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TITOLO/TITLE: To be God's Sign in the Age of Globalisation: *Marja'iyya* between Crisis and Progress

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ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

In contrast to what happened among Sunnis, modernity not only did not undermine Shia clergy, but it also brought about mechanisms that bolstered their socio-political power (Keddie 1969, Cleave 2007, Brunner 2010, 2017). The development of neo-Usulism in the 18th century strengthened the authority of the Shī'ī clergy, and nearly a century later, the clerics' influence gave rise to the new meaning of *marja'iyya*. This phenomenon (here referred to as “institution”) has taken on numerous forms and expressions over time.

The current panel aims to investigate the impacts of an offspring of modernity, namely globalisation, on the *marja'iyya*. In the second part of the twentieth century, globalisation emerged as the most fundamental international change, challenging local identities and conventional religious authorities. As a reaction to this homogenising cultural force and westernisation, Ayatollah Khomeini interpreted the doctrine of *marja'iyya* as the source and justification for the claim to executive power as declared at the beginning of the volume of lectures entitled *Wilayat-i Faqīh*, under the heading “The Necessity for Islamic Government”. This principle implied that the leader of the Islamic state is to be vested with extra-territorial authority over the Shī'a, as well as the quest for the immediate establishment of an Islamic state. *Marja'iyya* was linked to the role of the guardian of public order *walī al-faqīh*.

Later when the constitution of the Islamic Republic was amended in 1989, the requirement that the *walī al-faqīh* has to be a *marja' al-taqlīd* (the primary source of emulation) was removed, thus, the institution of *wilāyat al-faqīh* became more confined to the political system of the Islamic Republic. This amendment created two problems. First, it was a move towards further politicization of the institution, making power and political engagement a fundamental matter that each *marja'* must address. Second, the relationship between the Arab *marāji'* and the Iranian supreme leader (Khomeini's successor) has remained tense ever since, with the *marāji'* living outside of traditional religious centers particularly struggling to have their authority recognized by those living and acting in the traditional centers of knowledge production such as Najaf or Qum (Algar 2012).

In the 21st century, the globalisation has accelerated by the frenetic pace of evolution in the digital communications technologies and advances in transportation. Nonetheless, the standing of *marja'iyya* and its development have remained uncertain in this context. On the one hand, this institution is regarded as the locus of innovation in Shī'ī law, updating rules in response to changing social requirements. Furthermore, the network spans national borders. As a result, it appears to be in line with the complexities of the globalised world. *Marja'iyya*, on the other hand, is rooted in the claims of purity and authenticity that battle with the fuzziness of cultural boundaries and contamination imposed by globalisation.

The main challenge that the globalised societies has posed to this institution regards the charismatic power of *marāji'*. In spite of evolutions, *marja'iyya* continues to be an informal and vaguely-defined phenomenon to the point that instead of institution it can be considered an “amorphous system of authority” based on an “ill-defined mix of scholarly and social credentials acquired in Shi'a seminaries” (Corboz 2015, p. 25). Since its modern inception, contrary to the Catholic Church (to which the current Shi'a clerical hierarchy is often compared), within Shi'ism there is no central authority and the procedure for designating a *marja'* is not institutionalised yet.

The only criterion for establishing that a jurist has become a *marja'* is the peers and followers' approval (Gleave 2004, Amanat 1988, Moazami 2013, Khalaji 2006, 2012). The acquisition of such an approval does not have any clear process and is more based on the cleric's charisma.

For example, M. H. Fadlallah defined the post of the *marja' al-taqlīd* as an exclusive, supranational, non-ethnic, merit-based authority (Algar 2012). At the same time, the title ayatollah (lit. sign of God, used for Iranian *marāji'*), with its presumed Quranic root, entails the extraordinary power of its bearer (Algar 2011). Because of the ambiguity of criteria, clerics should be wary of potential threats to their supposed charisma.

A way of conserving charisma is to remain out of access and avoid direct engagement with followers (Rizvi 2018). In the age of ‘mass amateurization’ when within the new forms of media everybody and no body are ‘expert’, this preventive measure makes *marja'iyya* isolated and more aloof from social change and reduces clerics' knowledge of the actual issues. Indeed, the distance of *marāji'* from the life of ordinary people has made this institution redundant in people's lives. It is worth mentioning that Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Murtada Mutahari and Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah underlined the parochial nature of *marja'iyya* however, whether they had the desired profound impact on the people's daily lives is a matter of debate (see eg. Takim 2009, Clarke 2016).

Nowadays, emigration of the followers of any *marja'* to non-Islamic countries and the rise of new digital media have further challenged the scope of traditional Shī'ī religious authority. Fadlallah at the turn of the millennium, added an important criterion besides that of the excellence in Islamic sciences – reflecting the demands of the times -, namely the ability of the *marja'* to visit the various Shī'ī communities worldwide. Theoretically, the easier travel facilities should have expanded their network and influence beyond Shī'ī heartland. Indeed, the unprecedented queries of followers have triggered the rise of an emerging genre of jurisprudential literature dedicated to *mustahdathāt*

(emerging matters), which is supposed to address the specific needs of Shī'a in the new social material or immaterial contexts. Moreover, the new social media helped the world-renowned *marāji'* to foster their network beyond the Iranian and Arab Shī'i communities (Riggs 2020, Rizvi 2018). Nonetheless, because of the uncertain relationship between the *marja'iyya* and the products of globalisation, there are concerns about the viability of the institution in the present and future worlds.

In light of the aforementioned problems of the globalised environment for Shi'a traditional religious authority, this panel will examine the following questions:

1. What is the future of *marja'iyya* in the age of globalisation?
2. What are the main trends and attitudes of the various *marāji'* toward political participation and access to power?
3. Does new social media help or hinder the expansion of the network of the *marāji'* and the extension of their authority?
4. Is it possible for *marja'iyya* to provide novel solutions to address the identity concerns of the globalising post-modern societies?
5. What are the new venues whereby charismatic influence can be manifested while keeping pace with the evolutions of time?
6. What are the primary fault lines and key aspects in the *marāji'*'s struggles for influence?

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