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The Compartmentalisation of Holy Figures: A Case Study of the Heritage of the Samarran Shi'i Imams

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Abstract: When discussing the relevance and value of holy figures in academia, culture and society, it is perhaps easy to compartmentalise them within the realms of theology, ritual worship and communal guidance. This is especially the case when we consider that historical analysis of saints, whether Prophets or Imams, positions their actions and work as mainly appealing to their own religious believers. These labels continue to exist today but where labels are not necessarily applicable is in the realm of the holy figure's vision for society and humanity. Here, holy figures have the ability to transcend sectarian and cultural labels and extend their relevance to a more universal audience and to universal problems. In this article, I aim to use the heritage of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth Shi'i Imams, Ali al-Hadi, Hasan al-Askari and Muhammad al-Mahdi (who at one point in their lives resided in Samarra, Iraq) as a case study in order to show how a holy figure's vision can be contextualised for contemporary society. I argue that Western academia and indeed, current social culture, have compartmentalised holy figures to the realms of theological analysis, sectarian belonging and communal issues. However, the lives, teachings and works of such figures need to be analysed in an interdisciplinary and holistic framework to allow a more realistic picture of how they lived and what they contributed to society. This will yield greater critical engagement with their vision and why they still hold an enduring place in the hearts of believers and the place they can hold for the rest of humanity. The Samarran Shi'i Imams help to illustrate my argument based on three reasons. The first is that the heritage of the Twelve Shi'i Imams has generally not been tackled in Western academia. Secondly, in comparison to the early Shi'i Imams such as Ali b. Abi Talib, there is less work available on the Samarran Shi'i Imams. Finally, the case study aims to generate discussion on the intellectual treatment of holy figures in academia, from whatever religious background they originate from.

Key words: Holy figures · Saints · Theology · Heritage · Shi'a · Samarra · Twelve Imams · Islam · Ali al-Hadi · Hasan al-Askari · Muhammad al-Mahdi

INTRODUCTION

The heritage of the Twelve Shi'i Imams has rarely been dealt with in Western academia both with regards to their contribution to classical Islamic sciences and society's moral growth as well as evolving issues such as pluralism and human rights [1-5]. This is a shame considering that the Shi'i Imams were scholars, leaders, teachers and reformers who left a legacy of intellectual dialogue, improving personal ethics and sacrificing their lives for the betterment of society. What exist currently are books dealing with contributions made by 10th - 16th century scholars and beyond such as al-Ghazali and Mulla Sadra [6], with the majority of literature orientated towards Sunni scholarship [7]. Whilst the aforementioned names are scholars in their own right, there is a vibrant legacy from which they have built stemming from the Twelve Imams.

I think there is always a need to historically trace the origins of any mode of scholarship and the progeny of Prophet Muhammad provides a vital starting point considering the knowledge which they learnt from the Prophet and the number of students they taught [8,9]. I have chosen the Samarran Shi'i Imams i.e Ali al-Hadi, Hasan al-Askari and Muhammad al-Mahdi (the 10th, 11th and 12th Imams) who lived in Samarra because at times, their contributions can be overshadowed by the oppression they went through making their lives

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synonymous with only suffering. Their label as 'holy figures' also compartmentalises their contributions to the realm of theology, ritual worship and communal guidance. Furthermore, the greater availability of literature on the earlier Imams (comparatively speaking), such as Ali b. Abi Talib or Zayn al-Abidin, naturally makes one curious about them rather than the Samarran Shi'i Imams.

My focus in this article will be the moral, philosophical and normative heritage of the aforementioned Imams. I have restricted the context of the article to Samarra, Iraq because each of the Imams is connected by that region; however, my reasoning may be applicable to any respected holy figure from a particular religious tradition. I would like to point out that the approach I am using in this article is based on two emerging academic methodologies: interdisciplinary analysis and epistemological holism. My concluding submission is that holy figures need to be placed in a broader academic context in order to understand their contributions to society, why they hold an abiding relevance to their followers and the need to contextualise their thoughts for evolving modern problems.

Methodological Approach of this Article: 'Interdisciplinary analysis' has become a buzzword in the study of Islamic studies in Western academia. There appears to be a realisation that the political space that Islam has occupied in the media (often negatively) can only be dealt with by engaging with the many intellectual roots from which it springs. These roots are Islamic law, Islamic history, Islamic tradition, Political Islam and more which are now being combined to understand the religious and social vision of Islam. The aforementioned disciplines are Western terms as classical *hawza* sciences have different names such as *ilm al-fiqh* (the science of jurisprudence) or *ilm al-hadith* (the science of narration) [10]. All this has led to a proliferation of interdisciplinary Islamic conferences where the emphasis is on seeing what other disciplines have to offer in formulating particular theories about Islamic interpretation [11]. Of course, any terminology can be contested in history with the argument that forms of analysis were present before but for our purposes today, interdisciplinary means 'work that integrates knowledge and modes of thinking from two or more disciplines. Such work embraces the goal of advancing understanding (e.g., explain phenomena, craft solutions, raise new questions) in ways that would have not been possible through single disciplinary means' [12-14]. In this article, I am combining various disciplines such as philosophy, law and history to arrive at a broader picture of what we mean by holy figures and their contributions today. This would give a foundation to my analyses on the Samarran Shi'i Imams, which can often be reduced to some simple form of hagiography.

The second aspect of this methodology is 'epistemological holism.' This is the 'view that whole theories are the units of confirmation. Single hypotheses yield observational predictions only with the aid of background theory…it is a consequence of epistemological holism that whether a belief is justified depends upon the support of the whole structure of beliefs to which it belongs' [15]. I will attempt to demonstrate that the contributions of holy figures need to be analysed in a holistic framework that moves beyond religion to ethics, social interaction and intellectual dialogue. This offers a wider contextual background to the holy figure in question compelling us to evaluate how we position their role in society, beliefs and understanding of a particular ontological reality.

The Contribution of Holy Figures Today: Before delving into the lives of the Samarran Shi'i Imams, it is necessary to place holy figures in an appropriate academic context. The definition of 'holy' means an association with 'sacredness', 'purity', 'God' and 'virtue' [16]. When we use the term 'holy figures', we are naturally indicating on a sacred person with high virtues, often in a Godly or religious context. As such, saints, prophets and Imams come under this category but the problem is that we *only* associate these figures as existing within a purely religious and/or theological frame work relevant only to their followers. How often have we found academic deliberation on the teachings of Jesus, Moses or Mohammed (apart from biographical works)? What happens when philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant are elevated to a status akin to Prophets? By venturing into this territory, I am fully aware that some academics may believe I am confusing academic thinking with religious thinking, the latter firmly rooted in beliefs. I wonder, is this distinction valid when it comes to the contribution of holy figures today or have we, as academics, chosen to compartmentalise holy figures? Over ten years ago, research into hagiography or the study of holy figures was minimal: 'unfortunately no adequate general guide to the history, study and use of hagiography exists in English' [17]. but today, it appears

to be a growing field of research, often met with some resistance [18]. I would like to offer three reasons as to why I believe there has been this resistance, which would provide my epistemological basis for this article.

The first is that investigating the deeds and works of holy figures can point to a greater humanitarian vision of elevating society from a lower form of existence to a higher one. Extracting this vision or at least parts of this vision can always be a difficult task due to historical and epistemological constraints. At times, the most common option is to choose a reductionist methodology in compartmentalising the figure thereby procuring a safer and more certain analysis. Despite the merits of this position, it does not secure the essence and living framework of the figure. From a holistic perspective, I think it is extremely significant to create a broader system of coordinates that allows us to understand and even empathise with the meanings, events and personal actions of historical figures. Why were these figures oppressed? What did they succeed in? How did they impact the individuals around them? Why did they attract students and followers which survive till today? This would, at the least, position the holy figure in a wider human context. It is interesting that any attempt to derive values, epistemic methods and relevance of a religious figure is now termed as apparently hagiographical and proselytising yet there is, I think, a deeper significance of theology, religious figures and religion in general within a sociological perspective, particularly a postmodern one. William Hart aptly summarises this tension in academia, 'the house of religious studies is full of strange beds and evens stranger bedfellows. One often finds oneself in a strange bed, embraced by a stranger, not knowing how one got there or how to get out. No wonder so much effort goes into policing the boundaries between the scholarly self and the dogmatic other, between the academic study of religion and the promotion of an ecclesiastical agenda in the guise of scholarship. For when this boundary is blurred, there can be a dreadful and palpable sense of violation' [19].

In this vein, Richard Roberts, in his book *Religion, Theology and the Human Sciences*, tackles several important questions related to the corporate management of education to yield skills and commodities rather than true academia, the need for practical theology in allowing religious believers to connect with their own tradition and figures, the disintegration of identities in an ever-changing postmodern society where unassailable human truths are not recognised and the role of religion in offering positive, soci *et al* renewal. It is his last point which interests me because I wonder whether there can be a critical investigation of religious tradition and its saintly figures with a view to contribute to constructive moral, social and transcendental values that help form rooted identities in human beings. According to him, society today is controlled by managerial modernity where everyone conforms resulting in a loss of meaningful human identity. In addition, religion and its contribution have been marginalised in the face of secularisation. This has led to a 'soci *et al* transcendental in which all other realities appear to subsist. Such totalisation, which has now grasped much main-line religion within its cold, fruitless embrace, closes off deeper sources for the renewal of the human condition' [20]. As Bauman states, human beings then become vagabonds - 'the vagabond does not know how long he will stay where is now, more often than not it will not be for him to decide when the stay will come to an end…What keeps him on the move is a disillusionment with the last place of sojourn and the forever smouldering hope that the next place he has not visited yet, perhaps the place after next, may be free from the faults which repulsed him in the places he ha already tasted…The vagabond is a pilgrim without a destination, a nomad without an itinerary' [21].

What Richard Roberts is perhaps getting at is the loss of important facets of religion, which we previously associated ourselves with and which have given a positive growth to society. Although he is rightly critical of those within a faith tradition that have been dogmatic, losing touch with a religion's essential values, he still brings out the spirituality which society may need, 'part of the collapse of socialisation can be associated with the disappearance of the ritual, experiential and mythic means of connecting the particular individual to the universals of cosmos, community and even the family' [20]. It is here that an evaluation of a holy figure's life within the context of his moral code and religious framework can offer society some intrinsic values which are being lost - values central to the way we interact with each other, build relationships, form communities, lead societies and conceive of what is meaningful to us [22,23]. The heritage of the Samarran Shi'i Imams is within this argument rather than a simplified hagiographical one because of their capacity to serve primary human needs through their spirituality.

The second reason, which has been acknowledged before by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars is the issue of Orientalists and Orientalism which have influenced the way in which academics think about Islam and its holy figures. Edward Said, in his seminal book *Orientalism*, stated,

'The closeness between politics and Orientalism or to put it more circumspectly, the great likelihood that ideas about the Orient drawn from Orientalism can be put to political use, is an important yet extremely sensitive truth. It raises questions about the predisposition towards innocence or guilt, scholarly disinterest or pressure-group complicity, in such fields as black or women's studies. It necessarily provokes unrest in one's conscience about cultural, racial or historical generalisations, their uses, value, degree of objectivity and fundamental intent. More than anything else, the political and cultural circumstances in which Western Orientalism has flourished, draw attention to the debased position of the Orient or Oriental as an object of study...' [24]

Although there has been a change within academia over the last 30 years in the study of Islam, his words still have a strong resonance today because the study of Islam, whether in the context of Middle Eastern Studies or Humanities, still has a position within an Orientialist context that is not considered for its own independent analysis and methodology, which has been substantiated by the *Siddiqui report* [25]. Perhaps a humble challenge for academics within the scope of Islamic studies is to consider the study of Islam within its own methodology, whether this yields merits or demerits with particular interpretations. At least that way, Islamic sciences and the contributions of holy figures would be appreciated from their own perspectives first with due consideration given to seminary training, thinking and terminology. This would involve acknowledgement of subjects such as *ilm al-fiqh* (the science of jurisprudence), *ilm al-hadith* (the science of narration) and *ilm al-mantiq* (the science of logic) which offer the classical framework needed to comprehend and develop the study of Islam, the solutions it can offer and the challenges it faces. It would also harmonise the subjects, figures and ideology of Islam with the context it finds itself in; whether this is geographical, intellectual, political, moral or social. Finally, this would yield greater understandings between different religious and secular systems from Islam's intellectual core.

The third factor to consider when deliberating about holy figures is the concept of heritage. It is easy to dismiss their contributions as existing in a bygone era and detached from the tangible technological age in which we live i.e we would like to rely on expressions and trends which we can immediately see and feel in the here and now, not some apparently mythic tradition that has somehow survived today. However, this notion of heritage is misconstrued only because it fails to take into account the broadness and diversity of heritage.

The concept of 'heritage' has evolved over the last 30 years. Initial definitions, dictionary and legal, have suggested land, property, possessions, architecture, natural habitats and environmental beauty. For example, the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) divides heritage into 'natural' and 'cultural' categories. Article 1 defines cultural heritage in terms of 'monuments', 'groups of buildings' and 'sites' [26]. Article 2 defines natural heritage in terms of 'natural features consisting of physical and biological formations', 'geological and physiographical formations' and 'natural sites' [27]. Approximately 30 years later, UNESCO saw the need to expand the concept of heritage to 'intangible heritage' via the Intangible Heritage Convention (2003). At the time of adoption, the Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, commented, 'I was surprised, upon my arrival in UNESCO, to note the relatively low priority given to living heritage compared to the strong focus on the tangible part of the world's cultures…' [28]

Realising this void, article 2 of the Intangible Heritage Convention (2003) states, 'The term "cultural heritage" has changed content considerably in recent decades, partially owing to the normative instruments developed by UNESCO. Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe of the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts…' [29] It is interesting that this expanded definition of heritage is relatively recent, thus confirming my argument that our understanding of 'tradition' and 'practice' is based on an empirical epistemology of the world that relies on our five senses. The newer notion of heritage includes knowledge and traditions that have been lived, passed down and ritualised. This implies an

acceptance of religious phenomena like revelation and worship which have given authenticity and meaning to people's lives. From this understanding, we can appropriately discuss the heritage of the Samarran Shi'i Imams.

The Moral Heritage of Ali Al-Hadi: With this in mind, what kind of heritage of Ali al-Hadi can one appreciate today? Born in Madinah on 212/828 and martyred in Samarra, Iraq on 254/868 owing to poison administered by al-Mu?tazz, the Abbasid caliph, means Ali al-Hadi only lived approximately 40 years. Briefly, Samarra is a town in northern Iraq and is one of the most well-known cities in Iraq, famous for its archaeological sites. Literally, Samarra comes from *Surra Man Ra'a* (delighted one who beholds it) and stands on the east bank of the Tigris in the Salah al-Din governate, named after the famous Muslim warrior-ruler, Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (known in Western history as Saladin). It was originally the capital of the Abbasids, after Mu'tasim, the eighth Abbasid caliph, relocated the capital in 221/836. However, due to difficulties in expanding the city, he returned the capital to Baghdad. After this, it became famous for housing the shrine of the 10th and 11th Shi'i imams and the last known residence of the 12th Shi'i Imam. It continues to be visited by numerous pilgrims throughout the year for *ziyarah* (visitation).

Al-Hadi arrived in Samarra in 233/848 with his wife, Hadithah and young son, Hasan al-Askari, who was 4 years old at the time [30]. He was a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad and the tenth of the Shi'a *Ithna Ashari* (Twelver) Imams, known for his piety and knowledge. He migrated to Samarra from Madinah because al-Mutawakkil, the reigning Abbasid caliph, was worried about his growing influence on the Muslim community in Madinah and so summoned him to Samarra. Upon al-Hadi's arrival, al-Mutawakkil put him under house arrest in an extremely impoverished area called Khan al-Sa'alik. Despite al-Hadi's house arrest, he was increasingly surrounded by the Shi'a and non-Shi'a who had an abiding affection for the *Ahl al-Bayt* (family of the Prophet's household). Al-Mutawakkil's reign was characterised by rebellions and internal government strife. During this time, al-Hadi continued to teach students and make an intellectual impression in Samarra. However, al-Mutawakkil continued to show animosity towards al-Hadi and his followers; he took away the wealth and properties of those that showed affection to al-Hadi and used to employ a jester in his court to ridicule Ali b. Abi Talib [31]. One of the reoccurring themes within al-Hadi's life is the moral way in which he dealt with his oppressors, which is my focus in this section.

Shaykh al-Mufid, the notable 10th century Shi'i scholar, reports an interesting incident between al-Hadi and al-Mutawakkil in Samarra. The Abbasid caliphs had a history of oppressing the Twelver Imams, their values and scholarship and al-Mutawakkil was no different. There are numerous reports about al-Mutawakkil attempting to assassinate al-Hadi, humiliate him, search his house and even incite him to immoral doings [9,32]. However, on occasion, al-Mutawakkil required al-Hadi's help and guidance. Al-Mufid states, 'al-Mutawakkil became ill with boils which appeared on him. He was on the point of death. No one dared touch him with a knife (to cut them away). His mother vowed that if he was preserved she would give a great deal of wealth from her fortune to Abu al-Hasan Ali b. Muhammad (al-Hadi), peace be on them' [9]. Al-Fath b. Khaqan advised al-Mutawakkil to go to al-Hadi for a solution and al-Mutawakkil sent al-Fath to do so. Al-Hadi informed al-Fath to 'take the dregs of the fat from a sheep. Mix it with rose-water and put it on the boils. It will be beneficial, if God permits' [9]. Al-Mutawakkil tried this remedy and it worked. His mother became overjoyed and sent ten thousand dinars under her seal to al-Hadi.

However, what transpired after al-Hadi helped al-Mutawakkil was highly dubious. Spies of al-Mutawakkil informed him that al-Hadi had money and weapons which were a threat to his government. Al-Mutawakkil sent Saeed, the chamberlain, to break into al-Hadi's house at night and search for the money and weapons. When Saeed reached there trying to break into the house, he saw al-Hadi on his prayer mat. On seeing Saeed, al-Hadi surprisingly gave him a candle and informed him where the rooms of the house were. After searching the rooms, Saeed could only find the ten thousand dinars that was given to al-Hadi by al-Mutawakkil's mother. When Saeed returned with the dinars and al-Mutawakkil saw his mother's seal, he called his mother to account for this money and his mother duly informed him of her vow to gift money to al-Hadi if al-Mutawakkil was cured of boils. On hearing this, al-Mutawakkil ordered Saeed to return the money and any other property to al-Hadi. When Saeed did, he felt ashamed and informed al-Hadi, 'Master, it grieves me to have entered your house without your permission but I was ordered (to do it).' Al-Hadi replied

by quoting from the Qur'an, "Those who do wrong will come to know by what a (great) reverse they will be overturned (26:227)"' [9,33,34].

The incident above is interesting for several reasons. It demonstrates the forgiving nature of al-Hadi who had no cause to help his oppressor, the medical knowledge he possessed to cure al-Mutawakkil's boils, the usage of patience instead of aggression when Saeed began his unilateral search, the reliance on honesty to reform Saeed and al-Mutawakkil and finally, scriptural reasoning in order to respond to Saeed's indirect apology. These facets of al-Hadi's character exemplify his fundamentally pious nature which directed his conduct. From this small example, perhaps we can deliberate that the heritage of al-Hadi is two-fold. The first is the reformation of society through sacrificial conduct by which people's consciences are awakened. Al-Hadi chose to help his oppressor, thereby removing his anger and replacing it with genuine human concern for a fellow man's well-being. This is decidedly humanitarian and charitable but achieved only through his own moral struggle. It may seem far-fetched to think that goodness in others, even dictators, c an be achieved through fleeting moments of reflection on other's moral conduct or through a sense of natural moral instinct. However, according to Charles Taylor, this instinct is part of the human condition and often forgotten today. He says,

'…much of contemporary philosophy has ignored this dimension of our moral consciousness and beliefs altogether and has even seemed to dismiss it as confused and irrelevant...we are dealing here with moral intuitions which are uncommonly deep, powerful and universal. They are so deep that we are tempted to think of them as rooted in instinct, in contrast to other moral reactions which seem very much the consequence of upbringing and education. There seems to be a natural, inborn compunction to inflict death or injury on another, an inclination to come to the help of the injured and endangered. Culture and upbringing may help to define the boundaries of the relevant 'others' but they don't seem to create the basic reaction itself. That is why eighteenth-century thinkers, notably Rousseau, could believe in a natural susceptibility to feel sympathy for others' [35]. A similar point is made by Arkoun who argued that the type of reason of contemporary Western intellectual thought was 'tele-techno-scientific-reason', which is a 'purely pragmatic, empiricist expertise' [36]. His criticism centres on reason as an instrumental venture yielding only efficiency and productivity but without actually answering the 'unreachable mysteries of the lived experiences of the individual' [36] Arguably, both authors advocate a deeper use of reason that is also rooted in instinct and has the power to awaken people's consciences and identities, akin to the aforementioned episode between al-Mutawakkil and al-Hadi.

The second aspect of his heritage is the way in which he dealt with rulers, government policies and spies. The notion of claiming a person, group or country is a threat due to possession of money and weapons sounds strikingly familiar to the arguments advanced in support of invading Iraq in 2003. However, the reaction of al-Hadi was to intellectually and practically engage with al-Mutawakkil, keeping a distance but never compromising his moral code in order to help his enemy. It seems there was no political motivation in al-Hadi's actions. His response to Saeed was a cordial but firm method to get the message across to both Saeed and al-Mutawakkil about their wrongdoings, which are wrought with consequences. Beyond any theories of leadership and governance, al-Hadi's aim as an Imam or leader appeared to be neither revenge, defamation, political gain, material enterprise or control of the masses but the spiritual growth of society through constant moral engagement, passive leadership and intellectual discourse.

The Philosophical Heritage of Hasan Al-Askari: Having described the moral heritage of al-Hadi, I would like to shift the focus to the philosophical heritage of his son, Hasan al-Askari. Born on 232/846 in Madinah and like his father, martyred by poison by al-Mutamid on 260/874, al-Askari lived an even shorter life of 28 years. Al-Askari was nominated to be the successor by his father and was also a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad. He moved to Samarra at the age of four with his parents and lived during the reign of the following Abbasid caliphs: al-Wathiq (842 - 847), al-Mutawakkil (847 - 861), al-Muntasir (861-862), al-Musta?in (862 - 866), al-Mu?tazz (866 - 869), al-Muhtadi (869 - 870) and al-Mutamid (870 - 892). Although al-Askari's own leadership started during the tenure of al-Mutazz, he lived at a time of great turmoil within the Abbasid caliphate and was always under close surveillance. In particular, al-Mutamid and al-Muwaffaq were incensed at the growing popularity of al-Askari and decided to imprison him in 256/870. Although al-Askari was freed later that year, he was put under house arrest. Al-Mu?tamid continued to worry

about the loyalty the Shi'a showed for al-Askari and once again decided to put him in prison in 257/871. Together with his father, al-Hadi, they are known as 'al-Askariyyain', meaning 'dwellers in the camp' because of their constant imprisonment and house arrest in the garrison part of Samarra that was Mu'tasim's military camp [9].

Prima facie, it may seem that no particular intellectual influence could be fathomed from al-Askari due to the constant restriction imposed upon him. However, upon researching several history books within the scope of Islamic history and Islamic philosophy, I humbly found a glaring omission - al-Askari's intellectual influence on the Muslim philosopher and polymath, Abu Yusuf Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, popularly known as al-Kindi or al-Kindus. Al-Kindi was born on 185/801 in Kufa, Iraq and lived through the lifetimes of the eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth Shi'a Imams [37]. Al-Kindi died on 259/873 in Baghdad, Iraq. One may be intrigued as to whether or not and if so, how al-Kindi intellectually engaged with these five Imams, most of who were in the same region as he was and participated in debates with numerous scholars from other regions in the courts of the Abbasid caliphs [38]. It is here that there is a notable incident recorded in history about exchanges between Hasan al-Askari and al-Kindi.

In one of these incidents, al-Kindi believed that verses of the Qur'an were contradictory to each other and wrote a book about this. The news of al-Kindi's views soon reached Hasan al-Askari through al-Kindi's students. Al-Askari told one of al-Kindi's students,

'Is there no wise man among you to prevent your teacher al-Kindi from that which he has busied himself with in the Qur'an?' The student said, "We are his disciples. How is it possible for us to object to him, whether in this matter or another?" Imam Abu Muhammad (Hasan al-Askari) said to him, "Would you inform him of what I say to you?" The student replied, "Yes." Imam Abu Muhammad informed him, "Go to him, be courteous with him and show him that you will help him in what he is doing. When he feels comfortable with you, say to him, is it possible that the speaker of this Qur'an means other meanings than what you think them to be? He shall say that it is possible because a man understands when he listens. If he answers that, you say to him, how do you know? He might intend other than the meanings you apply and so he places other than it's (the Qur'an) meanings." The student went to his teacher, al-Kindi and did as the Imam told him. Al-Kindi said to his student, "I ask you by Allah to tell me where you have got this from!" The student said, "It came from my own mind and I mentioned it to you." Al-Kindi replied, "No, it is not in your capacity to think in this manner. Could you tell me where you have obtained this?" He said, "Imam Abu Muhammad asked me to say that…" Al-Kindi said, "Now you speak the truth. This (argument) would not come from anywhere except from that house (the Ahl al-Bayt)…" After that, al-Kindi burnt his book' [33, 39-41].

The above exchange is important for several reasons. Firstly, it shows Hasan al-Askari had a direct impact on the philosophy and spirituality of al-Kindi. In the key compilation, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Felix Klein-Frank states 'al-Kindi is generally held to have been the first Muslim philosopher' [42] and 'al-Kindi's arguments go ultimately back to the late school of Alexandria' [42] and finally, 'it is generally held that al-Kindi's philosophy is in harmony with the Muslim creed' [42]. However, one humbly feels these statements can be challenged because had it not been for al-Askari's arguments, al-Kindi's philosophy would not have been in harmony with the Muslim creed for he believed the Qur'an contained contradictions. Secondly, al-Kindi appreciated the epistemology of al-Askari which led him to burn his own book. This impacted al-Kindi's own level of philosophical interpretation and logic, particularly in the understanding of the Qur'an. Arguably, al-Askari's influence must also be factored in the origin of al-Kindi's arguments, not just the late school of Alexandria.

Finally, the fact that al-Askari and indeed, the Imams before him, taught many students, it begs the question of how to characterise holy figures that are also scholars. For example, Ali b. Abi Talib is credited to be the first exegist (*mufassir*) due to the knowledge he obtained about verses of the Qur'an from the Prophet, some of which is present in Nahj al-Balagha [43-45]. Or the 5th and 6th Shi'i Imams were experts in both jurisprudential and theological fields as well as science, medicine and maths to the extent that Jabir b. Hayyan (also known as Geber, the father of chemistry and originator of algebra) was the 6th Imam's student [46,47]. Practically, one could link Muslim philosophy to al-Askari first, before al-Kindi because clearly, al-Kindi would have produced a very different form of Islamic philosophy had it not been for al-Askari's arguments. One wonders whether more exchanges were recorded between these two figures, especially considering how well-known they were and

being present in the same region [48]. What the above incident shows is that the intellectual heritage of al-Askari is unfortunately buried in history and needs to be brought out and contextualised today [49]. The influence which he had on Islamic and other sciences can be seen from such incidents as well as his narrations.

The Normative Heritage of Muhammad Al-Mahdi: The unison of al-Hadi's and al-Askari's moral and philosophical heritage can be seen in al-Askari's son, Muhammad al-Mahdi, the Twelfth living but concealed Shi'i Imam who was born on 255/869 in Samarra and a direct descendent of Prophet Muhammad. There are many books which deal with the life, proofs and signs of al-Mahdi and so I do not wish to recount these [50-54]. According to the Shi'a, Muhammad al-Mahdi is the saviour of humanity and will reappear from a long concealment according to God's will to restore peace and justice to humanity at a time of great discord and injustice. We know that Hasan al-Askari desperately protected his son as there were many people that wanted to kill him and what he represented [54]. It is precisely the emphasis on justice and elevation of ethical norms of society through al-Mahdi which is my focus in this last section. By normative, I mean the importance of setting correct standards for society based on our value judgements. When humanity undergoes war, corruption and suffering, there is arguably a constant need to revaluate our current morals, our definition of progress, our interpretation of laws and who and what we are placing our hopes in. According to Shi'i exegesis, many Qur'anic verses and narrations not only make reference to al-Mahdi but indicate on the ethical norms he will bring to human beings at a point where they would be in dire need of hope and wisdom. A few examples suffice here.

With regards to the verse in the Qur'an, 'O, but I call to witness the planets, the stars which rise and set' [55], Imam Mohammed al-Baqir, the 5th Shi'i Imam, states this means al-Mahdi would go into occultation in the year 260/847; then he would reappear suddenly like a bright shooting star in the dark night [52,54,56]. Furthermore, Ibn al-Furat, al-Kafi and al-Saduq interpret the following Qur'anic verse, 'Say: Have you thought: If (all) your water were to disappear into the earth, who then could bring you gushing water' [57] as a metaphor for the concealment of the Imam, whose presence among people is like the water they need to drink [58, 59]. The state of corruption just before the reappearance of al-Mahdi and the justice he will bring is illustrated by the hadith from Prophet Muhammad, 'Listen to the good news about the Mahdi! He will rise at the time when people will be faced with severe conflict and the earth will be hit by a violent quake. He will fill the earth with justice and equity as it is filled with injustice and tyranny. He will fill the hearts of his followers with devotion and will spread justice everywhere' [59]. This is also substantiated by sermon 93 of Ali. b. Abi Talib: 'Their mischief would come to you like evil eyed fear and pre-Islamic fragments, wherein there would be no minaret of guidance nor any sign (of salvation) to be seen' [60]. In sermon 182, Al-Mahdi would counteract this with wisdom, knowledge and a deep concern for the regression of humanity:

'He will be wearing the armour of wisdom, which he will have secured with all its conditions, such as full attention towards it, its (complete) knowledge and exclusive devotion to it. For him it is like a thing which he had lost and which he was then seeking, or a need which he was trying to fulfil. If Islam is in trouble he will feel forlorn like a traveller and like a (tired) camel beating the end of its tail and with its neck flattened on the ground. He is the last of Allah's proofs and one of the vicegerents of His prophets' [60].

According to the Shi'a, the least I can point out from the above in terms of the normative heritage of al-Mahdi is that he represents the ever-growing moral, social and intellectual aspirations of humanity. A human being's need for prosperity and happiness is a natural and innate feeling but this can only come about through the actualisation of normative conditions such as justice and dignity. This requires our constant reassessment of moral values and the kind of justice we are implementing in the world. The arduous efforts of al-Hadi and al-Askari to bring about these conditions through their intellectuality and morality are perhaps an enduring heritage for humanity, ultimately realised in al-Askari's son. The martyred scholar, Sayyid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, aptly sums ups up this sentiment:

'The concept of the Mahdi is not just the embodiment of an Islamic doctrine possessing a religious character but rather signifies a universal aspiration of mankind with the variety of its religions and creeds. It represents an innate aspiration through which people, despite the variety of their beliefs and their means of recourse to the Unseen *(ghayb),* perceive that there is, for all mankind on the earth, a promised day wherein the divine messages with their momentous significance will be

fulfilled and their ultimate objective will be realized, bringing the long and arduous human journey through history to its ultimate destination' [61].

CONCLUSION

So far, I have given some basic methodological indications as to how holy figures - in this case the Samarran Shi'i Imams, can be practically relevant today. I submit that holy figures arising out of a religious context can offer relevant intellectual and moral contributions, capable of being academically analysed, provided our epistemic understanding of them is broadened. More than this, it brings us closer as to why holy figures are still vibrant personalities in the hearts of their followers which can only enhance dialogue with religious traditions. Finally, specifically with regards to the Samarran Shi'i Imams and the Twelve Shi'i Imams in general, there is a need to contextualise their works for modern issues. By contextualisation I mean looking at specific circumstances that human beings find themselves in, whether these are financial, ethical, technological or social and universalising the principles laid down in the works of the Shi'i Imams or a relevant holy figure. Methodologically, this involves creating conceptual frameworks (not merely extending a pre-existing epistemological framework) from universal principles to either develop the classical Islamic sciences or act as a supplement to them.

This also means giving greater attention to fields such as applied ethics (including bioethics), sociology, international law, education and moral psychology, amongst others, which widen the scope of enquiry for a scholar. Arguably, one of the burning issues with regards to classical *hawza* or *madrassah* sciences is the need to supplement them with emerging disciplines or expand their scope of enquiry in order to meet context-specific modern problems [62]. For example, *Nahj al-Balagha* (a compilation of Ali b. Abi Talib's sermons, letters and sayings) is a unique combination of ethics, metaphysics, politics, philosophy and theology yet its principles have not been applied to current situations. Letter 53 which Ali b. Abi Talib wrote to Malik al-Ashtar, the governor of Egypt, is a comprehensive piece on governance, leadership, personal morality and financial ethics written over 14 centuries ago in Arabia. From this, we can develop frameworks for leadership development, ministerial training and financial ethical conduct within governments. Another example is *Risalat al-Huquq* (Treatise of Rights) expressed by the 4th Shi'i Imam, Zayn al-Abidin, in the 7th century. The charter is a significant construction of rights stemming from God, to the self, to the self's organs and actions, to individuals and social groups and to society as a whole (regardless of region and race). It can be used to engage with international law and approaches to law. Again, this all depends on our view of the Twelve Shi'i Imams (and indeed any respected holy figure from a particular religious tradition) as thinking and living beyond their immediate religious context and possessing a humanitarian vision that is still capable of being engaged with today.

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