MARJAʿIYYA IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Renegotiating the relationship between *marjaʿ* and *muqallid* in the era of the democratization of knowledge

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The *marjaʿiyya* is the dominant religious authority structure among Twelver Shiʿis. This study explores the attitudes of 'lay Shiʿis' (non-*marjaʿ*s) towards the institution of the *marjaʿiyya* outside of the Iranian political system. Rather than assuming that the relationship between authority and follower is one-way, it considers that both the *marjaʿ* and the follower might negotiate the relationship. It examines 'lay Shiʿis' commitment towards following a *marjaʿ*, regional variation, their understanding of religious leadership, and contemporary concerns regarding the *marjaʿiyya*. Insofar as the *marjaʿiyya* has undergone roughly three phases of development, a key point of enquiry in this paper is whether or not the *marjaʿiyya* is undergoing a fourth phase of development as a result of advances in digital technology, the democratisation of knowledge, and the global Shiʿi diaspora. Data for this paper was collected through surveying Shiʿis worldwide as well as interviewing five prominent *marājiʿ* in Iraq.

KEYWORDS: Shiʿism, *marjaʿiyya*, religious authority, Shiʿi diaspora, *tabʿīḍ*, Islam

INTRODUCTION

Literature on the *marjaʿiyya* – the dominant religious authority structure among Twelver Shiʿis – often presents it as a one-way relationship, dominated by the *marjaʿ*[1] Most major works on the *marjaʿiyya* also focus on theory, history, or politics, especially in Iran and Iraq. Although valuable, these studies leave open the question of how the *marjaʿiyya* is lived by Shiʿis worldwide, especially outside these regions given Shiʿi populations elsewhere and

today's unprecedented Shiʻi diaspora. They also leave open the question of whether the relationship between *marjaʻ* and follower is one-way, or whether the influence is actually bidirectional – that is, is authority wholly exerted by the *marjaʻ*, who makes his pronouncements, or do the followers of the *marājiʻ* also influence how that authority will play out? And, most importantly, is the advent of digital technology and the democratization of knowledge leading to a new phase of the *marjaʻiyya*? This paper will explore those questions through surveying 'lay Shiʻis' (Shiʻis who are not *marāji*ʻ) cross-regionally as well as interviewing five *marājiʻ* in Iraq. Since the situation in Iran is unique, given that Shiʻi religious leadership has become intertwined with the political system, it will not be discussed here.

MARJAʻIYYA IN THE INTERNET ERA

According to mainstream contemporary Twelver Shiʻi religious law, almost all non-*marjaʻ*s are religiously obligated to follow a *marjaʻ*, usually, the one they consider to be the most learned (*aʻlam*).[2] Formally acknowledged exceptions include (a) Shiʻis who have enough religious learning to derive religious law independently (that is, they are *mujtahid*s) and (b) those who choose to exercise precaution by following the strictest views of all *marjaʻ*s.[3] In practice, Shiʻis who do not follow a *marjaʻ* also include (c) Shiʻis who adhere to other Twelver Shiʻi traditions,[4] (d) Twelver Shiʻis who profess different views on the *marjaʻiyyah*,[5] and (e) Twelver Shiʻis who are simply disinterested in or unaware of the *marjaʻiyya*.[6] This latter group appears to have been larger before the Iranian Revolution – which led to an upsurge in Shiʻi awareness of religious law – and the Information Revolution, which facilitated awareness of the *marjaʻiyya*; it can also be seen in light of the global Islamic movement which gained speed in the mid-to-late twentieth century.[7] Therefore, because this paper is not beginning with the assumption that all Twelver Shiʻis actually follow a *marjaʻ*, the term 'lay Shiʻis' has been adopted in lieu of *muqallid* ('follower') – although, in practice, 90% of the survey respondents said they follow a *marjaʻ*.

While today's Twelver Shiʻis often project contemporary notions of the *marjaʻiyya* anachronistically onto the time of the Shiʻi Imams, the development of the *marjaʻiyya* is today conceptualized into three phases: (a) the era of transmitters of traditions (*aḥādīth*, *akhbār*), (b) the era of *ijtihād* (the derivation of new religious law from the sources, approximately the 10th/11th century onward, with the term gaining currency in the late 13th/14th century), and (c) the era of the centralized *marjaʻ al-taqlīd* (today's model, from the 19th century onward); this latter phase is what historians refer to as the beginning of the *marjaʻiyya*.[8] Each shift in phase was heralded by social or technological change. For instance, the shift to *ijtihād* (the derivation of new religious law) was ultimately spurred by the absence of the Twelfth Imam, insofar as Shiʻis had to grapple with answering new religious questions. Similarly, the actualization of a centralized authority went hand-in-hand with the development of modern communications and transportation technology, beginning with the telegraph, which allowed a centralized Shiʻi authority to communicate with his followers in a timely way.

Insofar as the third phase emerged alongside technological developments, it stands to reason that the Internet era might also usher in a fourth phase of the *marjaʻiyya*.[9] This leads to the question of whether the *marjaʻiyya* is indeed transitioning – perhaps haltingly – into

a fourth phase, characterised by a greater investment by the lay Shiʿi in the details of religious rulings, a desire for greater transparency (especially financial) from *marāji*ʿ, and the option to 'shop' for rulings among multiple *marāji*ʿ, instead of putting full faith in the vision of one *marja*ʿ. Relevant social and technological changes, which can be informally noted in discussions with Twelver Shiʿis and on Shiʿi media platforms, include:

1. *Higher levels of literacy and education.* Given the spread of mass public education today, it is easy to forget that, only a couple of centuries ago, religious scholarship was the purview of the educated elite. This was particularly the case in isolated or disadvantaged regions with low levels of literacy, and particularly the case among women. Today, however, the spread of higher education among Shiʿis – both men and women – has led to a greater desire to understand the rationale behind various *marāji*ʿs viewpoints and a desire to engage in critical analysis.

2. *The Shiʿi diaspora.* Primarily due to political persecution and economic challenges, there is an unprecedented Shiʿi diaspora today.[10] This, in turn, has led Shiʿis living in regions such as East Africa or England to present new questions to their *marāji*ʿ, and has resulted in the re-evaluating of some classical fatwas, such as those regarding the ritual purity of the People of the Book. Ayatollah Sistani's office has also published a book (in English) entitled *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West.*

Additionally, institutions of learning and scholarship have been established by migrant Shiʿis and/or converts to meet local needs. While some of these institutions follow the traditional seminary curricula, non-traditional influences (such as academic discourse) inevitably shape the outlook of these local institutions. Given the ubiquitousness of satellite and social media, the intellectual products of these institutions do not remain in the diaspora but rather circulate worldwide.

3. *The Internet and satellite media.* The Internet and satellite media circumvented the challenge of censorship that Shiʿis in some Muslim countries faced, even in Shiʿi-majority areas like southern Iraq. While, in some countries, Shiʿi books were banned or simply rare, today, anyone with a smartphone can search the key Shiʿi source texts in multiple languages. The Internet has also facilitated communication, not only between the offices of the *marāji*ʿ and their followers, but also between other Shiʿis, and has provided a global platform for Shiʿis to critically discuss the viewpoints of *marāji*ʿ with each other.[11] The uploading of the manuals of Islamic law by various *marāji*ʿ has also facilitated '*marja*ʿ shopping'. However, the openness and equality characterising the digital era are inherently at odds with the traditionally secretive culture of the *marjaʿiyya* and the strong sense of hierarchy between *marja*ʿ and follower.

4. *The Islamic Revolution of Iran.* Ironically, while the Islamic Revolution elevated the status of the *marja*ʿ to a political leader, and idealized the *marja*ʿ as a global political leader, the realities of bureaucracy and running a government (forms, taxes, traffic laws) diminished the mythos of the *marja*ʿ and instead further routinised his charisma. Furthermore, the question of the scope of traditional Shiʿi authority was vigorously rekindled by the Iranian Revolution.[12]

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The above considerations lead to the question of whether the idea of a single *marjaʿ*, akin to a single charismatic leader, may no longer be the model for the future. Possibly, the followers of *marājiʿ* may be demanding a more equitable relationship, one based on a shared intellectual understanding rather than a strict hierarchy of follower-followed in which the *marjaʿ* is veiled behind a screen of authority and inaccessibility. Today's Shiʿi may not only want to know *what* to do, but may also want to know *why*. Possibly, also, the *marjaʿiyya* may be becoming less charismatic and more routinised, moving towards a system of religious authority held by multiple individuals (a practice known as *tabʿīḍ*). Currently, many *marājiʿ* permit *tabʿīḍ* albeit with contextual specificity and limitations related to learnedness.[13] For example, al-Khomeini qualifies the permissibility of *tabʿīḍ* with equality in learning between two *mujtahid*s. Others, like al-Shirazi, state that when two jurists are equal, it is acceptable to follow one in some matters and the other in other matters. There is also the view that a *muqallid* may do *tabʿīḍ* when a matter does not have a specific ruling (that is, the *marjaʿ* is giving a cautionary ruling, or *iḥṭiyāt*) or when a *marjaʿ* remains silent on a matter. These rulings, however, only address details of religious law; they do not address the social or psychological impact of 'demoting' a powerful, single figurehead to a committee of experts.

SURVEYING 'LAY SHIʿIS' AND INTERVIEWING *MARĀJIʿ*

With those premises in mind, to explore current developments regarding the *marjaʿiyya*, a survey was conducted of lay Shiʿis. The research on lay Shiʿis was conducted via an online survey which was both quantitative and allowed space for free response. It was circulated from April to July 2018 to a number of Shiʿi mailing lists, institutions, and the like, who were then encouraged to share it with other Shiʿi groups or individuals, with the goal to reach as many Shiʿis as possible globally. To encourage responses from multiple regions, the survey was offered in English, Arabic, and Farsi. The Farsi version was included not to solicit responses from Iran, but because Farsi is also spoken by Shiʿi populations outside Iran, such as Afghanistan, and it is also not unusual for Farsi to be a second language among Twelver Shiʿis.

The method of distribution predisposed the survey results to be slanted towards those Shiʿis who have access to and the ability to use the Internet, who have enough of an interest in the *marjaʿiyya* to complete the survey, and who are affiliated with Twelver Shiʿi mosques or institutions, which tend to be linked to the *marjaʿiyya*. In turn, having access to the internet makes it more likely that a Shiʿi will participate in and be influenced by globalised discussions on Shiʿism. That being said, enough responses were received worldwide to make meaningful statements about religiously committed Twelver Shiʿis in multiple regions. (Responses from people who did not identify as Twelver Shiʿi were discarded). The survey was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Does *taqlīd* (the following of a *marjaʿ*), in practice, play a strong role in the lives of today's Twelver Shiʿa?
2. What critiques or concerns do today's Shiʿa have about the system of *marjaʿiyya*?

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3. Is following multiple *marāji'* (*tab'īḍ*) rather than following a single *marja'* gaining currency?

4. What degree of engagement do lay Shi'is have with *marāji'* or their formal representatives?

5. Are the *marāji'* viewed as more than scholars who simply provide jurisprudential rulings?

6. Is the process of paying *khums* (a mandatory 20% alms-tax on excess income in Shi'i law) to the *marja'* strictly followed by the Shi'i laity?

Respondents also had the option to skip questions.

Given that the Twelver Shi'i community can be tight-knit, with strong transnational family and social networks, and that the *marja'iyya* is a sensitive subject, confidentiality was a main concern. As a historically persecuted minority, many Shi'is also have an attitude of secrecy and distrust questioning or fear that academic researchers may be reporting to law enforcement or intelligence services.[14] This is a concern not only in Muslim-majority societies, such as Saudi Arabia, where Shi'ism is viewed as heretical, but also in places such as the United States, where financial links with Iran are outlawed. Therefore, in order to encourage as many honest responses as possible, no demographic data (such as age, profession, socioeconomic status, or gender) was collected alongside the responses; however, identifiers along these lines can be deduced from some of the responses, such as those specifically addressing gender.

543 valid responses (that is, from self-identified Twelver Shi'is) were received. The heaviest representation of survey respondents was from the US/Europe/Australia (66.2%), with the second-largest group from the Indian subcontinent (16.8%), and the third-largest group from the Middle East and Africa (14.7%). However, there was no distinct difference between the type or frequency of response from Shi'a in these regions, suggesting a globalized understanding of the *marja'iyya* among Twelver Shi'a today, and the number of responses from less-represented regions was still sufficient to make meaningful statements.

Overall, the survey respondents expressed a high level of personal commitment to following a *marja'*. 90% said that they did *taqlīd* to a single *marja'*, and only 10% said that they did not. There was little variance regionally, suggesting a strong sense of unified thinking among Twelver Shi'a in non-majority and diaspora regions. This highlights the commitment of the Shi'i laity to follow a *marja'* despite physical distance and cultural differences. Living in a predominantly Muslim country seems to have no bearing on a Twelver Shi'i's desire to do *taqlīd*. The globalization of today's world, especially social media, satellite media, and the relative ease of travel, may explain the uniformity of these findings.[15]

In addition to the survey of lay Shi'is, and in order to get another angle on these questions, five *marāji'*, all residing in Iraq, were interviewed by one or both of the authors from November–December 2018; namely: Grand Ayatollah al-Sayyid 'Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim, Grand Ayatollah Shaykh Bashir al-Najafi, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Taqi al-Husayni al-Mudarrisi, and Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayad. Four of these interviews were conducted in Arabic (or a mixture of Arabic/Farsi), and one was conducted in Urdu. The choice to interview these *marāji'* was largely based on the fact that they are considered to be the senior-most *marāji'*

in Iraq. However, accessibility also played a role, in that, due to their many responsibilities, not all *marāji*ʿ are able or willing to give time to projects of this sort.

One of the main limitations of these interviews was time. Furthermore, as with the surveys of lay Shiʿis, another hurdle was trust and a culture of secrecy. Not only does the *marjaʿiyya* tend to operate under an ethos of secrecy, but asking questions which implicitly challenge the legitimacy of the institution itself could be construed as a tacit attempt to undermine the institution, a particularly sensitive matter in the current social and political climate of Iraq. With that in mind, it should be seen as near-miraculous that five interviews were conducted. The main points which arose in these interviews have been integrated into this paper; however, they have been summarized in Appendix B in the event that they may be of assistance to future researchers.

SOURCES OF LEGITIMACY FOR THE *MARJAʿIYYA*

That 90% of the Twelver Shiʿis surveyed professed to follow a *marjaʿ* is, in and of itself, notable; even if the survey may have been more likely to have been received or completed by Shiʿis with a vested interest in the *marjaʿiyya*, it still shows that many Twelver Shiʿis do in fact care deeply about the *marjaʿiyya*, and that it is relevant on the world stage. However, what was even more notable was *why* the respondents felt that the *marāji*ʿ should have religious authority. Given that scriptural sources (the Qurʾan and hadith) are the primary source of Shiʿi religious law, one might have expected the respondents to cite Qurʾan or hadith to explain why following a *marjaʿ* is important to them. Certainly, one would have expected this from the *marāji*ʿ.[16] Instead, the argument for the authority of the *marjaʿiyya* fell into four main categories: (a) the rational necessity of following a specialist, (b) the role of the *marjaʿ* as an inheritor of the Twelfth Imam, (c) what the *marjaʿ* offers to the community as a leader, and (d) concerns pertaining to the afterlife. The responses discussing these things made it possible to put into words how religious authority is perceived among today's Twelver Shiʿa; they also shed light on how the *marjaʿ* is seen beyond being a jurisprudent. This, in turn, also allows for identification of areas of the *marjaʿ*–follower relationship which are evolving, or which are under tension in the modern era.

THE SPECIALIST ARGUMENT

One of the main rational arguments that Shiʿi scholars, in general, put forward for the necessity of the *marjaʿ* is that the intellect decrees that a person should consult a specialist for guidance. Just as an ill person goes to a doctor and accepts their prescription without quibble, similarly, a lay Shiʿi should go to a religious doctor and accept their guidance. (This argument falls somewhat flat in today's era of Google self-diagnosis, but, nonetheless, continues to be employed.) Given the importance of the intellect in faith in 'mainstream' Twelver Shiʿism and texts, it is not surprising that this argument took the forefront. A number of scholars and *marāji*ʿ – including Al-Ansari,[17] al-Musawi,[18] al-Sistani,[19] al-Najafi,[20] al-Fayad,[21] and al-Hakim[22] – agree that the natural disposition of humans to seek guidance

from the most learned (*aʿlam*) in any field suffices to suggest an almost automatic movement towards *aʿlamiyya* (rule of the most learned) in the absence of the Twelfth Imam. The 'specialist argument' is so emphasized that it can be considered a tacit doctrine among Twelver Shiʿis, part and parcel with belief in the importance of intellect regarding faith.

In the interview with him, coupled with written guidance received from his office, Ayatollah Sistani and his office emphasized that the 'specialist argument' is not only primary and eternal, but that it is inherently compelling. Some of their main points can be paraphrased as follows:

1. The system of *marjaʿiyya* as granting authority to the most learned does not change with the passage of time. However, in today's world, a *muqallid* might use social media or other forms of modern technology to discern which *marjaʿ* is the most learned.
2. Just as people consult a doctor when ill, an engineer when they need to design something, and a carpenter when they need to build something, so too should people consult a religious specialist when they require religious guidance. This is an eternal principle which does not change in the face of modernity. However, it is ironic that people prioritize finding a specialist medical doctor, but sometimes take a haphazard approach to finding a religious doctor.
3. Some of the youth may not take *taqlīd* (following a *marjaʿ*) seriously because they have received confusing ideas about it, and their minds are like 'a forest full of trees and barbed wire'. However, because following a specialist is something which all people agree on, clarifying this concept to them will make them accept the idea of *taqlīd*.[23]

Similarly, al-Najafi argued that when multiple doctors or engineers work together, there must be a lead doctor or engineer on the team, and that this is not dissimilar to the *marjaʿ* attaining his position by being the most learned. All in all, four of the five *marājiʿ* interviewed for this study emphasized the specialist argument.

The 'specialist argument' reinforces the idea of the static nature of the *marjaʿiyya* – as it was before, so it is today, and so it shall always be, because the rational necessity does not change. If some people, especially young people, do not find the argument about following a specialist sufficient or compelling, it is because of a defect in their understanding, not for any other reason, and can easily be rectified through proper instruction. Technology only facilities the discovery of the most learned; no other social effect, such as a breakdown of social hierarchies, is mentioned. This portrayal goes hand in hand with the common belief that *shariʿa* itself is eternal and unchanging; since human nature is unchanging, religious law also remains fixed. Of course, in practice, understandings of *shariʿa* have evolved historically and are debated today; the idea of the eternity of religious law, parallel to the eternity and unchangeability of the divine, is primarily a mental model.

The link between the eternal unchangeability of the rational argument for following a specialist and the eternity of *shariʿia* as a complete system was verbalized by this respondent:

> In my humble opinion, it's not possible to benefit completely from the beauty of Islam without either becoming a *mujtahid* yourself (difficult and time-consuming, hence not possible for everyone) or by doing *taqlīd*. Allah wants to guide us towards perfection, and He does so by

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providing us with a complete system of laws permeating all aspects of our lives. But we can only access these laws, this path towards perfection, by either getting enough knowledge to recognise the path ourselves, or by following those who have done so!

Similarly, another respondent writes:

In the absence of the twelfth Imam, [and because] one does not have [a] full understanding of religion in this busy life, one has to follow a *marjaʿ* for a better understanding of religious rulings since they spent 40+ years to learn and understand religion.

However, from a historical, religious, or even social standpoint, the above answers are oversimplifications; they also tacitly reject the quiet acknowledgement that – according to scriptural and jurisprudential reasoning – authority might possibly be held by a group, not a specialist. They also neglect other nuances that further respondents mentioned.

WHEN BEING A SPECIALIST IS NO LONGER ENOUGH

None of the respondents objected to the idea that a *marjaʿ* should be a specialist (as opposed to, say, the view that a *marjaʿ* should be the most active social reformer, or primarily hold spiritual authority).[24] Nonetheless, other respondents brought up concerns about how the system of following the specialist is operating in practice. Despite the assurance from al-Sistani's office that some youth are disconnected from the *marjaʿiyya* only because they do not understand it, these respondents were concerned that the *marājiʿ* are out of touch with the realities of living in the West or Shiʿi-minority regions, or the younger generations.[25] For instance:

They should be more reachable as well as understand the problems our generation faces, especially in non-Muslim countries

It's difficult to follow a *marjaʿ* or leader when they don't come to see your environment prior to making judgements. Geographical, political, environmental factors all play a part in the challenges believers face, and they need to be seen in order to fully comprehend.

I'm disillusioned with how out of touch some of the *marājiʿ* are with real life in the Western world.

Not with the times, too 'traditional religious'... need more [of a] practical, logical approach.

[I] wish our *marjaʿ* would travel to find out the problems in the environment we live in and the difficulties we face in our day-to-day lives because relying on second-hand information does not solve the problems of the community.

[I] don't think they have any idea how much they need to relate with people being brought up in the pluralistic West, living in close proximity to different people. They don't realise that at a time when Muslims are being slaughtered in mosques, it's important not to cause sectarian rifts and to do whatever is possible to unite all Muslims and help Muslims integrate into the world they live in.

Contrary to the response from al-Sistani's office, these respondents did not display ignorance of or disinterest in the *marja'iyya*. These responses convey a deep personal investment in the *marja'iyya*; however, that investment is tinged with disappointment about how the relationship between followed and follower is playing out. Rather than abandon the relationship, they wish to reform it.

Communication with the *marāji'* was another concern. While it is commonly understood that the *marja'iyya* operates under an aegis of secrecy, al-Mudarrisi specifically mentioned that external threats to the Shi'a or the *marja'iyya* dictate a level of non-transparency.[26] At the same time, especially in the West, many people today have become accustomed to a culture of transparency; for instance, expecting charitable organisations to provide public reports of how they spend their funds. Furthermore, as evinced by the above comment about travelling, it is rare for *marāji'* themselves to travel internationally to make public appearances, although this is often done by popular Shi'i preachers.

Nevertheless, despite this sense of disconnect, 55.5% of the respondents who do *taqlīd* had met either their *marja'*, his representative, or both (18.6% having met the *marja'*, 17.1% having met the representative, and 19.8% having met both). 19.6% of the respondents from the West had met their *marja'*, followed by 18.4% of respondents from the Middle East/ Africa, 15.9% from the Indian subcontinent, and 10% from East Asia. However, respondents from the Middle East/Africa were slightly more likely (23.7%) to have met their *marja'* and the representative of their *marja'* than respondents in the West (20.8%). As Walbridge highlights, '*marja'iyya* is not a one-man show but is an intricate network of relatives and representatives,'[27] and, of those who had met their *marja'*, 90.1% said that this reinforced their commitment to *taqlīd*. All of this suggests that, in practice, there is a significant level of communication between Shi'is globally and their *marāji'*; the fact that five *marāji'* could be interviewed for this paper also reinforces that.

It may seem unusual that slightly more respondents from the West had met their *marja'*, given travel costs. Possibly, this can be explained in the following ways. First, some leaders of pilgrimage groups and short courses for youth at the seminary (*ḥawza*) who cater to English speakers have strong personal connections to some of the *marāji'* (including family ties). As a result, they are better able to arrange for these meetings than the common man or woman. (Women are included here intentionally, as several prominent leaders of pilgrimage groups are women.[28] However, 'he' has been used exclusively to discuss the *marāji'*, since *marāji'* are all male.)[29] Second, Westerners may be seen as more of a novelty, or as being more in need of religious guidance, and so there may be greater willingness to accommodate visitors from Western countries. However, on the flip side, the representatives of the *marāji'* are easier to access and tend to reside in the Middle East, hence the greater likelihood of residents of the Middle East meeting them.

Nonetheless, meetings between *muqallid*s and *marāji'* tend to be short and formal, and do not provide a platform for in-depth discussion of contemporary challenges, especially if they are conducted through a translator. Samples of responses include:

I met him as part of a group, and it was very brief. I felt the awe towards the *marja'* himself, however I found those around him quite rude. His representatives in the UK – I wouldn't know how to contact them.

It's not very easy to get an audience with the *marja'* or the representative. If you have any queries, [you have] to rely on the local *mawlānā* [Shi'i religious leader] of the town or city you live in. E-mail is an option, but the lack of being able to communicate your problems in the language that the *marja'* understands [is a problem], or any follow-up queries take too long to be replied [to].

I was not able to speak directly to him. He did not speak my language.

Apart from a few active ones, like Sayyid Fadlullah and Sayyid Khamene'i, the grand scholars tend to be very much hidden. The Prophet didn't spread the religion by sitting in a cave. We need to see our *marāji'* and to speak to them, and they need that interaction too. Otherwise, the disconnect between them and people living in the West will only increase.

From this response, one has the sense that when the average follower meets a *marja'*, the goal of the meeting is not to convey useful information, or to discuss any subject in depth; rather, it is to reinforce the awe and charisma of the *marja'* and the hierarchical nature of the relationship. That is, it is to reinforce distance, not reduce it.

Hence, despite the centrality of communication to *marja'*–*muqallid* relationship, there were still obvious gaps. Technology could be a bridge. Figures like the Pope and Iranian leaders maintain a vibrant Twitter presence; even if, in practice, one cannot easily have a personal discussion with them that way, it at least offers a sense of personal communication and nearness. However, while most or all *marjāji'* administer websites and have e-mail query services, the responses can be short or slow, and language can be a hurdle. Just, as today, anyone can e-mail a famous professor or scientist, these respondents also want clear communication with their *marja'* – a central figure in their lives; however, this desire was not shared on both sides.

This was particularly pronounced among female respondents, who expressed concerns about the absence of women from the authority structure of the *marja'iyya* (that is, all *marāji'* and their formal representatives are male), and specific barriers that women face in communication:

It would be nice to meet the ladies of the family of *marāji'*. As a lady, it sometimes becomes very difficult to always speak to men in front of other men. Some ladies from the higher authority to serve the *marja'iyya* would be great and beneficial.

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But it might have strengthened it [my link to the *marjaʿ*] if I had easy regular access to him/them. If there was a female representative who spoke English, I feel I would have an avenue to ask questions I did not have before. However, this is not a reason to look down on my *marjaʿ* or the institution as there are always books and websites for me to view.

Gender also came up during the interviews, in that one of al-Sistani's representatives expressed curiosity that the female author of this paper was not a student of the male author, and in fact had a doctorate and an independent academic position. Valuable interview time was spent mulling over this.

These comments can be seen in light of an overall difference Muslim women often experience in mosques or access to religious scholars or centres of learning.[30] For instance, it is not unusual for women to be physically segregated from male speakers at mosques, to have smaller facilities at mosques than men, or not to attend mosques at all. There is also often stigma about women being seen by or speaking in front of men in religious spaces. This is despite the fact that, in theory, women and men are equally obliged to follow religious law and are expected to be equally learned about it. In this case, the tension associated with women being in 'men's space' was experienced on all sides: among the *marājiʿ*, the respondents, and the researchers. Perhaps for that reason, these comments from the respondents were not expressed as scathing criticisms but rather as suggestions for improvement; the opportunity to have a face-to-face audience with a male Islamic scholar, in and of itself, can be rare for women.

It is unlikely that the *marājiʿ* are blithely unaware of these concerns. In fact, during the interview with Ayatollah Sistani, one of his representatives embarked upon an impromptu critique of a preacher in the Shiʿi diaspora who has heavily non-traditional views on the *marjaʿiyya* – despite the fact that the representative does not speak the language that this person preaches in. The immediacy of this discussion and awareness this representative had of what was going on elsewhere suggests that matters related to Shiʿi religious authority are heavily globalized.

In any case, these responses lend credence to the view that the specialist argument has codified and internalized among both *marjaʿ*s and followers as a tacit article of doctrine. Even the respondents with constructive criticism regarding communication and gender still imply a desire to communicate more with their *marjaʿ* – to 'make the relationship work'. Simply emphasizing to them that following a specialist is rational and self-evident does not address the challenges regarding access and communication, especially but not only among women, since none of these respondents challenge that. In putting forward these criticisms – and, indeed, in making the effort to meet their religious authorities – these respondents are also exerting power in the follower-followed relationship and indicating how it should work on their side, rather than it simply being one-way.

ONE GOD, ONE IMAM, ONE *MARJAʿ*

In addition to the desire for communication, one of the main desires the respondents expressed was for the *marjaʿiyya* to act as a unified voice; that is, even if it is comprised of

multiple individuals, it should still act and speak as one. This can be seen as arising from the belief that the *marjaʿ* is more than a very learned man. Although the *marjaʿ* himself is not a divinely appointed authority, he is more than just a jurist. Rather, the *marjaʿ* acts as a living link to the absent Twelfth Imam, and the *marjaʿ* inherits his authority from the Imam, rendering the chain of authority: layperson → *marjaʿ* → Twelfth Imam → God.[31] While this may seem apparent, it requires nuance, for, according to Twelver Shiʿi narrations, anyone who openly claims to communicate regularly with the Twelfth Imam is a liar. Therefore, the link can be implied, or hinted at, or portrayed in art or rhetoric; but it is not acceptable for any Twelver Shiʿi *marjaʿ* to actually come out and declare that he receives direct guidance from the Twelfth Imam or that the Twelfth Imam has actually appointed him. Still, the expectation remains, and lay Shiʿis often expect the *marjaʿ* to have had a vision of or other form of supernatural communication with the Hidden Imam and to be somehow guided by or representing the Hidden Imam, even if the guidance is veiled or indirect.[32] Therefore, it is not surprising that some respondents expressed gratitude to the *marjaʿ* during the era of the absence of their Imam. Furthermore, since there is only one God, one Imam, and one *shariʿa*, there should be only one stance taken by the *marjaʿiyya*, whether or not the *marjaʿiyya* is vested in one man or many.

This expectation that the *marjaʿiyya* should be unified was expressed both directly and indirectly in the responses. One respondent simply said that the *marjaʿiyya* should either be vested in a single individual 'like one Pope'. Others used the plural pronoun 'they' to reflect multiple *marājiʿ* but treated it as a singular. For instance, 'they are the representative of our Imam and the backbone of Shiʿism'; 'they' is plural but 'representative' and 'backbone' are both singular. Virtually all respondents who commented on the matter conveyed the expectation that all *marājiʿ* should be inherently the same, even if, in practice, there are dramatic differences in approach between *marājiʿ* on some contemporary issues, especially politics. Interestingly, while many respondents expressed a strong commitment to the *marjaʿiyya*, most of them were unaware of how many *marājiʿ* are alive today.[33] For instance, nearly half of the respondents expressed the belief that there were only 6 or fewer *marājiʿ* alive today; most could name only 2 or 3. Conceptually, this reinforces the pattern of one God → one divine law → one Imam → one *marjaʿ* (or maybe two or three agreeing *marājiʿ*). The model of one God → one divine law → one Imam → a committee of specialists or one God → one divine law → one Imam → many disagreeing *marājiʿ* results in cognitive dissonance and indeed could shatter faith in a singular, perfect system.

Along the same lines, one thing that was absent from this set of survey responses was a sense of the historical development of the *marjaʿiyya* and/or a sense of the development of attitudes towards the *marjaʿiyya*. This may in part be due to the impact of globalisation on the worldwide Shiʿi community, in that social and satellite media have likely contributed to more standardised views on the *marjaʿiyya*. Ironically, this may also reflect a greater investment in the system of the *marjaʿiyya* among the masses today, since, in previous generations, it is possible that only those Shiʿis with an above-average knowledge of the details of religious law would have taken the time to or been able to give meaningful responses on a survey about the *marjaʿiyya*. In any case, these explanations are speculative; what can be said is that while this survey reflected concerns about how *taqlid* operates in practice, they

tended towards the paradigm that Islam is absolute and Islamic practices do not undergo evolution.

In any case, the desire for unified leadership goes beyond conceptions of faith. As was the case during the time of the Twelve Shi'i Imams, the authority vested in the religious leader often supplants secular political leadership, which may be seen as ineffective or corrupt. This is particularly relevant with respect to regions where Shi'is are an underrepresented minority and/or subject to sectarian violence and persecution. (Again, this is excepting the Iranian case, where Shi'is do not face sectarian persecution and enjoy political power.) As some respondents put it:

> We can all gather and follow him – his one command. So far, no politician has been successful in doing so.

> *Taqlīd* provides an axis of unity and power. A community cohesion that is to our benefit.

This is especially the case with Ayatollah Sistani, in that, since the 2003 Iraq invasion, many Iraqi Shi'is have looked to him for political guidance and stability; worldwide, Sistani also enjoys the largest number of followers. Perhaps for this reason, he was the only *marja'* singled out for praise:

> We are so fortunate we have the best leaders like Aqa Sistani. We should honour him and pray for his good life. Amen.

> *Tāj tāj 'alā ra's al-Sayyid 'Alī al-Sīstānī.* (A crown be upon the head of Ayatollah Sistani.)

Similarly, just as respondents praised the role of the *marja'* in providing theoretically unified leadership, they expressed discomfort with or even anger at areas of divergence. While many areas of disagreement among *marāji'* – such as in minor details of ritual practice – are insignificant, there are a few 'flagship' issues that inflame tensions between followers of different *marāji'* or are seen as divisive. One is the issue of *taṭbīr* (ritual self-flagellation with blades during 'Āshūrā' commemorations). Ayatollah Sistani has remained silent on whether or not it is permissible to engage in *taṭbīr* and encourages those who enquire about it to consult another *marja'*.[34] However, other *marāji'* express strong viewpoints. Ayatollah al-Najafi emphatically encourages it, whereas Ayatollah Khamene'i vehemently discourages it. Similarly, lay Shi'is opposed to *taṭbīr* abhor it and any media coverage of it, whereas proponents of *taṭbīr* consider it a powerful, sacred demonstration of the Shi'i faith. This has led not only to intense debates but even accusations of apostasy and physical altercations among lay Shi'is.[35] This is despite the theoretical understanding that, from the perspective of religious law, a follower of Ayatollah Sistani may select either view. It shows the intense emotions that can underlie some discussions about the differences between the religious rulings of *marāji'* in sensitive matters.

Another is the question of when the month of Ramadan begins, which Shi'i *muqallid*s expect the *marāji'* to concur on. Not only is fasting in the month of Ramadan a fundamental Islamic practice, but also, with modern science and technology, notions of time are expected

to be fixed and absolute, not uncertain. However, in practice, due to variances in how they interpret the Qur'an and hadith, *marāji'* differ in how the beginning of the month of Ramadan should be determined. While, traditionally, the beginning of the month of Ramadan has been determined by moonsighting, some *marāji'* allow the determination of the month via astronomical calculations while others do not; some allow moonsighting with a telescope while others do not; and some allow moonsighting before sunset while others do not. As a result, especially in extreme latitudes, Shi'is can begin fasting the month of Ramadan on three or four different days, and hence celebrate 'Eid al-Fiṭr – the largest global Muslim holiday – on different days. Given that it is not permissible for a young person to follow a deceased *marja'*, but it is acceptable for a person to continue following a *marja'* who passed away during their lifetime, it is also not unusual for parents and children to follow different *marāji'*. As a result, members of the same household may follow different *marāji'*, and hence commemorate these holidays on different days. While there is no easy answer to resolving the questions over moonsighting, the responses show that there is an expectation from *muqallid*s that this be done. For instance:

> It upsets me when in issues like moonsighting, which are age-old, different *marāji'* give different rulings, and in the same family/houses, different 'Eids are celebrated. This and many other such differences in rulings upsets [sic] me.

> [I] wish the different *marāji'* would come to unanimous decisions regarding certain issues such as sighting of the moon, distribution of *khums*, etc.

> It's absurd that in this age the moon sightings are interpreted so differently by some *marāji'*. I want to celebrate 'Eid with my family and friends, and, currently, the *marāji'* 'Eid *fatwa*s are dividing families and Muslim communities at this time when we desperately need unity.

In short, the reality of the *marja'iyya* as a plural system has an apparent, and unresolvable clash to many lay Shi'is with the belief in a single line of religious authority, stretching back to the divine.

At the same time, it also clashes in practice with '*marja'* shopping', or soliciting or even following multiple views, as well as the formalized practice of *tab'īḍ*. While choosing between a range of fatwas also occurs in the Sunni world, it is a more controversial subject among Twelver Shi'a due to the religious ruling that one should follow a single, living Shi'i scholar. While the majority of the respondents said that they follow a single *marja'* all or 'most' of the time, a few did not. One respondent was also quite enthusiastic about the prospect of *tab'īḍ*. The fact that Shi'is are willing to go online and debate extensively and views of *marāji'* indicate a tacit understanding that, in fact, the *marja'iyya* is neither wholly static nor unified. In other words, many respondents seemed to be balancing two conflicting paradigms: on the one hand, the idea of the *marja'* as the one representative of the one Imam; and, on the other hand, a desire to be able to choose the most suitable fatwa. However, the presence of competing fatwas comes at the cost of community coherence and strength of leadership, which are often considered in practice to be the main strengths of the *marja'iyya*.

SALVATION

In keeping with the model of the *marjaʿ* as the representative of the Imam and, by extension, God, another underlying reason expressed for following a *marjaʿ* is the desire for salvation. This also fits in with the Shiʿi paradigm of the family of the Prophet Muhammad as being the 'rope' or 'ark' of salvation; in their absence, the *marjaʿ* can fill that role.

In fact, Sistani's office did mention that one of the main reasons to follow a religious expert is for the sake of salvation and to seek refuge from punishment in the Hereafter.[36] Respondents expressed similar views:

> I fully promote and favour our *marājiʿ*, and I know and truly know they are there to guide us fully and make our way to paradise, and they teach us this world is temporary. They are always showing us the path to Allah and taking all the pain and effort.

> They are the stars of guidance in the absence/occultation of the Imam. They prevent innovation in religion and guide regular Muslims in matters of religious jurisprudence.

These two responses are noteworthy insofar as they encapsulate what can be considered a standard 'orthodox' Twelver Shiʿi narrative of religious leadership and its goals. The first response expresses the ultimate rationale behind following the Prophet or Imams, and, by extension, the *marjaʿ* – because life is temporary, the hereafter is eternal, and thus one should follow Shiʿi teachings, especially religious law, to garner a better afterlife. The latter response expresses several 'orthodox' views of what constitutes religious leadership in Twelver Shiʿi source texts: (a) that the Imams are sources of guidance (like stars, or the ark of Noah), (b) that one of the jobs of the Imam or religious leader is to prevent unlawful religious innovation (*bidʿah*), and (c) that one of the most important forms of leadership is to provide guidance in matters of religious law. Additionally, all of the *marājiʿ* ended the interviews with a prayer for the spiritual wellbeing of either the authors, or the Shiʿa people, or the Muslims – demonstrating their overarching concern with pastoral care. While neither line of argument is formally stated by *marājiʿ* in their works, both responses arise from a shared narrative on religious leadership, although in a process which the respondents may not have been consciously aware of.

Although these source texts were not mentioned, the themes of these responses fit in with a hadith narrated from the sixth Shiʿi Imam wherein the Imam refers to the *ʿulamāʾ* as those without whom the people would 'have no alternative but to become apostates from Islam'. The Imam highlights that the *ʿulamāʾ* are those 'who are the protectors of the people against the Evil' and that 'indeed, they will capture the hearts of true believers'.[37] Evidently, preservation of the faith and protection of the faithful are paramount roles of the *ʿulamāʾ*, and the *ʿulamāʾ* are responsible for the very survival of the faith, the alternative to which is apostasy. Therefore, the salvific role of the *marjaʿ* is strong, even if less emphasized in approaches to the *marjaʿiyya* based on scripture or politics. Furthermore, these themes show the shared paradigm itself between *marjaʿ* and follower is itself old, even if the system of the *marjaʿiyya* has evolved.

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FINANCIAL MATTERS

Lastly, it is not possible to neglect the financial role of the *marāji*, which can seem para-doxical. On the one hand, the *marja* collects the *khums* tax (a 20% tax on excess income) from his followers and administers it as he sees fit, and therefore manages enormous sums of money. The exact amount can only be left to the imagination because *marāji* do not release financial reports, but *khums* funds many Shi'i religious, charitable, and educational institutions worldwide. On the other hand, the *marāji* live very simple lives and avoid any sort of material affinity; for instance, some years ago, al-Sistani publicly disallowed his children to carry rucksacks to school, which had been gifted to them, since not all children have rucksacks. Similarly, the late Grand Ayatollah Mar'ashi Najafi was never able to afford hajj, even though he received and disbursed vast amounts of *khums*.

Therefore, simplicity of lifestyle was considered a tacit criterion for leadership among respondents. For instance:

> I have visited two *marāji*, and looking at their simple life, their humbleness towards others [elevates them in this person's eyes].

> One good example is the extravagant lifestyle we lead. And look how filthy rich many [of us] are and look at the *marāji*. Look at the lifestyle they lead and look at the peace they possess. Look at our leaders and how much peace they lack?

This again points to greater faith in the system of religious leadership, vis-à-vis the corruption and appropriation of wealth found in many governments.

It should be noted that, during the interviews with selected *marāji* for this paper, a certain simplicity of lifestyle was also evident. For instance, when meeting with Ayatollah Sistani, those present were seated on cushions on the floor, or on plastic chairs. During the meetings, tea or juice was served. Most of the *marāji*'s offices and homes were also in indistinct buildings, which one would simply walk past, were one not to know that they were there. In particular, when visiting Ayatollah Sistani, there was also an expectation of being unadorned; for instance, women were expected to wear all black and not to wear any visible jewellery. The *marāji* interviewed also demonstrated humility in their actions. For example, al-Fayad rose to his feet to receive the authors and only assumed his seat when both the authors had been seated. Al-Sistani rose to his feet when the authors were departing even though he was unwell on the day. Despite their stark and austere living conditions, some of the *marāji* presented the authors with small farewell gifts – either something of religious significance or books.

Nonetheless, despite an overall faith in the abstinence of the *marāji* from material indulgences, there were concerns about financial transparency and nepotism. That is, the *marja* himself was not accused of indulging, but there were concerns about individuals or organisations surrounding the *marja*, or people collecting and administering *khums* on behalf of the *marja*. For instance:

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[I am concerned about the] system of appointing the *wakīl* [representative], the person who should be given religious charity. I have been seeing that the next *marjaʿ* cancels the appointees of the previous one, and mostly authority is given to relatives or close friends of the family members, which I feel is totally wrong. Why it can't be institutionalised so that things are managed without any disruption, and only *ʿalim*s are appointed to carry forward the community welfare? This can easily be done by appointing senior students of the *marjaʿ*, and they can be sent to different countries This will also help in understanding the difficulties faced by the believers of that region and accordingly guidance is provided to us.

I feel strongly about me having some say in the distribution of my *khums*, i.e., if I personally encounter an institution where I am fully convinced that it is principally involved with spreading and teaching the religion, I do not [want to] have to wait for the granting of permission from the *marjaʿ*.

There are a lot of negative news about the collection of *khums* by the offices – there needs to be a clear directive to us in this regard.

Perhaps this explains why only half (54.3%) of the respondents said that they give charity to the *marājiʿ* or organisations authorised by the *marājiʿ*. That is, in theory, they are supposed to give their *khums* to a *marjaʿ*; in practice, they do not all do that, even if they do follow a *marjaʿ*. Instead, a significant proportion (40.3%) distribute their *khums* and/or give charity as they wished and without a fixed amount. That being said, respondents who have met both their *marjaʿ* and his representatives (71.6%) or met just the representatives of their *marjaʿ* (65.0%) were more likely to contribute their *khums* to organisations authorized by their *marjaʿ*. Respondents who had not met their *marjaʿ* or his representative were more likely to distribute their *khums* as they wished and without a fixed amount (54.5%). Evidently, meeting one's *marjaʿ* established trust. However, respondents who only met the representative of their *marjaʿ* but not the *marjaʿ* himself (63.7%) were just as likely to contribute their *khums* to authorized organizations. This may also tie back in with the challenges regarding communication; those *muqallid*s who had more formal channels of contact with the *marjaʿ* or his representatives were more likely to cede funds to them; others may be willing to do so but unsure of the best route to do this.

Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence reinforces the idea that opaqueness in the distribution of *khums* might be causal in this behavior. Indeed, some scholars who agreed to be interviewed for this study suggested that rumors and unsubstantiated assertions were exacerbating this issue, while some other scholars admitted that they knew there were issues with the system of *khums*. Thus, it can be said that financial transparency is a significant concern among Twelver Shiʿa who are otherwise committed to the system of *taqlīd*.

CONCLUSION

This study made clear that many Twelver Shiʿis are deeply committed to the *marjaʿi-yya*. Twelver Shiʿis worldwide currently share similar perceptions of and interest in the

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marjaʿiyya, possibly due to the impact of globalization, social media, and satellite media in standardizing views on the *marjaʿiyya*. However, Twelver Shiʿis are no longer content for the *marjaʿ*–follower relationship to continue according to the traditional model, in which the *marjaʿ* acts from behind a veneer of secrecy, and the follower only receives occasional pronouncements. Instead, they want *marjaʿiyya* in the digital age to involve rapid, two-way communication, with the *marjaʿ* directly hearing their concerns. They do not only want to visit the *marjaʿ*; they also want the *marjaʿ* to come to them and witness their situations first-hand. Even if practical circumstances may dictate some level of secrecy, they no longer want the *marjaʿiyya* to act in secret; instead, they want intellectual and financial transparency, especially regarding the administration of *khums*. In short, they want increased agency and can wield the threat of 'market competition' – namely, that if they do not get what they want or need, they can go to a competing *marjaʿ*.

However, at the same time, the followers of the *marājiʿ* ardently desire that the *marjaʿiyya* act as one entity, and there be no 'market competition'. This derives from the belief that the *marjaʿ* represents the Imam, who represents God; and that religious doctrine and law is a single, eternal, perfect system. Just as the Imam is considered the 'ark of salvation' or the 'rope of God', the *marjaʿ* must act as a single 'ark' or a single 'rope'; Noah did not captain a fleet of boats. Secondarily, it is because the *marjaʿ* acts as a social and political leader, providing stability in areas where Shiʿis are a minority, at risk, or under-represented. This desire for unicity makes it unlikely that the *marjaʿiyya* will actually shift to a committee model (that is, *tabʿīḍ*), since doing so would strip away the charisma associated with a single leader.

Putting these two impetuses together – that is, the desire for options, and the desire for unity – one can conclude that many followers of the *marājiʿ* share a mental paradigm with an inherent conflict. While they accept that the *marjaʿ* has the authority to derive religious law, including religious law regarding how the *marjaʿiyya* works, and that *marājiʿ* are 'allowed' to differ, they find it difficult to accept the reality of difference among *marājiʿ*, especially regarding issues such as moonsighting. This inherent conflict is a source of tension that may continue to grow if it is not resolved.

The five *marjaʿ*s who were interviewed mostly glossed over these concerns and simply maintained that the system is as it is, it is how God as decreed it, and it is how it shall always be. This is not to say that all *marjaʿ*s share that view. There have been and are reformist *marjaʿ*s. However, the views expressed represent the stance that is most publicly endorsed today in Shiʿi scholarship. Possibly, the *marājiʿ* were intentionally simplifying their views to avoid bogging down 'laypeople' with the complexities of the derivation of religious law. Detail may also be avoided to avoid casting doubt into the hearts of the believers; it is easier to accept a conclusion of 'this is how it is' rather than to process a complex textual derivation. Textual derivation may also invite debate. This genre of answer is also reflective of the culture of secrecy surrounding the *marjaʿiyya*. That is, the inner workings of the *marjaʿiyya* are kept secret, and laypeople are only given pronouncements. However, the responses from followers of the *marājiʿ* suggest that this approach will not continue to be tenable in the future, and, ultimately, both follower and followed will have to negotiate a new relationship that fits the realities of the digital era.[38]

APPENDIX A: SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR THE *MARJAʿIYYA*

The following traditions (*aḥādīth* or *akhbār*) were presented by Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn al-Ansari as support for the *marjaʿiyya* during two interviews with Zain Moloobhoy (in Najaf, Iraq, December 2018 and in Sydney, Australia, June 2019). Comments on the narrations, narrators, or content have been made by the authors where appropriate. Note that the concept of 'judgement' in hadith has been extended to encompass religious jurisprudence in general. Note also that, in the Shiʿi tradition, the corpus of hadith includes narrations from the Prophet as well as the Imams.

1. An excerpt of the hadith known as *maqbūlat ʿUmar ibn Ḥanẓala* (The Accepted Weak Narration from ʿUmar ibn Hanzala):

> I [ʿUmar ibn Hanzala] asked Aba ʿAbdillah [Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq, the sixth Shiʿi Imam] about a situation where two men from among our companions [that is, two Shiʿi men] disagreed over religion or inheritance… What should they do?

> He [the Imam] said: 'They both should look to the narrators of our traditions, those who know the lawful and the impermissible, and who know our rulings. They should embrace him as a judge, for I have made him a judge over you. If he passes judgment according to our rulings and someone does not accept that from him, that person has made light of the judgment of God….'[39]

There are no available narrations in the biographical sources regarding the trustworthiness of the narrator ʿUmar ibn Hanzala; hence, the tradition is formally classified as weak. However, because it was cited by the early Shiʿi hadith compilers and was embraced in classical Shiʿi scholarship, it is considered reliable. The import of it on the subject of religious leadership is clear.

2. It is narrated from Muhammad ibn ʿAli ibn Mahbub from Muhammad ibn al-Husayn from Dhibyan ibn Hakim from Musa ibn Akil:

> Abu ʿAbdillah [the sixth Shiʿi Imam, Jaʿfar al-Sadiq] was asked about a man who had a dispute with his brother regarding a [legal] right. Each of them selected an arbiter to represent them; however, the two arbiters disagreed.

> He [the Imam] said, 'How did they disagree?'

> He [Musa ibn Aqil] said, 'Each arbiter ruled in favor of the one who chose him.'

> He [the Imam] said, 'Let them look to the one who is the justest (*aʿdal*) and the most learned (*afqah*) in the religion of God; his judgment shall prevail.'[40]

3. The first Shiʿi Imam, ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, wrote to his close companion, Malik ibn al-Harith al-Ashtar, whom he had appointed as governor of Egypt:

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For the settlement of disputes among people select him [as a judge] who is the best (*afḍal*) of your subjects.[41]

'The best' or the 'most distinguished' can be taken to mean the 'most learned'. This view holds particularly true when read in conjunction with the other traditions referred to here. Furthermore, given that the Imam refers to the 'most distinguished' specifically in the case of judgeship, such an assumption would be the most reasonable, for distinction between potential judges must hinge first and foremost on their knowledge of the law.

Furthermore, by virtue of its widely accepted applicability in the contemporary Shiʿi world as a guide for justice, this letter by the first Imam, while ostensibly addressed to a specific governor at a specific time and specific place, can be reasonably assumed to hold general, timeless truths. However, if the advice from the Imam is taken to mean judgement solely for the community of Malik al-Ashtar as opposed to future generations, then this excerpt might not be relevant to the topic in question.

* * *

In addition to the above, Ayatollah al-Ansari also mentioned the following two traditions which lack a chain of narration. Al-Ansari explained that the first of these, sourced from *Kitab al-Ikhtisas*, was identified by the late Grand Ayatollah Sayyid al-Khuʾi as pertaining to general *khilāfa* (leadership) and not necessarily to specific cases. Nevertheless, they follow the same theme as the other traditions mentioned above that support the case for *aʿlamiyya*.

1. The Messenger of God said: 'Whenever a person learns knowledge to argue with the foolish, or to appear bright in front of the learned, or to attract the masses to himself, and says "I am your leader" – let that person take his seat in the Fire. Leadership is only for those who merit it [lit. "its people"]; whenever someone calls the people to himself while there is someone more learned than him, God will not look at him on the Day of Resurrection.'[42]

2. It is reported that the ninth Shiʿi Imam, Muhammad al-Jawad, said to his uncle: 'O uncle, it is an enormity in God's eyes that you stand in front of Him tomorrow while He says to you: "Why did you give fatwas [ruling] to my servants about what you do not know while there is someone more knowledgeable than you?"'[43]

APPENDIX B: A SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEWS WITH THE FIVE *MARĀJIʿ*

In addition to the survey of lay Shiʿis, and in order to get another angle on contemporary developments in the *marjaʿiyya*, five *marājiʿ*, all residing in Iraq, were interviewed by one or both of the authors[44] in November–December 2018; namely: Grand Ayatollah al-Sayyid ʿAli al-Husayni al-Sistani, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Saʿid al-Hakim, Grand Ayatollah Shaykh Bashir al-Najafi, Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Taqi al-Husayni al-Mudarrisi, and Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayad. Four of these interviews were conducted in Arabic (or a mixture of Arabic/Farsi), and one was conducted in Urdu.

The following summary of each of the interviews has been included in case it might benefit other researchers

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Grand Ayatollah Sistani.[45] Al-Sistani is the most popularly followed *marjaʿ* worldwide and has a particular following among English speakers due to his network of representatives and the translation of his manual of religious rulings into English (as well as a specific publication for Shiʿa living in the West). Although of Iranian origin, he resides in Najaf, Iraq, and plays a key role in contemporary Iraqi politics.

Due to security concerns, note-taking or recording equipment (including pen and paper) were disallowed during the interview with al-Sistani, which resulted in some frantic scribbling and recapping afterwards. However, in addition to the personal interview, a written response was received (in Arabic) from al-Sistani's office; the verbal interview reinforced the written response and did not yield any new information regarding the questions at hand. The main themes that emerged from the written response are as follows:

1. The system of *marjaʿiyya* as granting authority to the most learned does not change with the passage of time. However, in today's world, a *muqallid* might use social media or other forms of modern technology to discern which *marjaʿ* is the most learned.

2. Just as people consult a doctor when ill, an engineer when they need to design something, and a carpenter when they need to build something, so too should people consult a religious specialist when they require religious guidance. This is an eternal principle which does not change in the face of modernity. However, it is ironic that people prioritize finding a specialist medical doctor, but sometimes take a haphazard approach to finding a religious doctor.

3. When multiple *marājiʿ* appear to be at the same level of knowledge, one should follow the one who seems to be the most pious. If they appear to be at the same level of knowledge and piety, then it is permissible to divide *taqlīd* among them (engage in *tabʿīḍ*).

4. Some of the youth may not take *taqlīd* seriously because they have received confusing ideas about it, and their minds are like 'a forest full of trees and barbed wire'. However, because following a specialist is something which all people agree on, clarifying this concept to them will make them accept the idea of *taqlīd*.

5. One of the main reasons to follow a religious expert is for the sake of salvation and seeking refuge from punishment in the Hereafter.

6. Whoever seeks knowledge and is keen to reach the highest levels of knowledge can reach *ijtihād* and its highest levels. Reaching *ijtihād* is rather easy (!).

Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Saʿid al-Hakim.[46] Al-Hakim also resides in Najaf, Iraq, and has a significant following mainly in the non-English-speaking world.

Al-Hakim's responses were generally in line with al-Sistani's. Al-Hakim was explicit in rejecting the idea of *tabʿīḍ* of convenience and emphatic on the validity of *aʿlamiyya* (following the most learned).[47] While acknowledging challenges to the *marjaʿiyya*,[48] al-Hakim expressed reservations around the idea of an institution that can continue to protect and build on the base of knowledge established by a deceased *marjaʿ* with a replacement *marjaʿ*

taking the work forward. Instead, he stressed a faith-based approach with a firm belief that the Twelfth Imam was looking over the Shi'a, something reinforced by the responses from 'lay Shi'a'.

Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Taqi al-Husayni al-Mudarrissi.[49] Ayatollah al-Mudarrisi resides in Karbala, Iraq and also has a significant following mainly in the non-English speaking world, although some English-speaking students have of late attended his seminary.

Al-Mudarrisi suggested that the *marāji'* who prescribe *a'lamiyya* considered themselves to be the *a'lam* (most learned). Therefore, it would not be reasonable for them to be expected to prescribe *tab'īḍ*. Furthermore, al-Mudarrisi highlighted the concern that unqualified people are claiming the title of *marja'* and the consequences of making *tab'īḍ* widespread could therefore be of concern. However, he cited Qur'an 16:43–44 and pointed out that the *hadith* related to *fuqahā'* use the plural, not singular. Although he did not explicitly state his position on this issue, it can be reasonably concluded by his fatwas that the notion of turning to a single *faqīh* is not necessarily something he agrees with entirely.[50]

Al-Mudarrisi underlined the potential pragmatic challenges facing *marja'iyya* today. He suggested that some of the opacity around the *marja'iyya* is because protection of the *marja'iyya* is the responsibility of the *'ulamā'*. Among the many ways the *'ulamā'* manage the *marja'iyya* is that 'they hide some strategy in preparing for the next *marja'* and how they communicate with other *marāji'* due to *taqiyya* (dissimulation) to prevent enemies from weakening the *marja'iyya*.'[51]

Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Bashir al-Najafi.[52] Al-Najafi is of Pakistani origin and resides in Najaf, Iraq. Being from South Asia, he has invested particular attention in improving the circumstances and overall religious awareness of Shi'a in South Asia.

Al-Najafi stressed that *a'lamiyya* was necessary and rejected the idea of splitting *taqlīd* for convenience. Al-Najafi used the analogy of a doctor and engineer to underline his view that the idea of following the guidance of the most knowledgeable person in any field is the only rational choice to make. When probed on the specialized nature of doctors and engineers (and indeed, teams of specialist doctors and engineers from different fields working on a single issue), al-Najafi suggested that there would have to be a lead doctor or engineer on the team; this is not dissimilar to the *marja'iyya*.

On the differences in the views between various *marāji'*, al-Najafi suggested that two doctors graduating in the same field from the same institution at the same time could still have different opinions on the same subject matter. It was up to the patient to find the most knowledgeable doctor.[53]

Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayad.[54] Al-Fayad was born in Afghanistan and resides in Najaf, Iraq.

Al-Fayad's views were similar to those of al-Sistani and al-Najafi. He emphasized that there would always be an *a'lam*. Therefore, he rejected the idea of splitting *taqlīd* (*tab'īḍ*). Al-Fayad also used the engineer/doctor analogy to make the case for *a'lamiyya*.

When asked about the difference in opinions between the *marāji'*, al-Fayad suggested that the difference was only in how they thought about the issue at hand (and not in their knowledge) because God, the law-giver (in His *ḥukm* and *shari'a*) is one.

Summary. In summary, the main points that were raised throughout the interviews with the *marāji* were (a) the rationale of following the *marja'* as a religious specialist, (b) the

importance of following the most learned, (c) a link between the *marjaʿ* and the Hidden Imam, (d) the importance and continued relevance of the *marjaʿiyya* in today's world, (e) the role of the *marjaʿ* in helping the lay Shiʿi achieve salvation, and (f) the need for the *marājiʿ* to sometimes act non-transparently due to dangers surrounding the Shiʿi community. The main points of difference were over (g) *tabʿīḍ* (splitting *taqlīd* among a group of specialists).

By and large, as will be seen in the survey results below, points (a) through (f) were reiterated by some lay Shiʿis who were surveyed, whereas (g) was largely rejected in favor of the *marjaʿ* as a single leader or the *marjaʿiyya* acting as a unified whole. This suggests a shared paradigm regarding the nature and role of religious leadership.

NOTES

1. For instance, in *The Thread of Muʿawiya*, a posthumous work published on behalf of the late Linda Walbridge, it is written that few original questions are asked of the *ʿulamāʾ* 'considering that a majority of Shiʿa might never need the answer to any new religious question.' *The Thread of Muʿawiya: The Making of a Marjaʿ al-Taqlīd* (Bloomington, Indiana: The Ramsay Press, 2014), 22. This may have been true in the distant past but is certainly not true today, when *marājiʿ* are bombarded with questions about things such as transgender surgery and organ donation.

2. ʿAli Husayni al-Sistani, 'Following a *mujtahid* (*taqlid*),' in *Islamic Laws* <https://www.sistani.org/english/book/48/2116/>. Accessed 20 July 2020.

3. ʿAli Husayni al-Sistani, 'Following a *mujtahid* (*taqlid*),' in *Islamic Laws* <https://www.sistani.org/english/book/48/2116/>. Accessed 20 July 2020.

4. The question of what constitutes 'real' Twelver Shiʿism can be fuzzy, and sometimes a matter of definition, insofar as literature on Twelver Shiʿism today is generally written on the assumption that Twelver Shiʿism is and only is the juristically-focused tradition associated with the *marjaʿiyyah* and its textual and historical tradition. However, it could be argued that any Muslim who self-identifies as Shiʿi and adheres devotionally to the Twelve Imams is practising Twelver Shiʿism, even if they do not look to jurists as their primary authorities. Furthermore, matters of authority are not always absolute; and, in practice, multiple systems of authority can persist simultaneously. Therefore, this exception is a nod to the reality that there has historically been diversity in what can be considered 'Twelver Shiʿism', although the *marjaʿiyyah* model is considered 'orthodox' and 'mainstream' today. Examples would be Twelver Shiʿi Sufi orders with their own authority structures, as well as groups referred to as 'Shiʿis' in some countries, such as the Ahl-e Haqq and the Alevis. In 'De-centring Shiʿi Islam', Morgan Clarke and Mirjam Künkler do discuss the complexities of studying Shiʿa and call for a broader range of studies on Shiʿa beyond top-down studies placing the *marjaʿiyyah* at the centre of the Shiʿi experience, albeit 'De-centring Shiʿi Islam' does focus heavily on the *marjaʿiyyah*. Morgan Clarke and Mirjam Kunkler, De-centring Shiʿi Islam, in British Journal of Middle East Studies (2017) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1387421>. Accessed 19 October 2020.

5. For instance, Akhbaris, or Shiʿis who, for whatever reason, personally do not believe in the *marjaʿiyyah*. Regarding the latter, John Cappucci cites a minority of religiously committed Shiʿis who decline to reject the *marjaʿiyyah*. See John Cappucci, '*Selecting a Spiritual Authority: The Maraji ʿal-Taqlid among First- and Second-Wave Iraqi Shiʿa Muslims in Dearborn, Michigan*', in *Journal of Shiʿa Islamic Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Winter 2015), 5–17.

6. For instance, in *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa*, Linda Walbridge speaks of lack of awareness of the *marjaʿi-yyah* among some Lebanese Shiʿis in the 1960s and the 1980s. Linda Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa: The Institution of the Marjaʿ Taqlid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6.

7. Evidence for change in this area is largely anecdotal, resting on what elderly and now-deceased Shiʿis have said about how the Iranian Revolution changed their awareness of Shiʿi religious law. That being said, even before the Revolution, some Shiʿis were very dedicated to and interested in the *marjaʿiyya*.

8. For discussions on the development of the *marjaʿiyya*, see Linda Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa*; Juan Cole, 'Imami Jurisprudence and the Role of the ʿUlamāʾ: Murtaza Ansari on Emulating the Supreme Exemplar', in *Religion and Politics in Iran: Shiʾism from Quietism to Revolution*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 22–46; Devin J. Stewart, 'Islamic Juridical Hierarchies and the office of Marjiʿ al-Taqlīd', in *Shiʿite Heritage: Essays on Classical and Modern Traditions*, ed. Lynda Clarke (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 133–157; et al.

9. Stephen Rosiny argues in a piece originally published in 2003 that advances in mass communication, communication, transportation, the sedenterization of nomads, urbanization, higher education, publishing, mass media, television, and satellite TV 'heralded fundamental changes in the conception of religious author-ity with Shiism', and predicts that the Internet will do the same. Stephen Rosiny, 'The Twelver Shia Online: Challenges for its Religious Authorities', in The Other Shiites: From the Mediterranean to Central Asia, ed. by Alessandro Monsutti; Silvia Naef; Seyed Farian Sabah (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 245–260 (quotation from page 246).

10. The factors behind the spread of the Shiʿi diaspora, especially with respect to the Baʿath regime, are outlined in Yafa Shanneik, 'Gendering Religious Authority in the Diaspora: Shii Women in Ireland', in *Reli-gion, Gender, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Niamh Reily and Stacey Scriver (New York and Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 58–70.

11. A simple Google search on al-Sistani's fatwas on the Iraqi elections or on the establishment of the popular front to fight ISIS in Iraq demonstrate this point. The same is true for those of al-Khameneʾi or any of the other leading *marājiʿ*.

12. See Hamid Mavani, 'Analysis of Khomeini's Proofs for *al-Wilaya al-Mutlaqa* (Comprehensive Authority) of the Jurist', in *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa: The Institution of the* Marjaʿ Taqlid, ed. Linda Walbridge (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 183–184.

13. Sayed Hossein Al-Qazwini, interview by Zain Moloobhoy, Karbala, Iraq, December 2018.

14. This challenge is discussed in John Capucci, 'The Surreptitious Scholar: The Challenges of Conducting Interviews with Iraqi-Shiʾa Muslim Participants in Dearborn, Michigan', in *Fieldwork in Religion*, vol. 10, no. 1 (July 2015), 82 – 96 and Muhammad Reza Tajri, 'Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth', in *Muslims in the UK and Europe II*, ed. Yasir Suleiman and Paul Andersen (Cambridge: Centre of Islamic Studies, 2016), 148–156.

15. This is in keeping with a finding by Stephen Rosiny that the Internet (by 2003) had caused '[s]pecific local rites' to be 'increasingly complemented by, or even replaced, by translocal practices,' and that the international circulation of printed publications, CD-ROMS, and online material has led to more 'formalized mass education' among Twelver Shiʿis. Stephen Rosiny, 'The Twelver Shia Online', 248–9.

16. However, one scholar was specifically interviewed regarding his view on which traditions (*aḥādīth/ akhbār*) support the *marjaʿiyya*, and the traditions he cites have been included in the appendix, for those who are interested. The material in Appendix A is taken from Muhammad Husayn al-Ansari, interview by Zain Moloobhoy, Najaf, Iraq in December 2018 and Sydney, Australia in June 2019.

17. See Appendix A.

18. M. al-Musawi, 'Taqleed – Your Questions Answered' (Ahlulbayt TV, 2013) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TF8JwGRocg&feature=youtu.be>. Accessed 23 July 2020.

19. 'Ali Husayni al-Sistani, interview.

20. Bashir Husayni al-Najafi, interview with Zain Moloobhoy and Amina Inloes, Najaf, Iraq December 2018.

21. Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayad, interview with Zain Moloobhoy, Najaf, Iraq December 2018.

22. Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim, interview, Najaf, Iraq, December 2018

23. Written guidance provided by the office of al-Sistani with reference to the interview with 'Ali Husayni al-Sistani by Zain Moloobhoy and Amina Inloes, Najaf, Iraq, December 2018.

24. Popular acceptance of the idea that one should follow the most learned *marja'* was also found in John Cappucci, '*Selecting a Spiritual Authority: The Maraji' al-Taqlid among First- and Second-Wave Iraqi Shi'a Muslims in Dearborn, Michigan*'.

25. That Shi'i youth in the UK know about the *marja'iyya* but feel disconnected from the *marja'iyya*, and feel internally compelled to obey it, is supported by Muhammad Reza Tajri, 'Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth'. A sense of disconnect between *marja'* and *muqallid* (irrespective of age) was also found in Cameron Zargar, *The Legal and Spiritual Authority of the* Marāji', 148–151.

26. Mohammad Taqi Al-Mudarrissi, interview with Zain Moloobhoy, Karbala, Iraq, December, 2018.

27. Linda Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shi'a*, 37.

28. For instance, there is a short video interview of Razia Dhirani, who has been leading Shi'i pilgrimage groups, available at <https://youtu.be/f4nEI1Ar3_w>. One could also mention Nazma Datoo who runs Haj Tours. The co-author of this paper has attended meetings with *marāji'* in Iraq arranged by them, despite the fact that the office of *marāji'* are essentially male spaces.

29. The mainstream Twelver Shi'i view is that a *marja'* must be male, although some Shi'i scholars and thinkers challenge this. For instance, Ayatollah Sistani specifies maleness as a criterion for a *marja'* in the second point of the chapter on *taqlīd* in his Islamic Laws. The opposing discussion can be found in Ladan Rahbari, *Women's Ijtihad and Lady Amin's Islamic Ethics on Womanhood and Motherhood, in Religions*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2020), 1–13 <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/11/2/88/htm>. In any case, 'male' was specified since, in practice, all of today's recognised *marāji'* are male.

30. Also discussed with respect to Shi'i women in Yafa Shanneik, 'Gendering Religious Authority in the Diaspora'.

31. Liyakat Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 80–85.

32. This point is mentioned in Thomas Fibiger, '*Marja'iyyah* from Below: Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion', in *2015 Proceedings of the First Annual International Conference on Shi'i Studies: Past and Present* (London: ICAS Press, 2015), 43–62. That being said, the expected nature of the relationship between the *marja'* and the Mahdi is blurry, since the *marja'* should not profess any direct or regular communication with the Mahdi, and there is no formalized requirement that the *marja'* have any sort of spiritual or unusual experience. However, there are ample stories of Shi'i scholars throughout history having had encounters with the Mahdi; for instance, see <https://knowthemahdi.com/incidents-of-mulaqaat-people-who-met-imam-mahdi-as/>. See also Cameron Zargar, *The Legal and Spiritual Authority of the Marāji'* [PhD dissertation] (University of California, Los Angeles, 2020), 34–49, 186–187.

33. The distinction is due to the fact that not all Shi'a scholars agree on who qualifies as a *marja'*. For instance, the late Ayatollah Fadlullah had a significant following, but not all Shi'i *marāji'* accepted him as a *marja'*.

34. 'Ali Husayni al-Sistani, interview by Zain Moloobhoy and Amina Inloes, Najaf, Iraq, December 2018.

35. For a sampling of the views of lay Shiʿa on *taṭbīr*, one only has to search online for the term, paying special attention to sites not run by Shiʿi scholars, such as ShiaChat.com or Twitter. The views of lay Shiʿa on *taṭbīr* can also be deduced from which scholarly views they personally choose to share online, such 'Is tatbir lawful?', in *alqatreh.net, 19 Muharram 1431* <http://www.alqatrah.net/en/an74> (for *taṭbīr*), versus 'Why We Should Ban Tatbir and Zanjir in our Centres', in *Islamic Human Rights Commision*, 27 September 2017 <https://www.ihrc.org.uk/news/articles/11959-why-we-should-ban-tatbir-and-zanjir-in-our-centres> (against *taṭbīr*); both of these articles cite fatwas of one or more Shiʿi scholars and argue strongly for their point. The association with one's view on *taṭbīr* and apostasy can be found in *Tatbir: A Disturbing Innovation* (available online at <tatbir.org>, n.p., n.d.).

36. al-Sistani, interview.

37. Mohammedreza Kalantari, 'Power of Association', 37.

38. The authors would like to thank Cameron Zargar for his thoughtful feedback on the article. The authors would like to express their gratitude towards the five *marāji* and other Shiʿi scholars for agreeing to be interviewed. The authors would also like to give a nod of appreciation to the anonymous respondents for taking the time to share their views.

39. Muhammad ibn Yaʿqub al-Kulayni, *al-Kafi* (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1367 AH (solar)/1988), vol. 1, p. 54; al-Shaykh al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih* (Qum: Jamaʿat al-Mudarrisin, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 2; al-Shaykh al-Saduq, *al-Tahdhib*, vol. 6, p. 301.

40. al-Hurr al-ʿAmili, *Wasaʾil al-Shiʿa* (Qum: Muʾassasat Al al-Bayt li-Ihyāʿ al-Turath, 1414 AH), vol. 27, p. 123.

41. al-Sharif al-Radi (ed.), *Nahj al-Balagha*, Letter 53 <https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-2-letters-and-sayings>, accessed 15 June 2019.

42. Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 413 AH), *al-Ikhtisas*, ed. A. al-Ghifari (Qum: Jamaʿat al-Mudarrisin, n.d.), 263.

43. Muhammad ibn Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Wafaʾ, 1983), vol. 50, p. 100.

44. Zain Moloobhoy was present at all five interviews, and Amina Inloes was present at two.

45. al-Sistani, interview.

46. al-Hakim, interview.

47. When asked about the ideas on 'institutional *marjaʿiyya*' of the late Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim and his student the late Grand Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr, al-Hakim suggested that the idea of an 'institution' had merit but not for the zeitgeist.

48. See Muhammad Saeed al-Hakim, *Marjaeya: A Candid Conversation* ([United States]: The Mainstay Foundation, 2018). Al-Hakim was not aware that the book had been translated and a fair amount of time was spent in discussing the publishing of the book.

49. Mohammad Taqi Al-Mudarressi, interview with Zain Moloobhoy, Karbala, Iraq, December, 2018.

50. Mohammad Taqi Al-Modarressi. *The Laws of Islam with Scriptural References* (n.l.: Enlight Publishing, 50–52).

51. Al-Mudarrisi, interview. Al-Mudarrisi also mentioned the late Grand Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr who called for a foundation or institution of the *marjaʿiyya*. Al-Mudarrisi highlighted al-Sadr's position that the new *marjaʿ* should not deal with an existing issue and pointed out that this was done in the 1970s before the *marāji* started establishing their offices (as they currently exist). However, al-Mudarrisi stressed that al-Sadr referred to his suggestion as *al-muaʾssasa* of *marjaʿīyya* as opposed to today's *al-maktab* (office) of *marjaʿīyya*. Al-Mudarrisi seemed to be suggesting that al-Sadr's work warranted a fresh look today.

52. Al-Najafi, interview.

53. When asked about the idea of a 'collective *ijtihād*' council, al-Najafi argued that there can only be one of three outcomes for such an endeavour: either the *aʿlam* amongst the scholars present will automatically

rise to the leadership role (rendering the 'collective' moot); or there will be a lack of consensus on outcomes (in which case, how would it be 'collective'?); or, if consensus was forced, it would result in weak outcomes.

54. al-Fayad, interview.

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