

EDITORIAL

Marja'iyya and society

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The *marāji'* (sing. *marja'*) are the most prominent jurists of Twelver Shī'ism. Though primarily located in Iran and Iraq, they have millions of followers across the globe. It is by way of these followers (*muqallids*) that the *marāji'* receive the financial support and spiritual capital necessary to achieve their status. It is also up to followers to choose to abide by the laws the *marāji'* write. As a result, a *marja'*'s legitimacy is largely dependent upon his reception by and engagement with society. Linda Walbridge, Farhard Khosrokhavar, Amir Nikpey, Thomas Fibiger, and Elvire Corboz have all investigated how the *marāji'* are received by their communities. The current issue of the *Journal of the Contemporary Study of Islam* explores this phenomenon further.

A few themes emerge from the three articles presented in this special issue. The first is that the *marāji'* have a greater role in society than is apparent in the legal works that officially represent their opinions. Another theme is that the interplay between *marja'* and *muqallid* is a critical factor in the trajectory of *marja'iyya* and even the formation of contemporary Twelver Shī'ī culture. A third theme is that this interplay – when combined with the emerging voices of followers – dictates that the *marāji'* will need to increasingly engage with contemporary issues and concerns.

Though the *marāji'* officially confine their position – or the position of the most knowledgeable jurist – to the realm of law, they also function as cultural icons, argues Aun Hasan Ali in “The Canonization of *Nahj al-Balāgha* between Ḥilla and Najaf: al-Sistani and the Iconic Authority of the *Marāji'*.” This is not a formal status mentioned in their legal manuals. Still, the *marāji'* recognise their status as protectors of the faith and occasionally insert their opinions on matters related to philosophy, theology, ethics, and tradition. Ali studies the role of Ali Sistani in the canonisation of *Nahj al-balāgha*. By stating that the work attributed to the second Imam, 'Ali b. Talib, is second to the Qur'an, the prominent *marja'* regulates the reading practice of his followers.

My article, “*Marja'iyya* between law and laity: the requirements of jurists as imagined by their followers,” argues that many of the practical functions of the *marāji'* remain unstated in their legal manuals and must be gleaned from their presence in society. In my field work in Iran, *muqallids* essentially reinterpreted the two legal requirements of *marja'iyya* (knowledge and righteousness) in accordance with the needs of the community. They maintained that the *marāji'*'s technical knowledge of the law must be accommodated by an awareness of their societal and temporal context. They also expected the *marāji'* to form a strong, loving relationship with their followers and to be able to attract them with their

behaviour and appearance. Most importantly, the *muqallids* I interviewed expected that the *marāji* observe the very laws they legislate.

Zain Moloobhoy and Amina Inloes argue that modern forms of technology have enabled well-informed Twelver Shi'īs in the diaspora to propose new questions and means of reform to the *marāji*. In “*Marja'iyya* in the digital era: renegotiating the relationship between *marja* and *muqallid* in the era of the democratization of knowledge,” the two authors demonstrate that these *muqallids*, unlike their counterparts in the Twelver Shi'ī stronghold of Iran, must turn to the *marāji* for the preservation of their communal identity, and this drives their desire for greater communication with them and coordination among the *marāji* themselves on matters integral to communal practice. The authors imagine a new phase of *marja'iyya* – characterised by the democratisation of knowledge – in which people's demands for greater transparency and investment in the local cultures of *muqallids* must be met for the *marāji* to maintain their following.

The five books reviewed share in common an interest in the evolution of traditional religious authority when confronted with the forces of modernity. Three of the books discuss the place of Islamic law in the modern nation-state: Morgan Clarke's *Islam and Law in Lebanon: Sharia within and without the State* (reviewed by Robert Gleave); Zahra Ali's *Women and Gender in Iraq* (reviewed by Sherwan Ali); and Tarek Elgawhary's *Rewriting Islamic Law: The Opinions of the 'Ulamā' Towards Codification of Personal Status Law in Egypt* (reviewed by Sumeyra Yakar). Clarke's work includes a section on the role of a *marja* (Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah) in maintaining his interpretation of Sharia in Lebanon, where the state provides its own definition. Ali's work includes a look at the tension between traditional Twelver Shi'ī law and women's rights that emerged in 2014 in the process of reforming the Iraqi Personal Status Code. Jeffrey Guhin's *Agents of God: Boundaries and Authority in Muslim and Christian Schools* (reviewed by Tim Orr), meanwhile, is not as concerned with the state or the clerical class but instead examines the role of educators, scripture, and science in shaping religious authority. Lastly, Ali Akbar's *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: An Analysis of Four Discourses* (reviewed by Liyakat Takim) studies the impact contemporary Western discourses of human rights and theology have on the interpretation of the sacred text of Islam.

It is my hope that the articles and reviews in this issue will stimulate new conversations about religious authority and the role society plays in shaping its nature. I am immensely grateful toward the *Journal of the Contemporary Study of Islam* for agreeing to publish a special issue on the topic of *marja'iyya* and society, a topic that deserved far more attention than it had received. I would especially like to thank Seyfeddin Kara, who invited me to serve as guest editor and provided support throughout the process. Lastly, I would like to thank the authors, the book reviewers, and the peer reviewers of the articles for a pleasant and productive collaboration.