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## Mavani. H. Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

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**Mavani, H. *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.**

The conflict over the control over the Muslim state and society, which began immediately after the Prophet Muhammad's death and which precipitated an internal struggle over his rightful successor, remains the source of the most profound division in Islam: the Sunni-Shi'a division. Because the struggle over political power was the source of this most important division in Islam, Muslim political theories of state attract considerable attention and are discussed in almost every book on Islam. Sunni Islam is the largest denomination of Islam, constituting nearly 90% of the world's Muslims, while the Shi'a constitute only approximately 10-13% of the world's Muslims. As such, Sunni perspectives typically take precedence in the analyses of Muslim political thought and theories of state, power, and authority, while the perspectives of the Shi'a are often only discussed superficially. The Shi'a concept of *wilayat al-faqih*, meaning the "rule" or "government" of the "jurist" – with the idea of an individual most proficient in the Islamic law and with absolute authority over other as rule being expounded by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1970s – is typically discussed as the last one in the history of Shi'i political thought. Overall, most sources provide a limited look at Shi'a political methodologies and perspectives.

Shi'a political theories are by no means homogeneous. Some of them see Shi'ism as esoteric by nature; others interpret it as a generally political phenomenon. The theories of the Shi'a have evolved considerably, with particular elements remaining debated to this day, including whether the Imam is meant to be exclusively a religious leader (*hidaya*) or whether he should also hold political power (*hukuma*); also disputed is whether there is a rightful place in politics for *ijtihad* (using reason in deliberations over religious and political leadership) or whether ultimate authority must be an issue of divine origin exclusively. There is also disagreement about the political activity of *ulema*, those recognized as scholars of Islam. It is for these reasons that it is a good thing that those interested in Shi'a political thought now have the opportunity to read Hamid Mavani's *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini*, an exhaustive work discussing the entirety of issues related to the Shi'a approach to state, politics, and authority as well as power in Shi'ism. Hamid Mavani Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies in the Department of Religion at Claremont Graduate University was the right person to approach this topic due to his theological background obtained at traditional Muslim institutions, both Shi'a ones, in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, as well as Sunni ones in Egypt, and Western ones (in Canada). Not only is Mavani an expert on traditional Muslim theological and legal methodology who can describe and interpret past and present Shi'a theories, but he can also approach these methodologies from the perspective of modern knowledge and discuss intersecting issues such as the relationships among Shi'a methodologies and pluralism and secularism; relations between state and religion; interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims; and women's rights. Thanks to his expertise in traditional Shi'a theological languages – Persian and Arabic – as well as theological and legal issues themselves, he translates texts discussing this subject matter from these languages into English. Most recently, he translated a text on *jihad* of Ayatollah Salehi Najafabadi, an Iranian scholar, a supporter of Shi'a-Sunni rapprochement. (Ayatollah Salehi Najafabadi's books were published in Iran, but he was under house arrest for many years, and his views were censored.)

The main part of the book begins with a chapter explaining the word *Shi'a* and its origin, the history of Shi'ism and its emergence, and the meaning of key concepts in Shi'a political thought, including *khilafa*, or caliphate, referring to a government led by a caliph, a person considered to be a political and religious successor to the Prophet Muhammad, *wilaya/walaya* (rule, government; sovereign power/guardianship, custodianship), *hubb* and

*mahabba* (love, attachment), and different types of *wilaya* authority (including both legislative and creative). In fact, the chapter discusses 14 topics related to *wilaya*, including infallible leaders, divine guides, esoteric guidance, intercession, and others. Understanding the Shi'a attitude to *wilaya* rule is a key to understanding Shi'a political theories, as the *wilaya* i.e. governance became the absolute center of Shi'a doctrine in the absence of the Twelfth Imam – the last in the line of rightful leaders, the Imams, who disappeared at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and is expected by Shi'a Muslims to someday emerge and bring peace and justice to the world. Shi'a political theories tried to fill the spiritual and state leadership void in order to resolve the problem of who should rule the Muslim world (and how) in the time before the saviour's arrival.

The next chapter outlines the development and changes affecting traditional, theological, philosophical, and mystical approaches to the Imamate in Shi'i thought. This chapter can be summarized with a sentence from the previous chapter: "Scholars adopted different approaches to engage in the systematic study of this central doctrine of Imamate and *wilaya/walaya*. The detailed rational and traditional arguments were gradually articulated and refined with care and diligence, bearing in mind that for the Shi'is it was the very foundation of their faith" (p. 57). Since no theory emerges or develops in a historical or political vacuum, particularly not theories of power or of religious and political authority, the next historical chapter describes the issue of the succession of Prophet Muhammad and analyzes the attitudes of subsequent imams to their contemporary rulers. Mavani observes that Ali – Prophet's son-in-law and the first official male convert to Islam, the fourth caliph, recognized by Shi'a as the first Imam and the rightful successor of the Prophet – considered his power as a caliph to be based on people's support (*bay'a*), which means that even a jurisconsult (*wali al-faqih*) who derived his authority from the infallible Imam, thus legitimizing his power, he believed he should obey the people's will. Chapter four presents models of a Muslim state, designed by Shi'a scholars. These different models disagree on the role of jurisconsults; some argue that jurisconsults have no political power, while others hold that jurisconsults' power is divine and that all individuals must obey jurisconsults unconditionally.

Shi'as are a minority in Islam, but they were the ones who successfully implemented one of the Muslim models of state. Iran, where this first implementation took place, is still an important political player, and its internal workings and construction of its state system is an object of global interest. It therefore comes as no surprise that Khomeini's theory and its evolution are the focus of all of chapter five. Usually the form of governance introduced in Iran by Khomeini – *wilayat al-faqih* – is considered a culmination of the evolution of Shi'a political thought in Islamic studies textbooks, but it appears that despite its effectiveness, this form of governance is a deviation from the most prominent views and theories, as it is based on an esoteric approach to the Imamate. Even though Khomeini's theories seem like a logical conclusion to a series of events which started in 1501 with the proclamation of Shi'a Islam as the state religion in Iran and to a growing political power of the Iranian *ulema* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the "evidence" quoted by Khomeini to prove that *wali al-faqih* represented the comprehensive authority of the Twelfth Imam was purely speculative in nature and therefore constitutes a breach from the classical views.

It is poignant that Mavani does not limit his analysis to the era before Khomeini and Khomeini's theory, as is the case with many works on this subject. Mavani instead takes his examination right up to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which makes his study very up-to-date and enables the reader to gain an insight into fascinating conflicts between today's *ulema* (Islamic scholars or experts) and their respective *fatawa* (legal or expert opinions and interpretations). Such conflicts may be related to issues of great significance, like gender equality, the question whether *ahl adh-dhimma* (Jews and Christians living in a Muslim state) are ritually pure, or even whether smoking constitutes breaking the fast in Ramadan. Some

contentious issues are related to issues associated with Shi'ism and not present in Sunnism, including the postulated ban on self-flagellation during the *Ashura* celebrations.

Partly because of the conflict that ensued after the presidential elections in Iran in 2009, Shi'a experts in theology have started to look more closely at the model of power introduced by Khomeini. This analysis brought them to a conclusion that granting *wali al-faqih* the authority of the Twelfth Imam or divine sovereignty is based on feeble grounds and may lead to dictatorship, thus effectively equating state and religion. This is why chapter six might be the most interesting one. It focuses on the possibility of reconciling secularism with Islam from the perspective of Shi'a theories and views on power, represented by modern experts on theology, including Salehi Najafabadi and Mohsen Kadivar. The chapter has a secondary title "Traditional and foundational *Ijtihad*" because it is the *ijtihad* reform that is necessary, a reform that would make the *ijtihad* relevant to modern world problems and challenges (i.e. new medical and bioethical issues, environmental ethics, freedom of religion, and human rights). The inseparable connection between state and religion commonly ascribed to Islam might be overcome by such interpretations of *Shari'a* (Islamic jurisprudence or law), which try to keep up with the changing social circumstances. Even though *Shari'a* is unchangeable, its interpretations (*fiqh*) are only fallible human readings of the ideal. Thanks to this attitude connected with the rationalist ethical theory, and based on the rational, scientific stance rooted in the Quranic rule of egalitarian justice, we can create some space for secularism or reconcile the separation of religion and state with Islam. Islam, per se, does not provide us with an ideal Muslim state. Models of ruling have changed since the Prophet's times, and the main command included in Qur'an is the creation of a just, ethical political order based on the idea of equality. As the author stresses in the conclusion, the so-called Arab Spring of 2011 has clearly shown that this is what is needed in the Muslim world, including Shi'a Islam.

The Imamate and various approaches to it remain the center of the Shi'a doctrine (one of *usul ad-din*) which affects all other basic doctrinal questions of this Islamic sect, and the conflict over the nature and scope of the Imam's authority has been the reason for divisions within Shi'ism itself. This is why *Religious Authority and Political Thought in Twelver Shi'ism: From Ali to Post-Khomeini* is a must-read for those interested in the concept of power in Shi'ism and its implications. It also characterizes the Shi'a contribution into *ijtihad* theories and Shi'a attempts at making peace with modern times. Hamid Mavani himself is an advocate of the *ijtihad* reform.

The well-developed twenty page-long bibliography that includes primary sources, including those in Arabic and Persian, is a strong aspect of the book. However, in contrast to the bibliography, the index (of terms and names together) is rather short, as it is merely four pages long. This is the only criticism that could be levelled at this work.

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