

BOOK REVIEW

The Shi'i World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity

Edited by FARHAD DAFTARY, AMYN B. SAJOO and SHAINOOL JIWA (London and New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015. Muslim Heritage Series), xvi + 390 pp. Price HB £27.00. EAN 978-1784534776.

Except for a handful of recent sources, there has been a lack of ample introductory level texts suitable for teaching Shi'ism to undergraduate students. Andrew Newman's *Twelver Shiism: Unity and Diversity in the Life of Islam, 632 to 1722* (Edinburgh U.P., 2013), Farhad Daftary's *A History of Shi'i Islam* (I.B. Tauris, 2013) and Najam Haider's *Shi'i Islam: An Introduction* (Cambridge U.P., 2014) have begun to fill in this gap. Daftary, and Aryn Sajoo and Shainool Jiwa, have added to this brief list the essays collected in *The Shi'i World: Pathways in Tradition and Modernity*. This is the fourth volume of the Muslim Heritage Series published by I.B. Tauris in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies. Chapters 1–9 concentrate on historical figures, formative scholars, theological developments, and imperial institutions that are widely considered central to teaching the historical development of Shi'i Islam. Chapters 10–16 pursue topical themes like art, literature, gender, cinema, and music within contemporary global Shi'ism.

Intended for both specialists and non-specialists, the editors' introduction states that Shi'ism has been represented incorrectly and disproportionately by Sunni-oriented scholarship, while certain strands of Shi'ism have also been essentialized as more emblematic or representative of wider global currents than others. They cite the Alevis in Turkey as one prime example that does not 'fit the mold' within the wider corpus of Shi'i scholarship that they seek to address. While this sentiment is correct, several chapters in this volume ignore significant geographies and histories of Shi'i Muslims.

A recurring theme in many of the chapters is the 'pluralism' built into historical and contemporary Shi'ism that emerges from its inherent minoritarian status. The reader will notice that scholars close to the Aga Khans are making a normative claim in support of today's Isma'ili leadership that encourages pluralistic expressions of Muslim thought and culture.

While certain chapters like Asani's depiction of Shi'i ritual (ch. 8) read like a lecture, others such as Jiwa's examination of Fatimid politics (ch. 6) will task the lay reader with navigating a denser field of historical characters and institutions. For this reason, non-specialists may find some difficulty in tackling the entire volume, while specialists will pass over several well-known themes that are written for a more general audience.

In the first chapter titled ‘Remembering Muhammad’, Omid Safi does not restrict his analysis to memories of the Prophet among the Shi‘a. Instead he considers how the wider monotheistic landscape is memorialized through the Prophet’s message, and in turn, how Muslim pluralism receives support from the Qur’ān. The emphasis on pluralism resonates with much of the volume’s wider authorship positing that the Isma‘ili experience remains integral to the wider Shi‘i landscape.

In ch. 2, Reza Shah-Kazemi depicts many of the popular views of Imām ‘Alī between traditional Shi‘i as well as Sunni perspectives. His chapter lucidly surveys the themes of *walāya*, *tauhīd*, the caliphate, the imamate, and the central theological focus on justice common among all Shi‘a. This chapter would nicely serve as a condensed summary to accompany an undergraduate lecture on these themes.

Chapter 3 discusses the historical memory of Imām Ja‘far al-Šādiq and his intellectual significance among scholastics as well as esotericist circles, both Shi‘i and Sunni alike. Karim Crow echoes the sentiments of Šafī al-Dīn Ardabilī, stating, ‘the fact that he [Ja‘far al-Šādiq] was embraced by opposing schools is an acutely relevant lesson in tolerance for our era of intra-Muslim bloodshed’ (p.76).

Andrew Newman’s ch. 4, ‘Legal Traditions’, covers the evolution of Imami legal thought from al-Kulaynī (d. 941, as given in the book) through al-Majlisī (d. 1699). Notably absent from his survey are the Indian influences on Imami jurisprudence either in the Sultanate, Mughal, or colonial eras. His claim that Imami Shi‘ism ‘enjoyed limited popular support’ during its developing years under the Deccan Sultanates (p. 88) is misleading. In fact, Imami Shi‘ism was established thoroughly enough to withstand the Mughal conquest and consequent attempts to re-impose Sunni Islam. Similarly ignored are important jurists of the Mughal and colonial eras such as Nūr Allāh Shūstārī (d. 1610) who served in Lahore and Agra and Sayyid Dildār ‘Alī (d. 1820) of Lucknow.

Chapter 5 by Paul Walker discusses the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian currents within the theologies of prominent historical Isma‘ili and Imami scholars including al-Sijistānī (d. 971?), al-Kirmānī (d. 1021), al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1032), al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274), and Mullā Šadrā (d. 1640). Walker’s conclusions hold that the early Isma‘ili philosophical and esoteric experience cannot be ignored when plotting the intellectual pedigree of wider philosophical Shi‘ism.

Chapters 6 and 7—Shainool Jiwa’s ‘Governance and Pluralism under the Fatimids (909–996 CE)’ and Rula Abisaab’s ‘Moral Authority in the Safawid State’—detail the administrative measures undertaken by two messianic Shi‘i states whose rulers sought to bring down to earth the divine missions of governance granted by the Isma‘ili and Imami conceptions of the imamate. Jiwa points to the non-denominational reading of al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān’s (d. 974) *Dā‘im al-Islām* (*Pillars of Islam*) that advocate for a universal Fatimid state and governance of a pluralistic society, not exclusively Isma‘ili. Abisaab’s survey of the importation and indigenization of Arab ‘Amili jurisprudence in the Safavid realm repeats much of what she has written in more detail elsewhere in her *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (I.B. Tauris, 2004).

Her concluding remarks hold that allowing juristic disagreement and denying any single jurist the exclusive power of deriving legal determinations reinforce a ‘pluralistic ethic of jurisprudence’ (p. 148); yet the reader should not confuse this ‘pluralistic ethic’ with socio-cultural cosmopolitanism or religious pluralism under the highly prosecutorial Safavid state.

Ali Asani’s ch. 8, ‘Devotional Practices’, charts the *taziya* ritual (theatrical mourning of the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn) of Shi‘i Muslims from Iran to South Asia and into Indonesia, where local communities adapted the ritual to suit local tastes. The *rawziā-khānī* (performed recitals commemorating the lives of ‘Alid figures) and *marṣiya* (elegy highly popularized in Urdu retelling the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn) are also considered. Asani provides the reader with poetic translations of Isma‘ili *gināns*—devotional songs recited in Indic vernaculars. This chapter quite attentively points to the cultural, religious, and aesthetic layers of ‘Alid devotion and ritual that inform how Shi‘a Muslims commemorate the past.

Farhad Daftary’s main contribution ‘Shi‘i Communities in History’, arrives halfway through the book, in ch. 9. It provides readers with a broad overview to be expanded upon by the previous chapters, which suggests that it more appropriately belongs at the beginning of the volume. His depiction of Twelver Shi‘ism remains largely Iran-centric, mentioning developments in India—much like Newman—also as an afterthought. Increasingly the Indian landscape has been shown to serve as a catalyst for Akhbari sentiments and philosophical approaches to theology, not to mention as a conduit receiving and returning Sufism to Iran during long stretches of Safavid persecution. The scholarship of Sajjad Rizvi, Akbār Thubūt, Muḥammad Sa‘īd al-Ṭurayhī are informative in this regard.

Zayn Kassam and Bridget Blomfield’s ‘Remembering Fatima and Zaynab: Gender in Perspective’ (ch. 10) focuses on the historical figures of Fāṭima, Zaynab, and Sayyida Nafīsa. The authors detail the historical memory of Fāṭima present within the empire that bore her name, as well as modern memories of pious female ancestors informing actors under the modern Islamic Republic of Iran. The reviewer had hoped for greater consideration given to how gender is inflected within literature, law, mysticism, and other facets of Shi‘ism so as not to relegate ‘the gender question’ to a single, stand-alone chapter. (That is not the fault of the authors but of the editorial board.)

We may consider at this juncture how many of the chapters feature the development and educational work undertaken by the current Aga Khan, who has endowed trusts and agencies to oversee charities that work towards various channels of inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding. While these programmes are undoubtedly prominent, several chapters highlight the role of these agencies at the expense of clearly presenting their research. William Sumit’s otherwise astute discussion of Tajik and Azeri music (ch. 13), for instance, is forced into a narrative that primarily lauds the Aga Khan Music Initiative, while attempting to make relevant rather thin references to the musical theories of the tenth-century Basran Ikhwān al-Safā’. This diverted attention compels him to

produce a tired narrative that imagines a clash between tradition and modernity with reference to musical forms and media, which is not well evidenced (p. 283).

On the other hand, in imagining what could be classified as distinctly Shi'i forms of art, Jonathan Bloom's chapter 'Art and Architecture' (ch.11) remains silent on the architectural preservation projects currently undertaken by the Aga Khan, and his reader is allowed to consider more freely the characteristics that animate scholarly categories. His attention to material objects and shrine sites bolsters the volume's project of articulating how plural Shi'i and Sunni audiences embrace similar art forms. For this reason, his chapter would particularly assist students interested in researching material religion.

Eric Ormsby's chapter, 'Literature' (ch. 12), highlights Shi'i belles-lettristic art forms in prose and poetry. In addition to covering well known ground such as the *Epistles of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, and *The Path of Eloquence (Nahj al-balāgha)* of Imām 'Alī, Ormsby complements this well known core of 'Alid literature with commentary and translations from the poetic careers of al-Mutanabbī (d. 965), al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 1016), Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d.1088), and Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 1221?) to demonstrate how the esoteric and exoteric (*bāṭin* and *ẓāhir*) senses of meaning reflect religious sentiments.

Nacim Pak-Shiraz's 'Shi'ism in Iranian Cinema' (ch. 14) charts how varying tastes have affected the depiction of religion in Iranian film since the mid-twentieth century, from slapstick to the abstract. In contrast with Sumit's clunky depiction of tradition conflicting with modernity, she produces a more nuanced claim about the relationship between modern technology and the traditional purview of textually-mediated religious identity. She writes that cinema 'has opened up a new arena for a modern medium: an opportunity to imaginatively retell the beliefs of a 15-centuries-old religious tradition, as well as the many facets of its expression and experiences' (308–9). The contours of modern Shi'ism thus connect with traditional roots without conflicting or breaking with the past.

Zulfikar Hirji and Karen Ruffle's 'Diasporas' (ch. 15) accounts for the less commonly known Shi'i populations in Southeast Asia, West and sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe, and North America. They leave out certain geographies like South Asia due to the long-established history of Shi'i communities who live in that territory as a '*homeland*' (p. 327). The authors freely admit that between generations, Shi'a have settled into new regions and made themselves part of the wider social fabric of different states, such as the Lebanese Shi'a in Senegal. This chapter is commendable for its scope, and should be assigned to undergraduates as demonstration of the range of diversity among the global Shi'a.

Finally, Aryn Sajoo's 'Modernity: The Ethics of Identity' (ch. 16) arrives at the end of the book. Again, like Daftary's chapter, Sajoo's might, it seems to this reviewer, have been more productive had it appeared earlier to introduce the themes expanded upon in chs. 10–15. Very well written and intended to stimulate reflection, it is surprisingly the only chapter in the book that actually pursues 'modernity' as an analytic category, even though that term appears in the volume's subtitle to be taken up by many more of the authors. Informed by Charles Taylor's conception of the 'social imaginary', Sajoo examines religion fluctuating under and outside of the modern institutions of citizenship,

constitutionalism, and civil society. He claims that Islam possesses ‘an energetic civic cosmopolitanism’, and that ‘Pluralism is no more inherently secular than exclusivism is religious’ (pp. 366–7). One might respond that cosmopolitanism does not necessarily equate with pluralism. Explicitly illiberal forms of pan-Islamism link diverse ethnic and linguistic human geographies, which is ostensibly a sort of cosmopolitanism that does not value religious pluralism. But his point is well taken to educate the secular-minded reader who must confront some of the contradictions brought against the universalizing tendencies of modern Western society and social categories.

Finally, readers are given a helpful glossary of primarily Arabic key terms associated with Shi‘i studies scholarship that will help them navigate ambiguous or novel themes. These are the only instances of formally and fully transliterated non-English terms, raising the question of why full transliterations were included here while only the simplified transliterations and italics were included in the chapters.

What this book sorely neglects is a thorough analysis of Zaydi Shi‘ism in any geographic context, medieval (Gilan) or modern (Qasimid or Republican Yemen). Daftary’s own chapter devotes a modest seven-page subsection to the Zaydis and there are scattered references to Zaydi thought in the nearly 400-page volume. Similarly absent is an examination of any defunct Shi‘i community lost to history, such as the Kaysaniyya or later iterations of Shi‘i *ghulāt*. Regardless, the volume will serve instructors as a helpful teaching tool, especially if one is unable to assign entire monographs by some of the authors. The chapters from Newman, Abisaab, and Walker are digestible summaries of their other scholarship. The chapters by Bloom, Asani, and Pak-Shiraz further allow instructors not to feel bound to teach only the historical development of law and theology, but to explore fine arts and other cultural outlets reflecting Shi‘i sentiments.

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