

- 61 Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 5.
62 Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 22-23.
63 'Azzāwi, Tārīkh, III, 153 ff.
64 Ibid., III, 152.
65 Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 124 (from Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ, Kalām al-Mahdī).
66 Ibid., 126-127.
67 Ibid., 127.
68 Ibid., 128.
69 Khunji, Tārīkh-i ālam-ārā-vi Amīni (Minorsky, Persia in A. D. 1478-1490), 83.
70 'Azzāwi, Tārīkh, III, 258 and 261-62 (based on at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthī. The events concerning Iraq in this manuscript end with this year, i. e., 883/1478-9). For a general evaluation of at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthī see 'Azzāwi, op. cit., III, 262-63.
71 Khunji/Minorsky, op. cit., 83-84, and 98-99.
72 Minorsky (Musha'sha' [in:] E. I. ¹, Supplement) makes Fayyāḍ the third son of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ; Caskel makes him the son of Muḥsin and has them both dying in the same year, 914 (for a family tree see his Ein Mahdi..., 75); Kasravi is for 'Alī and Ayyūb (Musha'sha'iyān, 38-39); Khwāndamīr (Ḥabīb as-siyar, IV, 497) is for Fayyāḍ ibn Muḥsin, and describes a bloody battle between the Ṣafavids and the Musha'sha's; 'Azzāwi (Tārīkh, III, 345) accepts Khwāndamīr's story. Cf. Ḥasan-i Rūmlū, Aḥsan at-tavārīkh, I, 104 (English translation, II, 47, and see p. 237, n. 3); Qazvīnī, Lubb at-tavārīkh, 250; and Iskandar Munshi, Tārīkh-i ālam-ārā-vi Abbāsi, I, 35.
73 Minorsky, op. cit.
74 On this part of Musha'sha' history see Caskel's summary article Die Wāli's von Huwēzeh, Islamica VI (1933-34), 415-434; and Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 42 ff.
75 Minorsky, Tadhkirat al-Mulūk, London 1943 (GMS, new ser., 16), p. 44. The others are the valis of Lūristān, Georgia, and Kurdistān, The ruler of the Bakhtiyāri tribe comes after them in importance.
76 Minorsky, Musha'sha', [in:] E. I. ¹, Supplement.

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THE LIFE AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT
OF AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SHI'Ī SCHOLAR
SAYYID MUḤAMMAD MAHDĪ ṬABĀṬABĀ'Ī "BAḤR AL-ʿULŪM"

Part I
THE LIFE OF THE "BAḤR AL-ʿULŪM"

The life of Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdī b. Murtaẓā Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the "Baḥr al-ʿUlūm" (1742-1797) coincides with one of the most fertile periods of Iranian religious and social history. Twelver Shi'ism in all its popular and scholarly forms - mujtahidism, ṣūfism, akhbārism, uṣūlism, and shaykhism - was in revolutionary ferment during Muḥammad Mahdī's life. During the latter half of the 18th century, Twelver Shi'ites strove to re-interpret fundamental religious values and to arrive at some wider communal consensus on the duties and future directions of a Shi'ī society. It was a period of intellectual challenge, controversy, and occasionally violent confrontation between the various movements in Twelver Shi'ism each one claiming or being seen to claim precedence for its vision and therefore its right to the spiritual loyalties of the mu'minīn.

Muḥammad Mahdī Ṭabāṭabā'ī was born and raised in the center of these swirling currents and his own training, experiences, and intellectual development reflect the transformation of the society around him.

Details of his life and works are available in a number of works ¹. The biographical information the primary sources contain may be roughly classified thematically as follows: 1) his marvelous or marvel-attended birth, 2) his pious childhood in which various signs of holiness appear, 3) his education and

assembling of credentials (the *ijāza* theme), 4) the performance of saintly marvels (*karāmat*²), 5) proof of the superiority of his intellectual prowess and thus his religion through victorious debate with people of other religions and, on occasion, their conversion³, and 6) the marvelous or marvel-attended death. In the following biographical discussion I have attempted to balance this thematic emphasis with a more modern bias which is the subject's intellectual and social development within a chronological frame. I have therefore divided Muḥammad Mahdī's life into four parts: 1) the first 'atabāt (Najaf and Karbalā) period from 1155-1186/1742-1772, 2) the Iran period of 1186-1193/1772-1779, 3) the Hījāz period of 1193-1195/1779-1781 and 4) the second 'atabāt period of 1195-1212/1781-1797. While adhering to this framework I have also taken into account the traditional biographical themes.

Karbalā and Najaf (1155-1186/1742-1772)

On the date and circumstances of Muḥammad Mahdī's death the sources are in basic agreement⁴. He was born in Shawwāl on a Friday eve, in 1155. The accounts of his birth relate the dream which his father, Sayyid Murtaẓā experienced the night of his birth. In it he saw the Eighth Imām hand a candle to a trusted servant, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl b. Bazī'⁵ who placed the candle on the roof of the Ṭabāṭabā'ī house in Karbalā. The sayyid then emerged from this dream⁶ and saw the corporeal form of the Eight Imām before him. The latter made a sign to him indicating that, as the candle lit up the sky, so his son's intellect would light up the world⁷.

Muḥammad Mahdī was born into a family with a strong scholastic tradition. The lineage was al-Ḥusainī and the family had marital ties with the Majlisī, Bihbihānī, Ma'ālī, and Sabzawārī families. Muḥammad Mahdī's grandfather came from Burujird, a center of Shī'ī scholarship⁸. As the Ṣafavi hold over Iran was disintegrating in the first quarter of the 18th century, the family moved to the 'atabāt. After an indefinite stay there, it returned

towards Burujird but settled at Kirmānshāh at the request of scholars there. After Muḥammad Mahdī's grandfather's death, the family returned to Karbalā where the Baḥr al-'Ulūm was born.

For the Shī'ī community of scholars it was a time of some uncertainty. The year of Muḥammad Mahdī's birth, 1155, marked the seventh year of the official reign of Nādir Shāh Afshār, the man who had put an end to the Ṣafavid line, the great patrons of Shī'ism, and had himself taken a somewhat ambiguous stand on the status of Shī'ism as the state religion of Iran. In fact only a year after Muḥammad Mahdī's birth came the abortive convocation of Sunnī and Shī'ī scholars that was to have found some reconciliation of the two great divisions of Islām⁹. In addition to the religious questions, Nādir Shāh launched a series of campaigns against the Ottoman provinces which continued until his death in 1747¹⁰. The Shī'ī community in the Ottoman-controlled 'atabāt could not have found this period a very secure one¹¹.

Born into these circumstances, Muḥammad Mahdī's early schooling and spiritual experiences were nonetheless not much affected by them. His father took him to the tomb of Ḥusayn and other holy sites in Karbalā and at home taught the boy to read and write. At the age of seven he began taking Muḥammad Mahdī to the majlises in Karbalā where works were discussed, the controversies of the day debated and where a young boy, inconspicuously seated to one side, could be exposed to the subjects which he would later study in depth. Soon he was busy at home with his tutors and by the age of twelve was considered advanced enough to begin serious work with specialists.

At fourteen, Muḥammad Mahdī left Karbalā for Najaf where he studied with Shaykh Muḥammad Mahdī Futunī and Muḥammad Taqī Dūraqī. He then returned to Karbalā to work with Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbihānī. It is at this time that he seems to have acquired the title and status of "muṭtahid". After spending an indeterminate time with Bihbihānī, Muḥammad Mahdī once more moved to Najaf¹². He was now a leading light, and according to at least one source,

was given the position of qāḍī¹³. This office and its status in the community seems to have differed somewhat from the qāḍī-ship in contemporary Iran. According to the *Tadhkirat al-mulūk*, the office of qāḍī had been completely bureaucratized under the Safavids¹⁴. If we take 'Alī Ḥazīn's attitude as typical then it would have been somewhat distasteful for a Shī'ī scholar to have accepted the post, at least in Iran¹⁵. The situation under the Ottomans vis a vis the Shī'ī community seems to have been quite different. Not only do we find a man of Muḥammad Mahdī's stature accepting such a post but later we learn that he bestowed it on one of his disciples¹⁶ which suggests that the post was not integrated into the Ottoman provincial bureaucracy¹⁷.

Muḥammad Mahdī Ṭabāṭabā'ī was thirty years old when the first 'atabāt period of his life ended. His reasons for leaving 'Irāq-i 'arab at this point are not clear¹⁸. One may have been for his health. In 1772, one of the worst epidemics in 'Irāq's history struck¹⁹. One of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's teachers, Shaykh Yūsuf al-Bahrānī, the author of *al-Ḥaḍā'iq* and *al-Durrah al-Najafīyyah*, reportedly perished in the epidemic²⁰. Iran had the natural attraction of the shrine of the Eighth Imām at Mashhad the importance of which in Muḥammad Mahdī's life had been fixed at his birth and, in addition, the political turmoil of the years after Nādir Shāh Afshār's death had been replaced by a time of relative calm under the Zand house. For the travelling scholar it must have seemed an opportune time for an extended visit to Mashhad.

Iran: 1186-1193/1772-1779

Muḥammad Mahdī stopped briefly at Kirmānshāh en route to Mashhad. There he may have sought out those who remembered his grandfather's time in the town. The biographies have nothing to say of this short stop. The trip to Mashhad was to all appearances unremarkable. Although the scholar was to make Mashhad his residence for the next seven years he must have returned

to 'Irāq during this time for his son, Muḥammad Ridā, was reported; y born in Najaf in 1189/1775-6. In 1193/1779, Ṭabāṭabā'ī left Mashhad for good and travelled to Isfahān. His arrival there coincided with the death of Karīm Khān Zand and it is possible that unsettled political conditions made employment and thoughts of a longer stay less attractive than it might have been. In any event he did not stay in Isfahān but went directly to Najaf.

al-Hijāz: 1193-1195/1779-1781

Muḥammad Mahdī had hardly reached Najaf when he was off again, this time to the Hijāz. Although a number of the sources indicate that the reason for his trip was the ḥājj, this was clearly not the sole motive²¹. He travelled by sea from Baṣra²² suggesting that this was not the pilgrimage season and there were no overland pilgrim caravans to secure the shorter route from 'Irāq through the Najd. Besides the pilgrimage the trip to the Hijāz offered Ṭabāṭabā'ī the opportunity to practice taqīyah. Wahhābism was in its early conquering phase and Ṭabāṭabā'ī's biographers at least depict the Arabian world as a place of mortal danger to the Shī'ī scholar²³. Beyond the pilgrimage and taqīyah themes, the latter of which we will discuss more fully below, *Ri-jāl* and *Makārim* mention other more mundane reasons for the trip²⁴. He was authorized, apparently as a representative of the 'Irāqī Twelver community, to refurbish and re-organize accommodations for Shī'ī pilgrims to Mecca and Medina. He was also to spruce up the places where certain prayers were said around the Ka'bah. Specifically this entailed installing small stone benches and kneeling stones in the Masjid al-Ḥarām. He also was commissioned to re-locate the precise spot - in accordance with the best traditions - where the Hidden Imām would appear on the Day of the Return. He determined that the location was in the Masjid al-Sahlah and had a blue-tiled dome erected over the exact spot²⁵. One source has Muḥammad Mahdī living and teaching for a brief period in al-Tā'if²⁶. After a stay of nearly

three years, his activities during which will be dealt with more fully below, the Shī'ī scholar left Mecca and returned to 'Irāq.

The Second 'Atabāt Period: 1196-1212/1782-1797

In 1782, in his fifth decade, Muḥammad Mahdī returned to 'Irāq. He took up residence in a fine old house on Shārī'ah al-Ṭūsī in Najaf²⁷. There he prospered first as a teacher and later as successor to Muḥammad Rāqir Bihbihānī as marja' al-taqlīd. His activities in the non-scholarly world at this time are difficult to assess. His relations with the rising Qājār power in Iran are uncertain although it is reasonable to assume that a man of his stature in the Shī'ite community would have been actively courted by Qājār politicians²⁸. There is no hint of any sort of relations with the Ottoman authorities in 'Irāq to compare with the ones that the Ṣūfīs and Shaykh Aḥmad-i Aḥsā'ī later had with Daūd Pashā. By and large, the Shī'ī community seems to have been left to itself during this last period of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's life.

The only possibly political action taken by the sayyid was his campaign against the Ṣūfīs in the 'atabāt, in particular the Ni'matullahī order led by Nūr 'Alī Shāh. This is labelled a political action only because there is evidence that this group of Ṣūfīs enjoyed both a modicum of protection from the Ottoman authorities as well as substantial popularity in the Shī'ite community itself. Its size, influence, and pedagogical methods all posed a threat to Ṭabāṭabā'ī as marja' al-taqlīd. The successful effort to expell the Ṣūfīs from the 'atabāt climaxed his career as the spiritual leader of the Shī'ites of 'Irāq²⁹.

We will return to a more detailed examination of this period in Ṭabāṭabā'ī's life when we discuss his intellectual development. It suffices here to note that he spent the last years of his life engaged in the multiple responsibilities of the marja' al-taqlīd — teaching, giving and receiving ijāza leading worship, settling questions of law and ritual, arbitrating disputes. The biographers

also mention his vigils, concern for the poor, and influence on those he met.

Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdī b. Murtaḍā Ṭabāṭabā'ī died in 1212/1797³⁰. His death coincided with two historic moments — the official inception of Qājār rule in Iran and, within a year, the symbolic opening of the Middle East to European imperialism. His death also marks the end of an important era in 'Irāq, as we will discuss below.

If what has been presented here as a sketch of his life seems unsatisfyingly imprecise and haphazard, it is because the biographical material considers his physical life a good deal less important than his intellectual and spiritual existence.

Part II

THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE "BAḤR AL-'ULŪM"

There are unevennesses in the biographical material about his intellectual development as well. Items of major significance to the direction of his scholastic training are discussed in some sources and not in others. This is particularly true regarding the more controversial involvements of his life, with ḥikmat and ṣūfism. In a separate appendix, I have listed his teachers as presented by each source. This has been done in order to avoid having to determine not just who they were but even more crucially which were considered the most influential. There are some major differences in the lists.

Having said that, let us now turn to the major periods of his intellectual life and their contributions to his growth. Perhaps the most formative period occurred before Ṭabāṭabā'ī was born. Two currents of intellectual life flowing out of the period before he was born would converge in him. The first and arguably most important was the scholarly tradition of his family. To the important asset of Ḥusaynid descent, the three generations before Muḥammad Mahdī added impressive marital connections to the most

famous scholarly families of the time. The sister of al-'Allāmah Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī married Sayyid 'Abd al-Karīm Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the great-grandfather of the Baḥr al-'Ulūm³¹. The mother of Sayyid Muḥammad, our subject's grandfather, was the daughter of Mawlā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Māzandarānī, a famous commentator on Kulaynī's *al-Kāfi*³². Sayyid Aghā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbihānī, who was to become Muḥammad Mahdī's most influential teacher, was a student of Sayyid Muḥammad and his son-in-law³³.

This family heritage with the different traditions incorporated in it was extremely important for the expectations and standards it imposed on future generations. This heritage conferred privilege and guaranteed a place of respect in the Shī'ite community but in return demanded attachment to the ideals and standards of the forefathers. With this illustrious legacy and his father's convictions about Muḥammad Mahdī's role in the world as symbolized by the nativity dream, it is difficult to imagine that Muḥammad Mahdī would have, or could have, aspired to anything more sublime than the scholarly path.

Another formative influence taking shape in the pre-natal period was the theological dispute in the Twelver scholarly community between the "Uṣūlīs", those who held that there was a need for a scholarly elite to provide spiritual guidance to the community and the "Akhbārīs", those who argued that the entire community of true believers were muqallid (followers) not of a scholarly elite but of the Imāms directly. The Akhbārīs rejected the notion that there was any esoteric knowledge only accessible through scholarly mediation and they maintained that the only true guidance was provided by the lives and teachings of the Imāms as evident in the traditions, akhbār³⁴. In essence, the levelling nature of akhbārism was a direct threat to the privileged position of Shī'ite scholars.

The leading exponent of the Uṣūlī position was Aghā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbihānī, Muḥammad Mahdī's uncle and his most influential teacher³⁵. By the time Muḥammad Mahdī came under

Bihbihānī's tutelage, predominance in the dispute had shifted to the Uṣūlī position, in 'Irāq at least. Ṭabāṭabā'ī himself was supposed to have written a tract denouncing the Akhbārīs³⁶. How the dispute actually affected personal relationship is difficult to unravel. Algar has suggested a somewhat polarized confrontation in which physical force was used. This may have been true at certain times but, in Ṭabāṭabā'ī's case at least, the situation was clearly more ambiguous. We find for example that one of the students to whom he gave ijāza was by nisbah at least an Akhbārī³⁷. During the reign of Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh Qājār, the two main antagonists in the last gasp of the dispute were both former pupils of Ṭabāṭabā'ī. In any event, Ṭabāṭabā'ī seems to have inherited the Uṣūlī mantle.

These then were the two principal elements in the period before his birth - the family heritage of scholarship and the theological controversy of akhbārism and usulism which resulted in the re-assertion of the primacy of the Shī'ī scholars role in Shī'ī society.

Ṭabāṭabā'ī's early education followed the pattern of one born to the cloth³⁸. At the age of four he began study at home of the Qur'ān thereby learning Arabic, the language of all his later works. His father, Sayyid Murtaḍā was his first teacher taking him on numerous visits to the Shī'ī shrines and other notable spots with which Karbalā was filled. The boy was steeped in the lore of these holy places and was exposed to the traditions attributed to the saintly personages entombed therein. Sayyid Murtaḍā's goal was to develop in the boy a sensibility to such objects of piety and to instill in him the long religious heritage of which they were only the most recent legatees. At the age of seven, the "age of discretion" Muḥammad Mahdī was permitted to attend the majlises in which his father took part. At home he continued his formal study of Arabic learning its difficult grammar and syntax and began his elementary study of the principles of logic, jurisprudence, exegesis, and theology. Although the sour-

ces remark that he studied these subjects with noted specialists, it is not until he reaches the age of twelve that we have a direct reference to his teachers. It was then that he went to study with Shaykh Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī. Whether Ṭabāṭabā'ī was under Bihbihānī's tutelage at the same time is problematic. Qīṣaṣ states that it was only after the first Najaf sojourn that he returned and began to work with Bihbihānī³⁹. However, since the latter was his uncle and lived in Karbalā it seems safe to say that the young man was aware of Bihbihānī's views and position in the debate on the Akhbārī-Uṣūlī split. This period, the early 1750s, was one in which, according to Algar, "a clearer concept of orthodoxy" was emerging and Ṭabāṭabā'ī was clearly positioned to be one of the leading proponents of that new concept.

In 1169/1756, Karbalā was left behind and a new period of study opened in Najaf. Coming from Bihbihānī's circle and carrying ijāzas from his father and from Shaykh Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī, Muḥammad Mahdī probably found ready access to the majlis of Najaf. There he worked with Shaykh Mahdī al-Futūnī, Shaykh Muḥammad Taqī al-Dūrāqī and Shaykh Muḥammad Bāqir al-Hazārjībī⁴¹. It was in Najaf that Muḥammad Mahdī began to teach and gain a name for himself. As mentioned earlier, it appears that he returned to Karbalā to study with Bihbihānī and then made Najaf his residence again where he would spend the majority of his time until his departure for Mashhad in 1772. Much must be inferred from the sources about this last period in Najaf regarding his intellectual development. One assumes that teaching took up much of his time and energies with the function of qāḍī rounding out his days. He did not do much writing.

Of special interest reference to contact he may have had with Ṣūfism during this first 'atabāt period. That there is only a single reference to such involvement is not surprising in light of the fact that the major biographical material comes from late 19th authors whose antipathy for the Shī'ī Ṣūfī orders was well

established. In the Ṭarā'iq al-Ḥaqā'iq under the biographical entry for Shaykh Aḥmad-i Aḥsā'ī is the following paragraph:

Of those who were in attendance within the blessed sphere of Sayyid Quṭb al-Dīn al-Nayrīzī (al-Shīrāzī al-Dhahabī) a few of the men who had become full to overflowing with the utmost of learning, good deeds, and right thinking by the ṣāhib-i yarūgh's having conferred his authority and spiritual ijāza upon them were each ordered to a region and charged with the responsibility of replacing the heretical Greek philosophy which remained from ancient times and about which the people really knew nothing and which did not correspond in any way with the principles of the pure religion, with the chaste and divine hikmat. Ākhūnd Mulā Mihrāb al-Gīlānī was sent to Isfahān and 'Irāq-i 'Ajam Agha Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdī Baḥr al-'Ulūm and Mawlānā Shaykh Ja'far al-Najafī were sent to the sublime 'atabāt and 'Iraq-i Arab...⁴²

This Ṣūfī element in his background (Quṭb al-Dīn Nayrīzī was the leading Dhahabī shaykh of this time) and education should be treated with some circumspection. He is always depicted as at least potentially antagonistic to the activities of the Ni' matullāhī order in the 'atabāt. However, the author of the Ṭarā'iq, for reasons not entirely clear, has chosen to present Muḥammad Mahdī in a generous light with regards to his attitudes and relations towards the Ṣūfīs (see esp. v. 3, pp. 199-200 for his encounter with Nūr 'Alī Shāh).

It was during this first period in Najaf that Ṭabāṭabā'ī also became acquainted with Shaykh Aḥmad-i Aḥsā'ī. Aside from the Ṭarā'iq which has both men studying together under Quṭb al-Dīn Nayrīzī⁴³, the sources specify that it was Aḥsā'ī who sought Ṭabāṭabā'ī's tutelage. Aḥsā'ī came to Najaf in 1772⁴⁴, the same year Ṭabāṭabā'ī left for Iran and it was probably in this year therefore that Muḥammad Mahdī gave Aḥsā'ī ijāza⁴⁵. Aḥsā'ī remained in the 'atabāt until 1209/1794-5 just three years before

Muhammad Mahdī died and a year after he had assumed leadership of the community there (as *marja' al-taqlīd*). We know little about the effect, if any, of Aḥsā'ī's teachings and growing popularity on the relations between the two men. At least in this first 'atabat period of Muhammad Mahdī the relations seem to be merely that of teacher-pupil. It is not clear whether the second 'atabat period (1782-1797) saw a radical change in their relations.⁴⁶

Muhammad Mahdī left 'Irāq in 1772, as already mentioned, with two exceptions, he had acquired all the *ijāzas* he would ever hold and thus, by this time, the scope of his teaching had about reached its fullest extent. The tree of his knowledge was anchored deep in the soil of Uṣulī Shī'ism and would so remain.

But despite his being already molded in a certain tradition, there was a new intellectual experience for him in Mashhad. For the seven years he spent at the Rīzavī shrine he not only taught the books permitted him by his *ijāzas*, he also studied under Sayyid Mīrzā Mahdī al-Isfahānī al-Khurāsānī with whom he studied philosophy (*ḥikmat*) and theology (*kālām*). He also received the honorific "Baḥr al-'Ulūm" from the Mashhad teacher.⁴⁷

On leaving Mashhad in 1779, he travelled to Isfahān and there received *ijāza* from Mīr 'Abd al-Bāqī Khātūnābādī, the *imām jum'ah* there. At first there appears little motive for this other than a desire to add another *ijāza* to the already impressive list. But there appears to have been more to it than that. The chain of authority in the *ijāza* given by Khātūnābādī went back through al-'Allāmah al-Majlisī to the the Shahīd al-Thānī, Bahā al-Dīn al-'Āmilī (Shaykh-i Bahā'ī)⁴⁸. Muhammad Mahdī already possessed the right to teach the traditions which had come down through its ties with the Majlisī family and it may have been the desire to gather together as many threads of the Majlisī traditions as possible that took the Baḥr al-'Ulūm to Isfahān and 'Abd al-Bāqī Khātūnābādī.

Although the formal part of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's training was completed after Isfahān there remained one important intellectual credential yet to be earned. To the earlier biographers, the *ijāza* period was noteworthy primarily for one thing - the *taqīyah* practiced by the Baḥr al-'Ulūm. While it is generally agreed that he did pursue a course of concealing his true madhhab, there is much difference of opinion as to the degree with which he exercised *taqīyah*. The traditions range from total dissimulation⁴⁹ to overt proselytizing for Twelver Shī'ism⁵⁰ with intermediate gradations⁵¹. The overall impression which the sources give is of Ṭabāṭabā'ī boldly flouting the religion of the "āmmah" while piously fulfilling his duties to Shī'ism. It is clear from several incidents mentioned in the sources that the assumption of the cloak of *taqīyah* was a formality occasioned by being embedded in an environment at least nominally hostile to Shī'ism.

One way in which he practiced *taqīyah* was by teaching *fiqh* at the Masjid al-Ḥarām. The way *fiqh* was taught was in a question-answer format the responses to have been given in accordance with one of the four major legal madhhabs. Muhammad Mahdī is reported to have taught according to all four schools while maintaining the anonymity of his own.

Having never truly distinguished himself in his writings as had other students of Bihbihānī like Shaykh Ja'far al-Najafī (author of *Kashf al-Ghiṭā'*), Muhammad Mahdī perhaps found in the Meccan period the religious distinction and fame necessary to preeminent status in the Shī'ī community of 'Irāq. Or perhaps his biographers found in the Meccan period the bases for the distinction he would achieve in 'Irāq.⁵²

Ṭabāṭabā'ī returned to 'Irāq in 1782. The Bihbihānī "Uṣūlists" were clearly paramount⁵³. For the next sixteen years the Baḥr al-'Ulūm would live there gradually emerging as the leading Shī'ite figure there and second only to Bihbihānī in all the 'atabāt. Ṭabāṭabā'ī spent his time teaching and acting as arbiter for the community. Although he is never referred to as *marja'*

while Bihbihānī remained alive, it is clear that he fulfilled that role in Najaf.

It was during these sixteen years - a period, by the way, which gets scant attention from biographers - that he wrote the few books, treatises and glosses known to come from his pen. His intellectual stance seems to have hardened during this period in response to the rising wave of mysticism in the 'atabāt as well as the growing cult of al-Aḥsā'ī. The students he attracted tended to be from the more established scholarly families - the Bihbihānis, 'Āmilis, Khwānsāris, Burūjirdis, and Ṭabāṭabā'is - although this should not imply that there was a philosophical or intellectual uniformity about his students.⁵⁴

When the reaction against the Ṣūfis exploded in the 'atabāt, inspired in large part by a son of Agha Bihbihānī, Muḥammad 'Alī, the Baḥr al-'Ulūm took an active part. He was instrumental in arranging the expulsion of Nūr 'Alī Shāh Ni'matullāhī, but the author of *Tarā'iq* attributes that not to Muḥammad Mahdī's personal antipathy but to the pressure put on by people in Karbala. Ṭabāṭabā'ī may have been the one who requested Nūr 'Alī's departure but the *Tarā'iq* seems to be placing the blame on others. That the ill-will against the Ṣūfis was widespread is suggested by the two attempts to poison Nūr 'Alī Shāh.⁵⁵

Muḥammad Mahdī's relations with the followers of al-'Aḥsā'ī are mentioned only obliquely in the sources. As stated earlier this was probably due to the fact that the latter's imānist revisionist doctrines had yet to reach maturity before the Baḥr al-'Ulūm passed from the scene.⁵⁶ Aghā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbihānī died in 1208/1793 and left vacant the position of marja' al-taqlīd. His successor was Muḥammad Mahdī, the Baḥr al-'Ulūm.⁵⁷ He would serve the Shi'ī community as spiritual leader for the next four years.⁵⁸ The period seems to have been a calm one aside from campaign against the Ṣūfis. The biographers depict the periods as a somnolently pietistic one for the new marja' al-taqlīd. He spent his days teaching and the evenings distribut-

ing alms and performing vigils at the Masjid al-Kūfa. Although not an old man - he was in his middle fifties - he was afflicted by deafness. Perhaps more than any other factor, this handicap made him more and more reclusive in his last years.

Ṭabāṭabā'ī was presiding, during his four years as marja', over the demise of the 'atabāt as he had always known them. With Bihbihānī dead, much of the old fervent revivalist spirit of the ṣūlis was gone. Compounding this decline in the dynamism of the shrines of 'Irāq was the rise of a powerful new dynasty in Iran which was successfully wooing large numbers of scholars back to Iran.⁵⁹

Out of this period sprang a new intellectual movement - Shaykhism - the teachings of a former student of Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Aḥsā'ī. For the next thirty years Shaykh Aḥmad-i Aḥsā'ī would lead a popular attack on the position of the Uṣūlist scholars. And by the time Shaykhism was successfully counterattacked, the field of battle had shifted from 'Irāq to Iran.

The period of Muḥammad Mahdī's leadership in the 'atabāt can be seen as the end to the eighteenth century domination of Shi'ī scholarship and thought by 'Irāq-i 'Arab. It was also the end of the period of estrangement between the community of Shi'ī scholars and the politicians who ruled Iran.

For Ṭabāṭabā'ī's intellectual growth the last years of his life seem to have been of little importance, judging by the silence of the biographies. Beyond the question of this later period, there is the even more difficult question of assessing the Baḥr al-'Ulūm's scholarship. By the standards of his time literary output was meager indeed.⁶⁰ Of the six books, eleven treatises, two commentaries, and two glosses, only five works were ever published.⁶¹ His works, with the exception of one rijāl book and some devotional poetry, were legal and catechismal. Without a careful study of these books as well as a study of the works of his teachers and his students, it is impossible to say what, if anything, distinguished his work from that of his ijāza-conferring predecessors.

But in more indirect ways, his influence on the direction of Shī'ite clericalism was profound. Where Bihbihānī had re-formulated the tenets of clerical elitism, Tabātabā'ī produced a generation of scholars who fulfilled these tenets. Many of his students, notably Hājji Muḥammad Karbāsī, Shaykh Ja'far al-Najafī, Shaykh Abū 'Alī al-Hā'irī, Sayyid Muḥammad Jawād al-'Āmilī and his own son, Muḥammad Rizā, carried on the traditions of uṣūlism both in the 'atabāt and in Iran. All were influential in, if not primarily responsible for, maintaining the dominance of this form of scholasticism in the political as well as religious life of nineteenth century Iran.

NOTES

¹ The source closest to the life of the Baḥr al-'Ulūm was not available to me: Shaykh Abū 'Alī al-Hā'irī, Muntahā al-Maqāl (a.k.a. Rijāl Abū 'Alī). The work is cited by Rawḍāt and Mustadrak and is described by Makārim as "the first book in which stories of him are recorded" (p. 415). The most copious source is the editors' introduction to the Baḥr al-'Ulūm's own, Rijāl Sayyid Baḥr al-'Ulūm, ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq Baḥr al-'Ulūm and Ḥusayn Baḥr al-'Ulūm, 3 vols., Najaf, 1385 A.H., v. 1, pp. 1-195. Among the most important 19th century sources for the life of the Baḥr al-'Ulūm are: Mirzā Muḥammad al-Tumukābunī, Qisaṣ al-Ulamā', Tehrān, n.d., (henceforward Qisaṣ), pp. 169-175; Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir al-Khwānsārī, Rawḍāt al-Jannāt fī Ahwāl al-Ulamā' wa'l-Sādāt (henceforward Rawḍāt), Tehrān 1367 [(sic!) A. H.] pp. 648-652; and Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad Taqī al-Nūrī al-Ṭabarsī, Mustadrak al-Wasā'il wa Mustanbat al-Masā'il (henceforward Mustadrak), 3 vols, Tehrān, 1321 A. H., v. III, pp. 383 ff. The sources of Qisaṣ, both oral and written, include Ākhūnd Mullā Zayn al-'Abidīn al-Salmāsī, Mirzā al-Qummi, and Mullā Āghā-yi Darbandi, author of Kitāb Iksīr al-'Ibādāt. Rawḍāt's main source other than unnamed oral informants appears to be Abū 'Alī al-Hā'irī's Muntahā al-Maqāl. Mustadrak's sources are mainly the ijāzas acquired by the Baḥr al-'Ulūm and those he conferred. Other useful works for Ṭabātabā'ī's life are: Shaykh 'Abbās al-Qummi, Fawā'id al-Ridāwiyah fī Ahwāl 'Ulamā' al-Madhab al-Ja'fariyah (sic) (Fawā'id), Tehrān, n.d., pp. 699 ff; Mu'allim-i Ḥabībādī, Makārim al-Āthār dar Ahwāl-i Rijāl-i Dawrah-vi Qājār, 2 vols. Tehrān, 1382 A. H. (Makārim), pp. 414-429

(an excellent bibliographic tool); Mir Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh, Ṭarā'iq al-Haqā'iq (Ṭarā'iq), 3 vols. Tehrān, n.d. v. 3, pp. 200, 217-18, 399 (an important though sketchy source on Ṭabātabā'ī's relations with the Ṣūfis); Shaykh Asadullāh Izādgushasb, Shams al-tawārīkh, Tehrān, 1345, A.H. (Sh.); and, among useful works in European languages, H. Algar, Religion and State in Iran, Berkeley 1969; E. G. Browne, A Literary History of Persia, v. 4, Cambridge 1924; and W. Royce, Mir Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and the Revival of Sufism in Iran, Princeton 1979 (unpublished PhD dissertation).

² See L. Gardet, Karāma, [in:] Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition

³ See, e.g. Qisaṣ, p. 171

⁴ Rawḍāt, p. 648; Qisaṣ, p. 168; Rijāl, p. 31

⁵ Makārim, p. 416 calls this man the confidant of both the Eighth and Ninth Imāms and dates his death to 220 A. H.

⁶ The following segment appears only in Rijāl and may be an embellishment of the original story.

⁷ Rijāl, p. 32

⁸ Rawḍāt, p. 650

⁹ R. M. Savory, Iran, EI² v. IV, pp. 50-51

¹⁰ Holt, P., Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, p. 145

¹¹ It is worth noting however that the biographers of Ṭabātabā'ī find little in the political sphere worth commenting upon. One is left with an impression, somewhat contrary to the one expressed above, that the course of the lives of the subjects (of the biographies) was little influenced by political upheaval.

¹² This sequence of Ṭabātabā'ī's travels is found in Qisaṣ, pp. 168-9.

¹³ Rijāl, p. 41

¹⁴ Tadhkirat al-mulūk, ed. and trans. V. M. Minorsky, London 1943, pp. 42, 111

¹⁵ Shaykh Muḥammad 'Alī Ḥazīn, The Life of..., trans. F. C. Belfour, London 1831

¹⁶ Rijāl, loc. cit.

¹⁷ There is a strong caveat to be voiced here, however. Only Rijāl mentions his holding the post of qādī and his conferring it on his disciple. Ṭarā'iq, v. 3, p. 217 speaks vaguely of his receiving "wazīfah" and "tiyūl" from the Ottoman sultān. There are at least two conclusions one might draw from the absence of mention in other sources: 1) that it was not considered worthy of mention or 2) that his holding the post reflected

badly on the overall image of piety and spiritual aloofness. It is also worth noting that Rijāl makes it appear that the marja' al-taqlid in the 'atabāt had the power to appoint qādis, imām-jum'ahs, and other religious functionaries while Tarā'iq seems to accord that prerogative to the "khwandegār-i Rūm", i.e. the Ottoman sultān. The two indeed may be more complementary than contradictory, the sultān's function being to approve the marja's choice.

¹⁸ Two of the sources, Rawdāt and Qisas, do not mention the Iran period although the former does mention as an ijāza-giver, Mīr Abd al-Bāqī al-Khātūnābādī, whom Ṭabāṭabā'ī met in Isfahān.

¹⁹ Mustadrak, p. 387; Makārim, p. 417

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Makārim, loc. cit.

²² The sea journey is inferred from a marvel (karāma) attributed to him of calming a fellow sea-traveller who was terrified at the approach of a storm (Mustadrak, p. 401). The only logical sea journey the Baḥr al-'Ulūm would have taken would have been either to or from the Hijāz.

²³ This, at least, is how his biographers have recounted his trip to Mecca. It is reasonable to assume that from the activities, outside his teachings, in which he took part, it would have been apparent to anyone who was interested what his true madhhab was. The biographers are principally concerned with the moral question, i.e. whether or not taqiyah was practiced, not how effective it might have been.

²⁴ Rijāl, pp. 35-6; Makārim, loc. cit.

²⁵ Rijāl, p. 96

²⁶ Makārim, p. 417. Ḥabībādī's source is a risālah written by Muḥammad Bāqir al-Khwānsārī on his family's genealogy. The latter does not mention this journey in the Rawdāt however.

²⁷ Rijāl, pp. 17 ff.

²⁸ According to Rijāl, p. 97, Ṭabāṭabā'ī late in life sought and received funds from Fath 'Alī Shāh Qājār (r. 1797-1834) to build a minaret in al-Shaḥn al-Sharīf in Najaf. On the question of Qājār relations with the 'atabāt scholars at this time see Algar, Religion and State, chapters 2 and 3.

²⁹ Makārim, p. 446

³⁰ E. G. Browne, v. IV, p. 410 dates Ṭabāṭabā'ī's death as 1240-1824/5, without, however, giving any source for that date. His other sources, (e.g. Rawdāt) either give 1212 or no date at all (Qisas). All the sources used for this paper agree on the latter date as correct although the month varies (Makā-

rim, p. 426, says 24 Jumādā I, Rijāl says Rajab, p. 116) The issue of his death date would not be worth raising were it not for the fact that had he died as late as Browne says, Shaykhism would have been a major issue in his lifetime. A study of his works for references to the teachings of Aḥsā'ī and a review of the birth and death dates of his students strongly suggest that he could not have lived as late as Browne says.

³¹ Rawdāt, p. 650; Makārim, pp. 428-9. There is some controversy over this marriage. Ḥabībādī goes into it in great detail.

³² Rijāl, p. 12. It would seem from this that Majlisī's sister was not a blood ascendant or the Baḥr al-'Ulūm.

³³ Ibid. It is of some interest to note the "political" nature of intellectual marriages. While the first-cousin marriage may still have been the preferred type, the incidence of marriage among the off-spring of otherwise unrelated scholarly families was common enough to merit comment. The intellectual and spiritual ustādh-tilmīdh or pīr-murīd relationship was transferred and perpetuated not only through the ijāza but via the marriage bond as well. This element in intellectual relations is a recurring theme in the rijāl literature particularly where a leadership role (e.g. among Sūfī orders) as well as an intellectual tradition is being transferred.

³⁴ Algar, op. cit., treats this controversy in some detail in the first two chapters of his work.

³⁵ It is never entirely clear that Bihbihānī was in fact Ṭabāṭabā'ī's most important mentor. The ijāzas conferred by Ṭabāṭabā'ī are contradictory on this question and noted as such by Rawdāt. On p. 649 Khwānsārī states that in his ijāzas, Ṭabāṭabā'ī gave preference to Muḥammad Mahdī al-Futūnī over all his teachers. Yet when he conferred an ijāza on Khwānsārī's grandfather in Isfahān in 1779 "he ascribed the tradition only to Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir al-Bihbihānī". These two references are not necessarily exclusive, of course. There are other signs of the principal influence of Bihbihānī. The most positive statement appears in Mustadrak, p. 381, where of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's teachers Bihbihānī is called "awwaluhum wa ajalluhum wa akmaluhum".

³⁶ al-Fawā'id al-Uṣūliyah, according to Qisas compiled by his son, Muḥammad Riḍā (p. 169).

³⁷ Rawdāt, p. 649

³⁸ I have somewhat arbitrarily chosen the account of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's education as given by Rijāl to present here. The major area of disagreement - and not an unimportant one - between the sources is on the question of when he became a student of Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbihānī. Neither Mustadrak nor Rawdāt are at all precise about the sequence of teachers or places of study. On one side, Qisas and Makārim assert that at age 14 Ṭabāṭabā'ī went to Najaf but returned to Karbalā sometime afterwards to

study with Bihbihānī and then went once to Najaf. Rijāl does not mention the interim return to Karbalā and asserts that the boy began his study with Bihbihānī before he first left Karbalā. Unable to make a satisfactory judgement on the correctness of either version I have followed Rijāl because of the more precise approach to categorizing the biographical material.

³⁹ Qisās, p. 168

⁴⁰ Algar, op. cit., p. 36

⁴¹ I have deliberately omitted any discussion here of the philosophical tenets of these teachers and how they might have shaped Ṭabāṭabā'ī's thinking. Without a detailed study of their works as well as the works of their teachers, it is futile to characterize their scholarly approaches. Instead I have selected those few about whom there is some more general knowledge and have considered them to have been the major influences on Ṭabāṭabā'ī's thought. These are Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbihānī, the great uṣūlī spokesman; Qutb al-Dīn al-Nayrīzī, the Dhahabī shaykh; and Mīrẓā Maḥdī al-Isfahānī al-Khurāsānī, a specialist in ḥikmat. These three typified what Ustādh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī calls the "three perceptions" of the "reality of existence" in Maktab-i Tashayyu, 1339 A. H. (Sh.), v. 2, p. 85, the first being religious exotericism, the second mystical esotericism, and the third, philosophical rationalism. Although European sources, eg. Algar and Browne tend to differentiate these three "perceptions" and consider them to some extent at least as exclusive, the biographical sources for Ṭabāṭabā'ī show all three elements to have been integral to his education.

⁴² Tarā'iq, v. 3, p. 339. A similar passage is found in v. 3, p. 217. The source for these two passages is Mīrẓā Jalāl al-Dīn Dhahabī b. Mīrẓā Bābā Dhahabī in the preface written in 1301 A. H. to his father's work, Sharā'it al-Ṭarīqah. On Shaykh Ja'far Najafī, a renowned mujtahid, see Qisās, pp. 183-198.

⁴³ Tarā'iq, v. 3, loc. cit.

⁴⁴ H. Corbin, L'Ecole Shaykhie..., Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes 1960-61, p. 16

⁴⁵ Rawḍāt, p. 25 (where Ṭabāṭabā'ī is called "ṣāhib al-Durrah" after his most famous work, al-Durrah al-Najafiyah)

⁴⁶ It is still not clear when Aḥsā'ī first postulated his new doctrines. Since his chief disciples and propagandists, Sayyid Kāzim-i Rishī and Shaykh Muḥammad Karīm Khān Kirmānī were not born until the Baḥr al-'Ulūm had passed from the scene (the former in 1212, the latter in 1225 A. H.) it seems likely that Aḥsā'ī's imāmism was not systematically set out until quite late in the shaykh's life and well after the passing of Ṭabāṭabā'ī.

⁴⁷ Most sources agree on this as the origin of the title-nickname, Baḥr al-'Ulūm. Ḥabībādī in Makārim, p. 416, however,

attributes the origin to Āghā Mīrẓā Abu'l-Qāsim al-Khwansarī but then, quoting Dhikrī al-Muḥsinayn says that Mīrẓā Muḥammad Maḥdī Shahīd (i. e. al-Isfahānī al-Khurāsānī) gave it to him.

⁴⁸ Rawḍāt, p. 649

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 650

⁵⁰ Qisās, pp. 169-170; Makārim, p. 417

⁵¹ Rijāl, p. 35

⁵² Rawḍāt, p. 651; Rijāl, p. 50 states that a debate with the Jews of Dhū'l-Kafl is credited with giving his name renown. According to Fawā'id, p. 677, it was in the Ḥijāz that the Sunnis were so impressed by him (on the eve of his departure he revealed his Shī'ism) that they said, "If there truly is a maḥdī in the Imāmī madhhab, then this (Muḥammad) Maḥdī must be he".

⁵³ In an ijāza which Shaykh 'Abd al-'Alī al-Baḥrānī conferred on Ḥājji Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Karbāsī (or Kalbāsī) he wrote, "I sought from him (the Baḥr al-'Ulūm) an ijāza so that my way would be linked with that of the 'ulamā' of 'Irāq" indicating that the Baḥr al-'Ulūm's teachings were clearly the prevailing doctrines of the 'atabāt.

⁵⁴ The two most ardent adversaries in the uṣūlī-akḥbārī controversy towards the end of the dispute were both students of the Baḥr al-'Ulūm, i. e. Shaykh Ja'far al-Najafī and Mīrẓā Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Sānī' al-Nishāpūrī. See Rawḍāt, p. 649 and Hamid Algar, Religion..., pp. 64-5

⁵⁵ Tarā'iq, v. 3, p. 200.

⁵⁶ See Corbin, op. cit., p. 16 where a purported reply from Ṭabāṭabā'ī to a request from Aḥsā'ī for an ijāza is given. He is supposed to have answered, "It is for you, oh shaykh, to confer an ijāza on me". This seems out of keeping with the relative positions of the two men during Ṭabāṭabā'ī's lifetime and does not accord with the fact that the shaykh held an ijāza from the Baḥr al-'Ulūm and not vice versa.

⁵⁷ Makārim, p. 416 indicates that Bihbihānī himself made the designation but other sources disagree. Rawḍāt, p. 648 says, "Eventually the imāmī leadership came to him at the end of his life and the community of scholars decided (on him) due to his judgement and impartiality (ittafaqat al-ṭā'ifah 'alā fiqhīhi wa 'adālatihi...).

⁵⁸ The exact title of the position, which was recognized as the supreme leadership of the temporal Shī'ite community, is at issue here. Rawḍāt, p. 648 uses "ra'īs al-imāmīyah"; Rijāl prefers the more modern "marja' al-taqlīd". Rijāl also declares (although no other source does) that Ṭabāṭabā'ī wanted to re-organize the structure of religious leadership and after Bihbihānī's death he appointed Shaykh Ja'far al-Najafī as marja' al-taqlīd and muftī

(p. 41). If so this would suggest that leadership was not necessarily synonymous at this time with the "marja'-ate".

⁵⁹ The 'atabāt remained the single most important academic center but until the marja' al-taqlid-ship of Shaykh Murtaḍā al-Anṣārī (Algar, p. 163), the shrine cities lost the ability they had maintained since the fall of the Ṣafavids to attract and hold Shi'ī scholars throughout their lives.

⁶⁰ Rijāl, pp. 92-4; al-Kāshānī, Mullā Ḥabībullah al-Sharīf, Lubāb al-Alqāb fī Alqāb al-Atyāb, Tehran, 1378 A. H. noting from the Muntahā says, "His marvels (karāmāt) were many but his compositions few". (karāmātuḥu kathīrah wa lakinna muṣannafātihi qalīlah)

⁶¹ Khān Bābā Mushār, Mu'allifin-i Kutub-i Chāpī, v. VI, pp. 439-440

Peter CHEŁKOWSKI

ROOHOWZI: AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT IN THE HOMEOSTASIS OF IRANIAN CULTURE AND MORES

The history of Iran is most impressive not only for its mere length of the cultural and artistic creativity of the nation, but mainly for its capacity for self-preservation. Despite constant encroachment by enemies and migrating peoples descending upon the Iranian plateau from all corners, the Iranians have maintained their identity and way of life for twenty-five centuries. Even the most significant invasion of Iran - the Arab-Islamic conquest - could not wipe out the language of the country, as it did in some other conquered regions. On the contrary, the old language was given a new vital infusion, saving it from stagnation, and elimination.

It is no exaggeration to say that there is a poet in every Iranian, and that almost every Iranian is familiar with the great poetical tradition of his country, to a degree that is rare among people of other cultures. In the long history of Iranian nation, the language and its literary idiom has played a pivotal role around which the nation and culture have revolved. Age-old values do find expression in poetry even in today's context. Poetry has been a reference system, a mirror of Iran's history and heroic myth, an expression of national identity. This is why, for example, despite the total commitment of Iran before 1979 to join the modern nations of the world, the Arabic script of the Persian language has not been replaced by the Latin one, as has been the case in Turkish. Rather, the script has been actively safeguarded as an ongoing proof that Persian, and the Persian literary corpus of today is