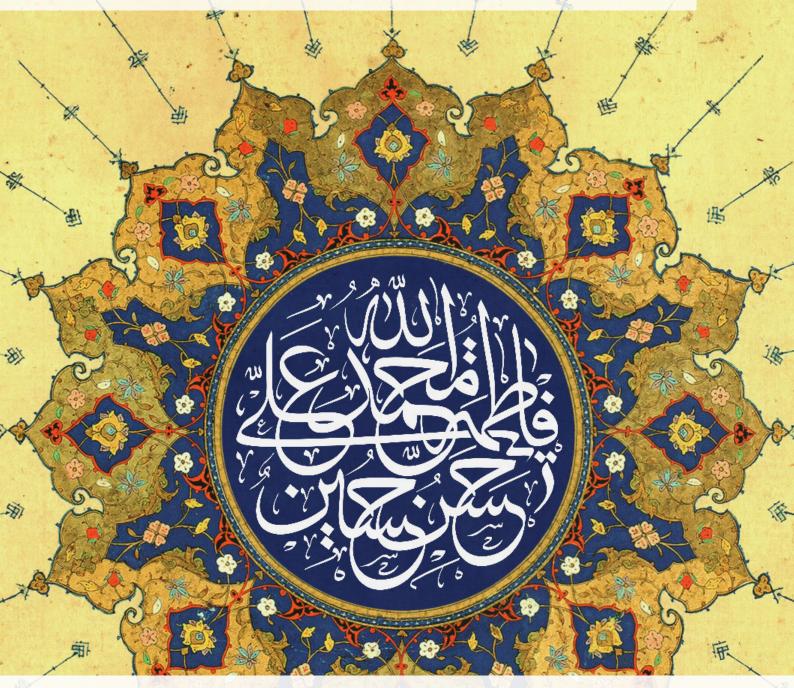
# Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism







December 2021

### The Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs Weatherhead Center for International Affairs

1737 Cambridge Street Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone: (617) 495-4420

Fax: (617) 495-8292

Website: https://shiism.wcfia.harvard.edu

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Cover Photo: This calligraphic illustration represents the Panjtan (the Holy Five): Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali, Hazrat Fatima, Imam Hasan, and Imam Hussain. The name of God is often placed above the Panjtan to illustrate the purity of the Holy Five. All five personalities are revered nearly universally by Muslims of all denominations, but particularly by Shi'a Muslims because of their status as the purest and best representatives of God. Imam Ali married Hazrat Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad; their two sons Imams Hasan and Hussain continued the legitimate line of leadership in the Muslim world — as argued by Shi'a Muslims — following the death of their grandfather Prophet Muhammad and their father, Imam Ali.

August 9, 2015. Credit: Asr-entezar.ir











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# Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism

Proceedings of the International Symposium on Intra-Shi'a Dialogue and Confessional Diversity within Shi'ism at Harvard University (April 5-8, 2021)





### **Editors**

### Ali Asani

Faculty Chair, Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs
Weatherhead Center for International Affairs
Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures, Department of Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations
Murray A. Albertson Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures
Harvard University

### Payam Mohseni

Director, Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs Weatherhead Center for International Affairs Harvard University Email: pmohseni@fas.harvard.edu

### **Mohammad Sagha**

Humanities Teaching Fellow & Lecturer
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
University of Chicago
Email: msagha@uchicago.edu

# Acknowledgements

This report provides a wide spectrum of expertise on transnational Shi'a Muslim communities, cultures, worldviews, and socio-political issues across diverse geographies and time periods. The research highlighted by the contributors represents a unique survey of interdisciplinary approaches and expertise looking across various Shi'a denominations and communities. Such conversations between diverse communities within the Shi'a worlds are quite rare, especially considering the large breadth of Shi'a denominations represented in this report stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans through the Levant, Iran, Iraq and covering communities in Central and South Asia as well as the Western diaspora.

We would like to thank all the speakers and scholars who shared their expertise and experiences at the symposium we hosted on issues relating to "Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism." It is due to their insights that we are able to advance our academic un-derstanding and broaden the public discourse on the multiple layers of complexity and diversity within transnational Shi'a Muslim communities. The nuanced and in-depth analysis provided in these symposium proceedings represent an important contribution to the understudied field of intra-Shi'a dialogue and the broader field of Islamic and Shi'a studies. We would also like to acknowledge and thank all our symposium co-sponsors, including Harvard University's Asia Center, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the South Asia Institute, and the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga, with a special note of appreciation to the generous support provided by the Henry Luce Foundation. Finally, we would like to express our appreciation to the students and research assistants who helped in editing and

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# **Executive Summary**

From April 5th - 8th 2021, the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at the Harvard Weatherhead Center for International Affairs hosted a four-day online symposium entitled "Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism." The symposium brought together over 20 leading specialists and scholars representing interdisciplinary voices across various interpretations of Shi'a Islam in both contemporary and historical contexts. Over 2000 individuals from around the world attended the symposium virtually. Most scholarship on Shi'a Islam has focused on particular Shi'a groups in specific countries or world regions, while less attention has been paid to addressing diversity within Shi'a Islam from a comparative perspective or thinking about how to approach the subject of intra-Shi'a dialogue more broadly. This is even more important as the historical and contemporary legacy of Shi'a Islam is extraordinarily rich and truly global in reach. The symposium, therefore, represented an initial step in a larger scholarly investigation on the historical and contemporary relationship between diverse Shi'a Muslim confessions and social identities ranging from Twelver Ja'faris in Iran, Iraq and Pakistan to Zaydis in the Arabian Peninsula, to Ismailis in Tajikistan and India, to Bektashi Shi'as in the Balkans, and to Shi'a diaspora communities in the West and beyond.

These symposium proceedings contain transcripts of the talks presented by the speakers. These have been lightly edited for clarity. The research and expertise offered covered the diversity of Shi'a thought and communities across denominational lines including Zaydi, Ismaili, Alevi, Alawite, Bektashi, and Twelver Ja'fari Islam and more.

Based on the contributions of symposium participants and the larger conversations fostered therein, we outline a few key points which we should consider as we move forward with further comparative studies on diversity within Shi'a Islam as well as contemporary dialogue between transnational Shi'a communities.

Firstly, the study of Shi'a Islam, similar to the study of Islam in general or other world religions in academia, has historically been mediated through particular conceptualizations of religion—usually through utilizing Eurocentric markers—that tend to project a view from the outside on indigenous Muslim communities. In the academic study of Islam, European experiences of orthodoxy and heterodoxy as well sectarianism and confessional identity are often projected on Muslim communities that replicate Catholic-Protestant divisions or reify Euro-centric definitions of a "sect" or a "religion." However, the idea of such sectarian binaries between people who

adhere to certain worldviews or "religions" can be misleading and does not capture the full spectrum of the eclectic and diverse ways that various beliefs and ideas are practiced by individuals or communities in the past or present. Further study is required to deconstruct and move beyond some of these commonly used religious studies paradigms and pay greater attention to the pluralistic ways that religion, identity, and faith can be understood in different contexts.

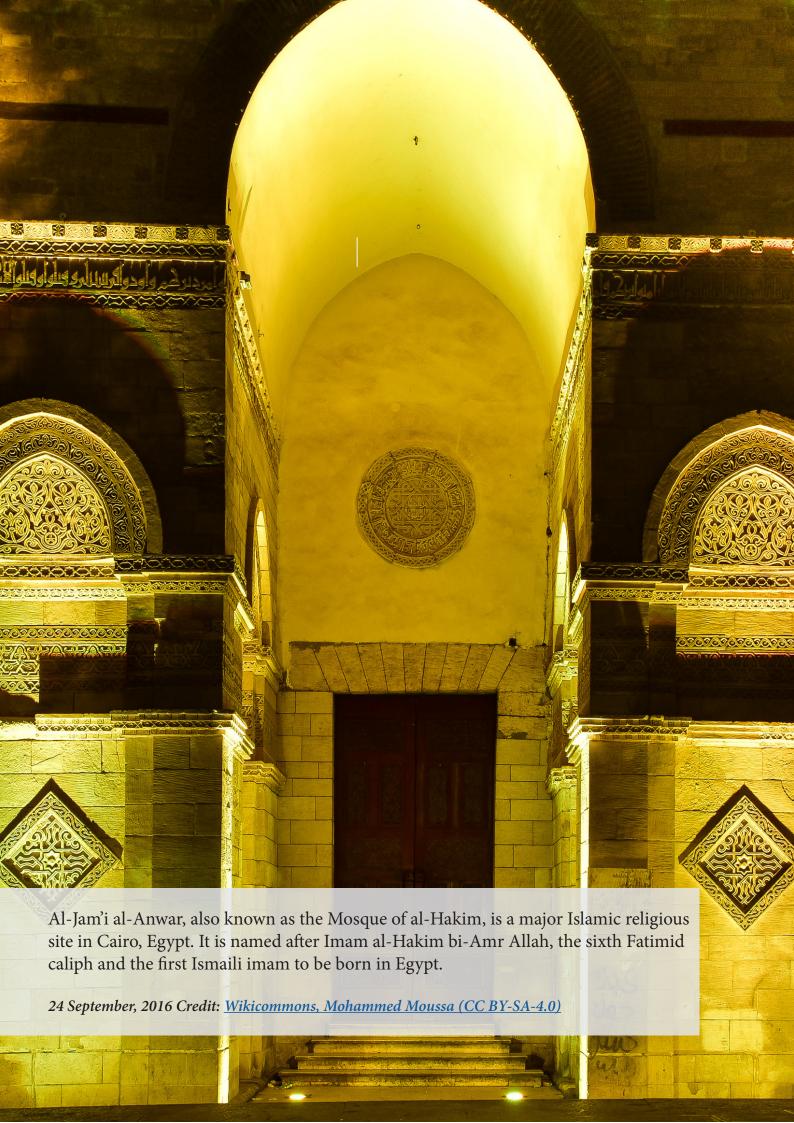
Importantly, as some scholars in the symposium argued, recognizing diversity and difference of opinion does not mean necessarily giving up those differences or unique beliefs ascribed to particular Shi'a denominations. Recognizing differences and plural ways in which Islam can be approached and practiced can be educational for the rich insights it provides. Moreover, dialogue between Shi'a groups should move beyond polemics and areas of theological dispute to the consideration of the various issues, experiences and questions that impact all Shi'as as well as larger humanity. Such important topics may include but are not necessarily limited to: Shi'a philosophy on the meaning of life and transcendence to true humanity; the relationship between God and creation; the role of walaya and love in philosophies of ontology; the concept of Imamate; comparative beliefs in social-ethical norms; the impact of cosmological and ethical thought on art, poetry, and literature, as well as other such issues.

The symposium participants engaged in scholarly debates concerning the study of Shi'a Islam in diverse regions such as the Middle East and South Asia. These discussions, in part, focused on the long history of Shi'ism and its early origins in Islam—not as a later offshoot which some works in the field erroneously categorize Shi'a Islam as. In the Middle East, in particular, which is currently experiencing high degrees of regional instability and insecurity, there is diversity in how Shi'a Islam is being interpreted (or instrumentalized) within relatively understudied grassroots movements affecting politics, culture, society, and inter-state dynamics. The historical marginalization of many Shi'a Muslim communities, such as the Alevis in Turkey or the Alawites in Syria, have contributed to their contemporary sense of self as well as the important question of how they define themselves vis-à-vis the larger Muslim body politic. Varying positions can be found among such groups that alternatively advocate either for larger cosmopolitan integration with other Islamic denominations or those who advocate for more insular looking communal identities, positions which actually cross traditional ideological divides. Moreover, some contributors questioned the focus of many contemporary scholars linking Shi'ism in the Middle East primarily with security concerns—i.e. Shi'a groups only being important as a subject of study when relevant to violent political conflict—which glosses over larger diverse identities and the deep-rooted histories of Shi'a communities in the region spanning over centuries. This can be seen, for example, with the case of the Zaydi Shi'a Muslim

experience in Yemen. Although Shi'ism in Yemen is often viewed thorough an exclusive security lens, the Zaydi community is currently experiencing a cultural and social revivalist movement. This is significant given the loss of the institution of the Zaydi imamate after a millennium of rule in the mid-20th century and the identity challenges this posed to their community. This revivalism, notably, is occurring in the backdrop of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world with a staggering 17 million Yemenis, if not more, on the brink of starvation due to the Saudi blockade and war launched against Yemen.

The diversity of Shi'a Islam in South Asia is also quite significant, including prominent and flourishing Twelver Ja'fari, Nizari Ismaili, and Bohra Ismaili Muslim communities. Each of these communities is quite diverse internally, and they have adopted different socio-political strategies in different contexts in South Asia across time. In addition to their varied levels of political engagement with the modern Pakistani and Indian states, Shi'a Muslim elites have historically played important roles in their respective countries—including Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah, Aga Khan III, the 48th Imam of the Nizari Ismailis and fervent supporter of the Pakistan movement and the founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Historically as well, Shi'as have a long record of paramount importance due to their outsized cultural contributions in the Subcontinent, such as in philosophy, poetry, and mysticism among Ismaili and Twelver Muslims alike, as well as the predominance of Shi'a Muslim dynastic rulers, such as the Oudh dynasty, in the patronage of public religious culture, scholarly production, pilgrimage practices, architecture, and other arenas which have left an indelible impact until today.

When looking at these diverse manifestations of Shi'a Islam across different geographies, time periods, and confessions, it is important to note that the comparative study of Shi'a denominations and their rich histories is still in many ways a nascent enterprise. As has been pointed out above, much work needs to be done especially with regards to pluralism within Islam and especially in the realm of intrafaith dialogue and understanding. It is hoped that efforts such as this one will be a step in the right direction for longer-term study and appreciation for diversity within Shi'a Islam and the depth of its contribution to Islamic civilizations across time and geographic regions.



# Introduction: Discussing Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism

Speakers:

Ali Asani (Harvard University)

Payam Mohseni (Harvard University)

Ali Asani: Hello everyone, my name is Ali Asani and I am the Faculty Chair for the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. I wish to welcome each and every one of you to this unique symposium on Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism. It is particularly meaningful for me that in recent years there has been an increasing number of efforts at Harvard intended to include voices and perspectives of Muslim communities, such as the Shi'a, who have traditionally been marginalized in the academy. In this regard, I am particularly grateful to the Henry Luce Foundation for their generous support of this important initiative. Today, we are honored to have as our keynote speaker, Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an internationally renowned scholar who has made profound and exceptional contributions to the field of Islamic Studies.

It is a particular pleasure for me to welcome him as I have known him for many years. I first met him through my mentor, the late Professor Annemarie Schimmel, who had been good friends with him for many years. In fact, they share not only common interests in Islamic studies but also share the same birthday, April 7th. So I take this opportunity not only to welcome Professor Nasr but also to wish him a very happy birthday. Before I turn over the platform to Dr. Payam Mohseni, the Director of the Shi'ism and Global Affairs Project and really the brains behind this whole initiative, I would like to acknowledge with deep gratitude, the crucial role that Payam and his energetic team have played in making this symposium a reality. So, thank you to Payam and your team, and welcome everyone.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much for your kind introduction, Professor Asani. It was very kind of you. I would also like to express my warm welcome to everyone here

attending our Symposium on Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism hosted by the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

I hope everyone is well and staying safe and healthy. We are very excited for what is truly a unique gathering bringing together experts and scholars of Shi'a thought and communities across Zaydi, Ismaili, Alevi, Alawite, Bektashi, and Twelver Ja'fari Muslim denominations and beyond here at Harvard University. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, we were not able to hold this conference in person as we had originally planned.

However, by hosting the symposium on a virtual platform, this has provided us with even greater reach and participation than we could have imagined. We have received such kind and overwhelming support and outreach from communities, individuals, scholars, and institutes across the world since our advertising for the conference began only last week, with over [2,000] people who have registered for the Symposium. This is a sign I think of the acute interest there is on this topic. This symposium builds off and continues an earlier international symposium we hosted a few years ago [2018] at the Harvard Kennedy School, focusing on sectarian deescalation and Shi'a-Sunni dialogue [The Symposium on Islam and Sectarian De-Escalation]. We hosted leading scholars, clergy, and community leaders to approach the subject of intra-Islamic dialogue and peacebuilding.

I recall when we first started discussing and brainstorming topics for our conference this year, before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Professor Asani immediately stressed the significant work that we could do in understanding the diversity within Shi'ism and to pursue a symposium on intra-Shi'a dialogue, given how little there has been done on the topic and how needed and valuable such an undertaking would be.

While many individuals and institutions have done excellent work, though arguably not enough, on interfaith dialogue between Islam and other religions or on topics within Islam, such as Shi'a-Sunni dialogue, intra-Shi'a dialogue between different Shi'a denominations has been much more lacking. We are hoping this symposium can provide a much-needed venue to begin some of these conversations within and between global Shi'a communities as a first step in a longer dialogue between diverse Muslim groups. This vision highlights some of our main goals at the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs. We were established in 2019 at Harvard University with the goal of advancing and promoting the academic study of Shi'ism with a comprehensive, holistic, and multidisciplinary perspective. Our mission is to undertake advanced research on the multifaceted and diverse manifestations of Shi'ism, both historically and in the contemporary world.

The Project encompasses an interdisciplinary approach with a focus on the history, sociology, theology, and politics of the diverse Shi'a communities and nations across the globe, who number at least 220 million individuals mainly spread across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the West. We actively engage with and incorporate the work of various scholars, students, and community leaders who work on a variety of aspects of Shi'ism and the manifestation of Shi'a thought and identity in civilization across fields of study.

One of our primary areas of focus and interest lies in promoting and studying the diversity and pluralism that exists within Islam. Shi'ism, in general, is very understudied in academia, especially in the modern period. Subjects such as Shi'ism outside the Middle East, in particular, are relatively understudied. The current state of Islamic and religious studies in the United States and beyond often fails to address the rich diversity and pluralism within the Islamic tradition. Instead, educational institutions and primary texts tend to focus on a particular reading of one Sunni tradition as the normative understanding and worldview of Islam, perpetuating a monolithic reading that marginalizes other Sunni interpretations of Islam as well as Shi'ism and the complexity of many [diverse] Islamic traditions. To help correct this inaccurate portrayal, we seek to provide a platform to expand the scope of the study of Islam and to include other prominent modes of thought under the Islamic umbrella, including Shi'ism and its diverse manifestations, such as Twelver Shi'ism, Zaydism, Ismailism, and other expressions.

There is especially a dearth of focus and work on thinking about how to approach the subject of intra-Shi'a dialogue rather than interfaith dialogue. We sincerely hope this symposium will mark the beginning of a larger dialogue on the historical relationship between Shi'a groups, encourage intellectual and scholarly conversations between them, and explore contemporary areas of convergence and diversity that intersect with transnational Shi'a groups ranging from Twelvers in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Pakistan; to Zaydis in Yemen and Saudi Arabia; to Ismailis in Tajikistan, India, and the Arabian Peninsula; to Bektashi Shi'as in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Eastern Mediterranean; and to the very diverse and historical Shi'a diaspora communities in the West and beyond, including Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. We hope this platform and our project can be used to push forth greater research and knowledge of not just different Shi'a denominations, communities, and cultural traditions, but also for forging pathways and vehicles for bringing greater understanding, closeness, and engagement between different Shi'a communities.

The symposium will begin shortly with our distinguished keynote address by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, followed by a panel today on "Intra-Shi'a Dialogue." Tomorrow,

Tuesday, April 6th, we have a panel on "Shi'ism and Sufism: Islamic Traditions of Esoterism." Then, we will shift our focus to learning about the Diversity of Shi'ism in South Asia and the Modern Middle East. On Wednesday, April 7th, we will have a panel on "Shi'ism and Minority Communal Dynamics in South Asia." And our last panel for the symposium will be on Thursday, April 8th on "Shi'a Confessional Identities and Politics in the Middle East." I would like to conclude by thanking our Project Faculty Co-Chairs Professors Ali Asani and Melani Cammett for all of their support and guidance throughout the years. I would also like to express our gratitude to Professor Hassan Abbas for his continued support and advice for this project and all of the work we do. I would also like to thank the Henry Luce Foundation, and in particular, the Religion and International Affairs Program, which has generously supported our project from its inception.

Additionally, I would like to express our appreciation for our symposium co-sponsors including: the Asia Center, the Center for Middle East Studies, and the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute (all at Harvard University), as well as the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto for their support with this conference. I would like to turn now to introduce our keynote speaker, Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who will be giving a special address for us on the subject of intra-Shi'a dialogue entitled, "Shi'ism: Unity and Diversity." We are very honored to have Dr. Nasr speak for us today as he is one of the foremost and preeminent scholars of Shi'ism and Islamic and Persian philosophy in the West. He has worked extensively on religious and interfaith dialogue and comparative religion, so we are very much excited and look forward to hearing his remarks on the subject of the intrafaith approach and dialogue within Shi'ism today. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is the University Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. After graduating from MIT with a bachelor's in Physics, he received a Master's in Geophysics and a Ph.D. in the History of Science from Harvard University.

In 1958, Nasr returned to Iran to teach philosophy at Tehran University, where he later served as vice-chancellor and dean of the faculty of letters. Nasr was the first Muslim to deliver the prestigious Gifford and Cadbury Lectures, and he was inducted to the Library of Living Philosophers in 2000. He has published over 50 books and 650 articles on Islamic science, philosophy, comparative religion, Islamic ecology and environmentalism, art, and Sufism. Some of his publications include *The Study Quran* as its editor in chief, *Religion and The Order of Nature*, *Man in Nature*, and *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism*. I would like to express our warm welcome and appreciation to you, Professor Nasr, and to have you with us at our symposium at Harvard.

Before we turn over the podium to Professor Nasr who is getting set up [with his Zoom connection], in the meantime, I would like to ask Professor Asani to share some remarks and engage in a discussion on Shi'ism as we wait for Professor Nasr to join us.

Ali Asani: Well thank you, Payam, for asking me [to engage in a discussion]. I do not actually have any prepared remarks [as] I was not intending to [speak], but [as we wait for] Professor Nasr, I thought I would just share a few perspectives on the term Shi'ism itself

When we think about religions today, we always think about them as "-isms," [for example] Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism and so on. This is evident in the study of Islam as well when we talk about Sufism, Shi'ism and so on. This way of framing religious beliefs as an "-ism," as a self-contained ideology is based on the post-Enlightenment European [perspective] in which religion is primarily seen as an "ideology of identity." This notion of religion was promoted globally in the 18th and 19th centuries through European colonialism. Postcolonial nation-states, the media and even the academy have pretty much adopted this way of thinking about the world's religions. As a result, religions have come to be seen as being monolithic entities. In fact, in the case of many religions, such as what we today call Hinduism, the name did not exist until the nineteenth century. In the 16th and 17th centuries, people in South Asia did not identify themselves as Hindus. Rather they identified themselves as devotees of a particular deity or holding a particular philosophical outlook. They never thought about themselves as members of global community following a distinct religion. It was only through colonialism that the idea of Hinduism was born. In contemporary India, this notion of Hinduism has been appropriated in the context of nationalism. We increasingly are finding people talking about India as a Hindu nation.

Similar processes seem to have been at work with regard to Shi'ism. People contend that the use of the term Shi'ism implies that there is a monolithic ideology that holds all the Shi'a together, and that all Shi'a are the same. Indeed, one of the aims of this conference is to highlight the fact that even within this category, Shi'ism, there is an immense diversity. One of the central principles underpinning intra-Shi'a dialogue is to recognize each other's diversity and each other's differences in opinions. Engaging in diversity [and] pluralist discourse does not mean giving up the difference. It means embracing and engaging with difference and understanding someone else's perspective [without eliminating or erasing difference]. Even the term Ismailism does not have a native origin. It is one that is projected from the outside and, therefore, is a late invention. These groups that we call Ismaili, for example the Fatimids, they never

called themselves Ismaili. They called themselves "the Rightly Guided *Dawa*" or the Ismaili groups in Iran never used the term Ismaili. They call themselves "The People of *Ta'lim*," the people of the right instruction. In South Asia, the term Ismaili was not used until very recently; people called themselves Satpanthis, those who follow the true path. It would be very interesting to investigate what these traditions called themselves and what were the indigenous terms that they use to refer to themselves. Using conceptualizations or ways of thinking that are from outside of the tradition may actually become obstacles to understanding each tradition on its own terms.

Payam Mohseni: I am thinking about what role the academy can play. I guess one is dispelling some of these misunderstandings but also in reifying them. I am thinking in particular about the study of Islam: in the study of comparative religion, we like to classify everything that is studied. And so my question for you would be, as part of the university, has [academia] reified and made [these categories stagnant] in the first place? Has it done so in our talks on Islam itself? Islam is usually presented from a monolithic perspective. How does the academic study of religion actually contribute to this modern understanding of religion that you speak of?

Ali Asani: Increasingly within the study of religion as a discipline, there is a lot of dialogue taking place [around the fact that] we have to understand that people's constructions of ideology and identity as being situated in different contexts. In fact, when we use term Shi'ism there is a legacy that we are appealing to, and that ties in with Orientalism and colonialism. More recently, as many universities particularly in North America, are engaged in issues of diversity, inclusion, belonging, and equity, instructors are becoming conscious of whose points of view are being represented [in their courses] whose voices are louder, [and] whose voices are marginalized. Those kinds of issues have become very central. I am optimistic that within universities themselves, there will be [a growing] tendency to question this categorization and pay closer attention to voices that are marginalized by the [predominant] categories, the very categories that we are using.

It also reminds me of a point that the late Mohammed Arkoun writes about with regard to representations of Islam in political and media spaces. Very often, the political expression of Islam is what we find as the most prominent or loudest in all of these spaces. He calls such representations "loud Islam" because they occupy all the spaces in the academy and the media. Based on that, he says that the Islam of faith, the Islam of how ordinary believers actually engage with the faith, how they understood their relationship with the sacred, with the divine, their expressions have been totally silenced in these spaces.

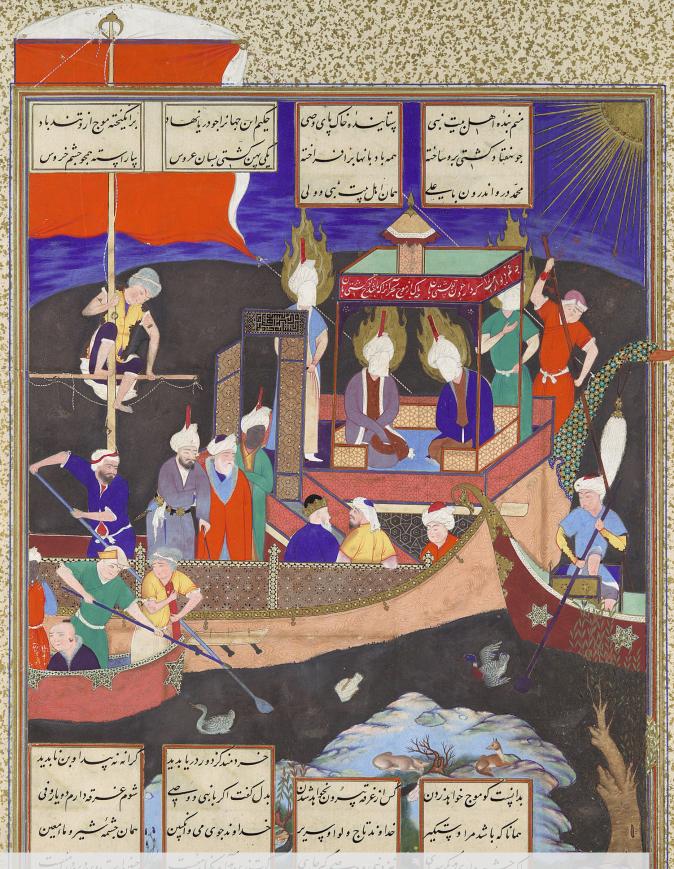
[As a result of our emphasis on "loud" forms of Islam] we have ended up thinking about Islam primarily as a reformed revivalist movement with political agendas which are often appropriated by political elites and the nation-state. That kind of approach is now being questioned. We need to diversify and pay closer attention to voices that have been marginalized. It is not just about interpretations, like [those of the] Shi'a, but also voices like those of women and [those of] minority interpretations that are often ignored.

Muslims have understood their faith not just in terms of theology and philosophy, they have understood their faith through the arts, the sound arts, the visual arts, and poetry. That is the way knowledge has transmitted. So, we should also be thinking about how we can, in the study of any religious tradition, including Shi'a Islam, pay closer attention to how ordinary people connect with the faith. They are not going to be reading difficult works of theology and philosophy. Rather for them knowledge of faith comes through they have experienced through the different art forms. When they go to ta'ziya in Iran, participate in a Muharram majlis, listen to a devotional poem, or recite a divan, they are experiencing their faith. Perhaps in the academy, we need to pay more attention to those types of practices. That is one of the shifts that we are starting to see in the academy, slowly: the questioning of the term Shi'ism as an ideology of identity because it is more than an ideology of identity. It is a faith experience. through which people and individuals are engaging in meaningful ways to understand the world and the universe around them and their connection with the transcendent.

Payam Mohseni: Professor Asani does a lot of unique and excellent work on this topic. I am thinking about the lived experience of Islam, the diversity of the plural manifestations that artistic forms and literary forms and even music can take on with thinking about religion today. So, I think that comes back as you were saying, Ali, [that] the whole notion of approaching religion through various angles that not only reify [but also] bring out the richness of life, the cultures, and the world views. Those civilizational elements give meaning to the lives of many people around the world. It does not apply to just Shi'a Islam or Islam, but we can think about these much more broadly when we think about categories that somehow connect with spirituality and religion as well.

One can easily say that religion as our modern understanding of religion itself is a product of the post-Enlightenment period, where we categorize it as a specific concept and identity marker or ideology separate from social realms and cultural realms. In many ways, post-Enlightenment modern understanding of the category of religion can create problems in some ways that contribute to sectarianism or to

reified identities and ideologies that mask over broader commonalities in values and worldviews, shared ideas, and understandings of cultural life shared amongst people. Thank you so much Professor Asani for speaking with us and engaging in this dialogue on your thoughts on Shi'ism and lived culture today.



In the introduction to the *Shahnameh*, God launched seventy ships, bearing adherents to the religions of mankind, into a stormy sea. Clearly depicted on the central ship are the Prophet and his son-in-law and successor Ali sitting beneath the red canopy, while Ali's sons, Hasan and Hussain, stand nearby.

Artist: Painting attributed to Mirza 'Ali (Iranian, active ca. 1525–75). Credit: <u>The Met Muesum</u> (CC0 1.0)

# Shi'ism: Unity and Diversity

Keynote Address Speaker: Seyyed Hossein Nasr (George Washington University)

Catholicism, Theravada, and Mahayana in Buddhism, Shaivism, and Vishnuism. [Of] all these schools and denominations of various religions, Sunnism is the large majority, but nevertheless, I want to begin by saying that the significance of Shi'ism must not be understood in light of the percent of the population of Muslims or Shi'ites because [if] we take the central lines of Islam from Egypt to Pakistan, from Lahore to Cairo, which has been the heart of Islamic civilization for so many centuries, except for Andalusia, almost every important force, movement, idea, and field of art, science, philosophy, thought, theology and so many other things came from this central area where the presence of Shi'ism is very large. It must be considered a major force to be contended with and understood in both the history of Islam and present-day Islam.

With that prelude, oftentimes, I find students do not exactly know why we call Shi'ism Shi'ism. There will be some discussion of that, but everything I say today is from the point of view of Islamic sources - not what the Orientalists say. They can say whatever they like. But from the point of view of Islamic sources, the word Shi'a, which means "party" or "partisan of," was used by the Prophet himself, by the Prophet of Islam, and he said, "Shi'at Ali," "the partisans of Ali," [which] is the origin of the word Shi'ism. Spiritually, you might say that Shi'ism, like Sunnism, goes back to the inner soul of the Prophet. There is something of the root of the reality of what became Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and other Sunni caliphs and great figures of Sunni Islam, but [also] of Ali, Fatima, Hasan, Hussain, the Ahl al-Bayt, who were the family of the Prophet and that descended from him. And this is very important to understand and that is why Sunnism and Shi'ism should not be compared to later divisions within other religions, especially not compared to Protestantism and Catholicism. Protestantism came 1500 years after the foundation of Christianity by Christ, whereas Shi'ism goes back to the prophetic reality. The Shi'ites, in fact, shared with Sunnis the three most important elements of the religion. That is the elements of tawhid [monotheism], nubuwwah [prophethood], and ma'ad [the resurrection and Day of Judgment]. There is a little variation [between Shi'as and Sunnis on these issues] but there are also differences between Sunni [schools of thought]. And of course, [Sunnis and Shi'as] share the same Qur'an. [There is one Qur'an]. It is not true, as some people have written, including Orientalists. When I was studying at Harvard many decades ago, [some Orientalists would say] that the Shi'ites believe that the present Qur'an is already part of the Qur'an, and the rest of it is hidden and so forth. That is a misunderstanding of the Shi'ite belief

that the inner meaning of the Quran will be revealed by the Mahdi when he reappears, which is not to be confused with 114 chapters or the sections of the Qur'an on which all traditional Sunni and Shi'ite ulama accept and share together. Having said this, let me go back to a very important issue in order to understand Shi'ism.

People say that the difference between Sunnism and Shi'ism began as a result of the differences of who was to succeed the Prophet. That is not true. The question was: what was the function of the person who succeeded the Prophet? All sides agreed that the prophetic function, nubuwwa, had come to an end with [the death of] the Prophet. He is called "Khatam al-Anbiya [the Seal of the Prophets]." which is alluded to in the Qur'an; it is written in black and white. [However], the question was not who would succeed him, but what function he would have? What characteristics should he have? The Sunnis from the very beginning [had a different conception], from the time of Abu Bakr who was a holy person [and] close to the Prophet, was [called] al-Siddiq [the truthful], and led the prayers even during the time of the Prophet. He had a very strong religious character of the Four Sunni Caliphs, [all of who] are called Rashidun (rightly guided). Nevertheless, he was considered to be the person responsible for administering the divine law, the law of what was going to become the codified Sharia later on.

This [Sunni] idea goes back [to] the beginning of the role of the caliph. They developed [this role] later on during the Umayyads, and especially the Abbasids, [with] classical works written by people like al-Mawardi and others on Islamic political thought. The role of the caliph is to protect the *Shari'a* within Dar al-Islam (the abode of Islam), to protect the borders of Islam from invasion from other people, and to keep order. The function of the caliph was not to interpret the *Shari'a* or to act as one of the ulama (scholars) to give fatwas. That was not his function. And the first four caliphs interpreted certain things because they were close companions of the Prophet, and they were very learned men, they were *ulama*, but not because they were caliphs. This is very important to understand.

Shi'ism disagreed with what the function of the caliphs should be from the very beginning. They believed that the caliph should succeed the Prophet (the word khalifa was not used). He would have to inherit the Prophet's religious authority (not the prophetic function; no more Qur'an would be brought). He had to have an 'isma, that is, inerrancy. I translate 'isma as inerrancy. I have been doing it for decades and most people use that [although] now there are other translations. 'Isma [means] God would protect him from error. He must have knowledge of the religion. He must have knowledge of the inner meaning of religion. I will get to that [because it is the] important point. He must at the same time, rule over society. [Additionally, he would have] the function that the khalifa had in Sunni Islam. Now, this person was called the Imam. I am sure in a conference like this it has been very clear [what] the different meanings of Imam [are] in Islamic civilization, history. The very particular meaning of Imam in [Twelver] Shi'a Islam is only used for the 12 Imams. When Ayatollah Khomeini was called

Imam Khomeini, it caused big consternation among the ulama in Qom. Even during the rule of the Islamic Republic, they could not have the powers to say much, but there was a lot of opposition to that because when you said Imam (when I lived in Iran, I am a Persian myself) it meant one of the 12 Imams. There is imam jum'ah, the imam of prayers, Imam al-Haramayn, Juwaini, the teacher of Ghazali, which were the titles of various people. And sometimes the Sunni used it like in the case of Imam Fakhradeen Razi, Imam Ghazali, which was an honorific religious title, [and] was sometimes used in Persia. [But otherwise] it always meant in [Twelver] Shi'ism the 12 Imams. I will get to that point more in a moment.

The [Shi'as] branched out [while rooted in] the Islamic revelation from the very beginning after the death of the Prophet and the day he died in Medina. [The Shi'as] believed in the idea of imam being the ideal ruler of Islamic society, a guide in religious affairs, and also spiritually and ethically. You have to have special ethical and spiritual characteristics. The fact that they were descendants of Ali and Fatima was not considered a requirement at the very beginning. And in fact, the Zaydis, one of the three branches of Shi'ism, do not believe in that [requirement] after the first five Imams that they share with Twelver Shi'ism. Anyway, from this idea, grew the veneration of that person, he was to be venerated and his sayings, especially in Twelver Imami Shi'ism, were considered to be after the Qur'an and the hadith, authoritative in affairs of religion, called hadith walawi, instead of nabawi (Prophetic), meaning from the Imams. This is very significant for the whole of Shi'ite philosophical and theological thought. And also for much of Sunni thought because many of these hadiths of the Imams [are also] used in Sunnism with other roots you might say. Now, there is another very important point to add that the Imam was associated with what is called the function of wilayah, but it could also be pronounced in Arabic, Walayah, because you do not write out the declensions, so we are at waw, lam, alif. It could be "Walayah" or "Wilayah." Both of these have meanings. Hundreds of books have been written about them. I do not want to do this sort of lecture. I do not have the possibility of going into them, but I want to emphasize the very great significance of the concept and reality of walayah.

This is where Shi'ism and Sufism were originally from the same source and they meet. In Sunnism, wilayah is associated with Ali ibn Abi Talib like in Shi'ism and is a function that was transmitted by the Prophet to him and through him, a spiritual function to Hasan al-Basri and to other people, Imam Hasan himself, his son, and through that other people. And it is the origin of all the Sufi Orders. In Shi'ite Islam, the Imam is a source of wilayah. And it is not accidental. If you look at the spiritual genealogy, that is the silsilah, what we call in Arabic silsilah. The spiritual genealogy of Sufi orders in the Sunni world, almost all of them have the first Shi'ite Imams as their Qutb, as their pole.

All Sunni orders, except the Naqshbandi Order, go back to Ali. All of them with that exception. The Naqshbandi Order goes back to Ja'far al-Sadiq [the Sixith Imam in non-Zaydi Shi'a Islam]. If you talk to a Naqshbandi shaykh today (eminent shaykhs in Egypt or Syria),

they are still going to say it does not go back to Ali, but it goes back to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, who is one of the [Shi'a] Imams. So it is like going back to Ali, and I can hardly overemphasize especially to people who are not Shiites, [and who] have not traveled to the Sunni world very much, the respect of all that has been held in Sunni Sufi orders for Ali. In the Shi'ite world, the same was true for the Shi'ite Sufis, who wanted to find initiation, who wanted to have the power of wilayah transform their being and power. Because wilayah has many meanings, even to my own day, I have friends that go to Mashhad and pray in Imam Reza's [Shrine] for him to ask God for help for them to find a spiritual guide. So this is a very important point that is in Shi'ism, although today in Iran, there is an opposition between Shi'ite ulama and Sufism and tensions in the Safavid period that is not to be considered to be complete or to be always there.

Ayatollah Khomeini from his twenties was in [the] quest of Sufism. He was initiated into Sufism. He loved *wilayah*. He wanted to live according to the power of *wilayah*. [This] was not really much emphasized, but it reflected in his poetry, [he is not thought of in that light because] he is a very important political figure, [and] is only seen in that light, but not in the other aspects of what he wrote, [for example] his commentary on the Qur'an and on Ibn Arabi, (he spent forty years teaching Ibn Arabi). People do not even think about that, but this is not a new reality. It goes back to this significant power of *wilayah*. Now, let me come to the branches of Shi'ism and what they have in common.

I will consider three major branches. The numbers five, seven, and their addition making twelve, which is very interesting. These are the three main numbers to consider with the branches of Shi'ism which [all] start from Ali. They all [share] that. They consider Ali as their first Imam, Hasan as the second, Imam Hussain the third Imam, and so forth. I am Shi'ite. But also I am a sayyid, a descendant of Imam Hussain. I am also born on his birthday, [and] that is why I am called Hossein. That line is shared by all these three branches, with the Zaydis going down to five local Imams and branching separately from other figures. But Ismailis who are very famous are called Seveners sometimes and even in Western Orientalists writings. In the late 19th century they used to call them Seveners. It was because of the sixth Imam, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, [since] his oldest son Ismail was designated as Imam, but he died while the father was still alive, so the Shi'ites believed by the order of heaven, a direction of heaven, of God, He chose his second son Imam Musa al-Kazim, who became the seventh Shi'ite Imam of Twelver Shi'ism. But a group of Ismaili Shi'ite did not accept that. They accepted the son, Ismail, who had [already] died, so they became known as Ismailis, as it sounds.

Then you have the third group, the Ithna Ashari, or Twelver Shi'ites, which are the largest group of Shi'ites in the world. Just to think of the spread, put aside the immigrants of Ismailis in Vancouver and Twelver Imami Shi'ites in Los Angeles, I am not going to talk about that. But in the Islamic world itself, classically [and] historically, a great center of Ismailism was Egypt, where they established the Fatimid rule, which was an Ismaili caliphate. [So] they even used [the term] *khilafa*, "Khilafa al-Fatimiyah." They built the city of Cairo, and Cairo

was built around the tomb of the head of Imam Hussain, whose sister Zaynab was expelled by Yazid from Damascus, and carried to Cairo. And Ismailis grew there and had a big empire, the biggest Shi'ite empire until the Safavids. [However,] the population I am talking about now, not in the old days, is scattered.

Their main population is in the subcontinent of India, both branches, the Bohras and the Agha Khanis, went from Yemen after the Mongolian invasion, and then they wound up in part in India, part in Iran. Aga Khan was given the title of Agha Khan by Fath Ali Shah, the Persian King, but the British started to fight against the Persian King, so [the Agha Khan] fought and lost in Eastern Iran, fled to India, where then his descendants continued until now we have the famous Aga Khan. Aga Khan Karim, who went to Harvard University where you are, was a Harvard student. At the time, he was a very close friend of mine from those days in my classes when I was teaching at Harvard, and he [donated for] a big chair for Islamic Studies at Harvard and MIT for Islamic arts and architecture that I am sure you know about.

These are the two branches of Ismailis, the Bohras remained much more traditional. There is not much heard about them outside of India and Pakistan. They have their own Imam and that other branch [of Ismailis] because they came to the West to Europe, the Aga Khan is very well known. There are about 10-15 million Ismailis in total. Nobody knows exactly how many, [but] probably something around there. And the concentration besides Pakistan and India is one place in Iran and Iraq, one place in Southern Egypt near the Aswan Dam, and there are some in Syria, little pockets here and there. There is no big concentration. A big concentration is primarily in the Bombay area and Karachi area in Pakistan and India.

But the largest branch of Shi'ism was of course the Twelver Imamis. The Twelver Imamis did not gain political power like the Ismailis did at the beginning of Islamic history. They did not have an empire. They did not rule over any place, except one or two towns in Khorasan, very local. Even the Buyids who we know were Shi'ites were probably not Ithna Ashari. There is a big debate on what form of Shi'ism they followed because we do know that they had borrowed the names of Imam Ali, and celebrated Muharram, but we do not know what branch they belong to; they were definitely Shi'ites, but they were probably Zaydis.

It took nine hundred years after the rise of Islam for Twelver Imami Shi'ism, [which is] by far the largest number of Shi'ites, to gain political power, and that claim is very important to understand, especially with what is going on in Iran today. [Shah Ismail] came through a Sufi order, which was Shi'ite, the Safavid Sufi Order founded by Ardabili, who was a great Sufi Sheikh. It is very interesting because of the contention between Sufism and Shi'ism today and in many circles. Ayatollah Khomeini is an exception, among others, but, considering that he came from that background, it was a Sufi order. Shah Ismail [conquered] riding on a horse, although in his teens, as the leader of a Sufi order who captured Azerbaijan and from there, the rest of Iran. I mean Persian Azerbaijan and the rest of Persia, and [he] created a Persian empire, [which is only half of] present-day Iran. Half of Iran has been cut off by the British

[and Soviets]. Baluchestan is gone, Afghanistan is gone, part of Central Asia is gone and part of Eurasia is gone. [As well as] Bahrain and those little islands in the Persian Gulf. So, it was the belittling of this major empire that was created by the Safavids, [who] established Twelver Imami Shi'ism as the official religion of the state, and there was a great deal of exchange and clash with the other major empires of the Islamic world at that time. That is, of course, the Ottomans.

The Ottomans were Hanafi Sunnis. And they were a Sunni Sultanates, sometimes called caliphates, but not really caliphs. Technically, from a point of Sunni theology, they were Sultans. They created the world's most powerful empire for many centuries going from Albania in the east all over the Mediterranean to Algeria. It was a very large empire and they never expected to have a major force behind them. As soon as the Safavids [rose], it changed the whole dynamics of Shi'ism and Sunnism in that region and that is why I am mentioning it. There were a lot of Shi'ites in Turkey (what is called Turkey today, [i.e. Anatolia] not to mention even the [Shi'as in the] rest of the Ottoman Empire [but just Turkey alone]). And some of them journeyed to Iran; some of them became simply Alevis, [and we also had] the Bektashis, which is a very strongly Ali-oriented Sufi order, [and] is very Shi'ite in that sense. They survived and flourished in the Ottoman Empire, but the whole dynamics between Sunnism and Shi'ism changed when one state played a very significant role in this exchange, and that is Iraq.

At the height of Safavid's power, the Persians took over Iraq, but soon the Ottomans defeated the Persians, and they took over Iraq themselves. Iraq became a province of the Ottoman Empire. Having become the province of the Ottoman Empire, nevertheless, the Ottomans did not try to convert the Iraqis to Sunnism. Shi'ism continued there and since Najaf and Karbala were located there, it remained the major center of Shi'ism. In the Safavid period, even when the Ottomans ruled, Persians were going to study in Najaf which is one of the oldest religious universities and centers of Twelver Imami Shi'ite learning [in the world]. The dynamics of this interaction between Sunnism and Shi'ism really underlines the uses of it for their own political ends by Western powers during the last decades, [including] when the British ruled over India.

One of the gimmicks [of Western colonialism] was trying to pit the Shi'ites against the Sunnis when necessary; when necessary, the Sunnis against the Hindus. And so playing one side against the other, the famous policy of "divide and conquer" into which I shall not go. But now I want to return to the branches of Shi'ism, and what they share in common, which is very important for us to know. Besides the theology of the Imamate as an intellectual model – and I will mention that in my lecture in a moment – in practical ways, it is the celebration of Muharram and Saffar. That is a celebration, [or rather we] call it commemoration because celebrating [implies] happiness, but the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussain ibn Ali in Karbala, a city not far away from where his father was also killed. Ali was killed in Kufa [by] Ibn Muljim [who] struck him with the poisonous sword on the back of his head, and the

Umayyads came to power after the death of Ali. Muawiyah became the caliph and established Damascus as the center. And when he died after twenty years, his son Yazid, who was famous for debauchery and carelessness in religious matters and drinking wine all of the time, became caliph. Imam Hussain, who was living in Medina, refused allegiance to him, so [Yazid] threatened him. And Imam Hussain moved with his family, which changed Islamic history, from Medina to Iraq. On the way, they were stopped by an army sent by Yazid in a plane called Karbala, and one by one, the companions of Imam Hussain were killed, including his brother, Abbas, who was a great hero in Shi'ite Islam. [Abbas'] tomb is next to Imam Hussain in Iraq. And finally on the 10th of Muharram, the first lunar month of the Islamic lunar calendar, at noontime, Hussain was overcome by a large army of Yazid, and he was killed. His head was severed. And at that time, despite the ruthlessness of these people, it was some kind of chivalry, that they did not kill the women.

They did not kill the son of Hussain who was sick, who became the fourth Shi'ite Imam, Imam Zayn al-Abideen. They sent them all to Damascus, and the head of Hussain was taken by Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet and one of the most important women and female figures in early Islam and the whole of Islamic history, who was an extremely eloquent speaker of Arabic. She gave a very beautiful *khutba* (speech) [after the killing of Hussain in the court of Yazid], and Yazid was shaken. [The *khutba*] shook the Umayyad throne, and Yazid said I did not order the killing of Hussain. He exiled her to Egypt where the city of Cairo was born. Ra's al-Hussain, the "Head of Hossain," became the center of Fatimid Cairo. And this act [his martyrdom] is celebrated annually by all branches of Shi'ism or commemorated again but in a very intense way.

For many, [commemoration is] among their religious rites in the world that are alive. In the West, religion has gone inside houses and churches. You do not see it in the streets so much. In the rest of the world, it is also out of the society at large, but if you look at these juggernauts in India and Southeast Asia. There is one place in the Christian world where something very similar to Shi'ism takes place. That is in Spain. Yesterday was Easter. The week before, it was Holy Week. If you were in the cities of Spain last week, you will see these marches of men wearing black, [and] wearing conic hats, something like the Ku Klux Klan, but they are very pious people. They are carrying out images of Maryam, the Virgin Mary, and of Christ on (statues). Some men flagellate themselves, beating themselves on the chest. And if you take the statues away and put banners, Islamic banners just like in Iran, you could not tell a difference. They are also wearing black. It is unbelievable how similar [it is]. [It] is called Semana Santa, Holy Week. I have seen so many processions of Muharram in my own country, Iran, [and] I was astounded that there is an exception [of public religious commemoration] in the rest of the Christian world, both in Europe and America; but that aspect of religion is not around much anymore.

But in the Islamic world, even in Morocco, which has been Sunni for over a thousand

years, if you ask about Shi'ism nobody knows what it is. [However,] they do celebrate Ashura. I have attended some of the most moving ceremonies outside of the wall of Meknes, the Royal city of Morocco. I was totally astounded as a Persian that they were doing this, [and I witnessed] a young man singing in Arabic sad songs about the death of Imam Hussain [while] playing *dutar* (a type of stringed instrument). Everybody was crying; it was really amazing. This phenomenon transcends the Shi'ite world. Lucknow, which was a great Islamic city, has been the center of Islam for centuries in India, especially Twelver Imami Shi'ism, [and there] they have the imambara, and they have these tremendous horses of Hazrat Abbas some 100 feet high and they bring all this out which is quite amazing. There is participation in all of the events: the marching, the mourning, what is called *sineh zani* (the beating of the chest, sometimes with chains which the *ulama* forbids, but people still do it). Some people hit themselves with swords and [it is unbelievable]. I have seen a lot of religious phenomena in the world from the Pacific to the Atlantic, but this is one of the most remarkable.

I do not have time to go into personal tales, but just to tell you about the intensity: during the time of the Shah (I have been in exile since), there [was] a mosque in the middle of the Bazaar of Tehran called the Mosque of the Turks, Masjid-e Turkan, and most of the people that pray there are from Azerbaijan. And the court minister, Asadollah Alam, who came from Khorasan and a Khorasani family who respected Ashura, would sometimes come visit me and ask me: "let's go together to this mosque." So we would go together. At midnight, they would close the door. No policemen are allowed inside. And these very viril Turkic Azerbaijanis, who were very tall and strong, would first start with chaining themselves; they would also take out swords and hit themselves with swords, and there was a pool of blood all over, and people were walking in red – a sight you could never imagine. This is against Islamic law. But it brings out the intensity of devotion to Hussain, and Karbala [and demonstrates] devotion to [Hussain and Karbala] is at the heart of Shi'ism.

Of course, there are Eids after Ramadan, [and] after the Hajj [which] is all over the Islamic World, but I can hardly overemphasize for you the significance of these historical events, which have colored Shi'ite piety to this day. They have also influenced Shi'ite social and political life. Since Ayatollah Khomeini has come to Iran, maximum use is made of these events for the political purpose of the government; but the most significant part is spiritual. Now my time is almost over, there is one more thing I want to say and that is that Shi'ism, especially Ismaili and Ithna Ashari branches (the Zaydi branch's intellectual aspect is fairly close to Sunni Islam, to the Maturidi School of Kalam which I will not go into right now), play a very important role far beyond the number of their adherents in Islamic philosophy and in the intellectual sciences. Those of you who know something about Islamic philosophy have heard of the name of [Abu Nasr al-] Farabi. Farabi is said to have Shi'ite inclinations. Nobody knows exactly [about his identity] since things were very mixed up at that time. [Abu Rayhan] al-Biruni had a ring that had both [the names of] the Four Caliphs and the Twelve Imams inscribed. The teacher of

Ibn Sina, the greatest of all the earliest Islamic philosophers, was an Ismaili, although he himself [Ibn Sina] was not an Ismaili – there is a big debate in Iran whether he was Shi'ite or not, and many people think he was Shi'ite because he talks about the Imams, but it is not distinctly [the] Ithna Ashari treatment of the Imams – so one does not fully know. However, if [Ibn Sina] was Sunni, he was very close to the Shi'ite world.

What is especially important is that in the early centuries we have a lot of great Ismaili philosophers, such as [Abu Hatim al-] Razi [and Hamid al-Din] Kermani and others and Ismaili philosophy grew parallel with peripatetic philosophy and this has been neglected a great deal, although Corbin and a few German scholars wrote about [Ismaili philosophy]. It is not in the ordinary history of philosophy that is taught at Harvard, for example. I brought two volumes of Islamic philosophy out of Oliver Leaman in 2000 in London, which is now taught in some courses in Harvard. There, we made sure there is a chapter on Ismaili philosophy and the 1964 book which Corbin, I, and Osman Yahya wrote, The History of Islamic Philosophy, has a large section on [Ismaili philosophy], but by and large, it has been neglected in the West. Intellectually, [it is] very important both in and of itself and because of its challenge to both kalam and falsafa, and also because of its esoteric character. For the Ismailis, philosophy was really esoteric. [Without going into too much detail], *zahir* va *batin*, the exoteric and esoteric, [is a major part of] various schools of Shi'ism, as I am sure other speakers will bring up. It is very important. Ismailis emphasize the batin and identified with the batin of religion, not with discursive philosophy, [but] with Ismaili philosophy, which is very profound, [and] metaphysics is connected with it, which begins in fact, not with "being," but "being" itself is the first act of the Supreme divine reality. [This] was an incredible expression of metaphysics and people like Ibn Arabi and Mulla Sadra, the great thinkers of Islam, were much more aware of these texts than we are today. It was much more prevalent among non-Ismaili thinkers in the Islamic world, both Ithna Ashari and even Sunni and Sufi writers.

Anyway, then comes Shi'ite intellectual thought, which comes to form philosophy in a distinct manner from the Mongol invasion onward with the School of Shiraz and Ibn Turk Isfahani. I do not want to just burden you with names, but [there were] a lot of very important philosophers in the Safavid period, like Mulla Sadra and Mir Damad, which continued for the last 400 years in Persia. There is no Islamic country with a continuous Islamic philosophical tradition as strong as there is in Iran. I have studied philosophy at Harvard and in France for years. In Iran, there were the greatest philosophers, such as Allameh [Muhammad Husayn] Tabataba'i, who were fully aware of the intellectual significance and presence of this tradition which is identified with the Shi'ite way of considering 'aql [Intellect], from a religious point of view, which is a story for another day. Anyway, I will just conclude with this simple statement. There has not been much intellectual exchange between branches of Shi'ism in recent decades. There are more intellectual exchanges between Twelver Imami Shi'ites and Sunnis, Ismailis and Sunnis, Zaydis and Sunnis, especially after Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered the attack on Yemen –

half of Yemen is Shafi'i and the other half Zaydi – and Imam Badr [the Zaidi Imam] left. There has been exchange [however], not that much exchange, between them.

For many years, I taught Islamic philosophy at Tehran University where I was also Dean. I changed many courses and curricula over there and we saw trouble because of the opposition raised by the faculty and the lack of knowledge to introduce Shi'ite Ismaili philosophy as part of the curriculum. So, despite the yeoman work, especially Henry Corbin and a few German scholars who are also very important, there is still a lack of total knowledge. And especially when it comes to the question of the rapport between the various branches of Shi'ism, [this is] a relatively new field of study as far as the last few centuries are concerned. In the early Islamic centuries [by contrast] there are some texts and very important discussions that have taken place.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you so much Dr. Nasr for such insightful comments and remarks. We learned so much from you. It was very interesting in your presentation of the origin of Shi'ism that you gave and dispelling or going beyond the traditional caricatures of it being a rupture following the succession to Prophet Muhammad as the main story of the Shi'a-Sunni split. If you can speak about that with this new perspective and thinking about confessional ambiguity: the confessional ambiguity between Shi'a and Sunni, for example, that existed historically, or with many Sunni communities that may believe in the Imams or even the notion of Twelver Sunnism.

If you can speak on that perhaps, and whether we have something similar within Shi'ism. Is there any confessional ambiguity among the different Shi'a schools or types of overlap or diversity that may [be overlooked in the field]? [Are there expressions of Shi'ism] we cannot categorize distinctly in particular boxes? How can we think about the larger richness and diversity that we can see both between Shi'a and Sunni communities and among Shi'a communities themselves?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: As far as the confession is concerned, in order for a person to become a Muslim, [they must] say: "ashadu an la illaha illa Allah, ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasoolullah" ("I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah"). That is what is required to become a Muslim, including becoming Shi'ite. [However, in] the Shi'ite adhan (call to prayer), they say "ashadu an la illaha illa Allah, ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasoolullah, ashadu anna Alian Wali Allah" ("I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and that Ali is the vicegerent of Allah"). It adds that [Alian Wali Allah] to it. So, to become a believing Shi'ite, you have to accept the wilaya (sovereignty) of Ali. In addition to accepting the prophethood of the Prophet and the divinity of Allah, [these are] the three things that you have to accept. After that comes the diversity that you detect in the various forms of Shi'ism.

As for the second part of the question, the key question is that of the Mahdi. I did not say anything about the Mahdi. Twelver Imami Shi'ism, both in its daily piety and its theology, religious psychology, and metaphysics, has a great [emphasis] on the notion of the Twelfth hidden Imam who is in occultation. This is not to be confused with a number of Ismaili Imams who are in hiding, called "sitr" in Arabic, which we translate as hiding. Whereas [the term] ghayba we translate as occultation. The two should not be confused because when you read the history of Ismaili Imams, there is a period in which you did not see them around. And then Ismailis believed that they were in the sitr, which in Arabic means hidden – not that they did not exist. In Twelver Imami Shi'ism, you have the first Eleven Imams whose lives, births, and deaths were known. Then you have the 12th with whom all this mysterious reality of occultation, of disappearing into the non-physical world, of not dying, but being present and returning back to the earth in a messianic function, are very central. This is a very important issue. I did not turn to it in my talk today, so I am glad to bring this up. This is a very important question. [This is] what distinguishes Twelver Imami Shi'ism from both Zaydism and Ismaili Shi'ism.

**Payam Mohseni:** We have a lot of different questions on themes, so I am just going to go with different topics of questions. One of the prominent themes that we have is esoterism and Sufism. Perhaps we can ask a general question about this: is esoterism, or the focus on the *batin*, a means for thinking about an intrafaith dialogue amongst Shi'a groups?

If so, how can we approach it? Also, are we seeing any type of revival today in Sufi Irfani esoterism within the Shi'a world? And is this common among only one tradition? Is this only common to Ismailism or is this beyond one branch? As I was saying, it is common in Twelvers, but is this something across the Shi'a that we see?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr: It is very hard to fit everything in, but let me try to summarize by talking about Sufism in the Shi'ite world today. That is the central part of your question. The first part of the question can be answered by a statement I already made that both Shi'ism and Sufism are rooted in the inner dimension of the Islamic tradition, the *batin*. A lot of people, such as Muslims that are Salafis, Wahhabis, externalists, rationalist, modernists, both sides of the spectrum, do not pay attention to the fact that God in the Qur'an refers to His Own Reality as a *Zahir* wa *Batin*: "Huwa al-Awwal wa al-Akhir wa al-Zahir wa al-Batin" (Qur'an, 57:3). And God is the source of reality [which] has an inner aspect and that is reflected in his creation. And we have many hadiths of the Prophet about things having an inner dimension, an inner meaning. And Ibn Abbas, a very prominent Sunni transmitter of [many] hadith, said that: "To everything, there is a *batin* (inner reality). And to that *batin*, there is a *batin*. And to that *batin*, there is a *batin*, until seven *batins*, where the seventh one is known only to God." Both Sufism and Shi'ism rely upon this reality. Their perspective is based on the fact that there is an inner

aspect to religion.

For Sufism and Shi'ism, I do not mean pseudo-Sufism, that does not mean [they] deny the *zahir* or exoteric. No, but it means that there is also an esoteric, inward [aspect]. Every outwardness has an inwardness. My outward is outward by virtue of something inward. There is no inward without the outward and vice versa. The two complement each other. Sufism identifies this inner message of Islam, [as] the transmission that was made through Ali ibn Abi Talib to a number of his companions, especially Salman al-Farsi and Hasan al-Basri. I do not want to go over the names of certain companions who were known throughout the history of the *tasawwuf* [Sufism] as being the early patriarchs of Sufism.

Shi'ism believed that this esoteric, hidden aspect is transmitted through the institution of the Imams themselves. And so, the source of Sunnism and Shi'ism in a sense is the same reality. Two trees grow out of the same root. And in the first century of Islam, it was very difficult to distinguish one from the other. But the difference is that Sufism cannot stand by itself as a complete tradition and religion because it does not have the *Shari'a*. Whereas Shi'ism also contains the *Shari'a*. And it is this reality which has caused the relation between Shi'ism and Sufism to be so complex to understand.

On the one hand, the beliefs are much closer together with that of Sufism to the Sunni theological views of Ash'ari or Mu'tazilites. On the other hand, Sunnism provides an easier home for Sufism to flourish in because there is no competition really between the *ulama al-zahir* and *ulama al-batin* whereas in Shi'ism, there is a kind of competition where they are similar to each other, and Shi'ism claims a thought that provides spiritual guidance. And here comes a very complicated matter of guardians from the Hidden Imam or the possibility of direct guidance from the Imam. You will have in Sunni Islam [the figure of] Khidhr, the green prophet, to be a Khidhri and the Eliatic function. You also have the question of Shi'ite-Sufi *tariqas* in which you have Sufi guides like you have in the Sunni world, but at the same time you have the Imams and you have the structure of Shi'ism. So it is a very complicated question [for] those who pose the question [and] it is a very profound one. But, to understand the other dimension of the response really needs a lot of studies [to be undertaken]. I think I will [answer] one more question if somebody has one.

**Payam Mohseni:** So what are practical steps that you would recommend or approaches to thinking about a dialogue between and among different Shi'a communities? You mentioned the commemoration or mourning for Imam Hussain. Is that a primary vehicle or do you also have other suggestions for this type of dialogue?

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr:** First of all: who is interested in dialogue? Who is going to be the subject of the sentence? If nobody is really interested, this is usually what I say. In the same way that there were people in the Sunni world who became interested in rapprochement with the

Shi'ite world and vice versa. When Shaykh Shaltut became Shaykh al-Azhar, he created what was called Dar al-Taqrib (with a *qaf*) in Cairo to bring Sunnism and Shi'ism together in concert, and he concentrated especially on Twelver Imami Shi'ism and the Shafi'i [Sunni] school, [which] in many ways is very close to Shi'ism, but other schools as well. So there has to be interest as the first condition. If there is interest, those who are interested should get together. Usually, these things begin with a small number of people.

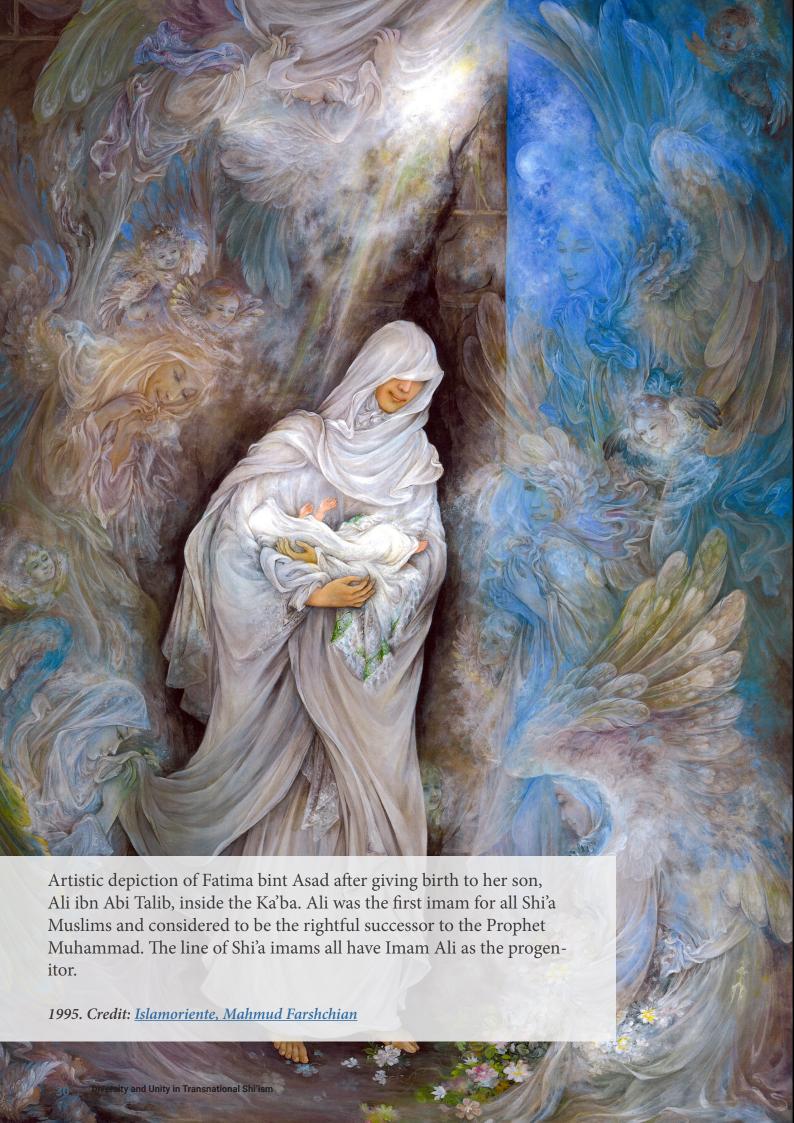
A few years ago, we began what is called "The Common World Initiative," to bring Islam and Christianity closer together. We consisted of a Jordanian prince, Prince Ghazi, a first cousin of [Jordanian] King Abdullah, myself – and we were very close because he was my student – and two or three of my own students that I had sent to Jordan. Gradually, the document was prepared and it was sent to the Vatican. Then we had a conference with the Vatican, and an Islamic delegation met with the Pope and the Cardinals. The movement began to improve the relationship between Catholicism, but also Christianity in general, and Islam. Now, I do not know of any movement of that kind with the same nature to bring the various schools of Shi'ism closer together. When I was in Iran, the Shi'ite *ulama* were especially against the Ismailis, more than the Sunnis, for denying the later Imams. And of course in their mind, when you say Shi'ite Imam, it meant Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq or someone like that. Not someone who was a young man, very well dressed, who arrives in the Rolls Royce like a King and comes to Niavaran palace in northern Tehran. It was very confusing about what kind of imam is this, they could not understand [this] because of the iconography they had in their mind of what an imam should look like and so forth.

So it is going to take some [action], and if one could find just two or three competent Twelver Shi'ite ulama who are very much interested in dialogue – like those [scholars] who are interested in dialogue with Sunnis and even Orthodox Christianity who have been interested in Iran, and there have been conferences with Orthodox Christian priests - if one could find a few who are interested in closer dialogue with other branches of Shi'ism, that would be a very important step because of the different branches of Shi'ism, it is only Twelver Imami Shi'ism that rules over countries. Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Iran are majority Shi'ite countries and, especially in Iran [there is] the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the rulers are mullahs (clergymen) from the Shiite branch of Islam, and they are very much interested in intra-Islamic dialogue and inter-religious dialogue with other religions. So the ideal situation is to approach whoever is interested in the idea, so two or three of the *ulama* of Iran. Unfortunately, I am not in Iran right now, and I am growing old and do not have energy, otherwise, I would do it myself. I have done many things like that when I was in Iran with everything in my power – I would go do anything I wanted to, but it is not possible for me, as it should be somebody from within Iran. I have been in exile for decades now. [They should] have a small conference just with the title of my talk today: "Shi'ism Unity and Diversity," or something like that, and go on from there.

Now, let me conclude by saying that there are certain countries where the Shi'as being a minority will have trouble attending. The government might not put its imprimatur's approval on a particular Shi'ite who is important but is not pro-government. For example, in India and what is happening with the BJP. I am not saying it is impossible, but it would need to bring together not only Persians but also Azerbaijanis, Iraqis, Syrians, Pakistanis, Afghanis, Indians, and the Persian Gulf regions, including the 3 million Shi'ites of Saudi Arabia. So to really to have the whole of the Shi'ite world and part of the Middle East presented. And let us hope inshallah that it will happen.

Anyway, I am going to stop talking and wish you well with the rest of your conference. Dr. Mohseni, I am glad that I got to see your face. I heard about you from my friends and former students at Harvard. I wish you well and give Dr. Asani my best salaams, and all the professors who I know there. Take care.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much, Dr. Nasr. It was very nice having you here. We very much enjoyed your participation. Thank you to everyone in the audience as well for your questions.



# Panel 1 | Approaching Intra-Shi'a Dialogue

## Speakers:

Zahra Jamal (Rice University) - Leading the Knowledge Society Once More: Prospects for Intrafaith Collaboration

Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi (Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society) - Pragmatic Lessons in a Dynamic World: A Twelver Ja'fari Perspective on Intra-Shi'a Dialogue

Scott Lucas (University of Arizona) - Four Classical Arabic Books for a Zaydi-Imami Conversation

Eliton Pasaj & Huseyin Abiva (Bektashi Community of America) - The Bektashi Tekke in America and the Place of Bektashism on the Sunni-Shi'a Spectrum

#### **Moderator:**

Payam Mohseni (Harvard University)

Payam Mohseni: Welcome to our first panel as part of our Symposium on Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism. The subject of this panel is "Approaching Intra-Shi'a Dialogue," and we hope to continue the main line and topic of inquiry and discussion that we began a bit earlier today with our opening remarks and our conversation with Professor Asani and the keynote address that we just heard on unity and diversity in Shi'ism, thinking about approaches to intra-Shi'a dialogue. This panel will build on some of the main points and insights that we gained from Seyyed Hossein Nasr's discussions on thinking about Shi'ism, the origins of Shi'ism, the esoteric aspects of Shi'ism, and the diversity and plurality of thought that makes up the tradition as an important cultural and civilizational phenomenon.

Our first speaker will be Dr. Zahra Jamal. She is the Associate Director of Rice University's new Institute for Religious Tolerance who will be speaking on leading the knowledge society.

Zahra Jamal: Thank you for the kind introduction, Payam, and thank you to you and

the other organizers, your team, and to the sponsors for creating this conference and for the invitation to speak. I would like to unpack my title ["Leading the Knowledge Society Once More: Prospects for Intrafaith Collaboration"] a little bit before I proceed with my remarks. The title refers to the Muslim civilizations of the past from Cairo to Cordova, from Baghdad to Bukhara, that led the knowledge societies of their time. And it also refers to Muslim leaders of the present, individuals like Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel Prize winner, His Highness, the Agha Khan IV, as well as the late Imam al-Khoei, all of whom have worked with diverse peoples and institutions to advance the quality of life and dignity of all peoples across geographies and generations. And they have done so as Muslims responding to the Qur'anic call to justice, [and] to leave this world a better place. And perhaps I think [of these individuals] as also submitting to the divine and looking for that divine wisdom to know what constitutes [knowledge] in any particular context to know how it is that they should leave the world improved.

Now, despite all of their positive contributions as Muslims, Islam and its interpretive and cultural diversity, including Shi'ism, is still homogenized, vilified, securitized, and even hijacked in Western and extremist discourses claiming to act in the name of Islam. Around 2015 a group of us from across from different sectors, different disciplines and professions examined the state of Shi'a studies in the United States looking in particular at academia, media, and policy. And what we found is that in education, Shi'ism is largely absent, or it is framed in positive terms, but as a divergence from Sunni Islam. There is little or no mention of Shi'i diversity. And this is looking at the textbooks that are used both in high schools and also in universities in media and policy domains. There's a tendency to view Shi'ism as synonymous with Iran or with Twelver Shi'ism and through the lens of political conflict or sectarian violence. This myopia has had disastrous effects as we can see in the impact of Western policy in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. And so in reflecting on what an intra-Shi'a dialogue might entail, I would suggest that perhaps we work together to correct these narratives in the knowledge society, as an expression of our shared call to justice, and specifically by making this new scholarship and products of Shi'a studies programs like this one, the work of the Ismaili Institute, Leiden University, and others, and make them broadly accessible and engaged in Shi'a diasporic and other communities, in U.S. education, media, and policy, and also in the public. And here I am speaking to the American context as a case study, because that is where my own work and efforts lie, and because the law allows for the teaching of religion or about religion in the public domain. Of course, some of these ideas can be used in other countries as well, perhaps with some modification.

I think there is an imperative here for us to also respond to the lack of knowledge or the misinformation that is out there in noting that there has also been

a sharp rise in anti-Muslim discrimination. For example, in the United States in the last few years, there has been a 200% rise in the number of anti-Muslim hate groups. There has been a rise of almost 600% of hate crimes against Muslims. This has been experienced primarily by Muslims who are Arabs, by women, by young adults, 18 to 29, and by children aged 11 to 17. And it is done not only by peers and colleagues, but also neighbors and strangers, teachers and administrators, those who are in influential places of power. And as you might imagine, the health impacts on the American Muslim population have been stark. Almost half of American Muslims had internalized this shame. And so if you hear bad things about yourself, often enough, you begin to believe it. So we are seeing that impact. And we have also seen a sharp rise in the mental health needs of these communities between 50 to 100%, depending on the racial or ethnic profile of the American Muslim subpopulation.

There has also been a rise in hate crimes against those who are mistaken to be Muslim. So immigrants and refugees, Sikhs, Hindus, and Janes. And so our call to explain Islam and Shi'ism more broadly in the knowledge society is not only about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, or promoting better policy, but it is also about protecting the sacrality of life. How can we do so? I would suggest intra-faith dialogue begins with us with members and leaders religious, scholarly, or otherwise, of our respective Shi'a communities that we build relationships and work together and strategize together about a path forward. First of all, we can learn from each other because we are not necessarily aware of our own diversity and also find ways to serve together.

There are already some examples of this happening. For example, Ismailis, Bohras, and Ithna Asharis (Twelvers) have been working together for the past decade with the mayor of Houston in his office during Ramadan to offer food drives during iftar time. We also have Ismailis and Ithna Asharis who have collaborated on issues of racial justice, for example through Believers Bail Out. We also have multiple communities working together on voter registration drives through Emgage. And so finding more opportunities to work together and rub shoulders together to understand each other I think is really important. Our leaders can also come together to collectively assess the needs, the interests and opportunities that lie before us, and also share our networks, pool our resources, and therefore maximize our impact.

Many of our needs are common and shared so why should each of us expand what few resources that we have to reproduce the same kinds of opportunities? We may as well work together. I think it is also helpful for us to connect professionals in our respective communities, create a strengths inventory to understand who is working where and find out ways to leverage that. For example, those who work in tech may help us to adjust some of the algorithms that lead to searches of Islam that

have very negative content. Or there may be some individuals who work in early childhood development or in primary and secondary education who can help us in putting together some books and songs and music and other kinds of resources to provide to the education of our young children not just Shi'a and Muslims, but in the broader public domain.

And that leads me to my second area of our broader collaborative efforts to educate others in religious literacy and in pluralism. We might want to repackage some existing materials and collate it and share it perhaps in a centralized way for early childhood development through the graduate level and for the public. Some of this work is already occurring. For example, through the National Council for Social Studies, the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard, the Islamic Networks Group out in California, the Boniuk Institute, where I work, or the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown. And so we can tap into those existing places and provide some of these additional resources in that setting.

We might also provide or offer guest lectures or adding readings to K-12 teacher training sessions or look at the general education courses at our respective universities, most of whom do not focus on religion or on Islam or on Shi'ism. But perhaps there are pieces of philosophy or literature or the arts or culture from our faith traditions that can be integrated into those existing courses so that we can broaden exposure to Shi'ism and to Islam. Certainly also we could guest lecture at journalism and policy schools and work with those who will go into these professions in the future and help them to deepen their understanding of our traditions. We might also wish to train or consult for corporate civic and faith leader groups, as I have been doing for the last few years, because what we find is that beyond the scope of Islam, the United States, and the world is religiously diverse, but we are not inclusive. Roughly 84% of the world belongs to or professes some religious tradition, but a large percentage of the hate crimes across the US and in Europe are targeted against religious and racial minorities. And so there is a lot of space for this work to be done. Of course, there are other organizations that are working in this domain as well that we can also tap into like the Tenenbaum Foundation, the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, and others.

We might also wish to participate and leverage student, faculty, or diplomatic exchanges. For example, there are some already that have been occurring through the State Department through the G20 interfaith forum and through the United Nations. And here, what we can do is to highlight the ways in which faith communities in their respective countries really are able to fill the gaps where the government cannot do all of the work of providing social services or of supporting diverse communities and perhaps there we can offer some insight as to what more can be done to leverage

the work of these faith communities and use them to build bridges across ideas of difference. In the realm of media and policy, I think that we need to fill the gaps. With respect to media, there are a variety of organizations that have focused on enhancing and improving the narrative of Islam in media, like Rethink, Soundvsion, and the UN Alliance of Civilizations. So perhaps we can leverage one of these groups to help train our youth, our leaders, and our scholars to learn how to interface better with journalists and with the broader media industry.

We might also offer expertise or refer diverse Shi'a professionals to those journalists. We also have folks who are in the film industry out in Hollywood. And there is an organization called MPAC Hollywood that brings together Muslims who are screenwriters, filmmakers, producers, directors, and even actors who are advising the Hollywood industry like Disney and Netflix and others on how to provide alternative narratives of Muslims. And we have seen that they have had impact. But again, there is scope to add some Shi'a voices to the dialogue here as well. We might also use social media to support like-minded groups and these need not be other Muslim groups. These can be secular groups, civic, or faith groups, that can work to amplify some of the common causes that we all care about and work towards things like poverty alleviation, disaster relief, food insecurity, etc, and amplify those common causes and those common messages, and then connect in person and find ways to also work together, not just inter-faith, but also intra-faith and across groups of civil society as well.

In the domain of policy, I think that we can offer to repackage some of our research and to write policy briefs, or even to simply offer some grounded expertise and context about the sensitivities of working in Shi'a majority populations or in diasporic regions, on evolving countries' situations on new programs or policies before they have deployed on the ground. And again, there are institutions that are doing some of this work that we could then tap into and offer diverse Shi'a perspectives, institutions like the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Quilliam, Brookings, the Baker Institute and even the Kennedy School at Harvard. And lastly, I will say that you know, there is this beautiful quote from Hazrat Ali, that I think is really quite inspirational and I think encapsulates the call that I have offered here today. He says, "No honor is like knowledge, no attainment is like humility, and no support is more reliable than consultation." And so in our shared commitment to knowledge and justice, let us humbly lead together today's global knowledge society by uplifting diverse voices and timeless values of Shi'i communities. Thank you.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much, Dr. Jamal. It is very good to hear such pragmatic steps that we can take. Now we turn to Sayyed Ali Abbas Razavi.

Sayyed Ali Abbas Razavi: Thank you very much for this symposium. It has been wonderful so far to listen to all the participants. They have offered a deep amount of wisdom and insight, and I think it is very important that symposiums like these do go ahead. We are living in very unique times and I do not think Shi'a communities at large have witnessed something like what we are witnessing at the moment. And though we have a very rich history as Shi'as across denominations, I do feel that this [symposium] is a very critical gathering of intellectuals and scholars and of Shi'a representation. So I do pray that this is successful. And I pray that we can hopefully have a follow-up on this. So I want to really start off by bringing a couple of things together.

Shi'a communities have offered and contributed a lot to the Islamic civilization, a civilization that officially consists of seven different cultures from Andalusia all the way across to Indonesia. So it is quite a huge land. And the most popular language in the Islamic world is Urdu. In the same way, not all Shi'a for example live in the Middle East. So you have large diaspora communities. And if we were to pin Shi'ism down, where would you say it begins? Well, I would say it begins in Medina and from Medina as a nucleus, we see contributions and philosophy [stem from there]. The School of Baghdad [in Shi'ism] is [also] very famous -- you can go back 1,100 years and you will see that. [One can find similar centers of Shi'ism] in Damascus and the surrounding regions, in the Maghrib [the Islamic West], in Medina itself, in the places as you heard in Dr. Nasr's remarks, from Lucknow -- which for at least 250 years was a center for theology and Islamic philosophy. [In Lucknow the focus was therefore] different than the jurisprudence and the principles of jurisprudence which you found that Najaf and Qom were quite central in the Twelver tradition. And then after that, with the shift of the Ismaili and the Bohra communities to India, for a period of time, you see a very unique dynamic take place. The partition of Pakistan saw his Highness the Agha Khan's grandfather, Shi'a leaders, and Bohra leaders come together. And they turned to the guidance or at least guiding [role], I would say, of Mohammad Ali Jinnah. [Such cooperation] was an amalgamation and you can see the rotation that took place within the Shi'a conferences which took place for about five years prepartition. And that is a unique contribution of coming together that we have not seen, I suppose, within Shi'ism for about a thousand odd years, where we have [historical] contributions [from coming together] in philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, and so forth. We have seen dialogue already mentioned between the Sunni communities. And of course at the moment, it is a hot topic.

There is not a week that goes by that there is not a dialogue which is taking place. And after the visit of the Pope to Najaf, there is now a growing conversation

between al-Azhar and Najaf at this time which I know of firsthand. So where we have contributions taking place and dialogue taking place [is] on an interfaith level, so on an interfaith level with Christians, with Jews, with the Dharmic faiths, and you find that there is a door open now for intra-faith dialogue between Sunni and Shi'a communities, and speaking from a Twelver perspective, I believe, we will move in such directions progressively. [In these larger interfaith dialogues, however], we are finding that there is one thing that is lacking and that is this intra-faith dialogue in regards to Shi'a sects or denominations. And the reason why I say that this is that I believe [intra-Shi'a dialogue] is the most important priority at this moment in time. And we can go into references of what Imam Ali (a) says, but again, this is not a theology lesson, so I am not going to bring in the traditions, but it is phenomenal to see that the one thing the Prophet or his children wanted was this umbrella Shi'a community to be together. But instead today you find those people are the closest are the furthest apart. Now I am not saying that we do not have dialogue [at all between Shi'a denominations]. Yes, of course we have dialogue and I have been in a number of dialogues [as have] others, including friends who have also been in a number of dialogues, be it a Twelver-Bohra, Twelver-Ismaili, Twelver-Zaydi so forth. And I am sure amongst each other there are also other dialogues which are taking place.

But today when takfirism (extremism) is rising, today when you could open up a manual, a Barelvi manual -- and the Barelvi are Sufi Muslims -- and you could see their leaders say that the Shi'a are *kafir* (unbelievers). And when we talk about *takfir* there, we talk about the blood of Shi'as being halal, their property, their lives, their women, their children, and so forth [being considered forfeit and licit by those who call Shi'as infidels]. There is no integrity left in such statements. When we are faced with that type of situation growing in the sub-continent when you are seeing certain things [like I just mentioned] take place, [and likewise] in the Middle East today. Moreover, we also are witnessing radicalization within the Western world, and we have already started to see denominational violence in places across Europe.

We saw in Brussels, a number of years ago, a Shi'a Imam, killed by a radical one could say - of Wahhabi tendencies. So when we are seeing things like this take place, my question: is it too late? Or should we now begin to dialogue in terms of intra-faith outreach? And we are looking at it more on a practical basis for the sake of our communities? We share common issues [across Shi'a denominations]. And so therefore it is important [to undertake this dialogue]. Do we have examples like this in history of what we may do [in terms of dialogue]? Shaykh al-Ta'ifa al-Tusi's (d. 1061) conversations in Baghdad [with other Muslim sects serves as a great example] and we also have dialogues in Basra on an intra-faith level that were taking place. And under the Fatimid dynasty we found that within Cairo there were dialogues taking

place among Shi'as. Another example that comes to mind is the Hasanids, which I would say is the oldest Shi'a empire. After the split that took place [following] Zayd ibn Ali's martyrdom, and then after that, the coming in of the Abbasids, you then had the Hasanid Shi'as then go to Morocco. You find a Shi'a empire in the early Islamic period which had been established [in North Africa by the Hasanids]. Now whatever denomination [of Shi'ism] they were, there was still a linkage between the house of Hashimids or the house of Ali. And I can bring forward multiple traditions that talk about even the Hasanid sayyids, for example, having a dialogue with Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, and they were not getting along. There was not mutual acceptance of each other in certain places. But you did find that the respect was there [regardless]. The house remained a house, regardless of whatever the splits were, whatever the issues were, up to the time of the eight Imam [within Twelver Shi'ism] Ali ibn Musa al-Rida, what you find is the entire house of Hashim together, regardless from the very beginning of Karbala, where you found splinter groups [that emerged as documented in the heresiographical literature] *Kutub al-Firaq*. Because we can look at multiple different splinter Shi'a groups, but the fact was that in the first 150 to 200 years of Islam, regardless of whichever splinter ideology there was, there was an umbrella. There was almost, if I could use the term, a council with various members would come together, they would have dialogue, they would have conversation and there they would present the rights of the Shi'a community. Now what symbolizes the Shi'a community? All of these different sects have one thing in common, and that is the nasb (affirmation) of the Imam, Imam Amir al-Mumineen, Imam Ali [ibn Abi Talib]. But at the same time as that, you also have an idea of wilayah (guardianship, or sovereignty), which has already been mentioned previously.

So, therefore the situation that we find ourselves in is very unique and in the current climate, I honestly do believe that this is a time where we can draw closer together given some of the experiences from the past. It is important to also mention, at the same time, that certain dialogues get stopped. You do find the likes of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Now again, without raising [the question] of which denomination or faith he was, the fact was that he studied both in Cairo as well as in Najaf and he had relationships with *ulema* (scholars) of Qom and he was the one who advised [Ayatollah] Mirza Shirazi (d. 1895) to give a fatwa (edict) against the British in the 1890s, which led to a huge crisis with the East India company and [Iran]. The fact was that [in the late 20th century] there [were very influential] individuals talking [and pushing forward dialogue]. In the same way, we find in the 1950s and '60s similar things take place.

One individual that I find quite interesting is Imam Musa Sadr, who within Lebanon was able to bring together communities such as the Druze as well as the

wider communities, including many of the Sunni communities, and Coptics Christians or the Orthodox communities. One person was spearheading those interfaith dialogue initiatives. If I was to pull together those resources [and look at historical experience] to contextualize that into the modern day period, [we would come to the conclusion] that there is a lot of work that is required. [At the same time] there is a lot of good work which is [presently] going on. Already as has been mentioned, [we have] the G20 forum as well as Religions for Peace. You have got Kaiciid programs and so forth, but none of these I feel supplement for the Shi'a community coming together and doing something for themselves, whether it is in terms of dialogue, whether it is in terms of social outreach, whether it is in terms of security, or in terms of academics.

There is such a negative portrayal of the moment [within academia]. The narrative is very negative when it comes to Shi'a studies, perhaps no more than some of [the better-known] universities, but there are multiple universities across the Western world who have a very negative image or understanding [of Shi'ism]. We have seen in our curriculums, for example, up to recently some negative portrayal within European curriculums on Shi'ism. In such curriculum [we found] passing reference to Shi'ism that was in fact very Shi'a-phobic if I could use the term. So when the narrative is written by others we are allowing that to happen because of a lack of centralization. Now, as we said, pluralism is something which is important, but with that pluralism, we must accept one another's differences.

However, I strongly do believe that something more official is required some form of a council, or at least in the way that Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq or prior to that his father Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, or even Imam Sajjad, Imam Zayn al-Abideen, [and others]. Go through the history and see that those individuals who splintered off [within Shi'ism] still had a place on a council where they were accepted, but they were able to talk to one another to defend the rights, the image [of Shi'ism], and to carry on with the social work that Imam Ali always emphasized. The final point is that if four and a half years of Imam Ali's life [as the caliph of the Muslim world] is to be summed up, you could see two facets to that. And as we, Shi'a, we all follow the same Imam Ali. The one was acceptance and pluralism of others under divine compassion, you could say, or mimicking the compassion of God. So everybody was treated with compassion, regardless of color, race, creed, or so forth.

The second thing was social work. There was not one person in [Ali's] time who went hungry. And as you already heard [of similar initiatives undertaken] in Houston, and the wonderful work that's being done by friends, we can do that globally. Or at least we can do that in the Western world. And if we can do that, that is sufficient enough, I believe, to bring our communities together and to give the impact that we require for the outside world to look in and say, actually, you know what?

These are the people we can dialogue with. So I am going to bring that to a close and I am going to hand it back to you Dr. Mohseni.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much Sayyed Razavi for your insightful comments. I'm looking forward to continuing that conversation with our Q&A session afterwards. Now I would like to welcome Professor Scott Lucas to speak with us on the potentials for Zaydi-Imami conversation. Thank you.

**Scott Lucas:** Thank you very much for inviting me to join this really remarkable gathering and it is quite an honor to be here. Twenty-five years ago, when I was briefly a student in a Zaydi school in Sana'a, Yemen, I do not recall seeing any Imami Shi'a books other than the famous *Nahj al-Balagha* by al-Sharif al-Radi and a short Qur'an commentary by the 19th century Iraqi scholar Sayyid Abdullah Shubar. During the quarter century -- it's been a quarter century since my last time in Yemen -- numerous classical Zaydi works have been published for the first time. And it is apparent that there are far more citations of Sunni books than Imami-Shi'a ones in them. I'm less familiar with the Imami library, but would be surprised if the legal or theological opinions of Zaydi Imams or scholars are cited frequently within them.

Part of this is due to geography. There never has been a significant Imami community in Yemen, and Zaydi communities in Iran and Iraq were small for most of their history. And another reason, maybe the fact that several of the Zaydi scholars wrote refutations of Imami Shi'ism, their criticisms frequently targeting the Imami's concept of *nasb*, or the designation of the living Imam of his successor and has a long history, arguably going back to being Imam Zayd ibn Ali himself in the eighth century. So where are we to begin? My goal today is to suggest four classical books that should lead to fruitful conversations between educated Zaydis and Imamis. I selected the books because I believe their contents would be appreciated by both Zaydis and Imamis, leading to greater mutual understanding between these Islamic denominations. I do not expect a discussion over the Imamate or specific legal topics or canonical hadith books to be the best starting place for Zaydi-Imami dialogue. Although these certainly could be aspirational topics for future conversations. I of course also welcomed suggestions for other books that we should read and discuss too. And I am sorry, there is no prize if you guessed the four books correctly. I did not have time to assemble one.

The first book is perhaps the most obvious, al-Sharif al-Radi's exquisite *Nahj* al-Balagha, the *Peak of Eloquence*, assembled in Baghdad at the end of the 10th century of the common era. This book has been read by his Zaydis in Yemen since at least the 13th century, and its depiction of Imam Ali and his own incompatible speech

remains electrifying even today. Imami and Zaydis share a similar vision of Imam Ali and recognize the extraordinary political challenges he faced across the vast territory, significant parts of which refuse to recognize his authority. Al-Sharif al-Radi's abrupt disorienting transitions from history to ethics, to theology, to asceticism keep the reader engaged and offer endless possibilities for discussion and reflection, serving as a perfect catalyst for our intra-Shi'i conversation.

My second book choice follows from my initial one, The Neat Brocade that Explains the Secrets of the Legatees Speech or al-Dibaj al-Wadi fi-l Kashf 'an Asrar *Kalam al-Wasi.* This is a six volume commentary on the *Path of Eloquence* written by the Zaydi Imam Mu'ayyid bi-llah Yahya ibn Hamza, who lived during the first half of the 14th century in Northern Yemen. Imam Yahya ibn Hamza was one of the most sophisticated Zaydi thinkers of all time who wrote extensively on law, legal theory, theology, grammar, rhetoric, and even an ethical book that may have been based or modeled on Imam Ghazali's Ihya Ulum al-Din. I don't think many Imamis are aware of this commentary on the Path of Eloquence, which was only published in San'a in 2003.

Imam Yahya applies his deep knowledge of the Arabic language to his elucidation of Imam Ali's soaring rhetoric, and includes all sorts of useful information that enhances the reading of the Path of Eloquence. It's also a lot shorter than Ibn Abi Hadid's very long commentary [Sharh Nahj al-Balagha] on this book as well. For example, in one of the passages, where Imam Ali justifies his decision to his followers for arbitration with the Syrian adversaries after the battle of Siffin, Imam Ali says the following: "Verily, we have not appointed men as arbiters. Rather we have only appointed the Qur'an as arbiter. The Qur'an is only written lines between two leaves. It does not speak with a tongue and must have an interpreter. Only men can articulate it." Imam Yahya in his commentary notes that this statement could be perceived by the listener as being contradictory because initially Imam Ali says the purpose of the arbitration was to let the Qur'an rather than men decide which side was right. And then he says that the Qur'an can't actually speak, but that only men can interpret its meaning. Doesn't that mean that men will make the decision rather than the Qur'an? Fortunately, Imam Yahya ibn Hamza alleviates this concern by explaining that the Imam Ali (a.s.) intended that the appointed men were supposed to arbitrate on the basis of the Qur'an rather than their own judgments. Therefore, the true arbiter is the Qur'an, even though technically the human arbiter articulates and applies its verdict.

The third text that I believe would generate engaging conversations late into the night between the Zaydis and Imamis is the magnificent Qur'an commentary by al-Hakim al-Jishumi, al-Tahdhib fi-l Tafsir, or The Refined Books of Exegesis. Al-Hakim al-Jishumi was an extraordinary and under-appreciated scholar from Khorasan, who wrote numerous books on theology, hadith, and ethics in Arabic and Persian. A

Mu'tazali Sunni by training, al-Jishumi migrated to Mecca late in life and probably became a Zaydi. Zaydis think he did, but there is room for debate. The survival of his writings, most of which remain in manuscript, is due primarily to Yemeni-Zaydi scholars and copyists to preserve them long after his demise in 1101 CE. Al-Jishumi's encyclopedic Qur'an commentary was published for the very first time in 10 large volumes in 2018 and 2019. And as an aside, happily, I was able to get a copy of it from Amazon. Although it took several weeks despite [being ordered on] Prime. A recent professor has shown that this book was a major source for the Imami exegete al-Tabarsi [author of the] famous commentary *Qur'an Majma' al-Bayan* – a work that probably would have been on my list had Jishumi's al-Tahdhib not been published.

Jishumi's commentary maintains an eight part framework throughout it's 7,600 pages, consisting of variant Qur'an readings, language, syntax, occasions for revelation, the structure of the Qur'an, meaning, rulings and occasionally stories and combines much of the contents of al-Thalabi's foundational tafsir (exegesis) al-Kashf wa-l Bayyan along with material from Mu'tazili commentaries that are no longer extant. One Qur'anic passage that should generate a lively discussion is al-Jishumi's commentary on the 23rd verse of Surah al-Shura, the 42nd surah. "Say: I ask of you nothing for it save for love for al-Qurba (i.e. close kin)." As we will see, what "al-Qurba" means is the big question here. Jishumi identifies three opinions over the meaning of muwwada fi-l qurba in this verse. Most of the Sunni Mu'tazilis who follow the teachings of al-Juba'i, took al-qurba to mean "to draw closer and love God" by obeying him and acting righteously. Of course, this is not the interpretation Shi'a have espoused. Jishumi's detailed account of the Sunni Mu'tazili arguments for this position allows Imamis and Zaydis the opportunity to analyze and critique this position.

The second interpretation is that this passage means "Say: that you love me," meaning the Prophet on account of my kinship with you. In other words, interpreters say this verse is addressed to the disbelieving Quraysh, all of whom had some degree of kinship with the Prophet. The third opinion that Jishumi reports of *al-qurba* refers to the family and descendants of the Prophet and his '*itrah*. This is clearly the opinion the Imamis and Zaydis would favor, and al-Jishumi acknowledges that the large number of reports detailing the virtues of the family of the Prophet make it a compelling position.

The fourth and final book I am proposing for this Zaydi-Imami book brew is al-Allamah al-Hilli's *Nahj al-Haqq wa Kashf al-Sidq*, or *The Path of the Truth and the Unveiling of Sincerity*. Al-Allamah al-Hilli was an extraordinary Imami scholar of Iraq during the Ilkhanid period. In fact, he was a contemporary of the Zaydi Imam Yahya ibn Hamza, whom I mentioned earlier – so it would be great to have a workshop just on those two figures; you could talk all day about that as well. This book, *The Path* 

of the Truth, was dedicated to Ilkhan [ruler] Uljaytu and may have contributed to his decision to try out Shi'ism. It consists of a clear and concise reputation of Ashari Sunni theology, law, and legal theory, and of course the imamate. Both the Imamis and Zaydis can enjoy the Allamah's critique of Ashari tradition's position on the divine attributes and determinism as he excels in reducing them to absurdity. Even better, al-Hilli, like many Zaydis, deploys eighty-four Quranic verses, and a smaller number of hadith, that many Sunni sources claim refer to Ali's excellence, following reports from Sunni sources criticizing the first three caliphs, Muwaiyah, and the companions more broadly. In fact, the overwhelming thrust of Al-Hilli's polemics regarding the imamate is limited to the superiority of Ali over the first three caliphs rather than defending the claim of Twelve Infallible Imams, which is very cursory in this book.

What this means is that the majority of the *Path of the Truth* is almost indistinguishable from the Zaydi refutation of Ashari Sunni theology so the thorny issue of the imamate is avoided. We have come some distance from the *Path of Eloquence* to the *Path of the Truth*. I confess I proposed a narrow range of classical religious books, but I am optimistic that they would provide an excellent foundation for Zaydi-Imami dialogue. Imamis and Zaydis have developed their rich intellectual traditions largely independent of each other. Perhaps now in the 15th and 21st century, it is time for them to get to know one another. Thank you.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you, Professor Lucas, for providing such a rich theoretical and textual basis for thinking about dialogue with the Zaydi tradition in particular. I am looking forward to our discussions [in the Q&A section]. Now if I can ask Eliton Pasaj and Huseyin Abiva to present. Welcome to both of you.

Eliton Pashaj: Bismillah al-Rahman al-Raheem. Dr. Mohseni, thank you for bringing us here together today. Me and my brother Dervish Huseyin are going to try and [expound upon the foundation] of the Bektashi way. But first, I want to explain a little bit for [those who may not be] familiar with Bektashi Shi'ism who we are and for how long we [have been] in this country. We call ourselves the Bektashis: the name Bektashi comes from Hajj Baktashi Veli, who first started the path in the old [or pre-] Ottoman days. We are located in Michigan in the city of Taylor. And this Bektashi tekke (center of worship) has been here since 1954. Baba Rexheb is the person who started this tekke and [he was originally] from Albania and left that country in 1944, when the communists took over the Albanian government. He moved and stayed in Italy for a couple of years and, after that, he moved to Cairo, Egypt where he served as a dervish in the tekke there under the directory of Ahmed Sirri Dede until 1952. By the end of 1952, he left that country to come to the United States of America.

In 1953-54, a few small groups of Albanians started the first Albanian-American Bektashi tekke and after he passed away in 1995, we [are] still here to serve all the Albanian Muslims, and mostly the people who love the Ahl al-Bayt (the family of Prophet Muhammad), and the Prophet Muhammad (a.s.). This tekke's mission was to bring all Albanians together, not just the Bektashis, but even [Albanians] from other religions. When Baba Rexheb was alive, he had very good dialogue with all other Albanian communities like Catholics, Orthodoxs, and the Sunni [Muslims]. Today, we try to keep that tradition alive, which is very hard because mostly because politics enters into religion [attempts] to demonstrate which religion is [better than others rather than engaging in dialogue]. It is sad to [see that state of affairs], but I was very happy here today to see all of these people who love the Ahl al-Bayt, who follow the Ahl al-Bayt and follow the Twelve Imams. [Unfortunately], after Baba Rexheb passed away we never had any connection with other Shi'a groups here in Michigan or other areas. I do not know why this happened, but I wish the old people who love the Ahl al-Bayt to be together and to have a very nice connection and friendship with each other. This tekke is the only tekke in the United States, Canada and Australia and we are serving the whole Albanian diaspora. After 1991, when communism [collapsed in Albania], we have a lot of members who left that country [and] they came here to build a new life. Today, we have so many Albanian young followers, but we still have serious problems: [Albanians] grew up in a country for forty-five years that was the only athiest country in the Balkans and [only country in] Europe that never used [the word] God.

We have a very big mission and, sadly, this mission for one year has been stopped by this COVID-19. I hope we start it back. Thank you, Dr. Mohseni, and my brother Huseyin Abiva will explain more about our connection to other groups in Shi'ism and Twelver Imamis. Thank you.

**Huseyin Abiva:** Thank you. In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Peace and blessings be upon our dear beloved Prophet and upon his purified household [Ahl al-Bayt]. Thank you, Dervish, for that introduction of our tekke in the Detroit area. What I would like to speak about is actually: where does Bektashism fit on the spectrum between the Sunnis and Shi'as?

I know since Bektashim has become a topic of study over the last hundred or so years, we have had quite often outsiders defining who we are. You have, for instance, travelers who visited the Balkans and Anatolia describing Bektashism as a mishmash of Islam and Christianity and Buddhism, even shamanism. And from our own Muslim clergy, our *ulema*, both Sunni and Shi'a, defining us as a sort of warped version of Sufism or a warped version of Shi'ism. I know some people will even express a belief

that Bektashis are part of the *ghulat*, which isn't necessarily a pleasant term. So I would like, [from a perspective] of inside [the Bektashi Order] to at least present some of the similarities that we share with our mainstream Shi'a brothers, particularly our Ithna Ashari brothers, and also as well as part of Sunni Islam that may be present inside of Bektashism.

So, first off, I would like to list clearly Shi'a aspects that are found within the Bektashi paths. The first would be immense love for the Ahl al-Bayt (family of the Prophet) as well as the Twelve Imams, starting with Imam Ali and ending with Imam Mahdi. And also that we believe that *nubuwat*, prophethood, and *wilayat*, which is sainthood, go together as one. We do have the concept of tawalla and tabarra; [tawalla] which means to attach ourselves to those who are friends of the Ahl al-Bayt or friends of the Prophet's family, as well as tabarra, which is to disassociate ourselves from those who fought against them. And of course we do commemorate the matam (mourning) during the days of Muharram. In fact in the year before Baba Rexheb and the community in Detroit actually established the tekke (religious center) which was 1954, Baba Rexheb actually went to the the main Shi'a mosque there, in Dearborn, and participated in the *matam* commemoration that they had there. Making *ziyarat* to the tombs of our Imams and ma'sooms (infallible personalities) in Najaf and Karbala and of course in Mashhad was something that many Bektashi dervishes and babas (religious leaders) did throughout the centuries, both as a means of enhancing their spiritual connection with those figures and also as a means of penance to alleviate any sort of shortcomings that they may have exhibited. They would be told to go and make these very difficult ziyarahs (pilgrimages), as you can imagine, coming from the Adriatic coast and having to travel often by foot, all the way to Mashhad in Khorasan.

So this *ziyarah* [is something] which we also share I think with the vast majority of our Shi'a brethren of all different stripes. Of course this Shi'ism however should not be thought of as utilizing anything of fiqh (Islamic law). It should be made clear that fiqh, these *shari*' (jurisprudential) matters really are not a concern for most Bektashis because we see ourselves as being a school to develop one's spirituality. If one wishes to study fiqh and the *shari'a*, they can study in the madrassas that dot the Muslim world.

We also celebrate Nowruz, which is, of course, an ancient Persian holiday. And we see that as not only being the first day of spring, but also the birthday of Imam Ali. And we commemorate the *matam* (mourning for Imam Hussain) by fasting during the first ten to twelve days of Muharram. With that said, [these are] our kind of a spiritual connection to our Shi'a brothers.

It should be kept in mind though Bektashism grew in a predominantly Sunni environment. So the Ottoman Empire of course, was officially the upholder of Sunni

Islam and those sorts of Sunni elements can also be found within this broad body of Bektashis, for instance our own Baba Rexheb, whose picture is there behind Dervish Eliton, was a madrassa graduate, as was his Baba, as was his Murshid, his spiritual master Baba Selim. They both studied at *madrassas* (Islamic seminaries or schools) in Albania [as] well. In those days, Ottoman Albania, these weren't Ja'fari *madrassas*, these were Sunni and of course, in the Ottoman empire, Hanafi *madrassas*, so they studied in these places as other of our masters did. So there, they had a grounding in Islam that was Sunni and Hanafi.

There are also books. In most of our Bektashi writings, we don't have a lot of prose books or a lot of big theological tomes, or even books on *tasawwuf*, but Bektashis have traditionally expressed themselves through poetry, which we call *nefes*. One of the rare prose books is a book by Alibaba, who was originally from Crete, called *Uyun al-Hidayat*. And within the text of that book, even though the focus of that book is mainly on the Ahl al-Bayt and the mysticism and the spirituality of the Ahl al-Bayt, he does mention the *Khulafa Rashidun* ("rightly guided caliphs) of the Sunni's and not in a negative way. We also have, in the later part of the 19th century, books that were published in the late Ottoman Empire for instance Bektashi Sirri and Ahmet Rifat Efendi's *Mir'atul Maqasid*, which even at some points claim that Bektashis are part of the Sunnis.

Now of course, this may have been *taqiyah* (dissimulation) because still at that time Bektashis were somewhat illegal since in 1826 the Ottoman government outlawed Bektashism along with destroying the Janissaries as I'm sure most of you know. So it may have been an effort to kind of hide things to prevent the persecution of Bektashis, which was understandable. But nonetheless, you know, for instance, in Baba Rexheb's own book, *Islamic Mysticism and Bektashism*, he devotes, I would say roughly the first quarter of the book – as he's gradually getting to the point of discussing Bektashism – he lays the groundwork by discussing great Sufi luminaries including Ibn Arabi, Rumi, and al-Ghazali.

And he discusses them at great length and these were all very well known Sunnis and it's only when you get to the portion of his book on Bektashism and you start reading about the Ahl al-Bayt and you start reading about the Twelve Imams [and related issues] – so it's this very fluid attitude. And I think this [discussion indicated] for us to maybe come together and understand the Bektashi mentality of things, which in a way it's a reflection of the broader way of Sufism as it existed in the Ottoman Empire. I would like to end with a very nice story that was told by Shaykh Muzafir Oza, who was actually one of the more famous Shaykhs of the Jerrahi Sufi order, which is technically a Sunni order during the late 20th century. He told a story in one of his books of an incident that his Shaykh, his master, witnessed. It was a

meeting that took place somewhere in Turkey, I believe probably toward the end of the Ottoman Empire, and it was a pleasant gathering of ulema, our *hojjahs*, our imams. So in this gathering of our *ulama*, I presume they were probably all Sunni Hanafi, they were having tea together and discussing things. And the topic of Sufism came up and the Sufi orders. So each of the imams told one by one which Sufi tariqa or order they were affiliated with. So one of them said, "well, I'm a Halveti," one of them would say, "well, I'm a Rifa'i," another one Badavi, Nakhshabandi and so on until it got to one of the *ulama* who did not take too highly of Sufism thing to begin with. [However] being polite and showing *adab* (propriety/etiquette), he did not stand up and start denouncing them and making *takfir* (excommunication) on all of them for following *tasawwuf*. He thought though that he would show his displeasure with all of this by kind of poking fun at them. So when it came his turn to tell which Sufi order he was affiliated with, he said, "oh, I'm a Bektashi".

And the other *ulama*, knowing this fellow, were a bit shocked, but once again, having good adab, they shook their heads in agreement and said, 'oh, that's very interesting'; because for someone like that to be a Bektashi was what would have been very strange to hear. So the imam, this hojjah, went home that night after having played a little trick on the rest of the gathering. He went home and fell asleep. And during the night he had a dream and in the dream, he dreamt that he was standing on the mahshar, the plain of the Day of Judgment, and he was being judged and the tally [of his good and bad deeds] went up and finally, the decree came from on high that this imam, this mullah would be thrown into the hell fire. And so the angels came and were dragging him to the pit and at that moment, there's very old looking venerable man appeared out of nowhere and asked Janab-e Haqq, asked Allah, to free him from the hell fire for his sake. So Allah said: "Yes, you are indeed one of my friends and I will free this man for your sake from the hell fire." So the imam went to this figure and started kissing his hand and kissing his feet and stood up and said: "who are you that saved me from this, my doom"? And the man said, "I'm Haji Bektash" who is the patron saint of our Sufi order. And the mullah said, "But I was only pretending to be one of your murids, one of your disciples." And Haji Bektashi said: "Indeed, I know. Imagine what you would have gotten if you were one of my disciples." And it is said that the mullah woke up and went directly to the nearest Bektashi tekke, or center, and he took his baya or his initiation into the order. So it's this kind of fluid attitude that exists in Ottoman Sufism. I know that our our esteemed imam was saying that he was in Kosovo at some period, and he found people very sympathetic to him; because not only Bektashis, but also Rifa'is and Qadiris (other Sufi orders), also have, at least in the Balkans, this veneration for the Ahl al-Bayt.

And as far as our Bektashi community is concerned, as Baba Rexheb said, the

doors of this tekke are open to everyone regardless of religion and nationality. And it is even in one of our principles that we have a gradation of spiritual steps, the first being *shari'at*, then *tariqat*, then *marifat* and *haqiqat*. And it said that at the highest level, *haqiqat*, which is knowledge of reality, that a Bektashis is to see all of the 72 sects [which is related] to the famous hadith [of the Prophet Muhammad] that "my ummah (community) will split into 72 sects." [Although] there is a debate about the authenticity of that [hadith], nonetheless, we are to see all of the 72 sects as being one. So alongside my brother Dervish Eliton, I wanted to thank you for giving us this opportunity to interact with our Shi'a brothers from outside our Albanian community, and also in the wider community around the world. Thank you very much. God bless all of you.

Eliton Pashaj: Thank you, Dervish Huseyin. I just want to add that I added one thing. I heard Sayyed Ali Abbas Razawi speak about some of the problems that are coming from Wahabbi groups targeting the Shi'a Muslims. I just wanted to say that the Albanian Bektashis have very similar problems in Albania [stemming from Wahhabi pressure]. Also today we have a very old [historic Bektashi] tekke in Macedonia, called the "Harabati Baba Tekke," [facing threats and occupation from Wahhabi groups]. So for the brothers and sisters who want more information about the Bektashi Shi'ism and what [our movement represents], I [would recommend] they read the Frances Trix book, *The Sufi Journey of Baba Rexheb*. Thank you so much for everything [and God] bless you all, and [I hope all of you] stay safe.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you so much both of you, Dervish Eliton and Dervish Huseyin. If we can ask all the other panelists to join us now for a Q&A session. I am just going to begin with posing an initial question for each of our speakers and then open up to Q&A from the audience. If we can begin, Zahra, with your presentation and talk, I would like to ask what you think are some of the main challenges to thinking about doing all the programmatic areas that you were mentioning – which I think is very significant and important. What are opportunities, challenges, maybe both within a [particular] perspective – I don't know if you can speak of Ismailism in particular – and the strengths and weaknesses within that tradition or community organizations. And then [if you could speak on] challenges and weaknesses across different Shi'a groups to work together on that pathway.

**Zahra Jamal:** Sure, thank you for the question. So I guess the main challenge is humility. You know, I think that often times many of us think that we have all the answers or we have a monopoly on truth within or between interpretive traditions.

And I think that it's important to remember that humility before the divine because none of us have all of the answers. Only He is perfect and He is not just the Judge of the Day of Judgment, but the Lord of the Day of Judgment. So who are we to say that any of us have all of those answers? So I think [if] we can suspend that and remember that our diversity is actually a divine gift, [that would be a positive step]. In the Quran, God says that he created us different so that we may know one another and vie in good works. And so there is a call for us to actually come together to value one another's identities and views and interpretations [and] to learn from [that diversity]. And even to work together, to collaborate, to leave the world a better place – that call to justice is not something specific to Islam, but you find it across faith and philosophical traditions. And so I think if we can get past our differences and perhaps our sometimes lack of humility perhaps we can move towards that opportunity.

**Payam Mohseni:** And just as a follow-up: I liked your framing in terms of thinking also about anti-discrimination writ large within a plural society or Islamophobia. What would your thoughts be in terms of just Shiaphobia, or focusing more on the common dilemmas that face Shi'a in particular? And what do you think some of the organizational needs in our communities are?

Zahra Jamal: I think organizationally it would be worthwhile, as I mentioned, to begin that intra-faith dialogue with, you know, our leaders, scholars, professionals, faith leaders, etc. to understand together what are some of the needs and the opportunities for us to collaborate. And so I think that internal dialogue beginning with that is critically important; I think one of my fellow panelists mentioned having perhaps a council of various Shi'a scholars or leaders. And to some extent that was done with the Amman Declaration where you had leaders of Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Salafi, et cetera interpretations of Islam coming together and jointly proclaiming what constitutes or defines a Muslim - what is it the way to determine a fatwa and who is outside of that fold? And the fact that none of us can declare one another an apostate, [so] it forbade apostasy. And so maybe building on that tradition is an opportunity. But beyond that, [regarding] creating a separate set of Shi'a efforts to combat Shi'aphobia - I'm not sure that that's really going to be the best use of our resources, which are limited not just monetarily, but in terms of time and effort and so forth because there are already existing platforms that are working well in those spaces as I had mentioned, [including] some of the think tanks and media groups and, and other educational efforts. And so I think entering into those spaces, perhaps as maybe a coalition of Shi'a to advance whatever we want to do in those existing spaces would probably be the most practical and the most fruitful.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you, Dr. Jamal. Sayed Razawi, maybe we can continue from Dr. Jamal's response right now [and] thinking about the Amman message. What are practical steps moving forward with the proposal you made? And I'm looking through the Q&A right now, we're getting a lot of questions in terms of are there particular individuals or communities within Twelver Shi'ism or Twelver Ja'fari Shi'a Islam who would be interested in intra-Shi'a dialogue and undertake this type of initiative?

Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi: Thank you very much. And let's start off with Risalat Amman, the Amman Declaration, [which I actually] spent time in Amman on the declaration. In theory, it's a very good declaration. In practice, it has no value. And be it the Marrakesh Declaration, be it the declaration which was signed in Washington a number of years ago, which I was there for as well, or be at the Risalat Amman, the bottom line is: is that yes maybe we recognize individuals that are Muslims on the list of conditions [mentioned in the declarations]. My question is: do people really believe that? And is it implemented? And if that was the case, then there wouldn't be such a violence across the Middle East in the wake of the Amman Declaration, you saw violence just in neighboring countries.

So it is theoretically a very good document of which we have had our own contributions to, however, I still believe that there is a place for an intra-Shi'a dialogue or a document or some kind of understanding amongst the Shi'a denominations, because I do believe that each one of us, each one of our denominations are quite influential within their own circles. And I think what's very important is that there needs to be a multifaceted approach. So it can't be just a linear approach. I can't put my experience in one basket and just work on one particular document or resolution, but there needs to be things which are interfaith, intra-faith, and then after that intra-Shi'a faith, if you could use such a word. I would say also there needs to be work, which should be done on the governmental civic level as well as media and interfaith outlets. So a number of those interfaith outlets, which were mentioned, we have worked closely with them. And again, the purpose of it, [speaking as] a trustee of a number of those organizations, is to be universal. So you're not specifically looking at one particular faith group, but it's a universal message.

For example, we go to the world conference of the World Council of Churches. They're a Protestant organization, which brings together everyone other than the Catholics. So they have ecumenical dialogue within themselves. They would have a specific dialogue amongst their own denominations under one bracket. So be you for example, Anglican or Lutheran: the fact is that they are individual dialogues which are taking place [and] are very important because there's going to be pertinent issues.

So to give you an example, for example, God forbid as was the case, a number of years ago, multiple Ismailis [were] killed in Karachi. What do you do with that? Where do you go with that? Where's the mechanism in place?

So I think dialogue is not just something which is theological. Dialogue can be on multiple levels, be it on a civic level, or on a charitable level. And I think until the Shi'a communities take the narrative in their own hands, you are always going to have people who are going to dictate [that narrative from the outside]. At the moment, the vast majority of declarations are not coming from us. And so they've [been] as good as they are and as necessary as they are, don't get me wrong. I'm not negating them. It is very necessary to have a document, which has official leaders saying that you are not a kafir (infidel), so-and-so's not a kafir, this is a fatwa [regarding excommunication]. But that doesn't do away - unfortunately - [the phenomenon] of takfir, or fundamentalism. So we would need, I believe going forward, practicality something that shows that we can have a dialogue amongst ourselves. And we were there to look at our own communities and to see where collaboration can take place to move forward. I've seen it in Tanzania. I have seen in Kenya, for example, where Bohras, Ismailis, and Ithna Asharis get together on the basis of security. I remember a number of years ago in Dar es-Salaam, for example, they had a security meeting which took care of the Jamatkhana and Imambargah or the Hussayni over there [as well as] the Bohra centers.

So there are relationships where there was an imminent threat, which was recognized by one of the Ismaili members who then came and fed it back to the small council. So I'm not going to go any further because I don't want to compromise the networks. But the fact is that there is a requirement for various sector levels of dialogue, and it just doesn't have to be theological, but there are a number of things that we can do together to safeguard and to preserve our communities. And I think that that would be important going forward.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you, Sayed. Professor Lucas, for those in the audience, but also [in the broader] Zaydi community, it seems like there is a lot of engagement or interaction between how contemporary Zaydis relate to Sunnism or to Sunni communities. There's much less, until perhaps very recently, on Zaydi-Imami relations, and particularly Zaydi Twelver or Ja'fari denominations. How does the Zaydi community, or how do Zaydi communities, look at this subject? Do they look at commonalities across Sunnism and Shi'ism? Do they not want to be categorized as either group? Are there questions of leadership – community leadership or religious leadership – that we should know from the Zaydi community when thinking about interlocutors? So who should we work with given the nature of Zaydi leadership and

#### community building?

Scott Lucas: Thank you. Those are some great questions. I've been in Tucson, Arizona for many years, and I don't know any Zaydis here. And I've been a bit out of touch with the communities in Yemen. And obviously they've been going through a horrendous situation for many years. And so if we think [about] a little history: in 1962, the [Zaydi] imamate was overthrown by secular nationalists and, ever since then, until about the '90s, there was understandably some anxiety by the government of Yemen that Zaydis would find another Imam and raise a revolt and so forth. And so until about the dawn of computers, which I happened to see just when that was beginning when I was in Yemen, Apple [computers] were arriving there and texts were being edited by people in places you've never heard of. And so there was a real revival happening in the '90s before the Sa'da wars in the early 2000s. And so I think a lot of what's been happening is [that] Zaydis [are] publishing [and through that] rediscovering their legacy. It's true, a lot of their legacy got sent to Europe because manuscripts were collected, bought, stolen - however you want to look at it - and ended up in European libraries. But there are still a ton of manuscripts and books in Yemen that have not seen the light of day, [including among the] ones I mentioned.

So, I think a lot of what Zaydis have been doing prior to the war – I mean, now a lot of [Zaydis] are just trying to survive - but prior to the wars many of them were rediscovering their heritage because there [just] hadn't been attention [paid to that heritage]. I think Professor Heikel at Princeton talks about this: between Zaydis who went the [Muhammad al-]Shawkani route and became more or less Sunnis, and those are the ones also the Republican government tended to favor. And then [on the other hand] those who looked into their heritage and developed and published their texts and wrote commentaries on them, and engaged in the old sort of theological debates, [etc]. So I think a lot of what Zaydis have been doing is not figuring themselves out: they know who they are, but [they want to] make accessible to the next generation of [Zaydi] students who are hooked on the internet and hooked on iPhones and everything else [their heritage] so that they'll be able to learn more about what the Zaydi tradition is all about. And so maybe this isn't the ideal time for [a dialogue]: for someone like me in Tucson, it is great: I would be happy to talk to Imami-Shi'as. [But the issue is that] I am not trying to survive in Yemen right now. So it is hard to say, I do not know much about the Zaydi community in the United States; presumably there is one, but I have not had time to really explore them.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you, Scott. And for Dervish Huseyin and Dervish Eliton: I would like to ask you a bit more about what you think can be done practically in terms

of developing a dialogue with other shared denominations. In Michigan you are close to a very large Twelver, or Ja'fari, denomination: are there grounds for cooperation or is this really a new type of initiative to think about this? And then a related question: you both spoke about the history of Bektashism. Are there linkages or dialogue between Bektashism and Alevism in Turkey or [is this not the case]?

Huseyin Abiva: I can only speak about our Bektashi community in America. There are basically three kinds of areas or regions where Bektashis are found. One of them, of course, is in Turkey, where there are Bektashis and the wider Alevi community – which is several millions of people, whereas Bektashi are a small number of them. There is a level of interaction, a level of cooperation, and a level of sympathy between Bektashi and Alevis. We share many things in common with them, although there are many things that we don't share. And there is, I do not want to say "aggressive," but there is a very powerful Sunni religious establishment there [that] in many ways is pushing for assimilation of all non-Sunni groups.

So the situation there is a bit different in many ways. In the Balkans, and particularly in Albania, it is almost the reverse. The Bektashi community in Albania has been recognized legally by the government even post-independence, except for the communist era. The Bektashi community is recognized as a legitimate sect or *madhab* (sect) or *tariqa*, however you want to define that and to this day the Bektashi community in Albania has very cordial relationships not only with the Sunni establishment, barring the Salafi minority, but it also has very cordial relations with the Sunni [popular] community of Albania, as well as with the two large Christian groups being Albanian Orthodox and Roman Catholic.

However, in other places, for instance, in Macedonia, as Dervish Eliton mentioned, Bektashis are not recognized by the government. And unfortunately there are people within the Sunni establishment that are very hostile toward Bektashism. As our dervish mentioned, there's the case of the Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetova that part of it has been taken over by the Sunni community quite unjustly, but here in America maybe Dervish Eliton can address [that issue] a little better since he is living at the tekke as our resident clergyman. So he may see a much larger interaction with, as you mentioned, the very large Shi'a community there in Dearborn and in the area. But from my own experience, I do not think, since Baba Rexheb walked to *haq*, that he walked to truth, that there has been much interaction between the wider Shi'a community in Michigan and and our Tekke. Dervish I am sure you could correct me if I am wrong.

**Payam Mohseni:** It seems unfortunately that Dervish Eliton is no longer on zoom.

We will see if he can join again. If he joins, we would be happy to hear his comments, but thank you so much. So turning to Q&A from the audience: how much of do each of you face difficulties interacting or working or facing discrimination from larger Sunni Muslim communities? And have you tried or not so far [to work with other Shi'a communities], or what are the challenges or reasons that Shi'a communities do not work with each other? I know we have addressed that, but if we can have just short answers from each of you to that question.

Zahra Jamal: Well, I can just share that I have had very positive relationships with various Sunni and Shi'a groups in my interactions. Everybody is kind of facing a common challenge of being vilified in the West. And so we all come together, I think, on that basis. And I think in having those conversations and then rubbing shoulders with each other, we recognize that actually we have a lot more in common than we do than different. And so I think that's really actually quite valuable in this regard. So my engagements have been, I think, positive.

Huseyin Abiva: Also if I may speak next I once again, in America there hasn't been any real serious discrimination against Bektashis. I think the harshest thing that I have personally ever experienced from mainstream observant Muslims would just be some subtle, derogatory remarks about what they think Bektashism is and whatnot. But there are issues of discrimination, as I had mentioned in parts of the Balkans, particularly in this state of Northern Macedonia and also in Turkey. [In] Turkey, [there is] discrimination against not only Bektashsis but also [against] the larger Alevi community.

So it does exist and these kinds of old stereotypes, these old *fatwas* that were decreed 200 years ago, declaring the property of Bektashis elicit, their blood is halal and calling us *rafidhis* and all of these things. This attitude is there unfortunately, and amongst many people in Turkey.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you. We had a question from the audience asking about how the Bektashi brothers [practice] without fiqh, what framework is used to situate ritual practice and daily conduct? Interestingly, Nizari Ismailis do not have fiqh either, but they follow clear guidance from their Imamate [regarding] ethical conduct and ritual practice. Do Bektashis follow the guidance from Shaykh or particular imams?

**Huseyin Abiva:** Traditionally, there is a sort of hierarchy – for want of a better word – of clergy. The top being the Dedebaba which literally means the great grandfather, who is the Bektashi Shaykh that sits on the sheepskin post of Hajji Bektash Veli.

Generally though, our rituals stem from a tradition that had been passed down in books known as *Erkanname*. And the Bektashis believe that these rituals were put in place by an individual who lived in the later part of the 15th century, early 16th century. His name was Balim Sultan, and he is considered to be our second founding pir because he kind of organized our order, our tarique with its rituals and regulations and whatnot.

Actually, it is very interesting. I would also like to add that our Bektashi view of exoteric Islam, zahiri Islam, is very much similar to the Ismaili views on the shari'a and fiqh. So, I think at that level, even though we do proudly consider ourselves to be Ithna Ashari (Twelver), we follow in the train, the caravan of the Twelve Imams, but we do have many things in similar with our with our Ismaili brothers and sisters at least in regards to our spirituality.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much. Sayed Razawi, what steps can Twelver clergy take to further dialogue with other Shi'a groups? And has there been any work done within clerical circles on intra-Shi'a dialogue or has the focus mostly been on interfaith [efforts]?

**Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi:** I know there has been focus on interfaith, but there has also been work amongst the Twelver clergy and the wider Shi'a denominations. So I think it is a positive step. I think a lot of it has not come onto the surface yet. And I think it is wise for it not to come up to the surface [immedietly]. [We should] have our own conversations first and develop our own templates. So that is something which is sustainable.

But [turning to the question of] what can clergy do? Well, I think clergy can just do just that: reach out to people. And I think that's what we do best and you will find the other denominations being very hospitable, you know, sharing some wonderful meals. [Also regarding the question of discrimination]: do we feel I've never felt any discrimination at all? Not at all: In fact, I've only been treated with the utmost respect from all of the other Shi'a denominations that we have interacted with. I remember being stuck once in Istanbul and looking for a place to pray. The closest place in fact was a Bektashi tekke. And I remember going over to the eastern side of it, as you mentioned I think Belim Sultan's grave is located there; we went right there and we were allowed to pray and then we came back out again. So, I think it is a wonderful thing when all of these multiple shades of the various Shi'a spectrum, stemming from Imam Ali, [interact with each other]. I think it's wonderful to connect with each other. So I would say: just reach out. It's so easy to reach out – just reach out to your local khaneghah, tekke or your local Jamaat Khana, whatever it may be; just reach

out and talk. And I think that that's the way forward. And I think you will find love reciprocated, and I think it is as easy as that.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you. Professor Lucas, could you speak a bit perhaps on the nature of Zaydi authority and education?

Scott Lucas: Sure. So the Zaydi Imam is very different from the Ismaili or the Twelver imams. Zaydis believed that the Prophet peace be upon him, designated Ali, Hasan, and Hussein but that after that there was no longer any designation. There was no more *nass* and that to be an imam, a descendant of Hasan or Hussain had to make a claim by raising a revolt and then ultimately be successful. They were also supposed to be a scholar, although many imams historically were not. But in theory, they're supposed to be very pious scholars, essentially in the model of the Imam Hussain or Imam Ali – that was the ideal. Obviously it is not the most stable political system if every Imam has to raise a revolt that can lead to some instability. But that was the idea; but there's also a sense that it's not necessary to have a living imam at all times, and that probably helped the Zaydi community [in allowing them] to work without [always] relying upon [an imam]. And of course there are many great scholars who were not imams. It was not as if only the imams were keeping the religious learning going and usually it was other people who were doing that.

Payam Mohseni: Great, thank you. And Dr. Jamal, perhaps maybe we'll end with our closing questions for you: are there any contemporary examples of fruitful intra-Shi'a collaboration and engagement that you'd point to as good models, such as the voting rights and social justice initiatives you have already mentioned, or even fruitful intrafaith work or Shi'a-Sunni work? And at your center at Rice, do you work on similar issues or not?

Zahra Jamal: So in preparing for today's presentation, I contacted as many people as I could around the world from different Shi'a communities asking them, "Do you know of Shi'as working together on volunteer or justice projects?" And most folks said, no. It was really hard to find those examples. So the ones that I offered were the few that came up, and I really hope that that they're happening but that my contacts and I just don't know about [such collaboration]. And so I would love to hear from my co-panelists if you all do know of other opportunities, certainly the example offered in Tanzania is a great one and and I think there's others like it as well. I think in terms of Sunni-Shi'a conversation, as I mentioned, especially in the U.S. where I am, there is a lot of that happening – and it is in these various domains of really trying to change

the narrative and the face of Islam. And there has been quite a bit of work done in these different domains like I mentioned: media, education and policy; but what's interesting here is that they were are not doing it alone. There are various Jewish, Christian, Sikh, and Hindu groups; there are also secular humanists. There are even atheists. There are so many people who are joining us because they're seeing how difficult it has been for us for the last, you know, twenty years, since 9/11, and many of them have also faced similar kinds of challenges historically in this country and elsewhere. And we also see people collaborating across other kinds of challenges like racism, for example, or other areas. As far as the work that the Boniuk Institute does, our mission is the study and advancement of religious tolerance and we work in the areas of education, so both [in] producing scholarship, but also [in] training teachers around the world in religious literacy so they can bring that work into the classroom.

We also work in engagement. So a lot of my work is really in training and working with government leaders, law enforcement, civic leaders, and corporate leaders on these issues and helping them to see that religious literacy is really central to the diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging agenda, and [is] just so critical to the future of humanity more generally. And then lastly, we also do research and we engage in the arts. And so we found a lot of traction with our Arts of Tolerance program and sharing that as a common thread of building, understanding, and humanity across different faith and philosophical traditions. Unfortunately, with the pandemic and sort of curtailment of funding, we've suspended that program for now. But hopefully we will be able to bring it back because it has been very high impact.

Payam Mohseni: Great. Thank you so much Dr. Jamal and thank you to all of our distinguished and esteemed panelists for all of your comments and remarks. It has been very good and wonderful to learn from your insights and thoughts on this important issue. And hopefully we can engage with you in the future in thinking about how to build on the discussions that we have had today and actually being able to promote good examples that we can turn to for this type of collaboration. And thank you to all our audience and guests with us today. We hope you can join us for the remainder of our symposium panels, with tomorrow being on Shi'ism and Sufism which will look at esotericism in Islam, and that will be moderated by Professor Ali Asani. Thank you everyone for joining us.



The World Headquarters of the Bektashis, located in the capital of Albania, Tirana. The Headquarters were built in 1930 by the first Dedebaba of the Bektashi Order, Sali Njazi.

8 June, 2019. Credit: Wikicommons, Fjoralba Ismaili (CC BY-SA-4.0)

# Panel 2 | Shi'ism and Sufism: Islamic Traditions of Esotericism

### Speakers:

Shafique N. Virani (University of Toronto) - Much Ado About Nothing: Coming to "Terms" with Sufism and Ismailism

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump (William & Mary) - Sufism, Shi'ism and Confessional Ambiguity among Qizilbash/Alevis

Nicholas Boylston (Harvard University) - Twelver Shi'ism and Sufism: Their Relationships in History and Today

#### Moderator:

Ali Asani (Harvard University)

Ali Asani: Welcome everyone to this session on Shi'ism and Sufism. I am Ali Asani, the faculty chair of this Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs, an initiative of the Weatherhead Center at Harvard University and an initiative that is funded by the Henry Luce Foundation for which we are very grateful. And without much ado, I'm going to just briefly introduce our panelists, and then we'll start with the first presentation.

So we have the pleasure to have with us-it's a special pleasure for me to have two of my students on this panel. Dr. Shafique Virani is a Distinguished Professor of Islamic studies at the University of Toronto. Then we have Nicholas Boylston, who's also a colleague here at Harvard in the Study of Religion, we also have Professor Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, Associate Professor of History from William and Mary. So, welcome everybody. We will start with Shafique Virani's presentation; so Shafique, please feel free to start.

**Shafique Virani:** Thank you very much for a kind introduction, Professor Asani. My presentation is [entitled]: "Much ado About Nothing: Coming to terms with Sufism and Ismailism." In 1916, the young Russian Wladimir Ivanow presented a study of Ivan Zarubin's collection of Ismaili manuscripts. This launched the young scholar's career in what would become his lifelong passion: Ismaili studies. It was also the first time he drew a connection between Sufism and Ismailism, having studied the former at university and met adherents of the latter during a 1912 sojourn in Iran. Half a century later, after his passing in 1970,

he was recognized in a biographical notice in the journal *Middle Eastern Studies* as "the greatest modern contributor to Ismaili studies." Building on his first foray into the subject, in a paper exploring an Ismaili interpretation of Mahmud Shabistari's *Golshan-e Raz*, or the *Rose Garden of Mystery*, a poem as famous as its author is obscure, Ivanow wrote: "It is a well known fact that many persecuted sects in Persia, not rarely tried to veil their tenets by adopting the terminology of Sufism. Though Persian Ismailism is very little known, we may see from those works which are available that often, it is very difficult to decide whether one has to deal with, so to say, 'Ismailised Sufism' or with 'Suficised Ismailism." In this brief paper, I hope to nuance what I call the symbiotic relationship thesis first proposed by Ivanow and Henry Corbin, and since then, widely accepted by researchers. I hope to demonstrate that though Sufis and Ismailis did share many characteristics, including a vocabulary, they did not always mean the same thing, even when using the same terms.

Act 2, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's Much ado About Nothing plays on how the same word often means different things when used by different people in a variety of contexts, and by extension, how what often appears most obvious is really not so. Don Pedro, the Prince of Aragon, bids Balthazar, his attendant and musician, to perform. And the pithy conversation that ensues has a triple play on words with the word "noting" suggesting noticing, musical notes, and nothing. Don Pedro: "nay, pray thee, come. Or if thou wilt hold longer argument, do it in notes." Balthazar: "note this before my notes, there's not a note of mine that works the noting." Don Pedro: "Why, these are very crochets that he speaks—Note notes, forsooth, and nothing!"

The multiple meanings of what at first sight appears to be the very same word "note" reminds the audience to note things well, to analyze what we have received, and to be cautious of trusting our first impressions. We see this consciousness and then exchange between Sadr al-Din Qunawi, Ibn Arabi's most important commentator, and Nasir al-Din Tusi, writing to him from the Ismaili fortress of Alamut. Tusi expresses surprise in what he takes to be Qunavi's position, which to him resembles that taken by the Mu'tazila. Qunawi apologizes, composing a work he calls Treatise Giving Guidance, [or] al-Risalah al-Hadiya, that begins with the discussion of the technical terminology he uses. The work explains that due to the limitations of language, different schools of thought often use the same vocabulary, but in ten different meanings by it: "While every school among the learned is distinct in its particular use of technical vocabulary, there may be an overlap of some words and expressions between two different schools, despite their divergence in belief. This occurs because of the dearth of available terminology and occasionally the failure to define and limit words. So one can imagine the possibility of these shared words and expressions with numerous aspects and varying interpretations being applied by one group in a

completely different manner than how they are used by another group. This ambiguity would only cease with an explanation of what is meant by these applications in order to clarify the matters in which the two groups differ and in what they share."

We would be wise to keep this in mind in studying the relationship between Sufism and Ismailism. Writing about the post-Mongol period, and echoing current scholars' key sentiments, a prominent scholar of Ismailism writes, "The different Nizari communities in Persia and adjoining regions, as well as in India, had gradually come under the authority of their local leaders, [who] were often referred to by the Sufi term 'pir', the Persian equivalent of shaykh." However, what is more important than the fact that the Sufi term here is the Persian equivalent of shaykh is the fact that the Ismaili term pir is not the equivalent of the Sufi term pir and differs in many ways from the Sufi concept. A pir is a specific dignitary in the Nizari Ismaili hierarchy as an Indic Ismaili poetic textbook explains in Gujarati: "The true guide is the philosopher's stone, his disciple, copper, that will be transformed into gold by his touch. In this shadowy age, there are many who declare themselves pirs, but they dispel not misgivings. Know that the true pir is from the house of the Imam, he will guide you across the ocean of existence. The pir has shown you the indescribable exalted Imam, the Lord Ali, who has come in the West."

Clearly then, in South Asian Ismailism, the *pir* was appointed, and his purpose was to lead the adept to the imam. This is further emphasized in a 15th century text authored by the Ismaili Imam Gharib Mirza, also known as Mustansir Bi-llah, entitled *Pandiyat-i Javanmardi*, or "*The Counsels of Chivalry*": "O believers! If you wish to perfect your knowledge of God and attain gnosis of him, accept the commandments of the *pir* of your time. The *pir* is someone upon whom the imam of the time bestows this position, which makes it the noblest being of all creation. Whenever he is appointed and established a *pir*, the *pir* must explain the matters of gnosis in detail. Through his mediation, you must perfect your recognition of the imam." Hence while the meanings of the word *pir* may overlap in the context of Sufism and Ismailism, they're certainly not identical. This sharing of a pervasive vocabulary is not at all unusual. The Jewish Persian poet Imrani's work is similarly fused with such words. He refers to the Jewish elders to whom the Torah was handed by Joshua as *pirs* and to Moses as a *darvish*.

But one would hardly conclude from this that they were Sufis. Even within Ismailism, the word *pir* is not univocal. While in most geographical regions, it has traditionally, though not exclusively, been a title of the imam's supreme representative, in regions such as Balakshan, in recent times, the term was often used for local dignitaries. The use of such terms in the Nizari texts of this time has also been put forth to argue the Sufi connection. It has been noted, that: "The Nizaris are referred

to in the *Pandiyat* by Sufi terms, such as *Ahl-i Haq* and *Ahl-i Haqiqat*, or the people of the truth." It is unclear, however, why these terms must be considered specifically Sufi. In al-Ghazali's *The Deliverer from Error*, for example, he uses the term *Ahl-i Haq* to refer to the Ash'arite Sunnis. It is also the name of a sect in Western Persia, not to mention, of the Hurufis. Most importantly, for this discussion, the Ismailis have long used such terms to refer to their own community, writing more than 500 years before the author of *The Counsels of Chivalry*, virtually every single prominent Ismaili luminary, including al-Qadi al-Nu'man, Abu Hatim al-Razi, Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani, Hamid ibn Kirmani, and Hakim Nasir-i Khuraw, all referred to their community by the term *Ahl-i Haq*. But this does not make them Sufis.

Similar is the argument that the 15th century Ismaili imams began to "adopt Sufi names like Shah Qalandar and Shah Ghareeb, often also adding the Sufi terms, Shah and Ali, to their names." Concerning the first part of the assertion, the title Shah Qalandar, which refers specifically to the mausoleum, rather than the proper name of the first imam of Anjudan, Mustansir Bi-llah, never occurs in any extant Ismaili source from this period yet discovered. Likewise, the name Shah Ghareeb, in the Nizari tradition, has been taken as referring to the exile of the imam from his home, not necessarily to any Sufi activities.

Similarly, the eighth Imam of the Ithna Ashari Shi'a, Imam Ali al-Riza, is commonly referred to as Imam-i Ghareeb, to the extent that a hit film about him was titled *Ghareeb-i Tus*. But this title does not make him a Sufi. With regard to the second argument that the Ismaili Imams often added the Sufi terms Shah and Ali to their names, the non-sequitur of the conclusion needs scarcely be pointed out. It is difficult to see how Shah and, above all, Ali, can be construed to be exclusively Sufi names. Such names may equally be examined entirely within a Shi'a context as [the scholar Mohammad Ali] Amir-Moezzi does, or maybe taken as indicative of rising Alid loyalism among the Sufis, rather than increasing Sufi sympathies among the Shi'a.

In conclusion, shared vocabulary may certainly encourage cross-fertilization and it is entirely likely that it did. However, in and of itself, this does not indicate the elision of boundaries. If we were to make an analogy, one could mention that the word "imam" is used in both Shi'ism and Sunnism. But to conclude that it means the same thing in both communities would be a grave error. In modern contexts, the imam in Sunnism is the person who leads the ritual prayer, whereas, when this word is used in Shi'ism, the first definition that springs to mind is the divinely appointed successor to the prophet. In a scholarly conference, such as this, the imam may be taken to be the moderator and the timekeeper. So before Ali Asani tells me my time is up, I should end here. Thank you all very much.

Ali Asani: Thank you very much, Shafique, for that presentation. I wanted to respond to one of the points that you made, which I totally agree with, which is that shared vocabulary does not necessarily mean the same thing. So as you know, one of the interesting things that I find, especially working with [the] Ismaili and Satpanth traditions in South Asia, is they seem to incorporate, in addition to the Sufi vocabulary – of course interpreted within an Ismaili context – they're also adopting vocabulary from the Vaishnavite [and other local South Asian traditions]. So you find in their composition you have multiple discourses. And we certainly see the Sufi vocabulary, of course interpreted within an Ismaili context, but we're seeing all these other vocabularies too. So they are trying to explain the notion of the imam in multiple discourses

**Shafique Virani:** In the example that I gave, [quotes Gujarati], you see certain words used in a Sikh tradition, used by people like Kabir, used by all manner of mystics in the subcontinent. So we see a wide sharing of vocabulary.

Ali Asani: So this vocabulary, this is a very interesting sort of thing in which you find a tradition that is able to use vocabulary from different traditions [and] interpreting them within its own context, but being quite comfortable in doing this. And my feeling is that this notion – and this goes back to a very idea of the *zahir* (exoteric), the *batin* (esoteric), and the Ismailis are also called the batiniyya, and of course you have the importance of the *batin* amongst Sufis – but the *batiniyya* would say that in the *zahir*, you have the diversity, but all this diversity in the *zahir* is actually pointing to the same thing. You can use these multiple discourses, in the *zahir*, but at the level of the *batin*, it is leading to the same truth. So that is another interesting way you can sort of frame this use of the ambiguities of identity and why in a certain discourse they use something, but then, implied within it is a deeper sort of esoteric, existential connection that they're trying to make between traditions. So anyway, thank you so much for your comments. And I look forward to catching up with you at some time soon. Thank you again for making time for this panel.

**Shafique Virani:** Thank you very much and thank you to all the panelists, as well as the audience and Professor Asani. I look forward to catching up with all of you soon.

**Ali Asani:** So we will go to the next discussion with Professor Ayfer Karakaya-Stump. We look forward to your presentation.

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump: Thank you, Dr. Asani. The complex relationship between

Sufism and Shi'ism in the early period remains little understood despite pioneering efforts of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and a few others. A big component of this puzzle, if you will, is a phenomenon that's variously called confessional ambiguity, Shi'i-Sunni syncretism, Alidism, Alid loyalism, Alid Sunnism or methodoxy by different scholars. Historically, this phenomenon prevailed especially among Sufis and *dervishes* of the late medieval Irano-Turkic worlds. Technically confessional ambiguity, as I define it, refers to the espousal of *tawalla* without the endorsement of *tabarra*. *Tawalla* and *tabarra* are, of course, twin principles of Shi'ism: *tawalla*, meaning a love for Ali and his family, and *tabarra*, meaning this distancing of oneself or the dissociation of oneself from the enemies of Ali.

It is important to note here that when we are talking about confessional ambiguity, we are actually talking about individuals or groups, mostly from within the Sufi milieu here, who are nominally Sunni, but who nonetheless admired Ali and his descendents, and even considered Ali to be superior to the first three caliphs. Today I am going to talk about Qizilbash/Alevi communities and manifestations of this phenomenon in their history. The Alevis of Turkey, as you know, are descendents of the Qizilbash followers of the Safavids, and together with the kindred Bektashi order, they make up around 15% of Turkey's population, with smaller pockets of related groups in the Balkans. Yesterday, Huseyin Abiva briefly talked about this interesting issue of confessional ambiguity among the Bektashis.

We can talk about a similar phenomenon among the Qizilbash/Alevis, though it's a different type of ambiguity. In the case of the Qizilbash/Alevis, it is definitely not a case of taqiyya because they under no circumstance identify as Sunni, but neither do they self identify as Shi'i. They call themselves Alevi and actually many of them consider the Shi'a to be little different from the Sunnis in terms of their shari'acentered approach to religion. Now, some people might think and link this selfconscious disassociation from the Shi'a on the part of many Alevis - the majority of the Alevis – to be a result of secularization, modernization, or even to some extent, internalized Orientalism. So [that] might be part of the dynamic, but nonetheless a closer look at Alevi rituals and practices suggest that this phenomenon has much deeper roots. Even a superficial look at Alevi teachings and ritual practices actually reveals traces of this kind of confessional ambiguity within traditional Alevism. So for example, the central point of the ritual space, maydan, where the communal rituals, the cem ceremonies, take place is named after the famous 10th century Sufi martyr, Mansour al-Hallaj, whom Alevis hold in particularly high esteem, known as Dar-i Mansur. A disciple stands on the spot during initiation with one or both hands crossed on the chest, right toe placed on the left toe and head bowed down, which is a position that simultaneously eludes to Mansur's execution and signifies the disciple's

willingness to make sacrifices on the path to God or the truth.

Few Alevis would of course know that Hallaj identified as a "siddigi." Likewise, Eba Muslim-names, which had been repressed in Safavid Iran by the Shi'i ulama, are among the most widely read pieces of literature in traditional Alevism. But what is even more interesting, and what I'm going to highlight today is that we encounter the same phenomenon of confessional ambiguity in the oldest layer of documents preserved in the family archives of Qizilbash/Alevi saintly lineages in Anatolia known as ocaks. Now these documents, these sources, have come to surface relatively recently following the Alevi cultural revival of the late 1980s and early 90s. In my [research], I work with these sources. Now what kind of sources are we talking about here? Here is just a selection of the kind of documents and manuscripts that are found in these private archives. And they compromise such genres as Sufi and Ahi diplomas and ijazas (licenses), or genealogies of sayyid-hood, or shajaras, [and] ziyarat-namehs, confirming that their holders paid visits to the Shi'i-Alevi pilgrimage sites in Iraq, hilafet-namehs, granted by the Safavids, farmaans, or hojjats issued by the Ottoman authorities, confirming their holder status as sayyids and/or dervishes, in addition to several different types of religious manuscripts about which I won't really talk about today.

I actually have a whole list of the different types of Alevi sources here, but I'm only going to mention the first set of sources, which constitute the oldest layer of these documents and with few exceptions these comprise *wafa'i ijazahs* from the 15th and the 16th centuries. Now, one of the most surprising discoveries that came out of my research into these Alevi sources, was a previously little recognized, widespread presence in late medieval Anatolia of the Iraqi-born Wafa'i Sufi order cutting across social, ethnic, and even sectarian divisions and a historical affinity between the Sufi order and a sizeable group of prominent Qizilbash/Alevi *ocaks*.

Now the interesting feature of these *ijazahs* for our current purposes is that they contain traces of a past confessional ambiguity. Here you see the prologue of one of these *ijazahs*, and in this prologue tribute is paid, in addition to God, the Prophet Muhammad, his family, and companions, and Ali, to the first three Sunni caliphs, Abu Bakr, Omar, and Uthman, as well as a few major Shi'i-Alevi figures, including Imam Hussain, Imam Hasan, and the two uncles of the prophet Muhammad, Hamza and Abbas. In rare cases, when we have multiple copies of a single *ijazah* made at different dates, we can actually observe later efforts to erase these traces of past Sunni-Shi'i syncretism, if you will. In general, what we see is that when these sorts of documents are copied at a later date, that the prologues are changed whereby the names of the three Sunni caliphs are replaced with the Twelve Imams, for example.

So what is the significance of this and similar findings in regards to Shi'i-

Sufi relations, and in regards to Qizilbash/Alevi history? Of course, I am unable to give you all the evidence here due to time constraints, but I can tell you that the evidence emerging from these sources collectively not only overturns the common perception of Qizilbashism as an essentially pre-Islamic Turkic religion overlaid with the Sufi veneer, [but] they also push against their treatment as a reincarnation of *ghulaat* Shi'ism. I am not, of course, using *ghulaat* Shi'ism here in a negative sense; I understand it as Shi'ism associated with the initial party of Ali prior to the solidification of the imamate after Imam Ja'far [al-Sadiq] following Marshall Hodgson's definition.

So with these documents [considered] together, they show that Sufism was not an added veneer as conventional wisdom would have it, but the very context within which the Qizilbash communities formed and developed. And in light of these findings in my works, I reconceptualize Qizilbash movements as a coalition of separate but interconnected Sufi and *dervish* groups and *sayyid* families who have shared in common modes of piety marked by a pronounced esoteric and Alid orientation.

The example of the Wafa'i Sufi order is very important here, and it's very revelatory. The Wafa'iyyah; and you shouldn't confuse the Iraqi Wafa'iyyah with the Egyptian Wafa'iyyah these are two separate Sufi traditions. The Iraqi Wafa'iyyah originated in the 11th century. Its founder, Abul Wafa', was a *sayyid* according to his hagiography, who spent most of his life among tribal Kurds in central Iraq, where he commanded an ethnically and socially diverse following.

Now, there are a number of interesting things about Abul Wafa and the Wafa'i tradition. The overall religious profile of Abul Wafa' and the early Wafa'i milieu defy easy categorization within the conventional binaries of Sunni versus Shi'i and orthodoxy versus heterodoxy. Abul Wafa', by all accounts, was nominally Sunni, but had a pronounced Alid orientation as well as clear esoteric antinomian tendencies. The hagiography written in the late 14th century also foregrounds his *sayyid*-hood and especially his descent from Imam Zayn al-Abideen (the fourth Shi'i Imam). Now, [with] such a Sufi profile, we normally would associate [him] with the post-Mongol era, when the trend towards Alidism gained momentum. But the example of the Wafa'iyyah suggests that Shi'i influences within Sufism must have had their initial seeds in earlier periods. Further interest in Abul Wafa' for our purposes was that he was affiliated with one of the earliest Sufi circles in Basra, in southern Iraq, that emerged around the seminal figure of Sahl al-Tustari (d. 283 Hijri/896 CE).

This was an alternative strain within Iraqi Sufism distinct from that of the normative Baghdadi tradition associated with the famous Junayd al-Baghdadi. That's why pretty much all Sufi orders of Iraqi origin trace themselves back to Junayd al-

Baghdadi. And that's what makes the Wafa'i so special because in all likelihood it's the one and only Sufi line claiming an explicit and direct connection to Sahl al-Tustari, whose name is not normally encountered in the initiative chains of Sufi orders. Now, going back to the question of Shi'i influences on Sufism, I think Sahl al-Tustari, the pivotal figure in Abul Wafa's silsilah (initatic chain), is one of the central figures for understanding Shi'i influences in Sufism in early periods. Sahl al-Tustari was, as I said before, one of the two giants of early Iraqi Shi'ism and the other being Shaykh Junayd, and he was known for his powerful renunciatory orientation and esoteric batini approach to Qur'anic interpretation. He was the first mentor of the famous and controversial Mansur al-Hallaj, and he is also recognized for his unique light cosmology, which consists of [the Prophet] Muhammad as a cosmic entity composed of pure light-Nur Muhammadi-emanating from the primordial light of God Himself. He also caused a lot of controversy during his lifetime for claiming to be the proof of God, Hujjat Allah, which is, of course, a key term in the Ismaili system of thought, even though there is no evidence of him having any sort of explicit Shi'i affiliations. A possible source of Shi'i influence in his teachings is an earlier Quran commentary by the sixth Shi'i Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, which Tustari seems to have had access to, but it is no longer extant.

There are a number of other things that I can say about Sahl al-Tustari, which sort of suggests this kind of relationship between his Sufi ideas and early Shi'ism, but I'm going to stop here. However, I believe that Abul Wafa' and the Wafa'iyyahs' own Alid orientation and esoteric propensity were a direct legacy of Sahl al-Tustari and his Sufi circle in Basra. Now finally, what all this means with regards to the origins of Qizilbashism or Alevism is that it's wrong to view Qizilbashism as a reincarnation or an extension of ghulaat Shi'ism. Without a doubt, one could identify several obvious parallels and overlaps between various early Shi'i ideas, subsumed under ghuluww and a number of Qizilbash beliefs, starting, of course, with the centrality of Ali in Qizilbash/Alevi religious culture and devotional life. These elements within Alevism, however, appear to have been mediated in large measure through Sufism or other than being a direct extension or reincarnation of ghulaat Shi'ism.

It is true that the Shi'i thrust of Qizilbashism/Alevism would be reinforced under Safavid influence, but that is of course different from assuming some kind of historical continuity between Qizilbashism and the ghulaat, for which we do not really find any verifiable venues of transmission or direct borrowing in Alevi resources. Thank you very much.

Ali Asani: Thank you so much, Ayfer, for that wonderful presentation. We have got several questions coming up, but I will wait until we come to question time. But you [gave] a very intriguing [and] interesting presentation. So we'll turn now to Nicholas, and we're looking forward to hearing what you have to say.

Nicholas Boylston: Thanks so much and many thanks to the organizers and to my fellow panelists for their wonderful contributions. It's really been a really enlightening session for me so far. So I've been taking some time thinking about, for a number of years, the relationship between Twelver Shi'ism and Sufism in history. And I'll speak about that a little bit today. But I also wanted to challenge myself and take a really different approach, and look at things from a really different angle that I think will be quite useful for the general project of this conference of inta-Shi'i dialogue, and also Sufi-Twelver Shi'i dialogue.

So I am going to do three things in this presentation: First, I am going to think briefly about the terms: what is Twelver Shi'ism, what is Sufism? Then I am going to give a very brief, historical overview of the relations between the two, focusing on, in the later period, Iran, which is my area of specialization. And then at the end, I'm going to think about this problem through a text by the 20th century Twelver Shi'i scholar Allameh Tabatabai.

So getting right into it [and] clarifying the terms: my students know that I really harp on about this, but it is really important to know what we are talking about when we have a discussion about traditions, such as Twelver Shi'ism and Sufism. Even in the field at the highest level, there is actually confusion about the terms themselves. Twelver Shi'ism is perhaps a little bit easier: basically, it is that branch of Islam in which the authority of the Twelve Imams, from Ali to the Hidden Imam, is accepted. We can problematize that; there are such things as Twelver Sunnis as well. But that gives us at least an interpretive community – if we know what it means for someone to belong to this interpretive community. But it is still more difficult to say what actually is Twelver Shi'ism, what is authoritative Twelver Shi'ism, and what the main beliefs of that are. Again, like every tradition, it is deeply diverse and adapts in history in a number of ways.

But I will come back to that. Now the much more challenging question is: what is Sufism? It is such a challenging question and it is really important to know what we are talking about. And the way I like to think about it is actually that Sufism is like a mirror. Whatever scholarly approach [you use], or your perspective on what is important, you bring to Sufism, and you end up seeing that in Sufism and that shapes what you think Sufism is. So for early scholars of comparative mysticism, they will say: "Oh, Sufism is Islamic mysticism." But of course, what about, let's say, Ismaili mysticism and things like that? Clearly that is not enough, and clearly there's much more to Sufism than just mysticism. For people who are social historians, maybe

they will look at Sufism as a particular Islamic social configuration, and certainly you do have the development of Sufi orders. You have particular places the Sufis go: the *zawiyas*, the *tekkiyehs*, and so forth, the Sufi lodges. Some groups of Sufis wear particular clothes and have distinctive practices. But then [some] Sufis or people we would want to call them Sufis do not and are not members of orders and do not have particular lodges and do not have particular clothes and practices. So, that also presents a challenge.

Next, perhaps if someone's an intellectual historian or [a scholar with] a philosophical bent, they will think of Sufism as a mystical philosophy. And certainly there's a strong, mystical philosophy in Sufism too, but again, Sufism cannot be reduced to that either. So the perspectives we bring to the question, determine what we see. And I think there are answers to this question; I think it's useful to have complimentary definitions of Sufism from both historical approaches, approaches inside the tradition, and intellectual, artistic, [and] even literary approaches to Sufism. But I am going to sideline that question and actually let Allameh Tabatabai kind of give us a completely different approach, which almost sidelines the very concept itself towards the end of the talk, which I will finally present in his text called *Risalah al-Walayah*, or the *Treatise on Walayah*. And I will talk about what that means as well.

Very briefly, I want to give an outline [of Sufism and Twelver Shi'ism]. So this is almost [too] brief to give an outline of the relationships of nearly 1,400 years of history, but I want to get some clarity on the ground for the discussion that is going to happen after this. I think it is important for us to have the basics, but again, apologies for not going into detail on any of this. And it is definitely something we can return to. So a number of speakers in the conference, including Dr. Nasr yesterday, have mentioned that in the early period it is difficult to draw a clean line between Sufism and Shi'ism. And that's both in terms of the authorities of the Islamic spiritual practice and the participants. So for example, many of the first eight Imams of the Twelver Shi'i line were considered authorities and certainly later Sufi authors wrote them as being the first Sufis. This is kind of an allusion to that in the picture here [in the powerpoint], which is the tomb of Bayezid Bastami in Bastam, Iran. And note there's two domes here: one of them is Bayezid's dome, the other one is the dome of the son of [Imam] Ja'far al-Sadiq. So it's interesting that they're buried right next to each other, [and that is] something we could talk about later. So it is very difficult to draw the line; and it is very difficult to say with certainty which particular practitioners are Sufis, [and] even what Sufism is.

Remember, there is a saying, even in the 10th century, that Sufism used to be a reality without a name. Now it is the name without the reality. Then there is a period

of consolidation, both in Sufism and Twelver Shi'ism. And I see this as something of a parting of ways in the 10th to 13th centuries. So while the teachings of the Shi'i Imams had contained legal aspects and then contained mystical esoteric aspects, spiritual aspects, the Twelver Shi'i tradition really develops as the juridical theological tradition.

Most of what Twelver Shi'i scholars focus on in addition to Qur'an and hadith is law, and then *kalam* (theology) as well. So there is still a mystical dimension in the Shi'i *duas* (devotional prayers), the supplications, in the *hadiths* themselves, but there is not a formal science of talking about mystical contemplation until later. And there is also a consolidation of Sufi doctrine, practice and social organization, emergence of the Sufi orders, writing of Sufi texts, manuals, formulization of practice, and nearly all of this is done by Sunni Sufis. So at this point, the 10th to 13th century, there does seem to be a bit of a separation between these traditions and there is less overlap.

Again, moving briefly on, the Mongol period is the beginning of some kind of a rapprochement. And we see in this period the integration or the beginning of the integration of Sufi metaphysics in Twelver Shi'i thought by someone like Sayyid Haydar Amuli, who I am working on, and also interestingly, we see the spread of Ahl al-Bayt piety in places like Iran and Anatolia, even if it is not distinctly Shi'i. But it really spreads-piety to the family of Ali-and even specifically to the Twelve Imams, even among people who are not specifically Shi'a. I had mentioned Twelver Sunnism before. Okay, moving on specifically in the Iranian context: now we have the Safavid period where some really fascinating things happen. First of all, a Sufi order conquers Persia and establishes Twelver Shi'ism as the national religion. And this is related obviously to Dr. Karakaya-Stump's presentation that has played a really important role in this. So again, Sufism and Shi'ism are meeting in some really challenging and fascinating ways.

There, you have a further integration of Sufi metaphysics into Twelver thought. A lot of people are thinking about Ibn Arabi, Sufi metaphysics, and it gets integrated by someone like Mulla Sadra into philosophy. And you have the emergence of Shi'i Sufi orders such as the Ni'matullahi here who kind of started up Sunni, but now most nearly all the practitioners are Shi'i. And then you have the repression of those Sufi orders by the Safavids. So you have got this interesting shift where a Sufi order conquers the country then makes the religion Twelver Shi'ism and then represses other Sufi orders; so [it is] incredibly complex. And I do want to point out that this is a massively complex history that I am just kind of summarizing.

Finally, I want to make a few notes on the situation in Iran today, which has equally complex relationships between Sufism and Twelver Shi'ism. Firstly, Shi'i philosophy, which is extremely widely practiced – every student who goes through

the seminary in Qom will have the equivalent of a bachelor's degree in philosophy – contains strong Sufi components and particularly in Irfan, which is kind of the highest level of philosophy. It is a kind of meta-philosophy. In the seminaries, people are reading Sufi metaphysics at the highest intellectual levels. Shi'i Sufi orders still continue, but they face political pressure in Iran. There are ethics classes usually taught by members of the *ulama* class in general and also ethics classes in university, which very much resonate with Sufi teachings. Although, of course, [they also] resonate with Twelver Shi'i teachings as well because in ethics there is so much overlap. And so you also have Persianate Sufism as a cultural presence. Everybody is reading Rumi in high school; you have Persian Sufi music kind of everywhere.

So what I am trying to say here is that the relationship between Sufism and Twelver Shi'ism is deeply complex. And if we take a historical approach – [and] hopefully if you are new to this, it should be a feeling of being overwhelmed, which is what I'm going for here – the complexity of interactions is really overwhelming and we could talk for hours about any of these one single bullet points. But my key point here is that the lens we use to think about what Sufism is in particular, and also Twelver Shi'ism, really changes how we approach any of these topics. So we need to think about what lenses we're using when we think about relationships between Twelver Shi'ism and Sufism.

So I have given you a kind of historical overview. That is one lens, but now I want to work on presenting a new lens that I think is really particularly useful for dialogue. So I'm going to be talking about the thoughts of Allameh Sayyid Mohammad Husayn Tabatabai, who I think is perhaps considered the greatest Shi'i scholar of the 20th century by many; there would be disagreement obviously, but he's really one of the great figures of the 20th century in Twelver Shi'ism. He was born in 1903 in Tabriz [and he traveled to] Najaf, where he studied Islamic law as a standard [course of study], but also Quranic exegesis, Islamic philosophy to a very high level, and also Irfan in both theoretical and practical dimensions. Whether we call that Sufism or not is a big question, but for the moment let's just bracket that. He then returned to Iran and took a three-year fast of silence in Tabriz, where he's basically farming. And that's where he wrote this text, Rasalah al-Walayah, which I'll talk about. And then he moved to Qom and Tehran and he teaches and writes there until he passes away in 1981, right after the [Islamic] Revolution. And he is particularly known for his Tafsir al-Mizan, this great Quranic commentary – one of the greatest in the 20th century. [He also produces the following] philosophical texts, which are, again, the two texts read by every student in the seminary in Qom: The Beginning of Wisdom and The End of Wisdom. So he makes original contributions to philosophy and also, interestingly, a lesser known text but is important to mention in this context: Ali and Divine Wisdom,

where he roots the basis of Islamic philosophy and teachings of Imam Ali. Now, I am moving again quite quickly to talk about this treatise. Now moving on to *Risalah al-Walayah*, which means *Treatise on Walayah*. I like to tell students *wilaya*, sometimes spelled with an "I," means love, sanctity, and authority. I also set them a challenge of finding as many meanings as possible – and some students come back with as many as 72 meanings of this word, but in this context we will see it means proximity to God first and foremost, love of God, the esoteric power of bringing one to God. But it is also related, especially when spelled with an "I," to political authority. So there is a genre of *Risalah al-Walayah*, other people write them, such as Mohammad Riza Qumshi-i in the Qajar period. But Tabatabai actually makes a point of departure from the genre in his method. And what he does is he is presenting what I would call theological philosophy. He is responding to fundamental human questions. The questions he is asking [are] the questions anybody has, whether they are in the Twelver Shi'i tradition or not.

And he is trying to argue for his answers from first principles. So it is a philosophical text. (He does say to refer elsewhere for a long discussion of this and so forth) but he does complement it with scriptural sources, so each chapter has a kind of rational section and then a spiritual section. I think that this text, which I will give you a very brief summary of, can reframe the terms of discussion between Twelver Shi'ism and Sufism, and also among branches of Shi'ism, giving us a new perspective that the historical approach, which is really useful for other things, does not necessarily give us. So be ready for a very, very fast and brief overview of Tabatabai's metaphysics. Tabatabai starts with this philosophical point: there are two types of ideas or two types of concepts. There are real concepts, haqiqi, that correspond to a real entity. So a concept like a tree, there is a tree outside corresponding to it; that is what a real concept is. There are also conceptually constructed concepts or conventional concepts, i'tibari, but those do not correspond directly to an outside entity, but they are derived from it; something like ownership. You know, there's a house out there and there's you, the owner, but there's no objects of ownership. It is a constructed category that relates to something outside and for conceptually constructed categories, it is always social. There is always a social process. People, human beings, create these terms to fulfill their social needs. That is what they are for.

Then he moves to a metaphysical direction and he says: look, underlying this apparent world, the *zahir*, which professor Ali Asani mentioned before, there has to be a hidden reality, or *batin*. Why is that? Well, he proves this through the concept of vertical causality. This is really important metaphysically because usually we are taught in terms of horizontal causality, in terms of the billiard ball model: the one thing moves, hits another, and then the other thing moves. But Islamic metaphysics is

really rooted in an idea of vertical causality. A single object like this glass in itself is contingent. So it needs a cause at every moment to keep it in existence. And that's the vertical causality. I will come back to that in a second and give a clearer exposition of his view of reality. But basically he is saying that the things we see are all contingent. Therefore, there must be a hidden cause holding them in reality. There has to be this unseen world. He then notes the limitations of language. Conventional conceptually constructed concepts are only good for thinking about the *zahir*. You cannot actually talk about the hidden world using socially conceptually constructed ideas because they only belong to social realities. And that means, first of all, that you need to make sure you are talking about using real ideas, and also he concludes that there are going to be some things about this inner reality that are ineffable – that you can't use language to properly understand. You need some other way of knowing, other than language, to understand these realities.

So back to the levels of reality. Basically this is a philosophy on degrees of reality. Let's start from the bottom: the material world, which is pretty clear. Look around us. We have things, we see things that both have form and they have matter. There is a solidity to them and they have a shape, color and so on and so forth. But think about dreams for a moment. Dreams have forms, but they do not have any matter. You see a tree in a dream and it actually has a form there. So the tree in the dream is kind of real, but it is also unreal in a sense that; it has no matter to it. And then higher than that, think about ideas. The idea of numbers, let's say, or the idea of a triangle - triangles get a bit more complex, but the idea of a number. It does not have any matter, and it doesn't have form. This actually corresponds to the levels of reality for many Islamic metaphysicians; you have a whole world that is material form and matter. You have a whole world that's imaginal; it has form, but no matter. That is where meetings with prophets and angels and things like that happen. And you'll have a whole world that is intelligible - of beings with neither matter nor form; that is where the angels are. And beyond that, you have the Divine reality, which is reality as such, it is being as such, it is the necessary being. So that is his view of reality, which helps us understand the steps that come next.

Now he makes another metaphysical point. This is, again, quite subtle. And he says that you need to read more detailed philosophical books to really understand this. He says an effect is the shadow of its cause. What does that mean? It means in this vertical causality, the effects cannot possess something that is not possessed by the cause. The effect is always weaker. The effect is always less. The effect is always more limited than the cause. So in these degrees of reality, the real absolute reality contains all positive qualities and then each level contains less and less positive qualities. It is like the top of the ladder is pure infinite light, and then the intelligible

world is a bit darker, imaginal world is a bit dark, and then the material world is just really dark from an ontological point of view.

Then he shifts gears and asks: what is human happiness? [It is a] simple question everybody is asking, and he says that any pleasure on the material level is limited because of the conditions of materiality. What does that mean? It means, first of all, any pleasure is going to end. If you have a really great cheesecake, the pleasure is gone after you have finished the cheesecake. If you're having a really great cheesecake, the taste, the pleasure of that is going to be completely different from the pleasure of bungee jumping. And you cannot do them both at the same time, right? You have to choose otherwise it's going to be really messy. So on the material level the pleasures are limited and they also exclude one another. There is greater pleasure in the imaginal world, where there are no limitations of materiality, and maybe you have experienced this – you have a dream where it is just really pleasurable. You are really elated, and that that does not happen so much in the material world and even more so in the intelligible world, and the Divine reality itself. In the higher levels of reality, pleasure and happiness are multi-dimensional and there's really no limits to it.

So basically, for Tabatabai, happiness is about ascending. If you want to be happy, you need to ascend that chain of being. He says it's possible to ascend this chain of being because our soul actually belongs to the higher world. Your consciousness, it is clearly not material, it is not a block of wood or something like that. It is self-aware, which no material object is. So since your consciousness belongs to another world, you can go back there. And then, and this is the first time he has brought in religion in the philosophical part of this, he says the purpose of all divine religions is to direct our attention towards God, to help us ascend that ladder of being. Now the rules of the shari'a for him provide a basis for this, a kind of balance. And the spiritual teachings in all of the religions really provide the focus and they are, and what they are really for. The shari'a rulings have a social role and they have a preparatory role, but it is the spiritual, mystical, esoteric teachings that are really important because it is all about happiness, and that is found in these teachings. Now he makes another metaphysical point to help us understand how this is possible to ascend: he says the inward is always present in the outward. It is always possible to pass beyond the veil of material reality by opening the inner eyes. So even though we see the outward world, it's possible to see through it in a sense that it can become translucent. And he makes a point that some people think only prophets can do this, and they are just chosen by God, but no, this is possible for everybody. And the reason for this is that it's just attachment and attention to the body that keeps us attached to the material realm. If we pay less attention to the body, then we become able to see through these realities and see into deeper levels of being. And then he says the most

direct path to this ascent is self-knowledge.

So he then starts to build a method of how to actually do this. Crucially, there's been no mention of Shi'ism so far in all of this, which I'm going to say is actually really important and useful for us. He is now concluding the text and this is the first time when he even talks about wilaya really, and he talks about the Friends of God. And this is a really powerful chapter. By the way, the text is available, and a translation of it in English is on al-islam.org.1 It is definitely worth reading. So this conclusion is kind of a tour de force. He now uses scriptural sources to explain the awliyah. He makes [the point that] the path of return up the chain of being requires one to submit one's individual will to the ordinances of religion and to those who have already traveled the path. Prophet Muhammad is the ultimate exemplar of this. And the Quran itself says: "Say, if you love Allah then follow me, Allah will love you and forgive your sin" (3:31). So the Quran is saying that if you want to travel this path, follow the Prophet Muhammad, first and foremost, and I would also say the awliyah, who have become annihilated in God. That means the Divine attributes and character traits have taken the place of their own character traits.

So by following that person, someone is indirectly following God. Now he implies here that the awliyah par excellence are the Shi'i Imams, but this just comes at the end of the text and we have had all this discussion about the principles [beforehand]. So one who is not Twelver Shi'i could go all this way with him, and then maybe there would be a little bit of disagreement at the end over the identity of those awliyah perhaps.

So to conclude, what I am trying to say here is, first of all, the historical approach is really important. There are so many nuances to the interactions between Sufism and Shi'ism over history and there has been a certain amount of study, but there really needs to be a lot more study. For actual dialogue we need those, but we also need other approaches, too. So, first of all, something that is really useful in this text is the distinction between the real and the conceptually constructed ideas. We should ask ourselves, what are we investigating when we're talking about Sufism and Shi'ism? What are we actually talking about? Are we talking about different conceptually constructed social entities? That is one question. Or is there some idea of what realities that we are talking about? And that means our own metaphysics has to be in play. We have to be clear about what view of reality is underlying this discussion and what particularly of it is intra-Shi'i that needs to be on the table of differences, and metaphysics need to come to the fore. And also, I would say agreements in metaphysics [are important].

<sup>1</sup>Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Risalah al-Wilayah*, translated by Zaid Alsalami, n.d., Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, <a href="https://www.al-islam.org/risalah-al-wilayah-vicegerency-sayy-">https://www.al-islam.org/risalah-al-wilayah-vicegerency-sayy-</a> id-muhammad-husayn-tabatabai.

It is also useful that Tabatabai's teaching is that social and historical phenomena and the concepts used to describe them always have a conceptually constructed character. So even something like Sufism, particularly in the scholarship, the secondary scholarship, is constructed by the scholars thinking about it. So when we are talking about something historically, that understanding of how [the term] Sufism is used and what it means is going to change. So we need to be aware of that and we need to, again, be able to distinguish between what we are actually talking about. And interestingly, I am going to push a bit further than that: I am going to say the conceptually constructed labels actually have the tendency to divide human beings, particularly identity markers, particularly ideas of social grouping. They seem to work in our head with a sense of exclusivity. It takes a while to teach, let's say, an undergraduate in an introduction to Islam class, that someone can be both Sufi and Shi'i at the same time, or even a Twelver Sunni or something like that. The identity markers, the way our minds seem to work [tells us] we need a lot of training to understand that they are not mutually exclusive.

So the conceptually constructed labels, I would say, have a tendency to divide human beings and sometimes to limit conversation and particularly agreement. Now, another thing that is really important in this text is his approach. He is asking basic human questions. What is real? What is human happiness? How does language work? And I would say actually these basic human questions are the best way to enter into dialogue between Shi'i branches rather than the theological stuff and the really nuanced details or even historical questions. Fundamental human questions: What is happiness? And then you see that actually in Islamic traditions the considerations of happiness often will link branches together that you thought were completely different. Ethics is one branch in which many Islamic schools tend to be pretty similar. And then deeper resonances actually start to emerge when you see how different branches of the Islamic tradition have answered these questions.

And I would say as a result of this philosophical approach we open new possibilities for Sufi-Shi'i and also Shi'i-Shi'i dialogue. So each of Allameh Tabatabaei's points, yes, they are debatable – not every group is going to agree on the particular steps he takes, but actually for certainly a lot of Sufis and for a lot of other branches of Shi'ism, but by no means all of them, I think there will be a lot of agreement. So there will be much agreement on many stages of the journey. And then some smaller disagreements, which will then be seen in a more contextualized light of what the significance is. So I'm certainly not denying the importance of the historical approach, which is crucial, but I am adding something new to the table that people who are interested in this kind of dialogue hopefully can make use of. And I look forward to our discussion.

Ali Asani: Thank you very much, Nicholas, for that very provocative discussion. So before I open, there are lots of questions that have showed up on chat. I wanted to start out with, since we are talking about "-isms" – Sufism, Twelver Shi'ism, Bektashism, if you will, Ismailism – this way of labeling. [This is] something that Nicholas brought up, and Ayfer, you brought this up in your own context. How are labels being used? And part of the problem that I think we are facing here is the world in which we live. That we live in a world where there is an obsession with identity.

We want to label everything. We want to give everything an identity. And some of it starts from the individual. You have to have a passport to have an identity. You have to have a driver's license–[there is] no identity without these. So we live in a world that is identity obsessed and some of our ways of thinking, our ways of knowing, are based on putting labels on everything and, especially when it comes to the study of religion and religious phenomena, this way of imagining all of these as ideology, religion as an ideology, as the ideology of identity, it is marked by an "-ism." And this was a point that I brought up yesterday as well, that the notion of religion as identity and religion as an -ism is actually a product of the post-European enlightenment way of thinking about religion, this religious phenomenon, and then it has pervaded our world, in the academy, the popular [way of] thinking, and so on and so forth.

So categories like Hinduism and Jainism and so on, these are all things that have a particular construction and they are coming from a particular worldview that has now become pretty much standard without even questioning [it]. And so part of the problem, I think, in trying to understand this phenomenon is that we are using this contemporary worldview with -isms and identities and so on to look at the past. And then we project those labels and identities onto the past, and now we're trying to ask: where does this fit in? Whereas I think that the people in the past did not think this way and they had more open kinds of [modes of thinking]. So some of the discourses that we find today, if we go to a Sufi *dargah* in South Asia, you get people from all faiths coming. Yes, it is connected with Sufi *pir*, but you have people with all faiths coming.

And it is almost as if, when they enter the threshold of the *dargah*, they are in an experience where all the labels are dropped. So you can have Hindus and Sikhs and so on [enter], and they all feel the sanctity of the place. They all experience something. And it is in that experience of something, it could be or some ritual or something, the labels get dropped. We are there for the experience. So it is no longer about identity – it's about experience, it is a shared experience. So people from different backgrounds can participate. And so I think that some of the points that

Nicholas was bringing up, about how we think about knowledge and identities and so on, [were important]. But there's another way in which we can think about it as shared experiences, that different people from different traditions can experience a piece of poetry or a piece of music and share that experience but interpret it within their own context.

I think there is something about these traditions that we are talking about, where at some point the experiential becomes more important than the identity marker because people understand they are in an experimental space. And then the labels drop. And as I said, some of these labels are of contemporary construction. So I wanted to bring that up which also shows that sometimes these connections between Sufism, Ismailism, Twelver Shi'ism, as we point out at a certain level, [it would seem] these are all things in the land of the *zahir*. Labels operate in the land of the *zahir*. But in the land of the *batin*, you're beyond these labels, you do not need this label in the *batin*. So that was just a perspective, trying to respond to your presentation, but Ayfer's presentation also deals with this issue and the complications that our modern labels bring about to how we understand this material and engage with this material. So I will stop [to give an opportunity] for both of you to respond.

Nicholas Boylston: I fully agree with you, and I think I love this approach of really looking for just other modalities. Yes, identities are always going to be on the table and they're important for some things, but what are the other perspectives? And you have really complemented well the kind of philosophical approach, which I see resonating with very much at the end with this experiential approach. And we could also mention the literary approach [which contains] dimensions of the same thing. So many people can pick up a poem of Mawlana Rumi and engage with it in both a personal way, but also into that message and people across all of these traditions have been doing that for hundreds of years. So literature, experience, the arts and also potentially philosophy are important ways to bridge divides that are, as you say, socially, conceptually constructed but useful for some things.

People have been asking a bit about the distinction between Sufism and Irfan. And this is one thing that's really important for the Twelver Shi'i ulama today: to say that this Irfan isn't Sufism. The reason for that is precisely because of these questions we have been discussing, that the way the term Sufism is being interpreted is basically actually "khanagahi" Sufism, or the Sufi tariqas, which the ulema generally now have distinguished themselves from. It used to be the case that there were many of them who were also in Sufi orders as well, but today, and from the Safavid period onwards, it's become important for the Twelver Shi'i ulama to distinguish themselves from that movement.

And so they use the label Sufism to refer to that. Whereas if you use this label Sufism to refer to the philosophy Allameh Tabatabaei is talking about or the teachings that he got from Sayed Qadi Tabatabai, which is very similar to Sufism; if you call that Sufism, then all of Irfan is Sufism. So again, it's about the terminology, it's about how you approach it. So the first question is who is constructing those terms and who is using them and both the philosophical approach and the experiential approach allow us to set aside the terms for a while. Just thinking about what question that is being asked, what problem is being solved, what dimension of the human reality is being cultivated by these different traditions?

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump: So this whole idea of foregoing the zahir, transcending the zahir to actually come to terms with the batin, with the ultimate oneness of reality but then in practice, Sufis or other groups and individuals who made this point were historically accused of heresy. There is also that whole reality, because there is always this [struggle] among most ulama who might [otherwise] be sympathetic towards Sufism or other mystical ways of thinking. They still sort of say zahir is necessary, so I think there is an inherent tension here. And studying a group like the Qizilbash/ Alevis who one of the questions in the [Q&A] chat[box] was how do Alevis reconcile their rejection of a Shi'a identity with their adherence to Shah Ismail and so on and so forth. The way Alevis see it is that Shi'ism in Safavid Iran evolved in the direction of this zahir-centric, legalist Islam, and that is different from Qizilbashism or Alevism because the emphasis in the Qizilbash/Alevi tradition is on the batin. And the idea is that you have to forgo the *zahir* to be able to actually reach the it. So I think that even though it sounds nice, we have to engage with one another at this very high level, but in practice throughout history, individuals and groups who wanted to do that, they occupied this very precarious position and could easily be accused of heresy.

Ali Asani: I totally agree with you there, because it is a question of where you put the emphasis, and this is an issue you find in all kinds of [places] in history, like with Mansur al-Hallaj or Rabia al-Basri and individuals like that. But I think that you find in certain Sufi groups, there is an attempt to say that you need to balance the two, I think in response to the criticism. Like what you were talking about [the Sufis would] say: you need to balance the *zahir* and the *batin*, that there is a *shari'a* and that you can only progress on the *tariqa* after your form [your practice] on the *Shari'a*. And that becomes a way in a certain way of responding to that kind of criticism. But I would also say that, it seems to me that the term Sufism is an invented term. It is not indigenous, you can just see from the "-ism." And it is really a label of convenience in which [we find] all kinds of phenomena that people cannot

fit anywhere else. And it seems to me that sometimes trying to think about it as an orientation that is emphasizing the *batin* or recognizes the batin and the importance of the *batin* experience – not necessarily emphasizing it over and against the *zahir* – but recognizing that there is a *batin* aspect to reality and that a human being can experience and be in that realm and can experience the batin and also be in the *zahir*, [is beneficial].

So we talked about Sunni Sufis and Shi'i Sufis – when you think about the term Sufism, rather than thinking about it as an ideology of identity, [we ought to think about it] more about it as an orientation, and that you can have different communities amongst Muslims who have a Sufi orientation and then those who don't. And that part of the question in Islam has always been between the esoterically minded and the more exoterically minded. So what does it mean to relate to God? Can you experience God? And some who would say, yes, you experience God through the law, the *shari'a*, and this is what Islam is about, and you have to follow the *shari'a* that has been laid down as opposed to people would say, no, there's more than this. There is a more personal experience. So that's my response.

**Nicholas Boylston:** Yes I [certainly] agree with Ayfer, and I am certainly not saying that *zahir* is not important either historically, or for someone like Tabatabai, who is a jurist as well, which is important to remember. But I think his philosophical approach would be that in dialogue, as Ali said, one would expect to see differences in the *zahir*. The *zahir* is the place of differences, it's made of diversity. And actually it's a discussion to be had on the relation between the *zahir* and the *batin*. And so, all the figures I study: Amuli, Tabatabai, would say, no, the *zahir* is important. If you neglect that you cannot ascend. And there might be other schools that disagree with that for important reasons, but that is a discussion to be had on the basis of an agreement that there is such a thing as a *batin*.

And I would say maybe the term to use is just to have a dialogue between traditions that have a conception of wilaya, in not the purely political sense, but in this spiritual sense of wilaya. And that could be a dialogue where the term Sufism is set aside for a while, but to have discussion about what the term means, how is it accessed? What is that process of transformation that's involved in it? And that would be a way for rapprochement. And the historical differences and details are really important, but we live in a world in which we really need rapprochement. We really need mutual understanding. And there are movements in the Islamic world that are in opposition to wilaya that are causing a lot of those distinctions. So this is a really valuable perspective for bringing people to the same table, to then [perhaps] disagree about certain things, certainly, but at least they might be at the same table for that.

Ali Asani: So I will just respond very briefly to this idea of the *zahir* and how do you know about things? How do we know about it? And that is engaging with dialogue, engaging with difference. So there is that Qur'anic verse that God has created difference and diversity so that you might know one another, so that you may learn from one another. But very often we tend to use these differences as an identity marker and build a wall. But if we start building bridges and talking about how different groups understand this notion of *walayah* and what are the similarities, what are differences that could be interesting, or other notions, like *fana*' and so on. I do not know if you have been looking at the chat; if there are any questions that you particularly want to respond to.

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump: Somebody was asking about how Alevis felt about individuals who turn to Shi'ism, if they view Shi'ism—of course when I say Shi'ism, I mean the Imami Shi'a, the official Shi'a in Iran—if they see that as threats to their own identities, which definitely is the case. There is a concern that the distinctiveness of the Qizilbash Alevi identity with its emphasis on the *batin*, in universality of the truth and so forth, and their own unique rituals might face assimilation if there's greater integration with the rest of the Shi'a world.

Ali Asani: It's been a fascinating discussion, any last words?

Nicholas Boylston: I am just posting a link to the treatise. There is an English translation. I'm just posting that in the chat in case anyone wants to read it: Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Risalah al-Wilayah*, translated by Zaid Alsalami, n.d., Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project, <a href="https://www.al-islam.org/risalah-al-wilayah-vicegerency-sayyid-muhammad-husayn-tabatabai.">https://www.al-islam.org/risalah-al-wilayah-vicegerency-sayyid-muhammad-husayn-tabatabai.</a>

**Ayfer Karakaya-Stump:** About the different types of Alevi sources, documents, and manuscripts, if any listeners are interested, you may turn to my publications where I discuss these resources in detail.

Ali Asani: So we will stop here. Thank you, Nicholas. And thank you, Ayfer, for these wonderful presentations. And, of course, I am thanking Shafique. But this has been a wonderful panel and I would encourage everyone to stay tuned to the presentations tomorrow and the day after. So thank you once again to everyone for joining us and thank you again to our panelists and we will see you inshallah tomorrow.



Located in Lucknow, India, Bara Imambara – also known as Asfi Imambara – was built in 1784 by Asaf al-Dawla, the reigning sovereign of the Shi'a Oudh dynasty. Bara Imambara is one of the largest Shi'a Imambaras in India.

July, 2021. Credit: Photo by Ayan Ahmad on Unsplash

## Panel 3 | Shi'ism and Minority Communal Dynamics in South Asia

## Speakers:

Juan Cole (University of Michigan) - The Shi'ite Heritage in South Asia

Rameez Abbas (NESA) - The Dawoodi Bohras: Cohesion and Integration Strategies in India and Pakistan

Karen Ruffle (University of Toronto) - Two Perspectives on the Everyday in South Asia: The Question of Gender and Theorizing Agency in Material Practice

Simon Wolfgang Fuchs (University of Freiburg) - Reclaiming the Citizen: How Pakistan's Shi'is Have Engaged with the State

## Moderator:

Hassan Abbas (NESA)

Hassan Abbas: Welcome everyone to the third day of our conference, and we are looking forward to another session of conversations and rich ideas. The topic for this panel is "Shi'ism and Minority Community Dynamics in South Asia." My name is Hassan Abbas, and I am a professor of International Relations here at NESA, National Defense University in Washington, DC. I will start by congratulating Dr. Payam Mohseni and his team for bringing together diverse voices from leading scholars and experts of Shi'a thought in communities across various denominations and sects. I have seen the growth of this Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard's

Weatherhead Center for International Affairs firsthand. It is a unique program, and the scholarship that it is producing is filling a very important gap in scholarship on Islam in US academia.

The conference has been a joy to watch and listen to with very rich presentations and enriching discourse. We hope to build on these conversations, and we have an extraordinary group of scholars to make this possible. We have as our first speaker professor Juan Cole. He is Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan. He is a very renowned scholar; if I had to just pick one of his publications among so many, in fact, I will pick his blog, *Informed Comment*, which is a great source of scholarship with not only brilliant, but also brave analysis. That was my source of analysis whenever I want to know something that is different [and] that is missing in the mainstream media. The professor's topic is the "Shi'ite Heritage in South Asia." Over to you Professor Juan Cole.

Juan Cole: Well, thank you so much for the kind introduction, Professor Abbas. My charge was to give a brief overview of Shi'ite Islam in the South Asian sub-continent and that is an impossible task, but let me try to hit some highlights just to start us off. This is an overview rather than a proper monographic paper. I think when I entered the field, Shi'ism was an extremely underwritten subject in the English language scholarship. I can remember being an undergraduate at Northwestern and going to the library, looking for books, and there was Corbin's four volume quadrilogy that had just come out and I knew French, so I could read that, and there was this book from 1930 by a missionary who had been in Mashhad. And there were some Ismaili authors, but the section in the Northwestern University library on Shi'ism was just tiny, and that was [the case] in general for South Asia as well. That was unfortunate because Shi'ism in South Asia has been important far beyond its simple numbers.

It is estimated to be 5% of the Muslim population of South Asia, but that figure does not really encompass the reality.<sup>2</sup> For one thing, there were many Shi'ite ruled states in South Asia, you had the Chaks in Kashmir even before the Mughals, and then of course you had Golconda and Bijapur in the South, and the Awadh[dynasty], which I wrote a book about, in the post-Mughal period. Because they were Shi'ite ruled, they gave patronage for scholarship, [and] they gave patronage for poetry; and so Shi'ite forms of culture were propagated to the general population in South Asia, not just

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The precise demographic distribution of Shi'a Muslims in the world is difficult to calculate. There are various statistics on demographics found in the literature and that change across time; for example, see the 2009 Pew Research Center poll which estimated that the Shi'a population of Pakistan and India could be 15% of the total Muslim population of these states. In 2021, this would equal some 33 million Shi'a Muslims in Pakistan and 25.5 million in India. See: "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," 07 October 2009, Pew Research Center, <a href="https://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/">https://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/</a>. Other estimates place the Shi'a percentage of the Muslim population at 20% in these states resulting in estimates of 44 million Shi'a Muslims in Pakistan and 34 million in India.

[to] Muslims, but to the general population through these Shi'ite courts. And I can remember how surprised I was when I first went to Pakistan in Fall of 1981. I turned on the TV and I was watching the news and the newscaster, the anchor, who was a woman came on, and she said "salam alaykum," and then she gave the blessings to the imams and on the Prophet and his Family.

I checked myself: I was [actually] in Pakistan [and] his newscast was originating in Lahore. But this tasliya on the Al of Muhammad, the Family of the Muhammad, had been something that even Sunnis had adopted in South Asia. That changed very rapidly thereafter because of Sunni, especially Saudi influence, but I saw this with my own eyes in 1981. With regard to the rise of Urdu poetry, [which] first became popular in those southern Shi'ite kingdoms in the early modern period, and then it was very much cultivated at the court in Lucknow and Awadh, and Shi'ite themes often purveyed that poetry, and some of the great poets were themselves Shi'ites, like Ghalib. But even where they were not, there was a kind of ecumenical Shi'ite culture in India in the early modern period into the 19th century at least. I found evidence of Hindus and Sunnis joining in the Ashura processions in Lucknow. In fact, in India, because they were far from Iraq and most Indians could not afford to go on pilgrimage to the shrine of Hussain in Karbala, they would make models of the tomb of Hussain, cenotaphs, which they call ta'ziya; it is a technical term in South Asian Shi'ism, and [the ta'ziya] would be made out of bamboo and tinsel, and they would be pretty, and they even had contests. When I first came to the University of Michigan, our South Asian bibliographer, was a man from Hindu heritage, Om Sharma, but he grew up in Punjab and he said he could remember as a child winning a prize for the most beautiful ta'ziya for Imam Hussain during Ashura.

So this was the general culture and it spread even from South Asia elsewhere. So that practice of making ta'ziya, or the cenotaphs, for Imam Hussain in Ashura was taken up in the Caribbean because of the South Asian indentured servants that the British brought there to work in the sugar cane plantations in the mid-19th century. To this day, in much of the Caribbean, Ashura is commemorated and kinds of floats are made, which are intended to represent the shrine of Hussain. In some instances, Afro-Caribbean populations have taken this up and incorporated elements of carnival, which has caused some of the South Asian Shi'ites to refuse to go out that day and not see it.

But you can see the creativity of South Asian Shi'ism, its broad appeal, and its impact on broad culture in poetry, in ritual, and in culture. It is very common for South Asian Sunni Muslims, even to say if someone is idolized beyond what is reasonable, by saying "Oh, you think that guy is Imam Mahdi." They do not just say Mahdi, the way Sunnis would in the Middle East, they say Imam Mahdi; this is

obviously the Shi'ite diction that they have adopted. So you see it everywhere, or at least I saw it everywhere. It also showed signs of intersectionality with South Asian traditions, including Hinduism. I can remember going to the bazaar in Lahore, and there is a section where they have posters, things that people would like to put up on their walls. Coming from a Sunni Arab society, like Egypt as I had been there before, even just the paintings of Ali were a little bit of a shock. But beyond that, there was the Prophet on Buraq, the winged steed that he rode in the [mi'raj] ascension. Buraq had a human face and was done in a kind of Hindu god style, and you could see this intersectionality. I do not think you can call it syncretism because I do not have any evidence that they adopted anything ideological from Hinduism, but they were willing to deploy, some of the artists with Shi'a background, Hindu tropes in their art when approaching Muslim subjects.

I speculated in my book that some elements of Shi'ism may have been fairly easy for converts to pick up, [including] converts from Hinduism because they were in Awadh [in fact] converts from Hinduism. For instance, feelings about ritual impurity, najasa, which is important in Shi'ism, but it is also important in Hinduism. In fact, when I visited Benares and was with Hindu friends, they were constantly appalled at my manners because I was not observing [norms as they were]; you would [have to] use a different piece of cutlery for every dish, and what I thought of as an American is persnickety rules about daily hygiene, [but] it was owing this Hindu set of norms around ritual impurity, and some of those practices that also exist in Shi'ite Islam.

So that was the first point I wanted to make: although the numbers are small in proportion to the rest of the population, the influence is quite large and is quite visible, and Shi'ites have played major cultural roles in India and Pakistan all the way through. [So] with the vogue for the Ramayana and ironically enough, the intersections of television Ramayana, and Hindutva actually come from a 1980s television serial, which was enormously popular, in which the screenwriter for which was a Shi'ite Muslim. And that shared intersectionality is very common. When I met the Maharajkumar of Mahmudabad, and we had breakfast one time, I wanted to know about his family who were prominent Shi'ite family in Uttar Pradesh. He spent some of the time quoting the Ramayana to me, and clearly had memorized both the Sanskrit and the Urdu translation, and there were translations of these Hindu works. So another element that I want to underline is that although the Shi'ites of South Asia are small in proportion, they are quite numerous in absolute numbers given the enormous

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The current population of Iraq in 2021 is estimated to be 40 million people; if 64-69% is Shi'a, as stated by some mainstream sources, this would result in a Shi'a Muslim population of between 25.6 to 27.6 million people; see: "Iraq," 21 December 2021, The World Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/#people-and-society

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See footnote #2 above on calculations of Shi'a Muslim demographics in India.

population of South Asia.

Iraq notionally has a population of 32 million, maybe more now, and 60% are Shi'ite. So you are talking about [19] million people,3 and that is a very major Shi'ite rule, and a very influential one in the Middle East. But there are surely a good 130 million Muslims in India. If 5% of them are Shi'ite that is 7 million right there.4 Despite their small [proportion in South Asia], in absolute numbers they rival some of the influential Shi'ite groups in the Middle East. Another important point that I want to underline is that talking about Sunnis and Shi'ites in South Asia may be a mistake in many instances. Obviously there are people with strong commitments to particular traditions, [and] who exhibit those in their practices. But, in early modern [history] and in recent times, many people in South Asia were illiterate. They did not participate in bookish culture, and the British who did censuses in India in the 19th century faced this problem. They wanted to categorize people by religion, it was one of the categories that the British included in their censuses. I did some reading on the census takers and their problems, and they said that they often could not tell if somebody was Sunni or Shi'ite because ordinarily you would tell how they pray: are the hands down or up? And so forth. But these villagers did not pray, and so you could not tell that way. Was it that they loved the Family of the Prophet? But everybody loves the Family of the Prophet, and in South Asian terms, there was a pro-Shi'a point of view on things; Yazid was a dirty word even to Sunni South Asians. In a place like Sindh, for instance, which is suffused with Sufi culture, a cult of the Family of the Prophet is very widespread, and I think Annemarie Schimmel also made this point: Sunni or Shi'ite categories do not encompass very much about the lives of people, but from the point of view of, say, bookish Egyptian Sunni culture, if you were among them, you would be noticing all of these Shi'a attitudes and practices. So the in-betweenness of Shi'a culture in South Asia, should be underlined. Well, we have very learned colleagues here who are going to give us specific papers, and so I do not want to go on too long about these generalities, but I hope I have put some points on the table that we can come back to that may be provocative for our colleagues in the audience.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much, Professor Juan Cole. I think this was a perfect start because in your generalities that you were saying, these are some very important themes that hopefully other professors will take further. Our next speaker is Professor Rameez Abbas. Dr. Rameez is Associate Professor at the National Defense University where she teaches courses in South Asian politics and statecraft in the Muslim world. Her current research, an ongoing research, is on strategies of Muslim minorities: "How Minority Sects Navigate Citizenship and Belonging in Muslim States." She will

be speaking to us about the Dawoodi Bohra's cohesion and integration strategies in India and Pakistan. Welcome Dr. Rameez, over to you.

Rameez Abbas: Thank you very much, Hassan. The titles of my work tend to be a mouthful and I appreciate that you have stuck with it and said the whole [title]. Thanks everyone for being here. The broad question that drives my presentation is how minority groups maintain group cohesion and limit their vulnerability to violence and political persecution, and I am applying this question to the Dawoodi Bohra community, which is a South Asian Musta'li Ismaili Shi'a sect. So first, I will talk about the relationship between cohesion and safety because it is complex. It is often the experience of persecution itself that provides a powerful force for group cohesion. So for many groups, Shi'a and others, the experience of religious persecution is central to their group identity.

Another potential outcome of internal cohesion is that a group that maintains a strong separate identity apart from the majority population among which they live can be a particularly visible target, either for religious extremists or for state authorities who derive their legitimacy from some kind of religious nationalism. So that is the situation in both India and Pakistan: state authorities who use either Hindu nationalism or a particular form of Muslim nationalism to justify and legitimize their leadership. So in this context, I will describe two examples of how the Dawoodi Bohras sect navigate this political terrain in each country.

My original plan was to use two difficult cases of potentially hostile religion based politics: Pakistan under Zia and India under Modi to demonstrate some of the aspects of Bohra cohesion and community members' modes of political and civic engagement, but due to time I will just focus on India right now. So let me start a little bit about the Dawoodi Bohras. I will often shorten it to Bohras, but just keep in mind there are other sects too that are called Bohras and I am not talking about those, just the Dawoodi Bohras. So there are a lot of ways I could describe the Bohras and the ways in which they are similar to and different from other Shi'as and other Muslims. Bohra community norms include strict observance of religious practices, such as salat (prayers), modesty in dress, avoiding interest bearing loans, and commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hossain as a major part of the Bohra calendar. In terms of differences, one might be that they practice a high degree of gender mixing more than a lot of other Muslim communities. Though today, my focus is on the differences related to spiritual leadership and how these affect Bohra political engagement. So like other Shi'as and other Ismailis, Bohra theology emphasizes the central guiding role of the imam for salvation. Where it departs is that in the imam's concealment, the da'i, the spiritual leader of the Bohra community takes on the central guiding role. So I will skip over historical details except to say that the office of the da'i, which means

missionary, is rooted in the Fatimid Empire's bureaucratic institutions that developed the mission, the *da'wah*, which deployed missionary clerics across the empire to bring the imam's message to the people.

So that institution is the predecessor of today's Dawoodi Bohra da'wah, and the da'i mutlaq, the absolute missionary, is the imam's designated vicegerent and the leader of the community. So this means that his rulings and his guidance are incumbent upon believers to follow because the authority of the da'i stems from the authority of the Imam. So the other thing is that in the 15th century, the da'wat organization moved from Yemen to Gujarat due to persecution. Once in India, one major instance of Bohra persecution was when the Emperor, Aurangzeb executed the 32nd da'i. So, two points emerge from this summary: a centralized leadership with absolute spiritual authority and early experiences of persecution. Both of these have shaped the community's cohesion as well as today's modes of political engagement. So let me describe those in India. The Dawoodi Bohras in India are among the Muslims who suffered from the waves of Hindu nationalist violence in the 1990s and in the early 2000s: the infamous riots in the state of Gujarat in 2002 took place over three days and the official Indian figures, which are disputed, are that 1,044 people were killed.

So in these riots, the Bohra community did not escape the violence. On the contrary, they actually suffered a lot because of the visibility of Bohra shops and businesses. And at the time of the riots, the previous da'i of the community had maintained very cordial relationships with then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi. But that relationship did not keep the Bohras safe from mob violence. So back in 2008 and 2010, the Bohras in Gujarat, and in Mumbai that I interviewed before the BJP's dominance of national politics, were to a person against the BJP, and they were supportive of the Congress Party. I heard over and over again, "Bohras vote Congress because BJP wants India to be a Hindu country." But a few short years later with the electoral rise of the BJP, this political affiliation began to change. The current da'i, like his predecessor, has been close to Prime Minister Modi, he has conducted robust internal diplomacy with the Modi government, and soon after Modi won the national election, the da'i started encouraging Bohras to support Modi's initiatives. Most importantly, Bohra congregants have expressed public support for prime minister Modi. So the question is: why is this the case? How did the Muslim community that experienced violence at the hands of Hindu nationalists come to support Hindu nationalism?

And how did Bohra leadership overcome these political grievances within the community? One answer is the centralized leadership backed by the spiritual legitimacy of that leadership. It is not just the leadership, though the centralized part and the spiritual authority part is important. The Bohra alliance with Hindu nationalists is actually part of a broader trend among Shi'as in India. One example is in UP, Uttar Pradesh, where the chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, is not just a Hindu nationalist, he is a Hindu supremacist. He has been pursuing this campaign to build a temple for Ram on the site of the destroyed Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The chairman of the UP Shi'a Waqf board pledged 51,000 rupees to aid with the building of this temple to Rama in Ayodhya, and the politics of that are very complex. They speak to Sunni-Shi'a politics as well. But I think that one political difference between Twelver Shi'as (Ithna Ashari Shi'as) and Bohra Shi'as in India is that there is a greater gap between the Shi'a leadership of UP and the ordinary Shi'as, whereas Bohra congregants show more adherence to the terms of political engagement set by the *da'i* because of his spiritual authority. So that is an explanation on the religious side. Another explanation is that Bohras see this alliance as a consistent application of the principle of civic engagement over time. This is a stable orientation that has evolved out of the historical experiences of persecution.

One example of this is Bohra participation during the huge Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela, which was in the city of Nashik in Maharashtra in 2015, and that city has a substantial Bohra population. A Bohra community volunteer team distributed 70,000 cups of chai tea to Hindu pilgrims. They set up a free medical camp, ambulance services, health checkups and I often hear Bohras describe these civic activities and their own political orientation as apolitical, not political. But obviously these are, in some ways, intensely political stances and activities, this decision to ally, rather than oppose a controversial system and a system that has harmed you. As an aside, in response to this Kumbh Mela activity, a BJP activist on Facebook shared photos of the Bohra community service, and the commenters responded with feedback like "real Indians," "true nationalists," "Jai Hind," and the generous interpretation of this is that Muslims are also real Indians and true nationalists. The cynical interpretation might be that these Muslims are [true Indians], but maybe the subtext is that other [Muslims] are not.

I am talking about the modes of political engagement on the Bohra side, but obviously there is also the structural engagement of the state and the minority community who have important reasons to seek political alliances with minority groups as well, and I am not really addressing that side of it. The last answer to the question of why Bohras support Hindu nationalists that I want to put forward is based on instrumentality: that this is a calculated strategy for either survival or prosperity, and the community has relatively strict control over believers and forces adherence to that strategy. I find that the implications of this last explanation are particularly troubling because it assumes a lack of sincerity. Essentially, the instrumental

explanation is saying that we do not exactly believe what Bohras are saying about civic responsibility or we are not taking seriously what they are doing in the political realm. Maybe this will sound familiar to you because this instrumentality is often associated with the principle of *taqiyya* – hiding or dissimulation of one's real beliefs – and it is often used to describe various Shi'a politics and the ways that Shi'as escaped persecution historically.

But, I want to pose to you that what I am describing about Bohra politics is not taqiyya, it is not hidden, and it is not dissimulation. Bohra leadership and others are open about the various elements of the community's religion and identity that create alignment with Hindu nationalist politics, the spiritual authority of the da'i, [and] the religious philosophy of loyalty to civic authorities. In another context, a Druze scholar, Kais Firro, has written that the Israeli tendency to attribute the philosophy of taqiyya with the Israeli Druze is inaccurate and has been harmful to the community, and I think this observation is broadly applicable and applies to the Bohra as well. So in the Bohra case, the politics I am describing are rooted in a longstanding, theological, philosophical tradition about the community's outward relations. And I think I will leave it there. Maybe in the chat, we can also discuss the case of Bohra engagement with Zia-ul-Haq and his politics in Pakistan. Thank you.

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you so much, Dr. Rameez. Excellent [presentation]. Some of the points that you have raised, especially about political engagement, I have questions about. I was lucky to be, twice, hosted by the Bohra community in Karbala and Najaf, when they take pilgrims there. So I will come to that during the Q&A. Thank you for your insights.

So our next speaker and presenter is Professor Karen Ruffle. She is Associate Professor in the department of Historical Studies and Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. Her latest book, which we highly recommend you to look at and read is *Everyday Shi'ism in South Asia*, which just came out. So congratulations on the book, Professor, and her topic is "Two Perspectives on the Everyday in South Asia: the Question of Gender and Theorizing Agency in Material Practice." Over to you, thank you.

**Karen Ruffle:** Thank you so much. I would like to thank Payam Mohseni for inviting me to participate in this important and productive conference, and I would also like to thank Hassan for moderating our panel. Today, I want to take just a somewhat slightly different approach in engaging with the panel theme. I have been studying and engaging with Shi'i communities in South Asia, particularly in Hyderabad Deccan for nearly 20 years, and during these couple of decades [I focused] on what I refer to

as everyday Shi'ism. In my work on Shi'ism, I use the term "everyday" in a number of ways. At the most basic level, the "everyday" refers to the activities of everyday life that are inflected by Shi'i religious laws, norms, ethics, rituals of belief in devotion, and gender values. Well, one might consider the everyday to be a dimension of popular culture and religiosity or within the domain of folklore. This leads to the formation of essentializing exclusionary binaries of popular elite in everyday scholarly that belie on the ground experience of South Asian Shi'as. The "everyday" resists setting up an artificial binary that posits a divide between non elite practice and the "religion of the scholars."

The "everyday" is a space inhabited by all people, whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, male or female. The everyday reveals the ways in which Shi'i identities, like others, are multilayered, multi-situated, shaped by ethnic, caste, and socioeconomic factors, as well as by gender and age. Beyond being a site of resistance for our tendency to categorize identities and practices in binarized terms, the everyday is a space for the creative expression of Shi'i devotion to the imams and the Family of the Prophet, the Ahl al-Bayt. The everyday is grounded by emotional practices that mediate Shi'i historical memory and diverse South Asian cultural practices and norms to cultivate an ethos of love, *mahaba*, longing for sadness, and loyalty to the Family of the Prophet. The Shi'i everyday is translocative, collapsing time and space between the historically and geographically distant sites in Arabia, Syria and Iraq, where the imams and Ahl al-Bayt lived and died. The everyday is not solely a construct or condition of the present, although as scholars of religion, we tend to be presentist in engaging with this concept.

The everyday is a method for situating Shi'ism and the Shi'a as individuals in communities, in specific spaces, places, linguistic registers, and sites of cultural exchange in the longue durée. Rooted in bodily, emotional, and material practices, everyday Shi'ism is intrinsically historical and social. What I would like to do in what remains in my presentation [is] to present two considerations. One is a reflection on sort of thinking about gender methodologically, and the second is to present just one very small theoretical intervention in thinking about the role of materiality and material practice in South Asian Shi'ism. This is a direction that my research has taken in the last seven years, and figures quite prominently in everyday Shi'ism as does gender as well. Both gender and materiality are quite central in thinking about the everyday for me. But materiality and space, for example, are quite central in a book that I am writing now on thinking about Hyderabad during the Qutb Shahi period in the 16th and 17th centuries, and two book projects that I am in the process of thinking about with regard to Shi'i material, culture, and practices. This is very much at the forefront of what I am sort of working and thinking through right now.

Consideration number one: gender is not just for women. My first book, Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism, which was published in 2011 was a multi-disciplinary ethnographic study of Shi'i hagiographical texts in ritual performance in the South Indian city of Hyderabad, where on the 7th of Muharram Shi'as commemorate the wedding of the third Imam, Hussain's daughter, Fatima Kubra, to her cousin Qassim at the Battle of Karbala in Iraq in the year 680. The remembrance of events, such as this battlefield wedding through the recitation of hagiographical narratives and ritual performance, shape spiritual and everyday life for the Shi'as in South Asia.

Devotional text and ritual performance are integrally intertwined, producing the desired aesthetic affect of grief, and more importantly, these performances dynamically embody the social, ethical, and religious powers of the heroes and heroines of Karbala, transforming them into religious and social role models, what I refer to as "imitable saints." In the book, I demonstrate how the Shi'i hagiographical tradition is based upon the feminine voices and emotions of the women of Imam Hussain's family, who survived the battle of Karbala and were entrusted to keep the Hussaini ethic alive. The ethnographic approach that I used in this book highlights the prominent role of the feminine Shi'i sainthood in devotional literature and ritual. The deployment of feminine voices and emotions by male and female orators in the *majlis* mourning assembly, in the *majlis al-'aza*, and the central role that the women of the Ahl al-Bayt have in constructing Shi'i memory of the battle of Karbala, provides a compelling religious and social model for both men and for women.

Although the book emphasized both women and men's experiences and how both women and men are taught and cultivate idealized culturally specific gender roles, the book was almost universally characterized in book reviews as a book about women. This was another case of gender equals woman which became a serious source of frustration for me. My research was reduced down to focusing only on women rather than also being about Shi'i hagiography and ritual. Questions of gender remained central in my current research. In my recently published book, *Everyday Shi'ism in South Asia*, I elected not to have a separate chapter on women or gender because women's voices, emotions, and experiences are integral to shaping everyday Shi'ism. Likewise, I do not want to mark Shi'i maleness and masculinity as invisible, normal, and neutral – that is as ungendered, which is the unintended result of having separate chapters on women's rituals, or life cycles, or gender. This is an approach I hope more scholars will take to surface the fact that men's voices, religious rituals, and experiences are gendered just as women's are, and require attention and analysis.

In the second consideration that I would like to present, I would like to theorize agency in material practice, and here I am just offering one theoretical lens.

I have been working through multiple ways to theorize material agency in thinking about *ta'ziyas*, *alams*, and *tabuts* (coffins). Representations of Imam Hussain Karbala Shrine Tombs, *alams* as the metal flags or standards that index or represent members of Prophet Mohammed's Family, the Imams. For example Abbas' *alam* or *tabut* is particularly popular in many parts of South Asia. These are all types of visual images that stimulate acts of religious seeing for South Asian Shi'a, which at the primary level make present the imams and Ahl al-Bayt. *Alams* and *ta'ziya* are image objects that radiate sacralized thing-power, described by Jane Bennett, as the curious ability of inanimate objects to animate, to act, and to produce effects, dramatic and subtle.

Thing-power contends a continuity between human and non-human things, and it compels us to attend to the active role that the non-human material has in our lives. Jane Bennett's groundbreaking book published in 2010, Vibrant Matter, reenchants matter and materiality. Finding energetic vitalities and unlikely and often overlooked assemblages of things not entirely reducible to the contexts in which human subjects set them, Bennett's re-enchantment of materiality reflects the new materialism movement that calls the subject object binary into question. Emerging from feminist theory, cultural theory, philosophy, and the history of science in the late 1990s, "new materialism" is an interdisciplinary field with strong political and theoretical commitments to reframe the way matter and ideas are constructed, and to radically reshape human centered binary thought. This awareness, sensitivity even, is echoed in Bennet's charge, "the ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern non-human vitality, to become more perceptually open to it." To develop her theory of thing-power, Bennett draws on the post-modern, environmental, philosophical writing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to postulate metal as the symbol of vital materiality. Shi'i material culture is a metallic materiality, brass, silver and steel alams, inexpensive foil work, pocket size panj tans, the palm with the fingers extended and Zhul-Jinah's metalwork, ta'ziya and jula cradles are all quivering evanescent metal bursting with a life that gives rise to the prodigious idea of nonorganic life.

This material evanescence exists prior to and beyond its formation and spatial arrangement in assemblages, which derive their agency from their heterogeneous distribution across human and non-human fields. An *alam* maker's artistic prowess is achieved through a bridging of his devotion to the imams and Ahl al-Bayt and understanding of religious principles and an understanding of the material vitality of the metals with which he works. In her field work with *alam* makers, Sarover Zaidi has noted this balance, although not in relation necessarily. So she is not speaking specifically about new materialism, although it seems to underlie her ethnographic observations of the work of the *alam* maker. And I quote her, "he calls this sustenance,

barakat, which literally translates as a blessing, which is seen here as a gift and an abundance of skill given to him. Continuity between the forms of abstraction, that is the force of the Prophet's Family here provided by the making of panj tans, which represent the Family, and forms of particularisation, creating the material object, gathered smoothly at the level of the artisan. He suggests to us in his existence a double signification, accepting on one side, the materiality of this artifact and hence its iconicity and idle nature, and yet simultaneously locating all the skill, labor, work, craftsmanship within a theological language and framework of barakat." Here, we can see the materiality of the metal is felt and fashioned in dynamic relationship with Shi'i theology to create particular types of alams that instantiates specific imams and the Ahl al-Bayt. Material that is metal and the immaterial theology are worked by the artisan to create a new form, the alam, which has its own capacity to act in relation to human beings. In conclusion, the Shi'i everyday is capacious and inclusive of both women and men. It is the domain of the emotional and the imaginative. It provides a lens for us to understand the ways in which South Asian Shi'a have contributed to a broader Islamic humanistic tradition. Thank you.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much professor for your insightful thoughts and what you mentioned about everyday Shi'ism, and the whole issue of binary categories that we place them in. I think that is a very thoughtful point. [We] will discuss that further [in the Q&A]. Now, our last panelist, Professor Simon Fuchs, who will talk to us about "Reclaiming the Citizen: How Pakistani Shi'as Have Engaged With The State." And if you are a student of Pakistani history and Pakistani politics and religion in Pakistan then you should already know by now [of his book and] read one of the reviews in Dawn Newspaper in Pakistan of In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East, an outstanding contribution. Looking forward to this, [now] to you, Simon.

Simon Fuchs: Yes, thanks so much, Hassan, for your kind introduction. Thanks, Payam, for the invitation and thanks to everyone who is here, especially those of you from South Asia, where it is already quite late. So currently, as we speak, there are families of missing Shi'is holding a sit-in in Karachi since April 2nd, and they have not chosen any random place, but [they are] at the mausoleum of the founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Their argument is that they are victims of the Pakistani security services. There are blanket accusations against Shi'is that they went to Syria, fought on the side of Iran there, and upon their return have been abducted by security services, even though many of those who have disappeared have never really been to Syria. And these protesters have said that they have tried to seek assistance

from every government and civilian institution in Pakistan. They have staged previous sit-ins, but their conclusion is that politicians or state institutions are either not interested in their plight and in their missing family members, or they are incapable of really helping them.

The final decision was to stage this emotional appeal to Pakistan's founder and sort of claiming his support, so to speak. There is an interesting question in this recent protest and that is only the last one in a row of these sort of Shi'i sit-ins. Why are these Shi'is not giving up? Even though many would claim that Shi'is are only second class citizens of Pakistan, and others have even gone further and made the case that there is even a sectarian war against Shi'is, [that] there is even a Shi'i genocide happening. Why do these Shi'is still want to appeal to the Pakistani state? And in my presentation, I would like to make the case that Shi'is have never stopped claiming their right to citizenship since the inception of Pakistan, and they have always tried to intervene in crucial policy debates, such as Islamization [and] many others that I will touch upon. And they have argued in this context and others that they have been instrumental in bringing about Pakistan and that they also form a sort of spiritual elite that is really capable of leading Pakistan out of its current misery.

And in my talk, I would like to touch on some of these strategies that Shi'is pursue to reinscribe themselves into the fabric of the nation and the narrative of the nation. But I would also make sure and would like to state that Shi'is have always been very visible in Pakistan. This is also something that Professor Cole touched upon earlier. So that's also definitely a difference to the Middle East. Since Pakistan's inception, Shi'is have always been represented among the dominant land holders, the military local, feudal and federal bureaucracy, as well as in the industrial and entrepreneur elite. So each successive Pakistani government has included Shi'i ministers and no one less influential than Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who was a Shi'i himself. He was born into an originally Khoja Ismaili family, but converted to Twelver Shi'ism around 1904 before the age of 28. And when you travel through Pakistan, be it in urban settings or rural settings, Shi'i symbols and banners, and some of these aspects that Professor Ruffle just talked about, are visible everywhere.

And this has in fact, led anti-Shi'i groups to claim that, especially during the days of Muharram, the entire country really turns into a Shi'i country, and Shi'i processions are not just visible in the streets but are also [on] the radio, television, and, of course, on social media. And Shi'is have, on the other end, always defended the original promise of Pakistan that they cling to, that they had a place in Pakistan. This became particularly urgent since the 1980s, when we saw a rise of sectarian violence in the country. As one student activist, for example, put it in 1991, and I

would like to quote the Shi'i student activist: "Pakistan came into existence so that Muslims can be free in a particular region and can, drawing on this independence, implement an Islamic system. Pakistan was supposed to enable Muslims to build a model society in economic, political, societal, educational, and cultural terms, so that the whole world in witnessing these blessings would embrace Islam and breath with tranquility." Shi'is have always clung to this promise that Pakistan originally entailed and they would have argued that it was the tyranny of the Sunni majority or some structural problems that have really derailed this original promise.

But, Shi'is have not been satisfied in just claiming goodwill. They have also very much argued about Pakistan's early history in particular. They have made the case that many Shi'is have been supportive of this idea of Pakistan, and it was for example, Deobandi scholars who would have initially rejected the idea and would not have supported Pakistan as whole heartedly as they [Shi'is] would have. For Shi'is in particular, one incident is crucial in this regard. In 1951, a prominent Deobandi 'alim (scholar) in Karachi, Ihtisham al-Haq Thanvi, invited representatives from all Islamic sects, including the Ahmadis, to Karachi. Thirty-three scholars convened to work out the "Twenty-Two Principles of a Future Islamic State," and for the Shi'is, clause nine of these Twenty-Two points was particularly important, since it enshrined the right of each, as the document calls it, established Islamic sect to be bound by its particular interpretation of Islamic laws.

And Shi'is then quoted Ihtisham al-Haq Thanvi in the course of this conference because he said during this, that the terms minority and majority are purely political terms. If one uses, however, the criteria of minority or majority in the context of the religious rights of Islamic sects, this would mean giving rise to the greatest danger of internal dissent, or *fitna*. So this convention in Pakistan's early years, in 1951, was always a reference point of hope that Shi'is would be as accepted as their Sunni brothers in the Pakistani context and enjoy the same rights as citizens [like] everyone else. [However,] during the course of history, especially after the Iranian Revolution in 1978-1979, the whole question of loyalty came up for Shi'is in Pakistan.

They had to face these questions. They tried to counter this by always stressing Muslim unity. For example, when you listen to the speeches of Pakistan's main Shi'i leader in the 1980s, Sayyid 'Arif Hussain al-Hussaini, you will notice that sort of Muslim unity pervades all [of] his speeches and everything he said during this time. He was echoing the Iranian line at this time by claiming that the real threat or the real enemy of Islam was imperialism and global unbelief and not other Muslims, be they Sunnis, Shi'is, or anyone else. The problem for Sayyid 'Arif Hussain Hussaini and Shi'is in the 1980s was really that anti-Shi'i discourses became transformed in the

course of the 1980s.

Of course, we had anti Shi'i sentiment already earlier, but it was mostly focused on long standing doctrinal questions between Sunni's and Sh'is that are not particular to the Pakistani context, but with the 1980s, this became very much politicized and suddenly Shi'is were no longer "bad Muslims" so to speak, but they were seen as a political threat. Since they had a rival political model in the context of Iran that they supposedly wanted to implement in Pakistan and deprive Pakistan of its own Islamic Republic that it had established. And during this time in the 1980s, another event like the 1951 convention occurred that is an important reference point in Pakistan [for the coming decades]. We have talked earlier about Zia-ul-Haq, and many of you will know this episode. Zia-ul-Haq was trying to deduct zakat from all bank accounts in Pakistan, including the Shi'is. [There was] intense Shi'i mobilization against this move with laying siege to the capital district in Islamabad, which made the Zia regime retract their plans, and they negotiated with the Shi'is the so-called "Islamabad Accord," according to which Shi'is were free to administer the internal affairs in keeping with the law. It was once again affirmation of this internal freedom that Shi'is enjoyed. This success, like 1951, became later a point of reference for the movement when the unfulfilled promises of the agreement were then used to criticize Zia. Shi'i leaders over the next decades continuously referred to the Islamabad Accord.

Finally, in my short presentation, I would like to point out [a third strategy] that was pursued by Shi'is beyond arguing about history and mobilizing. Shi'is presented themselves as a spiritual elite in the context of Pakistan. And what do I mean by this? On the one hand, we have more on the religious plane that from the early days of Pakistan, we had esoterically minded Shi'i popular preachers, so-called *zakirs* who [would] try to forge a particular way of Muslim unity by mining the Sunni spiritual mystical tradition. One of the interesting and specific terms, *walaya* that is influential in Sufism, denoting the sort of closeness that also a saint enjoys with God. It is written in the Arabic, Persian, or Urdu script in the same way as *wilaya*, which for Shi'is denotes more the authority that the imams enjoyed. And this is also the same term that is used to denote, for example, the government of the jurist consult in the context of Iran, *vilayat-i faqih*.

So in noticing these close proximities, then these esoterically minded Shi'i preachers, we are trying to make the case that when you just look closely at the Sunni tradition, you can [also] find a veneration of the imams, which is also there, as Juan Cole had pointed out earlier. Everyone loves the Family of the Prophet to a certain extent, but they were really trying to make the case that the Sunni tradition is much more in line with Shi'i thought as you might at first think. But, once again, with the context of the 1980s and the politicization of this entire spectrum, we also see that

this context of reliance has also taken on the political plane. [This] is the last strategy that I would like to point out that is catered in present day Lahore with one rising Shi'i scholar there, Syed Javad Naqvi, who has received his entire education in Iran. He is trying to make the case that wilaya and a similar governmental model [to Iran] is actually feasible in Pakistan to the same extent as we see it in Iran. He says we are in a minority situation, but we could take heart of Shi'is in Lebanon, where Hezbollah has also clung to the Iranian line and they have also managed to carve out a space in the state that is not appropriate to their size. [So] we should give up these earlier attempts of being citizens, similar to what these Shi'is are currently doing at the Mausoleum of Jinnah in Karachi, that we always try to ask the state for protection, and that the state [would cause] the majority [to] finally accept this, but we should boldly claim our own leadership. We have examples of Shi'is who have done this. These were three strategies that I wanted to present to you; it was a very rough and broad overview, but I look forward to [hearing] what you think [about] Shi'is [claiming] their citizenship in the context of Pakistan. Many thanks.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much, Simon. [These were] fascinating presentations [on] a range of issues. Thank you [all] for your brief presentations. I know that the topics are so important, and they needed the kind of explanation of certain nuances, which you all did very well. I have read all the comments and questions. I will summarize some of those if it is okay. I will first go in the order that you all presented [with] one question to each panelist, and then we will come back to the broader common themes and have a conversation. So Professor Juan Cole: two points that you mentioned were very insightful. There was one question [from the audience] asking how much influence the Shi'a rulers of Sindh and Multan had on the spread of Sufism in South Asia – but I want to keep this question in the background to think about the trend and theme of Shi'ism and Sufism in South Asia. However, when you mentioned that when you were doing research in Pakistan and India in early 1980s, the way things changed with General Zia-ul-Haq and his Islamization, and that is also linked to the Afghan jihad and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. My question is: how [did] the old norms, themes, and adjustments of the way the Shi'as and Sunni's lived together historically, borrowed from each other, [and] learned from each other - how were those trends changed during Zia's time? Was something happening always and General Zia just triggered it? Or [did] the Afghan jihad and the Iranian Islamic Revolution trigger it? Or did something new happen in the last fifty years that is so different from the last few centuries? Any thoughts on the "currents of history" you referred to?

**Juan Cole:** Thank you for that question. I think I can tie the two together because Uch Sharif, near Multan, was the Sufi center for Pakistan and it was the [Sufi] orders based there that really became the matrix for the conversion of population of Pakistan to Islam. And one of the Sufi orders, out of the four, that had a shrine there and a shrine keeper, was the Suhrawardiyya. They had come not from the Middle East, but down from Bukhara in the 13th century, and in 1805 there was a dispute between two brothers [over] who would become Sajjada Nashin, over who would become the leader of the Suhrawardiyya and in Uch, and therefore [by extension], in South Asia. And there was also a contest at that time between the Sunni Raja Bahawalpur and the Shi'a Talpur Nuwabs in Sindh, [in which] they had been supported by Nader Shah when he came. So in 1805, the Talpurs won and they backed their candidate for the leadership of the Suhruwardiyya on the condition that he should convert to Shi'ism, which he did. About half of the Suhruwardi's then became Shi'a through the 19th century. And the leaders of these shrines of the Suhruwardi order all through Sindh and Punjab were called Bokhari pirs, and the Mughals had given them huge land grants to support them. So they were also big landowners and often their peasants would convert to Shi'ism.

So I think a lot of the Shi'a in Punjab were peasants who converted at the hands of their Bokhari *pirs*, who headed the shrine to which the peasants would come, and who owned the land because the Mughals had given it to them. [This is evident] at a place like Chak Sial where the Sajjad Nashins, as Professor Fuchs pointed out, became big politicians. Faisal Saleh Hayat who was in Benzair's cabinet and Abdul Hussain were Bokhari *pirs*. To address your point, you began to see in the Zia period conflict between Sunni townsmen and the Bokhari landowners and their peasants. I think it is a social thing; as Pakistan urbanized and became more literate, there were structural conflicts of a class sort and a topographical sort among these groups.

So the Sunni townspeople around Chak, for instance, who felt that the Shi'a had too much power and the Bokhari were in their view, throwing their weight around too much as a minority, they formed the Sipah-e Sahaba, which became a terrorist group and they conducted killings of Shi'a, and then they [collaborated] up with al-Qaeda and got training in the camps of Afghanistan and at some points, the [Pakistani] ISI sent them over the border for attacks in Kashmir. So, some of the Sunni radicalization that we see in the 80's has to do with these social and structural conflicts, which were legacies of this 19th century Shi'a movement of the Suhrawardiyya to become Shi'a. In the 80's, [there is] a turning point that generals who made the coup against Bhutto did not have grassroots support.

[Thus,] they were eager to find some civil society groups that would support them. So Zia reached out to the Jamaat-e Islami, but that means reaching out to Sunni

fundamentalists, and then brings and trains them, [providing] implicit support for Sipah-e Sahaba, and some of these other groups who would drive, some of them being taxi drivers, they would drive mini buses around the horn, and they would write on it "kill the Shi'a." The authorities clearly were not doing anything about that. So, keeping together what I call a kind of intersectionality of multiple identities, multiple practices, coexisting, some of the things that Professors Ruffle, Fuchs, and Abbas have told us about, I think those become sociologically speaking, more difficult in highly literate and urban contexts. That is where the world is going after all, and South Asia may be somewhat more [slower] than some other places. Nevertheless, that is where it is going. So I see the rise of a hardline, almost Wahhabi Sunni fundamentalism in South Asia not only as a result of Gulf money and Gulf expatriate workers who come under the influence of that money, but also of indigenous processes of urbanization and literacy, which tend to simplify out some of these loyalties, practices, and identities in ways that I feel are unfortunate.

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you so much. Just one point, and then I will move to Dr. Rameez Abbas. I often think that in [the] case of Muhammad Ali Jinnah the founding father of Pakistan, as Simon also mentioned, it was a very well-known fact that he was a Shi'a Muslim. His closest associates, whether the Habib family or the Raja of Mahmudabad or Liaquat Ali Khan, some of the leading stalwarts of the Pakistani movement, were Shi'ite. The opponents of Jinnah - Azad or so many other Deobandis at that time who were at least [against the] creation of Pakistan - challenged him on everything, called him "kafir-i-azam" [infidel leader], but never made a sectarian attack on him. Contrary to today [with regards to the] Chief of the Pakistani army, for instance. [If a] Shi'a is in line, people would say, "Oh will a Shi'a become the army chief?" which had happened previously many times. So that shift is visible in terms of more emphasis on sectarian identity and seeing that as problematic, whereas historically it was not there, and you are right: [outside] money, and the expansion and growth has a huge role to play, which is often missed. So many people always would just jump to say [that] this is Iran versus Saudi Arabia [or] this is jihad, which are also factors. But, I think you have pointed out a very important socio-political economic factor, which is there. We will come back to this theme when we talk to Simon later.

Dr. Rameez Abbas, your comments subjugate a very interesting conversation and most questions [have been focused on] some of the phrases that you use, but I would, at this time mention one [and] I will leave it to you if you want to pick on any of the themes that you saw in the chat that you think must be clarified. If you can talk about the political engagement strategy, if I may call it that because by and large, in

many other parts of the world and with South Asia also, Shi'as were seen [throgh the lens of] revolutionary resistance because that is apparently ingrained in the history of Shi'a Islam and the Bohra community and their constructive engagement with the political elites both in Pakistan and India. In the case of Pakistan, as you would know, I have heard it from many colleagues that the *da'i* or the leader of the Bohra community has the status of the head of the state. So whenever he arrives in Karachi, where there is a large Bohra community, he is really given a protocol in the contacts and engagement of the Bohra community with the Pakistani bureaucracy and political elite is also very strong. So, it may appear that this is very different from what potentially the Twelvers did or other [minority groups did]. If you can tell us a bit more of this. Is it just a leadership decision or there is more in [terms of] theological interpretations? Or is this just a minority figuring out the best way to survive? Where can it fit in? Thank you.

Rameez Abbas: Thank you, Hassan. I think [there are] a lot of interesting issues that you articulated there and I appreciate how you are phrasing them. I think I would like to start where Professor Cole left off, which [are the] observations. First, in urban and literate contexts, multiple identities get hardened and become harder to navigate sometimes for the adherents. Whereas, in the past they have been fluid and had accommodated each other. There are not such hard divisions between sects whether we are talking about Sunni-Shi'a, but also other minority sects. This broader point was about the political basis of a lot of religious conflict that we see. We may be tempted to say that there is something inherent in religious difference that creates conflict. But actually, not to say that religion is not important, but that you can see a lot of political dynamics, like the Jhang example that really are at the root of what we colloquially call Sunni-Shi'a conflict. Then that label makes us look for religious reasons for that conflict or the religious ways of explaining that conflict.

[However], it seems that most religious minority groups have developed some similar resources, whether those stem from their theology, their historical experience, or their modern articulations of identity, [and] have resources for when it makes sense for them either [in] highlighting difference for reasons of political power or, highlighting social contributions, or highlighting similarities.

And you can see this just by the fact that different minority groups have vastly different experiences over time in the same places. So, one very good example is that the Ahmadiyya Muslim community was not always as intensely persecuted in South Asia as it is in Pakistan today and as it has especially been in the 1970s. Their beliefs have always been the same. But the state acted against the instigators of the 1953 Ahmadiyya violence. Before that, Zafarullah Khan was an Ahmadiyya Foreign

Minister of the State of Pakistan. But now we see almost a complete intolerance of Ahmadiyya beliefs in Pakistan, which is to say that there is a group whose religion has not changed, but the way Pakistani politics engages with them has changed. So, in that context if we are talking about minority group political strategies - and this is a budding research project - and I am a little reluctant to use the word strategy because it even implies that there is something calculated going on. But I have two questions: what internal part of the group's history, theology, or beliefs is it using to engage with the rest of the world? And what labels are the rest of the world using to describe that group? So there was an interesting comment in the chat a while ago about, is it not this thing that you are calling taqiyya, just strategies of resilience that a lot of minority groups use, and I think that is absolutely right. [They are] strategies of resilience, and I really appreciate that word because it matters what you call it. Because a word like resilience gives us the basis for intra-religious dialogue between Sunnis and Shi'as, or different Shi'a communities. But a word like taqiyya gives us a language of blame or pointing fingers, or of saying somehow your politics are immoral or insincere.

So that touches on some of the issues that you mentioned. Number one, that the things that I am describing with the Bohra community, you see with a lot of minority communities, similar strategies under different names, and not just Muslim communities among Christian [but] Jewish minorities in different contexts as well. Then what we really are asking is about the politics around any particular mode of minority group of engagement. What can the minority group do to be consistent with their own religious beliefs but get by in a political environment that is difficult?

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much. One quick question. This is purely out of my curiosity and my lack of knowledge. In Karachi, for instance, the Ismaili Agha Khanis, the Bohras, and the Twelvers during Muharram, the whole country becomes like it is participating in Muharram. It is the same in Lucknow, and Muslim majority areas in India and [especially in] Pakistan. But are these major events, gatherings, and commemorations that the Bohras, Agha Khanis, Twelvers, and Ismailis go to each other's Imambargahs and Islamic centers? Do they interact in a big way, or do they want to maintain their own religious centers? Is there more interaction because there is not much in the United States that I know of.

Rameez Abbas: Yes well, in my experience, there is also [interaction] in the United States. So, I have been talking about the Dawoodi Bohra community as a unitary actor, but of course there is tolerance for a lot of different forms of religious engagement within that community. So, maybe the official guidance is to stick with one's community, for sure. But, in practice, I know plenty of Bohras who go to Twelver Imambarahs (mosques) or might send their children to a Sunni madrasa (religious school), especially in the early days of the Bohra diaspora in North America, when the Bohra madrasa structure just was not developed yet. So, there was a lot more engagement with other Muslim resources for learning the basics. I should mention that I am from the Dawoodi Bohra community and that presents some complications for scholarly analysis. The question of how one studies oneself while recognizing your own bias, avoiding it in certain ways, using your own experiences productively by way of explanation. So, I am caveating this in the category of anecdote rather than systematic study. So I am part of the diaspora in North America; my parents' and their friends' experience growing up in Karachi [was one of] robust engagement with Twelver Shi'a commemorations of Imam Hussain.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you very much, and that is such an important point for you to mention. I will move to Professor Karen Ruffle. This idea of everyday Shi'ism and everyday practices I think it is a very powerful and empowering idea in a sense that one of the critiques is that the Shi'as in South Asia, and especially in what is now Pakistan, before the partition, in both areas it was quite [elitist] and it was linked to some of the states where Shi'a ruling families were very powerful. And the ordinary Shi'a are not as [linked] into this debate of whether the scholars coming from Najaf or coming from Qom, or whether [they are] following [a particular] marja' taqlid or the spiritual leader from Iran, [so] this is an elitism issue. There is this debate. Any thoughts on that?

One quick anecdote: I remember one of the members of Pakistan Parliament telling me many years ago when the Shi'a persecution was at its height [and] the Shi'a killings were happening in Karachi and elsewhere. A big group of Pakistani Members of Parliament went to the President of Pakistan. At that time, the Pakistani Parliament, the national assembly had 237 members, and he said to all the Shi'as, [himself being a] Shi'a member of parliament from Karachi. He said, "We Shi'as went to the President and Prime Minister together and we were sixty-three in number, and we ourselves were surprised [about] how many of the members of the national assembly were Shi'a." But, because [those who came from Punjab were from ordinary backgrounds], in some cases, not feudals, their names were not Shi'a sounding, and we only came to know [of that] when we were in a crisis. So this point [got me] interested in having a conversation with him, and he [also] said because the politics of Shi'ism, with all due respect to the Pakistani Shi'as, it was different in the urban centers and rural centers, [so] the sectarianism had not creeped into some of the rural settings as it had into the urban centers, where the political economy of Islam with the Deobandi mosque and a Barelvi mosque and a Shi'a funding from somewhere. Those issues

are more urban than rural. Any thoughts on those, or whether in your research, you thought that everyday Shi'ism is different from this elitist politics, if I may call it that? Karen Ruffle: Yes, it is a really interesting question. I think this is one reason why I also emphasized that context really matters when we are talking about Dakni Shi'ism versus Avdi Shi'ism versus Karachi Shi'ism versus Lahori Shi'ism versus Punjabi Shi'ism. I think we really have to take into account these contingencies and I have been working on this book project about the development of Shi'ism under the Qutb Shahi Sultans in Hyderabad in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is an imperial formation, but it is also a formation that is beyond the imperium at the same time because it is in some ways also a grassroots Shi'ism. I think that is something that we tend to forget. While it is sponsored by the Sultans, it is also something that emerges out of people's own imaginations of the remembrance of the Karbala event and linking material practice to local material forms. So what is in the local environment and trying to create forms that are legible, which is why I think about Shi'ism not as Indo-Persian or Indo-Muslim, but as Indo-Shi'i. And, that is something for me [that has] worked much better to think about the blending of Indic and Shi'i Islamic religious sensibilities and practices, literatures and normative traditions.

I think that is a more productive model even in my own fieldwork. I think I have only had conversations about people's marja' twice. And, this is not just me talking with literate people, but [also] talking with scholars. It is just not something that is at the forefront – and this is not happening in the countryside, this is happening in urban spaces. [So the] deep consciousness of one's marja' is not front and center in particular places. In Hyderabad, at least, it is changing now [because] the Iranian government, for example, has invested considerable amounts of money in educating young Shi'i men and women to come to Iran, to study in hawzas (seminaries) in Qom and Mashhad and that is actually changing the religious landscape in Hyderabad in quite significant ways. I think making one-for-one comparisons between Shi'ism in Karachi and Hyderabad is very difficult to do, but I think we do have to not only talk about Shi'ism of the elites, but we also have to look at: what are Shi'i formations of other people who are Shi'a? And that is something that I think the space of the everyday enables us to do. [Also] because these are people who are also participating in articulating normativities, it is not just elite people. So this is where the everyday enables us to do this [because] they are doing it in different ways: through the recitation of poetry, through participation in the majles, through the performance of matam, for example. These are the kinds of questions that I am engaged with. This is what I am doing in my own reading of historical texts, but also in my fieldwork.

Hassan Abbas: Great, thank you. All of you are touching on some of the issues which each require a lot of time [to dissect], but hopefully our audience will get a taste of these range of scholarly thinking, scholarly works, the ideas, and the themes which are at play, which is so often seen as sectarianism, the Shi'a and Sunni differences – whereas the nuances are much deeper, and all of you are doing a phenomenal job [in explaining them]. I just have one question for Simon and then [we can turn to all of] your final thoughts.

So Simon, the word *matam* reminded me of something – which is self-flagellation for those who are not aware of that. I remember the first time [I met] a Sunni Pakistani from a Barelvi tradition – Barelvi, which is more Sufi oriented – and he had to explain to me, what is the difference between him and the Shi'as. He said, just take out *matam* and *tabarra*, and Shi'as and Barelvis Sunnis are the same. Coming myself from a mixed tradition of Shi'a and Sunni, when I was young, I heard the first time what the Barelvi Sunnis believe about Ahl al-Bayt, the Family of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). It was so similar, and I was so stunned that the Barelvis think like Shi'as. So the question for you is slightly different from your work which you published, but I know you must have been confronted with this question, which many people have asked.

How can you think more about the commonalities? Is the Shi'a-Sunni divide so doomed and so much written in blood that there is no way to overcome it? Is this more of a Western construct? It is not a Western construct, we know, but are outsiders thinking more so in Shi'i-Sunni [terms] than the local people living in the same streets [who] have the same dreams, same aspirations, and the same experiences? [Is there too much emphasis] on the Shi'i-Sunni [division]? And if there is, what is the way for them to come together?

Simon Fuchs: Thanks, Hassan. That is a beautiful question, but also a very tricky one. The point is well taken. To what extent these are outside concepts that are trying to stir up conflict that is maybe not there? I would like to take up something that Karen has said earlier that really the locale plays a huge role. And I think it does not really matter where we go in Pakistan. So I just saw this in the chat box. Someone commented that growing up in Karachi, we simply did not know the sectarian affiliation at school of each other, and to Nosheen Ali's work, for example, who has just recently published a wonderful book, *Delusional States*, doing field work also in Gilgit-Baltistan, and I think some of her interlocutors have said the same thing, that in the past there was a lot of intermarriage. Shi'is and Sunnis would just go along and I think this is really the poisonous stuff of the sectarian thought, that once it is released out in the open, it is really tricky to counter once again.

So for me, in my research, it was very telling to see how discourses progress in Pakistan. When we look at some of the earliest anti-Shi'i voices of the 1960s and 1970s coming not from Deobandi tradition, but in this case from Ehsan Elahi Zaheer who had an Ahl-i Hadith background. So his books are rather scholarly. He is trying to make the case why Shi'is should be criticized, and he is laboring hard to establish in his point of view that Shi'is belief in tahreef, the corruption of the Qur'anic texts. But later, when you fast-forward to the last couple of years, and then look at the Taliban and in their statements [of] why Shi'is need to be attacked, and if there is no legal reasoning, there is no effort anymore to make this case. So something definitely has happened that at least, obviously not for everyone, so many people in Pakistan just live together, and for them, this is not an issue. But at least [for] the audience they have in mind, [it] is not necessary to convince them or to make any points.

It is seen as obvious that there is this problem, and at the same time, I think so many things are happening at the same time. Probably once again, taking up also Karen's point, who said that maybe sort of this high level Shi'ism, the marja'-muqallid relationship, often does not really matter. Of course, it is totally true. You just have to go to the majlis of a renowned zakir somewhere in Pakistan, and I am sure in many of these spaces, there is also a mixed audience and it is not clear whether everyone is really Shi'i there or not. But I think at least this public discourse has been really poisoned, and for me I would really love to end on a positive note, but I think we see this in many contexts also where Shi'is really simply do not exist like in Egypt or in the context of Palestine, where we hear similar things that it is tough to counter this.

And of course, this is what Muslims have to do - and as an outside scholar -I cannot really give any advice, but it is really sad and I hope that other forces can prevail. But just when you look at the trajectory since the 1960s and 1970s, and also how efforts of taqrib (Islamic ecumenicism) trying to bring Sunnis and Shi'is together have often failed, since these were often state projects as well. So I think this has to happen probably on a local level, but at the moment, at least I am not too optimistic, but hopefully I am proven wrong.

**Hassan Abbas:** Thank you so much. So, [we will now turn to the panelists for closing] one minute [remarks], and then [bring the session to a close]. We will start with Professor Juan Cole. Thank you.

Juan Cole: Sure. Well, I think we have focused on differences amongst [the] Shi'a in this conference, and also in our South Asia section because there is a tendency to talk about these things in a modern way. And I wonder whether some of the broad trends we are seeing now in South Asia might not in fact tend more towards political unity

among groups. How long will Hindutva go on the way it is going on now and what we have seen in Kashmir before you see a greater appeal to unity among the beleaguered Muslims of India? And likewise in Pakistan, although there are forces that want to isolate the Shi'a, I think there are also moments where Shi'a input is very welcomed. I think the Pakistani elite was very happy that the Shi'a MMAs in parliament put pressure on the government not to join the war in Yemen, for instance. And that was a point where I think the Shi'a had played a national role and one that many cities were also happy about. So I think the emphasis on differences is important here, but there may be some trends towards unity that we should not ignore.

Rameez Abbas: Thank you, Professor Cole. I appreciate some of the comments in the chat that are about not papering over the differences or diversity. So some of the groups that we are talking about, the Nizaris, Ismailis, various sects of Ismailis, various sects of Bohras, [and] the different practices of Shi'ism that Professor Ruffle described – it is worth noting that all of the believers and communities that we are talking about see the genesis of their belief system [as] divine ordinance.

A crude way of saying that is that everybody does think they are right, and some of the differences between our different sects and communities of interpretation is Daftary's term for it – those are important to focus on as well. So for example, I mentioned some Bohra participation in Ithna Ashari rituals in Karachi. By the same token, it is worth mentioning that Bohra community institutions are closed to other Shi'as and other Muslims. That exchange is not necessarily two way, I think the same is true for Nizari Ismailis whose *Jama'at Khanas* are private. So I just wanted to close with an appreciation [to] some of the important differences as well to work through. Whether or not those are necessarily barriers to political dialogue though, I think, is a separate question.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much, very well said Dr. Ruffle please.

**Karen Ruffle:** I will just build on what Professor Abbas and Professor Cole have said to also just clarify some concerns that were raised in the chat with regard to the submerging or [the] sublimation of Shi'i practice and Shi'i identity through looking to commonality. I think that one thing that is really important for us to keep in mind is that there are long and deep traditions of what we know of as Alid devotion in South Asia, and we see this through what we have already discussed: diverse communities participating in mourning assembly, so in the *majalis-i aza*. In my own field work, seeing Hindus and Sunnis participating in mourning assemblies, participating or observing *julus*, the processions on the 10th of Muharram, sponsoring *sabil*, so

refreshment tents as a form of piety and devotion. But we also have long traditions, Hussaini Brahmins, for example.

But we also, as Professor Cole mentioned, have long traditions of Sufi devotion to the Family of the Prophet Muhammad, and this memory and orientation of loyalty and love to the Family of the Prophet [and] to Imam Ali is really important for us to keep in mind because I do think that it has a very strong centering role in not only Muslim traditions in South Asia but also in Hindu traditions in South Asia as well. So I do think that is really important for us. I do not think it leads to a diminution of Shi'ism. But it actually speaks to the power of the tradition and of the family.

Hassan Abbas: Thank you so much for that thought-provoking idea and very accurate understanding. Lastly, Professor Fuchs.

Simon Fuchs: Yes, thanks. This was really wonderful. So I would like to use my last words to express a wish until I make a recommendation. So the wish would be also that someone would take up the rich majalis literature that is out there in Pakistan and India in Urdu. We have some studies, but it is just an ocean [that remains]. There is so much more that could be done and really goes in all directions. And it is so rich that I think analytically, it calls to be untapped, so to speak. I hope that someone takes this up and I also would like to make a recommendation in case you would like to read more on Shi'i ulama at least, there is a recent book by a wonderful colleague, Mashal Saif, who is a professor at Clemson University, and she has also done a lot of field work in Lahore, sat down with Sunni ulama as well, but also Shi'is. I think this book that was just released last November, if I am not mistaken, really brings out some of these wonderful perspectives on the state and their role for the Shi'i community in the context of Pakistan.

Hassan Abbas: So thank you so much. It is impossible for me to try to conclude by [summarizing], but I will just leave all of you with one idea after thanking our participants for being there, but especially our speakers for their very rich presentations. [So] I would conclude with this idea [by] building on the last point that Professor Simon Fuchs mentioned that South Asian Shi'ism, South Asian Islam also, but South Asian Shi'ism in all its beauty and diversity has contributed so significantly to Islamic learning, Islamic scholarship, Islamic arts, and culture, which is often not recognized. If you compare the South Asian contributions to Islam and to Shi'ism in the last few hundred years those would match the ones by Africa, most certainly more than that, but Middle East and the Persian literature as well.

Whereas, it seems at times that the ownership of Shi'ism even is taken by the

Arabs or the Persians because of their scholarship – Najaf and Qom are extremely important – but what South Asia has contributed towards Shi'ite scholarship these, *majales* and others, is huge. [So] that bias has to be pushed back in some shape or form, sorry to my Arab and Persian friends, but South Asian Shi'ism is as legitimate, as empowering, and as powerful as anything else. So thank you very much for the extra time to the organizers and that was the last thought, my own two cents. Thank you, and we look forward to further conversations.



# Panel 4 | Shi'a Confessional Identities and Politics in the Middle East

## Speakers:

Riza Yildirim (Emory University) - Remarks on Historical and Religious Foundations of the Alevi-Sunni Conflict in Contemporary Turkey

Rose Wellman (University of Michigan-Dearborn) - Shi'i Families in Provincial Iran: Everyday Piety in and Beyond State Power

Alexander Weissenburger (Austrian Academy of Science's Institute for Social Anthropology) - The Importance of the Concept of the Zaydi Imamate in the Context of the Current War in Yemen

Joshua Landis (University of Oklahoma) - The Alawites of Syria: Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism

#### Moderator:

Payam Mohseni (Harvard University)

Payam Mohseni: Welcome everyone to our final panel discussion for this symposium. We are turning our focus to the Middle East and West Asia, one of the regions that hosts approximately half of the world's Shi'a Muslim population. The rise of modern Shi'ism has been one of the most eventful developments shaping the Middle East's political, cultural, and ideological landscape. It has impacted geopolitical calculations for major world powers as they either confront or accommodate the dominance of Shi'a actors in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Studying modern Shi'a mobilization is all the more pressing since Western academia has historically focused on Sunnism as normative Islam and has downplayed Shi'ism's relevance. From the Iranian revolution of 1979 to the Lebanese Hezbollah to the establishment of the Hashd al-Sha'bi, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and the Houthi Ansarullah in Yemen, Shi'a groups have emerged from a seeming vacuum onto the volatile stage

of the modern Middle East. These Shi'a movements encompass a critical geopolitical space stretching from Central Asia to the Mediterranean, from the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf to the Bab al-Mandeb connecting the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea upon which much of today's global energy markets rely.

In several states in the region, Shi'a Islamist parties or systems are either in power or part of the ruling coalitions, namely in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Shi'a movements drive more significant phenomena, including the tens of millions of individuals who annually travel for pilgrimage in the region, particularly to the shrine of Imam Hossain in the Middle East, representing the largest [annual] pilgrimage in the world. The rise of Shi'a Islam outside of Iran has included allied movements across the region with over 200,000 active fighters organized in a complex transnational power network representing the Axis of Resistance. This effectively privileges Iran, Iraq, and Syria as a regional power block necessitating a deeper understanding of the intersection of Shi'a thought and political action.

At the same time, however, given the importance of Shi'ism in this geopolitical equation, we must also be aware of the cross-confessional nature of the Axis [of Resistance], which links together Shi'a Muslims with Christian volunteer fighters, large populations of Sunnis, [including[ Sunni paramilitary groups and fighters, including the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces or "PMF") and groups in Syria. Many marginalized groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, such as Christians and Druze in Iraq and Syria, have also joined the Axis [of Resistance], especially the resistance to the rise of groups such as ISIS. These developing dynamics will continue to take a front and center stage in world politics, such as determining how the United States will continue with its status-quo policies in the region or if it is going to begin to formulate different responses to the changing nature of the Middle East.

Our distinguished group of panelists will be speaking about this phenomenon and offering their analyses and disciplinary approaches to the topic of Shi'a confessional identity and politics in the region by looking at the particularities and complexities of Shi'ism in specific contexts and countries of the region. Our first speaker will be Riza Yildirim, who is a Ph.D candidate at Emory University. He is a scholar and expert on Alevism in particular, and his presentation is entitled "Remarks on Historical and Religious Foundations of the Alevi-Sunni Conflict in Contemporary Turkey." Reza will be followed by Rose Wellman, Assistant Professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Professor Wellman has done a lot of fieldwork and research in Iran on the sociology of Shi'ism and anthropology of Shi'ism. She will be speaking on the subject of "Shi'i Families in Provincial Iran: Everyday Piety in and Beyond State Power." We then have Alexander Weissenburger, a researcher at the Austrian Academy

of Science's Institute for Social Anthropology and a PhD candidate focusing on the ideology of the Huthi movement in Yemen who will present his talk entitled: "The Importance of the Concept of the Zaydi Imamate in the Context of the Current War in Yemen."5 Finally, we have Joshua Landis, the Sandra Mackey Chair and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies, and the Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and the Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Joshua is a leading expert of the Middle East, Middle East geopolitics, Syrian politics, and religious and ethnic diversity within the country, including [regarding] the Alawites. His talk is titled "The Alawites of Syria: Diversity and Unity and Transnational Shi'ism."

Riza Yildirim: Thank you very much, Payam, for this introduction and for inviting me for this most interesting panel. My talk pertains to Alevism in Turkey, and I will focus on the foundations of differences between Alevis and Sunnis in contemporary Turkey. So the Alevis constitute the largest religious minority group in Turkey. Their number is estimated at around 10 million, making up a little more than 10% of the population. Traditionally, Alevis consider themselves Muslim. However, over the past half-century, we see a growing trend among urban Alevis, which seeks to break their traditional ties with Islam. In any case, the Sunni majority does not consider Alevism as a rightful Islamic sect but deems it as a heresy.

Similarly, the Turkish government does not recognize Alevis as a legitimate religious group separate from the Sunni majority. Being deemed [as] heretic[s] by the hegemonic Sunni orthodoxy and having no legal recognition and protection, Alevis constantly face discrimination, defamation, and debasement in schools, government offices, and several public forums. These defamations and discriminations only worsen the Sunni-Alevi controversy, which indeed has deep historical, religious, and political roots that go back to the Ottoman period. In my talk today, I will remark on the religious and historical foundations of the Sunni-Alevi differentiation and highlight some important aspects, which condition both the societal dynamics and the sectarian politics in contemporary Turkey.

Firstly, for the religious foundations, I have to state that the question of conceptualizing and even defining Alevi faith in modern terms is still an ongoing debate, not only among scholars but also among Alevis themselves. For the sake of time I will leave aside a discussion of the large area of definitions and approaches in the literature and make due with summarizing my own views. To better understand the particularities of Alevi religiosity and how it relates to larger well-known categories, such as Sunni and Shi'a Islam, one should examine its doctrinal and ritual aspects distinctly. In terms of doctrine, Alevi religiosity should be considered within

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The speaker requested his contribution not be published in print form in the current report.

the large spectrum of Shi'ite Islam. Similar to other Shi'a groups, including the *shari'a*-based Twelver Shi'ism, Alevis believe in the *wilaya* and *imamah* of Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants. In other words, according to the Alevi faith, both religious and temporal authority passed from Muhammad, the Prophet, to Ali, the saint or *veli*, who enjoyed a set of special qualities that made him different from the rest of human beings. These qualities descended through his divinely chosen offspring, down to the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, and then dispersed among unspecified spiritual elites [to a] much lesser extent. As a corollary of this belief, Alevis refute the first three rightful caliphs of the Sunni tradition, considering them as usurpers of the rightful inheritance of the "People of the House" or Ahl al-Bayt.

Similarly, Alevi perception of Islamic history concurs with the Shi'ite version, which believes the whole narrative around the deeds of the People of the House. Accordingly, the Alevi perspective highlights the occasions in which transition of authority from the Prophet to Ali procure, such as the meeting of Ghadir Khumm or the atrocity of the enemies of the Ahl al-Bayt, which is identified with Sunnis, and epics, such as the Karbala tragedy. When it comes to the mode of piety, however, Alevi religiosity shows little resemblance to the *shari'a*-based Twelver Shi'ism. And the same observation is all the more valid when they compare it with Sunni Islam. The crux of differentiation relates to the role of Islamic law, *shari'a*, in the whole religious system. As opposed to the Sunni and Twelver Shi'ite understanding, the Alevi faith does not hold the *shari'a* as a prerequisite to becoming a good Muslim. Instead, it emphasizes ethics, moral values, and spiritual bonds, both with the enlightened guides, such as *murshids*, and the fellow members of the community.

Therefore, Alevis do not observe most of the *shari'a* ordinances, such as the five [daily] prayers (*salat* or *namaz*), Ramadan fasting [practices], pilgrimage, et cetera. Neither do they abide by the rulings of Islamic jurists for that matter. It is this feature of the Alevi mode of piety that makes it heretical in the eyes of both Sunni and Twelver Shi'i religious scholars and their followings. To sum up, Alevi religiosity differs fundamentally from Sunni religiosity in terms of both doctrine and mode of piety. When we compare [it] with the *shari'a*-based Twelver Shi'ism, it stands close in terms of doctrine but remains as different as it is from Sunni Islam, as long as the mode of piety is concerned. Meanwhile, Alevi religiosity shows a lot of similarities in terms of both doctrine and mode of piety to that of other *shari'a* inattentive Shi'ite traditions, such as Ismailis, Nusayris (or Alawites) and partly to Yarsan (or Ahl-i Haqq) of Iran.

And now [turning to the] historical background: Alevis are descendants of the Qizilbash, who founded the Safavid state in Iran in 1501 and constituted the military, at least, of this polity in later periods. As such, they were disciples of the Safavid

Shahs in the Safavid Sufi order. This is to say that Qizilbash Alevis of the 16th and 17th centuries, living in the Ottoman Empire, physically lived in the Ottoman empire, but they were religiously and politically attached to the Safavid Qizilbash order. Consequently, they did not integrate into the Ottoman socio-religious order, which was based on the Sunni shari'a. This meant that the Ottoman authorities considered the Qizilbash Alevis not only the fifth column of the enemy state - the Safavids in this case - but also legally illegitimate and religiously heretical. Considering that the Ottoman legal system was based on Islamic law, these two terms, that are "illegitimate" and "heretical," were almost synonymous in the Ottoman context. The Ottomans first aimed to extirpate the Qizilbash Alevis from Anatolia. However, after a wave of massacre and persecution during the early 16th century, they came to terms with the reality that Qizilbash Alevism was so deeply rooted in Anatolia that they could not finish it in total.

Nonetheless, they never recognized the Alevi faith as a legitimate Islamic interpretation either. As a result, a modus vivendi was established between Qizilbash Alevi communities and Ottoman authorities, according to which the Qizilbash Alevis were the defacto existent [but] dejure non-existent. Unlike the Jews and Christians who were integrated into the Ottoman legal system, in the classical "dhimmi" status, the Qizilbash Alevis could never achieve a religio-legal status during the Ottoman era. Such a lack of legal status led the Qizilbash Alevis to transform into isolated, closed communities in rural areas, and to develop a closed socio-religious and legal system among themselves. By the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, this situation fundamentally changed. The new state replaced the Islamic law with the positive law, which gave Alevis an opportunity to gain legal status as citizens. Nevertheless, the political consequences of this momentous change on Alevis' lives came into effect only by the 1950s. This is because before then, the overwhelming majority of Alevi communities continued to live in rural areas [largely being] isolated from the Sunni dominant urban spaces.

By the same token, they had minimal interaction with the surrounding Sunni society and the Turkish state. This situation too changed in the course of the second half of the 20th century. Joining the general trend of urbanization in the country, Alevis immigrated to towns and especially to cosmopolitan cities, such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara. As of today, the overwhelming majority of Alevis are living in towns and large cities. Such a large scale and abrupt urbanization of the community rendered the previously established modus vivendi [as] fatigued, thereby triggering a set of crises in the relationships between Alevis, the Turkish state, and the Sunni society, which controlled the state and urban cultural spaces. The central question behind all these crises was: how to carve out a place for Alevis in Turkish urban public space? The first-generation urban Alevis attempted to transform their traditional beliefs, institutions, and values, which had been shaped in a thoroughly rural setting in accordance with the demands of their new life.

As such, they aimed to create an urban Alevism that is capable of meeting urban demands, such as establishing a relationship with the state and the nation. Although they were ready to dismantle Alevism of much of its religious peculiarities to achieve this goal, their attempt was smashed by a rigorous Sunni reaction in the 1960s. Witnessing this overwhelming Sunni hegemony over the urban religiocultural landscape, urbanized Alevis tended to ally with secular groups, namely the Kemalists and/or the socialists as a survival strategy. Over the three decades until the turn of the 21st century, these two ideologies, Kemalism and socialism, penetrated into the texture of the urban Alevi identity. Although a significant portion of the Alevi community started to critically revisit their relationship with Kemalism and socialism, recently, the secularizing effect of these ideologies on the Alevi religiosity and the religious system proved irreversible. As a result, the Alevi identity gained a third undergirding element in addition to the traditional Shi'ite-oriented doctrine and shari'a inattentive religiosity. And that is a secular lifestyle saturated with a pro-left political orientation.

As my last remarks on the present situation, I will argue that this third element capitalized the integration of Alevi communities into Turkish public life during the Kemalist era. In fact, in the 1990s, when the Islamist movements were on the rise, secular bureaucrats regarded Alevis as a bulwark against the fighting traps pointed towards the secular nature of the state. Alevis too felt this trap and turned into staunch supporters of the secular state and liberal democracy. However, during the JDP era (AKP era), since 2002, which has been marked by a resurgence of Sunni Islam in every segment of life, including the government, the whole set up of the country changed in favor of the Islamists, who consider the secular state as an obstacle to establishing their idealized Islamic order. Under these foundations, [the dynamic] that infuses secular and left-oriented elements with the Alevi identity further deepens the abyss between the conservative Sunnis and Alevis in Turkey. Thank you.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you so much, Riza, for your insightful comments on Alevism in contemporary Turkey and its history. We now turn to Professor Wellman.

**Rose Wellman:** Hi everyone. So today I will be talking about "Shi'a Families in Provincial Iran: Everyday Piety in and Beyond State Power." I [would] just like to begin by thanking the organizers, including Dr. Payam Mohseni, for inviting me to

be here today and for moderating our panel. The topic of Shi'a confessional identities and politics is very timely indeed, and I am grateful to be a part of it and in such wonderful company. I have also been participating in some of the other sessions and I have learned a lot, so thank you to those of you who have participated. So my research focuses on Twelver Shi'as in Iran, who also happened to be supporters of the state and of the teachings and political legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini. They, thus, are what some might describe as everyday or ordinary advocates of Khomeini's foundational legislation enshrined in the Guardianship of the Jurist. They are also, in many cases, veterans of the Iran-Iraq war and members of the Basij. The Basij as most of you already know is Iran's voluntary paramilitary organization, and it was founded by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1980. Often translated as "People's Militia," members of the Basij were the original revolutionaries who upheld the sacred defense of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. They were the first to go to the front to be martyred. Today, though, the majority of Basij consists of inactive members who nearly continue to have ties to officialdom. We know that this term of the Basij and the organization itself can provoke strong reactions and for good reason. [However,] the group is far from monolithic, and it includes generational diversity as well as broad differences between people [who] signed up as inactive members or those who comprise special or active forces.

So it is important to be aware of all those distinctions. The broader concern of my research, though, is how everyday piety and forms of intimacy link to state power. Despite hegemonic narratives of modernity that position kin-based societies as prior to modern state-based societies, kinship has had persistent power in modern nationmaking. So this is one of the underlying ideas of my work. In the same way, religion has not receded into the confines of the private sphere in the manner assumed by liberal theory, and obviously – we know this from Talal Asad and many [other] sources - but it continues to shape diverse, local, national, and transnational political allegiances and affinities. So it is really interesting to think about this in terms of Shi'ism in particular. So in my research, I get down to the granular aspects of all of this. I explore how daily acts of prayer, of coordinating, ablution for instance with cooking and feeding at home, of vow making, of talking or even worrying about sin at home or for your family resonate with and appear in rituals of the state and state making in Iran, across the present-day Islamic Republic. These activities, of course, also occur alongside and emphasize the model of the Family of the Prophet across both those demands of the family and the nation. We see those ideas [are] called on in both contexts, so it is all the more significant.

One of my concerns is specifically how women, as wives and mothers, employ their understandings of Shi'a Islam, Twelver Shi'a Islam, and Islamic ethics, in

connection to what I have found to be the religious practices of cooking and feeding to shape and protect their family. Many of the examples I look at in detail in my book by the way, which is *Feeding Iran*, coming out in June, includes making vows, [preparing] *sufras* (i.e. meals served on dining cloths), [which] if you speak Persian you will know about, and *ash-i dandan*, which is kind of like a soup for teething children. In household contexts, often these food-related vows are performed to combat things like family feuds or fighting or drug use that is occurring in these provincial communities or other problems. The problems are often located, ultimately for the people, I talk to, in something related to Western politics, something like Western-struckness (*gharbzadegi*), or maybe drug trafficking that comes from Afghanistan as a result of the US foreign policy there. So that is how they are seeing this.

I am looking at how this kind of votive food and feeding often appear at a national scale as well. Often it is sponsored by the state and/or parastatal organizations such as the Martyr's Foundation (bonyad-i shahid). For example, the kitchens of imams, which you may be familiar with if you have been to Iran, or state-sponsored commemorations for martyrs. The Mausoleum of Ruhollah Khomeini often has events in this manner where they give out food and things like this. In this photo, you can see mothers of martyrs at a commemoration for two unknown or unidentified martyrs who had been exhumed from the Iran-Iraq border, and then this is where they were going to be buried.

My research here is looking at the role of kinship in the religious nation-making. Following this particular event, the Friday Imam of the town that I was doing my research in, and I did this research for about a year and a half, he addressed the crowd and said: "Because this martyr is unknown, we the people are his brother, his sister, his mother." I will just close with some additional thoughts, and that is just the need to explore the dialogue between everyday piety in the intimate spaces of the home in Shi'a Muslim contexts and institutional statist discourse. So rather than seeing those things as two separate domains that do not relate to each other, it is bringing those two together and [looking] at how those relate.

This is part of a larger argument that kinship and religion rather than being subsidiary or secondary are often central to political structures and allegiances in the 21st century. There is also the need for more ethnographic explorations of specifically Shi'a notions of kinship, and this is in and beyond just notions of law, inherited substance or inheritance law, but also just a way that Shi'as practice kinship, household, and relatedness in a diverse historic and political context. So, I will leave it with that, and thank you very much for allowing me to give this talk today.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you so much, Professor Wellman. We now turn to Professor

Landis on the Alawites in Syria.

Joshua Landis: It is a pleasure being with such a good crew here, and I thank you very much, Dr. Mohseni, for inviting me to join. Let me just jump in and say that obviously in [a short talk], I cannot say that much about Alawites and their rise to power and their relationship with their fellow Syrians. But most of you know the story by now of the Alawite rise to power. So I am going to try to focus on some of the things that we do not know as well. Let me begin by trying to draw a little baseline of what Alawite life was like before the 20th century. Under the Ottoman Empire, because they were extremely excluded from most [of] society, [they] had a very big chip on their shoulder going into modern Syria.

Without understanding that, you cannot understand the real violence that is going on in this civil war. The Alawites, as a result, are in the midst of a real identity crisis today about whether they are Muslims or not Muslims and who they are. So let me begin here by talking a little bit about their life under the Ottomans and the level of exclusion from the mainstream of Ottoman society. The Alawites, or Alawis, live on the coast of Syria in the coastal mountains; they are called today the "Alawite mountains," or they are actually called the "coastal mountains" because people try to obscure these sectarian names. But they have lived there since the 11th century and came to predominate over the Ismailis in the 18th and 19th century who lived in the same region. They represented a majority of the habitants of Latakia and Tartus provinces [and] coastal regions by the beginning of the 20th century.

Although Alawites remained a distinct political minority and wielded little political power, today the Alawites make up about 12% of the Syrian population, although they hold most of the political power. The top thirty military officers in Syria are all Alawite today. Let me say a few things about demography because this will give us a sense of the exclusion. Under the Ottomans, the Alawite community was officially excluded from society as a *ghulat* extremist sect which followed neither the basic principles nor practices of Islam. The Alawis were designated apostates and termed "milat al-kufr," or "community of unbelief." They could not officially give evidence in a court of law, nor did they live with Sunni Muslims.

The demographic isolation of Alawites from Sunni Syrians was stark. The first French censuses in the 1920s established that in no town of over 200 inhabitants did Alawis and Sunnis live together. Alawis and Christians shared towns; Christians and Sunnis shared towns, but Alawis and Sunnis did not. The coastal cities of Latakia, Baniyas, [and] Tartus were Sunni cities with Christian neighborhoods. There were no Alawites living in them in the first censuses. A century later, today, all of these coastal cities are dominated by Alawites, who represent the majority of the population. Still

[there are] big Sunni neighborhoods and Christian neighborhoods, but the Alawites are the majority, and that is a very rapid change and it has certainly created many resentments as well. So now I do not want to overdraw the exclusion of Alawites from Sunni societies. Stefan Winter and others have shown that persecution was not systematic under the Ottomans nor was exclusion regular.

Alawis show up in *shari'a* court records. They give witness, their members vote in society. There are instances of Alawis reaching exalted positions in Ottoman service. And they migrate to the edge of towns like Hama and others. But to Alawites, these examples of success do not prove the integration of their community in the Ottoman realm or suggest that life under the Ottomans was not grim and filled with misfortune. Alawis argue that these exceptions prove the rule of exclusion. They underscore the capriciousness and uncertainty of Alawite life under Ottoman rule. But it is true that Ottoman officials frequently overlooked the legal exclusion of Alawis as a *milat al-kufr*, who in legal theory should have been converted or killed. In order to draw a few tears from my audience, let me just focus on the word *khazu*, which is so widespread, particularly amongst Alawite society in Syria, but it is used by all Syrians and it means to get screwed or to screw somebody, "*khazo*." And this has a long history, the word of course originally means impale: to impale somebody on a pike, which happened frequently to Alawites.

We only have to delve into the French consular records of the 19th century to see how frequently [this happened]. If we just take one [example], they mention these revolts, massacres, and atrocities with placidity, which suggests that these things were customary occurrences. And we have the files of the French consular officer in Latakia. For example, in 1823, the governor of Latakia, the consular officer says, announced the goal of amassing a thousand armed men in order to march against the Nusayri villages - Nusayris are Alawites - of Sahyun, which had revolted and had put Turkish villages to the sword and set them on fire. Ten days later, the French consular agent in Latakia writes that it is the most horrifying anarchy. Every day, several unfortunate peasants are impaled and stuck on the side of the road, and he would ride his horse by them and have to look up at them. This impaling, or khazu, that Alawites regularly got, has stuck in the vocabulary of the region as "to get screwed." Today it does not mean [to] be stuck on a pike, it can [be] meant very lightly as a joke or anything else, but the Alawites continued to get the khazu right up to the end of the 19th century. The French interceded to make sure that Greek Orthodox and Christians, after 1830 roughly, would not be impaled, and the Ottomans agreed to that and they stopped getting impaled in the Latakia region. So only the Alawites were getting the *khazu* in this region on a regular basis.

Much of the legal status of the Alawites under the Ottomans, under the

cloud of Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas, still darkened the outlook for Alawites and laid the groundwork for their legal status under the Ottomans. Ibn Taymiyya wrote that the jihad was legitimate and pleasing to God against this accursed religion, against these sectarians of the hidden meaning (batin), [who were] more infidel than Jews or Christians, more infidel even than many idolaters, who have done more harm to the religion of Muhammad than the infidel, belligerence, the Franks, the Turks, and others. He proclaimed that taking their blood and their possessions [was allowed]: "mal al-Nusayri wa damahu halal." So this fatwa gets repeated under the Ottomans, not all the time, but whenever there is tension in the region, it would be brought up, and that has been the same case during the civil war where if you look at the battle videos, Ibn Taymiyya is constantly being referred to in [targeting] the Nusayris.

The Alawites lived in a closed community under the Ottomans, and they began to come out of it under the French [Mandate]. The Alawites played little role in the nationalist movement in Syria during the colonial period; the Alawites' leaders boycotted the general Syrian Congress of 1919 under Amir Faisal and his kingdom for a short period until the French conquered [Syria] in 1920. They refused to be drawn into the great Syrian revolt of 1925, which ranged from 1925-28 against the French led by Syrian notables; the Sunni notables of the cities and the Druze [also] played a big role in it. They made their peace rather rapidly with the French once it became clear that the French would establish an independent Alawite state in 1922 that included all of Syria's coastal region. The Alawis were given most of the political power in this state. They made up 70% of the inhabitants of this coastal region – an independent Alawite state or quasi-independent. The French set up two political institutions, which were established to provide a local administration of the Alawite state.

One [political institution] was a representative council of the government of Latakia, which started out with twelve tribal leaders, the majority of which were Alawi, and they held the lion's share of power. And the other [second political institution] was a system of religious courts for the Alawite community, and it was staffed by Alawite religious sheikhs. So this is the first time that Alawite religious sheikhs come to have official state authority. The policies of both the new legislative and judicial bodies had an immediate influence on the Alawite communal identity and the region's connections to the broader Islamic and Syrian world. But they led in opposite directions. The tribal leaders formulated a distinct Alawite nationalism, whereas the judges and the courts led in the other direction. They drew the Alawites into a broader Islamic community, and rather than away from it. They set about establishing Alawite legal practice on the basis of Ja'fari Shi'ite law and began to make connections with the Shi'a of Lebanon where they already had a tradition of connections. But, they began to get into the larger Islamic community and they

insisted that Alawites were Twelver Shi'ites who were integral and legitimate members of the wider Islamic world, that they were not [kafirs] (infidels).

Many of the first members of the Alawite community to abandon Alawite particularism sprang from the religious families. They had formed links to the Shi'a of Lebanon [and] they felt connected to this larger Islamic world. Sheikh Sulayman al-Ahmed, chief judge of the Alawite state, had connections to Najaf and Azhar. When the French urged him to announce that the Alawite religion was not Islam, he refused. He said, we are Alawite Muslim. He insisted: "Our book is the Koran, our Prophet is Muhammad, the Ka'ba is our Qibla, and our religion is Islam." This became the slogan of many Alawi sheikhs afterwards, just at a time that the Alawite tribal leaders were trying to articulate an Alawite particularism that was different from Syrian nationalism. In 1936, Haj Amin al-Hussaini, the Grand Mufti of Palestine, announced that these Alawites are Muslims and it is the duty of all Muslims to cooperate with them and stop antagonizing each other for reasons of religion. Now, Haj Amin al-Husseini was in the midst of a Palestinian Great Revolt in 1936 and he wanted to draw and fix these sectarian differences in the Islamic community.

Allow me to skip over much of the [interim Alawite history] and move forward to independence. Once the French troops left Syria in 1946, the government in Damascus led by Sunnis was able to quickly gain control over the coastal region. There was a small Alawite revolt, but the Alawis were in no way united. Their tribal leaders often competed against each other. [So] they were quickly subdued [as] one of their top leaders was hung in Damascus as an example to the others. When [a] British official went in 1947 to the region, he interviewed [many] of the Alawite sheikhs, and they were grumbling about the homogeneity. All of the Alawite sheikhs that had been political leaders were wiped out, not killed, but they were removed from their office. The Sunni governor of the region was able to boast that there were no more Alawite leaders in the region. This remained the case until the Alawites emerged in the military and the Ba'ath Party, but mostly the military, and took power in 1966 under Salah Jadid through the Ba'ath Party, and then through Hafiz al-Assad in 1970 and consolidated their power.

But the Alawites faced a predicament because they were not recognized as Muslims theologically, and the Syrian Constitution said that the president should be a Muslim. Hafiz al-Assad tried to change this in 1973 and get rid of this Article III in the constitution but there were big uprisings in all the major cities led by the Muslim brotherhood, and he [Hafiz al-Assad] had to retreat. After adding it [Article III] back in, he really marched his community to claim that they are Muslims. He had a big gathering of sheikhs to deny that Ali is divine and to say that they just believe in the Qur'an and Muhammad, and that has been, in a sense, the compromise that

Alawite authorities and the Alawite leaders of Syria have made: to say that they are Muslim and legally they are defined as Muslims in Syrian society. But they have never been considered [Muslims by others]; they have been considered heretics, in a sense pagans, because of the deification of Ali, and this all came out [to the fore] in the civil war. After fifty years of very tight Alawite rule, people were fed up, and in the civil war, we see that many of the Islamist rebel leaders came out and accused the Alawites [of heresy], and repeated Ibn Taymiyya's fatwa.

A [man] named Zahran Alloush, the head of the Jaysh al-Islam number fifty brigades, had a big army [which is] supported by Saudi Arabia. He gave a big speech calling this the "Nizam al-Majusi": the Magi, the quasi-Persian Alawites who are neither Arab nor Muslim. He called for them to be driven out of Syria and ethnically cleansed in a sense, and this kind of rhetoric of the "rafida" really grew. The question then is: where does that leave us today in Syria? The Syrian textbooks - I wrote an article on Syrian textbooks and Islamic textbooks that are assigned to every Syrian school - and before the civil war they had a ninth-grade textbook [which] had a section on pagans and atheism, and they said: how should Muslims treat pagans? The answer as quoted in this ninth-grade book was: "Islam sets only two choices for pagans that they convert to Islam or be killed." That is in a ninth-grade textbook right up until the civil war. And of course, the Alawis were considered pagans by many orthodox Sunnis because of the deification of Ali. And we see that in the treatment of many of the minorities where ISIS and others started to kill minorities. They called for the Druze sheikhs to all be killed, and this is true for the Alawites as well because of this legacy of not being [being considered] Muslims, not being included in this Muslim orthodoxy. So that brings us to the present question of how will Syria reconcile this terrible divide which we have seen become so brutally manifest in the civil war. Obviously, Assad has won in 70% of Syria today, and he can impose this orthodoxy, but it is unclear how this will end. Thank you.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you so much, Professor Landis, for such a rich discussion of the Alawite community in Syria. Let me begin by perhaps asking one broader question for everyone to respond to: thinking about each of your discussions – and the purpose of the panel was looking at Shi'ism and the intersection of Shi'ism, identity, politics, and life in each respective country that was looked at - how would you, from your own research, suggest that we should approach the role of Shi'ism theoretically to think about what has been understudied, what has been misinterpreted, and how [we can] integrate or approach Shi'ism and religion in Middle East history and Middle East politics? Is this about theology or sociology? [Or is it just] about symbolic rhetoric? How should we approach thinking about Shi'ism in contemporary politics of the Middle East?

**Riza Yildirim:** So how should we approach the several Shi'ite groups [present] in the Middle East? I think one of the most important things missing in the literature is [that] we need to create some new concepts or new approaches to the groups that traditionally lay in the Shi'ite spectrum and historically [have been] called ghulat. So ghulat is not a good term for contemporary usage because it implies heresy in itself. But, we still use this term. As you said, in the beginning of Islamic studies during the late 19th and early 20th century, the first Orientalists started with Sunnism, and they consider Sunni Islam as normative Islam. Shi'ite [studies] only came during the second half of the 20th century, but now there is a significant literature on Twelver Shi'ism as well. But we have the same problem in my view, as what we had during the first half of the century, which is we are looking at Islam from the very shari'abased perspectives of either Twelver Shi'ism or Sunnism. There are other Muslim groups, most of them are Shi'ites in terms of doctrine, and they do not follow strictly the ordinances of shari'a, including Alevis, Alawites, Ahl-e Haqq, and Ismailis even [are included in these groups]. So how should we approach these groups and how should we think about their religiosity [and] their theory? Should we take them just as heretics or a group of people who did not understand Islam exactly? Or should we give them credit [for] authenticity within their own strains, in their own traditions? I think that is one of the most important and urgent needs in the literature that we need to think about.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you. Rose.

Rose Wellman: Yes. I would add a couple of things. I teach anthropology of Islam, and I often use Dr. John Bowen to talk about locating my research right at the places where people are arguing, where different groups are arguing rather than deciding what I think is right or correct or not. I am interested in the discussion and in the argument. But, the main contribution I can actually give them here is [that] instead of just looking at the law, or the elites, [it is important to think] about ordinary and everyday people and all of the ways that they are inhabiting their religiosity as part of the rest of their lives. [However], it is not always a distinct field, and it is not always located in the mosque. We tend to recognize that it is connected to politics, but it is not always located in the mosque or even just in politics. It can also be a part of everything that we do [including] education, kinship, etc. So just bringing it back to that point and then providing more granular studies of what it is like to live in different households in different contexts and political and historic times from that

perspective. And that is just another way of avoiding the focus on the cultivation of ethics [which is predominant] in the current [studies on] the anthropology of Islam]. That is how a lot of anthropologists have been approaching the study of Shi'ism and other identities, but I think that it is really important to think about relationships as well.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you. Joshua.

Joshua Landis: I would simply say, not from an academic point of view, but from a Syrian point of view, it is so important for people to get to know each other, and Syrians do not know each other, which has been a real big problem. For example, in the Syrian textbooks, there is not one mention of an Alawi or a Shi'a. Islam is just talked about as Islam. And it is a sort of Sunni Islam, and so there is no knowledge about each other, even though they live next door to each other and they communicate, and there is a convivienda, but they do not know [about each other]. When things began in the civil war, there was a big taboo, a very important taboo about talking about any of this stuff, and the Alawites are constantly lying to themselves. They do not know themselves because they [are] hiding and embarrassed about their religion. I will just recount one story, which I think is emblematic. A good friend of mine said his sister went to school, and you study Islam in school and [her] parents, Alawite parents, told her there is no difference [between you and others], you are a Muslim. You are just like everybody else. When she came home one day around 15 and wanted to wear the hijab, the father said, no, we do not wear the hijab, we are Alawites. She went through this identity crisis because she thought she was like everybody else, and she was going to follow the same customs. I think many Syrians [and] different religions go through that same identity crisis because there is such demand to conform, and there is so little open conversation about the differences [and] that is really an impediment. So, I suppose as academics, we can throw a little spitballs in there and make it – and with the internet and [other communication] make it more available - but there really is too little conversation and it leads to deep misunderstandings.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you, Joshua. So let us turn to questions for each of the panelists again, I will go in order of the presentations. For Riza Yildirim: could you speak a bit about the current situation [and] context of Alevis in Turkey from two contexts, both with the rise of the AKP party and also with the post-ISIS period? How has both the rise of extremists, Wahhabi groups like ISIS, and that threat together with the political developments [and] greater religious [and in particular] Sunni

position in Turkey, how has that, [if] at all, impacted domestic Alevi communities in Turkey?

Riza Yildirim: Yes. So, as I have tried to summarize in the presentation before [the] AKP era, when the Turkish state was secular, we already had that differentiation between the Alevis and Sunnis inherited from the Ottoman past. But during the second half of the 20th century, the Alevi community, especially the urban Alevis – a significant portion of this community – also secularized. So, we have another element in the Alevi identity; this is a very peculiar combination. You have religious elements: doctrinally, they are Shi'ite [and] practically, they are non-shar'a; they are not following the shari'a practices, and now you have a third element, which is secular [and] supporting liberal democracy and a secular state. So, during the AKP era in Turkey, we have now the rise of Sunni Islam in every aspect of life. Also, there is this sense among people that there is a connection between Islamists in Turkey and Islamists in the broader Middle East.

So in terms of international politics, for example, when ISIS was in power in Syria, they were effective there, and [the] Turkish government did not take serious measures to prevent their infiltration in Turkey, and that created a real sense of threat among Alevis of Turkey because they felt that they will be the first target if Islamism [were to] rise and especially with that version that is the fundamentalist version of Islamism. So that affected seriously the perception of Alevis. I will say today, it is really difficult to see or describe one version of Alevi theology and Alevi religiosity because especially these secular elements and the traditional religious elements are for the most parts, not compatible with each other. So how would you combine these two together and create a modern Alevi identity? That is the struggle Alevis are facing today. Traditionally, they do not want to leave their link with Ahl al-Bayt because the Ahl al-Bayt - Ali, [and] Twelve Imams - are very central in Alevi theology. But in the meantime they took sides with secular groups in Turkey who support secular state and democracy. When it comes to the international settings, in Syrian civil war, for example, I think Alevis mostly sympathized [with the] regime, [with] Assad and Alawites against the Sunni fundamentalists.

**Payam Mohseni:** Thank you. Just one follow-up question, Riza, and this will be a question I ask Joshua as well because we have a lot of people asking too: do we see any convergence or alignment or a closer association with Twelver Ja'fari Shi'ism, particularly in the post-ISIS period? How should we think about the relationship of Alevism in Turkey with Twelver Ja'fari?

Riza Yildirim: So actually, there are some people who are trying to proselytize Alevis to Ja'fari Shi'ism, Twelver Shi'ism, in Turkey. There is a historic group of Twelver Shi'as in Turkey as well, apart from the Alevis. They are just regular Ja'faris coming from eastern Anatolia, and they want to convert Alevis to Twelver Shi'ism, [so] there are people working through that. But as I said, that non-shari'a or shari'a inattentive religiosity, shari'a inattentive mode of piety is so deeply rooted in [the] Alevi religious system. For Alevis, it is really difficult to accept the ordinances of shari'a. So, the allegiance to Ahl al-Bayt is so powerful, but also that stands against the shari'a-oriented or shari'a based version of fighi Islam (legal Islam) [and that "inattentiveness"] is also so deeply rooted and strong in Alevi attitudes. That is why it does not look likely to me that a lot of Alevis will convert to Twelver Shi'ism in Turkey. Instead, they will prefer to go towards a secular type of religiosity. I mean it looks strange. It sounds strange [to say] secular religiosity, but it goes in this direction in the Alevi case.

Joshua Landis: In 1948, for the first time about sixteen Alawite students were sent to Najaf to study and none of them graduated. They all came back with tears in their eyes and they said how badly they had been treated and that they had to [perform] ghasl al-tawbah, they had to repent their bad religion and convert to Twelver [Islam], to real Islam. So, the Shi'a authorities were treating them the same way they have been treated by the Sunnis. Now that has improved over time, not entirely however, because of course the Alawite religion is just very different. Just this week I was in a big debate on Twitter with a woman who [is a] Syrian opposition scholar who works at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and she had written a big position piece talking about the spread of Ja'fari Shi'ite schools across Syria - that many of them had been spread. So, I said where are [these], can you name one, what is it? And I was trying to get to the truth of this, and it turns out that there was a newspaper article from 2014, [in which] one school was [said to be] established on the coast, and it turned into just myriad schools and [that] the Shi'ites are taking over. So there have been some schools established, but I can tell you from [my] personal [view that] the fall of Saddam Hussein had a tremendous impact on Shi'a culture because once Iraq was taken over by Shi'a - because in Syria nobody ever talks about anything Shi'a, there is 1% of the Syrians are Twelver Ja'fari Shi'ites - but nobody talked about religion because the Alawites were in constant denial that they are anything but good Muslims. So, there was no discussion of this confessionalism, but once Saddam fell, you have got this flood of Shi'a culture and Shi'a songs and nashid would come into the souq (market) in Damascus. I gathered a bunch of these tapes so that my kids could learn Arabic and hear these songs. I was playing them back in the United States [with] my wife and her sister in the car and all of a sudden [they] started listening and [realizing that] they had given us their Shi'ite tapes [in Syria]. I did not know they were Shi'ites. [My family] had never heard them before, and they all were mesmerized because they had never heard anything like this before. [When waves] of Iraqi refugees came to Syria and began to live in the neighborhoods and bring their culture, you began to get [Shi'ite] practices. For example, there was an Ashura [procession] in Souq al-Hamidiyya, a very Sunni place. There was a *latmiya* [and] procession down Souq al-Hamidiyya, and you cannot imagine the outcry of fellow Syrians who thought that this was an invasion of some weird martians coming to take over Damascus. There has been a great growth of Shi'a culture and openness, but it has really caused a great deal of counter-reaction because there is just not a tradition of this open display of Shi'ism in Syria.

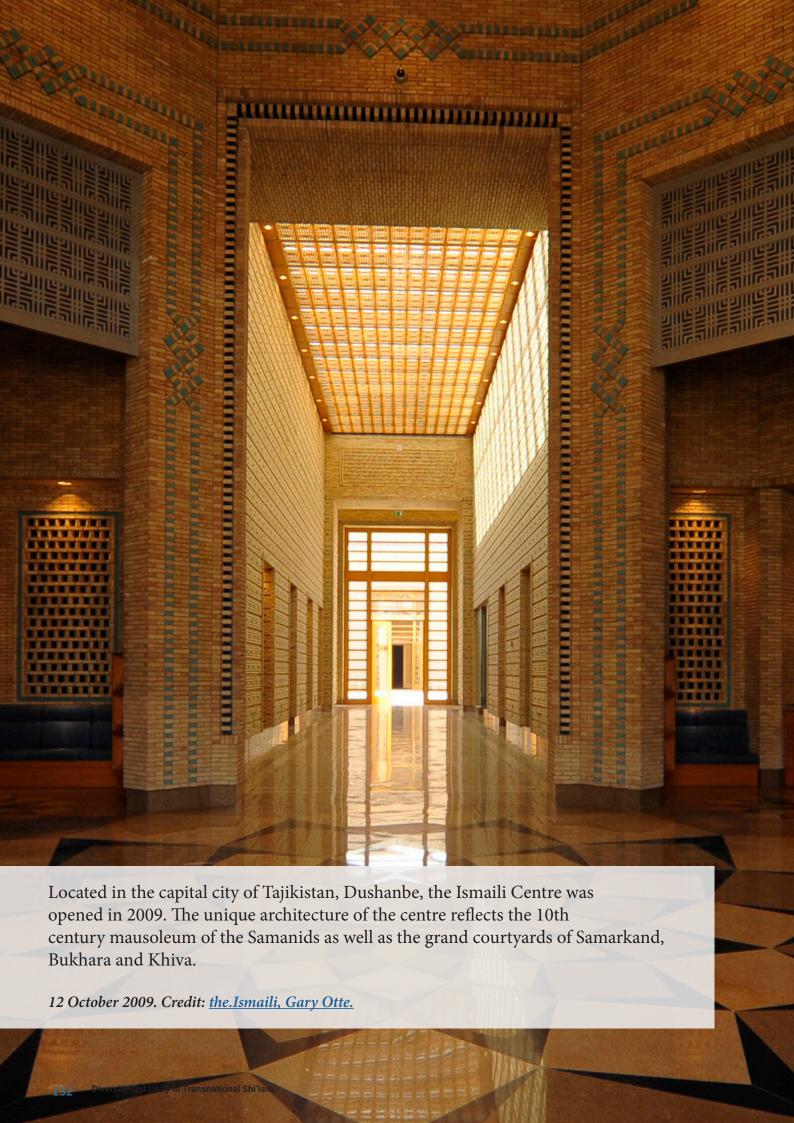
Payam Mohseni: Thank you. So Rose, I think your work is fascinating because many times – from a political scientist's perspective – we [often] lose sight of the more bottom-up approach or the sociological, anthropological approach of what actually forms community. Many times – and I am interested in studying the Axis of Resistance – many times [we look past the fact that] these are social movements, they are actual communities, there are actual societies that exist that have been marginalized across decades, particularly in the Arab lands when we think of Yemen [and communities in] Iraq [being] marginalized. But [now] you are seeing the emergence or reemergence of a fabric of society. How does your work and research, particularly in your book, *Feeding Iran*, tie into this idea of family? How should we think about family and the social fabric of society, and what Shi'ism has to do with it?

Rose Wellman: Yes, well there is a movement and something called "new kinship studies" that I am a part of that makes these kinds of explorations. But I will say also that Iran has been doing that since right after the Constitutional Revolution where already there were lots of kinship terminologies being used to describe citizens and their relation to the motherland. I think [Firoozeh] Kashani-Sabet has written about this. But also [after] the Revolution, families [were] considered the foundation of the nation in Iran. So, this is something that is enshrined in the Constitution as well. People like Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Mutahhari, all these Islamic scholars and leaders also talked about things like Muslim brothers and sisters, and they use the terminology and [it is] very interesting to me. Actually, in relation to all of the discussions that have been happening that I think about the anecdotal examples of my hosts, they would always tell me Islam is first, rather than the nation. Even these state-aligned Basijis would tell me [that] Islam comes first and not the nation, which

is an interesting viewpoint for that particular community to have.

Then the question of what is true Islam is also something that comes up a lot. [So] a lot of their practices, even in this location [are] again being aligned with the state, are not exactly following statist norms. They are doing evil-eye [protection]. They are doing things like prayer taking, well they are not doing it, but they are aware of this possibility of partaking in prayer taking (dua giriftan) where you can pray over tea and it is like an evil-eye type of act. Or, writing prayers, and they are following Ayatollah Bahjat, and people like this, so they have this more encompassing or a wide view of Islam than the state might. It is so complicated. I think you begin to see that when you get these smaller examples of individuals and how they think and see things. So that is why I take that approach, but yes, I am excited about my [forthcoming] book. Like I said, it is just coming out [and it is] called Feeding Iran. It talks all about this time I spent with these families and all the different things that they participated in as supporters of the state, but also beyond that statist discourse. So, I look forward to sharing that with everyone when it finally comes out.

Payam Mohseni: Thank you. We are unfortunately over time, so I am going to have to thank everyone on our panel. I think we had a very good discussion, a very interesting and rich conversation, [and brought] together [several] various strands. I think it was quite a unique panel in that sense: to hear [about] the Alawites in Syria, Alevis in Turkey, Zaydis in Yemen, and Twelver Ja'fari life in Iran. So I want to thank each of you again for your participation with us today, and I hope that we will be able to engage again in the future and build on some of these conversations we had [because] we have to really deepen our knowledge on the diversity and complexity of various manifestations of religion and society or communities that one could branch under this broader umbrella of Shi'ism and Shi'a identities.



# **Closing Remarks**

### Payam Mohseni, Harvard University

fourth and final panel of the symposium but also for staying with us throughout this four-day symposium on Diversity and Unity in Transnational Shi'ism. I want to again thank everyone, our speakers, audience members, our co-sponsors, our staff, our student researchers, and the support team at the Weatherhead Center who really made this happen. It has truly been a very engaging four-day symposium, and we have been honored to have such unique voices who looked at the variety of these interlinked topics and discussions from across comparative perspectives, both thinking about theory and philosophy and Sufism and Irfan, and then moving into the complexities and diversity of the manifestation of Shi'a religion and society and cultures in the context of South Asia, and now in the context of the Middle East. At the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard, we hope to build on the themes and findings presented in the symposium in order to inform our future work and research. As I stated in the opening, the symposium is also drawing on and building on our earlier conference [that] we hosted a few years ago at the Harvard Kennedy School, where we focused on sectarian de-escalation and Shi'a-Sunni dialogue more broadly.

Beyond just the Shi'a-Sunni question, we have moved into understanding diversity within Shi'ism, and we hope to really build on that. We were very happy so far with incredible audience support and enthusiasm for the symposium. We had over 2,000 people who registered for the symposium. We had hundreds of attendees for each of our panels, and it shows really the high interest there is, and the lack of work, unfortunately, that [exists] in thinking about pluralism and diversity, not only within Islam but within Shi'ism in particular, and the need for the academic community at least to look at and analyze the complexities and diversities that exists here. One of the initial things [we are doing in this regard] even as the symposium has been ongoing has been reaching out to different Shi'a and Muslim leaders from across the world to continue this intrafaith dialogue that we initiated with the symposium, [including] reaching out to different Shi'a leaders of various communal associations and denominations within Shi'ism to receive feedback and statements of support for thinking about intra-Shi'a dialogue and whether intra-Shi'a dialogue is possible at all given the [contemporary] context. We have received encouraging feedback thus far from some Muslim leaders that we will include in the proceedings.

These statements affirm the importance of dialogue from an intra-Shi'a approach. So we are very excited about that and we hope that you will follow us and continue to join us for future events. Again, [I would like to thank] all of our faculty [support] and [Project] Co-Chairs Professors Ali Asani and Melani Cammett, Harvard University, the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Religion and International Affairs Program for their funding and support of this project, all of our co-sponsors, and all our staff and students and research assistants, our IT team and departments, and administrative team, and media team who really help make this conference possible. And again, I would like to thank our own Professor Hasan Abbas, as always, for [his] advice and guidance. With all this, I would like to bring this symposium to a close and again, thank everyone and all of our audience members for your enthusiastic participation over the last four days. I hope you remain engaged with us moving ahead as we build off this symposium and research into future topics and events.



# Speakers and Bios

As of April, 2021

#### Hassan Abbas

Hassan Abbas is Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the Near East

South Asia Strategic Studies Centre (NESA), National Defense University in Washington DC. He serves as a senior advisor at the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. His current research work focuses on building narratives for countering political and religious extremism and law enforcement reforms in developing states. He recently published a highly acclaimed biography entitled The Prophet's Heir: the Life of Ali ibn Abi Talib (Yale University Press, 2021). The work covers arguably the single most important spiritual



and intellectual authority in Islam after Prophet Mohammad, Imam Ali, and was rated the #1 new release on the history of Islam on Amazon.

#### Rameez Abbas

Rameez Abbas is Associate Professor at the National Defense University, where she teaches courses on South Asian politics, statecraft, and the Muslim world. She has also been Lecturer and Program Coordinator at the MA in Global Security Studies at Johns

Hopkins University; and Editor and Publications Manager at the Migration Policy Institute. Her current research is about the political strategies of religious minorities in South Asia and the Middle East. Her work has appeared in several publications, including Foreign Affairs and the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies. She holds a PhD in political science from Johns Hopkins, where her work focused on migration and citizenship politics in India and included extensive fieldwork in Mumbai and Kolkata. Her research has been supported by the East West Center in



Washington, and she was also awarded a Fulbright grant.

### Huseyin Abiva

Dervish Huseyin Abiva holds a degree in history from the University of Maryland, and he is a dervish serving the Bektashi Community of America. Dervish Huseyin has translated a number of important Bektashi works into English, including the Vilayetname of Haji Bektash Veli, and Baba Rexheb's Islamic Mysticism and Bektashism.



#### Ali Asani

Born in Nairobi, Kenya, Ali Asani is Murray A. Albertson Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures. He served as the Director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University from 2010-2016. After completing his high school education in Kenya, he attended Harvard College, with a concentration in the Comparative Study of Religion, graduating summa cum laude in 1977. He continued his graduate work at Harvard



in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC), receiving his Ph.D. in 1984. Prof. Asani holds a joint appointment between the Committee on the Study of Religion and NELC. He also serves on the faculty of the Departments of South Asian Studies and African and African-American Studies. He has taught at Harvard since 1983, offering instruction in a variety of South Asian and African languages and literatures as well as courses on various aspects of the Islamic tradition including Understanding Islam and Contemporary Muslim Societies; Religion, Literature and the Arts in

Muslim Cultures; Muslim Voices in Contemporary World Literatures; Introduction to Islamic Mysticism (Sufism); Ismaili History and Thought; and Muslim Societies in South Asia: Religion, Culture and Identity.

### **Nicholas Boylston**

Dr. Nicholas Boylston studies Islamic intellectual history, Persian literature and Shi'i Islam through the lenses of religious, intellectual and literary pluralism. He is particularly interested



in the way 12th century Persian authors created texts that are discursively pluralistic - drawing on multiple sources and espousing multiple intellectual and ethical perspectives - whilst also maintaining both narrative and intellectual consistency. He also researches the role of literature as a means of negotiating multiple religious identities in late Qajar Iran, focusing on the versified commentary and translation of the Quran by the Shi'i-Sufi, Safi 'Ali-Shah. These projects are part of a wider concern for understanding how Muslim authors have come to terms with the diversity of their own tradition and understood the religious other in differing

cultural contexts. He is currently working on a book manuscript entitled The Kaleidoscope of Reality: Perspectivism and the Integration of Diversity in 12th Century Persian Metaphysical Literature, and is continuing his work on the complex relationships between Shi'ism and Sufism through history.

# Juan Cole

Juan R. I. Cole is Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan. For four decades, he has sought to put the relationship of the West and the Muslim

world in historical context. His most recent book is The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam: A New Translation from the Persian. Among his other recent works are Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires (Bold Type Books, 2018) and The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East (Simon & Schuster, 2014). He has translated works of Lebanese-American author Kahlil Gibran. He has appeared widely on media, including the PBS News Hour, ABC World News Tonight, Nightline, the Today Show, Anderson Cooper 360, Rachel Maddow, Chris Hayes' All In, CNN, the Colbert Report,



Democracy Now! and many others. He has written about Egypt, Iran, Iraq, the Gulf and South Asia and about both extremist groups and peace movements. He is proprietor of the Informed Comment news and analysis site. Cole conducts his research in Arabic, Persian and Urdu and Turkish as well as several European languages. He knows both Middle Eastern and South Asian Islam. He lived in various parts of the Muslim world for more than a decade, and continues to travel widely there. He has written, edited or translated 19 books and authored over 100 articles and chapters.

### **Simon Wolfgang Fuchs**

Simon is a Lecturer in Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany.

He is interested in transnational Islam and how the Islamic scholarly tradition is debated and negotiated in modern and contemporary Muslim societies, in particular in the Middle East and South Asia. Before coming to Freiburg in October 2017, Simon was a Research Fellow in Islamic Studies at Gonville & Caius College, University of Cambridge. He completed his PhD in September 2015 at Princeton University's Department of Near Eastern Studies. His second book, In a Pure Muslim Land. Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East, was published in April 2019 with University of North Carolina Press. Simon is currently working on a book



manuscript (under contract with Princeton University Press) which explores the global history and impact of the Iranian Revolution. Simon's articles have been published in Modern Asian Studies, the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, South Asia, Welt des Islams, and Islamic Law and Society, among others. You can follow him on Twitter at @Simon\_W\_Fuchs.

# Zahra Jamal

Zahra N. Jamal is Associate Director at Rice University's Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance, and a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Consultant. An award-winning former faculty member at Harvard and MIT, Dr. Jamal was founding director of the Civil Islam Initiative at University of Chicago, founding director of the Central Asia and International Development Initiative at Michigan State, and Associate Director at The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding's Center for the Study of American Muslims. Her fieldwork covers voluntarism,

migrant labor, gender-equity, and food security in Muslim societies. Dr. Jamal consults on gender, race, and religion for the United Nations, State Department, Department of Justice, Aspen Institute, Aga Khan Development Network, and private corporations. She has published with Duke University Press, Fortress Press, The New York Times, Foreign Policy, and The Hill, and appeared on BBC World News. She received her M.A. and Ph.D. in cultural anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard, double B.A. in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies and in Slavic Studies from Rice, and is a Certified Diversity Professional.



### Ayfer Karakaya-Stump

Ayfer Karakaya-Stump is an associate professor of history at William and Mary. She holds



a Ph.D. in History-Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University (2008). Karakaya-Stump is the author of The Kizilbash/Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019/2020). She has also published many scholarly articles and chapters on Alevi-Bektashi history, a selection of which appeared in a book entitled Vefailik, Bektaşilik, Kızılbaşlık: Alevi Kaynaklarını, Tarihini ve Tarihyazımını Yeniden Düşünmek (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2015; 3rd edition 2020). Her scholarly interests include social and cultural history of the Ottoman Empire, Ottoman-Safavid borderlands, Sufism,

nonconformist religious movements, Kizilbash/Alevi-Bektashi communities, and women and gender in Islamic(ate) societies.

# Joshua Landis

Joshua Landis is Sandra Mackey Chair and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies and the Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Oklahoma in the Boren College of International Studies. He writes and manages "SyriaComment.com," a daily newsletter on



Syrian politics that attracts some 50,000 page-reads a month. Dr. Landis publishes frequently in policy journals such as Foreign Affairs, Middle East Policy and Foreign Policy. His book: Syria at Independence, Nationalism, Leadership, and Failure of Republicanism will be published by the Arab Center for research and Policy studies this coming year. He is a frequent analyst on TV, radio, and in print and is a regular on NPR and the BBC. He has received three Fulbright Grants, a SSRC Grant and other support for his research and won numerous prizes for his teaching. He is past President of the Syrian Studies Association. He has lived 15 years in the Middle East and 4 in Syria. He spent most summers in Syria before the uprising on 2011. He was educated at Swarthmore (BA), Harvard (MA), and Princeton (PhD).

#### **Scott Lucas**

Dr. Lucas is an associate professor of Islamic Studies. His research explores the creative process by which Sunni and Zaydi scholars composed works in the genres of law, hadith, and Qur'anic commentary during the classical period of Islamic civilization. He recently published a two-



volume, unabridged translation of thirty passages from al-Tabari's Qur'an commentary, titled Selections from the Comprehensive Exposition of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'an. Dr. Lucas was a member of the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton during Fall 2018 and received an ACLS Fellowship to pursue research on the relationship between the Qur'an and Islamic Law during the 2018-19 academic year. He currently is working on multiple book and article projects related to Zaydi law and theology in Yemen.

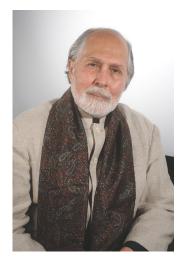
# Payam Mohseni

Dr. Payam Mohseni is the Director of the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and manages Visions, Harvard's premier online publication on all matters pertaining to global Shi'ism. He is also a Lecturer in the Department of Government at Harvard University and served as a Lecturer on Islamic Studies at the Harvard Divinity School. At Harvard, he teaches on Iranian and Middle East politics as well as Islam and is a



multiple recipient of the Harvard Excellence in Teaching award. Dr. Mohseni is an active term member at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) in New York and also a Faculty Affiliate of the Program in Islamic Law at the Harvard Law School (HLS) and the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at Harvard University.

### Seyyed Hossein Nasr



Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is University Professor of Islamic Studies at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. After graduating from MIT with a Bachelors in Physics, he received a Masters in Geophysics and a PhD in the History of Science from Harvard University. In 1958, Nasr returned to Iran to teach philosophy at Tehran University where he later served as Vice-Chancellor and Dean of the Faculty of Letters. Nasr was the first Muslim to deliver the prestigious Gifford and Cadbury Lectures, and was inducted to the Library of Living Philosophers in 2000. He has published over 50 books and 650 articles on Islamic Science, Philosophy, Comparative Religion, Islamic Ecology and Environmentalism, Art, and Sufism. Some of his publications

include The Study Quran as its Editor-In-Chief, Religion and the Order of Nature, Man and Nature, and The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism.

# Eliton Pashaj

Dervish Eliton Pashaj holds a degree in theology from Bursa Uludağ University (Turkey). Originally from Albania, Dervish Eliton is currently the senior clergyman at the First Albanian-American Bektashi Teqe, which he has served for over ten years.



### Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi

Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi is a British scholar and religious leader with a research interest in Islamic philosophy, mysticism, and comparative religion. In particular, he focuses upon the concept of "love" theoretically and applies his insights as a practitioner of theology to expound upon the values and thought-system of Shi'ism and

Islam on one hand and to undertake interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding through civil society engagement on the other. Fluent in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, Razawi is the Chief Imam of the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society in the United Kingdom and an Associate at the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs at Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs. His work constructively engages issues of contemporary social affairs as a passionate civic member and active Muslim interlocutor at the local, national, and international levels.



#### Karen Ruffle

Karen Ruffle is Associate Professor in the Departments of Historical Studies and Study of



Religion at the University of Toronto. She has widely published articles focusing on devotional texts, ritual practice, and Shi'i material practices in South Asia. She is the author of Gender, Sainthood and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism (2011); her second monograph is Everyday Shi'ism in South Asia (2021).

# Shafique N. Virani

Shafique N. Virani's research focuses on Ithna-'ashari and Ismaili Shi'ism, Quranic studies, Islamic history, philosophy, mysticism and pluralism, and Muslim literatures in Arabic, Persian and South Asian languages. Educated at Harvard and McGill, he has lived, taught, and researched across Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. His work has been translated into over 20 languages, and has received awards and recognition from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the American Academy of Religion, the Middle East Studies Association, the Foundation for Iranian Studies,



Farabi International, the British Society for Middle East Studies, and two Iranian presidents. He has served on the faculties of Harvard, Zayed and the University of Toronto, including in senior leadership positions, and received the title of Distinguished Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Toronto. He is the author of The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, A Search for Salvation, published by Oxford University Press, and delivered a TEDx Talk entitled "Islamophobia and the Clash of Ignorance." An avid volunteer around the world, he has consulted for projects by Cirque du Soleil, the History Channel, Lord Cultural Resources, Google, the Unicode Consortium and numerous governmental and other organizations. Describing him as "a visionary," the United Nations honored him for dedicating his efforts "to the cause of extending the frontiers of knowledge and the welfare of humankind."

### Alexander Weissenburger

Alexander Weissenburger is a researcher at the Austrian Academy of Science's Institute for Social Anthropology, where he writes his PhD thesis on the ideology of the Huthi movement in Yemen. He holds an MLitt in Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asian Security Studies from the University of St Andrews and an MA in Islamic Studies from the University of Vienna. He was an intern at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs and teaches at the University of Vienna.



#### **Rose Wellman**

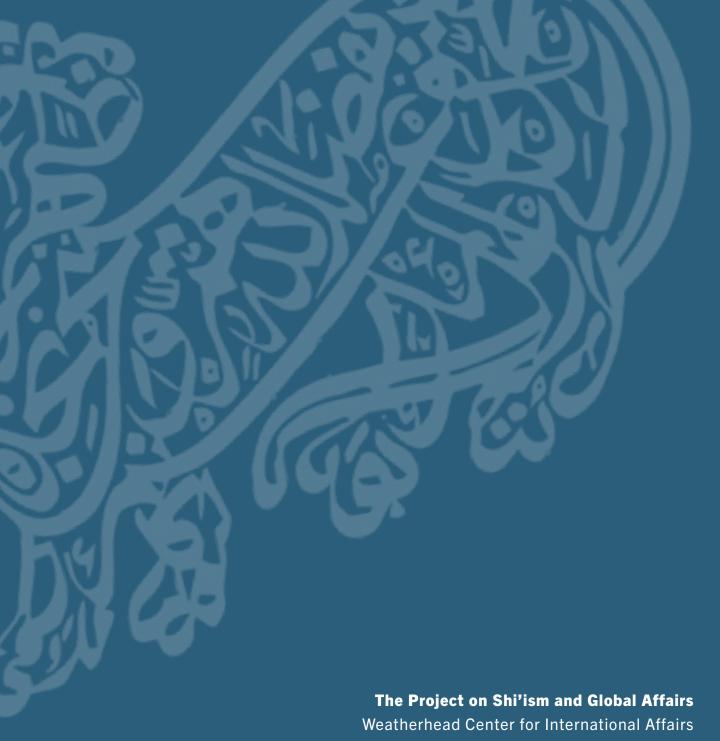


Rose Wellman is an anthropologist who specializes in Iran, the Middle East, and its diaspora. Between 2007 and 2010, she conducted ethnographic research in Iran. The result is her forthcoming book, Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of an Islamic Republic. In addition to her monograph, Rose is the co-editor with Dr. Todne Thomas and Dr. Asiya Malik of New Directions of Spiritual Kinship: Sacred Ties across the Abrahamic Religions (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

#### Riza Yildirim

Riza Yildirim's research focuses on the history and religiosity of Qizilbash-Alevi, Bektashi, and similar *shari'a*-inattentive, Shi'ite-oriented religious communities in the region stretching from Iran to the Balkans. He has published five books and several research papers on the history and religion of Qizilbash-Alevis, Bektashis, and futuwwa people. Having a PhD in Ottoman history from Bilkent University (Turkey), he taught in TOBB University in Ankara between 2009 and 2016. His second dissertation, which he is currently writing in religious studies at Emory University, examines the religious system of the politico-military elites of the Safavid empire, the Qizilbash.





Weatherhead Center for International Affairs 1737 Cambridge Street Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone: (617) 495-4420

Fax: (617) 495-8292

Website: https://shiism.wcfia.harvard.edu

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