



SHI'ITE DOCTRINE II. HIERARCHY IN THE IMAMIYYA

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ii. Hierarchy in the Imamiyya

The distinction between believers and ulema (*'olemā* "religious scholars") is known to both Sunnites and Shi'ites, and forms the starting point for internal ranking systems among their ulema. Therefore, the widespread opinion according to which Islam is a religion without priesthood and the believer faces God directly, without any interceding authority, does not stand up to historical evidence.

From early on, seeking for religious knowledge was considered a virtue, and the ulema who were imbued with knowledge were held in the highest esteem. The idea that the ulema are heirs to the prophets is expressed in a famous [hadith](#), which is quoted in Sunnite (cf. Boḳāri, *Ṣaḥiḥ*: chap. "al-'elm," sec. "al-'elm qabla al-qawl wa'l-'amal") and Shi'ite (cf. Kolayni, *Kāfi*: chap. "faẓl al-'elm," sec. "ṣefat al-'elm wa-faẓloho wa-faẓl al-'olamā") compilations. This reverence for learning fostered the emergence of an autonomous group of scholars, and established the principle of *a'lamiya* (Ar. *a'lam* "more learned"), according to which the believer should always seek the advice of the most learned scholar



in his vicinity. Although both Sunnites and Shi'ites uphold an internal hierarchy among the ulema (Stewart, 2001, pp. 140-44), it is Shi'ism, and especially the Imamiyya (*Emāmiyya*) or Twelver Shi'ism (*Eṭnā 'Aṣariyya*), that came to be perceived as a stratified denomination. Within the Imamiyya, the hierarchy has led, on the one hand, to the emergence of a politically motivated religious administration that comprises members of the judiciary and the religious endowments (sing. *waqf*) and, on the other hand, to the establishment of a religious leadership that regulates the ulema's internal hierarchy.

Politico-religious offices. These were also known in Sunnite Islam, particularly in the Ottoman administration (see Repp), but the proclamation of Twelver Shi'ism as state religion under the Safavids (see [SAFAVID DYNASTY](#)) made the establishment of state-run religious institutions a necessity. The head of these institutions became the *ṣadr*, a function that was already established – like many other Safavid institutions – within the Sunnite Iranian tradition (Floor, 2000, p. 461). Although it was not the *ṣadr*'s duty to promote Twelver Shi'ism, he had important tasks as both administrator of the religious endowments and chief judicial officer of the religious courts. The office was customarily divided between two scholars, and under Ṭahmāsp I (r. 1524-76) this split would be further formalized by the introduction of the *ṣadr-e 'amma* and the *ṣadr-e kāṣṣa*. While it always remained an administrative rather than a theological post, its holders belonged to the class of pre-Safavid clerical notables, and only ulema were appointed as *ṣadr* (Floor, 2000, pp. 464, 476).

Other politico-religious offices of the Safavid era, whose creation reflected the growing tension between the traditional, often non-Shi'ite ulema and the newly established elite of Imamite scholars, were the *ṣayḥ-al-Eslām*, the *qāẓi'l-qoṣāt*, and the *mollā-bāši*. A *ṣayḥ-al-Eslām* was appointed for every big city, and the *ṣayḥ-al-Eslām* of the Safavid capital assumed the role of *primus inter pares*. As the main function of this office was to enforce all matters of the Sharia (*ṣari'a*), especially to enjoin the good and prohibit the bad (Ar. “al-amr be'l-ma'ruf wa'l-nahy 'an al-monkar;” see [AMR BE MA'RUF](#)), a *ṣayḥ-al-Eslām* could wield considerable power. The most noteworthy example is Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesi (d. 1627-1699/1700), who gained unprecedented influence as the *ṣayḥ-al-Eslām* of [Isfahan](#), which in 1597 had become the Safavid capital. The *qāẓi'l-qoṣāt* assumed important duties in the judiciary, e.g., in the fields of contracts or personal law, although he was subordinate in rank to the *ṣadr*, the *ṣayḥ-al-Eslām*, and the *mollā-bāši*. The office of *mollā-bāši* was only created in



1712, at the very end of the Safavid epoch, and marked the final consolidation of the independent Imamite elite and the solution, in their favor, of the long-standing conflict with the traditional ulema (cf. Arjomand, 1983). De facto this office institutionalized Majlesi's enormous power as *šayḵ-al-Eslām*, and survived the demise of the Safavid dynasty. However, it lost much of its significance under *Nāder Shah* (r. 1736-47) and, under the Qajars, it seems to have become limited to the function of the tutor of the Crown Prince.

Clergy. Within their scholarly community the Imamite ulema are ranked according to the merits of their scholarship. This led to a distinct, though not totally clear-cut hierarchical structure whose members may well be called a "clergy." The result of this process is illustrated by the term *ruḥāniyat*, which in contemporary Persian denotes the class of Imamite scholars, replacing to some extent the general term *mojtahedin* (sing. *mojtahed*). This evolution, which stretched over several centuries, became possible only after *Moḥaqqueq Najm-al-Din Ḥelli* (d. 1277) and *Ebn Moṭahhar Ḥelli* (1250-1325, cf. Amir-Moezzi, pp. 72-74) had incorporated the concept of *ejtehād*, which the early traditionists had rejected, into Imamite doctrine.

The general question of the legitimacy of political power and the spiritual guidance of the community of believers in the absence (*ḡayba*) of the 12th Imam entailed a gradually increasing role for the ulema, who de facto began to assume the prerogatives of the Hidden Imam (see *ISLAM IN IRAN vii. The concept of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism*). After a temporary revival of the traditionalist school (*Akbāriya*, cf. Gleave) in the 17th and 18th centuries, the victory of their rationalist counterparts (*Oṣuliya*) further accelerated this development after 1800. Apart from the discussion about who was entitled to lead the Friday prayers (see *EMĀM-e JOM'Ā*; cf. Stewart, 2009) during the occultation of the Mahdi, the appropriation of two of the Imam's prerogatives proved to be especially crucial: the right to collect the religious alms (*zakāt*) and taxes (*koms*), which contributed to the financial independence of the ulema and the right to declare *jihad* (see *ISLAM IN IRAN xi. Jihad*), which in the long run considerably enhanced their political influence (cf. Momen, pp. 190-91, 206-207).

The concept of *ejtehād* has two important corollaries. On the one hand, it requires believers to obey the ulema and to emulate (*taqlid*) the most learned scholar. On the other hand, the ulema must follow a set of procedures to determine the most learned scholar and acknowledge the resulting internal hierarchy (Momen, pp. 203-06; Amanat, pp. 98-101). The practice of granting



authorization (*ejāza*) to exercise ejtehād regulated access to the ulema circles, and further strengthened the process of internal stratification. The combination of these prerogatives with the principle of a'lamiya allowed the idea of a supreme Imamite jurist (*marja' al-taqlid*) to emerge during the 19th century. Moḥammad-Ḥasan Najafī (d. 1850) and [Mortazā Anṣārī](#) (1799-1864) are commonly regarded as the first scholars on whom this title was bestowed (Calder, p. 46). While there is no formal process of promoting a scholar to the rank of marja', the unwritten consensus upholds the *conditio sine qua non* that he must have published a treatise about the concrete application of the Sharia (*resāle-ye 'amaliya*). The eligibility as marja' continues to be restricted to jurists, while even highly esteemed theologians, Qur'ān commentators, or philosophers are not considered for that rank (Amirpur, p. 219).

Titles. Epithets traditionally express reverence for an erudite scholar. In his famous biographical dictionary *Jāme' al-rowāt*, Moḥammad b. 'Ali Ardabili (17th century) addressed his teacher, the aforementioned Majlesi, who was the most important Imamite scholar of his time, as *šayḵ al-Eslām wa'l-moslemin kātām al-mojtahedin al-emām al-'allāma al-moḥaqqueq al-modaqqeq*. Likewise 'Ali Karaki [Moḥaqqueq al-Tāni](#), (1464-1533), who had played a decisive role in establishing the Imamiyya in Safavid Iran, had been given such imposing titles as *nā'eb-e Emām* or *kātām al-mojtahedin* (Arjomand, 1985, pp. 188-89). After 1700 several scholars were addressed as *solṭān al-'olamā'*, *mojtahed al-zamān*, or *ra'īs al-foqahā' wa'l-mojtahedin*. But these titles did not yet imply any formal supremacy or institutional hierarchy, each epithet having a unique relation with the honoree. Even after the rank of marja' al-taqlid had gained acceptance, scholars such as [Ḥasan Āštiāni](#) (d. 1901) and Faḏl-Allāh Nuri (d. 1909) preferred to be addressed only by relatively humble titles, such as *āqā*, *mirzā*, or *šayḵ*. Epithets like *ākund* or *mollā*, which in other contexts may even be used as pejoratives, were, for example, among the honorifics of the scholars [Moḥammad-Kāẓem Korāsāni](#) (1839-1911) and Aḥmad Narāqi (d. 1829).

It was only in 20th century Iran and Iraq that the rather informal epithets of highly respected scholars developed into a formal hierarchy, as their usage seems to be largely unknown among the Imamite communities in Lebanon and South Asia (see [SHI'ITE COMMUNITIES IN LEBANON](#); [SHI'ITE COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA](#)). But the modern usage does not always correspond to its traditional connotations. For example, the title of *ḥojjat-al-Eslām*, which originated in the Sunnite milieu as a reverential epithet for the Sunnite theologian [Abu Ḥāmed Ġazālī](#) (1058-1111), became customary in the



Imamiyya as late as in the 19th century, when Moḥammad-Bāqer Šafti (d. 1844) was one of the earliest and most prominent men on whom this honorific was bestowed (Amanat, p. 107). But in the 20th century, this expression of deep reverence had been lowered to serve as the formal title of a middle rank scholar. The same phenomenon occurred with regard to the honorific *teqat-al-Eslām*. While it had originally also been used for higher-ranking ulema, it was later in the 20th century restricted to those mojtahedin who were just one rank above the students (Calmard, 1995, p. 163).

Ayatollah. In the 20th century, ayatollah (*āyatallāh*) superseded ḥojjat-al-Eslām in its originally respectful sense of indicating the most high-ranking ulema. ‘Allāma Ḥelli was the first Imamite scholar to be called ayatollah, though in a purely reverential sense, during his lifetime. Except for a few instances during the Safavid era, when some scholars honored their teachers by calling them ayatollah, the title was not used in any technical sense prior to the 20th century. Only in the wake of the [Constitutional Revolution](#), when both supporters and opponents of constitutionalism bestowed the title ayatollah, did its usage proliferate; the most prominent of these ayatollahs were Moḥammad-Kāzem Kōrāsāni and ‘Abd-Allāh Māmaqāni (1870-1933). In the 20th century the title was retroactively used for a few Imamite authorities of the past, who thereby became proto-marja’ al-taqlids; this practice may even extend to scholars who once had been opponents of ejtehād, such as [Kolayni](#) (d. ca. 941, cf. Calmard, 1991, p. 552).

In the 1920s and 1930s, Qom emerged again as a main centre of Imamite theology, largely due to the importance of ‘Abd-al-Karim Ḥā’eri Yazdi (1859-1937, q.v.). The centralization of learning increased the number of ayatollahs, which in turn necessitated further stratification. Consequently, the most respected ayatollahs were now called *āyatallāh al-‘oẓmā*, a title which today is mostly used synonymously with marja’ al-taqlid. [Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Borujerdi](#) (1875-1961), who was regarded as the sole marja’ since 1947, appears to have been the first on whom the title was bestowed. His death marked the beginning of intense internal discussions about the nature of proper Islamic government and about a formal appointment process for high-ranking positions within the religious hierarchy. Since no single scholar seemed sufficiently qualified to provide answers to all problems of modern life, it was even proposed to set up a council of distinguished ulema to guide the Imamite community (Lambton, pp 125-26; cf. Motahhari). This debate, however, seemingly abated, and several ayatollahs in Iran and Iraq were



simultaneously acknowledged as marja' al-taqlid so that the office became decentralized. The most prominent among Borujerdi's successors were Moḥsen al-Ḥakim (d. 1970) and Abu'l-Qāsem al-Ku'i, (d. 1992; cf. Calmard, 1991, p. 553). Until the beginning of the 21st century, the process of how to elect a new marja' has remained rather informal (Walbridge).

Rahbar-e enqelāb. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 led to the establishment of a state that was run by the politically minded faction of the high-ranking ulema. Their reliance on the political theory of *welāyat-e faqih* (lit. "the mandate of the jurist;" see [CONSTITUTION OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC](#)), as developed by Ayatollah Khomeini (Ruḥ-Allāh Musawī Komeyni, 1902-89), had serious repercussions for the Imamite hierarchy. The position of *rahbar-e enqelāb* (lit. "leader of the revolution") was the first newly created politico-religious office of considerable importance since the Safavid era. Khomeini held this office until his death in 1989 and even expanded its competences in 1988. Responding to a long-standing power struggle between parliament and the Council of Guardians, he issued a decree in January 1988 to introduce the jurist's *welāyat-e moṭlaq* (lit. "absolute mandate"). This form of government was defined as the most important obligation imposed by the Sharia, having priority even over the "derivative commandments" (Khomeini apud Arjomand, 2001, p. 310; cf. Reissner, p. 214) such as prayer (*ṣalāt*), [fasting](#) or the pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*).

Khomeini's exalted position within the hierarchy, far above the constitution and even claiming divine origin, is reflected by his honorifics *nā'eb-e Emām* and even *Emām* (Matini, pp. 593-604). The former had been one of the honorifics of 'Alī Karakī Moḥaqqueq al-Tāni in the 16th century, and in the 20th century the latter was in an informal manner also used as an epithet of Musā Ṣadr (b. 1928), the noted Lebanese scholar of Iranian origin who disappeared under unclear circumstances in 1978 on a trip to Libya. Khomeini's supra-constitutional role obviously implied his supremacy over all Imamite scholars, although he never explicitly claimed this position for himself. Since this role appears as the necessary consequence of his theory of *welāyat-e faqih*, the political title *rahbar-e enqelāb* may be interpreted as a synonym to the juridical and theological title *wali-e faqih*.

Moreover, Khomeini's unique position in post-revolutionary Iran is reflected in the unprecedented ways through which he consolidated his rank among his peers. In 1982, he demoted Moḥammad-Kāẓem Ṣarī'atmadāri from his rank of *āyatallāh al-ʿoẓmā* and had him placed under house arrest. Furthermore,



when he dismissed his successor-elect Ḥosayn-ʿAli Montazeri in March 1989, he deliberately addressed him only as *ḥojjat al-Eslām wa'l-moslemin* (Montazeri, p. 540). According to some reports (Calmard, 1991, pp. 553-54; Momen, pp. 298-99), Khomeini also issued a decree in September 1984 to order that several unnamed ayatollahs were only to be called *ḥojjat al-Eslām*. This step may express the consideration that the growing number of ayatollahs lowered the value of the previously rare title. Although neither his claims for supremacy nor his imposing titles earned Khomeini undisputed acknowledgement as the leader of all Imamite Muslims, especially outside Iran, his efforts to exert a tighter control over the Imamite ulema created the impression that their hierarchy became a much more rigid formal system after the Iranian Revolution. In Iran, the ulema's independence was curtailed, while believers experienced less freedom of choice, as previously customary, when they turned to the ulema for spiritual guidance. Nevertheless, outspoken Imamite criticism of Khomeini's positions, both within Iran and abroad, has always been able to assert itself, both during his lifetime and after his death (Ourghi).

Khomeini's death on 3 June 1989 made it clear that his political theory was closely connected to his position as *marja' al-taqlid* in the Imamite hierarchy. The *ḥojjat al-Eslām* Khamenei (ʿAli Ḥosayni Kāmene'i, b. 1939) was officially promoted to the rank of ayatollah, and Khomeini's prestigious epithet *wali-e faqih* was even bestowed upon him when he assumed the post of *rahbar-e enqelāb* on the day after Khomeini's demise. He did not, however, gain the title *Emām*. Nor did he succeed in establishing himself as one of the leading ayatollahs – let alone as a *marja' al-taqlid* – even within Iran, despite several attempts to do so after the death of Kho'i (1992), [Moḥammad-Rezā Golpāyagāni](#) (1993) and Moḥammad-ʿAli Arāki (1994). Khamenei was merely acknowledged as *āyatollāh al-ʿoẓmā* among the seven scholars who were suggested by the religious seminaries in Qom (Arjomand, 2001, p. 321), and his attempt to be accepted as *marja'* by Imamites living outside Iran was also only partially successful.

In 1989 a constitutional amendment had been passed on Khomeini's initiative to the effect that the rank of *marja'* was no longer mandatory for the *wali-e faqih* and the *rahbar-e enqelāb* and that the minimal qualification as *mojtahed* is now sufficient (*Qānun-e asāsi-e jomhuri-e eslami-e Irān*, arts. 5, 107, and 109). Thereby, at least in Iran, the clerical hierarchy, that under Khomeini had encompassed the religious and political spheres, again bifurcated. Because of



the welāyat-e moṭlaq of the jurist, to which allusion is made in the Iranian Constitution (art. 57), the traditionally religious office of marja' is even subjected to politics. Khamenei and the ulema who support him have repeatedly made it clear that the welāyat-e faqih is a God-given institution not dependent on any other form of legitimation, and that the wali-e faqih is above the Sharia and even above the constitution (Amirpur, pp. 226-34).

In the first decade of the 21st century, the traditional office of the marja' has asserted itself outside Iran. The Iraqi scholar Ali Sistani (Sayyed 'Ali Ḥosayni al-Sistāni, b. ca. 1930), who is of Iranian origin, has succeeded Kho'i as the most respected Imamite scholar and is also acknowledged by many Iranians as their highest religious authority. Although politically quietist, Sistani was instrumental in establishing new structures after the fall of Saddam Hussein (Ṣaddām Ḥosayn 'Abd al-Majid al-Tekriti, 1937-2006) in 2003. Nevertheless, it has recently been argued that Sistani may be regarded as the last traditional religious leader of the Imamiyya so that with his demise the office of the marja' will come to an end (Khalaji, p. 4). At the time of writing (2008), it seems too early to assess the consequences that events in Iraq and the changing political influence of Iran might have for the future structure of religious hierarchy in the Imamiyya.

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