

Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, (1627-98), *Shi'i scholar of the seventeenth century*.

Also known as 'Allama Majlisi was an authoritative jurist, a prolific *hadith* collector, and an influential figure in Twelver Shi'ism. Coming from a family of well-known clerics, his father, Muhammad Taqi is often referred to as Majlisi Awwal (the first Majlisi). Majlisi's ancestors as well as his descendants are known to be scholars in Twelver Shi'ism.

Under the guidance of his father and other scholars, Majlisi studied Islamic subjects such as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), sources of Islamic law (*usul al-fiqh*) Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), theology (*kalam*), philosophy (*falsafa*) and mysticism (*tasawwuf*). He reportedly authored 66 works, almost all of which are devoted to the exoteric dimension of Shi'ism such as *fiqh* and *hadith*. Many of his works pertain to the lives and deaths of the Shi'i Imams. Even though Shi'ism had been introduced earlier, Majlisi was primarily responsible for promulgating Twelver Shi'ism in Iran. He popularized Shi'i practices such as mourning for the Imams, visitations to their shrines and their role as intercessors. In his works, he also denigrated the first three caliphs. He is reported to have converted 70,000 people to Twelver Shi'ism.

Majlisi's most famous work is undoubtedly *Bihar al-Anwar* (oceans of light). This work is a collection of traditions on disparate subjects. It has been recently published in 110 volumes. He codified the disparate statements of the Imams, collected the scattered Shi'i *hadith* and compiled them into various Arabic and Persian books. Since he was primarily a collector and transmitter of traditions, Majlisi was not considered to be an original thinker. In fact many traditions that he cited were of doubtful authenticity. Yet he left an enormous legacy in Shi'i scholarship, as many of his works are frequently quoted by contemporary Shi'i scholars. He also wrote a number of books in Persian, many of these being translations of different sections of the *Bihar*. He wrote in Persian as he wanted to make the traditions from the Prophet and Imams

accessible to laity who had no familiarity with the Arabic language. He hoped that his works may give life to the hearts and spirits of the dead-hearted people.

Majlisi was closely affiliated to two Safavid rulers, Shah Sulayman (d. 1694) and Sultan Husayn (d. 1713). In return for state patronage, Majlisi preached obedience to kings even if they were tyrannical and violated Islamic norms. Rather than rebelling against such rulers, people were asked to pray for their reformation and improvement. He clearly states that anyone who despises the kings will suffer abasement; he also equated obedience to kings with obedience to God. In 1694 Majlisi crowned the new king Shah Husayn (1722) after Shah Sulayman's death. Majlisi's quiescent political posture and subservience to the Safavid rulers is in stark contrast to the politically-active policies of the present theocratic regime in Iran.

In 1687, Majlisi was appointed as the *Shaykh al-Islam* of Isfahan by Shah Sulayman. Being the chief religious dignitary invested him with enormous clerical powers which he deployed to eradicate anything which was seemingly heresy and infidelity. He was exceptionally harsh on gnostics and philosophers whom he labeled as heretics. He was also very critical of Sufism especially their practices of singing, dancing, and their concept of *wahdat al-wujud* (oneness of existence). He called them unbelievers. Due to his influence at the court, Sufis were expelled from Isfahan. His intolerance can be gauged from the fact that he ordered the Hindu idols of Isfahan to be demolished. He was also vehemently anti-Sunni declaring the first three caliphs, i.e. Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman, to be hypocrites and unbelievers who deserved God's curse. Due to his harsh denouncements and intolerance of esoteric Shi'ism, Sufism, Sunnism and other religions, Majlisi was often criticized by his detractors as being a bigot and religious dictator.

Twelver Shi'ism enjoyed unprecedented popularity through Majlisi's efforts, and the influence of his teachings and practices on later generations—common believers as well as scholars — is immense.

Further Reading

Sa'id Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

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Ahmad Kazemi Moussavi *Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam: From the Office of the Mufti to the Institution of Marja'* (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1996).

Colin Turner, *Islam Without Allah? The Rise of Religious Externalism in Safavid Iran* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002).

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