/1999, 2/580f. (with the incorrect *nisba* al-Ḥusaynī); Ḥasan al-Amīn, *Mustadrakāt Aʿyān al-shīʿa*, Beirut 1408/1987, 1/248. – Besides al-Ḥasanī, he refers to four writings of Iranian Shiʿite authors: Neʿmatollāh Ṣāleḥī Najafābādī: *Ḥadīth-hā-ye khayālī dar tafsīr-e Majmaʿ al-bayān*, Teheran 1382sh/2003-04 (on the author [1923/24-2006] see Evan Siegel, "The Politics of *Shahīd-e Jāwīd*", in Brunner / Ende [ed.], *The Twelver Shia*, 150-77); Abū l-Faẓl b. Reżā (al-Burquʿī), *ʿArż-e akhbār-e osūl bar qorʾān va ʿoqūl*, Riyadh (Maktabat al-ʿUbaykān) 1435/2014 (on the author, see above, note 35); Ḥaydar-ʿAlī Qalamdārān, *Ziyārat va ziyārat-nāme*, by which he probably means *Ziyārat-e qobūr bayn ḥaqīqat va khorāfāt*, a copy of which is accessible online <http://qalamdaran.com/sites/default/files/zeyarat-qoboor-beyne-haghighat-va-khorafat-PDF.zip> (on the author [1913-89] see the websites <http://www.qalamdaran.com/> and <https://islamhouse.com/fa/author/266249>); Moṣṭafā Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *Naqd-e ketāb-e ḥadīth*, n.p. 1379/2000 (on the author [b. 1935], see the archived website <https://web.archive.org/web/20190209080606/http://www.mostafatabatabaie.net/> and <https://sonsofsunnah.com/2013/11/15/mostafa-husseini-tabatabai-shiite-reformist-friend-of-al-borqei/>).

[55] al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 9-109.

[56] On him see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *La preuve de Dieu: la mystique shiʿite à travers l'œuvre de Kulaynî, IXe-Xe siècle*, Paris 2018; specifically on his only surviving book, *al-Kāfī fī ʿilm al-dīn*, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi / Hassan Ansari, "Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī (m. 328 ou 329 / 939-40 ou 940-41) et son *Kitāb al-Kāfī*. Une introduction", *Studia Iranica* 38 (2009), 191-247, esp. 226-35.

[57] On him see now George Warner, *The Words of the Imams. Al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq and the Development of Twelver Shīʿī Hadith Literature*, London 2022. Al-Qabānjī quotes from several books of the author: *Man lā yaḥḍuruhu l-faqīh* (the second of the "four books"), *al-Khiṣāl*, *Maʿānī l-akhbār*, *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-niʿma*, *Ṣifāt al-shīʿa*, *ʾIqāb al-aʿmāl*, *ʿUyūn akhbār al-Riḍā*, *ʿIlal al-sharāʾiʿ*.

tenth-century founding fathers of Twelver Shiʿite jurisprudence and authors of two of the so-called "Four (canonical) books" (*al-kutub al-arbaʿa*)[58]; as well as Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1599/1600)[59] and Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1693)[60], the two most important representatives of the later scholarship in seventeenth-century Safavid Iran, when Twelver Shiʿism experienced a remarkable renaissance and expansion of the study of *ḥadīth*. By quoting and refuting dozens of traditions from their works, al-Qabānjī tries to show how these scholars, by including traditions which even they themselves sometimes did not consider to be trustworthy, contributed to "the intellectual pollution of the masses" (*talwīth dhihniyyat al-ʿawāmm*)[61], which then resulted in countless subsequent authors untiringly citing these traditions, knowing right well that they had been invented and disseminated by hypocritical transmitters. A great number of *ḥadīths* adduced in this chapter contain fantastic and legendary tales, often with a clearly recognizable sectarian background, e.g. when an Imam gives a theological reasoning for his predilection of yellow shoes over black ones[62], or when another Imam feeds some sparrows because they are the friends of the Shiʿites, but chases away others, as these are the friends of the Shiʿites' foes. In such cases, al-Qabānjī finds no difficulty in ridiculing the story by himself narrating the anecdote of a contemporary scholar who once, on a bus ride from Tehran to Qom, in good earnest explained to him that he considered the dry and barren Iranian desert in central Iran to be Sunnite, and the green and fertile mountains in the North Shiʿite.[63] Especially traditions in which natural or geographical phenomena are presented as wondrous signs in relation with the Imams meet his disdain, and al-Qabānjī untiringly tutors the reader about the scientific facts that prove that the *ḥadīth* in

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[58] On the significance of the canonical *ḥadīth* collections in Shiʿite intellectual history, see Robert Gleave, "Between *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*: The 'canonical' Imāmī Collections of *akhbār*", *Islamic Law and Society* 8 (2001), 350-82; Amin Ehteshami, "The Four Books of Shiʿi Hadith: From Inception to Consolidation", *Islamic Law and Society* 29 (2022), 225-79.

[59] On him, see Rainer Brunner, "Majlesī, Moḥammad-Bāqer", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_10783>; on his main work, the collection *Biḥār al-anwār* in 110 volumes (from which all of al-Qabānjī's quotations are taken), see Etan Kohlberg, "Beḥār al-anwār", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 6/90-93 and online <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-iranica-online/behar-al-anwar-COM_6827>; Karl-Heinz Pampus, *Die theologische Enzyklopädie Biḥār al-anwār des Muḥammad Bāqir al-Mağlisi (1037-1110 A.H. = 1627-1699 A.D.): Ein Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte der Šīʿa in der Ṣafawidenzeit*, Ph.D. diss., Bonn 1970.

[60] On him, see Meir Bar Asher, "Ḥorr-e ʿĀmelī", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 12/478f. and online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_3173>; for his 30 volume collection *Tafṣīl wasāʾil al-shīʿa ilā taḥṣīl masāʾil al-sharīʿa* (from which all of al-Qabānjī's quotations are taken) which has not yet been studied separately in detail, see al-Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa*, 4/352-55; on his collection of *ḥadīth qudsī*, see Roy Vilozny, "Imāmī Records of Divine Sayings: Some Thoughts on al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī's *al-Jawāhir al-saniyya fī-l-aḥādīth al-qudsiyya*", *Shii Studies Review* 3 (2019), 107-28.

[61] Al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 82.

[62] Ibid., 104f.

[63] Ibid., 33f.

question cannot be taken seriously.[64] He is not the first author to use this method of contrasting ancient traditions and modern science; also ʿAlī Akbar Ḥakamīzādeh had quoted such traditions (some of them identical to al-Qabānjī's selection) in order to emphasize the necessity of a rational approach to modern life.[65]

Three principal topics can be discerned which arouse al-Qabānjī's ire in a continual and particular way: the Imams' alleged secret knowledge, the use of the *ḥadīths* for the interpretation of the Qurʾan, and the countless recommendations to visit the Imams' graves and to supplicate them to intercede with God on behalf of the believers. The first two issues are of a mainly theoretical nature and relate to the exegetical and epistemological foundations of Shiʿite theology, and in both cases, al-Qabānjī is rather determined in his judgement. He vehemently rejects the idea that the Imams are omniscient or possess any secret knowledge about hidden or future things, by arguing that no one has such wisdom, not even the Prophet. Any suggestion that they were given secret scriptures would therefore run counter both to the Qurʾan and to Muḥammad being the seal of the Prophets.[66] As the allegedly super-human nature is the very cornerstone of the Shiʿite belief in the Imamate[67], its contestation is of great importance to al-Qabānjī; we shall shortly see to what lengths he was ready to go elsewhere in order to "prove" the purely human character of the Shiʿite Imams. For the same reason he also rejects the Qurʾanic exegesis by means of *ḥadīth*, in favour of explaining the Qurʾan by itself (*tafsīr al-qurʾān bi-l-qurʾān*) which he deems to be the best method of understanding the scripture.[68]

As far as the visitation of the tombs of the Imams is concerned, al-Qabānjī is of course aware of the fact that these traditions entail a thoroughly practical side as well: the holy sites of Shiʿism, centred around the Imams' graves in Iraq and Iran, are pilgrimage venues and thus

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[64] E.g., ibid., 36-38 (on reciting *ḥadīth*s against all kinds of natural disasters and illnesses), 50-53 (on two cities with iron walls around them and one million gates each in which 70 millions languages are spoken that are all known to the imam), 63-65 (on the blowing of the wind), 87f. (on a Chinese envoy to Imam Jaʿfar).

[65] Ḥakamīzādeh, *Asrār-e hezār sāle*, 77-84.

[66] Al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 38-50, 53-57, 195-98; on the traditions about secret scriptures in Shiʿism see Etan Kohlberg, "Authoritative Scriptures in Early Imami Shīʿism", in: E. Patlagean / A. de Boulluec (eds.), *Les retours aux écritures. Fondamentalismes présents et passés*, Louvain 1993, 295-312; reprinted in Etan Kohlberg, *In Praise of the Few. Studies in Shiʿi Thought and History*, ed. Amin Ehteshami, Leiden 2020, 349-64.

[67] On the various aspects of this doctrine, see the collected articles by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *La religion discrète. Croyances et pratiques spirituelles dans l'islam shi'ite*, Paris 2006; idem, *ʿAlī, le secret bien gardé. Figures du premier Maître en spiritualité shi'ite*, Paris 2020; Etan Kohlberg, "Some Shīʿī Views of the Antediluvian World", *Studia Islamica* 52 (1980), 41-66, reprinted in Kohlberg, *In Praise of the Few*, 327-48.

[68] Al-Qabānjī, Tahdhīb, 113-38; on the exegetical procedure of *tafsīr al-qurʾān bi-l-qurʾān* in general, see Seyed Ali Sadr, *Offenbarung, Exegese und Ratio. ʿAllāma Saiyid Muḥammad Ḥusain Ṭabāṭabāʾī und sein Korankommentar* al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān, Berlin/Boston 2022, 106-24.

important material resources for the clergy. It comes as no surprise therefore that al-Qabānjī slams traditions to the effect that visiting ʿAlī's tomb in Najaf is equivalent to the merit of ten thousand martyrs and guarantees the forgiveness of all past and future sins not only on theological grounds – why then should one take the pains of *jihād* or of a pilgrimage to Mecca, if one single visit to Najaf gives the believers free rein?[69] He compares the relevant *ḥadīth*s to the medieval letters of indulgence issued by the Catholic church, which were meant to ensure maximal material profit for the benefit of the *ʿulamāʾ* and to foster the hypocrisy on the part of the believers.[70] The result is, al-Qabānjī exclaims, as Muḥammad ʿAbduh once said upon returning from a journey to Europe: "There, I found an Islam without Muslims, here I find Muslims without Islam."[71] The fact that all *ḥadīth*s about visiting the Imams' graves are posterior inventions is all the more obvious for him, as the location, for instance, of ʿAlī's grave was not yet known at the time of the sixth Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq to whom many of the traditions were traced back.[72]

Taking into account the severity of his attack on these practical consequences of credulous use of Shiʿite *ḥadīth*, his own method of *ḥadīth* criticism comes across, on the face of it, as remarkably traditional. He does provide a list of ten points as criteria for forged traditions (among others: the Qurʾan, the consensus of the *umma*, rationality, the empirical natural sciences)[73], but he himself also uses some traditions in order to refute others, and more often than not, his rejection is based on the purely traditional method of *isnād* criticism. What is more, his main culprits are the ancient *ghulāt* who exaggerated their veneration of the Imams[74], and the Akhbārī school of thought that temporarily regained the upper hand during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and preached the unconditional observance of all

[69] Al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 145-69.
[70] Ibid., 92f.
[71] Ibid., 154.
[72] Ibid., 166-69; indeed, the location of the grave of the first Imam in Najaf was identified only in the ninth century and embellished with legends; Najaf is considered by Shiʿites also as the last resting place of a number of pre-islamic figures of salvation history, notably of Adam and Noah; for details see Rose S. Aslan, *From Body to Shrine. The Construction of Sacred Space at the Grave of ʻAli Ibn Abi Talib in Najaf*, PhD diss. Chapel Hill 2014, esp. 98-106; Sepideh Parsapajouh, "The Topography of Corporal Relics in Twelver Shiʿism. Some Anthropological Reflections on the Places of *Ziyāra*", *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World* 1 (2020) 199-225, esp. 209-12; on the shrine itself see also Salah Mahdi al-Fartusi, "The History and Architecture of the Imam ʻAli Shrine", in: Sabrina Mervin / Robert Gleave / Geraldine Chatelard (ed.), *Najaf. Portrait of a Holy City*, Paris / Reading 2017, 19-37; on Shiʿite discussions about visiting the graves of the Imams, see also Yitzhak Nakash, "The Visitation of the Shrines of the Imams and the Shi'i Mujtahids in the Early Twentieth Century", *Studia Islamica* 91 (1995), 153-64.
[73] Al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 176-80.
[74] Ibid., 5, 12, 18, 42, 52, 139, 171, 184f., 196; on the ghulat in early Shiʿism, see Mushegh Asatryan, Controversies in Formative Shi'i Islam. The Ghulat Muslims and their Beliefs, London 2017; Heinz Halm, Die islamische Gnosis. Die extreme Schia und die ʿAlawiten, Zurich / Munich 1982.

Imamic traditions.[75] But one should not be deterred by this method; that there are today neither *ghulāt* nor Akhbāris to a substantial degree any longer is most probably well known to al-Qabānjī. His procedure is therefore best understood as as a kind of "kicking the dog and meaning the master", namely by insinuating that today's Uṣūlī clerics are by no way different from their *ghulāt* and Akhbārī predecessors. His *ḥadīth* criticism per se would not be particularly remarkable (and would certainly not suffice to call him a dissenter); rather, it is the combination of his critique of traditions with his rejection of the power of the religious dignitaries and the social consequences of this traditionalism that puts him in a line with his predecessors in the twentieth century. In his book *Tashayyuʿ al-ʿawāmm wa-tashayyuʿ al-khawāṣṣ*, he went one step further.

In need of a divine tyrant?

Al-Qabānjī finished his follow-up book in 2010, i.e. after his return from Iran to Iraq; it appeared in February 2011.[76] Already its very title rings a bell and reminds the reader of the abovementioned books by ʿAlī Sharīʿatī and Mūsā al-Mūsawī who implied the existence of two kinds of Shiʿism, the one symbolizing a perceived miserable present state of the Shiʿite institutions, convictions and conventions, the other one standing for something defined as "the authentic, actual and correct belief" in ʿAlī and the *ahl al-bayt*, to which, one way or another, Shiʿism would have to return.[77] However, as we have seen, this is not to say that these authors agree on what should be considered to be "true Shiʿism", or when exactly the distortions and aberrations began. For the would-be revolutionary Sharīʿatī, it was during the Safavid era that the *ʿulamāʾ* started to be negligent about the message of Shiʿism so that it became necessary to restore the original meaning of the Imamate with all its components in order to transform it into a mobilizing force against the Pahlavi regime. For the disillusioned post-revolutionary al-Mūsawī, on the other hand, the watershed was the final disappearance of the twelfth Imam and the beginning of the great occultation in the middle of the tenth century, that is the period that marked the transition of Shiʿism "from chiliasm to law"[78]. All later developments led Shiʿism away from its origins and away also from the other Islamic confessions so that

[75] Al-Qabānjī, *Tahdhīb*, 95, 113f., 237; on the Akhbārī school of thought, see Robert Gleave, "Akhbāriyya and Uṣūliyya", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_0029>; idem, *Scripturalist Islam. The History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shīʿī School*, Leiden 2007.

[76] Aḥmad al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ al-ʿawāmm wa-tashayyuʿ al-khawāṣṣ*, Beirut 2011; this seems to be the only existing edition; it is also available from his website: <http://www.ahmed-algubbanchi.com/books/1.pdf>.

[77] See above, notes 24 and 31, respectively.

[78] Said Amir Arjomand, "The Consolation of Theology: Absence of the Imam and Transition from Chiliasm to Law in Shiʿism", *The Journal of Religion* 76 (1996), 548-71, reprinted in idem, *Sociology*

Shiʿism became isolated within Islam. As to Aḥmad al-Qabānjī, he goes even further back in time, to the very beginning of Shiʿism, but then proceeds beyond the Shiʿite dimension proper to arrive at some more fundamental and radical conclusions.

Al-Qabānjī mentions neither Sharīʿatī nor al-Mūsawī throughout his book. Instead, he invokes, from the very beginning, none other than the radical anti-Shiʿite Aḥmad Kasravī.[79] Although he asserts that he intended to refute an out-of-stock treatise of Kasravī word by word[80], he goes on to reproduce, over the first one hundred pages (which is more than a third of the entire book), a verbatim Arabic translation of the complete epistle, without critical notes or any commentary of his own.[81] The text in question is the pamphlet *Goft-o shenīd* from 1944 in which Kasravī in the form of an alleged "conversation" (hence the title) with three unnamed Iranian workers – who play the roles of mere stooges – summarizes the main points of his anti-Shiʿite stance: the supposedly divine nature of the Imamate, the political claims brought forward by its defenders, the Imams' super-natural features, the believers' veneration of the Imams and their graves, including all aspects of pilgrimage and intercession. And inevitably it is the scholars – "your scholars and your shaykhs", as he tellingly calls them[82] – who are to blame for this. They managed to talk the ordinary believers into such "disgusting manners" (*al-sulūkiyyāt al-shanīʿa*) as the self-mutilations in Muḥarram or the transport of corpses to Najaf or Qum for burial, with all their macabre and unhealthy concomitants, and while they seemingly disapprove of this behaviour as merely popular practices, they abstain from issuing *fatwā*s that would forbid it.[83] In many respects, Kasravī's treatise can be read as an abridged and popularized version of his other anti-Shiʿite diatribe, *Shīʿī-garī*, which has already been referred to above; the thirteen points of criticism which he provided there in detail are condensed here into ten short items.[84] In two aspects, however, he

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of Shiʿite Islam. Collected Essays, Leiden 2016, 96-120.

[79] See above, note 19.

[80] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 8f.

[81] Ibid., 11-113; Kasravī's treatise can be found in several versions online, e.g. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WYYlpNNmv6ipink3Dm_EI6CuD1uJNE3n/view> which can also be accessed through <https://kasravi-ahmad.blogspot.com/>. An interesting, even if minor, detail is that al-Qabānjī translates Kasravī's solemn invocation *be-nām-e pāk-e āfarīdgār* ("in the name of the pure creator") rather conventionally by using the standard basmala formula *bi-smi 'llāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*.

[82] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 31 (also for the following quotation).

[83] Ibid., 30-35 (= *Goft-o shenīd*, 13-18); on the self-flagellations, see above, notes 9 and 10; on the various sanitary, socio-economic, political and sectarian aspects of the transport of corpses to the holy cities, see Anja Pistor-Hatam, "Pilger, Pest und Cholera: Die Wallfahrt zu den Heiligen Stätten im Irak als gesundheitspolitisches Problem im 19. Jahrhundert", *Die Welt des Islams* 31 (1991), 228-45; Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite*, 233-36; Nakash, *The Shiʿis of Iraq*, 184-201; Sabri Ateş, "Bones of Contention: Corpse Traffic and Ottoman- Iranian Rivalry in Nineteenth-Century Iraq", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30:3 (2010), 512-32.

[84] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 46-48 (= *Goft-o shenīd*, 25f.); see also above, note 20.

went beyond his earlier book: for one thing, he directly attacked one particular scholar who, ironically enough, had himself emerged as a Shiʿite dissident, namely Sharīʿat Sangalajī whom he castigated for having linked in his sermons the outbreak of typhus to the allegedly immoral behaviour of women and for thus being responsible for the death of thousands of people, his own in 1944 included.[85] And secondly, Kasravī did not restrict his acerbic criticism to Shiʿism alone, but lashed out on all sides and included "a great number of schools and tendencies that were instrumental in the seduction of the people", such as Sufism, the Kharābātiyya, Bahāʾism and materialism – even the *dīwān* of Ḥāfeẓ which he called "a book full of superstition and stagnant poison"[86].

After this furious polemic, al-Qabānjī begins his own text with a methodological introduction on "the axioms of the dialogue" (*awwaliyyāt al-ḥiwār*) and the difference between a dialogue and a controversy (*jadal*). By having recourse to Immanuel Kant and the idea of a subjectivist understanding of religion, he emphasizes the pluralism of truths, as against the traditional form of religious debates which tends to stress the distinction between "true" and "false", and therefore to deepen existing conflicts.[87] This is at the same time his only point of criticism of Kasravī to whom he refers on several occasions throughout the book. This criticism, however, never appears to be a refutation of *what* Kasravī wrote in terms of content, it is limited to *how* he approached Shiʿism in terms of methodology. In his eyes, Kasravī had a narrow and superficial view of religion, when he tried to discern true from false convictions.[88] Between the lines, he thereby gives to understand that Kasravī may have been rhetorically radical with regard to Shiʿism in particular, but not intellectually radical enough with regard to religion in general. According to al-Qabānjī, the adequate form of religious dialogue, of tackling religious problems in general, consists in "deconstructing the confessional discourse" (*tafkīk al-khiṭāb al-madhhabī*), in proceeding archaeologically (*bi-ḥafr arkiyūlūjī*), and in taking into account the human, sociological and anthropological background that led to "the production of the text and to the formation of the confession and religion".[89] Continuing this unmistakably post-modern approach, he then makes a basic distinction upon which the rest of his book is based: there are, he explains, two tendencies within Shiʿism: the *tashayyuʿ al-*

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[85] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 67-72 (= *Goft-o shenīd*, 39-42); on Sangalajī see above, note 12; on Kasravī's attack on Sangalajī see also Rahnema, *Shiʿi Reformation in Iran*, 47-50.

[86] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 80f., 106 (= *Goft-o shenīd*, 49f., 67); on Kasravī's polemics against Sufism, see Lloyd Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator. Ahmad Kasravi and the Iranian mystical tradition*, London, New York 2006, esp. 137-59 on Ḥāfeẓ and the Kharābātīs.

[87] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 118-20; on the intensive reception of Immanuel Kant in modern Iran, see Roman Seidel, *Kant in Teheran. Anfänge, Ansätze und Kontexte der Kantrezeption in Iran*, Berlin et al. 2014.

[88] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 120f., 125, 127, 138, 152f., 160f., 165, 168f., 177f., 197, 225, 232, 240.

[89] Ibid., 125f.: "intāj al-naṣṣ wa-ṣiyāghat al-madhhab wa-l-dīn".

ʿawāmm, the plebeian or traditional (*taqlīdī*) Shiʿism on the one hand, and the *tashayyuʿ al-khawāṣṣ*, the rational (*ʿaqlānī*) and emotional / psychic (*wijdānī*) Shiʿism of the elite on the other, and it is here that the title of the main part of the book, "the identity of Shiʿism and the Shiʿism of identity", becomes understandable.[90] In fact, the idea of the chosen few and the separation of the Muslim community into *khāṣṣa* (i.e. Shiʿites) and *ʿāmma* (the rest) has always been a hallmark of Shiʿite theology[91], but al-Qabānjī turns the tables and applies this concept in a modified sense on the Shiʿites themselves. The first group, the *ʿawāmm*, he says, uphold an outward identitarian form of Shiʿism, based on the imitation of the social milieu and the superficial and dogmatic observation of traditions and rituals imposed by society and family. It is against these people, al-Qabānjī is ready to concede, that Kasravī's attack is first and foremost directed. The members of the second, *khawāṣṣ*, group, by contrast, are motivated by humane examples and internalised ethical values, and while they, too, perform the religious rituals, they do so in a far more moderate and reasonable way. They would never think of flagellating themselves in Muḥarram, or of going on pilgrimage to the Imams' graves from afar. They love the Imams because of their general love for the good and for truth, not for the selfish reasons of hoping to enter paradise and being scared by the threat of eternal hellfire. In this sense, both groups are unsurprisingly not restricted to Shiʿism, and al-Qabānjī by consequence talks of "the *ʿawāmm* of all religions and schools of thought"[92] who resemble each other, whereas all people of pure heart, be they Shiʿites or not, will be saved. Religion, al-Qabānjī concludes from a brief discussion of Western thinkers (among them Herbert Spencer, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Émile Durkheim), is a pluridimensional phenomenon which rests on four pillars (*arbaʿa arkān li-l-dīn*), a hardly coincidental choice of words[93]: the innermost belief with the heart, the dogmatic system, ethics and values, and rituals and prescriptions.[94]

Up to this point, Qabānjī's efforts do not come across as overly spectacular, his post-modern first two chapters notwithstanding. As we have seen, criticism of the *ʿāshūrāʾ* rituals or of the corpse traffic to the holy sites in Iraq has already been an integral part of inner-Shiʿite reform debates in the twentieth century, and many authors, Qabānjī himself in his aforementioned *Tahdhīb* book included, struck an sardonic tone when making a laughing-

[90] Ibid., 115 ("huwiyyat al-tashayyuʿ wa-tashayyuʿ al-huwiyya"), 126f.

[91] On this trope, see Etan Kohlberg, "In Praise of the Few", in G. R. Hawting, J. A. Mojaddedi and A. Samely (eds.), *Studies in Islamic and Middle Eastern Texts and Traditions in Memory of Norman Calder*, Oxford 2000, 149-62; reprinted in idem, *In Praise of the Few*, 250-65; for a more general sociological interpretation of the terminology, see M.A.J. Beg, "al-Khāṣṣa wa'l-ʿĀmma", *EI*[2] 4/1098-1100 and online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4228>.

[92] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 133, 142.

[93] Ibid., 157.

stock of absurd traditions or obdurate scholars. However, this relatively low-keyed touch changes, in the following chapters, even if not in tone, but in substance, when al-Qabānjī turns to the very heart of Shiʿism, the Imamate.[95] He discusses it from the two most controversial angles: politics and government on the one side, and the question of the Imams' superhuman abilities, on the other. Kasravī had asserted that the caliphate and the Imamate were initially identical, and that it was only Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq who detached the latter from the former by claiming divine prescription and designation, while at the same time sitting idly around not actively striving to assume leadership.[96] Al-Qabānjī disagrees by emphasizing that only Muḥammad was in fact both religious *and* political leader of the community at the same time. But he stresses that all respective Qur'anic verses that demand obedience to his government were revealed only in Medina (the most notable being Q 4:59[97]), while the far more numerous Meccan verses do not once mention the need to obey the Prophet or to form a government. Which means, al-Qabānjī goes on to explain, that the issue of political rule is neither part of the *uṣūl* nor of the *furūʿ* in Islam and therefore has no religious basis at all. From Muḥammad's death onward, the two spheres were by consequence completely separated, as the Prophet had designated ʿAlī, at the famous incident at the Ghadīr Khumm, only to be his successor in religious matters, his trustee to preserve religion after the impending finality of Prophethood.[98] The theory of *wilāyat al-faqīh* that has been invented by "the Shiʿite jurists" (*fuqahāʾ al-shīʿa*, in the plural; Khomeynī goes unnamed here) is therefore nothing but a theocratic alteration (*taḥwīr*) of the Imamate and a dangerous aberration.[99] All this amounts to a secularisation of Shiʿite thought *avant la lettre*, in a way that reminds the reader of the Egyptian jurist ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Rāziq (1888-1966) who, in the 1920s after the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate, had (in vain) tried to secularise Sunnite political thought.[100]

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[94] Ibid., 157-68.

[95] Ibid., 177-251.

[96] Ibid., 39-45; cf. also Kasravī, *Shīʿī-garī*, 39-52 (=Kasravī, *On Islam*, 122-25).

[97] "O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you" (Arberry's translation); al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 194f.

[98] On the episode at the pond (*ghadīr*) of Khumm see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Ghadīr Khumm, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27 419>.

[99] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 191.

[100] On this famous controversy that was caused by ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Rāziq's book *Al-Islām wa-uṣūl al-ḥukm*, Cairo 1925, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*, Oxford 1962 (reprint Cambridge 1983), 183-92; Anke von Kügelgen (ed.), *Philosophie in der islamischen Welt. Band 4,1: 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: Arabischer Sprachraum*, Basel 2021, 191-97 and 235-37; Souad T. Ali, *A Religion, Not a State. Ali 'Abd al-Raziq's Islamic Justification of Political Secularism*, Salt Lake City 2009. For an English translation, see Ali Abdel Razek, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, edited by Abdou Filali-Ansary, translated by Maryam Loutfi, Edinburgh 2012.

al-Qabānjī then turns to the thorny issue of the superhuman characteristics of the Imams.[101] While he had treated them like bizarre episodes of superstition in his *Tahdhīb* book, he now approaches the question from a theoretical point of view, with ultimately far more devastating consequences. He does so in three consecutive steps: First, he distinguishes between subjective and objective rationality. In order for religious ideas to make sense, it is not necessary that they are indisputable and rational in a scientific way (*ʿaqlānī*); subjective comprehensibility (*maʿqūliyya*) is perfectly sufficient, and Qabānjī here even uses the arabicized forms *sūbjiktīf* and *ūbjiktīf*.[102] And unlike his remarks on the non-political nature of the Imamate, where he refers to Shiʿite authors such as Murtaḍā al-Muṭahharī[103] or Muḥammad Riḍā al-Muẓaffar,[104] his authorities here are slightly more surprising: Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, Ludwig Feuerbach and once again Immanuel Kant go into the witness box to confirm the psychological and social urges of religious belief and the philosophical incentive to shape a God figure that assembles all heavenly features and ideals that humans are yearning for. Al-Qabānjī does not even stop at quoting Feuerbach's famous sentence that "man created God in his own image" (and not the other way round),[105] in order to make the point that religion can neither be verified nor falsified by intellect. In a second step, and applying "the Kantian distinction (*tafkīk*) between the essence of reality and the way it appears to us or to the Shiʿi Muslim",[106] he then calls for separating the historical Imams from the mental image that today's Shiʿites conceive of them: the historical ʿAlī is not identical with the belief in ʿAlī. Only by doing so, we can recognise the psychological and emotional motives on the part of the Shiʿites that led to this image – and this rational tool would then have to be applied to the belief of Muslims in general, not only of Shiʿites.[107]

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[101] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 225-51.

[102] Ibid., 229.

[103] On him (1920-79) see Hajatpour, *Islamische Geistlichkeit*, 179-201; Mahmoud T. Davari, *The Political Thought of Ayatullah Murtaża Muṭahhari. An Iranian Theoretician of the Islamic State*, London, New York 2005; Urs Gösken, *Kritik der westlichen Philosophie in Iran. Zum geistesgeschichtlichen Selbstverständnis von Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī und Murtażā Muṭahharī*, Berlin et al. 2014.

[104] On him (1904-64) see al-Amīnī, *Muʿjam rijāl al-fikr*, 3/1217f.; Muḥammad Mahdī al-Āṣifī, *Al-Shaykh Muḥammad Riḍā al-Muẓaffar wa-taṭawwur al-ḥaraka al-iṣlāḥiyya fī l-Najaf*, Qum 1419/1998.

[105] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 231: "fa-inna 'l-insān huwa 'lladhī khalaqa 'llāh ʿalā ṣūratihi lā kamā taqūlu al-adyān min anna 'llāh khalaqa Ādam ʿalā ṣūratihi".

[106] Ibid., 228: "luzūm al-tafkīk 'al-Kāntī' bayn māhiyyat al-wāqiʿ li-dhātihi, wa-bayn al-wāqiʿ al-ladhī yabdū lanā aw li-l-muslim al-shīʿī."

[107] Ibid., 232-36. Particularly in this passage, it becomes evident in passing that al-Qabānjī's use of the word *tafkīk* either in Kant's philosophical wake or in the post-modern sense of "deconstruction" (see above, note 89) is fundamentally different from the philosophical / theological school of thought *Maktab-e tafkīk* that managed to gain a foothold in Iran in recent decades. The latter's scripturalist trust in the traditions of the Imams as sole authoritative source besides the Qurʾan brings them rather close to the Akhbārī branch of Shiʿism and is quite exactly the opposite of al-Qabānjī's endeavour to get rid of the unquestioned reliance on the Imams' authority; for details see Robert Gleave, "Continuity and

What this ultimately means is made clear by al-Qabānjī in his third and final step, when he introduces his theory of *al-ḥāja wa-l-insijām*.[108] Again by referring to an unexpected witness, namely none other than Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution,[109] he explains that for every invention (*ikhtirāʿ*), both in the material and in the intellectual realm, there must be a need (*ḥāja*), and the outcome must be in harmony (*insijām*) with the surrounding milieu. Without the human mental need to believe in hidden forces to overcome difficulties and to find answers to the big unknown questions about the meaning of life, "humans wouldn't have invented the notion of God".[110] What is more, when it comes to the idea of the Imams, there is the frightening image of God as painted in the Qur'an: a tyrant, haughty, revengeful, deceptive, who prepares hellfire for everyone who opposes him. In view of this, it was simply necessary to invent a God who is compassionate towards the sinners, a humanized God or a deified human, who acts as a mediator between the humans and this austere God – and this is precisely the foundation of the Shiʿites' exaggerated belief in the Imams. Everybody needs half-Gods (*anṣāf āliha*) to talk to and to pour out one's heart, and for this reason "the Shiʿite machine" (*mākinat madhhab al-shīʿī*)[111] went on to promote the Imams to the rank of half-Gods by means of thousands of fabricated traditions and random exegesis of Qurʾanic verses. It may be fair to call this belief a kind of idolatry, such as the Wahhabis do, but, al-Qabānjī exclaims, "I personally prefer this Shiʿite *shirk* a thousand times over the Wahhabi *tawḥīd*, and I consider it as closer to God."[112]

These last words may strike the reader as strange after all what was going on before, but al-Qabānjī tries to finally have the cake and eat it by also fitting this devastating image of God he just depicted into his theory of *al-ḥāja wa-l-insijām*.[113] For contrary to the Imams' portrait that is presented as a human product, here it is God himself who is said to have provided this image. Obviously it also filled a need, and it was in harmony with the appearance of the surrounding strong kings and rulers, such as when the Qurʾan describes God's throne that will be

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Originality in Shiʿi Tought: The Relationship between the *Akhbārīyya* and the *Maktab-i Tafkīk*", in: Denis Hermann / Sabrina Mervin (eds.): *Shi'i Trends and Dynamics in Modern Times (XVIIIth - XXth Centuries) – Courants et dynamiques chiites à l'époque moderne (XVIIIe - XXe siècles)*, Beirut, Würzburg 2010, 71-92; Sajjad Rizvi, "'Only the Imam Knows Best'. The *Maktab-e Tafkīk*'s Attack on the Legitimacy of Philosophy in Iran", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22 (2012), 487-503.

[108] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 236-43.

[109] On the reception of Darwin's theory in the Arab world, see Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*, Chicago, London 2013; for Iran see Kamran Arjomand, "Islamic Responses to Darwinism in the Persianate World", in C. Mackenzie Brown (ed.), *Asian Religious Responses to Darwinism. Evolutionary Theories in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian Cultural Contexts*, Cham 2020, 65-97.

[110] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 237: "mā 'khtaraʿa 'l-insān fikrat allāh".

[111] Ibid., 241f.

[112] Ibid., 242.

[113] Ibid., 243-51.

carried by eight angels (Q 69:17) – perhaps the Arabs had heard about Khosrow or Caesar being carried around by eight slaves. The same holds true for Prophethood which was also in harmony with the Middle Eastern milieu where people were used to revelations, scriptures and Prophets, contrary to India, China or Africa, which is why we do not find this kind of prophethood there. But this theory, al-Qabānjī finally stresses emphatically, is not meant as a disenchantment of prophethood and Imamate, but as a rational explanation of these phenomena – just as Darwin's theory did not deny God's existence behind evolution. It is meant to answer the question "how?", not "why?".

Al-Qabānjī ends his book with a chapter on the notion of *badāʾ*, i.e. the idea that God may change His mind and alter a previous commandment in the light of new circumstances.[114] For the Shiʿites, this has always been a theological Achilles' heel, because Imam Gaʿfar's first son, Ismāʿīl, had died before his father and thereby deranged the ordinary succession of the Imamate. In the light of the conviction that the Imamate was divinely ordained, it was necessary to explain why God apparently changed His mind and why the Imam whose knowledge of the future was taken for granted did not know about it.[115] The latter issue is predictably no difficulty for al-Qabānjī, as it only proves yet once again that the Imams do not have any such knowledge. He does, however, go to great lengths to "prove" the necessity of *badāʾ* with regard to God's own freedom: God is free to act as He wishes precisely because He does *not* know the future Himself. If He was subjected to His eternal knowledge, neither He nor the humans would have free will, and God could not have mercy towards man – after all, what sense would it make "to create millions of people so that they are tomorrow firewood in hell"?[116] Human freedom of will means for al-Qabānjī that God gave all humans the two components of good and evil and let them chose without knowing Himself on which option they will decide.[117]

Conclusion

Aḥmad al-Qabānjī's two books need to be read in conjunction with each other in order to do justice to his reform programme. While *Tahdhīb aḥādīth al-shīʿa* is restricted to a specific area of Shiʿism, namely those traditions within Shiʿite literature which beyond measure en-

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[114] Ibid., 253-83.

[115] For the Shiʿite discussions of *badāʾ*, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Badāʾ", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_25083>; Mahmoud Ayoub, "Divine Preordination and Human Hope a Study of the Concept of Badāʾ in Imāmī Shīʿī Tradition", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106:4 (1986), 623-32.

[116] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 268.

[117] Ibid., 270; on the problem of free will in Islamic theology in general, see van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 4/489-512.

hance the position of the Imams and their significance as the emotional epicentre of Shiʿite religiosity, his *Tashayyuʿ al-ʿawāmm wa-tashayyuʿ al-khawāṣṣ* is a radical approach to religion beyond Shiʿism proper. Two elements make it particularly noteworthy in this regard: on the one hand, the positive reference to the Western study of religions and to luminaries such as Kant, Schleiermacher, Feuerbach or Freud. This point should, however, not be overestimated, since al-Qabānjī drops their names – in very few instances –, but does not quote from their books, let alone discuss their key ideas in any depth. And since he does not even provide bibliographical references,[118] it is next to impossible to gauge what he read of and about them (and in which editions / translations), and to what extent his own thinking is influenced by the Western science of religion. Some of al-Qabānjī's main arguments – above all the distinction between objective reality and subjective internalization, or his theory of the need for religious belief that shapes religious perceptions accordingly – could be read as borrowings from the concept of "natural religion", and in the context of Kant or Schleiermacher, this would have been an obvious link. But al-Qabānjī does not address this issue; he does not even refer to the concept of *fiṭra* ("natural disposition") as an Islamic equivalent.[119]

On the other hand, there is his own rather merciless deconstructivism of all Shiʿite certainties and the choice of his internal paragons: rather than the Iranian reformist thinkers of the more recent past (whose writings he has translated into Arabic)[120], or, for that matter, Sharīʿat Sangalajī who criticised Shiʿism in order to reform it from within, al-Qabānjī is inspired by Aḥmad Kasravī, one of the most radical and devastating critics Shiʿism has experienced in the twentieth century. Al-Qabānjī could have made do with a short summary of Kasravī's thought as a convenient runway for his own criticism. Instead, he reproduces a one hundred-pages treatise in which Kasravī's sparring partners are presented as more or less clueless lads who are easily won over by Kasravī's arguments. Al-Qabānjī's protestation to write a refutation of this text notwithstanding, the amount of critical points he has in common with his predecessor is unmistakable: the emphasis on the purely human character of the Imams and the Imamate; the sharp criticism of the *ʿulamāʾ* and their tacit approval, even encouragement of pilgrimages to the graves, veneration and supplication; the call for a rational understanding of God and religion; the call for human individual responsibility as opposed to any

[118] In fact, the only reference to Western literature that he gives in the entire book is *al-Dīn wa-l-āfāq al-jadīda. Taʾlīf majmūʿa min falāsifat al-gharb*, translated by Ghulām Ḥusayn Tawakkulī (without date or publisher): al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 155 note 1.

[119] See Jon Hoover, "Fiṭra", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, online <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27155>; for a concise introduction to the concept of "natural religion", see Karl-Heinz Kohl, "Naturreligion", in Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow and Matthias Laubscher (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart et al. 1988, 4/230-33.

ideas of intercession or predetermination. Al-Qabānjī not only repeats Kasravī's ten points of criticism of Shiʿism, he even adds more fuel to the fire by adducing other points of his own. Consistently, he ends his book by singing the praises of "this bold thinker, great historian and unique critic", who may have been too rash in some of his judgements, but who, by being killed by the *Fedāʾiyān*, "paid the price for his freedom and his courage in an Oriental society that can endure only words of veneration and glorification of religious symbols, and that supports only imitation, induration, petrification and sanctification for everything old."[121] His book can therefore also be read as a refutation of everything related to Khomeynī who is obviously the elephant in the room; after all, it was Khomeynī who, by his direct counter-attack on Aḥmad Kasravī's polemics, *Kashf al-asrār*, was a mastermind behind Kasravī's assassination.[122]

The question arises to what degree – if at all – al-Qabānjī can still be considered to be Shiʿite. In the two books, he emphatically stressed his affiliation to Shiʿism, by claiming to complete what Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr had started, and by protesting against the Wahhābī version of monotheism.[123] By contrast, he seems to have alienated himself more and more from Shiʿism, perhaps also under the influence of being anathematized by his own brother. To all appearances, al-Qabānjī has stopped publishing books in recent years,[124] but he continues to be active on various social media channels. Here, his estrangement from Shiʿism becomes manifest; on the pictures on his website and media channels, he no longer dons the black turban that would identify him as a descendant of the Imam Ḥusayn, and characteristically, he calls the intellectual school he claims to represent *Madrasat al-wijdān*, "the school of emotional life".[125] As far as I can see, there are no printed refutations of his books, but in order to estimate his sphere of influence and the both affirmative and controversial echo he manages to create, it would be necessary to delve into the social media as well, which is beyond the scope of this article. All in all, Aḥmad al-Qabānjī's personality appears less revolutionary in the Iranian context (where there has been the said tradition of radical criticism, and where reform debates have been running high for decades) than in Iraq where the traditional scholar-

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[120] See above, note 47.

[121] Al-Qabānjī, *Tashayyuʿ*, 282.

[122] See above, note 19.

[123] See also above, notes 14 and 35.

[124] In *Tashayyuʿ*, 251, he announces his intention to expound his views on the interaction of religions and human societies in more detail in a new book titled *Aṣl al-adyān wa-taṭawwuruhā*, but this book never seems to have come to light; also of all his books offered on his website, *Tashayyuʿ* is the most recent one.

[125] Apart from his website (see above, note 42), his main media outlets appear to be Youtube <https://www.youtube.com/@user-zf5gj7px6m>, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw9QX18O4R16OmDXJ3RgYJA>, Twitter <https://twitter.com/bait_alwijdan>, and Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/alwjdan>.

ship at the *ʿatabāt* seems to prevail. Nevertheless, it is hardly exaggerated to say that his deconstruction of Shiʿism is, at most, a minority position, not the least due to his radical rejection of the *ḥadīth* corpus, as this is the repository of what can be identified, both in Shiʿite and in Sunnite Islam, as the core of religious identity.[126] It is therefore no wonder that this realm in particular is in the centre of all critical voices who had their say in this article – and who corroborate time and time again the famous aphorism by William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."[127]

[126] On modern Sunnite controversies about the *ḥadīth*, see Rainer Brunner, "Quelques débats récents autour du hadith en Islam sunnite", in: Daniel De Smet / Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (eds.), *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l'Islam*, Paris 2014, 373-428.

[127] William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, New York 1950, 92. – All websites quoted in the footnotes were valid as of 15 April 2023. My sincere thanks go to Rob Gleave, Ulrich Rebstock and Monika Winet for their critical reading and helpful comments.