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Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Networks*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 288 pp., \$39.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781474412131.

In this book, Elvire Corboz delineates the different challenges faced by two key Najafi Shi'i clerical families in the face of modern transformations. Corboz's rich analysis paints a subtle picture of the gradual transnationalization of Shi'i religious authority as, from one generation to the other, the families of al-Hakim and al-Khu'i addressed issues of religious continuity and development. It is Corboz's main claim that the modern period, with the establishment of the nation state and its secular laws and the rise of a new elite, has forced the Shi'i clerical establishment of Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon, to spread their influence outside their respective localities. By tracing the legacy of successive generations of *'ulema* in al-Hakim and al-Khu'i's families and their respective associated organizations, Corboz paints a vivid picture of the complex making of authority in Shi'i Islam, as its clerical establishment witnessed a transfer from being dependent on the financial largesse of a landed aristocracy to new elites and modern state structures.

Corboz's endeavor is a timely reminder that religious continuity involves more than the transmission of a set of doctrines or a discursive practice, to refer to Talal Asad's notion, but rather an intricate process of interpersonal networking, lobbying a whole set of influential people, institutions, intermarriages, tribal relations, and the formation of more formal organizations that, for the first time in the history of this community, led to the transnationalization and semi-institutionalization of authority, through an interplay of "traditional" processes and more modern, even western, NGO-like formations. In effect, one common conception of the transformation is to look at the history of the Shi'i clerical establishment as entering a difficult time in the modern era, where the latter is threatened by all of these institutional, legal, and ideological changes and innovations. Yet, Corboz shows that these daunting challenges—for example fleeing the persecution of the Baath regime in Iraq—paved the way to opportunities for clerical authority to expand and assume a different "transnational" role.

Authority is a crucial question in the Shi'i Twelver tradition because practicing religion involves as a prerequisite following a "source of emulation" (*marja' taqlid*). As Corboz explains, there is no set criteria in order to become a *marja'*, a source of emulation in religious, worshiping, and other juridical matters. Instead, the *marja'yya* is based on a series of informal variables, such as descent from the prophet's family (being a *sayyed*), probity of character, scholarly excellence (which not only depends on *ijtihad* and publications, but also on popularity through teaching such that students lobby for him). This interplay of *nasab*

(genealogical lineage) and *hasab* (excellence in character) in the continuity of clerical leadership from one generation to the other has allowed for a fine balance between community cohesion and the preservation of an ethical practice. Moreover, the traditionally informal nature of this process enabled clerics of the twentieth century up until today to produce creative mechanisms for gaining religious and political influence.

Indeed, what happens when an informal type of authority meets the highly institutionalized environment of modern organizations, and ultimately the challenge of the centralizing power of the nation state? Corboz's book sets on explaining this very interaction. Clerical figures balanced between building local bonds through intermarriages and tribal ties, and developing a "hybridised version of clerical leadership" (57). They combined a modern NGO-type structure and the *marja'yya's* traditional networking practices. The book traces the different types of organizations that al-Hakim and al-Khu'i founded, some more overtly political such as SCIRI (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq), and charitable foundations based in the Muslim as well as the Western world. Through a description of these institutions, Corboz shows the complex alliances and forms of allegiance clerics, across generations, have invented in order to preserve their interests. Noteworthy is al-Hakim's relationship with the Iranian monarch, through SAVAK (Iran's National and Security Organization), prior to the revolution and the eventual founding of SCIRI.

This is less a theoretical book than a narrative one, and Corboz makes up for this lack through an impressive display of stories and descriptions that clearly depict the change undergone to the notion of *marja'yya*. As we read a very dense collection of stories, biographies, social and political activities of the various clerical figures under examination, we gradually come to grasp the dynamics I have just tried to outline above. Al-Hakim is a prominent Najafi family of clerics that has passed down from one generation to the other. Corboz describes the legacy of the *marja'* Muhsin al-Hakim (1889-1970), extending to his descendants and the various institutions that became affiliated to them. Of special note is how SCIRI became an institutionalized arm of the family through Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim's (1939-2003) and then 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Hakim's (1950-2009) leadership—an organization that called for the establishment of an Islamic state and definitely had turbulent relations with the Baath regime. Yet, although SCIRI was known for its close ties to Iran, Corboz, demonstrates the relative independent agenda the organization maintained over the years, and even highlights certain conflicts of interest as exemplified in tensions with Muqtada al-Sadr in the aftermath of the Iraqi war.

Likewise, in the case of the other family under study, Abu al-Qassim al-Khu'i (1899-1992) came from Iran and settled in Najaf early in the 1970s and soon became one of the main *Marja'* for Shi'a worldwide. Corboz illustrates well the efforts deployed by al-Khu'i, as well as his sons, to transnationalize his authority by creating NGO-like institutions which were constituted by a board of trustees akin to Western organizations, most of them either drawn from al-Khu'i's extended family or from trusted students. This institutional novelty seems to have been a natural outgrowth of the more traditional practice of appointing various *wakil*, who would represent the *marja'yya* in the various places throughout the world. Corboz describes the relative autonomy these representatives had. For example, the late Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, who migrated to Lebanon in the 1950s and rose to become a leading *marja'* in his own right, sometimes even issued *fatwas* that contradicted some of his teachers. Al-Khu'i's move to Najaf was not only triggered by his search for social connections in what was arguably the most prominent seat of Shi'i clerics, but also because of his sharp disagreement with Khomeini's thoughts on clerical involvement in the affairs of

the state. A whole chapter devoted on the political views of al-Khu'i is mostly a comparison with those of Khomeini and the profound gap between their respective approaches.

Overall, these clerics of Najaf had highly ambivalent relationships with political authorities. But Corboz very shrewdly demonstrates that, whether in the case of al-Hakim or al-Khu'i, these clerics were not at all the "quietist" actors that are usually portrayed in scholarly literature. Their myriad lobbying efforts across the world and the organizations they founded and managed engaged in different types of politicking and gained significant leverage in many instances. All in all, these Najafi clerics strived to preserve their traditional independence from power, while making sure that they could still exert influence through their teachings, practices, and compliance to religious laws, rules, and conventions. According to Corboz, several political watersheds would prompt clerics to re-evaluate their positions, such as the personal status law that was passed in 1959, after communists took over power in Iraq for a brief period. This, coupled with the land reforms and nationalizations a year before, ultimately detached the affairs of people from religious legal autonomy, upsetting the prevailing fine balance on which the various groups of the community rested, most specifically the clerical independence that benefited from a powerful landed aristocracy.

Nevertheless, as Corboz skillfully describes, even with these existential threats, clerical authorities took time to adjust and take action. One reads that in 1960, Muhsin al-Hakim issued a *fatwa* forbidding membership in the Iraqi Communist party, a policy that strangely suited Iran's Shah whose main opponent at the time were the communists and other leftist formations. Other interesting *fatwas* by al-Hakim included declaring attacks against Iraqi Kurds in 1965 as the Iraqi regime prepared a military campaign in the north. But active infiltration into political formations was something Al-Hakim was very much wary of. On this subject, Corboz narrates a revealing anecdote: while visiting Iraq, Ruhollah Khomeini met with Muhsin al-Hakim and urged him to take action against the Baath regime who had just came to power in 1968. Al-Hakim is said to have replied: "If we took drastic measures people would not follow us. The people lie and follow their whims, they are in pursuit of their world desires" (130).

Ultimately, Corboz leads us to see two paradigms for *marja'yya* facing one other: the first, the older, "traditional" understanding symptomatizes clerical aristocracy and a clear consciousness of social differences and roles, whereas the second one, which came to be epitomized by Khomeini's ascendancy to power in 1979, invests in the notion of "people" by adjusting to the new mobilizing powers of the nation state, political parties, and related institutions. Although not explicitly stated this way, Corboz does explore this tension through a thick description of these Najafi-based clerics' social, institutional, and political actions, as well as their similarities with Qom and the Khomeini exception. And indeed, a generation later, al-Hakim would found SCIRI signaling a much more active stance than that of the previous *Marja'*.

There are a few details in the book that would have benefited from being fleshed out. For example, what is the exact relation between a *marja'* and *wali al-faqih*, the legal innovation put forth by Khomeini? Corboz does explain broadly Khomeini's theory but its implications on the changing dynamics of authority remain obscure. Corboz does a fine job describing the transnationalization of the *marja'yya* but not its relationship with other institutional innovations such the establishment of the Islamic state of Iran. While the author's primary focus was on Iraqi *marja'*, this change in the Iranian context had a long lasting impact on the whole region. While we do have a sense of some of the effects of this change, Corboz provides little critical understanding of it. For example why did Khomeini, the successor to

Khomeini, become a *marja'* after Muhammad 'Ali 'Araki's death in 1994? Furthermore, there seemed to be a push towards the establishment of one *marja'* per locality. Was this a new convention? What role did the rise of the nation state play in this development, if any?

Overall, this is a fascinating book that provides a fresh and subtle look into the complexity of Shi'i religious politics by focuses on two families of Najaf. This book is an invaluable resource for any student of religion, politics, and authority in the region.

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