



## BAHR-AL-'OLŪM

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**BAHR-AL-'OLŪM**, SAYYED MOḤAMMAD MAHDĪ (1155/1742-1212/1797), a Shi'ite scholar who exercised great influence both in Iraq and in Iran through the numerous students he trained. He began his studies in Karbalā, first with his father, Sayyed Mortazā, a descendant of the Majlesī family, and then with Shaikh Yūsof Baḥrānī. Later he proceeded to Najaf to study with Shaikh Moḥammad-Mahdī Fotūnī (d. 1183/1769) and Shaikh Moḥammad-Taḳī Dawvaraḳī (d. 1187/1773), who became his two chief teachers. He returned to Karbalā only briefly to study under the celebrated [Moḥammad-Bāqer Behbahānī](#) before settling definitively in Najaf to embark on his own career of teaching. Great polemical skills are attributed to Baḥr-al-'Olūm: he is said to have converted many Jews to Shi'ite Islam by his arguments, and such was the mastery of Sunni *feqh* that he acquired in debate with Sunni '*olamā*' that he taught the subject in Mecca for two years without his Shi'ite identity being detected. By contrast with many of his colleagues, he was not, however, unconditionally hostile to Sufism, for he refused to declare the celebrated Ne'matallāhī Sufi, Nūr-'Alīšāh, an unbeliever, and he even facilitated his safe departure from Karbalā at a time of danger. Baḥr-al-'Olūm's biographers report that he was favored by miraculous communication with the Prophet and the imams, especially the Twelfth Imam. He wrote little of substance, but was so highly regarded for his learning that he became the leading scholar in the whole Shi'ite world after the death of Behbahānī. His posthumous influence was also great, especially in Iran, where pupils of his such as Mollā Aḥmad Narāqī, Moḥammad-Bāqer Raštī and Ḥājj Ebrāhīm Kalbāsī were often able to impose their will on secular authority.



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