

Transcript Shi News Chat with Simon Wolfgang Fuchs (University of Freiburg), recorded on January 4, 2023

Hello everyone,

My name is Simon Wolfgang Fuchs and I'm a lecturer in Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Freiburg. I'm grateful to Andrew Newman for the invitation here to the Shi'i News Chat and the opportunity to talk about my way into Shi'i studies and what drives the field more broadly.

It's somewhat funny that I ended up in Freiburg. Werner Ende, who held the chair for Islamic Studies here from 1983 until 2000, was one of the first people in post-war Germany to study the modern Shi'a. In 1977 he published a book on how Arab historiography in the context of nationalism and pan-Arabism has dealt with the Umayyads. Subsequently, he worked on modern Shi'i controversies on the third *shahada* in the *adhan* and traced the eventful life of the colorful Shi'i modernist Muhammad b. Muhammad Mahdi al-Khalisi.

So Freiburg is a fitting place for the kind of work that I do. All of this was far from my mind, however, when I embarked on my PhD journey at Princeton's Department of Near Eastern Studies. I arrived at Princeton with the clear intention to extend previous work I had done for my Master's degree. This project had traced how an influential Egyptian Jihadi figure, who spent several years in Afghanistan in the 1980s, had used the Islamic scholarly tradition to make the case for his particular interpretation of Islam. Since the controversial 14th century Damascene scholar Ibn Taymiyya figured prominently in his arguments, I figured it would be worthwhile to write a dissertation on how the reception of Ibn Taymiyya had actually played out during the long centuries before his fame took off at the end of the 19th century. I also thought, somewhat naively, that I was really interested in Islamic law. This conviction lasted until I took an actual class on Islamic law with Prof. Hossein Modarressi. It was Modarressi's habit to ask which topics students would like to read about. One student, who later dropped the class, suggested that we should focus on *'urf*, on customary law. And this is what we did. The entire semester, we had to read each week dozens of pages in Arabic on all sorts of contracts, from marriage contracts to sale contracts and agricultural issues, delving into the intricacies of how binding they were. To a certain extent, this is of course really the heart of Islamic law, not some fancy debates on Islam and the state, as we sometimes tend to assume. Yet, I thought to myself, hm, perhaps I'm actually not *that* much interested in law. I didn't go to law school for a reason and I didn't want to enter it through the back door of Islamic studies. So perhaps, after all, I was actually more fascinated by Islamic theology. Luckily, I took a general exam with Michal Cook on this topic, focusing on the development of early *kalam*. I became increasingly intrigued by how Shi'i thinkers had to grapple with much more complicated issues than their Sunni coreligionists. For the Shi'a several hard questions emerge: how do you square the insistence on *tawhid* with the Imams' status and their superhuman powers? What is the essence of early Shi'ism? Is it an esoteric faith or rather an intellectual, philosophical religious tradition – or perhaps somewhere in between? I find these questions still extremely intriguing.

What truly pushed me to go down the Shi'i route, however, was my encounter with my later supervisor Muhammad Qasim Zaman. He kindled my ongoing fascination for South Asia. I had been trained in the German tradition in which Islam basically just means the Arab Middle East proper. India and Pakistan, in this view, were not even a side show but rather

totally irrelevant. Taking a comparative look at the Subcontinent and the Middle East was sort of a revelation. Suddenly all those connections and entangled developments come into view that Area Studies make virtually impossible to perceive. So, I decided to give Urdu a go, after I had studied Arabic in Damascus and Persian in Tehran – and I’ve never regretted it. After that step, all fell into place quite naturally. As I dug deeper, I was amazed to learn that South Asian Shi’i were only relegated to a peripheral position in the field. In the context of Shi’i studies, the Middle East is the unchallenged heartland with most scholarship up until today still focused on Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. The amount of literature on Shi’i phenomena in Pakistan and India is really miniscule. This was a surprising discovery to me as Pakistan alone has the second biggest Shi’i community in the world after Iran, perhaps as many as 40 million Shi’a live in Pakistan today. After my first visit to the country in 2011, I was hooked. I wanted to know more about the Shi’i periodicals, debates, about rare Urdu books and towering scholars that conventional introductions to the field don’t ever mention.

Only after I had been knee-deep into fieldwork, I came to remember that perhaps the ground for this interest had actually been laid way earlier, perhaps in a somewhat unconscious fashion. My first encounter with South Asian forms of piety had actually happened in Damascus in 2005. Back then, I was really amazed when being confronted with a group of pilgrims from the subcontinent and their intense flagellation at the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab.

So that’s my personal story how Shi’i studies found me, so to speak. Andrew also asked me to address what I see as the big issues of the field more generally and in my field of specialization in particular.

Within Shi’i studies, I think we’ve become a bit too comfortable with playing up the allegedly big differences in religious authority between Sunni and Shi’i Islam. It has become common knowledge to make the case that of course there is no church in Islam and in a historical perspective, there has never been a hierarchy comparable to the catholic church. Yet, actually, in a Shi’i context, the Hujjat al-Islams and the Grand Ayatollahs are somewhat comparable and we can label them as clerics as well. I am wondering whether it’s not time to once again deconstruct this neat picture, now that it has served its purpose, namely to highlight the unique position of the great *mujtahids*. Which role do popular preachers play, for instance? Or female figures – I’m thinking of the work by Miriam Künkler and Maryam Rutner here, for instance. How much authority rests with individual believers who are the ones to decide as to whether they would like to pay *khums* and to whom? Could it be the case that a Sayyid background is sometimes more important to make claims about the faith than formal training? How is all of this changing in the context of the digital age and immediate accessibility? The digital transformation of Shi’i rituals in particular strikes me as a fascinating area of research. This is only a hunch but when I look at the extensive efforts that are put into the development of virtual reality equivalents of Shi’i *‘ibadat* and the rendering, for instance, of the Arba’in pilgrimage into an immersive experience, I think that the landscape is really shifting here. The same could be said about Jamkaran, for instance, the mosque near Qom where you can supposedly communicate with the Hidden Imam and which can also be explored virtually.

Related to these aspects is another question that I feel has really not been answered in the context of Shi’i Islam. I’ve already mentioned Ibn Taymiyya in the beginning. Over the last couple of years, we’ve seen many publications and efforts to trace how Sunni editors and publishers went ahead in putting certain manuscripts into circulation throughout the second half of the 19th and the 20th centuries. Many of these had gathered dust in libraries and were

not as popular as the internet makes it seem today, thus reshaping the Sunni canon, sometimes out of all recognition. To my knowledge, we're still missing similar studies in the Shi'i context to get a better sense of how the entire religious package was remodeled in the modern period, so to speak. We could probably say the same about the neglected field of Shi'i modernism. The latter case is particularly intriguing because one question that has not been looked at is how ideas developed by Shi'i modernists have influenced Sunni thought in turn.

If we want to consider South Asia in a more particular fashion, I think it's hard to even decide where to start. I hold that there is truly a wealth of aspects and questions that scholarship needs to investigate. In 1989, Juan Cole has published his pathbreaking monograph *Roots of North Indian Shi-ism in Iran and Iraq*, an influential study on how Najaf was instrumental in reshaping Shi'i Islam in the princely State of Lucknow. Yet, not much has happened in the last 30 years. Cole's work is about all we have for the 18th and 19th centuries as far as efforts go to trace the intellectual exchange and cross-pollination. Lucknow itself is a problem, too. There are so many other Shi'i centers, such as formerly Shi'i princely states in the Deccan or in Sindh and Punjab that have hardly received any attention. I remember an offhand comment by Annemarie Schimmel, for example, in a 1964 article where she mentioned that she was able to consult a manuscript in the private library of Mir Ghulam 'Ali Talpur in Karachi. The Talpurs were a significant Shi'a dynasty that lasted from 1783 until 1955 in Sindh. As far as I can see, however, there is not a single study on the Shi'i character of their princely state. There are also hardly any studies on Shi'i landlords in Sindh, for example, the Bhutto family being a particularly well-known case. When Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on the campaign trail in 2007, there was both a public, Sunni funeral – and a private Shi'a one. Focusing on different areas would mean broadening research languages, too. Urdu is of course a rich South Asian Shi'i language but we would also need researcher proficient in, say, Balti, Sindhi, and Punjabi to really shine light on these local phenomena.

If we shift to other more contemporary issues, one phenomenon that has always intrigued me is the Pashtu Turi Tribe, based in an area close to the border with Afghanistan. Pakistan's leading political cleric of the 1980s, Sayyid 'Arif Husayn al-Husayni, is from this tribe. The Turis have face intense sectarian conflict for quite some time – yet we hardly know anything about how their conversion took place or what it means to be a Shi'i in a tribal, Pashtun context.

For my own monograph, *In a Pure Muslim Land. Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East*, I very much focused on questions of transregional religious authority, sectarianism, and debates on reform. What I came to realize, however, during my fieldwork is that poetry in a South Asian Shi'i setting is absolutely crucial and woefully understudied. The sheer wealth of elegies, of *marsiyas*, dealing with Karbala or the suffering of the Imams is virtually untapped, despite the fact that access has been made so much easier in recent years as we now can find a wealth of *majalis* recording online. It's really cool that Fizza Joffrey at Oxford is currently working on this topic for her PhD dissertation and I hope that many more colleagues will be following in her footsteps! What makes the South Asian context additionally exciting is the fact that it is a much less regulated religious sphere than other Shi'i settings. This means that we also find currents alive and well that have a hard time elsewhere, such as Shaykhis or Akhbaris who subscribe to an Isma'ili version of cosmology. The same applies to antinomian Sufis who incorporate both Sunni and Shi'i elements and call into question the thesis of an increasing narrowing of options in modern Islam in general.

After having opened up all these vistas of lacunae, let me address Andrew's third prompt, namely the question of how my own work has addressed and perhaps continues to address some of these issues. In this final section, I would like to tackle two aspects, namely the question of center and periphery within Shi'i Islam and, second, the urge to mainstream teaching and research on Shi'i Islam.

I've already hinted at the fact that the Subcontinent is relegated to a marginal position. My book on Shi'i Islam in colonial India and post-Partition Pakistan tried to challenge these dynamics by focusing on the agency of South Asian scholars. I found, for instance, that even the acknowledgement of the sources of emulation in Iran and Iraq did not mean that *'ulama* who acted as their representatives could not act as proper gatekeepers in their own right.

Take the Shi'i journal *Hujjat* that was published from Peshawar, for instance. It was founded by Mirza Safdar Husayn Mashhadi (d. 1980) who is counted among the leading Pakistani Shi'i *'ulama* of the 20th century. Born in Bombay in 1901, he received most of his education in Lucknow before switching to Qom. Mashhadi made the case for an elaborate religious hierarchy that hinges on the centrality of *one* single Grand Ayatollah as a source of guidance at any given time. In his case, this means the Iraqi scholar Muhsin al-Hakim. No other leaders or forms of organization claiming authority were acceptable. What follows from this seeming acknowledgment of Najaf and Muhsin al-Hakim as the indisputable center, however, is somewhat counterintuitive. Mashhadi made it very clear that he was Muhsin al-Hakim's only legitimate representative in Pakistan. It was his exclusive right to translate these mandatory rulings into a local context

Or consider the example of Sayyid Javad Naqvi who spent nearly his entire adult life in Iran. In 2009, he returned to his native country after 26 years in Qom and now runs a sprawling new *madrasa* in Lahore. Naqvi not only appropriates Iranian rhetoric, domestic politics, and aesthetics. He also goes to unprecedented lengths in promoting *vilayat-i faqih* as a viable, desirable option for Pakistan. Naqvi criticizes the Iranians for not doing enough for the export of the revolution, a role, so much is implied, which he has to fill himself.

The last example brings me to my current book project and my second goal, namely to mainstream the teaching and research on Shi'i Islam. In my opinion, it's very unfortunate that Shi'i studies are relegated to their own journals or courses etc. instead of comprehending Shi'i as an essential part of Islam. This means that supposedly internal Shi'i debates also have much to do with general discussions over Islam's character both in the premodern and modern period. I am trying to make this case in the global history of the Iranian Revolution that I'm writing for Princeton University Press. I argue against the established narrative about the disillusionment that came shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979. Colleagues have claimed that Sunni Islamist actors and others quickly got to see through Iran's ecumenical charade and saw the revolution for what it was, namely a barely disguised attempt at Shi'i world dominance. I think there is a different story to be told, namely a confluence of ideas that today's sectarian climate prevents us from seeing. Take, for example, Lebanese Sunni Islamists who carefully analyzed the Iranian Revolution to realize that they, too, needed to break out of their middle-class comfort zone and to familiarize themselves with the condition of the working class in order to bring about an Islamic Revolution in Lebanon. Or consider Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami, the party founded by the famous ideologue Abu 'l-A'la Mawdudi. Mawdudi's signature idea had been the question of *hakimiyya*, of divine sovereignty. When the Iranian Revolution emerged victorious in 1979, Jamaat members read the developments mostly through this lens,

namely that the Iranians had been motivated primarily by Mawdudi's concept. This also explains why, until today, the Jamaat has never actively and publicly broken with Iran.

I hope that I've not covered too much ground in the last 15 minutes or so. Thank you, Andrew, again for the invitation and thank you all very much for listening and for your interest in my work! I would love to hear from you, so please get in touch via Twitter or find me on academia.edu.