

The Study of Shi‘i Islam in the Western Academia

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Abstract

This paper will initially examine the historical study of Shi‘ism in the Western Academia. It will argue that until the last four decades, Western scholarship studied Shi‘i Islam primarily through Sunni lens. It will also show that since the 1980s, various socio-political factors like the Islamic revolution in Iran, the emergence of Hizbollah in Lebanon and the American invasion of Iraq forced Western scholars to look at Shi‘ism in different light. Consequently, they explored different facets of Shi‘ism ranging from the Shi‘i concept of centralized authority during the occultation of the Imam to Shi‘i liturgies, rituals and Shi‘i political theory.

In discussing the matrix of forms through which Islam was studied, Western scholars in the medieval period posited Islam to be monolithic, ignoring, in the process the mosaic of diverse religious, ethnic and cultural groups that comprised the Muslim community. In fact, until fairly recently, Western scholarship on Shi‘ism was predicated through Sunni lens. The dearth of primary Shi‘i sources that affected research up to the second half of the twentieth century contributed to the lack of academic understanding on the history, law and doctrines of Shi‘ism. As Frederick Denny states, “Islamic studies in the West and in the greater part of the Islamic world itself have long shared a bias that Sunni Islam is the normative tradition, whereas Shi‘ism is at best heterodoxy and at worst heresy.... This myth of the silent center has given Sunnis a sense of being heirs to a providential dispensation in ruling most Muslim domains, even where, as in Iraq and Lebanon, Shi‘ites comprise a major part of the population.”¹

Earlier, Henry Corbin (d. 1978) had pointed to the Western penchant to look at Shi'ism² through Sunni texts. He claimed that the Shi'i discourse had yet to be heard in the West.³ Later on, McDermott in his *The Theology of Shaykh al-Mufid* and Seyyid Hossein Nasr also expressed similar reservations on the study of Shi'ism. Writing in the 1980s, Nasr complains that "Until now Shi'ism has received little attention; and when it has been discussed, it has been relegated to the secondary or peripheral status of a religio-political "sect", a heterodoxy or even a heresy."⁴

Recent religious and political events in the Middle East have prompted Western scholars to study Shi'ism on its own merits and to delineate the salient features and nuances that characterize Shi'ism and distinguish it from Sunnism. Events such as the Iranian revolution, the rise of Hizbollah and capture of Western hostages in Beirut and, later on, the American invasion of Iraq, the uprisings in Bahrein and in Eastern Saudi Arabia, and the enhanced geo-political importance of Iran have all contributed to the increased academic awareness of Shi'ism. This paper will explore the provenance and subsequent development of Western studies on Twelver Shi'ism. It will also discuss some of the current trends in Shi'i studies in the West. It is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the subject; rather, it will provide a sampling of the range and variety of the major trends on how Shi'ism has been and continues to be studied in the Western academia.

¹ Vernon Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), ix.

² In this paper, the term Shi'is is used to refer to Twelver Shi'is only. Therefore it excludes other Shi'i groups like the Zaydis, Bohra and the Agha Khani Isma'ilis.

³ Jallal al-Din Ashtiyani, *An Introduction to the Iranian and Shi'i Studies of H. Corbin*. The Paper Collection of the Vare Council for Studying Iranology. Editor 'Ali Mousavi Garmaroudi. The publication center of the Ministry of Foreign affairs, 30.

⁴ Allama Sayyid Muhamad Husayn Tabatabai, *Shi'ite Islam* (Albany: SUNY, 1975), 1.

This paper will argue that the history of the study of Shi'ism can be divided in two broad categories of religion and social sciences. The first, based on certain assumptions about Islam and the Orient, can be termed as an heir to the classical Oriental methodological approach. The second category reflects the efforts of modern scholars many of whom are Shi'is. Their works encompass not only different facets of Shi'ism but also utilize different methodologies ranging from the historical-chronological to sociological, phenomenological, hermeneutical and more ethnographic approaches. Recent studies on Shi'ism are also interwoven to contemporary social and cultural considerations than with hair-splitting philological and textual matters.

Western Studies of Shi'ism in the Medieval Period

The West came to know of Islam from the eighth century onwards. Among the earliest European accounts of the Prophet is that by John of Damascus (c 650-750). He claimed the Prophet Muhammad was a great deceiver and an epileptic.⁵ John's *Pege gnoseos* also contains a chapter on heresy which mentions the Prophet as "pseudoprophetes". It should be remembered that Western images and depiction of the Prophet were also determined by socio-political events of that milieu. For obvious reasons, the Crusaders, for example, wanted to portray Islam in pejorative terms. Many of the chroniclers of the First Crusade (1095–1099) imagined that their Saracen enemies were idolaters who erected a statue of their god Mahomet in the "temple of the

⁵ Minou Reeves, *Muhammad in Europe: A Thousand Years of Myth-Making* (New York, New York University Press, 2000), 84.

lord” (i.e., the Dome of the Rock).⁶ Most of the sources in this period denigrate Islam and the Prophet and have nothing to say about Shi‘ism.

The rise of the Fatimid dynasty in tenth century Egypt and its pervasive influence in the Middle East meant that initial Western encounter with Shi‘ism came through the Fatimids. For example, William the archbishop of Tyre, speaks only of Sunni and Fatimid Islam. It would appear that was unaware of Twelver Shi‘i beliefs and practices. He also cites an opinion espoused by an extremist Shi‘i group called the *Ghurabiyya* which held that the revelation was meant for ‘Ali (d. 661) and that Gabriel had erred by delivering it to the Prophet Muhammad. The group were called the *Ghurabiyya* because they believed that the Prophet and ‘Ali resembled each other more than two crows.⁷ This group is also mentioned by Ibn Hazm in his heresiographical work.

Jacques de Vitry was another Crusader historian and the archbishop of Acre between 1216 and 1228. He demonstrates his ignorance of Shi‘ism by stating that the Shi‘is believe that God had spoken to ‘Ali in a more intimate manner than to the Prophet Muhammad. According to Jacques, ‘Ali and his associates had slandered the Prophet and attacked his laws.⁸ Dante Alighieri composed his Divine Comedy in the early 1300s in Florence. The Divine Comedy is one of the first in a European vernacular language to mention the Prophet and ‘Ali. Dante takes the reader on a tour of heaven and hell. The Prophet and ‘Ali are depicted with their bodies split from head to waist in the eighth circle in hell. The Prophet is seen as tearing apart his breast to

⁶ John Tolan, *Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*. Cambridge, 2013). See also Liyakat Takim, "Western Depictions of Muhammad" in *Mohammed in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Prophet of God* (2 volumes), Fitzpatrick, C. & Walker, A. (Eds.), ABC-CLIO (2014).

⁷ Etan Kohlberg, "Western Studies of Shi'a Islam" in Martin Kramer ed. *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution* (Boulder: Westview, 1987), 31-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32

indicate that he was among the damned soul to have brought schism into religion. It is important to remember that many like Dante were responding to the last crusade defeated in 1291.⁹

Although he mentions both the Prophet and 'Ali, Dante does not make any specific mention of the Shi'is or of their beliefs.

Even after the Crusades, Shi'ism continued to remain largely unknown in Western academic circles. European contact with the Muslim world was based primarily on its interaction with the Ottoman Empire which was, of course, Sunni. It was only after the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1501 that Europeans became somewhat familiar with aspects of Shi'i beliefs and practices. Most of their information was predicated on accounts and notes of diplomats, missionaries, and merchants who visited or were based in Persia. Hence, their accounts were neither objective nor academic, often based on popular beliefs and what they witnessed in the streets in Iran. For example, Pere Raphael Du Mans (d. 1696) headed a monastery in Isfahan in the seventeenth century. In his book, *State of Persia*, he outlines some Shi'i doctrines, legal practices, and festivals. He also refers to scholars like Muhammad Taqi al-Majlisi (d. 1659) who lived in his period.¹⁰

Others like Jean Chardin visited and wrote about Persia between 1664 - 1670 then 1671 - 1677. He describes the hierarchy of the Shi'i clergy in Mashhad and the earthquake that occurred during his time. It is to be noted that the Safavids paid great respect to the Shi'i 'ulama and had co-opted some of them in their courts. The scholars' religious and political authority had increased considerably during this period. In his work, Chardin also mentions the *mujtahids'* influence in the socio-political domains.¹¹

⁹ Liyakat Takim, "Western Depictions of Muhammad."

¹⁰ Etan Kohlberg, "Western Studies of Shi'a Islam, 33.

Subsequent travelers provide some additional insight into Shi'ism. Humayun's *Illustrated Documents of Europeans from Iran* features Iran more than other Middle Eastern countries. Of the one hundred and forty seven itineraries mentioned in the second part of the seventeenth century, fifty two featured Iran. These journeys were made primarily for political and economic reasons; however, other factors such as interest in the Orient, proselytization, and the desire to learn Middle Eastern languages also contributed to their travels.¹²

As European influence and dominance in the world increased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, more Europeans travelled to the Orient, including Iran. The writings of the eclectic diplomat Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau (d. 1882), who wrote *Trois ans en Asie* (1859) and *Religions et philosophies de l'Asie centrale* are important to note. He witnessed and wrote on the Shaykhi movement. He also addressed the Akhbari and *mujtahid (usuli)* dispute and provided detailed accounts of passion plays enacted during the month of Muharram. His works are replete with misconceptions and gross simplification of Shi'i beliefs and practices. For example, he depicts Shi'ism as being alien to the "true" and original Islam due to the Shi'i veneration of the Imams and the authority of the Persian mullahs. In his *Religions and Philosophies in Central Asia* de Gobineau equates Shi'ism with Persian nationalism.¹³

This was also the period that saw the provenance of Orientalism. Edward Said defines Orientalism as the acceptance in the West of "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on." Orientalism also provided

¹¹ Ibid. See also Abbas Ahmadvand "An Iranian Point of View of Shi'i Studies in the West," in *International Journal of Shi'i Studies*, 5, No. 1, (2007) 15.

¹² Abbas Ahmadvand, "An Iranian Point of View of Shi'i Studies," 12.

¹³ Etan Kohlberg, "Western Studies of Shi'a Islam", 35.

a justification for European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which “the West” constructed “the East” as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or “rescue”.¹⁴ In essence, Orientalism imposes Western categories to dominate, restructure and exert authority over the Orient.

Initially, Oriental studies took the shape of textual analysis of the other, often premised on hypothesis and assumptions drawn in the West. This approach meant that only works that were deemed to be canonical or normative were studied. The major impact of this posture was a monolithic depiction of the Islamic other, with little acknowledgment of the diversity inherent within Islam. The objectification of Islam, as something that is uniform with clearly defined boundaries, does not take into account the diverse nature of a lived tradition. Since Muslims are projected as a singular comprehensive entity, their diverse practices, beliefs and cultures are largely ignored. The approach that Oriental researchers adopted enabled them to categorize and polarize Islamic ideas and movements as either orthodox or heterodox.

Oriental studies have also impacted how Shi‘ism was projected in the West especially as scholars who wrote on Shi‘ism did so primarily through the lens of Sunni historians and heresiographers like al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 1071), Ibn Hazm (d. 1064), and Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 1153). Inevitably, such depictions presented a hostile and, at times, distorted view of Shi‘ism. The title of Ibn Hazm’s (d. 1064) heresiographical text, *The Heterodoxies of the Shi‘ites*, clearly demonstrates his antipathy towards Shi‘ism.

The derogatory image of Shi‘ism inherent in Orientalist literature was also due to the fact that in the medieval period, there were very few Shi‘i texts available in Western libraries. The few exceptions were the publication of Shaykh Tusi’s (d. 1067) *Fihrist* and Allama Hilli’s (d.

¹⁴ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978), 12 - 14.

1325) *Tahrir al-Ahkam* and Muhaqqiq al-Hilli's (d. 1277) *Shara'i al-Islam*.¹⁵ As Western scholars came to learn more about Islam, the nineteenth-century witnessed more academic writings devoted to Shi'ism. This is borne out from a study of the works of Garcin de Tassy's edition and translation of a "Shi'i" chapter of the Qur'an in 1842, and Ignaz Goldziher's *Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte der Shia und der sunnitischen Polemik* in 1874. This was a treatise on Sunni – Shi'i polemics. In many ways, Goldziher was a pioneer in Western studies on Islam. Although it was not his area of specialization, Goldziher was very interested in Shi'ism. He included a section on Shi'ism in his *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*. Although he had difficulties in accessing the primary Shi'i monographs, Goldziher was able to correct some Western misconceptions regarding Shi'ism. More specifically, he argued against and discredited the widely-held view that Shi'ism began because of the Iranian influence and that the Shi'is reject the *sunna* of Prophet.

Around the same time, the German scholar Rudolph Strothmann's (d. 1960) book *Die Zwolfer-Schia* (1926) and his entries for the first edition of the *Encyclopedie de l'Islam* provide excellent samples of early scholarship on Twelver and other forms of Shi'ism such as Zaydism and Ismailism.¹⁶ The above-mentioned 1874 study of Ignaz Goldziher was not followed by a corresponding flow of studies on Shi'ism. Nonetheless, some important works which were composed in different research centers around the world, should be mentioned. Italian historians Sabino Moscati ("*Per una storia dell'antica Shi'a*," 1955, 251–67) and Laura Veccia Vaglieri ("*Sul 'Nahj al-balagha' e il suo compilatore ash-Sharif ar-Radi*," 1958, 1–46) provided more

¹⁵ Etan Kohlberg, "Western Studies of Shi'a Islam", 34–5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 40.

informed details on various dimensions of early Shi'ism.¹⁷ Despite these contributions, there was a paucity of texts that accurately depicted Shi'ism, a fact which is confirmed by a study of the first volume of Parson's *Index Islamicus*, the main bibliographical index for Islamic studies, covering the years 1906–1955. A noticeable feature here is the dearth of articles or entries on Shi'ism.

A more empathic understanding of Shi'ism began with the French scholar Louis Massignon (d. 1962) who served as a military officer in Iraq. His methodology was distinctly phenomenological, as he tried to present Shi'ism on its own terms. He focused on the mystical dimension of Shi'ism in works such as “*Die Ursprunge und die Bedeutung des Gnostizismus im Islam;*” “*Der gnostische Kult der Fatima im Shiitischen Islam*”.¹⁸ Trying to understand Shi'ism from within, Massignon wrote on diverse Shi'i topics. His treatment of the subject matter was much more accurate than his predecessors. Massignon contributed to the development of the study of Shi'ism by first outlining important aspects of the mystical-oriented ethos of Shi'ism. His contribution to Shi'i studies is also significant because he initiated Henry Corbin (d. 1978) in the field of Shi'i mysticism. Corbin was at first in touch with Iranian Shi'ism at the Sorbonne as a young phenomenologist and also in Tehran as the director of the French Institute of Iranian Studies and founder of the series *Bibliothèque Iranienne*. He collected, edited, and translated some of the most important works on Shi'i theology, philosophy and gnosis.¹⁹ Due to his focus on and alleged penchant toward Shi'ism, his objectivity and partiality were sometimes questioned.

¹⁷ Alessandro Cancian “Shi'ism”, in A. Classen (ed.), *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms - Methods - Trends*, 3 Volumes, (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter:, 2010), 97

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*.

Western Studies on Shi'ism in the 1960s

So far I have discussed scholarship on Shi'ism by Western scholars. One of the most important scholar on Shi'ism in the past fifty years has been the famous Iranian scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933). He has written extensively on Shi'ism in general and Shi'i philosophy in particular. His works range from the relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism, Islam in the Modern world to works on the ecology, Mulla Sadra (d. 1641), and the general doctrines and principles of Shi'i thought. An important milestone was his translation of Allama Tabatabai's (d. 1981) *Shi'ite Islam*. Perhaps for the first time, the voice of a prominent contemporary Shi'i scholar, writing from the Shi'i seminary in Qum, was heard by the Western academic audience.

Western research on Shi'i studies improved considerably towards the end of the 1960s, when in 1968 at *Colloque de Strasbourg*, a gathering on Shi'ism was convened. This was a round-table discussion regarding Shi'ism attended by some of the leading experts in the field. Participants included prominent figures such as Henry Corbin, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Francesco Gabrieli, Wilfred Madelung, and the Lebanese cleric Musa Sadr.²⁰ Most Western studies on Shi'ism at this time were undertaken by historians like Dwight Donaldson, Montgomery Watt and Marshall Hodgson. Writing in the 1920s, Donaldson's major contribution to Shi'ism was his book *The Shi'ite Religion* which was published in 1923. In addition, he composed a number of articles that were published in the *Muslim World*. They included titles such as "Salman the Persian" (1929), "The Idea of the Imamate (Spiritual Leadership) according to Shi'i Thinking" (1921/31), and "The New Iranian Law" (1934). *The Shi'ite Religion* was a significant contribution as, for the first time, the lives of all the Shi'i Imams were profiled and available to the Western academic audience. The work also discussed other topics like Shi'i political history, bibliography, extremist sects within Shi'ism and important theological debates. More

²⁰ Etan Kohlberg, "Western Studies of Shi'a Islam", 41.

significantly, although largely descriptive in nature, Donaldson's work narrates the lives and experiences of the Imams through Shi'i rather than Sunni sources making it rather sympathetic to their cause.

The increased interest in Shi'i studies in the 1960s can be discerned from the fact that prominent Western scholars like Montgomery Watt and Marshall Hodgson wrote a number of important articles on Shi'ism around this time. Utilizing a distinctly Orientalist approach, Watt's "Shi'ism under the Umayyads," (in 1960) and "The Rafidites: A Preliminary Study," (1970) were important in so far as they discussed the early period of Shi'i history and outlined some possible reasons why Shi'ism was viewed as heretical. Marshall Hodgson wrote an equally important article in 1955 titled "*How Did the Early Shi'a Become Sectarian?*" in which he outlined the role of Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), the sixth Imam, in creating a distinctly Shi'i identity and ethos.

Due to various political and economic considerations, Western scholarship on Shi'ism has increased considerably since the 1970s. Among these, Seyyed Husayn M. Jafri's *The Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam* (1979) discusses the history and formative period of Shi'i doctrines and laws; Mojan Momen's *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (1985) provides an account of Shi'i history from the beginning to recent times and Heinz Halm's *Die Schia* (1988) examines Shi'i history, doctrines, and practices. I.K. Howard's translation of Shaykh Mufid's *Kitab al-Irshad* was an important milestone in that, for the first time, a tenth-century scholar's biographical and, at times, hagiographical account, of the Imams was made available to the Western audience.

In the 1990s studies like Wilfred Madelung's *Succession to Muhammad* and Mahmoud Ayoub's *The Crisis of Muslim History* examined the crisis confronting the early Muslim

community and the various social, religious, and political factors that contributed to the tension within the nascent Muslim community. Andrew Newman's *Twelver Shi'ism* chronicles the progression of Shi'ism and explores the numerous challenges and internal disagreements up to the eighteenth century. Colin Turner's *Islam Without Allah* explores the rise of exoteric Shi'ism at the expense of its esoteric counterpart in Safavid Iran. Arzina Lalani's *Early Shi'i Thought: The Teachings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir* discusses the crystallization and elucidation of Shi'i doctrines during the time of the fifth Shi'i Imam.

The study of Shi'ism during the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by a distinctly historical - chronological method combined with a textual-critical analysis of the sources. This approach is challenging due to the tendentious character of the Muslim sources, which are often anachronistic. Moreover, their accounts often reflect later polemics and religio-political ideals. The narratives contained in these sources tell us more about the debates within the later Muslim community than about the early history of Islam.

The Impact of the Revolution in Iran

In recent decades, changes in geo-political conditions in the Middle East have impinged on Western Scholarship of Islam. In particular, the Iranian revolution in 1978-9 and the establishment of an Islamic republic premised on the principle of *wilaya al-faqih* (the authority of the jurist) created greater awareness of Shi'ism. It challenged Western scholars to critically reevaluate and adopt a more objective analysis of how it had studied Islam so far. It also challenged the popular misconception that Shi'ism was a later aberration from the majority Sunni Islam. Scholars like Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds in *God's Caliph* suggested that the Shi'i concept of divinely-guided and authoritative leadership was initially the normative form of

political governance, challenging the traditionalist Western-line argument that the Sunni form of caliphate had taken shape soon after the Prophet. These authors engage in a revisionist historiography, arguing that the nature of the Umayyad caliphate (650-750 C.E.) was akin to the Shi'i conception of the imamate, embodying both religious and political authority. Crone and Hinds further contend that the title that the Caliphs adopted, *khalifat Allah*, also implied divine legitimation for the power that the caliph exercised since he was depicted as the deputy of God rather than of the Prophet.²¹

From the 1970s onwards, not only were more studies devoted to Shi'ism, but the image of Shi'ism changed dramatically. The emphasis was now on the Shi'i self-understanding of its history, jurisprudence and theology especially as Shi'i sources became more accessible to Western scholars. This precipitated a proliferation of writings on Shi'ism. Scholars like Etan Kohlberg, Colin Turner, Andrew J. Newman, Norman Calder, Juan Cole, Robert Gleave and Lynda Clarke have written on different dimensions of Shi'ism. Their writings have also refuted major Western and Sunni misconceptions on the incipience of Shi'ism. These include the contention that the origins of Shi'ism can be traced to 'Abd Allah b. Saba, an alleged Jew, or that its origins can be traced to Persia. They also dispelled some *ghuluww* (exaggerated beliefs) regarding Shi'ism by distancing Twelver Shi'ism from groups like the afore-mentioned *Ghurabiyya*, the Druzes and Nusayris.

The 1980s also witnessed a generation of Western-based Shi'i scholars entering the academia. Many of these scholars were trained in the Shi'i seminaries and in the West hence they provided an "insider" and "outsider" approach to the study of Shi'ism. Synthesizing their

²¹ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 33-36.

training in the seminaries with their academic studies in the West, scholars like Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (*The Divine Guides*), Hossein Modarresi Tabatabai (*Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam*), Abdulaziz Sachedina (*Islamic Messianism*), and Mahmoud Ayoub (*Redemptive Suffering in Islam*) have all contributed immensely to Western scholarship on Shi'ism. An important work in this context is Lynda Clarke's edited work titled *The Shi'ite Heritage* in which a number of specialists in Shi'ism, both Western and those trained in the traditional seminaries, contributed articles covering Shi'i studies. Increasingly, the voices of scholars from the seminaries in Qum came to be heard in the West.

The increased interest in Shi'i studies in the West can be corroborated from Colin Turner and Paul Luft's *Shi'ism* (2007). The four-volume work provides an excellent collection of articles on diverse facets of Shi'ism written by scholars over the last fifty years. Other works of this genre are Etan Kohlberg's *Shi'ism*, and Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda's *The Study of Shi'i Islam*. Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende's edited work *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times* examines various aspects of Shi'ism since the eighteenth century. These include traditional institutions of learning, dissident Shi'i and political developments in the twentieth century, and the significance of the revolution in Iran in shaping the image of Shi'ism in contemporary times.

Western Study of Shi'ism in Recent Times

In this section of my paper, I discuss recent studies related to Shi'ism. I should make it clear that this is not meant to be a comprehensive list of monographs on the subject; rather, it is a sample of the numerous of works that have proliferated since the 1990s. The contention that Western scholarship on Shi'ism has grown exponentially and evolved in different directions in the last

few decades can be corroborated from the fact that in the last twenty years, more academic works have been published on a variety of Shi'i topics than ever before. These range from studies on Shi'i jurisprudence, history, biographical literature, to studies on Shi'i philosophy, rituals, esotericism and legal theory. Not only have different facets of Shi'ism been studied, the approaches to and methodologies of Shi'i studies have evolved. Shi'ism has been studied from historical, political, sociological, ritual, ethnographical, anthropological, and hermeneutical perspectives.

Shi'i mourning ceremonies and rituals have been studied by scholars like Vernon Schubel (*Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam*), David Pinault (*The Shi'ites, The Horse of Kerbala*) Syed Akbar Hyder (*Reliving Karbala*), Kamran Aghaie (*The Martyrs of Kerbala*), and Toby Howarth (*The Twelver Shi'a as a Muslim Minority in India*). They have explored the way in which Kerbala is invoked to mediate the personal sorrows and sufferings of the Shi'is. They have also examined patterns of continuity and change of Muharram rituals and symbols. This insider perspective is valuable insofar as it illustrates the Shi'i community's self-understanding of charismatic authority of the Imams, loyalty to its leaders, and how it seeks to identify with them. These studies also demonstrate the ways in which Husayn's martyrdom has been appropriated by diverse groups - from personal and communal lament, to a basis of protest and struggle that leads to a demand for socio-religious reform. These monographs also examine the influence of Kerbala on the cultural and literary landscape of South Asia demonstrating, in the process, how the Kerbala narrative is appropriated and lived in the contexts and memories of South Asian Muslims and non-Muslims at different times. In their research, some scholars have utilized Victor Turner's theory of the function and impact of rituals in molding the lives of believers.

Before the 1980s, Western studies on Shi'ism had barely discussed Shi'i political theory. In all probability, this was due to the fact that in the absence of the twelfth Imams, Shi'i jurists did not articulate a form of government during the occultation of the Imam. The Iranian revolution and Khomeini's articulation of the principle of *wilaya al-faqih* have encouraged many scholars to write on the topic. One of the most valuable contributions in this field is Hamid Algar's *Islam and Revolution* which includes an interview with Ayatollah Khomeini and his theory of an Islamic Government. The revolution in Iran spiraled not only an increased awareness of Shi'ism but also the association of Shi'ism with Iran. An important contribution was made by Said Arjomand's *The Shadow of God on Earth*. Other significant compositions in this field include Vanessa Martin's *Creating an Islamic State*, Nikkie Keddie's *Religion and Politics in Iran*, Hamid Algar's *Religion and State in Iran 1785 – 1906*, Roy Mottahedeh's *The Mantle of the Prophet*, and Sabrina Mervin's edited work *The Shi'a Worlds And Iran*. Many works have examined Shi'ism in the context of the political struggle for reform and democracy in Iran. These include Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran*, Majid Mohammadi's *Political Islam in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, Ulrich von Schwerin's recent monograph, *The Dissident Mulla* and Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Richard Tapper's *Islam and Democracy in Iran*.

With the emergence of the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* more studies have focused on the question of juristic authority in contemporary Shi'ism. Studies on the history and development of the concepts of *marji'iyya*,²² *taqlid*, and *a'lamiyya*²³ have emerged most notably in Abdulaziz

²² Shi'a religious leadership is predicated on a highly stratified hierarchical system called the *marja' al-taqlid*, or *marji'iyyah*. The term refers to the most learned juridical authority in the Shi'a community whose rulings on Islamic law are followed by those who acknowledge him as their source of reference, or *marja'*. The followers base their religious practices in accordance with his judicial opinions. The *marja'* is responsible for re-interpreting the relevance of Islamic laws to the modern era, and is imbued

Sachedina's *The Just Ruler* and Ahmad Kazemi's *Moussavi's Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam*. These studies consider the evolution in the authority of jurists in Shi'i history as reflected in juridical works. Their studies challenge the view that the authority of the jurists is anchored in the revelatory sources of Islam. They also demonstrate that Shi'i jurists wielded greater authority with the passage of time culminating in the comprehensive authority as proclaimed by Ayatullah Khomeini.

In recent times, even the Shi'i religious leadership has been studied from different angles. Elvire Corboz in her *Guardians of Shi'ism* studies the *mujtahids'* usage of diverse networks to construct and augment their authority transnationally. The book maps clerical networks and their encounters with communities in different parts of the world. Shaul Mishal and Ori Goldberg in *Understanding Shiite Leadership* explore the ways in which the vision of the Shi'i leadership has transformed political Shi'ism in Lebanon and Iran from that of a marginalized community to a highly visible and powerful socio-political presence shaping, in the process, the geo-politics of the Middle East.

Scholars have also investigated the concept of authority of the Imams, their disciples and the jurists based on the notion of charismatic authority. Hamid Dabashi's *Authority in Islam*, Maria Dakake's *The Charismatic Community*, Arjomand's *The Shadow of God* and Liyakat Takim's *The Heirs of the Prophet* have all made significant contribution in the field of charismatic authority in Shi'ism. Their research on Shi'ism are couched within the sociological framework of Weberian of charismatic religious authority. They also explore other related issues

with the authority to issue religious edicts thereby empowering him to influence the religious and social lives of his followers all over the world.

²³ The process of following the juridical edicts of the most learned jurist (*a'lam*) is called *taqlid* (literally, imitation or emulation). In Shi'a jurisprudence, *taqlid* denotes a commitment to accept and act in accordance with the rulings of the shariah as deduced by a qualified and pious jurist.

like routinization of Prophetic charisma and the importance of hereditary charisma in augmenting the authority of the Imams.

Closely related to the concept of authority of the jurist have been works on Shi'i political theory. In this field, Hamid Mavani's recent work *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism* is important especially as he examines the theories of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Syed Muhammad Fadlallah and Mahdi Shams al-Din on the types of political authority that should characterize a modern Shi'i state. Quoting the thoughts of various Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese scholars, he details diverse views on political authority and governance. Recent works like Ulrich von Schwerin's *The Dissident Mulla* discusses Ayatullah Muntaziri's arguments for alternative models of governance based on public participation and endorsement. Mahmood Davari's *The Political Thought of Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari* also elucidates the latter's views on political authority.

Closely intertwined with the issue of the authority of the *marji'*, an important field that has been neglected for a long time is the internal juristic debate among Shi'i religious scholars. The conflict between the *Akhbaris* (traditionalists) and the *Usulis* (rationalists) has been the object of close scrutiny by scholars like Robert Gleave (*Scripturalist Islam*), Andrew J. Newman, ("The Nature of the Akhbari/Usuli Dispute in late Safavid Iran) and Devin Stewart (*Islamic Legal Orthodoxy*)." These scholars demonstrate that within the Akhbari legal theory, there was much variety and scholarly difference. They also maintain that Akhbaris were not simple literalists; rather, they demonstrated much intellectual ingenuity and sophistication in the construction and defense of a coherent legal system.

As previously mentioned, in recent decades, Western scholars have diversified their studies on Shi'ism. Until recently, Western scholarship has largely neglected Shi'i legal theory

(*usul al-fiqh*). This field has now been discussed extensively by scholars like Robert Gleave (*Inevitable Doubt*), Amirhassan Boozari (*Shi'i Jurisprudence and Constitution*) and, more recently, Alireza Bhojani (*Moral Rationalism and Shari'a*) and Zackery Heern (*The Emergence of Modern Shi'ism*). They elaborate on the principles that undergird Islamic legal theory and demonstrate the methodology that Muslim jurists deploy in inferring moral-legal decisions. Studies in Shi'i *usul al-fiqh* also examine how the abdication of certainty and acceptance of conjecture gradually became the distinctive hallmark of Shi'ism in the nineteenth century. They maintain that the triumph of the *Usulis* at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the concomitant renewed emphasis on the role of reason in Shi'ism not only enhanced the position of the *mujtahids* in the community but it also placed the doctrine of *ijtihad* (text-based reasoning) in the center of the Shi'i juristic structure of authority upon which the institution of *marja'iyya* could be built.

There have also been increasing calls for reformation in the Shi'i world. Shi'i scholars like Mohsen Kadivar, Mohaqqiq Damad, Mujtahid Shabistari, 'Abd al-Karim Soroush, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Hamid Mavani, Liyakat Takim and others have composed numerous articles and encyclopedic entries on *ijtihad* and the need to elaborate on and invoke hermeneutical devices in the application of Islamic law, especially for Muslims living in the diaspora. Other important works in this context are Ali Rahnema's *Shi'i Reformation in Iran*, Naser Ghobzadeh's *Religious Secularity* and Mehran Kamrava's *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. Reformist literature challenges the sacrosanct character attributed by Muslims to their textual sources and calls for the consideration of the historical element in the classical articulation of Islam. For the reformists, to claim that the body of juristic literature is binding on all Muslim communities, regardless of time and space, is to ascribe divinity to the human historical

production of thought. Reformist scholars also argue that various interpretive strategies can be utilized to revisit and revise traditional rulings and that these strategies can shape the social and religious milieus in which more than a billion people live.

Another field that has received greater attention in recent times is the Shi'i experience in America. It is correct to state that, until recently, most studies equated Islam in America with Sunnism in America. This monolithic view has obscured the proper recognition and understanding of the religious experience of the Shi'i minority in America. Scholars like Lynda Walbridge (*Not Without the Imam*), Vernon Schubel (various articles) and Liyakat Takim (*Shi'ism in America*) have contributed extensively to the field. Others like Oliver Scharbrodt have focused on Shi'ism in the United Kingdom. Some of these studies have taken an ethnographic approach, studying Shi'i communities in Michigan and London. Others have traced the historical presence of the Shi'i community in America and have delved into the challenges confronting the community as it resolves the double minority status and the challenges of living in a post-9/11 world. Studies have also examined the ethnic divide within the American Shi'i community and explored the ways in which the Shi'is have altered their mourning ceremonies to accommodate the American milieu. The modified version enables the younger generation to relate to the rituals and to incorporate a distinctly Shi'i identity in America.

Mulla Sadra's theosophical works have also been researched by Shi'i scholars like Sajjad Rizvi (*Mulla Sadra and the Later Islamic Philosophical Tradition*), (*Mulla Sadra and Metaphysics*) and Mohammed Rustom (*The Triumph of Mercy*). The central argument of Rustom's book stands at the end of a complex process of nearly nine hundred years of mutual influence, intellectual exchange, and novel developments in Islamic philosophy, theology, and mysticism, and thus represents a highpoint in the history of post-Avicennan Islamic thought.

This is the first monograph in modern scholarship to investigate the complex relationship between philosophy and Qur'anic exegesis in medieval Islam.

Meir Bar Asher (*Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imami Shi'ism*) is one of the few scholars to have ventured into Shi'i exegesis (*tafsir*). He discusses ninth and tenth-century Shi'i *tafsir* texts and explores the development of Shi'i thought and doctrines during the formative period of Shi'i period. He also examines the impact that the allegorical and typological exegetical methods of these early scholars had on their *tafsir* works. These include the variant readings of the Qur'an and the presumption that certain Qur'anic phrases have encoded meanings. Ayatullah al-Khu'i's *al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* was translated by Sachedina (*The Prolegomena to the Qur'an*). Al-Khu'i stresses the importance of understanding the Qur'an in its historical setting so as to apply its provisions in contemporary Muslim society. After a critical investigation of the sources, he concludes that the present text of the Qur'an, though possessing variant readings that do not damage the original message, is the one that was transmitted personally by the Prophet himself. In this way he makes a distinction between the process of transmission that took place under the Prophet's personal guidance and its subsequent codification in seven readings under the early caliphs. By refuting the standard view regarding the transmission of the Qur'an, al-Khu'i is able to assert his conviction that the collection and transmission of the Qur'an was undertaken with the Prophet's supervision during his lifetime.

Scholars like Ziba Mir-Hosseini have delved into Shi'ism and gender studies. Her works include *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition* and *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Modern Iran*. Mutahhari's writings on women in Islam have been translated by various figures whereas Shi'i law on women has been critiqued by scholars like

Shahla Haeri's *Law of Desire*, Lara Deeb's *An Enchanted Modern* and a two-volume publication of *Women in Iran* (from the Rise of Islam to 1800 edited by Nashat and Beck) and (1800 to the Islamic Republic edited by Lois Beck and Guity Nashat). These studies argue that the one-sided interpretation of the *shari'a* concomitantly with the rigidity of certain trends of Muslim thought have, in the past, confined women to a passive life of subordination. They maintain that what is essential to a proper understanding of Islam is not the letter of the text but instead the spirit of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions.

Gender studies have challenged the normative juristic position on women and have argued for a more equitable articulation of Shi'i law. The situation is exacerbated by the refusal of the '*ulama*' to address cases of discrimination against women and minorities in the juridical corpus and their unwillingness to undertake a critical review of the historical Islam as preserved in these genres of texts. Scholars have also focussed on Shi'i iconic female figures like Fatima and Zaynab. These works include Mary Thurkill's *Chosen Among Women*, Nadia Abu Zahra's *The Pure and Powerful*, Diane D'Souza's *Partners of Zaynab*, and Christopher Clohessy's *Fatima, Daughter of Muhammad*. They combine historical analysis with the tools of gender studies to assess the importance of these female figures in the formation of Shi'i identity and spirituality, their salvific powers and struggle in upholding Islamic ideals like justice and equality.

Other scholars have delved into Shi'i spirituality. Of particular note is Hamid Dabashi's *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam* and William Chittick's *The Psalms of Islam* which is a translation of the fourth Shi'i Imam's supplications. James Bill and John Alden Williams in *Roman Catholic and Shi'i Muslims* have discussed attempts by Shi'is to reach out to the Vatican.

There has also been greater interest expressed in the field of area studies within Shi'ism.

The Shi'a of Samarra edited by Imranali Panjwani, Shaery-Eisenlohr's *Shi'ite Lebanon*; Rodger Shanahan's *The Shi'a of Lebanon*, Faleh Jabbar's *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, Yitzhak Nakash's *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Graham Fuller and Rend Francke's *The Arab Shi'a* are important contributions in this domain. These studies examine the social, religious, and political factors that contributed to the evolution and expansion of Shi'ism. They make an important contribution to our understanding of the interplay between religion and politics and the enduring presence of Shi'ism in various parts of the Middle East.

Other scholars have focused on a more militant version of Shi'ism, most notably the Hizbullah in Lebanon. While it is not possible to mention all the works in this field, we should note works on Hizbollah by Naim Qassem, Augustus Norton, and Judith Harek. Others like Jamal Sankari have focused on more politically-oriented Shi'i religious figures like Fadlallah. Closely connected to this is the rise of sectarian strife since the 1980s. Vali Nasr (*The Shia Revival*), Yitzhak Nakash (*Reaching for Power*), Brigitte Marechal and Sami Zemni (*The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships*), Frederic Wehrey (*Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*), Elisheva Machlis (*Shi'i Sectarianism in the Middle East*), and Nicolas Pelham (*A New Muslim Order*) provide accounts of sectarian conflict and the Shi'i struggle for political power in the contemporary Middle East.

Scholars have also focused on Shi'i hermeneutics. In his *Islamic Law, Epistemology and Modernity* Ashk Dahlen discusses the modern hermeneutics of Abd al-Karim Soroush and Mojtabid Shabestari. The later maintains that there is a need for a new method of historical criticism which views a text as a product of a specific historical situation and attempts to reposition it in its original context. Shabestari is convinced that such an approach would merely destroy false beliefs and traditions within the faith, it would not destroy religion or

religiosity. Scholars who advocate for modern hermeneutics of Shi'i texts argue that Muslims need to continuously review and reinterpret the texts based on the demands of their times. This is because interpretation is a human enterprise, one that is humanly constructed and conditioned by the milieu that the interpreter lives in. The use of modern hermeneutics as a critical theoretical tool by reformists such as Kadivar, Soroush and Shabestari has challenged the traditional view of a normative and singular reading of the sacred texts in Islam.

Shi'i Studies in the Post 9/11 World and the Challenge of Shi'i Self-Representation

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 revived prejudices of Islam as a religion that promotes the killing of innocent people and of Muslims as an inherently militant and irrational people. The media has represented the "absent Muslim other" and has sought to create a stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslims that have been impossible to ignore. In addition, the American global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq have invigorated stereotypes and suspicions against Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern origins.

Since the events of 9/11, Shi'is have sought to make themselves more visible comprehensible in the American milieu, to de-mythify and de-code Islam and to challenge the negative characterization of Islam. The events of 9/11 also proved to the American Shi'i community, if any proof was needed, that pluralism in America is a social reality from which it cannot escape. In fact, many Shi'is have become more visible, vocal, and extrovert while others have stressed their American rather than homeland identity.

Shi'is have become more aware of the need to give back something to American society. They have realized that it is better to speak with, rather than about, the other. They have engaged in dialogue, civic responsibilities, and numerous food drives for homeless Americans all over the

country.²⁴ They have also made themselves more visible in the academic field. The increased awareness of and studies in Shi'ism is reflected in the fact that since 9/11 projects, conferences, and centers focusing on Shi'ism in general or on specific aspects of Shi'ism have increased exponentially. More panels on Shi'ism are offered at the American Academy of Religion's annual conference than ever before. The British Academy-funded project on the "Authority in Shi'ism" (www.thehawzaproject.net) aims to create a broad network of scholars working on the theme and improve the status of research on Shi'ism. The increased interest in Shi'ism is not restricted to monographs and articles.²⁵ Shi'is in North America have digitized some of their most important texts and sources.

The Shi'i run website www.al-islam.org contains many valuable original Shi'i sources, links, scholarly and non-scholarly articles and e-books. Two Shi'i journals have been produced since 9/11, the *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* and, for a while, the *International Journal of Shi'i Studies*. In addition, a number of *cds* on Shi'i *hadith*, *fiqh*, *usul*, ethics, and *tafsir* are now available. These have been marketed and produced by Noor software, in Iran. However, none of the four major Shi'i texts of Kulayni, Tusi, or Saduq have been translated into English. Some of the most important works on Shi'i law, history, biography, philosophy or gnosis remain untranslated. Along the same lines, the *Ansariyan* publication in Qum, Iran, has translated and published a number of Shi'i texts. Although apologetic and polemical in tone, these works are nonetheless valuable resources in the study of different fields of Shi'ism.

A few chaired positions in Islam have been created in North American Universities. The Prince al-Waleed Chair, 'Umar al-Khattab Chair, Sharjah Chair in Global Islam (in Canada),

²⁴ See Liyakat Takim, *Shi'ism in America* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2009) chapter five.

²⁵ Alessandro Cancian "Shi'ism", 104.

King Faisal Chair are but a few. Until recently, not a single chair in Shi'i studies had been established. When I raised this issue with Ayatullah Seestani in 2013, he stated that such a chair should only be established with the provision that courses would be taught based on "correct" Shi'i beliefs and practices. The Ayatullah's statement clearly indicates the various expectations and potentially conflicting agendas of clerical authorities in Shi'i Islam – when promoting academic scholarship – and the approaches that are usually taken in Western academic scholarship. These often place Shi'i academics in a precarious position, as they need to satisfy both expectations from their community and its clerical leaders on the one hand and the academic community on the other.

Within the past year, the Imam 'Ali chair in Shi'i studies was inaugurated at the Hartford seminary in Connecticut. According to the Hartford seminary website, the Imam 'Ali Chair for the Study of Shi'i Islam and Dialogue Among Islamic Legal Schools provides a voice in the academy for Shi'i Islam and encourages dialogue among the diverse Islamic legal schools, including Shi'i and Sunni. Hartford Seminary believes that effective, contemporary interfaith religious understanding and leadership must include both Shi'i and Sunni traditions within Islam.²⁶

Since the events of 9/11, there has been a definitive shift in Shi'i public engagement. Increased government surveillance and other measures have forced Shi'is to abandon their traditional ambivalent stance toward the West. They have realized that it is only by participation in the North American socio-political order that they can overcome their invisibility in North America. Integration in North American society and the need to voice socio-political concerns necessitate that Shi'is become active in different sectors of the society.

²⁶ <http://www.hartsem.edu/2015/12/fundraising-goal-reached-for-imam-ali-chair-for-shii-studies-and-dialogue-among-islamic-legal-schools/>

The events of 9/11 have given the Shi'i community an opportunity to challenge the myth of a homogeneous Muslim entity. Shi'is have felt the need to move from being the other within the Muslim other to becoming a more visible and vocal minority group in North America. Shi'is also sense that there is a need to self-represent rather than being represented by the Sunni majority. Especially after the American invasion and occupation of Iraq and the concomitant awareness of Shi'ism, Shi'is have felt the need to counter the negative images the media has created about Islam.

Conclusion

This article has surveyed Western academic works composed on Shi'i Islam. A quick glance at the first and second sections of this paper reveals a stark contrast. In the early period, there were very few texts written on Shi'ism. Orientalists who wrote on Shi'ism before the 1960s predicated their works on Sunni sources and depicted Shi'ism as a later off-shoot from the "mainstream" Sunni community. Since the 1980s, there has been a plethora of works on Shi'ism that have challenged this thesis. With time, Western scholarship has realized the need to hear Shi'i voices in the academia. Thus, there has been a clear shift from talking about the Shi'is to conversation with the Shi'is. Shi'i scholars have also felt the need for self-representation. They have contributed to the academic studies on Shi'ism and, using the methodological tools of the West and the knowledge acquired in the seminaries, have introduced distinctly Shi'i motifs, themes and figures in their discourses. Collectively, these scholars have altered how Shi'ism is both studied and understood in the West.

In today's world, data flows in greater volumes, at higher speeds, over greater distances to larger audiences than ever before. And yet the result has not been greater understanding or

enlightenment. In fact, it has often been just the reverse. The information explosion has sometimes created more hatred and prejudices. By convening seminars, entering the academia, publishing books and articles in journals and making themselves more visible on the internet, and delivering lectures at various conventions and workshops, Shi'is have begun to alter the way they think about North America and about themselves. As the 'old world' or 'back-home' mentality gradually fades, as it largely did in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, organizations are shifting Shi'i academic and civil discourses in the United States to how they can interact with North Americans, while maintaining their own distinctive identity. The challenge for Shi'is is to also excel and to intellectually articulate their distinctive ethos in the academic field.