

The Emergence of Modern Shi'ism: Islamic Reform in Iraq and Iran

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This is the first comprehensive work on the origins, development, and sociopolitical ramifications of the Usuli movement within Twelver Shi'ism. Given that Wahid Bihbahani (1709-91), the founder and catalyst for Usuli revivalism during the nineteenth century, is barely known in the West, it is a welcome addition to the growing Western literature on medieval and modern Shi'ism. This ongoing movement is the most powerful force in Twelver Shi'ism.

Using a wide range of primary and secondary sources, Heern highlights the emergence of modern Usulism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While locating its genesis within a global context, he outlines its ideological roots, historical background, and development. His central argument is that Usulism was a response to the ummah's changing sociopolitical conditions and part of a wider trend of Islamic reform and revivalist movements that began in the eighteenth century. He maintains that its emergence enabled the Shi'i clerical establishment to attain sociopolitical and economic ascendancy in Iran and Iraq, and that the movement survived without government patronage by cultivating transnational links with the Shi'i laity. For him, Shi'i Islam's recent ascendancy is the result of the neo-Usuli movement.

Comparing the Usuli movement to the Enlightenment or the Great Awakening (p. 22), as he does, is to mischaracterize it. Similarly, to call it a reform movement in the usual sense of the word is misleading. As a matter of fact, the conceptual framework and agenda of Usuli thinkers like Bihbahani and al-Ansari were very different from those of other Muslim reformers like Jamal al-Din Afghani (1839-97) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-05), who were more concerned with the decadence of Islamic thought and colonial Europe's impact on the Muslim world. It could be argued that, in contrast to other reform movements, neo-Usulism was an attempt to reestablish itself after the Akhbari triumph of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Usuli-Akhbari dispute, it must be remembered, was more interwoven into the knowledge-authority relationship than it was of sociopolitical or religious reforms.

Rather than labeling it a reform movement, a more accurate description would be that the Usuli discourse was focused on Shi'i epistemology and attaining certitude, rather than on establishing a particular form of government

or outlining sociopolitical reforms. Usulism was also a movement that reestablished the role of reasoning and the *mujtahid*'s authority in Twelver Shi'ism.

In chapter 2, Heern links modern Iran's emergence with the transnational and transregional character of Usulism. He traces the sociopolitical circumstances leading to this movement's re-emergence and the close alliances forged between its members and the Qajar dynasty. He further links it with the social, religious, and political factors that contributed to Shi'ism's evolution and expansion in Iraq, such as the conversion of Arab tribes in southern Iraq and the protection of the shrine cities and programs against the Ottomans and Wahhabis. Tribal conversion was the result of Iranian 'ulama immigrating to Iraq and the Ottoman policy of enforced tribal settlement. Although the chapter does not show it, the tribesmen's conversion was mitigated by tribal customs and issues regarding social status. Thus, despite their conversion, the tribesmen's ethnic and cultural identities remained intact.

Bihbahani, the ideologue of Usulism, taught many scholars, some of whom excelled in *ijtihād* in the ensuing generations. As Heern correctly states, his efforts gradually caused Shi'i legal thought to transition from Akhbarism to Usulism. Since he explores Bihbahani's role in Usuli revivalism, Heern needs to examine and elaborate on this figure's thoughts in greater depth. By confining his analysis of Bihbahani's ingenuity and contribution in terms of legal thought to Shi'i legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) to a single chapter (i.e., chapter 6), the discussion is rather brief and superficial. Central to Bihbahani's argument was his insistence that conjecture was the main option available to jurists who sought to attain knowledge during the Imam's occultation. Like his Usuli predecessors, Bihbahani also insisted that every believer must follow the juridical edicts of a *mujtahid*.

It is no exaggeration to state that Bihbahani's depth and scale of discussion on Shi'i *uṣūl al-fiqh* was unprecedented. It was due to him that the authority of reason was re-asserted in Shi'i law. The Usulis' triumph at the beginning of the nineteenth century not only enhanced the *mujtahids*' position in the community, but also placed *ijtihād* at the center of the Shi'i juristic structure of authority, upon which the subsequent institution of *marja'iyah* would be built. In the process, he reestablished the role of reason in Islamic law and rehabilitated *uṣūl al-fiqh*. With him, Usulism became the sole method of deriving legal rulings and the cornerstone of Shi'i legal theory, especially as many Akhbari students accepted his mode of thinking.

Some of the author's statements are contentious, to say the least. For example, he states that Usulis played a role in the Iranian constitutional movement. Can this be attributed to Usulism per se, or did some Usuli scholars intervene to curb the Qajar kings' powers? He also claims that Iranian secular-

ization policies restrained the Usuli establishment (p. 72) and that the movement reemerged during the 1979 Islamic revolution. Did the Shah's modernization policies during the 1960s inhibit the Usuli movement? The link between Usulism and the Iranian revolution is tenuous at best. In fact, many Usuli clerics opted for a politically quiescent posture. Similarly, Heern's claims that Bihbahani and his students embraced Usuli methodology in order to adapt Shi'ism to the changing conditions of the late eighteenth century (p. 86) and that the Usulis "sought to adapt Islamic and particularly Shi'i sources to the emerging modern world in a time of change" (p. 31) can be challenged.

Although a valuable resource for any discourse on Shi'ism and modernity, Heern's work contains certain gaps that need to be filled. His analysis of Usulism and reform would have been enhanced by discussing the goals and methods of Islamic reform and how they could be interwoven with the goals of Usulism. Along the same lines, when examining the Usuli refutation of the Akhbari thesis, he needs to critique the weaknesses in, rather than merely recount, Usuli methodology and approach. The author also has to show how Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92), Ibn Idris, and Bihbahani can be considered reformers within the wider spectrum of Islamic reformation. On what issues did they agree or disagree, and what impact did these reforms have? There is not enough justification to warrant his conclusion that these three figures can be seen as part of the Islamic revivalist movement (p. 148).

Overall, Heern's work is a valuable and welcome addition to the emerging literature on Usulism in contemporary Twelver Shi'ism. Further research is needed to show how both it and the application of text-based *ijtihād* that it espouses can respond to the challenges of contemporary times.

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