Zackery M. Heern, *The Emergence of Modern Shi'ism: Islamic Reform in Iraq and Iraq*, Oneworld, 2015, 240 pp., $30.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9781780744964.

The eighteenth century is one of the least properly understood periods in the history of Twelver Shi'ism in Iran. Dubbed as the "Interregnum," it has been mainly seen as a period marred by political turmoil and, as a result, cultural, intellectual, and economic stagnation and decline. In comparison to the Safavid era that preceded it and the Qajar era that followed it, it has received much less scholarly attention. That is why I was very excited to read Zackery M. Heern's *The Emergence of Modern Shi'ism: Islamic Reform in Iraq and Iran*, in which the author aims to examine "the origins and early developments of the modern Usuli movement" (5) focusing on the crucial figure of Muhammad Baqir Bihbahani (d. 1791) and some of his prominent students.[1] I was looking forward to reading a rich and fascinating historical analysis of the astonishing success of the Usuli movement that came to dominate the Shi'i seminaries of Iran and Iraq by the end of the eighteenth century, marginalizing the rival Akhbari school, sometimes through violent means.[2] Although Heern's focus is mostly on the Usuli movement, he chooses to include two other movements in his analysis—the Wahhabi movement and the reform movement of Ahmad Ibn Idris—to help the reader understand how neo-Usulism "emerged as part of a wider trend of Islamic reform and revival that began in the eighteen century" (6). Heern never explains, however, why he has chosen these movements over others beyond saying that these are "the most prominent" examples of revivalist movements of the eighteenth century. One wonders based on what criteria the important reform movement spearheaded by Shah Waliullah Dihlawi (d. 1762) is considered less "important," for example?

The book is based on Heern's PhD dissertation, which was defended at the University of Utah's history department in 2011. It seems like there has been a conscious move in the process of publication to make it more suitable for a broader audience. From larger font size and a simplified transliteration system for Arabic and Persian terms (which is never explained) to an extensive glossary of terms at the end of the book and the small number of direct quotes from primary sources, these all indicate that the book is marketed not just to a few specialists in Islamic studies but an audience that might include undergraduate students

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[1] Heern consistently refers to Bihbahani as Bihbihani. I was unable to find any major Persian dictionary that agrees with the latter pronunciation.

[2] Heern coins the term neo-Usulism in reference to the movement spearheaded by Bihbahani in order to differentiate it from the long tradition of Usuli thinking within Shi'i intellectual circles represented by towering figures such as al-Hilli (d. 1325).

and the general educated public interested in the modern Middle East. This is a positive step in and of itself and I hope more of us academics make a similar effort to make our writing accessible. The goal of this review, however, is to assess the arguments and analyses offered in the book on a purely academic basis. From this perspective, Heern's book fails to satisfy some of the most basic standards of an original academic work. I have chosen to focus mostly on chapters one and six to substantiate this claim because, unlike the rest of the chapters that only offer a not-so-well-written historical narrative that is synthesized from other secondary sources, these are the two chapters that supposedly contain the "original research" of the author.

Chapter 1 is meant to offer "a theoretical basis for the reminder of the book." The main analytical framework used by the author is the concept of "multiple modernities." In using this concept, Heern intends to offer an analysis of the Islamic revivalist movements in the eighteenth century, especially the Usuli movement, that could serve as a corrective to the presumably distorted view created by mostly unnamed scholars who have committed the sin of relying on the "traditional Eurocentric frameworks of modernity" in which modernity is seen as a single phenomenon originating in Europe. The alternative framework of multiple modernities, Heern states, helps us unhinge "modernity" from "Eurocentrism" and would hypothetically lead us to understand how Islamic revivalist movements of the eighteenth century—Usulism, Wahhabism, and neo-Sufism—were "modern" phenomena as "responses to the changing socio-political landscape of the Middle East" and therefore "intimately linked to modernity" (18).

Heern's understanding of the idea of "multiple modernities" seems to have been largely taken from Eisenstadt's notable work, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (24).[3] His understanding of Eisenstadt's general theoretical framework, however, remains incomplete at best and incoherent at worse. Most fundamentally, there is a frustrating conceptual ambiguity that plagues Heern's entire chapter: Heern fails to recognize that talking about modernity, in singular or plural terms alike, is predicated upon a working definition of the very idea. Otherwise, it is not clear in what sense movements spearheaded by Bihbahani, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and Ibn Idris are to be considered "modern." The author spills a lot of ink about what modernity is *not* from his perspective but he seems to have little to say about what it *is*. For example, he is emphatic that for him modernity "does *not* refer to something positive, good, or progressive as it did for many Enlightenment thinkers. Instead, it has to do with change" (24, emphasis mine). Trying to clarify the general and ambiguous concept of "change," he continues to say that by "change" he does *not* mean a rupture between tradition and modernity because, "Traditions are not inert, unchanging objects; they have the ability to adapt, reform, fragment, and metamorphose. And when they do so in response to conditions in the new world, they indeed modernize" (24). Vague and extremely general statements like "modernity is 'a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs'" do little to help clarify Heern's position.[4]

Eisenstadt's definition of modernity would have been a good model for Heern to follow but perhaps he is too Eurocentric for the taste of the author.[5] Heern takes the liberty of

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[3] Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, 2 Vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

[4] This quote is taken from Eisenstadt. Heern mistakenly takes it as a description or definition for modernity but Eisenstadt makes it clear that he intends it as a general proposition that offers "the best way to understand the contemporary world" (Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 536).

[5] See Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 537-541.

painting most of the scholarship on the subject of modernity with the same broad brush, claiming that "[N]otions of a single modernity are so pervasive that even critics of Eurocentrism often end up supporting its most basic premises – especially the theory that traditional societies will eventually become modernized as they become more rational and that a single modernity originated in Europe" (25). He criticizes "many of the critiques of Eurocentric readings of history" on the grounds that they have not succeeded in decoupling the notion of modernity from Europe. This, from the author's perspective, includes "even postmodernists" such as Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Frantz Fanon, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault, who purportedly "assume that modernity is a European product, even if it was manufactured in South American, African, Asian, or Middle Eastern Colonies" (26). Unfortunately, no reference is provided to substantiate this huge claim from the abovementioned philosophers' works. Even Marshall Hodgson, the towering historian of the Islamic world who pioneered the effort of offering a non-Eurocentric historical analysis of the rise and development of the Islamicate world, is guilty of Eurocentrism according to Heern (33).

I cannot agree more with the author that "there is not one path to modernity; there are multiple (30)"; but even to defend this statement one needs to already have an idea of "modernity" that multiple paths lead to it. This, of course, does not mean that we need to have a universal definition of modernity that everyone agrees with. Rather, what we need is a set of characteristics that help us reasonably differentiate what we call the "modern" age from the rest of human history. In this regard, Heern seems to acknowledge the historical precedence of European modernity and the fact that, by virtue of this precedence, it has become a point of reference in discussions of modernity when he quotes Eisenstadt approvingly to this effect (30). Yet, he says the exact opposite two pages prior to this stating that "modernity in the Islamic world predates European dominance" (28), a claim that resembles the absurd pronouncements of Middle Eastern nativists more than it does a scholarly statement. Similarly, Heern seems ready to concede that, in the process of becoming "modern," Europeans made significant "progress" in sciences and technology (32) but fails to tell us what distinguishes the modernity of the Islamic world that supposedly predates the European one. I was unable to find a solid answer in Heern's analysis beyond vague and unhelpful generalities like: "that political decentralization and fragmentation of the eighteenth-century Islamic world took place prior to European imperialism and gave rise to new (modern) social, cultural, religious, economic, and political trends. Wahhabism, Usulism, and neo-Sufism are among the socio-religious trends that developed during this period" (37). Again, while the author might be right in his analysis that the reform movements of the eighteenth century had "direct correlation to the decentralization of the gunpowder empires" (37), I simply fail to understand how this makes such movements "modern."

When it comes to the defining characteristics of modernity, it seems that the author is of the view that one can simply decouple cultural elements of European modernity (the Enlightenment) from its more technical and scientific elements. When it comes to more intellectual, social and political ideas and ideals that have their origin in the European experience of modernity, Heern criticizes definitions of modernity that emphasize "concepts such as equality, freedom, rational thought, constitutionalism, popular sovereignty, capitalism, and secularism" because "many of these ideas are specifically associated with the Enlightenment and the spread of 'Western' culture" and, as such, contribute to the notion of "a single modernity" (25). But what does remain of modernity, singular or plural, if you take the transformative ideas of Enlightenment thinkers out of it? To say that modernity, both in terms of its philosophical underpinnings *and* technical manifestations, had its origins in

Europe is *not* equal to saying that all modern experiences are the same. To say that Europeans were pioneers in the process of modernization, that they defined its fundamental features like scientific and technological progress, and a new and emphasized understanding of human agency and autonomy that is not anymore bound by traditional God-centered metaphysics, is not to be Eurocentric. To say that European modernity set the historical precedence and thus influenced other forms of modernity profoundly is *not* to say that European patterns of modernity are the only "authentic" modernities. Rather, what the idea of multiple modernities suggests, it seems to me, is that there are multiple versions of the modern secular experience, multiple versions of "the imminent frame" as Charles Taylor put it, and multiple ways of thinking about human agency, equality and freedom as values that need to be protected in a modern social order against the tyranny of established religious and political institutions.

By the end of Chapter 1, and in fact by the end of book, we still don't know why, and in what sense, Usulism is deemed a "modern" phenomenon. In fact, if words have any meaning, the opposite is true: the Usuli movement, at its inception and early development during the eighteenth century, was *not* a modern phenomenon. That is to say, as Heern acknowledges, "Usuli scholars rarely referenced their non-Shi'i contemporaries" and "there is little direct evidence suggesting that the Enlightenment influenced Usulism per se" (30-31). Additionally, Iranian society at large was still unaffected by the Great Western Transformation, to borrow from Hodgson, that soon came to overwhelm it economically and politically. In what sense, then, should we call Bihbahani a "modern" thinker, one wonders?

Before I turn my attention to Chapter 6, let me offer a few examples of inaccurate statements and odd choice of words that can be found throughout the book. The claim that Shah Tahmasb "favored legalistic Usuli Shi'ism as the state ideology" (40) is inaccurate. While it is true that Safavid kings gradually distanced themselves from the Qizilbash and their messianic mode of piety moving to support Shari'a-minded scholars of Twelver Shi'ism, there is no evidence that Shah Tahmasb or his successors favored "Usuli" scholars in particular. Safavid kings sponsored some Usuli mujtahids like al-Karaki (d. 1533), true, but they also supported Akhbari leaning scholars like Majlisi Sr. (d. 1659), Mulla Muhammad-Tahir Qummi (d. 1689), Majlisi Jr. (d. 1699) and Hurr al-'Amili (d. 1693) among others. Furthermore, unlike what Heern claims, Shah Isma'il did not "sack" Tabriz (40), Majlisi Jr did not "massacre" the dervishes (47) and certainly Ja'far al-Sadiq is not the "seventh Shi'i Imam" (93). Bihbahani certainly did not write books titled *Ma'alim al-din* or *al-Fa'ida wa al-burhan* (193)[6] and it is not the position of a scholar to determine whether he, and his disciples, were "ultra-spiritual" or not, whatever that word means (107). Neither is it a sound scholarly practice to call Bihbahani, or other luminaries of the eighteenth century like Niraqi and Mirza Qummi "schizophrenic" in their attitudes and works (92, 100, 116). As if these are not strange enough, consider Heern's claim about Islamic law that, "Like scientific theories, Islamic law must be tested and stand the test of time. If a theorem remains uncontested, it must be true" (113).

Turning to the sixth chapter, we encounter more serious shortcomings. Heern's transliterations and translations of Arabic terms and phrases are filled with mistakes so much so that make us doubt his reading proficiency. I'd like to offer two sets of examples to

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[6] In the case of *Ma'alim al-din* it seems that the author has confused Bihbahani's marginalia (*hashiya*) on *Ma'alim al-Usul*, written by the Second Martyr, for an original work written by Bihbahani himself. Similarly, the author seems to have confused Bihbahani's marginalia on *Majma' al-Fa'ida wa al-burhan* for a monograph.

substantiate this claim. First, there are Arabic words here and there that have been transliterated or translated improperly. Second, there are sentences and paragraphs in original sources that Heern has completely misunderstood.

As for words, Heern transliterates the term *shahid* or "witness" as *shahadan*, not only replacing the short vowel *i* with *a*, but also taking the *tanwin* to be part of the word itself (127). In a similar case, the term *ghusl* or "washing" has been transliterated as *ghasal* (ibid.)! Another case is Heern's translation of the term *'ilm al-khawass* into "specialized knowledge," instead of "special people's knowledge" (143). Even worse, the term *janaba*, which refers to a state of major impurity in Islamic law that results from semen exiting the body has been translated into "purifying oneself" (127).

The author's lack of Arabic command has, in many cases in Chapter 6, severely compromised his understanding of the original sources. Heern's problem with Arabic is clear in most cases when he paraphrases Bihbahani and especially when he quotes him directly— which he does very rarely. For example, he quotes Bihbahani as saying, "the fixed term of the Lawgiver is desirable *unless* the text is clearly understood by custom (*'urf*)" (126). Bihbahani's actual statement reads, "So, if a specific terminology by the Lawgiver is proven [to exist] then that is what we wanted, otherwise, one harkens back to our customs (*'urf*)."[7]

Another example comes from a confusing sentence, in which Heern paraphrases Bihbahani as saying "that Hadith reports are a 'witness' or supporting evidence (*shahadan* [sic]) for the Qur'an and that the original intention of Hadith reports was to explain the manner (*kayfiyyat*) of proper practice" (116). Here, Heern is conflating two different issues discussed in two different chapters of Bihbahani's work, presenting both inaccurately. What emerges out of reading Bihbahani's own statements is rather different: Bihbahani never argues that hadith reports are supposed to function *just* as supportive evidence. Rather, in discussing the probative force of the Qur'an in chapter twenty-eight of *al-Fawa'id* he presents a hadith report, among some other hadiths, that says "whatever hadith you don't find a [supportive] evidence do not act according to it" to argue against the Akhbari position.[8] The focus and subject of his argument, in other words, is not the role of hadith in jurisprudence, which requires a complex and extensive discussion, but the probative force of the Qur'an and its role in whether one rejects or admits a report as authentic and as a basis for action. Even if we overlook the inaccuracy of Heern's presentation on this part, one is totally dumbfounded by the rest of his statement on behalf of Bihbahani that "the original intention of Hadith reports was to explain the manner (*kayfiyyat*) of proper practice." Again, what Heern is offering is a grossly simplified and misunderstood presentation of Bihbahani's position in chapter thirty-two of *al-Fawa'id* where he discusses the reported actions of the infallibles and whether they should be taken (without evidence that specifies the intent) as indications of an obligation (*wajib*), a preferable act (*mustahabb*), or a permissible one (*mubah*). Here, Bihbahani argues that *sometimes* the actions of the infallibles are illustrations (*bayan*) for a general concept (*mujmal*). If there is surrounding evidence, he says, that a reported act of an infallible was performed while he was in the status of illustrating a general concept then we can deduce that, in principle, the details in that act do fall within the parameters of the required manner (*kayfiyyat*) for that act. This, of course, does not include, according to him, things that common sense would exclude like the speed with which the act was performed,

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[7] Muhammad-Baqir Bihbahani, *al-Fawa'id al-ha'iriyya* (Qom: Majma' al-fikr al-Islami, 1995), 106.

[8] ما لم تجدوا للحديث شاهدا من القرآن فلا تعملوا به (.Ibid., 284).

etc.[9] I leave it to the reader to find how this argument can be summarized in the fashion that Heern has done.

In his enthusiasm to present Bihbahani as a "modern" thinker, Heern wants us to believe that Bihbahani, like a free thinker, has stated something to the effect "that the continuous use of reason is necessary for liberation (*itlaq*) and explains that reason is equivalent to the Truth and therefore 'the source of happiness'" (120). Not surprisingly, there is absolutely nothing like that in Bihbahani's statements in *al-Fawa'id*, neither in the page number that Heern references nor anywhere else in the book. The closest thing I was able to find was a statement early in the work where he says: "and it is indicated in many hadith reports indicating that intellect (*al-'aql*) has probative force (*hujja*) and that it is an obligation to follow it without condition (*'ala al-itlaq*)."[10]

Such distorted presentations of Bihbahani abound. Another major mistake in Heern's understanding of Bihbahani, which relates both to his command of Arabic and competency in understanding Bihbahani's work, is the important technical Usuli term *ta'addi*, which has been mistakenly transliterated as *ta'diyya* in Heern (122ff). I would like to first mention that there is no such word as *ta'diyya* in Arabic. The closest thing is *ta'diya*, which, according to the Hans Wehr lexicon, means "ferrying." But *ta'addi* is not *ta'diya* and ferrying, and other modes of transportation or transfer, I suppose, do not have any bearing on Usuli discussions! It should not be surprising that Heern's definition of the term is as unhelpful. He defines *ta'addi* as "a broad term used to explain a number of different situations in which a novel case can be determined on the basis of revelatory texts" (122). Quite to the contrary, *ta'addi* (literally, "to go beyond") refers to cases where the jurist is allowed (according to the Usuli principles) to go beyond the meaning that is implied by explicit textual evidence. As such, *ta'addi* is a specific term with limited use, shorthand for *al-ta'addi 'an murajjahat al-nusus* and not the broad term that Heern would like us to believe. I can only partially hold Heern responsible for this mistake since he is only repeating what Robert Gleave have said in his *Inevitable Doubt*.[11] One expects better than this from a scholar of Gleave's caliber.

As another case, consider Heern's statement, paraphrasing Bihbahani to the effect that "scholars must deduce rulings from cases of both ritual duties as well as social duties. If they are divided, he argues, Islamic law is ruined" (127). This is in fact quite opposite of what Bihbahani says. Let me translate his statement here so that the reader can see for herself. Bihbahani says, "Therefore, it has become clear that the way one argues on matters pertaining to ritual duties (*'ibadat*) is different from the way one argues in matters pertaining to business transactions (*mu'amalat*) and one who does not understand the difference and does not differentiate between the two [ways of argument] wreaks havoc on jurisprudence from its beginning to end."[12] Heern continues to misconstrue Bihbahani's position based on this faulty reading. According to him,

> Bihbahani gives the example of ablutions (*wudhu'*) that are to be carried out before prayer, which is a case of worship (*'ibadat*). He argues that what can be clearly understood from the command "al-ghasal lil-janaba [sic]" is the expression "to wash" (*al-ghasal* [sic]), but "purifying oneself" (*lil-janaba*) is not clear. Therefore, the command is linguistically and rationally

[9] Ibid., 315-318.

[10] Ibid., 96.

[11] See, Robert Gleave, *Inevitable Doubt: Two Theories of Shī'ī Jurisprudence* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 130ff.

[12] Bihbahani, *al-Fawa'id al-ha'iriyya*, 100.

incomprehensible. However, the correct understanding of ablutions was issued by an early judge who clarified the linguistic meaning of the command. In this way, Bihbahani explains that an unclear command in worship (*'ibadat*) becomes similar to a non-worship (*mu'amalat*) command. (127)

Of course, neither "*al-ghasal lil-janaba*" nor its correct Arabic form "*al-ghusl lil-janaba*" are "commands," as Heern puts it, and, as mentioned before, *janaba* does not mean "purifying oneself." But the havoc that Heern has wreaked on Bihbahani's argument is much worse. He somehow manages to overlook the fact that in this part of the book Bihbahani is disussing the position of al-Qadi Muhammad al-Baqilani (d. 1013), the famous Sunni jurist, whom Heern mistakenly renders as "an early judge." Again, to let the reader see the huge discrepancy between Bihbahani's position and Heern's representation I translate this section of Bihbahani's comments at some length:

> But the Judge from Sunnis [i.e. al-Qazi al-Baqilani] has gone [to the opinion] that what remains beyond the known [literal meaning] of washing (*al-ghusl*) should be considered among the conditions of its proper execution. That is, he equated the ritual duties (*'ibadat*) with business transactions (*mu'amalat*) in that [he believes] when a term [like *al-ghusl*] enters [discussion] he understands it according to its linguistic or customary meaning. Then, when the Lawgiver stipulates that so and so need to be considered part of it [i.e. *al-ghusl*], he categorizes it as a condition of its proper execution rather than an essential part of the very meaning of the term…and in a similar fashion the judge takes the command of God "*ightasil min al-janaba*" (do the ritual washing to do away with major impurity) and *salli* (pray the ritual prayer) and *adhdhin* (say the call for prayers) to mean what they mean in their linguistic (*lughawi*) and customary (*'urfi*) use. That is, [for him,] *salat* simply means prayer [in general] and *adhan* simply means announcement and so on and so forth unless some other conditions of its proper execution is positively proved. Otherwise, the assumption must be that there are not such conditions. And the falsity of his position is quite obvious in cases like *salat* and *adhan*. …[13]

The sloppiness of research spills over to the bibliography as well. For example, Heern lists some of Bihbahani's works that he has consulted as "unpublished." While this might initially create the illusion that the author has in fact done some original research on hitherto unpublished works of Bihbahani, a closer look reveals that he simply has not done his most basic homework of finding relevant research and published material. For example, *al-Rasa'il al-fiqhiyya*, which Heern lists as unpublished, has in fact long been out in a nice edition by the institute that has published other works of Bihbahani that Heern uses in his work as well. The same is true about *Sharh mafatih al-sharai'* that Heern mistakenly lists as unpublished. Even in the case of supposedly "unpublished manuscripts," Heern fails to furnish full bibliographical information. The list goes on and on. Another strange example comes from his last chapter and his discussion of Ahmad Ibn Idris as a "modern" reformist in Africa. Heern refers the reader to an "unpublished" treatise titled *Risalat al-radd*. It only takes a simple Google search to realize that four of Ibn Idris's treatises, including the above-

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[13] Ibid., 98-99.

mentioned treatise, have already been edited, translated, and published in an outstanding edition by Brill in 2000, by Bernd Radtke under the title of *The Exoteric Ahmad Ibn Idris: A Sufi's Critique on the Madhāhib and the Wahhābīs: Four Arabic texts with Translation and Commentary*. Even more strange, the name of Ibn Idris and his works that have—supposedly—been consulted is completely absent from the bibliography.

In sum, while some chapters of Heern's book that deal with historical generalities might have some use in undergraduate classes if used carefully, it has no research value.

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