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To be God's Sign in the Age of Globalisation
Marjaʿiyya between Crisis and Progress

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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 Shīʿī clergy, and nearly a century later, the clerics' influence gave rise to the new meaning of *marjaʿiyya*. 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 *marjaʿiyya*. 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 *marjaʿiyya* as the source and justification for the claim to executive power as declared at the beginning of the volume of lectures entitled *Wilayet-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 Shīʿa, as well as the quest for the immediate establishment of an Islamic state. *Marjaʿiyya* 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 *marjaʿ 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 *marjaʿ* must address. Second, the relationship between the Arab *marājiʿ* 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 marjaʿiyya 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 marjaʿ to non-Islamic countries and the rise of new digital media have further challenged the scope of traditional Shīʿī 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 marjaʿ to visit the various Shīʿī communities worldwide. Theoretically, the easier travel facilities should have expanded their network and influence beyond Shīʿī heartland. Indeed, the unprecedented queries of followers have triggered the rise of an emerging genre of jurisprudential literature dedicated to mustaḥdathāt (emerging matters), which is supposed to address the specific needs of Shīʿa in the new social material or immaterial contexts. Moreover, the new social media helped the world-renowned marājiʿ to foster their network beyond the Iranian and Arab Shīʿī communities (Riggs 2020, Rizvi 2018). Nonetheless, because of the uncertain relationship between the marjaʿiyya 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 marjaʿiyya in the age of globalisation?

2. What are the main trends and attitudes of the various marājiʿ toward political participation and access to power?

3. Does new social media help or hinder the expansion of the network of the marājiʿ and the extension of their authority?

4. Is it possible for marjaʿiyya 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 marājiʿ's struggles for influence?

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1. **Liyakat Takim**, Chair in Global Islam at McMaster University (Canada)

Abstract: *The* Maraji *in the Age of Globalization*

In recent times, there has been much discourse on the significance and function of the term jurisprudence of minorities (*fiqh al-aqalliyya*). The term, which is also called diasporic jurisprudence, refers to the issuance of juristic ordinances by the clerics to accommodate the needs of Muslims residing in non-Muslim majorities, with special requirements that may not be appropriate for other communities. This paper argues that, due to the hierarchical nature of leadership inherent in Shi'ism, Shi'i jurists (*maraji*)' have responded to the needs of their communities that live as minorities in the West by recasting Islamic legal discourse on Muslim minorities and reconciling Islamic legal categories to the demands of the times. It will demonstrate that, due to the pressures of globalization, this genre of jurisprudence addresses a wide range of topics that were either not traditionally discussed in Islamic juridical manuals or represent a revision of earlier formulations.

The paper demonstrates that most of the clerical rulings are casuistic in nature and do not represent a fully-fledged legal system Many edicts have been either imported to the diaspora or relaxed when abiding by these injunctions have created difficulties (*haraj*) for the faithful believers. As will be discussed, Shi'i minority *fiqh* is restricted to the collection of *fatawa* (religious edicts) produced in the seminaries by jurists who do not fully comprehend the challenges experienced by their followers living in the diasporic milieu.

The paper will also examine the *maraji*'s relationship with and their impact on their followers in North America. More specifically, it will discuss the role that the *maraji*'s representatives and institutions play on their followers in the North America milieu and how the *maraji*' have shaped the socio-religious lives of their followers through the internet, social media and the *ziyarat* to the holy cities.

2. **Oliver Scharbrodt**, Professor of Islamic Studies at Lund University (Sweden)

Abstract: *The Shirazi* marja'iyya*: Politics, Aesthetics and Community in Transnational Twelver Shi'ism*

In contrast to other influential clerical figures in contemporary Twelver Shi'ism, the Shirazi network has not received much scholarly attention. The Shirazi movement includes a loose network of political groups, religious organisations and transnational communities that follow the leadership of Muhammad al-Shirazi (1928-2001) and his brother Sadiq (b. 1942). Stemming from a family of Iranian descent, the Shirazi brothers began their activities in Karbala in Iraq in the mid-1950s. Muhammad al-Shirazi declared himself to be a marja' al-

taqlīd at a very young age in 1963 in an attempt to move the centre of gravity of Shii clerical authority in Iraq from Najaf to Karbala. Since his death, his brother Sadiq, based in Qom, is the clerical figurehead of the Shirazi network.

The Shirazis are the bête noire of contemporary Twelver Shi'ism, being most vocal in their opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran. They are equally maligned by the marja'iyya in Najaf for stoking anti-Sunni sectarianism. However, the trajectory of the Shirazi network from the mid-1950s until the present illustrates the complex transformation of the marja'iyya and the need to reinvent its remit and appeal. Initially, the Shirazi brothers played a central role in Shi'i Islamist mobilisation in the Middle East, contributing to the ideological formation of the concept of the guardianship of the jurisconsult (wilāyat al-faqīh). However, like other clerical supporters of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, they became increasingly disillusioned by political activism and have emphasised the formation of a distinct Shi'i aesthetics to portray themselves as guardians of Shi'i cultural authenticity. As this paper illustrates, the Shirazis offer a third model of the marja'iyya between the political aloofness of the clerical establishment in Najaf and politicised readings of clerical authority in Iran.

3. **Naser Ghobadzadeh:** Senior lecturer at the National School of Arts, Australian Catholic University

Abstract: *Theocratic Secularism: a political but non-governmental theology*

The political thought and behaviour of traditional *marāja'-i taqlid* (the senior shī'ī clergy) is often conceptualized as apolitical and quietist. This conceptualization is accompanied by the assumption that it was the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini's politico-religious discourse in the 20th century that politicized shī'ism. In contrast, this article challenges such notions in arguing that shī'ism has been political from its very beginning and throughout its entire history. Thus, Khomeinism was the impetus not for the politicization of shī'ism but for its governmentalization. In demonstrating this point, this article coins the concept of theocratic secularism to encapsulate the feature in Twelver shī'ī political theology that requires shī'ī leaders to distance themselves from the state apparatus. While the principle of theocracy is one of the most fundamental principles of the shī'ī orthodox belief system, its realisation in practice depends on the return of the twelfth Imām. Therefore, until such a time, all governments are considered religiously illegitimate, and for this reason, maintaining distance from the state apparatus is inherent to shī'ī political theology. Throughout history, shī'ī religious leaders have adhered to this political theology and, notwithstanding their presence in the public and political spheres, refrained from taking any action to seize the state apparatus and form an Islamic government. The article will also argue that Ayatollah Khomeini's

governmental discourse was the product of the revolutionary conditions of the 1960s and 70s, not the result of any meaningful transformation in the seminary or of the political theology of Twelver shīʿism.

4. **Bianka Speidl:** Senior lecturer and researcher at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Hungary)

Abstract: *Discussing female marjaiyya in contemporary Lebanon: the argumentation of Sayyed Haidar Hubbollah*

In recent decades, several Muslim scholars have looked into how re-evaluating traditional historical narratives could disrupt some prevalent gender assumptions and lead to more gender justice in Islam. Proponents of the right of women to hold religious and political power use a reinterpretation of early Islamic history to make their case. On the basis that masculinity is a condition of reference, the predominant opinion among jurists, which they indicate in their scholarly letters, is that it is not acceptable to copy a woman, even if all of the prerequisites and specifications are met in her. However, when discussing the topic scientifically and at the level of reasoning and study, the majority of those jurists admit that there is no convincing evidence to prevent it. This paper highlights an important attempt by Sayyed Haydar Hubbollah, a Lebanese religious thinker, to use legal reasons to support his position on the permissibility of female marja'iyya. This discursive change is remarkable in that it departs from the frame of Fāṭimah's legacy in order to establish an Islamic foundation for the rightful expansion of women's religious authority in modern Shiite communities.

5. **Thibaud Laval**: PhD student at EHESS (Paris)

Abstract: *The modalities of the diffusion of the marjaʿiyya in Iraq: the case of sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim*

My presentation focuses on the structural mutations of the *marjaʿiyya* in Iraq between the 1940s and 1970s, in particular the *marjaʿiyya* of Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim (1889-1970), which underwent an unprecedented expansion not only in Iraq but also in the entire region. The aim here is to discuss the various channels through which the *marjaʿiyya* spread, the most important of which was the system of representatives (*wukâla*) which was reinforced and centralised. Nevertheless, the *marjaʿiyya* of Muhsin al-Hakim also financed or supported the construction of a very large number of religious infrastructures throughout Iraq and then the region, including mosques, husayniyyas, religious schools, charitable societies, religious faculties and, most importantly, a very extensive network of public libraries. The development

and dissemination of these channels has greatly increased the visibility of the *marjaʿiyya* in the Shiite landscape by bringing it into contact for the first time with segments of the population with which it had no previous links. Most interestingly, I will examine how the Islamist party al-Daʿwa took advantage of the spread and then transnationalisation of the *marjaʿiyya* to gain a foothold and membership in the 1960s and 1970s by focusing on the case of Kuwait.

6. **Chair and discussant:** Minoo Mirshahvalad, Researcher at the John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies (Palermo, Italy)

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