

# THE TWELVER SHIA IN MODERN TIMES

*Religious Culture & Political History*

EDITED BY

RAINER BRUNNER

AND

WERNER ENDE



BRILL  
LEIDEN · BOSTON · KÖLN  
2001

## “THE TRAGEDY OF FĀṬĪMA AL-ZAHRĀ’” IN THE DEBATE OF TWO SHIITE THEOLOGIAN IN LEBANON

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### INTRODUCTION

The past four years have seen an intense debate which is an interesting example of religiously as well as politically inspired struggle over Shiite historiography. In this article I will describe this controversy, which took place between two tendencies within Shia historiography, as represented by two high ranking Lebanese theologians: al-Sayyid Ja‘far Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī and al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh. These two theologians and their respective followers debated over a short, violent episode in the life of Fāṭima al-Zahrā’, the Prophet’s daughter and wife of Imām ‘Alī, who plays a central role in traditional Shia hagiography.<sup>1</sup> I have chosen this dispute about the “Tragedy of Zahrā’” (*Ma’sāt al-Zahrā’*) as an example, because it enables us to survey these two dichotomous treatments of Shia history and to examine some typical aspects of contemporary Shiite religious thinking. Historicity in this context has a specific function for the different interest groups which are formed behind these conceptions. The debate has strong social and political implications reaching far beyond the boundaries of Lebanon and its Shia community.

The Shiite historians’ struggle will be presented not as something exotic, but rather as two ideal types of different approaches to history and modernity. From a religious point of view, history and salvation constitute an inseparable entity in the form of a “Heilsgeschichte”. History is understood as the incarnation of God’s holy truth. Religious historiography seeks to integrate past and present events into this eschatological perspective, to make them thereby understandable. With the help of symbols, rituals, dogmas and beliefs, religions may

<sup>1</sup> See “Fāṭema”, in: *Et*, Vol. IX, pp. 400–404; L. Veccia Vaglieri, “Fāṭima”, in: *Et*<sup>2</sup>, Vol. II, pp. 841–850.

offer advice, confidence and solace for this life, and also provide the hope of salvation, at least in the thereafter. For this purpose, the Shiite faith offers an elaborate iconography of healing and mediating saints like the twelve Imams, Zaynab and Fāṭima.

This combination of intellect (*ratio*) and emotion is probably the reason for the strong appeal of religions throughout time. But their relationship is not at all unproblematic, and especially in our age there is pressure to explain the metaphysical and emotional aspects of religion. A lot of miracles and mythical descriptions no longer appear reasonable, and many traditional and religiously legitimated social rules are no longer adequate for the new circumstances of globalization, which for example implies closer contact with other faiths.<sup>2</sup>

The two representatives of Shiite historiography offer two different types of possible reaction: Ja'far Murtaḍā tries to escape into the obscurantist dogmatism of the myths and the cordoning off of his own community, whereas Faḍlallāh endeavors to formulate a rational and more up-to-date interpretation of religion, which he wants to open up for a dialogue with members of other faiths and even with unbelievers.

#### THE ACTORS

Al-Sayyid Ja'far Murtaḍā al-Āmilī was born 1945 in 'Aytā al-Zaṭṭ in the South Lebanese district of Bint Jubayyil. His father, the theologian Muṣṭafā Murtaḍā al-Āmilī, gave him his first lessons in theology, which he deepened during his studies in Najaf (1962–1968) and, after 1968, in Qum. For a long time he lived in the theological center of Qum in Iran, and he still visits the country regularly and maintains good contacts to clergymen there.<sup>3</sup> At present he is the director of *al-Markaz al-Islāmī li-l-Dirāsāt* in Ḥārat Ḥrayk, Beirut. Murtaḍā is a theological historian by profession who has published more than 30 titles, focusing on the Shiite interpretation of Islamic history and other typically Shiite themes like the political thinking

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of religious symbols and their function in the contemporary Shia Islamist movements in Lebanon see my *Islamismus bei den Schiiten im Libanon*.

<sup>3</sup> See Muḥammad Murtaḍā, *al-Faḍīha*, pp. 11f.

of the Imams.<sup>4</sup> He is regarded as a representative of the so-called "Historical School" (*al-Madrasa al-tā'rikhiyyā*). One of his latest books, *Ma'sāt al-Zahrā'* ("The Tragedy of Zahrā'"),<sup>5</sup> provoked a wide-ranging and intensive controversy, not only about his main positions towards Fāṭima, but also about his historical method, the character and interpretation of Shia history, political strategies and the position of the *Marja' al-Taqlīd*.<sup>6</sup> It was mainly this last aspect which made the controversy so furious and emotional, because his book was seen as an attack on Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh.

Al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh was born in Najaf (Iraq) in 1935, and comes from a famous Shiite clerical family from South Lebanon. In 1966 he returned from Iraq to Lebanon, where he founded some social-charitable organizations and theological institutes. His political career started in 1982, when he became the intellectual and theological spearhead of the Shiite Islamic Movement, and was given the title of "Spiritual Guide" (*al-murshīd al-rūḥī*) of *Ḥizb Allāh*. Faḍlallāh was the pioneer of the Shiite Islamic Movement during its process of accommodation to Lebanese conditions and its adoption of a more nationalist vocabulary, often described as its "Lebanonization". He is nowadays recognized by many Shiis inside and outside of Lebanon as their *Marja'*. Because of his modern reformist and political critical positions he also enjoys a good reputation in secular circles and among members of other faiths in Lebanon.<sup>7</sup>

The third person involved—or rather the "object" of the controversy—was Fāṭima al-Zahrā'. In her double function as the Prophet's daughter and the first Imam's wife, she became one of the central

<sup>4</sup> A list of 35 publications can be found *ibid.*, pp. 12f. His son, Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Āmilī, has established a publishing house in Beirut, Dār al-Sira, which edited most of these works.

<sup>5</sup> J. Murtaḍā al-Āmilī, *Ma'sāt al-Zahrā'*, 2 vols., Beirut, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> The "source of imitation", which is the title for the highest-ranking theologian of the Shia. See J. Calmard, "Mardja'-i taqlīd", in: *EP*<sup>2</sup>, Vol. VI, pp. 548–556.

<sup>7</sup> For his personality and career see: Kramer, "The Oracle of Hizbullah", Rosiny, *Islamismus bei den Schiiten im Libanon*, pp. 142–5. Nowadays, most of his books are printed by Dār al-Malāk, a publishing house which is run by his son Aḥmad Muḥammad Faḍlallāh. Faḍlallāh was one of the first Islamist leaders who discovered the World Wide Web for his purposes. The interested reader may gain some impression of his religious, social and political stances by visiting his website at [www.bayynat.org.lb](http://www.bayynat.org.lb). There, his Friday sermons at the "Two Imam Mosque" in Ḥārat Ḥrayk, Beirut, are regularly transmitted in an English version. [www.mabarrat.org.lb](http://www.mabarrat.org.lb) shows the activities of his social-charitable institutions.

figures of Shiite belief, which sees her inheritance as a main proof for the legitimate aspiration of Imām ‘Alī to be the first Caliph. Fāṭima herself defended this claim by arguing and mourning. Her fate is one of the primary landmarks distinguishing the Shiite belief from the Sunni mainstream of Islam.

#### THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE TRAGEDY OF ZAHRĀ’

The causes of the controversy were some interpretations offered by Faḍlallāh who aims at reaching a modern, reasonable understanding even of the metaphysical aspects of his religion. From the point of view of Faḍlallāh’s conservative opponents, the straw that broke the camel’s back was a talk he gave in 1993 during an internal meeting with some activist Islamist women in Beirut. There he questioned some historical details about Fāṭima which play a central role in the traditional Shiite hagiography.<sup>8</sup> “I do not allow myself to be influenced by traditions (*ahādīth*) which state that the crowd broke her rib, beat her on her face and so on . . .”. He fiercely criticized the plenty of metaphysical stories about her creation out of a celestial light and of her marriage in heaven. Instead, the transmitters should have put more emphasis on her religious, social and political activities.<sup>9</sup> Thereby, he writes in another passage, Fāṭima could become a model for the modern activist Muslima and help her to reach even the highest level of religious authority: “All this [the reports of her socio-political activities] shows us that it is absolutely possible for women to enter the social and cultural life while acknowledging their moral needs. Therefore, there is no obstacle for a woman to become a *Mujtahida* and for people to follow her *taqlīd* (model of imitation).”<sup>10</sup>

In elaborating the social and political circumstances of the historical situation and in considering psychological aspects, Faḍlallāh depicts the Prophets, the Imams and Fāṭima as mainly human beings who have understandable reasons for their habits and actions, some of which may even be criticized. Another aim of his treatment of

Islamic history is to overcome some dogmatic beliefs of the Shia which cut it off from other faiths and in a number of cases create hostility towards Sunni Islam. Therefore, he elaborates the common denominators of all the heavenly religions, and he shows them in such a rationalist and positive manner that even unbelievers could accept them.

These two aims of Faḍlallāh—questioning metaphysical beliefs by rational reasoning and overcoming the provocative aspects of Shia dogmas—gave rise to a heavy counterattack of some traditional high-ranking theologians, especially from Qum. Ja‘far Murtaḍā became the spokesman and spearhead of this tendency. In his work on the “Tragedy of Fāṭima” of 1997 he not only defends, but even exaggerates the miraculous aspects of Shia belief. His two volume work is filled with attacks on the sinful Sunni usurpers of the Caliphate, of laments about the badly tyrannized Fāṭima (*al-mazlūma*) and of complaints that the Shiites have lost their “right” (*al-ḥaqq*).

The core of this quarrel is an episode which took place shortly after the death of the Prophet. Abū Bakr had just been nominated by an assembly of the Prophet’s companions as the Caliph, or, according to Shiite interpretation, he had usurped it from Imām ‘Alī. Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and a few other companions of the Prophet were furious with ‘Alī, because he had rejected the legitimacy of Abū Bakr’s claim to the Caliphate. Therefore, they planned to grab him and take him to the mosque, where he would be forced to succumb and give his oath of allegiance (*bay‘a*) to Abū Bakr. What they actually did can hardly be reconstructed. But Ja‘far Murtaḍā lists and discusses hundreds of notes, proofs and arguments about the ensuing attack from different traditions, drawing them together in a description of a really tragic event: The group of armed men went to the house of ‘Alī and Fāṭima, taking with them firewood and hot coals. They threatened to set fire to the house. They burnt the door and broke it down, although Fāṭima was just opening it for them. ‘Umar pressed Fāṭima with the door-frame to the wall, thus breaking a rib and killing her unborn son Muḥsin. Either ‘Umar or Qunfudh or Khālid ibn al-Walīd or perhaps even all of them together beat her either with their fists or with their sheathed weapons. Finally, they set the house on fire.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Copies of the recorded talk reached the theological seminaries of Qum where they caused some excitement among the high-ranking ‘*Ulamā*’. Some extracts are printed in ‘*Alam al-Dīn*’: “*Tafāṣīl al-khilāf bayn Faḍlallāh wa-Īrān wa-Ḥizb Allāh*”, *al-Waṭan al-‘Arabī*, 7.1.1994, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Faḍlallāh, *Dunyā l-mar‘a*, p. 125.

<sup>11</sup> The single parts of the story are treated in different contexts in Murtaḍā al-‘*Āmilī*, *Mā’sāt al-Zahrā’*, vol. I. A short summing-up can be found on p. 119. In

Murtaḍā admits that no single one of the reports can account for all of these details, and that each one of the authors has omitted parts. But, as he does not see any contradiction between them, he concludes that all of them are accurate.<sup>12</sup> The main interpretations by Ja‘far Murtaḍā are not new, though he proclaims that he has found some new details and proofs for this story.

Never naming Faḍlallāh directly in his book, Murtaḍā criticizes “somebody” (*al-ba‘d*) in a very hostile manner, which set the tone for a consecutive chain of polemics, involving several books with attacks and counterattacks.<sup>13</sup> As this battle is conducted with personal disparagement, foot-note-battles, exaggerations, shortened or even forged citations taken out of context, and as references are sometimes quoted at third or fourth hand, the arguments now and then read as if they are talking about two totally different subjects. The whole debate over Fāṭima did not take place in a particularly structured manner, because questions of dogma, methodology, the authority of contemporary clerics and many more were touched upon and intermingled. In the following sections, I present a few exemplary controversies in order to give an impression of both the intellectual quality of and the antagonisms involved in the debate.

#### HOW MUCH MYSTICS DOES THE SHIA NEED?

The argument of Faḍlallāh’s defenders is that most of the stories listed by Murtaḍā are only weakly documented or that the reports are too confusingly contradictory to make up a consistent story. Besides he ignored all the critical sources which do not fit into his concept. Maybe Abū Bakr and ‘Umar only threatened to burn Fāṭima’s house? As the attacking group was then so much filled with

the second volume, pp. 9–219, Murtaḍā lists hundreds of scattered hints from various sources.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> Books defending the position of Faḍlallāh are: al-Shākhūrī al-Bahrānī, *Marja‘īyyat al-marḥala*, 1998, and Nūr al-Dīn, *Ma‘ṣāt kitāb al-ma‘ṣāt*, 1997. (A third book, written by Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, *Hawāmish naqdīyya*, was not available to me). Books defending Ja‘far Murtaḍā’s position are: Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī, *Khalfīyāt*, 1997, Murtaḍā, *al-Faḍīha*, 1997, and Abū al-Sa‘ūd al-Qaṭīfī, *Jā‘a al-ḥaqq*, 1998. In addition, a lot of leaflets and pamphlets circulated among the Shia community inside and outside of Lebanon. A very polemic and hostile pamphlet was circulated in Beirut in the summer of 1997 under the title *Fitnat Faḍlallāh*. Presumably the author’s name, al-Ṣāfi, is a pseudonym.

love and respect for the Prophet’s daughter, how could they have committed such crimes in good conscience? The main critique of the excessive descriptions is that exaggerating the hard-to-prove legendary details would be anachronistic and, moreover, politically explosive, because they stir up confessionalist animosities between Sunna and Shia in Lebanon and in the world. Faḍlallāh does not deny that there was an attack against Zahrā’, which, considering all the upset during this period, was very likely to happen. But it would be hair-splitting to quibble about the details, given the seriousness of the contemporary global political situation. Today one should concern oneself with essential problems such as the aggression of the “world arrogance” and the conspiracy which tries to portray the Shia as a terrorist sect. He and his followers emphasize that it is more important that Islam should remain unified than that such historical details should be finally settled.<sup>14</sup> They even go as far as to claim that the secret services would be pleased by the fragmenting impact of such a sectarianist argumentation on the Islamic community.<sup>15</sup>

Faḍlallāh stresses the human traits of the Shia “saints” in order to introduce them as a model for contemporary daily life and politics. For example he interprets the *ḥadīth* in which Fāṭima was called “the mother of her father” (*umm abīhā*) as a sign of the understandable and all-too-human desire of the Prophet Muḥammad for emotional affection and support, because he had already lost so many beloved relatives. But for Murtaḍā such an interpretation is a sacrilege because it depicts Muḥammad as an imperfect human being who is susceptible to poor, earthly sentiments. In his interpretation, the *ḥadīth* simply means that Zahrā’ took care of her father as mothers take care of their children.<sup>16</sup>

Murtaḍā considers the mythical aspects of Fāṭima as essential components of Shiite belief. Minimizing their importance or even denying them would mean to question the core of the religion, endanger the faith of the people, or even deny the existence of God.<sup>17</sup> He lists

<sup>14</sup> Nūr al-Dīn, *Ma‘ṣāt kitāb al-ma‘ṣāt*, pp. 32, 183ff., al-Shākhūrī al-Bahrānī, *Marja‘īyyat al-marḥala*, pp. 189ff.

<sup>15</sup> Nūr al-Dīn, *Ma‘ṣāt kitāb al-ma‘ṣāt*, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> See Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī, *Ma‘ṣāt al-Zahrā’*, vol. I, pp. 59f., where he attacks this humanizing interpretation of the *ḥadīth* by Faḍlallāh. As a countermove, Nūr al-Dīn (*Ma‘ṣāt kitāb al-ma‘ṣāt*, pp. 88–91) and al-Shākhūrī al-Bahrānī (*Marja‘īyyat al-marḥala*, pp. 153f.) defend Faḍlallāh’s position as it would not be defamatory for Muḥammad to long for motherly love.

<sup>17</sup> Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī, *Ma‘ṣāt al-Zahrā’*, p. 84.

all the proofs he has found for the claims that Fāṭima was created out of a paradise fruit and that she talked with her mother when she was still in her womb.<sup>18</sup> Murtaḍā also relates at length how she never menstruated and all of the births of her children happened without a single drop of blood.<sup>19</sup> In his understanding, mankind became tired of human explanatory theories, and thus many Muslims returned to their faith. When Faḍlallāh depicts the saints and many holy traditions as “humanly made”, he just destroys their newly found confidence in religion.<sup>20</sup> The school of Murtaḍā defends the typical Shiite interpretation of history, which is believed to be the only true one. It is a religious duty to testify to the truth (*al-ḥaqīqa*) and to defend its right (*al-ḥaqq*). In the Shiite interpretation, the family of the Prophet was deprived of its right, and therefore the true believers shall mourn their fate, contest the crimes and engage in order to restore the “right” and the “truth” respectively.

The method of this school is a predominantly textual one. To find some forgotten written sources, to eliminate errors or defects in already known texts, to verify biographical notes and to write commentaries and meta-commentaries on the sources is their main tool. In this archeology of traditions Murtaḍā goes to great lengths to reconstruct his assumedly preformed and everlasting, absolute divine truth, which just has to be unveiled, spread and defended—even against intracommunal opponents or innovators (*mujaddidūn*) like Faḍlallāh. Murtaḍā sees nothing new in what Faḍlallāh calls his “innovations” in historical understanding, as the Sunnis and especially the Wahhabis have always used the same arguments against the Shia. But a real Shii should not weaken, but defend his community.<sup>21</sup> As evidence for Faḍlallāh’s alleged deviation from Shia Islam, he notes that he uses *qiyās* (argument by analogy), which in Murtaḍā’s understanding has no base in Shiite methodology, that he suggests giving up the third *shahāda* of the Shiite Islamic creed (“I confess that ‘Alī

is the favorite [*walī*] of Allāh”) and that he condemns the excessive ‘*Ashūrā*’-rituals. To sum up, in the eyes of his opponents Faḍlallāh departed from the methodology, the beliefs, the basic dogmas and the ritual practice of Shia Islam if not of Islam itself.<sup>22</sup>

Murtaḍā’s opponents in the “Rationalist School” (*al-madrasa al-‘aqliyya*) depict such arguments as reactionary and as falling far behind reformist theologians of the 20th century. Such a parochial mentality would deter all non-Shii believers. Instead, they stress rational reasoning as the main methodological principle of historiography. In their interpretation, the study of the textual sources and the traditions alone is not sufficient for understanding their meaning. Such material has to be examined “in the light of its time”. Even religious and “holy” history can no longer be considered as timelessly true, the eternal emanation of the nouminous, but must be critically reflected upon.<sup>23</sup> Faḍlallāh and his school assume that—with the exception of the Koran—all textual sources are historical products of their time. All theological interpretation and legal deduction, even concerning the Koran—and this means nearly the whole corpus of the *fiqh*—is just “human-made” and therefore fallible, depending on time and place. Therefore, no absolute truth exists.<sup>24</sup>

Faḍlallāh introduces modern modes of reasoning, especially sociological considerations and psychological reflections, into his thesis. The saints are no longer transfigured solely as personal mediators to God and sources of solace. Instead, they are stripped of their transcendent characteristics and transformed into representatives or symbols of a program worth of imitation. Instead of fatalistically mourning their fates, human beings should take them as inspirations for an active participation in society, the struggle against tyranny and the search for a better world. The Shiite saints provide universal models for the whole of mankind irrespective of individual belief.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 92–101. Nūr al-Dīn defends Faḍlallāh’s opposite viewpoint that such an anaemic condition would have necessitated a medical treatment rather than being a proof for her honor; see *Ma’sāt kitāb al-ma’sāt*, pp. 98–101.

<sup>20</sup> Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī, “Li-mādha Ma’sāt al-Zahrā’?” pp. 52f. In his book *Khalfiyāt*, Murtaḍā mainly lists and refutes references of Faḍlallāh in which he emphasizes the human aspects of the Prophets, Imams and other saints.

<sup>21</sup> Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī, *Khalfiyāt*, pp. 219ff. al-Ṣāfi, *Fitnat Faḍlallāh*, describes Faḍlallāh as the spearhead of a conspiracy of Wahhabism, freemasonry and “secret services”, who plan to destroy Shiism from within.

<sup>22</sup> Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī, *Ma’sāt al-Zahrā’*, vol. I, p. 162: “The big accumulation of deviating fatwas of only one person [Faḍlallāh] makes him leave the line of his faith’s legal order.” See also his *Khalfiyāt*, p. 40, 275ff., 302f. Murtaḍā, *al-Fadīha*, pp. 43–6, lists a lot of citations incriminating the allegedly anti-Shii ideology of Faḍlallāh.

<sup>23</sup> Nūr al-Dīn emphasizes that criteria like “truth” (*ḥaqq*) and “falsehood” (*bāṭil*) have to be avoided by any critical historian. Historians who represent a sect or an ideology tend to use historical documents in a selective way. See his *Ma’sāt kitāb al-ma’sāt*, pp. 13, 73f. For his concept of a critical historiography in general see pp. 7–19.

<sup>24</sup> Murtaḍā al-‘Āmilī lists some of these statements by Faḍlallāh, which he strongly contradicts; see *Ma’sāt al-Zahrā’*, vol. I, pp. 45ff.

With such an understanding, Faḍlallāh has paved the way for many modern interpretations of religious duties and rights, especially concerning young Shiite women and men. The two theologians operate with two very different concepts of human nature. For example, for Murtaḍā the *mukhaddara*, the woman who is totally separated from men and secluded in her house, seems to be his ideal,<sup>25</sup> whereas Faḍlallāh encourages women to take part in social life and does not see them as inferior to men.<sup>26</sup> The latter depicts Fāṭima and her husband ‘Alī as a model for the modern Islamic couple as they shared the housework.<sup>27</sup>

#### THE POLITICAL CONTROVERSY IN LEBANON

The schools of thought summarized above correspond to two different strategies for coping with the multiconfessional character of Lebanese society and politics. The Rationalist School propagates a critical, universalist understanding of religion. Its representatives emphasize the common ground of the different Muslim confessions and even of all monotheistic religions. Therefore, they try to play down the provocative distinctiveness of Shiite mythology. Faḍlallāh targets the different religious communities of Lebanon and even secular groups such as nationalists and communists. With a view to them, he stresses the universalist face of both Shia and Islam, which he interprets in a very rationalist and even secular manner. In his view, Islamic anthropology and ethics are compatible with that of other beliefs. He follows the strategies of *taqrīb* (the mitigation of inter-Muslim differences) and *tauḥīd* (the unification of all Muslim believers in the Islamic *umma*). But Faḍlallāh even goes as far as dropping the adjectives “Muslim” and “Islamic” and speaks of the unification of mankind in a universal community.<sup>28</sup> He rejects the pejorative description of Non-Muslims as “impure” (*najas*). “I consider every human

being as pure (*tāhīr*), no matter if he is an unbeliever (*kāfir*) or a Muslim. As a human being, no one is impure. Probably someone is impure in his convictions, in his sensations and feelings. But there is not a single Islamic legal hint that human beings as such are impure.”<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, the Historical School follows another strategy for the *tā’fīyya*, the rivalry within the multiconfessional Lebanese system. They stress the peculiarities of the Shiite rituals and saints in order to strengthen their own faith and community or even to stress its distinctness from other communities. The aim is to protect or even to enlarge the chances and resources of their own community as it competes with the others. It is a common characteristic of such a traditional religious historiography that the group sees itself as a community of fate (“Schicksalsgemeinschaft”) with a determinist affiliation and closed boundaries.

#### THE STRUGGLE OVER THE *MARJA’IYYA*

Many of Faḍlallāh’s followers see Murtaḍā’s book as a hidden attack on the former’s reputation as a *Marja’ al-Taqlīd*.<sup>30</sup> The controversy therefore also has an international religio-political dimension, as it reflects the struggle over *Marja’iyya* which is taking place in the aftermath of the deaths of Imām al-Khumaynī (d. 1989) and Grand Āyatullāh Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū’ī (d. 1992). It is not stated openly, but can nevertheless be read between the lines, that they suspect other groups are backing Ja’far Murtaḍā in his attacks. Some of Murtaḍā’s supporters, such as al-Mīrzā Jawād al-Tabrīzī, Muḥammad Taqī al-Bahjat and Muḥammad Sa’īd al-Ṭabātabā’ī al-Ḥakīm are also considered *Marāji’* (pl. of *Marja’*) by their followers. Another strong opponent of Faḍlallāh has been one of his former teachers in Najaf, Muḥammad al-Rūḥānī, who became furious with Faḍlallāh for not having proposed him as a *Marja’*.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 257f.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Faḍlallāh’s two works *Dunyā l-shabāb*, 1995, and *Dunyā l-mar’a*, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> “The Prophet made al-Zahrā’ prepare the dough and bread, and he made ‘Alī clean the house and prepare the firewood. This shows that sharing the housework is nothing despicable for the male.” Faḍlallāh, *Dunyā l-mar’a*, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> For example, when in the 1980s Hizb Allāh was still propagating an “Islamic Republic” for Lebanon, Faḍlallāh’s slogan was to create a “human state” (*dawlat al-insān*). See Rosiny, *Islamismus*, pp. 220–226.

<sup>29</sup> Faḍlallāh, *Dunyā l-shabāb*, p. 219.

<sup>30</sup> Nūr al-Dīn, *Ma’sāt kitāb al-ma’sāt*, pp. 193ff.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Alam al-Dīn: “Tafāṣīl” (s. above fn. 8), p. 34. The author suspects that al-Rūḥānī was responsible for spreading the tape with Faḍlallāh’s disrespectful talk about Fāṭima, which triggered off the whole controversy over the prophet’s daughter. ‘Alam al-Dīn lists as a further important opponent the late Grand Āyatullāh Gulpāyḡānī. Many statements in support of Murtaḍā are printed in Abū al-Sa’īd al-Qatīfī, *Jā’a al-ḥaqq*, pp. 213ff., and Murtaḍā, *al-Faḍīḥa*, pp. 253ff.

The whole story might also be seen as a subtle attack by the Iranian state clergy on an inconvenient Lebanese competitor for the highest rank of Shia theology, as 'Alī Akbar Khāmana'ī regards himself as the *Marja'* of all Shiites outside of Iran.<sup>32</sup> But these "Iranian" enemies nevertheless might be useful for Faḍlallāh, as they strengthen his reputation among Arabs who prefer to see one of their own in the position of *Marja'iyya*.

Neither the struggle for power among the Shiite theologians nor the furious debate over Fāṭima have come to an end so far. Ja'far Murtaḍā al-Āmilī with his book on Fāṭima embodies the uneasiness and discontent with some of the sudden innovations of Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, which can be found especially in the religiously conservative circles of the Shiite community. The controversy has been charged with so much sentiment and aggression because it coincides with a religious and political power struggle over *Marja'iyya* and over the control of the Lebanese Shiite community.

To sum up, the central controversy between the two schools may be expressed in the questions: How much mystics and exclusivity does the Shia need in order to survive? How much rationalism does it need in order to be credible under contemporary conditions? The answers presented in this article are in fact the two sides of the same coin. Most of the ordinary believers will try to find an answer which contains elements of both: the emotional affection of the transcendent and miraculous elements of religion as well as the rational reasoning of a modern theology. And Lebanese rarely eat their meal as hot as they cook it. During my research on Shia publishing houses in Beirut in 1997/98,<sup>33</sup> all of the editors I met and who are involved in publishing and distributing the above-mentioned controversial books emphasized that the debate is just an "academic" one. In their pragmatic and business-minded way, most of them print and sell the books of both sides.

#### POSTSCRIPT

A series of further books critical of Faḍlallāh has been published in the last two years, and the language of the attacks has become

<sup>32</sup> 'Alam al-Dīn, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> See Rosiny, *Shia's Publishing in Lebanon*, Berlin 2000.

more and more hostile. Muḥammad 'Alī al-Hāshimī al-Mashhadī published a collection of statements and *fatwās* by several high ranking '*ulamā'*' from Qum in which they accuse him of *inhirāf* (deviation).<sup>34</sup> There was an attack by an anonymous writer who used the pseudonym Muslim Ghayūr and who accused Faḍlallāh of having left the basis of Islam. The title of the series is "the turmoils (*fitan*) of the deviators".<sup>35</sup>

On 7 April 2000 there was a curious incident which may have been an attempt to assassinate Faḍlallāh during his Friday sermon. The Lebanese press speculated that there was a connection to his quarrel with Ja'far Murtaḍā al-Āmilī,<sup>36</sup> while Faḍlallāh tried to play down the attack as the isolated deed of a single "youngster".<sup>37</sup> But the assassination attempt, which certainly has to be interpreted in the light of the controversy on Fāṭima al-Zahrā', again showed that the struggle is much more than just an academic debate.

<sup>34</sup> al-Mashhadī, Muḥammad 'Alī al-Hāshimī, *al-Hawza al-'ilmīyya tudīnu al-inhīrāf*, n.p. 1999, 2nd ed.

<sup>35</sup> Ghayūr, Muslim, *Dīn bi-lā Islām*, Beirut, Dār al-Hudā, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> "Man aṭlaqa al-raṣāṣ 'alā Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh?", in: al-Waṭan al-'Arabī, No. 1207, 12.4.2000, pp. 22-26.

<sup>37</sup> See his interview on LBC-television, Kalām al-Nās, 11.5.2000.