

Methodological Note on the Intellectual Landscape in the Contemporary Twelver Shī‘a

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1. Introduction

Since the beginnings of Shī‘a Islam, followers have spread throughout the Islamic Empire. In the twentieth century they spread wider, venturing nearly all over the world, through migration, business activities, studying abroad and so on. With this expansion of followers, some actors have played roles which have formulated and reformulated the essence of Shī‘a Islam. One group in this category is undoubtedly the religious scholars who learn Islamic studies. Ayatollah Khomeini and the religious scholars who supported him have had an especially great impact on not only Shī‘ite Muslims but also Westerner including scholars. However, although such an impact certainly warrants researchers’ interest in them, research on this group has not been deepened sufficiently, excluding that on political matters.

Under such conditions, this paper aims to describe the landscape of the Shī‘ite religious scholars in contemporary Iran. In particular, it attempts to explain their conditions in Iranian society and their conditions in the inner religious circle by focusing on their terms of address and technical terms.

2. Hierarchy, Titles, and Terms for Religious Scholars in Shiite Islam

It is generally considered that there is in contemporary Shī‘a an institution which supervises the religious scholars who have some Islamic knowledge, like the institution of the Church and the Vatican in Catholicism, while it is generally considered that there is no such equivalent institution in contemporary Sunni. In contemporary Shī‘a, each religious scholar has a title according to his knowledge and this constitutes the hierarchy of the religious scholars. Those titles are, from the top, 1. “Grand Ayatollah (Prs. *Āyat Allāh al-‘Oẓmā*/Ar. *Āya Allāh al-‘Uẓmā*),” 2. “Ayatollah (Prs. *Āyat Allāh*/Ar. *Āya Allāh*),” 3. “Prs. *Ḥojjat al-Eslām va-l-Moslemīn*,” 4. “Prs. *Ḥojjat al-Eslām*/Ar. *Hujja al-Islām*,” 5. “Prs. *Zeqat al-Eslām*/Ar. *Thiqat al-Islām*.” [Moussavi 1994: 295–297; Amanat 1988: 124; Calmard 2004]

The initial establishment of the hierarchy of Shī‘ite religious scholars is closely related to the revival of the *Uṣūlī* school, which is one of the inner jurisprudence schools in Shī‘a, and to the establishment of the institution of “Ar. *marji‘ al-taqlīd*¹ / Prs. *marja‘-e taqlīd* (source

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1 There are two types of transcription for the Arabic “source of emulation” in prior studies. One is “marja‘ al-taqlīd” and this type of transcription is popular. On the other hand, some researchers transcribe it as “marji‘ al-taqlīd,” although this type of transcription is minor. However, the latter transcription is right based on Arabic grammar, because the noun of “Raja‘a” for a place or time is “marji‘,” and the noun of “Raja‘a”

of emulation)” [cf. Momen 1985: 203–5].

Marji' al-taqlīd as a centralized authority started with the death of Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥasan ibn Bāqir al-Najafī, known as Ḥasan al-Najafī (d. 1849–50) and succession of Murtaḍā ibn Muḥammad Amīn al-Anṣārī al-Tustarī, known as Murtaḍā al-Anṣārī (d. 1864) to his seat [cf. Mervin 2004: 66]. However, there was not a clear hierarchy based on the titles of religious scholars [Moussavi 1994: 295].

Of course, however, the titles of religious scholars were there. Ḥasan al-Najafī had the title of “Ar. *Shaykh al-Fuqahā'* (Leader of Jurists)” and Murtaḍā al-Anṣārī had the title of “Ar. *al-Shaykh al-A'zam* (Greatest Leader)” [Amanat 1988: 126]. But it was a kind of honorary title and it did not become customary to decide on or indicate the *marja' al-taqlīd* based on this title. Although Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Shīrāzī al-Ḥusaynī (d. 1895) had the title of “Ḥujja al-Islām” now fourth rank, he was the first person who had the title assigned to the most learned of the Shī'a. This tendency gradually developed among the religious scholars in Iran and Iraq. And in the background of the inflation of *Hojjat al-Eslām* and later *Āyat Allāh*, top-ranking religious scholars held the title of *Āyat Allāh*, and later *Āyat Allāh al-'Ozmā*, until late 1940 [cf. Amanat 1988: 124; Moussavi 1994: 295].

While it is clear how the titles of top-ranking religious scholars developed, as mentioned above, it is not clear regarding the titles of *Hojjat al-Eslām va-l-Moslemīn*, *Zeqa al-Eslām*. In addition, it is not clear what those who do not have any title are called.

Thus, in this paper I attempt to consider these problems limited to contemporary Iran, especially after the revolution. I will introduce the Persian technical terms for the religious scholars and rethink their intellectual landscape and hierarchy.

3. Intellectual Landscape and Indication in Persian Terms

3-1. Basic Terms of Address for Religious Scholars in Contemporary Iran

Here I will explain some basic Persian terms of address for the Shī'ite religious scholars in contemporary Iran. Then I will explain the intellectual landscape surrounding the hierarchy of religious scholars by focusing on four technical terms.

Prs. *Ṭalabe*/Ar. *Ṭalaba*

A term referring to a student in Prs. *Howze-ye 'Elmīye* (religious establishment). There are three education levels (Prs. *Jāme'e Moqaddamāt*, Prs. *Dars-e Soṭūh*, Prs. *Dars-e Khālej*)² in religious establishment. If a person participates in learning Islamic studies at any level, he

for actions is “marja'.” On the other hand, this Arabic grammar rule is reversed in Persian. In this paper, in accordance with the Arabic grammar rule, I use “Ar. *marji'*.”

2 After the Iranian revolution, *Dars-e Soṭūh* was separated into *Dars-e Soṭūh* and *Dars-e Soṭūh-e 'Ālī* (higher standard level).

is called *Ṭalabe*. However, there have been two types of *Ṭalabe* since the Iranian revolution in 1979. One type consists of students who are allowed to wear a mantle (Prs. 'abā) and turban (Prs. 'ammāme), as it were Prs. *Mo'ammāme*, while the other type cannot. A student is allowed to wear those two items after Prs. *Jashn-e Ma'refat-e Rah-e Pūyān-e Foqāhat va Tazkīye* (the Celebration of Wisdom-Seeking for Jurisprudence and Spiritualization), the so-called Prs. *Morāsen-e 'Ammāme-Gozārī* (Ceremony of Turbaning). In general, such students have finished *Jāme'-e Moqaddamāt* (elementary level) and ethical training, namely, they are studying at the *Dars-e Ṣoṭūḥ* (standard level) (cf. <http://www.rasanews.ir/NSite/Fullstory/?Id=69471>, also <http://www.kheimehnews.com/vdcc10qs.2bqxp81aa2.txt>). Then they are called turbaned (*mo'ammāme*).

Prs. 'Olamā/ Ar. 'Ulamā

The plural of Prs. 'ālem (Ar. 'ālim) and referring to a Twelver Shī'ite religious class with respect. This term tends to indicate "educated" religious scholars.

Prs. Rowḥānī

A term referring to a Shī'ite religious class with some respect or neutrally, meaning "Spiritual Guide." This term is more extensive than 'Olamā. It comprises not only Prs. *faqīh*, 'Olamā but also those who seek Islamic Knowledge (= *ṭalabe*, above mentioned). This term has a better connotation than Prs. Mollā or Prs. Ākhond and religious scholars describe themselves with this term.

Prs. Mollā

A Persian term referring to a Shī'ite religious class pejoratively. It is said that this term is derived from the Ar. *Mawlā* [Deh-Khodā 1970: vol. 42, 1026; Anvārī 1381: vol.8, 7308]. According to Deh-Khodā [1970: vol. 42, 1026] and Anvārī [1381: vol.8, 7308–7309], there have been four usages of this term. The first usage, the above mentioned usage, refers to a (Islamic) religious scholar who learns literacy skills, (Islamic) law, and the (Islamic) source of law. The second usage refers to Jewish or Zoroastrian religious scholars among Muslims (see also [Jamāl-Zāde 1341: 405]). The third usage refers to all those who learn. The final usage refers to teachers in Prs. *Maktab* (a small private school). The first and final usages are the same as the usage of Prs. *Ākhond*.

In the Iranian/Persian social context, this word has had ambiguity; positive and negative nuances. For example, narratives of Mollā Nāṣer al-Dīn have described a good image of a Mollā on one side and an amusing image of a Mollā on the other.

Prs. *Ākhond*³

A term referring to the Twelver Shī'ite religious class pejoratively [cf. Momen 1985: xix]. It is said that this word is an abbreviation of "Prs. *Aqā*" (Sir) + "Prs. *Khondgār*" (abbr. of Prs. *Khodābandgār*: a king) [<http://www.loghatnaameh.com/dehkhodaworddetail-0557030428744c4e8c47058477f17117-fa.html>]. It has been current in Persian since Timurid times [n.d. 1986: 331]. According to Anvārī [1381: vol.1, 65], there have been two usages. The first refers to scholars who learn Islamic studies. The second refers to teachers in Maktab.

This term has had ambiguity. For example, some prominent Shī'ite scholars in modern times were called *Ākhond* as their honorary title, like Ākhund Khurāsānī (d. 1905). On the other hand, *Ākhond* connotes bad sense and attitude, even pejoratively, for Islamic scholars in the contemporary Iranian social context. In addition, it tends to have a worse sense than *Mollā*.

3-2. Title and Hierarchy in Twelver Shī'ite Religious Scholars

Here I try to explain the main titles of religious scholars in contemporary Iran. These titles have a close relationship with the inner hierarchy of religious scholars.

Prs. *Mojtahed*/Ar. *Mujtahid*

A technical term for one who has studied sufficiently and achieved the level of competence necessary to obtain Prs. *Ejāze-nāme* (permission letter) which permits him to practice exertion (Ar. *Ijtihād*/ Prs. *Ejtehād*: a technical term for the process of arriving at judgment on points of Islamic law) [Momen 1985: xx–xxi]. Their opinions on jurisprudence problems are valid in law. In addition, their opinions are independent of each other and a *mujtahid* is prohibited from following the opinions of another *mujtahid*. In Shī'a, adherents are divided into two types. The first is one who is followed, and he is a *mujtahid*. The second is one who follows, and he is not a *mujtahid*. In addition, it is necessary for the latter to follow the former. Therefore, *mujtahid* have a special status in Shī'a. It takes ten years to achieve the preconditions of *Ejāze-nāme*, at least in contemporary Qom. One studies six years at the elementary level in a religious establishment and four years at the standard level (*Dars-e Soṭūh*) [Fischer 1980: 62].⁴ However, after this precondition is met, it is not clear how many years it takes for one to obtain *Ejāze-nāme*, and most of those who meet the preconditions do not obtain this level.

3 This term was used not only in Iran, but also in Azerbaijan, Russia and Afghanistan. In addition, Akhon (Islamic scholar in China) also derives from *Ākhond*. Although it is necessary to consider the usages in such countries, this paper's focus is limited to contemporary Iran. Therefore, I will consider this problem in another paper.

4 In recent religious establishment in Mashhad, the elementary level requires only five years and the standard level takes some four years.

Prs. *Zeqa al-Eslām*/Ar. *Thiqa al-Islām*

Traditionally this has been a title of Twelver Shī'ite scholars. In current Iran, this title is given to students in religious establishment. Thiqa is an Arabic technical term in the study of Hadith transmitters and refers to a reliable person and their transmission of the Hadith [Shahīd al-Thānī 1408: 203–204]. *Thiqa al-Islām* also derives from such reliable but discerning Islam [Mowlavī 1384: 80].

Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb Kulaynī (d. 941) was the first person who had this title as a title of Twelver Shī'ite scholars. However, this title was used as a special honorary title for him and was recognized as a specific honorary title [‘Amīdī 1414: 73]. After Shaykh Bahā'ī (Bahā' al-Dīn al-‘Āmilī, d. 1621) described Kulaynī as “Thiqa al-Islām,” more and more Twelver Shī'ite scholars described Kulaynī in this way [cf. Mowlavī 1384: 81].⁵ As a general title of Twelver Shī'ite scholars, it started under the Qajar dynasty. At that time, those who had this title were highly educated scholars in like derivation from Kulaynī [Mowlavī 1384: 81]. But as a result of the inflation of *Hojjat al-Eslām* (highest educated title at that time) at the time of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, the relative importance of the title of *Zeqa al-Eslām* decreased.

Since the Islamic revolution, students in religious establishment who have been allowed to wear a mantle and turban have gotten this title, generally in the beginning of *Dars-e Soḩūh*.

Prs. *Hojjat al-Eslām*/Ar. *Hujja al-Islām*

A title of Twelver Shī'ite scholars since mid-Qajar period and literally meaning “Proof of Islam.” According to Moussavi [1995: 295], this title seems to have been first of all accorded to Moḥammad Bāqer Shaffī (d. 1844). However, it was a special honorary title for his work as Ar. *Qāḩī* and Ar. *Muḩī*. As a general title of Shī'ite scholars, it started from his death, among Shī'ite scholars in Qajar Iran. Moreover, it became a title which means *marja'-e taqlīd* from Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Shīrāzī, known as Mīrzā-ye Shīrāzī. Since the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, the title denotes the highest rank among religious scholars. However, many prominent scholars used the title at the time of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, and the *Āyat Allāh* replaced the previous role of *Hojjat al-Eslām*. In addition, the title of *Hojjat al-Eslām* was sometimes enhanced and called *Hojjat al-Eslām va-l-Moslemīn* [‘Edālat-Nejād 1387: 654], and the relative role of *Hojjat al-Eslām* declined.

In contemporary Iran, *Hojjat al-Eslām* is the fourth rank in the hierarchy of religious scholars based on their knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and is mainly designated to students in late *Dars-e Soḩūh* and early *Dars-e Khālej*.

5 On the discussion of honorary titles.

Prs. *Hojjat al-Eslām va-l-Moslemīn*/Ar. *Ḥujja al-Islām wa-l-Muslimīn*

A title of Twelver Shī'ite scholars since the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and literally meaning "Proof of Islam and Muslims." At the time of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, the title of *Hojjat al-Eslām* was sometimes enhanced and called *Hojjat al-Eslām va-l-Moslemīn* [‘Edālat-Nejād 1387: 654].

Recently in Iran, *Hojjat al-Eslām va-l-Moslemīn* is the third rank in the hierarchy of religious scholars based on knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence. Normally, students who have spent some years studying in *Dars-e Khāleḡ* and are beginning mujtahid are designated this title.

Prs. *Āyat Allāh*/Ar. *Āya Allāh*

"Miraculous Sign of God." From a series of protests in late Qajar period, an association of some prominent scholars seems to have been clearer with the granting of this title. In fact, this title seems first of all to have been designated to the two prominent leaders of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, ‘Abd Allāh Behbahānī and Moḥammad Ṭabāṭabā’ī [Calmard 2004: 104]. In addition, these religious scholars had to contest the Qajar king, who had "Shadow of God (Prs. *Zell Allāh*)" and decided to use the title "Āya Allāh" [Moussavi 1995: 297]. As a result, the title of "Āya Allāh" was replaced in the role by the title of *Hojjat al-Eslām*, which had meant the summit of religious scholars until then.

Prs. *Āyat Allāh al-‘Ozmā*/Ar. *Āya Allāh al-‘Uzmā*

A title of Twelver Shī'ite scholars since the 1940s and meaning literally "Great Miraculous Sign of God." According to Calmard [2004: 104], this title seems to have been first accorded to Ḥoseyn Borūjerdī (d. 1961).⁶ After him, it became common for those who became prominent *marja ‘-e taqlīd* to be designated this title.

Pr. *Marja ‘-e Taqlīd*/Ar. *Marji ‘ al-Taqlīd*

A technical term for one who has his own followers in terms of the jurisprudence problem and collects *khums*⁷ from his followers. This custom started in the mid-nineteenth century and it is often said that the most learned of Shī'a has succeeded to the seat. In addition, it is also often

⁶ However, at the time of his succession to MT after the death of al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1946) and al-Ṭabāṭabā’ī, known as Āya Allāh Qummī (d. 1947), some prominent scholars like Khownsārī and Ḥojjat competed with him, and even some prominent scholars like Hamadānī opposed his ascension to the seat.

⁷ Ar. *Khums* is composed of two parts. One is the portion of the Imām and the collection and distribution of it is basically the right of Islamic jurists in the time of the occultation of the Twelfth Imām and is used for the Shī'ite community. The other is the portion of the descendants of the Prophet and is used for the poor descendants of the Prophet (*sayyid*). There are three types of collection of *khums* by MT. The first is only collecting the portion of the Imām without conditions. The second is collecting both portions, in case of the follower not being able to find a suitable poor *sayyid*. The third is collecting without conditions.

said that those who have the title of “Āyat Allāh al-‘Ozmā” become this in contemporary Shī'a [Walbridge 2001]. However, some researchers have pointed out that *marja'-e taqlīd* has been merely a higher *mojtahed* [Calmard 1996]. This indication fits the concept of *marja'-e taqlīd* based on the biography of al-Ṭīhrānī and a recent biography published in Iran [Kuroda 2007: 185–193; Aḥmadī 1382: 222; Golāmī 1384: 440–1; al-Saghīr 2003: 14; al-Jabūrī 2006: 15]. Therefore, while the prominent *marāja'-e taqlīd* is accorded to those who have the title of “Āyat Allāh al-‘Ozmā,” a wider concept of *marja'-e taqlīd* accords this title to *mojtahid*.

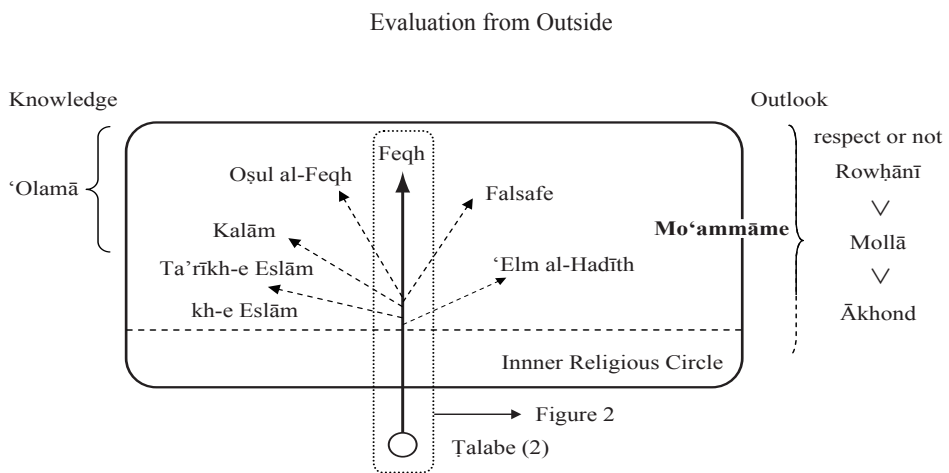
Prs. ‘Allāme/Ar. ‘Allāma

A title of Shī'ite religious scholars. There are clearly different usages between the usage in the Lebanese Shī'ite academy and the usage in the Iranian Shī'ite academy. In the Lebanese Shī'ite academy, ‘*Allāma* signifies a person who has much knowledge on Islamic law, similar to *Āya Allāh* in Iraqi and Iranian Shī'a. In the official website of Faḍullāh, he used ‘*Allāma* for Lebanese Shī'a and *Āyat Allāh* for Iranian Shī'a (compare with <http://www.bayynat.ir/index/>). On the other hand, ‘*Allāme* means a person who has great knowledge of Islamic philosophy, like ‘Allāme Ṭabāṭabā'ī.

IV. Conclusion

In this short essay, I have tried to explain the intellectual landscape among the Shī'ite religious scholars by focusing on the terms of address for those who have Islamic knowledge and the technical terms indicating the intellectual hierarchy among them.

Figure 1: Concept of Religious Scholars in Contemporary Iran



First, I explained some technical terms for the religious scholars. As a result, it was shown that ‘*Olamā*, Ākhond, Mollā and Rowḥānī are interchangeable technical terms

regarding what they indicate. These terms indicate those who have Islamic knowledge, even including young students without turbans, namely, the same religious class. However, at the same time, there is a difference in the degree of respect. *'Olamā* and *Rowḥānī* tend to be respectful terms; on the other hand, *Mollā* and *Ākhond* tend to be pejorative (see Figure 1).

Figure 2: Intellectual Hierarchy and Titles in Contemporary Iran

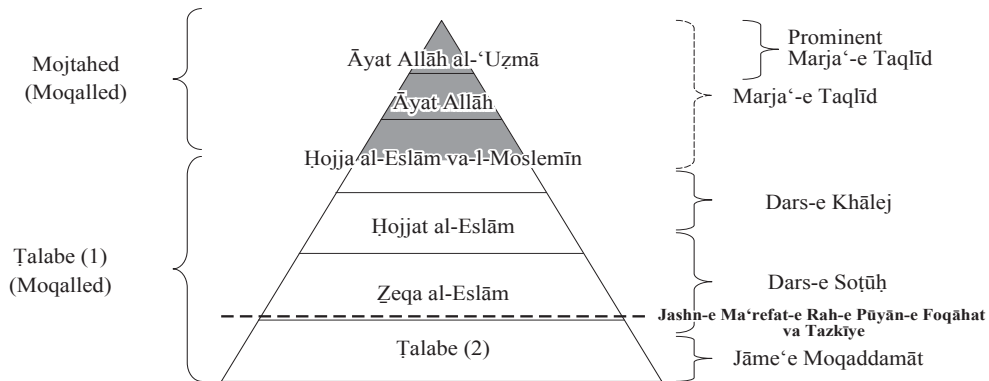


Figure 2: Evaluation from Inside

Next, I explained some technical terms regarding the titles in religious classes. Through this explanation, two points became clear. First, there is some difference between title and education level. Second, the origin of these terms as titles derives almost entirely from Iran in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (cf. Figure 2).

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