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Authority in Contemporary Shicism

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Workshop Report

**MATTHIJS VAN DEN BOS
& FARZIN VAHDAT**

The ISIM hosted a one-day workshop on 'Authority in Contemporary Shi'ism' in Leiden on 1 March 2002, convened by Matthijs van den Bos. Several observations on the current state of (Iranian) Shi'ite studies underlay its design. Most importantly, studies of religious discourse in contemporary Iran – particularly that comprising reformist thought – often neglect the disciplinary background of religious discourse. Therefore, scientific scrutiny was due to the decisive shifts that have taken place in the relative importance of *feqh*, *kalam*, *falsafa*, *hekmat*, *erfan*, and *tasavvof* as argumentative styles in debates over religious authority in contemporary Shi'ism.

'Contemporary' was chosen roughly to indicate the past century and also to locate the workshop within the tradition set by Said Amir Arjomand's *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (1988). Whereas politicized juristic debate caught the attention when the latter book appeared, it is nowadays a 'hermeneutics' of religion that once again brings non-juristic Shi'ite disciplines to the

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fore. This particularly applies to Abdolkarim Soroush's 'new theology', detailed by Forough Jahanbakhsh, and his theorizing on the 'expansion of prophetic experience'. In the words of Farzin Vahdat, who has been so kind as to share his thoughts on 'this timely conference': 'Forough Jahanbakhsh discussed the newest phase in the thought of the prominent Islamic thinker in Iran, Abdolkarim Soroush, which transcends the "expansion of religious knowledge" and incorporates the idea of the expansion of religion itself, what Soroush calls, the "Expansion of Prophetic Experience".'

Mahmoud Alinejad's paper 'looked at [...] two contemporary Shi'ite thinkers in Iran, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar, whose thoughts are having a major impact in the creation of a public sphere in post-revolutionary Iran' (Vahdat). Alinejad stated that Mohammad Mojtahed-Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar were part of 'a new generation of clergy and lay intellectuals [who] reclaimed the political potentials of the faith to legitimize the expression of political and religious pluralism' in – similarly – 'reviving those aspects of the Shi'ite tradition that had been neglected or pushed to the margins by dominant juridical thought.'

But the women's seminaries addressed by Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud constitute an exception to this trend – *feqh* remaining the dominant discourse, and their target for reform. Vahdat adds: 'Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud ad-

dressed the shifting of Shi'ite thought on women as a result of the participation of a large number of women in seminary education and new interpretations of women's position in an Islamic society. She also discussed the new attitude of some of the reformist clerics on the position of women in Islam in light of their new interpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic law.'

Another paradox, Sajjad Rizvi pointed out that some innovative philosophers in Qom combine a 'thoroughgoing radical approach to traditional philosophy associated with the school of Molla Sadra (d.1641) [...] with a most conservative defence of *velayat-e faqih*.' Vahdat: 'Sajjad Rizvi, in his analysis of the two prominent and influential conservative Shi'ite thinkers in Iran, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and Javadi Amoli, amplified the importance of these traditionalist Shi'ite thinkers who in fact resort to new interpretations of Islamic *hekmat* and *erfan* to oppose reformist thought and the political movement attached to it.'

The opposite may be said of Mehdi Haeri Yazdi (1923–1999) – addressed by Farzin Vahdat – who was an ardent critic of the 'guardianship of the jurist' while also holding a high social position among the clerical establishment. Vahdat's paper discussed the ideas of Ayatollah Mehdi Haeri Yazdi, a scholar of Islamic and Western philosophy whose thought penetrates deeply into modern Western discourses, especially that

of Immanuel Kant, as well as into Islamic philosophy and *erfan*. It pointed to the significant contributions of Haeri Yazdi to the process of creating reconciliation between Islamic thought and modern philosophy and its significance for the establishment of modern political and social institutions in an Islamic context.

Said Arjomand's overview paper examined the reform movement during the last decade and 'its sharp break with the intellectual outlook of the generation of the Islamic revolution.' It argued that the 'nativistic refuge in ideology constitutes the immediate background of the current discussions of modernity and advocacy of reform and pluralism. As the Islamic ideology eroded in the 1990s, a reform movement gathered momentum, proposing pluralism as against totalitarianism and a hermeneutic as against an ideological reading of Islam. This reform movement has revived the debate on tradition and modernity with the intention of radically modernizing the Islamic tradition, and thereby, (re-)infusing modernity with normative value. As Vahdat comments: '[Arjomand] shed light on one major trend in contemporary Shi'ite intellectual discourse in Iran which is marked by an emphasis on pluralistic and hermeneutic approaches to social and political issues and opened a new and crucial chapter on the decades-old debates on tradition and modernity in Iranian social and political thought.'

Papers given at the workshop:

- Said Amir Arjomand (State University of New York): 'Modernity, Tradition and the Shi'ite Reformation in Contemporary Iran'
- Farzin Vahdat (Tufts University): 'Mehdi Haeri Yazdi (1923–1999) and His Place in the Current Debates on Modernity and Tradition in Iran'
- Mahmoud Alinejad (IIAS): 'Scholasticism, Revolutionism and Reformism: New Intellectual Trends in Shi'ite Scholasticism and the Emergence of a Public Religion in Iran'
- Azadeh Kian-Thiébaud (Université de Paris VIII): 'Women's Seminaries and Strands of Shi'ite Discourse'
- Sajjad Rizvi (Institute of Ismaili Studies): 'Liberal Metaphysics versus Conservative Politics: The Paradoxical Cases of Ayatollahs Abdollah Javadi Amoli and Mohammad Taghi Mesbah-i Yazdi'
- Forough Jahanbakhsh (Queens University): 'Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Reflection on Abdolkarim Soroush's Views'