

THE OTHER SHIITES

From the Mediterranean to Central Asia

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Offprint



PETER LANG

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

ISBN 978-3-03911-289-0

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The Twelver Shia Online: Challenges for its Religious Authorities¹

Introduction

The technical terminology of the Internet has been entering the language in many fields. “Network” has become a synonym for informal, more or less loosely organized social connections among individuals, non-governmental and governmental institutions. “Networking” denotes a social activity of searching for “links” in order to acquire new resources for one’s own benefit. The Internet mirrors and even symbolizes contemporary society: an ever changing substrate in which all people are interconnected by invisible bonds without necessarily knowing each other personally. In a way, the limits between reality and virtual reality are becoming more and more diffuse.

It is fascinating to observe how religions, which are somehow more accustomed than scientists to virtual reality, are coping with this technological revolution. Shiite Muslims have adopted the Internet quite easily as a tool for their purposes and have integrated it into their world of beliefs and religious practice. Its diffuse, cross-border medium seems to harmonize with their specific social experience and religious needs.

1 A former version of this article has been published in *Maghreb–Machrek* 178 (2003–2004), 59–73, under the title “Internet et la marja‘iyya: L’autorité religieuse au défi des nouveaux médias”.

The impact of new media on the formation of the Shiite clerical hierarchy

Since the nineteenth century, new means of mass education, communication and transportation have been introduced into the Middle East. These have intensified and deepened translocal contacts among the formerly dispersed Shiite communities of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the Arab Gulf countries, and they have deeply influenced the conception of religious normativity and authority. The growing sedentarization of the Arab tribes during the nineteenth century, the huge waves of urbanization in the twentieth century, the improvements in mass higher education through reforms to the state school system, the tremendous increase in commercial book publishing, the spread of mass media such as radio and television and the recent introduction of satellite TV and the Internet: all these trends have heralded fundamental changes in the conception of religious authority within Shiism. For example, the development and spread of the *marja' al-taqlid* as the highest-ranking Shiite legal expert (*mujtahid*) is strongly connected to these improved facilities of communication and mobilization.² It became easier for believers to refer important questions to the eminent legal experts at Najaf, Karbala and Qom and to pay their religious dues to them, so that *marja's* gradually built up networks of communication facilities and educational and charitable services, as well as publishing their own works. Educated layers were thus increasingly able to read these works, and to gain immediate access to information that had previously been mediated by a chain of regional and local representatives (*wakils*). All this strengthened the central authority of the *marja's* at the expense of local clergymen.³

2 Moussavi highlights the importance of the printing press, which spread through the region in the late nineteenth century and facilitated the publishing of the *risala 'amaliya* works of the *marja's* (A. K. Moussavi, *Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam: From the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja'*, Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1996, 38).

3 D. J. Stewart, "Islamic Juridical Hierarchies and the Office of Marji' al-Taqlid" in L. Clarke (ed.), *Shi'ite Heritage*, Binghampton: Global Publications, 2001, 154.

High-ranking *mujtahids* also involved themselves more in day-to-day politics as they became able to intervene and mobilize their supporters on a short-term basis, even from abroad via telecommunications or leaflets. In Iran, the Tobacco Revolt of 1891–92 and the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) were stirred by the mobilization of senior Iranian *mujtahids* residing in Iraq, who used modern technologies such as the telegraph to transmit their verdicts and demands.⁴ The same could also be observed in the late 1970s, when audio tapes with inflammatory sermons of Ayatollah Khomeini and other opponents of the Shah were smuggled into Iran and became an important tool for revolutionary mobilization.⁵

We are now experiencing a new step in this *information revolution*, as the spread of the Internet further "enlarges the public space of discourse about Islam".⁶ It is still difficult to predict what impact this will have on the development of religious authority in Shiite Islam. Will it strengthen the position of the established authorities, who are able to afford the new technology and to pay a huge staff to manage and translate their websites?⁷ This may fuel a process in which the Shiite theological hierarchy more and more focuses on the *marja' al-taqlid*. The institutionalization and consolidation of his charitable and educational

4 M. Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1985, 205; Y. Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 49.

5 A. Srebetny-Mohammadi and A. Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

6 J. W. Anderson, "The Internet and Islam's New Interpreters" in D. F. Eickelman et al. (eds), *New Media in the Muslim World*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999, 48.

7 'Ali al-Sistani, actually the most respected *marja'* in the Arab world, operates several websites, some of them in up to 27 languages! Apart from Arabic, <http://www.aalulbayt.org> and <http://www.al-shia.com> are translated into English, French, Russian, Chinese, German, Turkish, Kurmanji, Sorani, Tajik, Azeri, Bulgarian, Hausa, Fulani, Burmese, Urdu, Bosnian, Swahili, Bengali, Italian, Hindi, Spanish and Thai. Further sites of Sistani are: <http://www.rafed.net>, <http://www.imamhadi.net>, <http://www.imamreza.net>, <http://www.aqaed.com> and many more.

network may gain fresh momentum through its management and promotion via the Internet.

But the *marja'iyya* might also face its biggest challenge, since the new medium makes access easier to the kind of religious information and knowledge that used to be the monopoly of an elite. The Internet intensifies competition among the interpreters of Islamic teachings and religious normative conduct. Hence, the function of middle and low-ranking *mujtahids* and '*ulama*' as intermediaries (*wakils*) to the *marja's* may also be further eroded. This probably compels them to establish a following of their own and to bid for recognition as a *marja'* much earlier than before, as only then can they receive adequate donations and build up their own networks of institutions. This may explain the constantly increasing number of claimants to the *marja'iyya* since the decease of Ruhullah Khomeini (d. 1989) and Abu al-Qasim Khu'i (d. 1992), the two most recognized *marja's* of the 1980s.

Religious Authority in Shia Islam

In Shia Islam the mediation between believers and God takes place through sacred rites and holy places, via oral transmission or scripture as a formalized form of linguistic communication, in localities such as *hawzas*, mosques, *Husayniyyas* and *ma'atim* that constitute an organizational framework for the transmission of knowledge and for religious representation, and finally via descendants of the prophet Muhammad, the *sayyids*, and figures of extraordinary learning, charisma or commitment. Religious personalities manage these channels of communication. They transmit and interpret the content, but they also gain their authority by determining the relevance of these media and by controlling access to them.

Several shifts may be observed within and between these types of mediation, under the circumstances of a modernity that also challenges the position of the religious authorities. Specific local rites are increas-

ingly complemented, or even replaced, by translocal practices. Parochial habits are superseded by abstract norms on a regional, national or even global level, which are more and more internalized by believers. Scripture and recently multimedia carriers replace the oral transmission of doctrines and legends. Personal religious instruction by local agents gives way to teaching through formalized mass education and even self-instruction through books, magazines, video tapes, mass media and digital media such as CD-ROM and the Internet. Better infrastructure as well as the growing complexity of modern societies leads to the formation of diversified networks: *hawzas* for learning and teaching; mosques and *husayniyyas* for practising collective rituals; publishing houses, radio and TV stations for spreading knowledge; and other institutions for managing modern religious "enterprises" such as welfare services, public schools and offices for contact between believers and religious personnel. Face-to-face relations between believers and local religious personnel give way to contacts with distant high-ranking '*ulama*', which have become much easier thanks to modern tools of communication and transportation.

As we have mentioned already, the changes in Shia Islam run parallel to the formation, elaboration and institutionalization of religious authority, which manifests itself at its highest in the position of the *marja' al-taqlid*, the "most learned" (*al-a'lam*) among the *mujtahids*.⁸ He satisfies the "emulation impulse" for ordinary believers (*muqallids*), who have to choose one in the first place, then follow his *fatwas* and pay their religious duties (*al-huquq al-shar'iyya*), the *khums* and *zakat*, and donations (*sadaqa*) to him. The *marja's* play an important role in determining ritual practice and normative behaviour, adapting them to the needs of changing circumstances. They write numerous legal treatises, which form an important segment of contemporary Shiite religious publishing.⁹ Whole

8 For an Islamic justification of the principle of *a'lam*iyya, see M. I. Jannati, "Al-masar al-tarikhi li-utruhat luzum taqlid al-a'lam" in *Ara' fi-l-marja'iyya al-shi'iyya li majmu'a min al-bahithin*, Beirut: Dar al-Rawda, 1994, 87–109.

9 S. Rosiny, *Shi'a Publishing in Lebanon: With Special Reference to Islamic and Islamist Publications*, Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000, 37ff.

networks of educational and charitable institutions are financed and organized by them. In some cases, they even became the spiritual leader of a political Islamic movement, perhaps with its own armed militia.

Apart from these organizational tools held by some younger *marja's*, and apart from the state clergy in Iran who appropriated governmental power under Khomeini's doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, an informal gaining of status and authority among believers is still the main path for legal experts in the Shiite communities. They have no coercive means at their disposal, only moral pressure and, best of all, the distribution of certain benefits to help them secure acceptance of their rulings.

The process of gaining and legitimizing religious authority is far from being formalized. Rather, it is an intellectual competition and a social struggle for acceptance as a *mujtahid* (with higher status among fellow '*ulama'*') and ultimately as a *marja' al-taqlid*. Ideally there should be only one supreme *marja'* leading the whole Shia community, but in recent times there have been always several *marja's* simultaneously. They are not regarded as infallible, and their *ijtihad* may lead them to different opinions on the same issue. The *mujtahid* who wishes to become a *marja'* has to prove his learning through numerous publications, and he has to build his own network of followers among the '*ulama'*' and the believers (*muqallids*). Furthermore, new doctrines have been introduced recently which allow the *muqallid* to choose among the *fatwas* of several *marja's*, perhaps through some interpretation even of dead ones (*taqlid al-mayyit*). Whereas the mainstream still restricts the powers of *ijtihad* to the juridical-theological specialist, more liberal interpretations go so far as to allow the educated layman to practise *ijtihad*. All this leads to a high degree of dynamism and plurality in Shiite jurisprudence.¹⁰ Rivalry among *mujtahids* may include apologetic debate, defamation campaigns and sometimes even assassination

10 R. Badry, "Marja'iyya and Shura", in R. Brunner and W. Ende (eds), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001, 204ff.

attempts.¹¹ Usually, however, communication is the crucial element in the acquisition and implementation of status and authority.

The Internet, as a new tool of communication, influences and accelerates the changes described above. The following examples of homepages¹² show the wide range of possible influence over legitimate religious norms and authority. It is therefore interesting to investigate the extent to which the Internet may challenge the established channels for the creation and legitimation of religious authority in Shia Islam.

Types and aims of Shiite homepages

There are special portals through which the interested person easily enters the "Shia Web". Some of these offer encyclopaedic information on Shiite history and doctrines, saints and rituals, holy sites and much more. They also provide sets of links to other sites, especially those of high-ranking theologians.¹³

The organizations of '*ulama'*' at the centres for the teaching of theology, especially those of the *hawzas* in Qom in Iran and Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, present their own pages. These contain typically exten-

- 11 S. Rosiny, "The Tragedy of Fatima az-Zahra': A Shi'a Historians' Debate in Lebanon", in R. Brunner and W. Ende (eds), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001, 207–219. Some assassinations of leading Shiite clerics in Iraq since April 2003, especially the killings of 'Abd al-Majid al-Khu'i on 7.4.2003 and Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim on 29.8.2003 as well as the failed attempt on the lives of 'Ali al-Sistani and Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim, should also be read in the context of this struggle for religious authority.
- 12 The World Wide Web is highly volatile. All the URL-addresses mentioned in this article were last checked in March 2007.
- 13 See for example: <http://www.al-islam.org>, <http://www.al-shia.org>. Further examples are listed in Appendix 3.

sive material on the biographies and writings of the main *mujtahids* at the centres, as well as links to their personal homepages. Online eulogies emphasize the spiritual significance of their biographies, presenting their original teachers and their own writings as proofs of learning, and praising their social and political commitment; all this is considered essential if a *mujtahid* is to gain personal prestige and eventually become a *marja'*.

Many high-ranking legal experts, especially the *marja's*, increasingly use the Internet as a means of intercourse with their followers (*muqallids*). They answer questions on ritual and customary practice via e-mail, offer their prayers and preaching as text, audio or even video downloads on the web, present their own biographical data and publications, advertise their institutions, and sometimes collect dues via e-banking.¹⁴ These digital forms of communication may one day replace the established face-to-face contact through which local and regional *'ulama'* act as personal intermediaries and representatives of the *marja'*. Meanwhile, the offices of nearly all *marja's*, even those of some dead ones, run their own homepages. There are sites of Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim (assassinated in August 2003), Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim, 'Ali Khamene'i, Abu-l-Qasim Khu'i (d. 1992), Ruhullah Khomeini (d. 1989), Fadil Lankarani, Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (assassinated in 1999), Muhammad al-Shirazi (d. 2001), 'Ali al-Sistani and many more.¹⁵

Ritual is one of the major topics on the Shia Web. Many homepages offer prayer timetables and support for the organization of *ziyara* and *hajj* trips; they transmit photo galleries, videos, prayers, lectures or sermons on ritual practices like those of 'Ashura'.¹⁶ Since the target groups for these pages reach far beyond the local Shiite communities of the Middle East, online instruction concerning the pillars of Islam – the

duties of prayer, pilgrimage, fasting and alms-giving – and various rituals create a new kind of “global code” for Shiite religious behaviour, which transcends local practice. This reinforces a general trend toward “Islamic globalization”, whereby local differences and special customs that are pleasing in the sight of God are levelled down through juridical norms of the *shari'a* that are regarded as universally binding on all Muslims. Many of the homepages are aimed at scattered Shiite communities living abroad, from Canada to New Zealand, from Sweden to South Africa, and offer them advice on permissible, recommended and forbidden forms of personal conduct which must also fit their varied needs and circumstances. The Internet helps such communities to develop new organizational structures and to keep in touch with their countries of origin.¹⁷ Most pages are largely given over to characterizations of the organizational structure, the membership and the range of activities. To intensify and channel communication among the members of dispersed communities – through religious discourse as well as such things as business relations and marriage announcements¹⁸ – is a special aim of the institutions residing in Western countries.

In the religious field, the Internet strengthens the impact of the written word as a translocal and transpersonal form of communication. Although most of the homepages are made less monotonous by means of sounds, picture galleries, recorded sermons and sometimes even moving pictures, they lack the special directness of oral communications directed at a certain time and place to a fixed audience. Whole libraries of standard Shia treatises as well as recent publications may be downloaded or read online. One of the most extensive Shiite sites, maintained by the Ahlul-Bait World Assembly in Teheran, offers a huge

14 For a list of such homepages see Appendix 1.

15 See Appendices 1 and 2.

16 See e.g. <http://www.ashura.com>, <http://www.hajj.org>, <http://www.al-islam.org/help/karbala/index.htm>, <http://www.al-islam.org/gallery/>, <http://www.duas.org>, <http://www.karbala.com>.

17 <http://www.shialink.org> listed 146 homepages of local Shia communities, about half of them based in North America, Europe and Australia. Many of the local communities may also be found in the huge Shia link-collections (see appendix 3).

18 Some examples of specifically Shia (but not necessarily religious) websites organizing the communities abroad are: <http://www.shiabusiness.com> for “business within the community”, <http://www.shia-jobs.com>, a Shia job agency which is no longer accessible, and <http://www.shiamatch.com> for marriage advertisements.

amount of digitalized and translated Islamic resources. This "Digital Islamic Library Project" (DILP) describes itself as

a non-profit private Internet-based group of people operating throughout the world. Our objectives are to digitize and present on the Internet quality Islamic resources, related to the history, law, practice, and society of the Islamic religion and the Muslim peoples with particular emphasis on Twelver Shia Islamic school of thought. The purpose is to facilitate dissemination of knowledge through this new medium to locations where such resources are not commonly or easily accessible.¹⁹

Some Shia publishing houses offer their publications on the net.²⁰ Both long-established and newly founded institutions and organizations, such as *hawzas*,²¹ mosques, *Husayniyyas*²² and social charitable organizations (*mabarrat*),²³ present themselves on the Internet and canvas support to strengthen their influence in the community. You can organize online your hajj to Mecca or your pilgrimage (*ziyara*) to the Imams' shrines.²⁴

Islamic political parties, sometimes connected to a specific *marja'*, are another important presence on the "Shia Web". For example, the General Secretary of the Lebanese Hizbullah, Hasan Nasrallah, serves

19 See the self-portrayal on <http://www.al-islam.org/info>. See also M. Brückner, "Der Ayatollah im Netz – offizielle zwölferschitische Websites", *Oriens* 43/4 (2002), 537ff. Further examples of online libraries are: <http://www.hadith.net> and <http://www.rafed.net>.

20 Some examples: <http://www.shiabooks.net/>, <http://www.al-khoei.org/catalog/>, <http://www.fadakbooks.com/>, <http://www.daralmahaja.com>, <http://shiatime.tripod.com/>. Many of the publishers listed in <http://www.darislam.com/home/khadamat/libraries.htm> (no more available) are Shi'ite.

21 Examples of this type are: <http://www.Hawzah.net>, <http://www.al-shia.com>.

22 See e. g. <http://www.alhussain.com>.

23 Examples are: al Mabarrat (<http://www.mabarrat.org.lb>), the charitable association of Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, and the Khu'i-Foundation (<http://www.alkhoei.org.uk>), an international network which was brought into being by the late *marja'* Abu al-Qasim Khu'i (d. 1992) and is maintained by his followers and relatives.

24 See for example the "Hajj Assistance Committee for North America", <http://www.ziyarat.org>.

as the representative in Lebanon of the Iranian *marja'* 'Ali Khamene'i.²⁵ The Iraqi Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya (Islamic Call Party) had close links to the *marja'* Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr²⁶, who was executed in 1980. Al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Thawra al-Islamiyya fi l-'Iraq (The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI²⁷) was led by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim²⁸ until his assassination in August 2003; he was considered by his followers as a *marja'* on political and social issues. Finally, Munazzamat al-'Amal al-Islami (Organization of Islamic Action) is led by Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi, who is similarly considered a *marja'* by his followers.²⁹

The Lebanese theologian Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah was probably the first *marja'* to post his own homepage, in 1997.³⁰ He also uses the web for his own "questions and answers", and he is one of the few who reflect the impact of Internet technology. In an interview with the Lebanese daily *Al-Nahar* in April 2000, he praised the Internet for the fact that it transcends national borders and bypasses the restrictive censorship of Arab states; it thus gives people access to his readings and writings in countries where his books are still forbidden, mostly for sectarian reasons. Defending the Internet against those who regard it as just another tool of Western imperialist propaganda, Fadlallah insists that one should take over the positive elements of Western culture and use the Internet to argue against its negative impulses. The main aim of his and similar homepages is to present a positive picture of the "original Islamic culture" (*al-thaqafa al-islamiyya al-asila*), thereby correcting the

25 <http://www.hizbollah.org>, <http://www.hizbollah.tv>, <http://www.hezbollah.org> (these sites are often disturbed by hackers), <http://www.nasrollah.org>.

26 <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Cyprus/8613> for Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr; <http://www.islamiodawaparty.org> is the current site of the party, which underwent several splits in the last few decades.

27 <http://www.sciri.ws>.

28 <http://www.al-hakim.com>, <http://www.alshahid.com> (no more available).

29 <http://www.almodarresi.com>.

30 The seminaries in Qom and the office of the *marja'* Muhammad Rida al-Gulpaigani (d. 1993) started to use digital media for religious sources and for internal communication via Intranet in the middle of the 1980s already.

negative image of Islam in the West.³¹ But such a missionary purpose is not dominant in *marja's* sites directed at a Shiite audience.

The *marja's* websites and challenges to their religious authority

The website of a *marja'* usually starts with a section on his biography. It contains links to some of his publications, lists ceremonial and other activities and affiliated centres, offers advice on how to fulfil religious duties (*ibadat*), and sometimes makes it possible to listen to the latest Friday sermon. The Question & Answers or *fatwa* section is an important part of the site; it becomes very popular, and relatively easy, for anyone interested to ask him for legal advice via e-mail. Emigrants, for example, who may have lost contact with their local Imam, are now able to get in touch directly with their *marja'*. Sheikh Muhammad al-Qubaisi, the "Internet sheikh" of the Lebanese *marja'* Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, told me in an interview in March 2001 that one hundred queries reach his office each day via e-mail, another five to ten via fax and fewer than five by letter. Fadlallah personally proof-reads all his answers.³²

Though posted before the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, the following passage from Ayatollah Sistani's homepage underlines the benefits, but also mentions the technical and political problems, of Internet use in the Middle East:

One of the main functions of a *Marji e Taqlid* [sic] is to answer the many *fiqh* questions put forward to him. In the past, questions were usually asked directly by those who personally went to see the *Marji-e-Taqlid* [sic]. Years later, letters and

31 *Al-Nahar*, 12 April 2000.

32 In the already mentioned interview in *Al-Nahar*, 12 April 2000, Fadlallah said that his web page was visited by 20,000 persons a month, and that twenty questions of *fiqh* were reaching him every day via e-mail.

faxes became more common, and now with the ease of the internet e-mail looks likely to take over. It is in response to this that we have decided to set up this page. You may ask any *fiqh* question(s) on Islamic Issues where the opinion of Ayatollah Seestani is required [...]. However, please be patient for the replies to your questions as the Ayatollah lives in Iraq, where there is very limited Internet Access. Hence all your questions have to be forwarded using more traditional methods.³³

Some of the *marja's* post huge *fatwa*-collections online, or even their whole *risala 'amaliyya* (standardized set of questions and answers), usually in Arabic and sometimes in Farsi and English. This genre reaches a much wider audience than ever before. With the many *fatwas* offered online, it is much easier to search for and to compare the various teachings. There are plans to list the *fatwas* of several *marja's* alongside one another, which would ease the choice between them.³⁴ But this remains music of the future, and even search engines for individual sites are still an exception. Such possibilities may further intensify the rivalry among *marja's*, who may feel it necessary to distinguish themselves by offering different answers on points of law rather than just repeating those given by others. In struggling for young and solvent supporters – the main target group of the Internet – they are forced to modernize their legal findings. For example, educated, self-confident young women have become an important new target group for Islamic teaching, and many pages offer special sections for them.³⁵

33 See <http://www.najaf.org/English/question/question.htm> (Office of 'Ali al-Sistani in Europe, 30.6.2000, no longer available).

34 Interview of the author with Sheikh al-Qubaysi, March 2001, Beirut.

35 The World Ahle-Bait Women's Organization maintains its own site at : <http://www.wawo.cjb.net> (not updated since 2001).

Conclusion

The Internet appears to harmonize in several respects with the structure of the Shiite communities. Relations between legal experts and believers have always transcended local and national borders. The *'ulama'* form networks through common studies and teachers, reciprocal visits and sometimes marriage bonds. They often share a common fate of sectarian discrimination and political repression. The *mujtahids'* teachings spread via envoys and local representatives from the centres of learning to the local communities of their followers, from whom they gain their income by religious taxes and donations. The *muqallids* submit their *fatwa* requests via the *wakils* to their *marja'*, in a permanent exchange of information, communication and money. Although the Shia theologians have developed a degree of hierarchy, their connections are still rudimentary and lack a formalized procedure for the acquisition and organization of religious authority. Legitimate authority is created through the recognition of other *mujtahids* and the conviction of one's own followers – that is, through communication.

For these reasons, use of the Internet for communication and as a tool for the organization of communities may lead to substantially changed relations among the *marja' al-taqlid*, his colleagues, his representatives and his followers. The intermediaries between *marja'* and believers are losing some of their influence, as the psychological and physical barriers to the direct questioning of a *marja'* decrease. Face-to-face contact may become the exception in the future, when believers send their queries by e-mail, pay their dues by e-banking and listen to the Friday sermon online.

Alliances between *marja's* have become commonplace, while rival claimants to the *marja'iyya* may be either tolerated, sidelined, shunned or simply rejected. Boxes in which a site organizer provides links to other Shia homepages are therefore of special interest for the study of religious authority, since they offer an opportunity to show respect – or, if the link is ignored, disrespect – for the learning of a fellow *mujtahid*.

In some cases, an opponent may even openly dispute the legitimacy of another *marja'*.³⁶

The plurality of self-styled *marja's* and the plethora of online *fatwas* raise some essential questions that are now being discussed among intellectuals. Is it permissible for the individual to select the most favourable of a series of *fatwas*? The practice of choosing among the *fatwas* of several *marja's*, which is called *tab'id* (sharing out), has recently been permitted by the Lebanese *marja'* Fadlallah.³⁷ But it may further undermine the restriction of *ijtihad* to *mujtahids*, since it demands a high level of consciousness for a believer to choose among several *fatwas* on his own. Indeed, he may come close to practising *ijtihad* himself.

Usually, the *muqallid* chooses his *marja'* on the recommendation of a *mujtahid*, or at least of a fellow believer. But how can one gauge the reliability of religious judgements on the Internet? The individual is forced to take greater responsibility for his own solutions. Internet users still seem to underestimate new options like online discussion groups on religious, social and political issues.³⁸ But, if the chat-rooms were to become more popular, they could further erode the exclusive authority of the *mujtahids* to answer the believers' questions. Does the Internet therefore undermine the theological hierarchy and facilitate a lay inter-

36 In his section "*istifta'at*", Kazim al-Ha'iri, an Iraqi *marja'* residing in Qom, openly questions the authority of Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah to practice *ijtihad* (see <http://www.alhaeri.org>). Obviously this "*fatwa*" is the result of political rivalry more than of a qualified judgment, for it appears under the rubric "Questions concerning the situation in Iraq" (though Fadlallah resides in Lebanon) and both Fadlallah and Ha'iri are competing for *muqallids* among the same spectrum of politicized Shiites in Iraq.

37 T. Aziz, "Fadlallah and the Remaking of the Marja'iya" in L.S. Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 205–215; M.H. Fadlallah, *Al-Nadwa*, vol. 1, Beirut: Dar al-Malak, 1997, 508 ff.

38 See <http://www.shiachat.com>.

pretation of theology and normative action? Might this lead to a process of “secularization within Shia Islam”?³⁹

On the one hand, the confusing array of contradictory rules and information may also lead to new forms of parochial closure and dogmatism; the pages of traditionalist *mujtahids* are often filled with puffed-up eulogies, but may contain no significant legal opinion concerning topical social or political issues. On the other hand, even these traditionalists feel compelled to present themselves on the Web in order to reach their *muqallids* and, indirectly, to remind them to pay their religious dues. This sets up pressure for them to participate in the intra-communal discourse.

Historically it took years if not decades for the “information revolution” to reach a wider audience and to precipitate fundamental social changes. The Internet as such will hardly cause a revolution inside the Shia clergy’s hierarchy. But it will further intensify and accelerate a process of change driven by the challenges of modernity. The influence of political power in Iran and Iraq, the party politics of Lebanon, Bahrain and recently Iraq, the socio-political situation of exile communities, the processes of social and economic change, and last but not least the personal conduct of the religious authorities themselves are important factors in the transformation of religious authority in Twelver Shia Islam.

39 For a more general account of this widening of popular discourse on religious issues, see D. F. Eickelman, “Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies”, *American Ethnologist* 19/4 (1992), 643–655; D. F. Eickelman, and J. W. Anderson (eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Appendix 1: Websites of *marja's*

- al-Ardabili, 'Abd al-Karim al-Musawi: <http://www.ardebili.org>
 Fadlallah, Muhammad Husayn: <http://www.bayynat.org>,
<http://www.mabarrat.org.lb> (no more available)
 Al-Fayad, Muhammad Ishaq: <http://www.alfayadh.net>
 al-Gulpaigani, Lutfallah al-Safi: <http://www.saafi.ir>
 al-Ha'iri, Kazim: <http://www.alhaeri.org>
 al-Hakim, Muhammad Baqir (assassinated 2003): <http://www.al-hakim.com>
 al-Hakim, Muhammad Sa'id: <http://www.alhakeem.com>
 al-Khamene'i, 'Ali: <http://www.leader.ir>, <http://www.khamenei.ir/>
 al-Khu'i, Abu al-Qasim (d. 1992): <http://www.alkhoei.org.uk>,
<http://www.alseraj.net>
 al-Khomeini, Ruhullah (d. 1989): <http://www.khomeini.org>
 al-Lankarani, Muhammad Fadil: <http://www.lankarani.com>
 Makarim al-Shirazi, Nasir: <http://makaremshirazi.org>,
<http://www.amiralmomenin.net>
 Misbah Yazdi, Muhammad Taqi: <http://www.mesbahyazdi.org>
 al-Mudarrisi, Muhammad Taqi: <http://www.almodarresi.com>,
<http://www.modarresi.org>
 al-Muntazari, Husayn 'Ali: <http://www.montazeri.com>
 al-Najafi al-Bakistani, Bashir Husayn: <http://www.alnajafy.com>
 al-Ruhani, Muhammad Sadiq: <http://www.imamrohani.com/>, <http://www.istefia.com>
 al-Sadr, Muhammad Baqir (assassinated 1980):
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Cyprus/8613/>
 al-Sadr, Muhammad Sadiq (assassinated 1999): <http://www.alsader.com> (no more available)
 al-Sana'i, Yusuf: <http://www.saanei.org/> (no more available)
 Shahrudi, Muhammad: <http://www.shahroudi.net>
 al-Shirazi, Muhammad (d. 2001) and Sadiq al-Shirazi (his successor):
<http://www.alshirazi.net>, <http://www.shirazi.org.uk>, <http://alshirazi.com>
 al-Sistani, 'Ali: <http://www.al-shia.com>, <http://www.sistani.org>,
<http://www.1god.org>, <http://www.rafed.net/>, www.imamhadi.net,
www.imamreza.net, <http://www.aqaed.com/>, <http://www.najaf.org>
 al-Tabrizi, Jawad: <http://www.tabrizi.org>

Appendix 2: Useful Link Collections for *marja's* and other *mujtahids*

<http://www.geocities.com/hussaynia/ulama.html>

<http://www.gooya.com/groups.htm>

<http://www.jafariyaneews.com/biographies.htm>

Appendix 3: Further Shiite Link Collections

<http://www.gooya.com>

<http://www.shiasearch.net>

<http://www.topshia.com>

<http://www.shialink.org>

<http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/7261/links.html>

<http://www.imamreza.net/arb/services/islamicsites/index.php>