



ĀYATALLĀH

ĀYATALLĀH (Sign of God), an honorific title awarded by popular usage to mojtaheds, particularly the foremost among them, presumably with ultimate reference to Qur'ān 41:53, "We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their own selves." The sense of the title is that the one to whom it is awarded manifests qualities of piety and learning that indicate God's purposes in creation (compare the analogous title of ḥojjat al-eslām). It is a title of recent origin, borne in the distant past by Ḥasan b. Moṭahhar Ḥellī (d. 776/1374), but not entering general usage until recent decades. Certain modern biographical compendia of Shi'ite 'olamā' (e.g., Ḥājj Shaikh Moḥammad Šarīf Rāzī, *Ganjīna-ye dānešmandān*, Tehran, 1352 Š./1973, 7 vols.), apply it retrospectively to 'olamā' of the past, but there is no indication that the persons in question were known to their contemporaries as āyatallāh. The title appears to have been used sporadically in the 1930s, possibly as an indirect result of the reform and strengthening of the religious institution in Qom inaugurated by Shaikh 'Abd-al-Karīm Ḥā'erī (d. 1355/1936). Ḥā'erī may, indeed, have been the first mojtahed to bear the title of āyatallāh (see Mīrzā Moḥammad-'Alī Modarres, *Rayḥānat al-adab*, Tabrīz, n.d., I, p. 66). With the emergence in the postwar period of influential figures such as Āyatallāh Borūjerdī and Āyatallāh Kāšānī, use of the title became increasingly common. Virtually all mojtaheds came to be designated as āyatallāh, so that recourse has been had to the relative al-'ozmā (the supreme) in order to distinguish the most prominent mojtaheds. Even this, however, has not been able to prevent a certain devaluation of the title in recent years. Partly because of the cheapening of the title, and partly because of his assumption functions that transcend by far the traditional



activity of the mojtahed, the most celebrated person ever to have been designated as āyatallāh, Āyatallāh Rūḥallāh Ḳomeynī, has come to be known as Imam Ḳomeynī in the wake of the Islamic Revolution of 1357 Š./1978-79. The title āyatallāh appears to be unknown among the Shi'ites of Lebanon, Pakistan, and India, and even in Iraq it is applied only to 'olamā' of Iranian origin. It should finally be noted that such is the ubiquity of the term in Iran that it is applied even to Sunni religious dignitaries, to whose vocabulary it is totally alien.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

'Abd-al-'Azīz Šāḥeb-jawāher, *Dā'erat al-ma'āref-e eslāmīya-ye Īrān*, Tehran, n.d., I, pp. 86-87.

J. Calmard, "Ayatullāh," in *EI²*, Suppl. 1-2, pp. 103-04.

J. Matīnī, "Baḥṭ-ī dar bāra-ye sābeqa-ye tāriḳī-e alqāb o 'anāwīn-e 'olamā' dar maḡhab-e Šī'a," *Iran Nameh* I/4, 1362 Š./1983, pp. 560-608.

Search terms:

ایاتالله ایاتوللا