

Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi‘ism: From ‘Ali to Post-Khomeini

Hamid Mavani

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Utilizing a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, Hamid Mavani examines the locus of religious authority and its contemporary expression in Twelver Shi‘ism. Starting with the time of the Prophet, he provides a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the doctrine of the Imamate and Shi‘i religious and political authority from traditional, rational, theological, and political perspectives.

The first part of the book, comprising three chapters, focuses on the doctrine of the Imamate and contains some of the material that has already been covered by scholars like Amir Moezzi, Wilferd Madelung, Mousawi, and Maria Massi Dakake. Here, Mavani examines the authority of the Imams and that of the jurists during the Twelfth Imam’s occultation. He stresses the Imams’ spiritual and religious-political authority as well as the ensuing doctrines of *taqlīd* and *ijtihād* during this period. Citing Shi‘i sacred sources, he provides a Shi‘i self-understanding of the concepts underpinning the Imamate, namely, those of *wilāyah* and *walāyah* (the Imams’ moral-spiritual authority).

Mavani argues, convincingly, that Khomeini’s model of governance (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) has received a disproportionate amount of attention in recent times. His theory was only one among others that have been proposed by such scholars as Montazeri, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Fadlallah, and Mahdi Shams al-Din. Other Shi‘i theories of governance have been largely ignored. His discussion and critique of this model is both incisive and erudite, for not only does he examine the views of its proponents and opponents, but he also provides a detailed and nuanced discussion of other possible forms of government and the dangers involved in Iran’s currently centralized form of leadership.

The last three chapters cover material that has been largely neglected by western scholarship on contemporary Islam. This is where Mavani’s major contribution lies: his criticism of traditional *ijtihād* as being deficient and ineffective as regards meeting contemporary challenges (pp. 226-27) and some of the discriminatory rulings that are based upon it, many of which are casuistic, arbitrary, and often based on the principle of secondary rulings.

Most works on religious authority in Shi‘ism focus on the authority of the Imams and the jurists during the Twelfth Imam’s occultation. Mavani proposes other state models to the one practiced in contemporary Iran. Quoting

the thoughts of various Iranian, Iraqi, and Lebanese scholars, he details alternative views on political authority and governance and examines different state models and public endorsements of *wilāyat al-faqīh*. It soon becomes clear that he does not favor the current model, preferring instead other models that require public participation and endorsement.

The special merit of Mavani's work is that he explores the possibility of secularism within the context of an Islamic state facilitating a separation between church and state and ensuring equal rights for all. He argues that the basis of such a state lies beyond the confines of traditional *ijtihād*. *Foundational ijtihād*, as it has been termed, strives to formulate new juridical rulings keeping in mind the Islamic ethos and the ethical-moral spirit of egalitarianism. A state based on this form of *ijtihād* would be a novel political state in the context of the modern nation-state.

This new *ijtihād* could provide a basis for alternative political models offered by eminent Shi'i jurists and the interplay of *ijtihād*'s foundational principles with various disciplines in order to reconstruct Islamic thought and legal theory so that it could provide a basis for a civil society that accommodates pluralism and secularism (p. xii). Mavani mentions scholars like Mojtabeh Shabistari, Mohsen Kadivar, Muhaqqiq Damad, and Abdolkarim Soroush as having put forth creative ideas to reform Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) so as to expand the scope of *ijtihād* (p. xi).

We are told that the proponents of foundational *ijtihād* have revised a theology that looks at the Imams merely as pious and gifted individuals bereft of the sanctity accorded them by other Shi'is. This *ijtihād* is based on a rationalist ethical theory that relies on a rational and scientific approach as well as a philosophically rooted system that has a moral outlook. However, the author does not elaborate upon precisely how this new *ijtihād* will function, the results it will achieve, and how it will resolve new challenges without ignoring the role of traditional Islamic legal theory.

There is little discussion of this new *ijtihād* and how it can ameliorate traditional *ijtihād*. The new *ijtihād* outlined by Mavani can appear arbitrary and often left to the whims of a scholar. Similarly, the author does not discuss a revision of traditional *uṣūl al-fiqh* that undergirds *ijtihād*. He had mentioned in the preface that some contemporary scholars had put forth creative ideas to reform Islamic legal theory, but does not pursue this theme in the book.

Although he quotes Kadivar as stating that the new *ijtihād* model reconstructs theology and ethics so that the intellect is given a more expansive role in decision-making, this theory still contains many gaps. The proposed model of *ijtihād* is conceptually ambiguous and vague, especially as it could form the

basis of new legal rulings and could be used to create a state that would be based on an Islamic ethical-moral vision and be secular at the same time.

In addition, some comments need to be fully explained. For example, the author states that Mulla Ahmad Naraqī favored the jurist's expansive *wilāyah* but only at the theoretical level (p. 196). He does not explain or speculate on the idea of jurists wielding authority that is not to be implemented.

Mavani's approach to the topic is based on a historical-chronological method combined with a textual-critical analysis of the sources and the proposed models of *ijtihād*. He has clearly consulted a vast array of primary and secondary sources on the subject, reflecting the depth and breadth of his scholarship. This book will appeal to graduate students in Islamic studies and undergraduate students interested in political science, reformation in the Muslim world, and contemporary religious/political thought. I would definitely want it in my personal library.

The book opens a window on how various interpretive strategies can be utilized to revisit and revise traditional rulings and how these strategies can shape the social and religious milieus in which more than a billion people live. It also examines the discourse on various contemporary issues, as scholars and jurists are engaged in hermeneutic and interpretive exercises, to provide a coherent re-evaluation of classical formulations and to assert a theory of political governance that will incorporate contemporary understandings of dignity, freedom of conscience, minority rights, and gender equality based on the concept of universal moral values.

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