A Shift in Shīʿism:

Religious Authority and Transforming Twelver Shīʿism on University Campuses

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis, which I have submitted for examination for the PhD degree at Lancaster University, is entirely my own work, other than where I have clearly indicated – through citations- quotations from the works of others. The copyright © of this thesis rests with the author. Quotations may be made from it provided full acknowledgement is made. The thesis may not be reproduced without the author's consent.

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In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Beneficent.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to UK's Shia community and the scholars who continue to study its progress. It can be considered a diasporic community that is undergoing transformations in numerous ways as, with its multi-ethnic composition, it continues in trying to find and establish a shared collective identity in Britain.

Abstract

This thesis results from a qualitative social science research, carried out between the years 2016 and 2019, which challenges established notions of Shīʿism as defined with respect to religious authority. The literature recognises Shīʿī authority to be distinct from non-Shīʿī contexts, through its hierarchical institutionalisation in the *marjiʿiyyah*, supported by theological doctrines, and its particular orthopraxy through a specific rigid performance of *taqlīd*.

By carrying out research amongst Shīʿa university students in the UK, and the student societies catering for them (ABSocs), this thesis successfully highlights numerous nuances that contest normative generalised ideas about how Shīʿa Muslims perceive and perform religious authority. Through assessing their attitudes and performances, my thesis contrasts their stances against theories of structured authority and its margins for different modes of agency – applying them in the context of Shīʿī religious authority. Examining jurisprudential texts, the thesis demonstrates the disparity between how *taqlīd* is theoretically defined and how it has been converted into practice – the former allowing the 'lay' individual some religious interpretive agency while the latter divests him of such autonomy.

After problematising the depiction of UK's Shīʿa student community as a conventional diaspora, the thesis underscores the disconnection between their contexts and that of the *marjiʿiyyah*, both in terms of geography as well as culture, particularly on attitudes towards gender. The *marjiʿiyyah* and Shīʿī jurisprudence are shown to be male-dominated spaces that are unrepresentative of women. Issues surrounding gender, including the practice of *hijab* observance, were noteworthy trigger points for divergence away from the established model of religious authority performance.

The thesis argues that expressions of Shīʿism, as a lived tradition, are malleable. Shīʿī religious authority, while being recognised as a central element of Shīʿism, is one such instance. The range of performances by the participants evince reconstructions of normative practice. These reconstructions often contravene orthopraxy in ways that do not compromise the subjects claims of attachment and loyalty to Shīʿism or Shīʿī identity. These reconstructed performances allow for religious interpretive agency within the reimagined authority models. The need for such recreated models, without simply disengaging from the *marjiʿiyyah*, speaks to the importance of this institutionalised religious authority as a facet of Shīʿism. By bringing to light the nuances in the participants' performances, the thesis highlights the ongoing tussle between established or traditional Shīʿism, and the endeavours to reformulate Shīʿism in newer contexts.

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Introduction

My thesis is an examination of my participants' performances against the theoretical backdrop of structural religious authority, and its relationship with the individual subject's agency. This thesis is the outcome of my four-year sociological research, which situates itself in a locus interlinking a number of developing branches of academic study. This thesis also crosses a bridge between two disciplines and approaches to the study of Islam and Muslims - the text-based study of creedal tenets and the sociological study of how some of those tenets are translated into the lived tradition.

The academic study of Islam and Muslims has seen recent expansion in several identifiable areas. One of those growing areas explores the situation of Muslims in the UK as a diasporic minority. Despite the progress in this field, studies are only very recently growing out of a homogenised assessment of UK's Muslims, often failing to perceive the depth of ethnic and denominational diversity. As a minority within the wider Muslim community, the experiences of Shīʿa[1] Muslims have often been overlooked, and as a result, under-researched.

A second increasingly explored field involves the study of religion on university campuses. Claims have been made, of university campuses having developed into secular environments, and then contested by the numerous works revealing the role of religion – organised and individual expressions – within the campus setting.

My thesis draws together the above aspects of sociological study, connecting them with the theoretical treatment of structured Islamic authority in the Shīʿī[2] Muslim context, and its ramifications on the modes of agency adopted. In contrast to other sociological works to be cited within the thesis, which have looked at those who have religious authority in Islam, this study looks at a segment of grassroots Shīʿa Muslims. Their perceptions and performances, in respect to religious authority, are assessed in my research. Just as

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[1] *Shīʿa*: This word has been transliterated from the Arabic word (شيعة). It is used throughout this thesis to refer to a person, or people, who identify with a distinct minority denomination, who make up approximately 15% of the global Muslim population. They are distinguished from non-Shīʿa Muslims through differences in some theological and jurisprudential stances, some of which are discussed in this thesis due to their relevance to my research.
While it would be contested, it is claimed that Shīʿa Muslims also distinguish themselves by *"upholding a privileged position of the family of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt)"*. [eds. Bosworth, E. et al. (1997). *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Leinden: Brill. p 420]. This point is of particular pertinence to aspects of my thesis.

Shīʿī: This transliterated word (شيعي) has been used adjectivally to refer to ideas, organisations, beliefs and practices that pertain to Shīʿa Muslims.

Shīʿīsm: This word has developed, in western writing, as an 'ism-ised' reference to the organised and formalised belief system of Shīʿa Muslims, as a collective of shared tenets and practices.
See also:
Haider, N. (2014). *Shīʿī Islam: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Halm, H. (1991). *Shiism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Heern, Z. M. (2015). *The Emergence of Modern Shiʿism: Islamic Reform in Iraq and Iran*. London: Oneworld Publications.

[2] See footnote 1, above, for *Shīʿī*.

it is unfairly reductive to view the Muslim community as a monolith, it would also be incorrect to claim the Shīʿa Muslim community as homogenous. My research has focused on Twelver Shīʿa Muslims, who represent, by far, Shīʿism's largest subgroup.[3] To this end, I have used "*Shīʿa*", "*Shīʿī*" and "*Shīʿism*" to refer to Twelver Shīʿism specifically.

Through this thesis, I recurrently used the terms "lived Shīʿism" and "Shīʿī identity". My thesis does not intend to delve deeply into the much-discussed problematising discourses on individual and social identity and identity constructions.[4] However, I will refer to these discussions here, to assign meaning to the above terms, oft used in the thesis hereafter. Castells describes "identity" as "people's source of meaning and experience". He goes on to describe it as people's most salient cultural attribute, or set of attributes, which give/gives them meaning, through which they engage with one another.[5] In a religious context, the participants of my research maintain a shared "Shīʿī identity". Even though individual experiences and expressions may vary between them, they collectively self-identify with a set of cultural attributes - a set of defining theological doctrines - that differentiate them from others. This thesis shows how that communal self-identity is maintained, despite variations and shifts in how that identity is expressed and performed. It is by looking at these expressions and performances, that I refer to Shīʿism as a lived tradition, or "lived Shīʿism". After analysing theories behind Shīʿī religious authority mechanisms, my research has looked at my participants' expressions and performances of religious authority, and how their performances of those doctrines compare with what is traditionally appreciated as acceptable orthopraxy for Shīʿī Muslims. Here, I will borrow Butler's insights into identity, as being beyond an essentialising category, but rather that, "identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results".[6] By analysing the attitudes and performances of my research participants, with regards to the central Shīʿī doctrine of practical authority, I have shown a shift in this lived experience of Shīʿism.

The following sections illustrate the wider setting for this research, situating it as an investigation into one part of UK's Shīʿa communities. Understanding the makeup of these communities sets an important context for understanding the importance of this research and appreciating its implications.

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[3] See footnote 1, above, for *Shīʿīsm*.
[4] Brubaker, R. and Cooper, F. (2000). Beyond 'identity'. in *Theory and Society 29(1)*. pp 1–47.
[5] Castells. M. (2009). *The Power of Identity: The Information Age, Society and Culture. Vol 2*. London: Wiley-Blackwell. p 6-7.
[6] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge. p 34

Shīʿa Muslims in the UK and on Campus

Migration Patterns and Demographics

As the study of Muslims in the UK has grown over the two decades, their general migration and settlement patterns have been quite successfully mapped in numerous works.[7] However, as a reflection of her wider work, which pays little attention to denominational nuances, Kabir's demographic analysis is also generalised and neglects paying any attention to Shīʿa Muslims. Due to the different timeframes, origins and causes of Shīʿī migration to the UK, their migration and resettlement patterns cannot be fully likened to that of non-Shīʿa Muslims.

The increased rate of Shīʿa Muslim immigration into the UK is a contemporary development. The first Shīʿa are believed to have entered the UK in the late 19th century;[8] these were isolated individuals and students, who did not form communities and were not part of larger migrating groups. The bulk migration of Shīʿa Muslims into the UK began in the early 1970s, with the expulsion of the Khoja[9] community from Uganda.[10] While the vast majority of these immigrants were Twelver-Shīʿa, they did include Shīʿa Muslims from other sub-denominations, including the Ismaili Shīʿa.[11]
This was followed by lower numbers of Shīʿa immigrants of Iranian, Iraqi and Afghani backgrounds, spread across the '80s and '90s, after which there was an upsurge in asylum-seeking Iraqi Shīʿa immigrants as a consequence of unrest and conflict. The UK has an almost negligible population of Shīʿa Muslims who do not fall into the categories of Iraqi, Iranian, South-Asian or Afghani ethnic backgrounds; among these are a small, yet growing, number of converts to Shīʿism from varying ethnicities.

The first Iraqi Shīʿa Muslims came to the UK in the 1940s. A much more significant number of Iraqi immigrants came to Britain in the '80s and '90s, forming communities of politically active expatriates.[12] Much of that political activity was linked to Iraqi opposition parties, and operated through the offices and institutions set up under the auspices of the Iraq-based *marājiʿ*,[13] The Khoei Foundation being a classic

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[7] Kabir, N. A. (2012). *Young British Muslims: Identity, Culture Politics and the Media*. Edinburgh. Edinburgh University Press. pg 29.
[8] Ansari, H. (2004). *The Infidel Within.* London: C. Hurst & Co. p 31
[9] '*Khoja*': Name attributed to a group of Indian Shīʿa Muslims, originating mainly from the East-Indian province of Gujarat. Many of the Khoja communities emigrated from India to the Tanganyika countries on the East-African coast in the late 19th century, and subsequently to the West and other parts of the world later in the 20th century.
[10] Jaffer, A. M. (1997). *An Outline History of Khoja Shīʿa IthnaAshari in Eastern Africa*. London: The World Federation. p 21
[11] *Ismaili Shīʿa*: Ismailis gain their name from their acceptance of Ismāʿīl ibn Jaʿfar, as the divinely appointed spiritual successor to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, wherein they differ from the 'Twelvers', who accept Mūsā al-Kādhim, younger brother of Ismāʿīl, as the succeeding Imam in the 7th century. Although there are several sub-groupings within the Ismailis, the term in today's vernacular refers to the Nizari community, generally known as the Ismailis, who are followers of the Aga Khan and the largest group among the Ismailiyyah.
[12] Rahe, J. (2002). Iraqi Shiʿis in Exile in London. in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (ed. Abdul-Jabar, F.) pp. 211-219. London: Saqi Books.
[13] Plural of *marjiʿ*; authority to which one turns or appeals *(Wehr, H. [1974]. A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. London: Macdonald & Evans Ltd. p. 328).* The word is conventionally used in Shīʿa jurisprudence to refer to the most senior jurisprudential authorities.

example.[14] The 2001 Census put the number of Iraqi-born Muslims in England at 20,351, and although their population is spread throughout England, just over half of those are based in London. In correlation with the proportion of Shīʿa and Sunni Muslims in Iraq itself, the majority of Britain's Iraqi immigrants are Shīʿa Muslims.[15] Iranian Muslims migrated to the UK in three main waves: in the 1950s, the 1980s and a final wave of the 20th century beginning in 1995. As with the migration of Iraqi Muslims, the majority of Iranian Muslim immigrants identified as Shīʿa Muslims.[16]

Muslim immigrants to the UK of Indian origin can be divided into two main categories in accordance with the nature of their 20th century migration patterns; those who arrived directly from India in the mid-twentieth century and those who arrived much later, after having first migrated to parts of East-Africa in the 19th century. It is in this latter group that the Khoja Shīʿa Muslims belong (Twelvers and Ismaili). Unlike Iraqi and Iranian Muslim immigrants, Indian Muslims in Britain predominantly belong to the Hanafi Sunni denomination.[17]

As a result of British colonial involvement in East-Africa, the Indian sub-continent, the Levant, North Africa and the Middle-East, "Britain was from the beginning a primary destination for Shiite migration to Europe, and has remained so".[18] Britain remains a hub of activity for Shīʿa Muslims and almost functions as a gateway for religious ideas from the Middle East into the western world.[19] This makes the research setting – UK university campuses - all the more significant.

The UK government's census data does not cover the different sects amongst Muslims and so there is no reliable estimate of the Shīʿa Muslim population. The Shīʿa population in Britain had traditionally been accepted as 10% of the overall Muslim population. However, a spokesman for the Muslim Council of Britain was quoted, in 2003, as saying that the number of Shīʿa Muslims in the UK could be as high as 400,000.[20] Among that group, analysts have recently estimated the number of Ismaili Shīʿa to be at around 50,000.[21] Van Den Bos, an academician specialising in Shīʿism in Europe, whose works have

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[14] Corboz describes how both the Al-Hakim and Al-Khoei families were politically active, either directly or indirectly, in establishing their prominence in the West, as well as opposing the Ba'ath regime. Often, for the Iraqi Shīʿa community in exile, the former was accomplished by doing the latter. [Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press]
[15] The Change Institute. (2009). *The Iraqi Muslim Community: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*. Ref: 08PEU05803. p 6
[16] The Change Institute. (2009). *The Iranian Muslim Community in England: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*. Ref: 08PEU05802. p 7
[17] The Change Institute. (2009). *The Indian Muslim Community in England: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*. Ref: 08PEU05801. p 6
[18] Van Den Bos, M. (2012). European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands. in *Ethnicities 12(5)*. pp 556-580. London: SAGE Publications. p 561
[19] Scharbrodt, O. (2019). Creating a Diasporic Public Sphere in Britain: Twelver Shia Networks in London. in *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations 31(1)*. pp 23-40
[20] Addley, E. (2003). *A Glad Day for Mourning.* [The Guardian online] Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/jun/28/religion.uk [Accessed: 06 Sep 2022]
[21] Cliffe, J. (2015). *Multicultural and Aggrieved*. [The Economist online] Available at: http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21640342-government-right-lobby-muslims-better-leadership-it-can-do [Accessed: 06 Sep 2022]

been cited in this thesis, places the figure for the number of Twelver-Shīʿa in the UK, as anywhere between 250,000 to 400,000;[22] and Ahmed Versi, editor of UK's *The Muslim News*, estimates the figure to exceed half a million.[23]

The number of Islamic centres, catering for Twelver-Shīʿa communities in the UK, is equally difficult to ascertain. Some online sources list 106 centres.[24] This seems to be an underestimate as others have listed up to 48 centres that cater for Shīʿa Muslims of Pakistani origin specifically.[25] Many of UK's Twelver Shīʿī centres will have some affiliation to one or more of the *marājiʿ* in either Iraq or Iran. Some have a more explicit affiliation than others and their religious ideological connections are sometimes intertwined with political loyalties. The political ties of The Al-Khoei Foundation to Iraq have already been mentioned. The London-based Islamic Centre of England primarily, while not exclusively, caters for Shīʿa Muslims of Iranian background. The premises serve as the headquarters of the representative of Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei. The banner, on the main opening page centres official website,[26] carries a quotation from the *marjiʿ*, Ayatollah Khamenei himself, obligating his followers to obey his representative.[27]

The difficulty in being able to assign more accurate figures to Britain's Shīʿa population is a reflection of the absence of quantitative research in this area, and a lack of significant exploration of the UK's Shīʿī communities in general. The lack of academic research exploring Shīʿa communities in Britain is an extension of its absence within the study of European Islam more widely.[28]
Most of the scant research into Britain's Shīʿa Muslims, seems to feature as sections in works analysing a wider field. Spellman, for example, has carried out ethnographic research on Iranians now living in Britain.[29] Whilst she makes useful observations about the migration process and cultural dynamics, the '*Shīʿism*' of these Iranians is almost incidental and under-discussed.

Another example is Bowen's recent work on Muslims in Britain's two major cities: London and Birmingham.[30] One could be forgiven for inferring, from the title of her book, *'Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent'*, that half of it might be dedicated to Iraqi Twelver-Shīʿa Muslims based in North-West London. Only the last couple of chapters are allotted to the exploration of Shīʿa Muslims in general; and some of that is dedicated to studying London's Ismaili community. The book gives some implied

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22 Matthijs Van Den Bos. Consultation meeting, [06 May 2017]. Edinburgh, UK.
23 Ahmed Versi, Editor of *The Muslim News*. Consultation meeting, [06 May 2017]. Edinburgh, UK.
24 https://www.arbaeenuk.com/directory-list/ [Accessed: 28 July 2017]
25 https://majlis.org.uk/shia-islamic-centres-in-uk/ [Accessed: 28 July 2017]
26 http://www.ic-el.com/en/# [Accessed: 28 July 2017]
27 See APPENDIX 1
28 Van Den Bos, M. (2012). European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands. in *Ethnicities 12(5)*. pp 556-580. London: SAGE Publications.
29 Spellman, K. (2004). *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain*. Oxford: Berghahn Books
30 Bowen, I. (2014). *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*. London: C Hurst & Co.

suggestions for what Bowen portrays as salient Shīʿī attitudes towards, and linkages with, the Middle East. In addition to the limited scope of her research, her findings are a result of concentrating on institutions and their transnational links within three London boroughs. The work does not engage with Shīʿa Muslim communities and the personal experiences of individual Shīʿa Muslim constituents of those communities. Although North-West London is an area where Shīʿa Muslims are more densely populated, London alone cannot be treated as a microcosm of British Shīʿism. The number of Shīʿī centres and denser populations in such a metropolis creates conducive environments for vibrant religious discussions and exchange of ideas. The academic arena has only recently begun to benefit from important sociological and ethnographic contributions looking at Britain's Shīʿa communities. As such, my research has, to varying degrees, benefited from the writings of Scharbrodt (2019), Degli Esposti (2018, 2019) and Bhojani (2023) – all of which have been referred to and cited in different parts of the thesis.

The participant pool of my research comprised of student communities and so the findings cannot be considered microcosmic representations of wider British Shīʿī attitudes per se. Within this segment of Shīʿa Muslims however, research represents a good geographical spread. Fieldwork was not limited to London although much of it was carried in the capital city. As discussed in the chapter expounding on research methods, covering a representative geographical range was one of the factors that informed my fieldwork.

Just as it is difficult to give an accurate estimate of UK's Shīʿa population, it is similarly unfeasible to expect any accurate assessment of the number of Shīʿa Muslims in higher education in Britain. The complexities and difficulties in trying to estimate the proportion of Muslims in higher education have been illustrated in a recent study.[31] These complications are mirrored in trying to determine the proportion of Shīʿa students, and then further for Twelver Shīʿa students. In any case, the number of Shīʿa Muslim students is a fluid one, year upon year, and includes Shīʿa Muslims who have come as foreign students, solely for the purpose of a higher education in the UK.

[31] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 56

Shīʿism on Campus: The ABSocs and the MSC

This research has explored the attitudes of Shīʿa Muslim students towards established religious authority figures, the different ways in which they apply notions of that authority in their daily lives, and what those performances tell us about the adaptability of Shīʿism. Given the specific research setting, it contributes to the growing area of academia that seeks to examine the role of religion in the campus environment from ethnographic lenses. This is a steadily growing area of academic research over the last few years, with a number of publications emerging since the start of this research.

Guest's work, for example, looked at the experiences of Christian students in higher education.[32] Guest's valuable study of Christian student experiences from various denominations and ethnicities, successfully counters generalised presumptions about Christian students. Christian students, however, cannot be categorised as a religious minority in British universities. My research has drawn parallels to his work in exploring the challenges students face on campus by virtue of their religious identities. Aside from the particular features of Shīʿism, one aspect of contrast is that my research has studied the experiences of a religious minority student community; this minority context is also relevant to the findings.

My research has also benefited from a recent important study into the experiences of Muslims in Britain's higher education institutions. This seminal piece of research[33] has also used qualitative methods to explore aspects of Muslim students' lives with which my research intersects. Some of those, as the later chapters show, include the themes of gender, identity and religious knowledge. The Scott-Baumann (et al) work does not focus on a particular Muslim denomination. My focus on Shīʿa Muslim students allowed me to delve deeper, managing to uncover subtleties that a broader examination could not have accomplished.

This research found issues related to gender to be one of the most prominent and recurring themes, along which transformations in attitudes and performances of religious authority could be analysed. The issues with gender, in light of Shīʿī religious authority, have been expounded upon in the following chapters. Ethnographic research focusing on higher education students who are both Muslims and female, has been carried out by Mir.[34] Her work highlights the experiences of her research participants in lieu of the very particular challenges posed by of the campus environment. Many of these challenges included female participants' sartorial choices. Although Mir's work is based in Washington D.C, there were areas of overlap with my research in Britain. Recognising the patterns in the data from my research, involving issues of gender, directed me to looking at some of these same gender-related challenges on campus, and analyse how the performance of religious authority is impacted by them.

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[32] Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
[33] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press.
[34] Mir. S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Of all the emerging academic works that explore the role of religious communities on campus, and Muslim students particularly, Degli Esposti's recently published article offers the most relevant connections to my research.[35] Not only does Degli Esposti concentrate on Twelver Shīʿa Muslim higher education students in Britain, but her writing also looks at present-day representations of Shīʿism by the student organisations that cater for them specifically. The evolution and function of these student organisations have been discussed in the following section.

My research has benefitted from numerous works that examine the experiences of religious communities on campus, particularly those of Muslim students. In my own examination of Shīʿa students' experiences, I have analysed the transformations in particular central aspects of their Shīʿism, illustrating how the adaptability of Shīʿism can be seen in their engagement with religious authority.

This study focuses on Twelver Shīʿa Muslim student organisations, called *Ahlul-Bayt Societies (ABSocs)*, on university campuses in England, and the individuals who constitute their membership. 'ABSoc' is an acronymic abbreviation of *Ahlul-Bayt Society*. 'Ahlul-Bayt' literally means *The People of the Household*. Shīʿa Muslims believe that the progeny, and members of the immediate household of the Prophet Muhammad, were his rightful divinely appointed successors. Along with the duty to guide, they inherited his God-given authority over man. Although all Muslims respect and revere the Prophet's immediate household, it is essentially this theology that sets the Shīʿa aside from other Muslim denominations. This gives the name, *Ahlul-Bayt Society*, a deliberate Shīʿī identity.[36]

The successive emergence of ABSocs, around Britain's university campuses, is a phenomenon that started after the year 2000. The initial emergence of ABSocs was instigated by Shīʿa students feeling marginalised from the universities' Islamic Societies (Isocs). Since then, the ABSocs have evolved to seek a wider Muslim membership and a better relationship with other Muslim student societies.[37] In 2007, graduates, who were themselves former ABSoc members, established the MSC (Muslim Students Council): a unifying and supportive umbrella body for the ABSocs throughout the UK. In line with the ABSocs' evolution, the MSC also presents a less exclusivist front. The MSC's Facebook pages use more generic 'Muslim' language.[38]

The relationship between the MSC and the ABSocs, has been described as one of support, but not control or governance. "The fact that we allow the individual ABSocs to do their own thing", an MSC EC

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[35] Degli Esposti, E. and Scott-Baumann, A (2019). Fighting for "Justice", Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. in *Religions* (10)189.
[36] See footnote number 1 under the definition of Shīʿa from *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*.
[37] Interview with a former ABSoc president [26/02/16]
[38] https://www.facebook.com/MSCUK [Accessed: 28 Feb. 2023]

member told me, "is one of our core strengths".[39] While it may be the case that the ABSocs were initiated as a counter to the Isocs, and as a result of the minority Shīʿa students feeling alienated,[40] the growth of the ABSocs has shifted the dynamics between this Shīʿa student organisation and the wider campus community. Activism, especially in inter-faith forums and civic movements, has allowed the ABSocs to gain recognition from other student bodies as well as citations from the governing student unions.[41] Consequently, a former ABSoc president described how some Isocs now approach the ABSocs at their universities, to gain access to some interfaith platforms and in order to participate jointly in various initiatives.[42] Such individual narratives about the ABSocs, from ABSoc affiliates, show how members have come to realise their own growth and influence.

There have been instances whereby an outwardly Shīʿī presentation has hampered MSC's activities. One MSC EC member explained how some Isocs refused to promote an NHS-backed *'Ramadhan Health Awareness'*[43] campaign while the posters carried the ABSoc logo, but had no qualms in doing so while the MSC logo was displayed.[44] It appears the word, *Ahlul-Bayt*, which is quite legible in the logo, was problematic due to its Shīʿī implications.
The fact that all of the ABSocs use slight variations of a unitary logo is evidence of mutual coordination. The obvious standardised features of the logos also suggest an effort to establish a unified identity among active Shīʿa students across the campuses. There was no official administering body coordinating the ABSocs during their initial emergence. However, considering their similarities, it is difficult to imagine that they would have been established in an uncoordinated way. In his very brief reference to ABSocs, Van Den Bos describes how a "Shia Students Council…does not seem to have materialised", and that the ABSocs were "not apparently led by an independent coordinating body".[45] His findings stem from research carried out in 2006, prior to the MSC's considerable growth.

Officially, there are over 40 ABSocs,[46] registered with their respective university student guilds, across the UK. However, the fluid and transitory nature of undergraduate students means that many of these societies are dormant. One of the aims of setting up the MSC was to counter this fluidity with its own stability. Even though the ABSocs operate at major universities spread throughout the UK, the greater density of Shīʿa Muslims in London means that many of these are in or around the capital. The MSC acts as a networking umbrella body for the ABSocs. Each ABSoc is governed by its own independent

[39] Interview with MSC EC board member [06/05/17]
[40] Interview with a serving ABSoc president [25/03/16]
[41] See APPENDIX 2 as an example.
[42] Interview with a former ABSoc president [26/02/16]
[43] See APPENDIX 3
[44] Interview with MSC EC board member [10/03/17]
[45] Van Den Bos, M. (2012). European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands. in *Ethnicities 12(5)*. pp 556-580. London: SAGE Publications. p 567
[46] Interview with MSC EC board member [10/03/17]

constitution, which must be in line with the rules of its corresponding university. As organisations, the ABSocs and the MSC, are not linked to any domestic or transnational scholars or clerics.

The fluidity of higher education students, and Shīʿa students more pertinently, makes it impossible to verify ABSoc membership numbers. Hence, further detailed mapping and analysis, in terms of ethnic backgrounds, gender and academic disciplines, are also difficult to establish. Previous studies show a wide-ranging diversity in ethnicities and gender balance. A project carried out in Cardiff involved eight participating ABSoc members, who identified with five different ethnic backgrounds.[47] Van Den Bos describes how '*Transethnic Shiite organizations*' are characterised by stronger religious than ethnic orientations.[48] The ABSoc community does not have a common, or dominant, ethnic background with which members identify. The communal focus, therefore, is based around the common denominators of religious belief and practice, which transcend individual ethnic affiliations.

The membership structures and procedures vary from one ABSoc to the next, depending on how active and sizeable the society is. Each individual ABSoc operates in line with its university's Student Union regulations. Many do not have a paid subscription system and 'registration' merely involves signing up to a mailing list. The MSC holds an annual summit as its flagship event, in addition to a yearly ABSoc Presidents' Retreat. Along with team-building and social activities, the latter are used to facilitate the development of regional ABSoc EC members' skills and address common challenges. It is also at these retreats that common initiatives and activities are coordinated.

Each ABSoc organises its own events and seminars. It is evident from online publicity material, from various ABSocs, that the themes are not restricted to squarely concentrating on traditionally religious or theological affairs. The topics, some of which include discussions on '*Extremism*', '*Shia Identity*' and the portrayal of Islam in the UK, show the ABSocs' overt recognition of their position as Shīʿa Muslims in a western, and particularly British, context.[49] One of the events features the screening of a film, entitled '*Why Can't I be a Sushi?*', positively dealing with the issue of inter-denominational marriages between Shīʿa and Sunni Muslims.
In addition to the seminars, the ABSocs also host a range of social activities and events.[50] These social events are often gender-segregated. These seminars and social events, which are well-publicised on social media, take place every few weeks or months, differing from one ABSoc to the next. The larger more active ABSocs, particularly those in London, organise weekly gatherings during which they congregate

47 Tajri, M. (2016). Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth. in *Muslims in the UK and Europe (2)* (ed. Suleiman, Y.) pp 148-156. Cambridge: Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. p 150
48 Van Den Bos, M. (2012). European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands. in *Ethnicities 12(5)*. pp 556-580. London: SAGE Publications. p 558
49 APPENDIX 4
50 APPENDIX 5

for religious supplications and also use the gatherings to deliberate on any matters they deem pertinent, theological or otherwise.[51] As well as asking pressing questions about the justifiability of Quranically-prescribed capital punishments and the need for religion at all, these discussions have also touched on issues of Islamophobia and whether Islam "Limits success in the West".[52] The themes covered in such gatherings and seminars are reflective of the questions the young Shīʿa at UK universities are faced with. They are also an indication of the intellectual questions the campus environment may pose to religiously established ideas.

One particular campaign, on which many of the ABSocs work, centrally guided and supported by the MSC, is the *Hungry for Justice* (HFJ) Campaign. This initiative began in 2012, with the backdrop of UK's recent economic slump, during which homelessness became an ever-increasing feature for life around Britain's larger cities. The HFJ drive seeks to combat the impacts of 'social injustice' – mainly poverty and hunger – by distributing food to the homeless in the UK. It has been running successfully for a number of years and has the support of national supermarket chains as well as other UK-based charity organisations. This internally initiated MSC/ABSoc project goes to demonstrate ABSoc members' awareness of their surroundings, and their sense of social responsibility. This campaign is one instance of how Degli Esposti describes the ABSocs' representation of Shīʿism, framing it as a platform for dissent against oppression and injustice.[53] The fact, that today's Shīʿa student activism is less flavoured with the language of religion and has a more humanist appeal to the wider campus, was highlighted in Degli Esposti's writing.[54]
While these campaigns do not, in themselves, indicate an absence of transnational affiliations, religious or otherwise, they are indicative of the ABSocs identifying with their positions in Britain and strong affinity with their immediate contexts. Some of the HFJ posters encourage participation by advocating '*Unity in the Community*'. The drive, which boasts the support of University Student Unions, is a more prominent feature in London, Birmingham and Leeds ABSocs.
A second annual flagship event, commemorated by the ABSocs, is 'Ashura Awareness Week'. It is an occasion commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Husayn. The transformation in the performativity of this commemoration, and the pertinence of that to this thesis, has been elaborated upon in later chapters.

As with other religious student organisations on campus, the function of the ABSocs goes beyond insulating Shīʿa students from the aspects of campus social environments that they would see as immoral, or as a parapet against contesting theological ideas. The function of the ABSocs and their evolution, as

[51] Degli Esposti, E. and Scott-Baumann, A (2019). Fighting for "Justice", Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. in *Religions* (10)189. p 7.
[52] APPENDIX 6
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid. p 2.

seen in this research, corroborates previous works that have recognised them as progressing "from spaces of minority representation to platforms for public engagement and activism".[55] These locally-geared aspects of ABSoc activism mark a contrast from the nature of activities carried out by Shīʿa Muslim student organisations through the '70s and '80s. Corboz and Spellman describe how the early Shīʿa student movements, Iraqi[56] and Iranian[57] respectively, consisting mainly of first-generation migrants, were very politically active in terms of transnational politics. These student organisations had strong and unconcealed transnational links, both religious and political.

The 20th century was a time in which universities became hubs of political activism and dissent, hosting a variety of protest movements.[58] The above-mentioned Shīʿī student activism suited that environment and formed part of that wider trend.

Subsequent to the Iranian revolution, the Union of Islamic Students Associations (UISA) was set up in Europe. The UISA is an organisation "among the globally dispersed Iranian Islamic students' societies outside Iran".[59] Despite the claims of being a Shīʿī body, the UISA was clearly ethnically defined, with strong affiliations with the Iranian government. Along with transnational Shīʿa student political activism, the UISA's activities also faded before the emergence of the ABSocs. This does not mark an end Shīʿa students' affinity to the Middle East.

Shīʿa Muslims' sense of belonging and identity in the UK is not mutually exclusive to affinity to the Middle East. The reality of Shīʿī identity is far more nuanced. A young Shīʿa Muslim in the UK may or may not be of immigrant background. However, the religious ideas and tenets with which he/she affiliates are certainly of a migratory nature; in this respect, the ABSocs can be said to resemble the much broader Muslim community in the UK.

The ABSocs are in themselves a community, brought together by common needs and interests, based on religious and denominational standpoints. The membership of this community, however, is made up of individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, genders, and varying amounts of exposure to mainstream '*Shīʿism*'. As such, it may be more accurate to view them as an instance of Mandaville's *'translocal space'* of transnational ideas. The challenges faced by *translocal spaces* would be magnified and multiplied for this community, by virtue of its British university campus context. Mandaville explains:

> The sheer multiplicity of subject positions… ensures that the production and representation of identity in these spaces will be intricate. This is especially the

[55] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 90.
[56] Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
[57] Spellman, K. (2004). *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain*. Oxford: Berghahn Books
[58] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 20-21
[59] Van Den Bos, M. (2012). European Shiism? Counterpoints from Shiites' Organization in Britain and the Netherlands. in *Ethnicities 12(5)*. pp 556-580. London: SAGE Publications. p 568

> case when we are dealing with a cultural form such as Islam, whose global sociocultural jurisdiction is extremely wide. For example, in the migratory or global city, Islam is forced to contend not only with a vast array of non-Islamic others but also with an enormous diversity of Muslim opinion as to the nature and meaning of Islam. In such spaces Muslims will encounter and be forced to converse with interpretations of their religion which they have either been taught to regard as heretical, or which they perhaps did not even know existed.[60]

The external challenges to religious identity, faced by the Muslim community, as well as the internal 'diversity of Muslim opinion', which Mandaville speaks of, are also faced by the ABSocs as an organised community: on one hand, outwardly displaying a coherent face of Twelver Shīʿī Islam in the face of challenges often faced in minority contexts, whilst concurrently balancing an array of standpoints, to do with religious authority from within its membership – which have been explored through this research. A board member of the MSC had the following to say:

> Shīʿas on campus are far far [sic] from having monolithic views on any issue; religious authority being just one. The challenge is to embrace this diversity while having the ability to work together to present a face of Shīʿas in the UK.[61]

The discussion on Shīʿī religious authority is inextricable from the conversation on Shīʿī transnationalism, as the chapter on Shīʿī authority thoroughly explains. Much of Britain's young Shīʿa population consists of second, or even third, generation migrants. As far as the UK's domestic Shīʿa university students are concerned, further than being past Anwar's *Myth of Return*,[62] many of them consider themselves fully 'at home' in Britain. On the discussion of the 'Shīʿī diaspora' in the West, an MSC board member said, "Many ABSoccers don't feel diasporic".[63] Degli Esposti certainly offers a useful, if not imperative, problematisation of using conventional diasporic lenses to analyse UK's Shīʿa Muslims.[64] Even though her work, cited here, focuses on the Iraqi community, her arguments for why it is problematic to use conventional diasporic models is equally applicable to the ABSoc Shīʿa community.

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[60] Mandaville, P. (2001). *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*. London: Routledge. p 107
[61] Interview with MSC EC board member [10/03/17]
[62] Anwar, M., 1979, *The Myth of Return: Pakistanis in Britain*. London: Heinemann
[63] Interview with MSC EC board member [06/05/17]
[64] Degli Esposti, E. (2018). The Aesthetics of Ritual – Contested Identities and Conflicting Performances in the Iraqi Shi'a Diaspora: Ritual, Performance and Identity Change. in *Politics 38(1)*. Political Studies Association. p 69-70.

Not Exactly 'Diasporic'

UK universities' Shīʿa students comprise of youngsters from an array of ethnic backgrounds, with no single geographical point of origin. In this regard, it would be inaccurate to view the ABSoc community as a conventional 'diaspora'. This being said, this organised bloc of young Shīʿa Muslims, does exhibit diasporic characteristics, as seen in other (faith or ethnically-defined) communities. Among these properties is the existence of internal complexities due to its heterogonous nature, while simultaneously striving to maintain a homogenous identity in confronting challenges faced in minority contexts; [65] and the romanticised view of another geographical place, with which one may or may not have ethnic links.[66] It is more accurate, therefore, to say that these Shīʿa students may be viewed as a diaspora in its post-modern understanding, relying more on common identity markers rather than a singular geographic point of origin.[67]

For Shīʿa Muslims in this western 'diaspora', their religious hearts and minds gravitate to the 'shrine cities', Najaf and Qom, in Iraq and Iran, where the most prominent seminaries of traditional religious learning are based. These places are seen as 'homelands' of Shīʿism. In this way, the Shīʿa student community can be viewed as an unconventional diaspora.
Diasporic communities, when separated from their homelands and cultural environments, often try to guard aspects of that culture even more resolutely than those who are not in minority contexts. To describe this, the term "cultural defensiveness" has been used for Welsh and Scottish communities who settled in British colonies abroad during the 19th and early 20th centuries.[68] The same term has been used to describe Caribbean migrants to the UK, who would guard their "Caribbean-ness more fiercely than those on the islands", through genres of music and other identity markers.[69] '*Cultural defensiveness*' refers to the idea that a diasporic community might hold on to their more significant shared identity markers more passionately when estranged from their source, or when in a minority context, out of fear of diluting that identity culture within the wider social environment. These examples, of course, are instances in which the diasporic communities are viewed with respect to a common 'homeland', on the basis of shared ethnic or national identities.[70] The earlier groups of Iraqi and Iranian Shīʿa students could

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[65] Werbner, P. (2002). The Place which is Diaspora: Citizenship, Religion and Gender in the Making of Chaordic Transnationalism. in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28 (1). pp 119-133.
[66] Rushdie, S. (1992). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books
[67] Dufoix, S. (2015). The Loss and the Link: A Short History of the Long-term Word 'Diaspora'. pp 8-11. in (ed. Sigona. N, Gamlen. A). *Diasporas Reimagined Spaces, Practices and Belonging.* Oxford: Oxford Diasporas Programme. p.10
[68] Constantine, S. (2003). British emigration to the empire-commonwealth since 1880: From overseas settlement to Diaspora?. in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 31(2)*. p 24
[69] Daley, K. (2018). *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*. London: Two Roads. p 109.
[70] Adamson, F. (2002). Mobilisation for the Transformation of Home: Political Identities and Transnational Practices. in (eds. Al-Ali, N. and Koser, K). *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home.* London: Routledge. pp 155-168.

be portrayed this way. The ABSoc organisations have come together on common grounds beyond ethnic and national identity markers.

As Shīʿa Muslims are a “minority within a minority”[71] in the UK, Shīʿa higher education students are also in the same complex minority setting in the campus environment: a minority within the wider sphere of Muslim students, who are also a minority within the wider campus. My research has assessed the extent to which this ‘diasporic’ body, in its minority context, clings on to established orthopraxy when it comes to the principal notion of religious authority in Shīʿism; or conversely, with the emergence of reconstructed ideas, whether the traditional mode of practiced Shīʿism “loses its monopoly” over their “religious imagination”.[72]

Cultural defensiveness becomes more manifest when the diasporic community feels that their cultural values are being threatened in the host environment. For my research setting, this could be represented by certain salient social features of student life - drinking alcohol and the sexual promiscuity - which would alienate religiously invested groups.[73] In such circumstances, the ‘homelands’, in diasporic discourses, are seen as ‘purer’ than the lifestyle in the diaspora.[74] When translated into my research situation, the ‘Shīʿism’ practiced in the Middle East, understood to be the homeland of Shīʿism, would be seen as a purer expression of the faith than its compromised practice in the West, and in the campus environment particularly.

The idea, that the lifestyle in the Middle East contributes to a purer expression of Shīʿism, is purported by religious authorities based there. The most prominent contemporary Twelver Shīʿa jurist is Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, based in Iraq. A book comprising of his teaching, rulings and edicts, specifically catering for the Shīʿa in western countries, expresses his view of a stark disparity between the position of one living in a ‘Muslim country’ and one living in the aforementioned diasporic context:

> A Muslim who is born and raised in a Muslim country where he consciously and subconsciously absorbs the laws, values and teachings of Islam, grows up into a young person who is aware of the customs of his religion, following its path and is led by its guidance. On the other hand, a Muslim who is born, and brought up in a non-Muslim country demonstrates the influence of that environment very clearly in his thoughts, ideas, behaviour, values, and etiquette unless his Lord helps him. This un-Islamic influence is seen more in the second generation of those who have migrated to non-Muslim countries.[75]

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[71] Scharbrodt, O. (2019). A Minority within a Minority?: The Complexity and Multilocality of Transnational Twelver Shia Networks in Britain. in *Contemporary Islam (13)*. Springer Journals. pp 287-305
[72] Mandaville, P. (2001). *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*. London: Routledge. p 84
[73] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 20.
[74] Werbner, P. (2004) Theorising Complex Diasporas: Purity and Hybridity in the South Asian Public Sphere in Britain. in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 30(5). p 899
[75] Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West*. London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 39
The book is also available at: http://www.sistani.org/english/book/46/2022/ [Accessed: 26 May 2017]

The participants' statements, collected in the data, both reflected and contested the above outlook. Some expressed how it is "more difficult to practice true Islam here",[76] while others said that "real Islam can be practiced anywhere, in any environment"[77]. Even on this matter, what is clearly evident is the diversity of viewpoints among them. The later chapters of this thesis further unpackage the notion of Shīʿa Muslims' emotional attachment to the Middle East and the ramifications of that on their attitudes to established religious authority.

In situating this research, this introduction has illustrated the general landscape of Shīʿa Muslim communities in the UK, showing how the ABSoc student organisations have risen above their ethnic diversity, coming together on religiously defined identity markers. This somewhat contrasts with previous Shīʿa student activism, which was more perceptible along ethnic and national lines.
This has placed the ABSocs in a position to present a more complete face representation of Shīʿism in the context of the university campus. Consequently, those who chose to become active members of the ABSocs do so primarily due to their shared religious investedness as opposed to ethnocultural interests. These specific denominational identity markers place the Shīʿa students in a minority context, in which attachment to those identity markers is heightened.
The participants identifying with their immediate local contexts – which is reflected in their activities – as well as their religiously inspired affinities to the Middle East, gives them a complex hybridised identity. While UK's Shīʿa communities, as a whole, cannot be classified as a conventional diasporic group, their religious and emotional connections to the Middle East may cause them to view its cultural norms and ideas as purer expressions of Shīʿism. This weight of this point becomes increasingly clear through the thesis. The participants' commitment to their religious identities may be challenged by their campus environments; firstly in terms of the intemperance of student life, but also because the campus offers a setting that allows all ideas and ideologies to be questioned – including religious ones.

Considering all of the above, this thesis assesses the participants' conceptions of normative Shīʿī religious authority and explores their performances of authority in light of Shīʿī orthopraxy. Furthermore, bearing in mind the centrality of adherence to Shīʿī authority to lived Shīʿism, this research explores the malleability of Shīʿism, and its articulations among the ABSoc members.

[76] Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[77] Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Mar 2017]

Structuring this Thesis

To address the above subjects through the course of the writing, hereon in, the thesis has been structured as follows.

The first chapter encompasses the conceptual bases of my research. Its opening section begins by expounding on the notion of authority and its different forms, its functions and utilities. Within the confines of speaking in a religious context, the section discusses authority's inseparable interaction with the types of agency its subjects have or lack. The section leans on anthropological and sociological works to explain why agency cannot be essentialised as being in opposition to authority, and the different ways the former can operate within the framework of the latter. This part of the thesis explains how religious authority often takes the form of epistemic authority, and within that understanding, philosophical and religious jurisprudential ideas are built upon to explain what 'epistemic authoritarianism' would imply when used in a religious context.

Having outlined the theoretical notions that ground the thesis, the first chapter then gives a sketch of Shīʿī religious authority, illustrating how it is transnationally structured, institutionalised, and how it involves those mentioned ideas on authority. In Shīʿism, not only are established notions of authority fastened to unchallengeable theological tenets, but the structure of religious authority is also formalised and institutionalised. The human actors, Shīʿa jurists, that personify Shīʿī religious authority are based in the Middle East. They are primarily located in cities that accommodate the shrines of Shīʿa Imams. These locations are considered spiritual 'homelands' for the Shīʿa 'diaspora' and this plays a role in enhancing the credibility, reverence and authority of the Shīʿa jurists based there.

Another feature of religious authority in Islam, but especially so in Shīʿism, is its male-dominated nature and complete lack of female representation. Chapter 1 continues to detail this male dominance, as well as how this male dominance is legally and jurisprudentially justified.

In reviewing the literature, the thesis demonstrates a dichotomy between how a mechanism of Shīʿī religious authority – namely *taqlīd* – is theorised, and its performance as established orthopraxy: the former seeming to grant the untrained 'lay' individual with some religious interpretive agency, and the latter denying any such autonomy. The orthopraxical performance of *taqlīd*, therefore, is demonstrated as one that involves features of religious epistemic authoritarianism.

The feature of male-dominance is one of the ways that Shīʿī authority contrasts with the context of my participants, i.e., members of the ABSoc organisations. Choosing these student societies was more than an arbitrary decision, and beyond the fact that they were conducive to carrying out fieldwork. Operating on UK university campuses, the ABSocs organisationally espouse a gender equality ethos. This is reflected in their activities and balanced gender participation. This research interrogated the idea of whether this disparity between the ABSoc space and structure of Shīʿī religious authority, impacted attitudes and performances amongst the participants. The ABSoc organisations are spaces on campus

used to present Shīʿism to the wider campus community. Affiliation with the ABSocs also denotes an active investment and commitment to shared values and tenets of Shīʿism. Carrying out research with these groups aided in questioning the suggestions, that those committed to Shīʿism would necessarily be inclined to normative religious authority attitudes and performances. The significance of the ABSocs, as a subject of the research, has been further elucidated further in Chapter 2, which also details and explains the qualitative methods used for this research.

As Shīʿī authority is shown to be male dominant, the closing sections of the first chapter look at a performance that is exclusively female, but is mandated by the male jurists. That is the observance of the *hijab*. In addition to being one of the most prominent and outward aspects of Muslim women's religious identities, my research has shown it to be a performance through which my participants express various modes of agency. As such, both the ABSocs and the practice of not/observing the *hijab*, have become agentic spheres for the research's female participants.

Reviewing the strands of literature in Chapter 1, which discuss the fields interlinked by this research, provided the research with conceptual bases. This enabled the formulation of the research premises that open Chapter 2. The research questions are based on these premises, and immediately follow them at the start of the second chapter.

Chapter 2 then proceeds to explain and justify the methods used in this research project. While the chapter outlines logistically important aspects of the project and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and data protection, the most substantial section of that chapter involves a reflection on my own positionality, and how it might have informed various components of the research.

Interrogating the above statements resulted in four emergent themes. Each of these has been allocated a chapter (from chapters 3 to 6) in the second half of the thesis. The first of these (Chapter 3) looks at the function of the ABSocs as a protective space for its members' Shīʿism, in addition to being a platform through which Shīʿism is represented. As Ashura, like practical religious authority, is a crucial element of lived Shīʿism, Chapter 3 illustrates how the performativity of this commemoration has been transformed, making it more acceptable and appealing in the campus environment. To demonstrate how Shīʿism, as a lived tradition, is adaptable, one of the tools I have used is to juxtapose the ABSocs' marking of Ashura with performances of religious authority. While paralleling them both as fundamental aspects of Shīʿī Islam, I also contrast the two, denoting Ashura as an outward and communal commemoration whereas religious authority is much more an internal conversation.

Chapters 4 and 5 speak to the participants' engagement with the established structures of religious authority in Shīʿī Islam. Chapter 4 analyses the Shīʿa students' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, religious authority. This chapter has looked at the extent to which normative understandings are substantiated by the participants. Chapter 5 considers the ways in which religious authority is performed

in light of what would be considered orthopraxy. The research uncovered an array of ways that religious authority was practiced. While there were instances of conformity with the established tradition, I also discovered that the established model of religious authority was often reshaped into one that afforded varying degrees of interpretive agency and autonomy. Instead of disconnecting from Shīʿī authority structures, the participants' reformed ideas allowed this agency to be weaved into traditional religious authority conceptions.

Although I had expected gender-related issues to appear during the course of my research, their salience was only fully realised once the project had commenced. This compelled me to revisit the literature on Shīʿī religious authority and revaluate it from a perspective of it being male-dominated – the latter parts of Chapter 2 were an outcome of this revaluation. Chapter 6 analyses the participants' engagement with religious authority with relevance to gender. The most noteworthy instances of dissent against established notions of religious authority, and divergence from normative performances, were seen in this strand of the data. The chapter reveals the stark contrast between female empowerment in the ABSoc spaces and a complete nonexistence of female representation in the ecclesiastical space of Shīʿī authority. This was a point of concern raised by both male and female participants. The gender-related challenges faced by the participants, were also noticeable causes of nonconformity with orthopraxy.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by bringing together the findings analysed in the previous four chapters. It evinces lived Shīʿism to be an adaptable tradition, particularly with regards to attitudes and performances of religious authority. In doing so, it contests assertions that rigidly define Shīʿism by inflexible parameters on religious authority practices. As a consequence, Shīʿī 'religiosity' and loyalty to wider Shīʿī doctrine, cannot be measured by assessing adherence to traditional religious authority notions. The multidisciplined approach of this thesis – by examining textual discourses on Shīʿī religious authority and sociologically assessing its application – successfully uncovered nuances between the theoretical notions and practical performances in this domain.

This thesis stems from the sociological research that has examined the campus experiences of Shīʿa Muslim students - contrasting their cultural environment with that of the *marjiʿiyyah* - and has paid particular attention to issues related to gender. In doing so, this thesis makes the principal argument that conceptions of Shīʿism cannot be reductively formed through established notions of Shīʿī religious authority; nor can performances of Shīʿī authority be reduced to conventional orthopraxy. The research has witnessed participants practice a range of performances when it comes to religious authority. The findings have related instances of those who express their resoluteness in complying with the orthopraxy that denies them their own agency, to those who embrace their own religious interpretive agency and diverge away from the established convention – and all practiced under the banner of a shared Shīʿī identity. The performances that were inconsistent with the normative practice of *taqlīd* often stemmed

from reconstructed models of Shīʿī authority, through approaches that would not disaffirm the subject's claim to a Shīʿī identity.

Chapter 1
Theorising Religious Authority and Agency

Defining the term 'Islamic authority' requires some definition of its constituents. Authority, in any religious context, has been described as "notoriously difficult to define".[78] This ambiguity has been added to by the haziness of the word '*Islamic*'.

The difficulty in accurately and concisely defining what *Islam*/*Islamic* is, and the consequent inability to use the term meaningfully in current scholarship, led to an extensive, in-depth exploration of these problems of definition by the late Harvard scholar, Shahab Ahmed, initially steering him towards a broad and encompassing conception of Islam and Islamic identity.[79] It is important to consider the heterogeneity within any religious grouping. Ahmed wished not to unfairly dilute or impoverish the vastness of 'Islam', but to encourage an appreciation and recognition of the paradigmatic in "all forms and tokens and calibrations and expressions that are Islam".[80] Though acknowledging this vastness is admirable, applying broad and imprecise understandings to this kind of social study would be unworkable. While developing a theoretical notion of 'Islamic authority' has its own challenges, understanding the practical elements and performances of authority is even more complex.

This chapter, therefore, combs through notions of authority and authoritativeness in a religious context. The existing engagements with the notion of authority, upon which this chapter builds, include discussions that differentiate between authority and the power to coercively affect the practice of other people.[81] It is on this discussion that I will distinguish between the theories behind Shīʿī religious authority, and – contrastingly – established performances of it. When it comes to authority in a religious milieu, this chapter will also analyse the differences between epistemic authority,[82] and authority that is not only grounded in epistemic credibility; I will illustrate how, in Shīʿīsm, the latter is more prone to religious interpretive authoritarianism. Furthermore, my elucidation of how religious authority operates in Shīʿī societies, shows how the demarcating lines between *practical authority* and *epistemic authority*[83] are blurred.
In the chapter, I have framed the attitude that exhibits an authoritarian understanding of Shīʿī religious authority, as one that stands binarily dichotomous to exercising religious interpretive agency. Nonetheless, I embrace Saba Mahmood's exposition of how authority and agency are not necessarily at

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[78] Kramer, G (2006). Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies. in *Speaking for Islam* (ed. Kramer, G) pp. 1-14. USA: Brill
[79] Ahmed, S. (2016). *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 304
[80] Ibid. p 545
[81] Kramer, G (2006). Religious Authority and Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies. in *Speaking for Islam* (ed. Kramer, G) pp. 1-14. USA: Brill
[82] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld.
[83] Zagzebski, L. (2012). *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority and Autonomy in Belief.* New York: Oxford University Press.

odds, but can function complementarily,[84] explaining how this authority/agency dynamic can – from a certain standpoint – be seen in performances of Shīʿī religious authority.

At this point, I make recognition of the work of Bhojani and Clarke,[85] whose engagement with the theories of religious authority have helped me in framing these notions. However, my work has built on their treatment of these theoretical ideas, through sociological analysis of how the notions are inflected in Shīʿī societies – specifically amongst higher education students in the UK. Although their work also includes data from some qualitative fieldwork, it is limited to Shīʿa Muslims from only one ethnic background,[86] whilst my research into the student societies goes beyond ethnic barriers to give broader ideas about Shīʿī performance. Limited ethnographic research into Shīʿa Muslims of a single ethnic background, like the one cited,[87] is still research into the standpoints of Shīʿa Muslims. However, if the research does not transcend ethnic demarcations, it must acknowledge the ethno-cultural factors that impact its data.

My research data, which illustrates a spectrum of performances and attitudes, is set in front of a backdrop that explains the distinction between theoretical notions of Shīʿī authority and the mechanism of *taqlīd* on the one hand,[88] and how Shīʿī religious authority performance has become orthopraxically established on the other hand.

This chapter expands on notions of agency, epistemic authority and authoritarianism. In doing so, I show how theoretical notions of Shīʿī authority are based on rational foundations of epistemic authority, but established performance of it leans towards authoritarianism; the former seemingly granting individuals with an extent of religious interpretive agency while the latter strips the subject of such agency.

The final sections of this chapter explain how the peripheral theme of gender has allowed me to further explicate how the authority/agency theories can be seen playing out in my female participants' performances.

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[84] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 18

[85] Bhojani, A. and Clarke, M. (2023). Religious Authority beyond Domination and Discipline: Epistemic Authority and its Vernacular in the Shiʿi Diaspora. in *Comparative Studies in Society and History 65(2)*. Cambridge University Press (272-295)

[86] Their fieldwork is limited to the Khoja Shīʿa Muslims, who have been discussed in the opening chapters of this thesis.

[87] Bhojani, A. and Clarke, M. (2023). Religious Authority beyond Domination and Discipline: Epistemic Authority and its Vernacular in the Shiʿi Diaspora. in *Comparative Studies in Society and History 65(2)*. Cambridge University Press (272-295)

[88] *Taqlīd*: The meanings given to this term, within the jurisprudential convention, are discussed later in this chapter. Put simply, it means to adopt the jurisprudential opinion of an authority, often unquestioningly. In modern standard Arabic, the verb to which this noun is connected, gives the following meanings and connotations: 'to entrust someone with the power of governance; to give someone authority or power; to imitate; to blindly follow the opinion of another'. *(Wehr, H. [1974]. A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. London: Macdonald & Evans Ltd. p. 786).*

Structured Religious Authority, Agency and Authoritarianism

My thesis is an examination of my participants' performances against the theoretical backdrop of structural authority and its relationship with the individual subject's agency. Theoretical elaboration and unpackaging of authority/agency notions is a prerequisite to understanding authority-agency dynamics within the Shīʿī religious framework, as well as religious authority performances in Shīʿī societies. While this section seeks to untangle the discussions of authority, agency and authoritarianism generally, much of this will be done in a religious framing and in the Islamic context, with allusion to the role of God, text and scripture.

'Authority' can sometimes be simplistically conceptualised as an instrument of domination.[89] By looking at how the concept of authority has been philosophically engaged with,[90] and how those notional engagements have been highlighted in practice,[91] this section will demonstrate the reductiveness of limiting the understanding of authority to characteristics of domination. In doing so, this part of the thesis will also illustrate how this minimising appreciation of authority wrongly essentialises it as being in contention with a subject's individual agency.
Pointing out that reductiveness does not detract from the fact that authority, and religious authority, can indeed present dominating and coercive characteristics. This particular understanding of 'authority' concentrates on binding it with the subject's obedience as an "essential component"[92], and especially when that authority grants a "right to impose obedience".[93] As the following discussion will show, the subject's obedience in itself does not necessarily contravene his or her agency; however, the 'imposition' of obedience would, as it implies the subject's coercion to obey. The nature of religious authority, when looked at alone and disentwined from forms of (imposed) authority, diverges from other forms in that it cannot be directly enforced and cannot be directly coercive in of itself. However, when that authority forms part of wider religious lived experiences and traditions, involving social and familial bonds, and including identity affiliations and credal rhetoric, then that authority can adopt coercive qualities. So, while religious authority, in many traditions, may claim to have theoretical foundations in epistemic credibility and trust,[94] it would be wrong to overlook factors that give the holders of authority the ability to exert pressure and influence, if not coerce. Krämer lists what religious authority, in practice, can involve:

> Religious authority can assume a number of forms and functions: the ability (chance, power or right) to define correct belief and practice, or orthodoxy and

[89] Raz, J. (1990). Authority and Justification. in *(Raz, J. ed). Authority*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pp 115–41
[90] Foucault, M. (1980). Truth and Power. in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans C.Gordon 109-33. New York: Pantheon Books.
[91] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
[92] Arjomand, S. (1988). Introduction: Shi'ism, Authority, and Political Culture. in (Arjomand, S. ed). *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*. Albany: State University of New York Press. p 1.
[93] Gaborieau, M. and Zeghal, M. (2004). *Autorités religieuses en Islam. Archives de sciences sociales des religions*. (125). p 5
[94] Zagzebski, L. (2012). *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority and Autonomy in Belief.* New York: Oxford University Press.

> orthopraxy, respectively; to shape and influence the views and conduct of others accordingly; to identify, marginalize, punish or exclude deviance…[95]

The idea that authority, in religious lived traditions, exceeds the ambit of epistemic expertise, has been noted. Zaman writes about it having the "ability to shape people's belief and practice".[96] This socially enforceable regulatory capacity, that religious authority has, is realised when that authority is personified, as is the case with Islamic authority generally and Shīʿī authority more specifically. The personification of authority in Shīʿī Islam will be explored in the next section.

Considering this facet of religious authority, the question then arises as to whether this allows space for personal religious agency; and whether such 'agency' necessitates the agent/subject to operate in opposition to the said authority. Is agency essentially postured as a breach or defiance of authority? Anthropological writings of Islam, as well as recent sociological endeavours, have problematised the idea of looking at the authority/agency dynamic as a "zero-sum game: the stronger the authority, the weaker the agency of those subject to it".[97] Efforts to undo this conceptual binary have taken two approaches; the nuance between them is subtle. Both approaches turn towards conferring a form of 'agency' on the follower, in ways that do not diminish the authority.

The first of them is Foucault's conceptualisation, he describes the agency acquired by the subject, as something inherent within the power dynamic. In her elucidation of Foucault's notion of 'subjectivation',[98] Mahmood writes, "the very process and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent". Butler explains this connection in explicating Foucault's 'paradox of subjectivation'.[99] This type of subordination to religious authority has been alluded to in the practice of some Sufi master-disciple relationships. Khurāsānī, describes the disciple's submissive attitude, saying, "The wayfarer must always be in submission [taslīm] to the spiritual authority of the Shaykh like a dead corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead [ghassāl]"[100]. The analogy of a corpse's subjection is reiterated by the contemporary Muslim philosopher, Nasr: "In the hands of the master he must be like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead without any movement of its own".[101] Through such a paradoxical understanding, the subject is using his or her own agency to enter into an association, within which their agency will be surrendered.

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[95] Krämer, G. & Schmidtke, S. (2006). *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Boston: Brill Publications. p 1
[96] Zaman, Q. (2012). *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 29.
[97] Bhojani, A. and Clarke, M. (2023). Religious Authority beyond Domination and Discipline: Epistemic Authority and its Vernacular in the Shi'i Diaspora. in *Comparative Studies in Society and History 65(2)*. Cambridge University Press (272-295). p 274.
[98] Foucault, M. (1980). *Truth and Power*. in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans C.Gordon 109-33. New York: Pantheon Books.
[99] Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[100] Khurāsānī, M. (2008). *Tuhfah Yi 'Abbāsī: The Golden Age of Sufism in Shi'ite Islam*. University Press of America. p. 213
[101] Nasr, H. (1967). The Sufi Master Exemplified in Persian Sufi Literature. in *Iran, Vol. 5*. p. 38

Even though the association itself is impossible without the wilful agent, the subject is disempowered after having entered the bond.

The second approach is one that builds on the first and develops it. Saba Mahmood, analysing women's movements in the mosques of Cairo, explores how the (female) subjects of her research negotiate their activities to acquire agency within the authoritative frameworks of fundamentally male-controlled environments. In doing so, she competently critiques representations of Muslim societies in which women's disempowerment has been overemphasised. Mahmood develops the theorisation of power structures to explain her participants' assumption of personal agency:

> Agency [is] not simply a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but… a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable.[102]

Working within the male-dominated religious spaces and embracing those authority frameworks, the Muslim women Mahmood speaks about found relative agency and empowerment. Rather than the authority being a cause of disempowerment, the subject manoeuvres through the spaces afforded within the framework itself, to assume an extent of agency.

The subsequent sections of this chapter will illustrate how both of these framings of agency, endorsed without being overtly in conflict with authority, are seen playing out in wider religious authority contexts.

The idea that sheer religious authority, when devoid of political or otherwise directly enforceable power, is often based on epistemic credibility or a subject's reverential attitudes, has already been mentioned. "The distinction", Abou El Fadl explains, "is the difference between deferring to a police officer and deferring to one's plumber".[103] The presumption here is that the 'authority' and the 'subject' have a shared epistemological framework in which the latter concedes to the former's relative superiority and uses their own agency to defer to that authority's expertise. This has been alluded to in Islamic – and specifically Shīʿī – contexts.[104]

At this juncture, I will refer to Abou El Fadl elucidate on how this type of religious epistemic authority can adopt authoritarian features that strip the individual of religious interpretive agency. Abou El Fadl's engagement with it is especially useful here because, although the authority/agency discussion is a general theoretical one, it is being employed in a religious framing and applied within the enclosure of an Islamic authority context. As such, whilst the term 'agency' has been employed with abstract usage hitherto, for its contrast to the notion of authority, I use it from here on in to refer to an individual's willingness to interpret God's law with some autonomy in a personal capacity, especially when referring to the research participants of this project, later in this thesis.

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[102] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 18
[103] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 19
[104] Bhojani, A. and Clarke, M. (2023). Religious Authority beyond Domination and Discipline: Epistemic Authority and its Vernacular in the Shi'i Diaspora. in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Cambridge University Press. p 287

As with other belief systems that claim divine origins, in the Islamic tradition, sacred texts and scriptures are seen as ultimately authoritative; and as with other religious traditions, it would be oversimplistic imagine that authority functioning without human actors. It is within this interaction between text and human actors, that religious epistemic authoritarianism can arise.

Abou El Fadl sums up this paradox:

> God, God's book, and the Prophet are authoritative in Islam – in fact, they are the only authorities that count. This statement has the comforting advantage of being crisp and clean but without explanations and qualifiers it is largely unintelligible.[105]

With reference to *God's book*, above, Islam is far from being the only religion that reverts to text for authority. Whilst most theistic religions hold certain texts as supremely sacrosanct - and authoritative - in being God's message to man, the way authority is practiced, at least in the Islamic (and specifically Shīʿī) context, bars the general masses from directly accessing those texts with an interpretive approach. The idea that the 'laity' does not have the capacity to fully decipher God's message, makes them reliant upon a religious elite to interpret God's word.

Hence, while theoretically speaking, authority in Islam does revolve around God, His book and His Prophet, it would be incorrect to claim that authority is restricted to those three. In the practice of Islamic authority, reliance on contemporary human actors for religious guidance becomes a pragmatic necessity and, hence, established through the lived tradition. In the opening chapters of his work, Hallaq theoretically discusses ways in which human actors have been positioned – effectively – between God and the laity.[106] Hallaq's work is theoretical and only looks at developments in the practice of authority through a historical lens; it is not founded on any direct ethnographic work to illustrate how his theorisations are actualised. It can be further contrasted with my research owing to it being principally focused on non-Shīʿī contexts. However, his analysis of developments in specific practices, is useful in contrasting them with Shīʿī performances. His work is referred to again in the following section, which specifically discusses institutionalised Shīʿī structures of religious authority.

Notionally, what is authoritative in any religion should reflect the extensive range of understandings that a religious tradition encompasses. In his already cited work, Ahmed speaks about facets of *Islam*, ranging across the fields of Islamic humanities – literature, history, philosophy, art, poetry and even music. Contrastingly, 'authority', in today's practice of Islam, has developed in a way whereby it is appropriated from all of these fields and allotted solely to the jurists and the field of jurisprudence. Vying for authority

[105] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 23
[106] Hallaq, W. (2004). *Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

and influence has historically resulted in tensions between scholars of jurisprudence and those of other Islamic disciplines. The celebrated Sufi poet and philosopher, Ibn ʻArabī, went to the extent of likening the jurists to the pharaohs who stood as nemeses to the prophets in the Quran.[107]

The jurists' retention of authority and influence is even more evident in Shīʿism;[108] It is not merely mirrored in Shīʿī Islam, but institutionalised and formalised through modes specific to Shīʿism, as is elucidated in the coming sections.

Human actors functioning as conduits for God's authority does not sever all direct relationship between the Muslim laity and scripture. Guidance is sought from the Quran as a source of spiritual direction, from narrated maxims of the Prophet Muhammad from which they might derive inspiration, and from any other scholarly personality who may not be recognised as a jurist. While guidance is sought and taken from the other sources above, the fact that there is an over-reliance on jurists for direction on day-to-day performances is indisputable. The conception of Islamic religious authority has become so centred on jurisprudence, that on beginning his discussion on Islamic authority, Abou El Fadl explains the reasoning behind his focus:

> The reader will observe that in addressing the matter of authority in Islam, I will focus exclusively on the juristic tradition and its particular conception of authority… Considering the alternatives, my focus on juristic culture warrants some justification. It is my contention that the juristic concept of authority has become a firmly embedded part of Islamic dogma.[109]

When religious authority is centred on human actors, as explained, its strength and influence can be assessed by considering the extent to which that authority is centralised and concentrated, or then devolved and diluted. Ultimate, legislative authority belongs to God. That is incontestable. The question of *'who has authority?'* in this religious context, therefore, is equivalent to the question, *'who has divine agency in determining God's law?'*.[110] Even if one adheres to the idea that the religious texts have authority, 'agency' to interpret then lies with those who are vested with the task of using those texts to deduce law, and upon whom the 'untrained' rely, for interpreting God's message. According to Abou El Fadl, herein lies a risk of a type of epistemic religious authoritarianism.[111] This type of religious authoritarianism arises when the individual (jurist) reader, he argues, becomes unified with the (sacred religious) text in a way that his interpretation is imposed upon the text and becomes accepted as its exclusively correct reading. This situation is an instance that exceeds the mere epistemic authority of an expert, as with the aforementioned analogy of the plumber. The epistemic credibility of an expert means that the expert retains authority, but this should not be at the cost of the possible validity of alternate

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[107] Chodkiewicz, M. (1993). *An Ocean without a Shore*. Albany: SUNY Press. p 21
[108] Cole, J. (2002). *Sacred Space and Holy War*. London: I.B.Tauris. pp 161-162
[109] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 31
[110] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 28
[111] Ibid. p 142

views being unacknowledged. Abou El Fadl refers to an attitude that would not be considered authoritarian:

> An opinion on a matter that presents itself as a point of view and that acknowledges that other points of view are possible is not authoritarian. An argument or opinion could be fraudulent, dishonest, or negligent, but if it does not claim to be decisive and conclusive, I hesitate in describing it as authoritarian.[112]

Using this explanation as a foundation, I go further to argue that when a religious community invariably and constantly views an authority's interpretation as the exclusively correct reading, without the space for the possible validity of contending opinions, then that community appreciates and regards the authority as authoritarian. Based on these theoretical explanations of religious authoritarianism, the later sections of this chapter discuss how the practice of Shīʿī *taqlīd* involves semblances of it, even though this diverges from the theoretical basis upon which *taqlid* is rationalised.

This thesis applies Abou El Fadl's theoretical treatment of religious authoritarianism in the context of Shīʿī authority. While he discusses a hypothetical individual reader imposing his understanding on a given text and rejecting the potential acceptability of any other understanding, in the context of Shīʿism, we speak not of an individual reader, but rather a group of Shīʿa jurists – the *marājiʿ*.[113]
From one angle, however, the thesis diverges from Abou El Fadl's treatment. In contrast to Corboz's work,[114] this project did not seek to focus on those in authority, but rather those who see them in positions of religious authority. So, the aim was not to discover whether or not the Shīʿa jurists assert an authoritarian approach, even though that will be briefly discussed in the following section with the practice of *taqlīd*. Rather, this research probed into the perceptions and attitudes of the research participants in this regard; assessing their understandings regarding Shīʿī religious authority, considering the above explanations on religious authoritarianism, and how they respond in terms of regulating the jurisprudence of their everyday lives.

At this point, I will add to Abou El Fadl's analogy of the plumber's authority,[115] using Friedman's assessment, to expand the notion of what can be appreciated as epistemically authoritarian and the relinquishing of the subject's agency. Recognising the epistemic expertise of an authority does not necessitate the subject becoming an intellectual version of "a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead without any movement of its own".[116] Deference of the authority, to the degree of become such an

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[112] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *And God Knows the Soldiers*. University Press of America. pg 101
[113] Plural of *marjiʿ*; authority to which one turns or appeals *(Wehr, H. [1974]. A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. London: Macdonald & Evans Ltd. p. 328).* The word is conventionally used in Shīʿa jurisprudence to refer to the most senior jurisprudential authorities, invariably based in Iraq and Iran.
[114] Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
[115] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 19
[116] Nasr, H. (1967). *The Sufi Master Exemplified in Persian Sufi Literature.* in *Iran, Vol. 5*. p. 38

intellectual corpse, implies the subject's appreciation of the authority as authoritarian, even though this degree of deference may have been reached through the individual exercising agency to arrive at his or her own of 'subjectivation'.[117] Friedman writes:

> It is the contrast between authority and persuasion through rational argument… that is essential to the delineation of the distinctive kind of dependence on the will or the judgment of another person involved in an authority relationship. That is, the crucial contrast is between the case in which one man influences another to adopt some course of action by helping him to see the merits of that particular action and the case in which no reasons have to be given to a person to gain his compliance with a prescription because he "accepts" the person who prescribes it.[118]

Friedman's explanation can be seen as describing an authority/subject dynamic that surpasses mere epistemic foundations. The subject's acceptance is not through appreciating rational argument, but rather through deference of the authority, be that due to perceived epistemic credibility or otherwise. Shīʿī religious authority has been described as having an epistemological rationale,[119] in which, as explained, both authority and subject share an epistemological framework and understanding. By virtue of being performed within a lived tradition however, 'religious' authority is rarely so pure and uncompounded. Shared epistemological understandings are coupled with religious heritage and tradition.[120] The impending sections of this chapter show how this is certainly the case in the case of Shīʿī authority, whereby deference of authority goes beyond merely perceived epistemic credibility.

The next sections illustrate Shīʿī authority as a male-dominated ecclesiastical space, and similarly Shīʿī jurisprudence as a patriarchal epistemic and conceptual space. While the focus of this thesis is not on gender per se, the reality of this imbalance means it can draw even further parallels with Mahmood's work.[121] The male-dominant features of these Shīʿī spaces contrasts starkly with the space provided by the ABSocs; the student organisations that constitute my research setting. As expounded upon above, Mahmood describes, through her ethnographic work, how authority and agency are not necessarily polar binaries;[122] but rather how her participants' agency was expressed within the male-dominated authority frameworks within which they operated, and through conformity with those frameworks. Despite the claim of agency here, the conformity itself may be looked at as a submissive expression in repressive religious discourses. Through her study, Shanneik has built on Mahmood's study, to show her participants using their agency, within given male-dominant frameworks, in a "counter-hegemonic" way "by

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117 Foucault, M. (1980). *Truth and Power*. in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans C.Gordon 109-33. New York: Pantheon Books.

118 Friedman, R. (1990). On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. in (ed. Raz, J.) *Authority*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pg 67

119 Kadhim, A. and Alebh, A. F. (2021). *A Shift Among the Shīʿa: Will a Marjʿa Emerge from the Arabian Peninsula?*. Washington: Middle East Institute. p 1

120 Arendt. H. (1993). *Between Past and Future.* New York: Penguin Books. p 128

121 Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

122 Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 18

redefining their subject-positions”.[123] Her valuable work describes how her female participants have used certain aesthetic practices,[124] in patriarchal environments, as ‘agentic’ performances that seek equality with their male counterparts, pertinently within inner-Shīʿī gender relations.

Progressing from the discussions on authority, agency and epistemic authoritarianism in this section, the next sections in this chapter first construct a picture of Shīʿī authority structures as institutionalised, hierarchical, centralised, personified and male-dominated; thereafter, the succeeding sections elaborate on the authority-enabling mechanism of *taqlid*, explaining how its established mode of practice chimes with the above descriptions of epistemic authoritarianism; in this chapter’s final section, I explain my impetus to revisit gender as a salient theme of the research, and the possibility of my female participants utilising their agentic spaces in counter-hegemonic ways.

Shīʿī Religious Authority

It has already been discussed that religious authority in Islam is associated with a juristic class of elite scholars. Religious clerical authority in Twelver-Shīʿī Islam revolves around a relatively formalised, centralised and institutionalised structure. At the apex of this structure, are a of recognised jurists: the *marājiʿ*.[125] At a time when academic analysis of Shīʿī Islam was even scarcer than it is today, Lambton outlined the historical and political factors facilitating this formalisation through the 18th century onwards,[126] leading to today’s institution of *marjiʿiyyah.*[127] As valuable as her work is, in building the narrative of *marjiʿiyyah* today, exploring it in detail is not the focus of this research.

Shīʿī authority is centred on the *marājiʿ*, based in the Middle East countries that have majority Shīʿa populations: Iran and Iraq. The extent and influence of their authority, however, encompasses Shīʿa communities across the world. One way in which the influence of the *marājiʿ* is exported to the western world, which includes my research setting, is by setting up regional offices that are run by their selected

[123] Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi’i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 245.
[124] Like self-flagellation during religious mourning rituals for example. [Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi’i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 207.]
[125] Plural of *marjiʿ*; authority to which one turns or appeals *(Wehr, H. [1974]. A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. London: Macdonald & Evans Ltd. p. 328).* The word is conventionally used in Shīʿa jurisprudence to refer to the most senior jurisprudential authorities, invariably based in Iraq and Iran.
[126] Lambton, A. K. S (1964). *A Reconsideration of the Position of the Marja' Al-Taqlīd and the Religious Institution*. in *Studia Islamica (20).* p 115-135
[127] *marjiʿiyyah*: Originating from the Arabic linguistic root “*ra-ja-ʻa*”, meaning to return, resort or recourse. In the contemporary context, *marjiʿiyyah* is now conventionally used to refer to the institution of clerical authority in Shīʿī Islam. Clarke labels it, *“the dominant institution of religious authority within modern Usuli Twelver Shiʿi Islam”*. [Clarke, M. and Inhorn, M. C. (2011). Mutuality and Immediacy between the Marjiʿ and Muqallid: Evidence from Male in Vitro Fertilization Patients in Shiʿi Lebanon. in *International Journal for Middle East Studies (43).* pp 409-427]

representatives. Corboz's entire work revolves around two renowned Iraq-based families of Shīʿa jurists – Al-Khoei and Al-Hakim – and how they actively sought to build transnational networks by setting up offices to represent the patriarchal *marjiʿ* at the head of their respective clans.[128] The world's two leading Shīʿa jurists currently, in terms of fame and following, Iraq's Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī and Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei, both have recognised offices in North-West London's "Shia mile".[129] The relative density of London's Shīʿa population and, therefore, the significance of the *marājiʿ* establishing satellite offices there, has been documented in recent sociological works.[130]

Many of the *marājiʿ*, who do not have offices in major cities, will have representatives living there. In explaining the inner political workings of the *marjiʿiyyah*, Walbridge describes how these offices and representatives act as liaison points between the *marjiʿ* and the Shīʿa 'diasporic' populations.[131] Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's predecessor in Iraq, was the late Ayatollah Abu Al-Qāsim Al-Khoei (d. 1992). The Al-Khoei Foundation was set up in his name, whilst he was under house-arrest under Saddam's Ba'athist regime – a time during which his outreach activities would have been severely curtailed. The Foundation, which has branches in several global cities including London, served as a channel through which the jurist's ideas were disseminated. In light of his precarious position, the physical presence of the Foundation, as well as its activities, "may be seen as an attempt to defend the institution of *marja'iyyah"*.[132] Despite Ayatollah Al-Khoei's demise two and a half decades ago, the Foundation still runs in his name and is a focal point for Iraqi Shīʿa Muslims in London.

Today, however, coming into contact with the authority of the *marājiʿ* need not involve any direct communication with their representatives. Walbridge has commented on how the advances in technology and communication allow the *marjiʿ* to "exert a great deal of influence on the entire Shia community".[133] Here Walbridge is commentating upon the formative years of exporting the *marājiʿs* influence beyond Iran and Iraq, when telegrams and then telephones became instrumental in expanding the ambit of the *marjiʿ's* reach. Muslim religious figures using emerging technologies to communicate with, influence and even politically mobilise their followers, is not a recent development. Political movements in Egypt, through the 20th century, were inspired by tape recorded lectures from clerics in Saudi Arabia and Jordon.[134]

The reach of the *marjiʿ's* influence is far more effective in the internet age. Many of the *marājiʿ*, especially those who have more prominence and larger followings, have official websites with English

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[128] Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[129] Bowen, I. (2014). *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*. London: Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd

[130] Scharbrodt, O. (2018). A Minority Within a Minority?: The Complexity and Multilocality of Transnational Twelver Shia Networks in Britain. in *Contemporary Islam 13*. pp 287-305

[131] Walbridge, L. (2014). *The Thread of Mu'awiya: The Making of a Marja' Taqlīd*. Indiana: Ramsay Press.

[132] Rahe, J. (2002). Iraqi Shi'is in Exile in London. in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (ed. Abdul-Jabar, F.) pp. 211-219. London: Saqi Books. p 215

[133] Walbridge, L. S. (2001). *The Most Learned of the Shi'a*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 6

[134] Bowen, J. (2012). *A New Anthropology of* Islam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 180

sections, containing their rulings and recent pronouncements.[135] Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's document of advice for the youth, which is discussed in more depth in the latter chapters of this thesis, is a prime example of this. Some of the *marājiʿ* even have official Facebook pages and active Twitter accounts.

There are factors beyond technology that attract Shīʿa Muslims in the western world, towards authority figures in the Middle East. In addition to Iran and Iraq being the two Middle Eastern countries politically governed by Twelver Shīʿas, they also contain the grand burial shrines of numerous Shīʿa Imams, theologically believed to be infallible saints. This further promotes the countries, and the religious ideologies emanating from them, in theological importance. It is due to the location of these shrines that Shīʻa Muslims visit these cities in their millions annually, especially since the fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. During these visits, many of them also make a point of paying homage to the *marājiʿ* who are based there, or somehow seek an opportunity to do so. These factors, as well as large segments of the western Shīʿa being of Iranian and Iraqi ethnic origin, play a role in the global Shīʿa community being drawn towards these shrine cities.[136]

Krämer does highlight the influence of the *shrine cities* of Najaf (Iraq) and Qom (Iran), and Litvak further emphasises the status of Najaf as the undisputed "leading centre of learning in the Shīʿī world".[137] The sentimentalised view of the shrine cities, among grassroots Shīʿa Muslims, is a factor that hinders the geographical decentralisation and devolution of Shīʿī religious authority. This concept is reflected upon by Kadhim and Alrebh, in discussing the potential devolution of Shīʿī authority to the Arabian Peninsula:

> But it will be very difficult to convince the Shiʻa of the Arabian Peninsula to turn away from the current major Shiʻa seminaries, especially Najaf, to which they maintain a great emotional and historical attachment.[138]

This tendency to be attached to the Middle East, and reliant upon the teachings from there for religious guidance, seems to be stronger in the Shīʿī diasporic contexts. Sociologists have commented on the (non-Shīʿī) Muslim diaspora in America, noting how the religious authority of transnational traditional scholars waned amongst professional first and second-generation immigrants.[139] Despite the scarcity of social science research into Shīʿa Muslims in the West, the sentimental attachment to these Shīʿī centres, in the Middle East, has been noticed and commented upon. In the US setting, Takim has mentioned how Shīʿism there is "highly reliant on the foreign based ayatollahs", and how this can be a hindrance to

[135] [https://www.sistani.org/English] [http://www.alnajafi.org/] [http://english.khamenei.ir/] [http://www.english.shirazi.ir/] [http://alfayadh.org/] [http://alhaydari.com/] [http://www.alhaeri.org/] [http://makarem.ir/index.aspx?lid=1]
[136] Krämer, G. & Schmidtke, S. (2006). *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Boston: Brill Publications. p 1
[137] Litvak, M (1998). *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-century Iraq: The Ulama of Najaf and Karbala*. Cambridge University Press. Page 80
[138] Kadhim, A. and Alrebh, A. F. (2021). *A Shift Among the Shīʿa: Will a Marjʿa Emerge from the Arabian Peninsula?*. Washington: Middle East Institute. p 11
[139] Grewal, Z. (2014). *Islam is a Foreign Country.* New York: New York University Press. p 131-132.

proselytization in the western world.[140] In one of the above-mentioned quotations, Takim remarked on the lack scholars, in the West, who are *"qualified"* to give independent opinions.[141] What it means to be sufficiently '*qualified*' to issue jurisprudential rulings is not entirely relevant here. The fact is that scholars in the West are not seen with the same aura of authority, nor deemed equal in scholastic competence, as the *marājiʿ* of Iran and Iraq. This romanticised image that the seminary establishments in these two Middle Eastern countries have acquired, aids in perpetuating the centralised and hierarchical features of Shīʿī religious authority. This has led to a perpetuating cycle of reverence between the *marājiʿ* and the seminaries located in the shrine cities. A similar phenomenon was seen in a Sunni Muslim context, in the 17th century in the Levant region.[142] An elite clergy class rose to prominence, and subsequently enabled the monopolisation of religious influence around their respective distinguished centres of learning. This led to a gravitation towards the centres of learning in Sunni Islam specifically located there. In the Shīʿī articulation, it has led to the centralisation of authority in the 'shrine cities'.

The Shīʿī religious authority model has the particular feature of linking fallible contemporary human actors, in positions of religious authority – the *marājiʿ* – to central theological tenets. Shīʿa Muslims, Twelvers particularly, believe that religious authority after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, was inherited by his immediate family and progeny of 12 infallible Imams – the last of whom, The Awaited Mahdi, is believed to be in a lengthy occultation. In his absence, religious authority over Shīʿa Muslims is assumed by the religious scholars. There has been a marked increase in religious rhetoric, in modern times, supporting the notion that the scholars and clergy class are representatives of the infallible Imams.[143]

Given the theological rhetoric used to ratify the authority of the *marājiʿ*, it is conceivable that they may be regarded as vested with this authority by God himself. As God is beyond critique, the *marājiʿ* are also placed beyond the boundaries of criticism. Aziz explains this theological linkage very explicitly, in a chapter entitled *Marjaʿism*, through the viewpoint of the late 20th-century Iraqi cleric, Mohammad Baqir Al-Sadr:

> The role of marjiʿ in Sadr's theory stems from his view that man would always have a constant need for some sort of divine intervention to protect him from corruption and guide him towards salvation. Without such intervention, man's potential for progress and emancipation will be hindered…
>
> …Since the Imams and religious jurists understand divine laws and revelations,

140 Takim, L. (2010). Preserving or Extending Boundaries: The Black Shiʻis of America. in *Jounrnal of Muslim Minority Affairs 30(2)* pp 237-249. London: IMMA.
141 Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147-148
142 Grehan, J. (2014). *Twilight of the Saints*. Oxford University Press. p 42
143 Walbridge, L. (2001). *The Most Learned of the Shiʻa.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. p 4

> they will take the responsibility of safeguarding the message of God, convey it to mankind, and take on the active role of guiding man in his historical mission.[144]

The second paragraph, from the above quote, implies an equivocation between the theologically infallible Imams and the fallible jurists, in their capacity to understand divine laws and their positions as conduits and protectors for God's message to mankind. Other contemporary Shīʿa scholars have also been explicit in their linking the authority of the *marjiʿ* to that of God. In describing their stances, Eliash lists a number of Iranian scholars and explains the subtle variations in their opinions. He summarises the opinions by conveying that of the 20th-century Iraqi Shīʿa jurist, Ayatollah Mohammed Ridha Mudhaffar (d. 1964):

> The opinion that Shi'i mujtahids are the deputies of the Hidden Imam and that they are authorized to wield his authority in his absence is held by many Shi'i mujtahids. The late dean of the College of Shi'i Jurisprudence in Najaf, Ayatullah Muhammad Rida Muzaffar, cites a hadith on the authority of the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq[145] to the effect that the mujtahid is not only the absolute deputy of the Imam in religious and temporary affairs (al-hakim wa-l-ra'is al-mutlaq) but that to disobey him is equivalent to committing the sin of polytheism.[146]

The beliefs expressed clearly use theology to consolidate religious authority – and therefore, God's authority – around the person of the *marjiʿ*. Equating the act of contravening his teachings to the 'sin' of polytheism also shows how fundamental the *marjiʿiyyah* institution, and the normative performance of authority, have become in the Shīʿī context. The rhetoric framing the clergy class as representatives of the Hidden Imam, was formulated in the Safavid and Qajar periods,[147] and has accelerated in traction through the political vehicle of Iran's revolution in 1979. As Halm observes, "The theory that all tasks of the Hidden Imam should be assumed in his absence, by qualified scholars, had found ultimate acceptance".[148] The ramifications of this rhetoric – linking contemporary authority figures to inviolable theological tenets – effectively enshrines the interpretations and opinions of the *marājiʿ* as sacrosanct. The association between their authority and that of God's make their interpretations practically incontestable. A realisation of the theorised epistemic authoritarianism can thus be seen here. This attitude somewhat contrasts with 'reformulist' stances in non-Shīʿī circles, wherein the status of those who have undergone formal seminary training is not linked to inviolable theological notions. In a fairly recent publication, Abou El Fadl observes:

> The long years of instruction and training in the halaqa system did not endow us with the right to represent God or to pontificate about the dictates of Islamic law.

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[144] Aziz, T. (2002). The Political Theory of Muhammad Baqir Sadr. in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (ed. Abdul-Jabar, F.) pp. 231-244. London: Saqi Books. p 237
[145] Jaʿfar Al-Ṣādiq is the sixth-generation descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. He is considered as an Infallible Imam by Twelver Shīʿa Muslims and his statements are also considered to be legally binding.
[146] Eliash, J. (1979). Misconceptions Regarding the Juridicial Status of the Iranian 'Ulamā. in *International Journal for Middle-Eastern Studies* (10). London. pp 9-25
[147] Momen, M. (1985). An Introduction to Shi'i Islam. New Haven: Yale University Press. p 195
[148] Halm, H. (2005). *The Shiites: A Short History*. New Jersey: Markus Wiener. p 120

> Rather, these years of training only gave us the tools to research and investigate Islamic law according to the systematic analytic methods of inquiry.[149]

It is when the opinions of the *marājiʿ* are viewed as the exclusively valid religious stance, at the exclusion of other voices, that the understanding of practical Shīʿī authority can be described as religiously authoritarian. The pedestalisation of the person of the *marjiʿ* is such that his pronouncements are viewed as inviolable; and this inviolability is realised in the contemporary Shīʿī diaspora. For example, expressing his own attitude towards the advice of a *marjiʿ*, an influential Shīʿī religious figure in North America, Sayyid Mohammad Rizvi, has been documented to state: "A Marjaʿ taqlid [sic], the supreme leader of the Shiʿa during the time of *ghaybat*.[150] Do you think you are going to reject the recommendation of a person of that status?!".[151]

Another prominent feature of structured Shīʿī of religious authority, is its hierarchical nature; with the elite *marājiʿ* at its zenith, their regional representatives scattered around the world and provincial scholars (often resident) at local Shīʿī centres. This hierarchical facet is sufficiently vivid and apparent for Kadhim and Alrebh to begin their article stating, "Shīʿī Muslims follow a hierarchy of clerical leadership based on superiority of learning".[152] While it is somewhat tangential to the focus of this research, Arjomand's article is useful in elucidating the various historical and political factors that played decisive roles in the formulation of this hierarchy of religious authority in Shīʿism.[153] Parallels have also been drawn between Shīʿism and Catholicism, in how textually derived theology has been used to facilitate the formation of an institutionalised hierarchical religious authority structure.[154] Whilst these parallels with Christianity are valid, they diverge when it comes to the specific specialisation of the religious scholars upon whom the authority is conferred. Analysis of the Christian Byzantine Empire, for example, reveals instances of Christian scholars assuming, and even vying for, religious authority.[155] These scholars, however, were primarily made prominent for their reputations of spiritual sagaciousness and expertise in theology. Whereas in the Shīʿī context, religious authority and influence are exclusively centred on scholars primarily distinguished for their reputations as jurists.[156] This reality is not exclusive to Shīʿism within the context of Islam. Hallaq describes this gradual development across the denominations of Islam.[157]

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149 Abou El Fadl, K. (2015). *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming the Shariʿah in the Modern Age.* New Delhi: Dev Publishers. p 23
150 *Ghaybat*: The Arabic word literally translates to "absence" or "concealment". In Twelver Shīʿīsm, it is a reference to the occultation of the Twelfth Imam, as explained earlier in the chapter.
151 https://www.shia-maktab.info/index.php/en/library/books/english?format=raw&task=download&fid=203 [Accessed 23/12/2021]. p 51.
152 Kadhim, A. and Alebh, A. F. (2021). *A Shift Among the Shīʿa: Will a Marjʿa Emerge from the Arabian Peninsula?*. Washington: Middle East Institute. p 1
153 Arjomand, A. (1985). The Clerical Estate and the Emergence of a Shiʿite Hierocracy in Safavid Iran: A Study in Historical Sociology. in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient (28)2*. London: Brill Publications. pp 169-219.
154 Bill, J. A. and Williams, J. (1987). Shiʿi Islam and Roman Catholicism: An Ecclesial and Political Analysis. in *The Vatican, Islam and the Middle East* (ed. Ellis, C.) pp 69-105. New York: Syracuse University Press. p 91
155 Drijvers, J. W. and Watt, J (ed. 1999). *Portraits of Spiritual Authority: Religious Power in Early Christianity, Byzantium and the Christian Orient.* Boston: Brill Publishing
156 Cole, J. (2002). *Sacred Space and Holy War.* London: I.B.Tauris. pp 161-162
157 Hallaq. W. (2004). *Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The systematised hierarchical feature of Shīʿī authority is a factor that facilitates the influence of the *marājiʿ* transnationally. In describing the *marājiʿs* transnational influence in the American context, Takim sums up numerous points the following paragraph:

> Authority, when it is strictly defined and hierarchical as it is in Shiʻism, reduces the chances of digression and the scope of divergent hermeneutics. For most devout Shiʻis, the marajiʿ's pronouncements are final and beyond critique. Religious matters not covered in the juridical literature composed by the marajiʿ are referred to their offices. There are very few Shiʻi scholars in America who are qualified to state a juridical opinion independent of, let alone one that is opposed to, the edicts of the marajiʿ. Due to this factor, the Shiʻi outlook in America is shaped by the marajʿ's pronouncements, which are often formulated in the religious circles in Iraq and Iran.[158]

It is not possible to extend Takim's assessment about the American '*Shīʿī outlook*', and the great extent to which he claims it is influenced by the *marājiʿ*, to the British context, without extensive further ethnographic research. My research interrogates Takim's generalised caricature of *most devout Shiʻis*, and questions whether or not they commonly view the *marājiʿ*'s pronouncements as "final and beyond critique". Being members of university student societies that have been established to cater for Shīʿa students, the participants of this research actively identify with Shīʿism; the findings of this research sought to examine the extent to which they recognise the *marājiʿ*'s pronouncements as incontrovertible.

The perception of the *marājiʿ*'s pronouncements as incontrovertible, or their religious interpretations as exclusively correct, would divest interpretive agency from their followers. The previous section has discussed the fact that agency does not necessarily have to be framed as being in opposition to authority. The latter chapters, in which I discuss my findings, explain the way some participants' negotiations of the edicts from the *marjiʿ*, manage to somehow preserve the *marjiʿ's* authority, as well as assume personal agency. Some participants' agency was expressed by applying reconstructed models of 'following the *marjiʿ*', enabling them to interpret his ruling in their own given social context.
Such a model would bear a resemblance to Al-Qarāfī's description of how religious authorities, and their rulings, could be followed within the Mālikī jurisprudential school. Al-Qarāfī (d. 1285) has portrayed the hierarchy of religious authority, within the Mālikī school, as a structure in which the lower rungs of the hierarchy can do *takhrīj* of the opinions coming from higher up. That is to say, those who are in the position of following, or emulating, may practice a level of interpretive reasoning of the rulings, according to their specific contexts.[159] This set up, wherein each stratum has some degree of interpretive agency, is quite distinct from the normative performance of Shīʿī authority, which inhibits the follower from having any interpretive agency whatsoever – neither of the sacred religious texts, nor of the rulings

[158] Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147-148
[159] Al-Qarāfī, S. (2010). *Anwār Al-Burūq fī Anwāʿ Al-Furūq*. Cairo: Dār Al-Salām. pp 543-544

of the *marājiʿ*. By assuming some personal agency, be it in interpreting the religious texts directly or by reconstructing existing rulings for a specific context, the lay individual would be practicing a type of *ijtihād*, or law derivation, but on a personal basis.[160] This religious interpretive agency is discussed by Kersten, in the introductory chapter of the a collection of articles, as "Interpretive License".[161] While Kersten does talk about this 'license' as a contrast to established orthopraxy in Islam, he discusses it in the context of it being practiced by religious "Muslim intelligentsia".[162] The implications, of the questions I ask in my research, would be even more problematic to Shīʿī normativity, as my research participants would be considered 'lay' as far as the traditional religious sciences of law derivation are concerned.

Untrained Shīʿa Muslims deferring to the authoritative standpoints of a *marjiʿ*, is an example of the subject willingly using their own agency to refer to one who is deemed epistemically superior. The final section of this opening chapter explains the mechanism of Shīʿī *taqlīd*, through which this epistemic authority is mediated. Despite the Shīʿī concept of *taqlīd* having rational theoretical foundations of referring to an expert and deference to epistemic authority, the way *taqlīd* is practically performed involves the utter divestment of interpretive agency from the subject. Such that a Shīʿa Muslim would comply "with a prescription because he accepts" the *marjiʿ*, and "no reasons have to be given to a person to gain his compliance", echoing Friedman's explanation of what would be epistemically authoritarian.[163]

The idea of endorsing agency – working within established authority frameworks as described by Mahmood,[164] and 'counter-hegemonically' as described by Shanneik[165] – was evidently realised by my participants when it came to issues particularly impacting female participants. This was striking as it forced me to consider the contrast between my participants' social setting, with the spaces in which Shīʿī authority operates. The ABSoc student societies, as portrayed earlier in the thesis, are gender-balanced in terms of their active members and Executive Committee board members, generally across the surveyed campuses. In contrast, the ecclesiastical space of the *marjiʿiyyah* and the epistemic space of Shīʿī jurisprudence are heavily male dominated. A failure to examine this further would not do justice to representing a complete picture of Shīʿī authority, and would fall short in discerning significant factors that have informed my participants' authority/agency performances. I have dedicated the penultimate section of this chapter, therefore, to a thorough examination of female representation (or lack thereof) in these Shīʿī authority spaces and their stark dissimilarity to the social spaces occupied by my research participants.

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160 Mandaville, P. (2001). *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*. London: Routledge. p 176.
161 Kersten, C. and Olsson, S. (2013). *Alternative Islamic Discourses and Religious Authority*. New York: Ashgate Publishing. p 6.
162 Kersten, C. and Olsson, S. (2013). *Alternative Islamic Discourses and Religious Authority*. New York: Ashgate Publishing. p 9.
163 Friedman, R. (1990). On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. in (ed. Raz, J.) *Authority*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pg 67
164 Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 18
165 Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 245.

Shīʿī Authority's Male-Dominant Dilemma

This section's critique of classical Shīʿī jurisprudence, as male-dominant and patriarchal, does not stem from colonial ideas on gender equality.[166] Such decolonial stances may be used to discredit the claims in this section, as Eurocentric impositions on the heritage of Shīʿī jurisprudence. As a pre-emptive response to such a criticism, I would make two points. Firstly, without asserting a moral judgement, I am identifying the inarguable lack of female representation at the height of the Shīʿī authority hierarchy. The section provides evidence for this reality from within the Shīʿī jurisprudential tradition itself. Secondly, as I have acknowledged in the section on reflexivity in this thesis, my revisiting the discussion on Shīʿī authority to delve deeper into the matter of gender, was a corollary of what was emerging organically from the data. It can be conceded that the research participants, having been through a western education system, may have adopted Eurocentric ideas on gender equality and societal gender roles. Accepting that supposition does not detract from the fact that they *do* have certain ideas on gender and that these ideas may have factored into forming their conceptions of Shīʿī religious authority. My research was concerned with their de facto attitudes to religious authority and their consequent performances.

My thesis is an examination of my participants' performances against the theoretical backdrop of structural authority and its relationship with the individual subject's agency; it is not an exploration of 'gender', and theories pertaining to it, as a focus. However, the positionality of my female participants – as female Shīʿa Muslims on western secular university campuses – meant that gender-related issues were a lens through which the authority-agency contention was being acutely effectuated. Reflecting on the interviews and observations as the research progressed, the significance of female experiences, to the discussion religious authority, became increasingly apparent. Hence, I decided to revisit the chapter on Shīʿī authority and elaborate on the ramifications of it being a male-dominated space.

It would seem almost impossible to find any substantial written discourse, on Islam as a lived experience, devoid of a chapter or a section designated to female-specific experiences in religiously defined spaces. When it comes to Islam specifically, the fact that Muslim women are consistently treated with such attention makes female-Muslim experiences a significant discussion point in academic discourse, regardless of whether that attention originates from – or is engineered by – orientalist vantage points. There is, therefore, an evident overrepresentation of Muslim women in the body of ethnographic works.

166 Miró, C. (2020). Encountering the Colonial: Religion in Feminism and the Coloniality of Secularism. in *Feminist Theory 21(1)*. pp 91-109

Ethnographic research examining the lived experiences of Muslim women, includes analysis of the experiences of Muslim women within physical spaces,[167] virtual spaces,[168] and even spheres of intellectual activity that impact wider society.[169] Examples of ethnographies in this genre include the study of women's experiences within mosques,[170] within ethnically identified communities[171] and even within the context of American college campuses.[172] I aim not to merely to flag up an array of instances wherein Muslim women have been the focus of research, but rather to illustrate how its significance means it has become an entire subfield of research unto itself.

Religious spaces, especially when they pertain to Muslims, have often been portrayed as having patriarchal features or being restrictive for women. Sullins, for example, comments on how women's activities in mosques are likely to be less empowering on account of the spaces they occupy being smaller and less desirable.[173] He makes a mention of "institutional barriers to women's participation" in mosques and how this tends to be looked at as "restrictive norms on female participation" by Westerners.[174] Prickett also implies that gender segregation and smaller spaces for women in mosques are tools for their disenfranchisement; she argues against such generalisations of mosques by pointing out that this segregation is not usually found in African American mosques.[175]

The apex of Shīʿī authority is the institutionalised *marjiʿiyyah*: an ecclesiastical religious space that is devoid of any female representation whatsoever. While there have been examples of Shīʿa women recognised as competent female jurists (*mujtahidāt*), able to derive religious law from their textual sources,[176] there has not been a single woman recognised as someone whose religious opinions can be emulated and followed, i.e. a *marjiʿ*. The prevalent opinion, among today's invariably male Shīʿa *marājiʿ*, explicitly disallows women from occupying the authoritative position of a *marjiʿ*. That is to say that maleness (*al-rujūliyya*) – alongside the characteristics of sanity (*ʿaql*) and perceived integrity (*ʿadāla*) – is among the necessary stipulations required as qualities for a potential *marjiʿ*. The opinions barring women from positions of legal judgement, in the school of Twelver Shīʿī jurisprudence, goes as far back as

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167 Prickett, P. (2015). Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: The Particularities of Patriarchy in an African American Mosque. in *Gender and Society (29)1*. California: SAGE Publishing. pp 54-55.

168 Riley, K. (2022). Online Narratives on Menstruation, Public Conversations and Relationships with Religious Law. in (ed. Bata. H). *The Regulations of Purity and Impurity in Islam.* Birmingham: AMI Press. pp 54-66

169 Kűnkler, M. (2012). The Life of Two Mujtahidahs: Female Religious Authority in 20th Century Iran. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H.). *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Boston: Brill Publications. pp 127-160.

170 Mahmood. S (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersy: Princeton University Press.

171 Bendixsen, S. (2013). *The Religious Identity of Muslim Women in Berlin*. Leiden: Brill

172 Mir. S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

173 Sullins, D. P. (2006). Gender and Religion: Deconstructing Universality, Constructing Complexity. in *American Journal of Sociology 112*. pp 838-880

174 Ibid. p 844

175 Prickett, P. (2015). Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: The Particularities of Patriarchy in an African American Mosque. in *Gender and Society (29)1*. California: SAGE Publishing. pp 54-55.

176 Kűnkler, M. (2012). The Life of Two Mujtahidahs: Female Religious Authority in 20th Century Iran. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H.). *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Boston: Brill Publications. pp 127-160.
[Kűnkler has analysed the lives of two female jurists who, among dozens of others in Iran, have risen to the rank of *mujtahida*.]

Shaykh Al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067),[177] who is considered a scholarly giant in classical Shīʿism. Such opinions have been maintained until the contemporary age by today's most prominent Shīʿa jurists, including Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī. The teacher and predecessor of Al-Sīstānī, Ayatollah Al-Khū'ī (d. 1992), who was the 20th century's most senior jurist in terms of popular recognition, was of the same opinion.

Consistency, in the methods of law derivation, would require the jurist to have deduced his conclusions by thorough analysis of the religious texts: the Quran and the corpus of hadith. In his treatment of this issue, after combing through the relevant texts, Al-Khū'ī concludes:

> Hence, there is no [textual] evidence indicating that masculinity is a stipulated consideration with regards to the emulated [jurist]…
>
> And it is correct that, regarding the emulated [jurist], masculinity is a stipulated consideration. And emulating a woman cannot be permissible…
> That is because we deduce from the 'proclivity of the [Divine] Legislator', that the desired role of women is merely to be screened and concealed away, to administer the domestic affairs, without meddling in what would be incompatible with those affairs.
>
> And it is obvious that, generally speaking, involving oneself in the issuing of legal edicts would result in putting oneself in the position of consultation through being questioned… And the [Divine] Legislator would never be pleased with the woman putting herself in such a position.[178]

The inferences, one can make from these few lines, are substantial. At the beginning of the excerpt, Al-Khū'ī concedes that there are no textually/scripturally justifiable grounds to bar women from assuming the highest office of Shīʿī religious authority. Despite this, by the end of the excerpt he presents his own stance on the matter, which stipulates maleness as a necessary condition for the position of the *marjiʿ*. The 'justification' he has used, i.e. the "proclivity of the [Divine] Legislator",[179] is not a recognised basis for justification in his own methodology of juristic interpretation – nor that of any other Shīʿa jurist. His personal position is made even clearer as he goes further to define and stipulate the societal role of women as he sees it: limited to a domestic function and proscribing any undertaking that would hinder that solitary function, including assuming the authoritative position of the *marjiʿ*. Al-Khū'ī's assertion excludes women from potentially assuming the ultimate position in Shīʿī religious authority. My research has uncovered awareness among some participants, of these male-exclusivist stances among the *marājiʿ*.

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[177] Takim. L. (2013). Ijtihad and the Derivation of New Jurisprudence in Contemporary Shi'ism. in (ed. Kersten, C. and Olsson, S.) *Alternative Islamic Discourses and Religious Authority*. New York: Ashgate Publishing. p 29.

[178] Translated from: [Al-Khū'ī, A. (2009). *Al-Tanqīḥ Fī Sharḥ ʿUrwat Al-Wuthqā*. *Vol 1.* London: Al-Khū'ī Islamic Foundation. p 187]
The original Arabic text, of the translated excerpts, is as follows:

إذاً لم يقم دليل على أن الرجولية معتبرة في المقلّد...

والصحيح أن المقلّد يعتبر فيه الرجولية. ولا يُسوّغ تقليدُ المرأة... وذلك لأنا قد استفدنا من مذاق الشارع أن الوَظِيفَةَ المَرغُوبةَ مِن النساء، إنّما هي التحجّب والتستّر، وتصدّى الأمورِ البَيتِية، دون التدخّل فيما يُنافِي تلك الأمور. ومن الظاهر أن تصدى للإفتاء – بحسب العادة – جعل للنفس في معرض الرجوع والسؤال... ولا يرضى الشارع بجعل المرأة نفسها معرضا لذلك أبدا.

[179] English translation for what Al-Khū'ī mentions as, *"madhāq Al-Shāriʿ"* - [مذاق الشارع]

The data has shown how that awareness affected their ideas about religious authority structure and performance in normative Shīʿism.

I have already pointed out Al-Khū'ī's methodological inconsistency in reaching this exclusory stance towards women. His standpoint has also been largely adopted by his successors. The aspects of the Islamic texts[180] that relate to women, especially those instances that are subject to western criticism of 'Islamic' norms and practices, mostly relate to rights and regulations governing marital and familial environments. Mir-Hosseini suggests that it is the family laws, derived from these texts, which permeate into wider jurisprudence and influence jurists' assessment of women as less capable in authority than men, and more suited to a domestic role.[181] This, she suggests, has resulted in the kind of misogynistic legal environment that disallows women from becoming judges and political leaders. The idea that women were not suited to roles of authority in society, Mir-Hosseini suggests, stems from the notion that they could not be free agents since they were under the authority of their husbands in the marital setting. She claims that this idea was further rationalised by the conceptions of women as innately weaker, vulnerable to their emotions and possessing qualities inappropriate for leadership. It is a remarkable point to note here that, at least according to Mir- Hosseini, this lack of representation at Shīʿī authority hierarchy's zenith itself stems from an appropriation of agency, and subordination to authority, in a domestic setting.

Mir-Hosseini is correct to state that the Islamic religious texts on the marital dynamic would be seen, in today's western context, as misogynistic. However, I would go further to say that the hadith corpuses, within both Shīʿī and Sunnī denominations, are replete with narrations that would be considered highly misogynistic - even those not dealing with marital or family law. While the authenticity of such narrations has been widely contested and their interpretation extensively debated, the Shīʿī hadith collections do include the following examples: cases wherein the Prophet or Imam commands men to disobey women, even when they enjoining them towards good, on account of their untrustworthiness;[182] where men are warned against consulting women on account of their feeblemindedness;[183] and even commanding men to prevent women from reciting certain chapters from the Quran.[184] With a backdrop of texts carrying this

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[180] What is meant by 'Islamic texts' here, is the Quran and the corpus of Hadith. It is primarily from these two sources that Muslim jurists derive jurisprudential law. The 'Hadith' are the authoritative words, actions and tacit approval historically attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. For Shīʿa Muslims, the Hadith corpus also includes that which supposedly emanates from the lives of the Twelve Imams from the Prophet's progeny.
[181] Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2015). Muslim Legal Tradition and the Challenge of Gender Equality. in *Men in Charge?.* in (Mir-Hosseini, Z. and Al-Sharmani, M. ed.) London: Oneworld Publications. pg 17.
[182] Al-Ḥurr Al-ʿĀmilī, M. (d. 1693). (pub 1993). *Wasā'il Al-Shīʿa*. Beirut: Āl Al-Bayt. Vol 20. p 179
أبو عبد الله (عليه السلام) قال: قال أمير المؤمنين (عليه السلام) في كلام له: اتقوا شرار النساء وكونوا من خيارهن على حذر وان أمرنكم بالمعروف فخالفوهن كيلا يطمعن منكم في المنكر
[183] Al-Kulaynī, M. (d. 941). (pub 1984). *Al-Kāfī. vol 5*. Tehran: Dār Al-Kutub Al-Islāmiyya. p 517
عن سليمان بن خالد قال: سمعت أبا عبد الله (عليه السلام) يقول: إياكم ومشاورة النساء فان فيهن الضعف والوهن والعجز
[184] Al-Ḥurr Al-ʿĀmilī, M. (d. 1693). (pub 1993). *Wasā'il Al-Shīʿa*. Beirut: Āl Al-Bayt. Vol 20. p 177
قال أمير المؤمنين (عليه السلام): لا تعلموا نساءكم سورة يوسف ولا تقرؤوهن إياها فان فيها الفتن وعلموهن سورة النور فان فيها المواعظ

undertone, it is conceivable that a person habitually using them might infer the "proclivity of the [Divine] Legislator", as Al-Khū'ī has done. Considering such a depiction of women, the prospect of a woman becoming a *marji*ʿ - an emulatable figure for all Twelver Shīʿa Muslims globally - would be inconceivable.

The hierarchical structure of scholarly authority in Shīʿism is male dominated. Davary has alluded to how the nature of this structure naturally leads to "male-centered interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith".[185] It should not come as a surprise to see this trend then being further consolidated by female scholars themselves. Davary explains, in the latter sections of her work:

> Male-dominated structures within the realm of religious discourse lead to the prominence of men in dissemination of religious knowledge and become a model for women's self-image. It is natural that in the transmission of religious knowledge, and by extension in the interpretation of the Qur'an, women's voices often resemble the discourses created by men.[186]

Davary goes on to describe how one of her (female) research participants continued to adopt traditional male-inclined views, despite herself being a scholar competent in deriving independent conclusions. In such an instance, the individual is using her agency, within a male-dominated epistemic space, to replicate and perpetuate the prevailing male-dominance of that framework itself; and within that framework she is empowered as being recognised for her epistemic competence. It may be that she would not attain that empowerment and recognition, were her agency to act contrary to that male-dominance or outside of the given authoritative framework. My research sought to ask a similar question of my participants. Despite undertaking higher education in a 'secular' environment, which is a space with a dissimilar gender ethos than that of traditional Shīʿī jurisprudence, do they endorse a kind of agency that allows them stances that contravene the normative authoritative framework?

Considering the prevalent views on gender and religious authority in Shīʿism, it is unsurprising that, despite the isolated instances of women becoming 'imams' in some mosques, delivering sermons and being appointed to guide women in Muslim communities, "contemporary Islam has failed to produce prominent female religious authority; none has reached the level of *marji*ʿ".[187] Within the existing framework of Shīʿī religious authority, this is unlikely to change for quite some time. Even those female scholars in the Middle East, who have risen within the traditional ranks of the Shīʿī hierarchy to attain the

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185 Davary, B. (2013). In Search of Female Authority in Islam: A Contemporary Shi'a Mujtahede. in *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies*. 20(1). p 19
186 Davary, B. (2013). In Search of Female Authority in Islam: A Contemporary Shi'a Mujtahede. in *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies*. 20(1). p 29
187 Ibid. p 20

level of competency in *ijtihād*,[188] have required accreditation from male authorities.[189] This effectively results in a lack of female input into jurisprudential legislation that impacts the day-to-day lives of female Shīʿa Muslims, including my research participants.
Inevitable consequences, of Shīʿī *ijtihād* being such a male-dominated arena, go beyond the fact that women are side-lined in the realm of authority. Rather, the entire domain of Shīʿī jurisprudence (*fiqh*) "fails to address issues of gender in an egalitarian manner".[190] This criticism is not exclusive to Shīʿism and is generally true of classical jurisprudence from all of the Islamic legal schools. An obvious symptom of this is the fact that there exists an entire genre of Islamic jurisprudence, entitled 'Women's Jurisprudence' (*Fiqh Al-Mar'a*), to deal with issues that are exclusive to women by virtue of their gender. The existence of this genre, and non-existence of any 'Men's Jurisprudence' as a counterpart, illustrates the othering of women in a patriarchal field. In addition to the exclusion of women from the echelons of *marjiʿiyyah* as an ecclesiastic space, this shows their lowering in rank even within the science upon which Shīʿism's epistemic authority is based. It is against this backdrop that the contemporary era is witnessing a relatively limited, yet not insignificant and unnoticeable, move towards more comparatively feminist-inclined voices emerging within the arena of Islamic jurisprudence generally,[191] and in turn, reflected in Shīʿī jurisprudence more particularly.

A number of works have described this ongoing shift and its sources as being based in grassroots movements. On the topic of "Shīʿī religious thought", at the beginning of her article, Tajali states that "the conventional stance has been that women are banned from positions of religious and political authority".[192] She goes on to explain how Iranian scholars' opinions contesting this stance are a result of grassroots pressure from Iranian society. While highlighting the changes that have been effected in Shīʿī female jurisprudential discourse, the article also underlines the limited progress made in terms of developing the female 'space' within Shīʿī jurisprudence. The voices of female scholars still do not have any credible standing in comparison to their male counterparts. Consequently, in Iran, female activist who are pushing for this kind of change, tend to promote the arguments of male reformist jurists rather than that of a female scholar;[193] this is especially more effective if the male voice is that of a *marjiʿ* - the position of religious authority to which female scholars cannot ascend. Tajali also concludes the article by acknowledging that the notion of a women rising to the highest echelons of Shīʿī religious authority is

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188 *Ijtihād*: The process of derivation through which one derives Islamic laws from their textual sources.
189 Kűnkler cites two such female scholars [Kűnkler, M. (2012). The Life of Two Mujtahidahs: Female Religious Authority in 20th Century Iran. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H.). *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Boston: Brill Publications. pp 127-160]
190 Davary, B. (2013). In Search of Female Authority in Islam: A Contemporary Shi'a Mujtahede. in *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies*. 20(1). p 20
191 Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2015). Muslim Legal Tradition and the Challenge of Gender Equality. in *Men in Charge?* (Mir-Hosseini, Z. and Al-Sharmani, M. ed.) London: Oneworld Publications. pg 36.
Mir-Hosseini speaks about how social developments in the 20th century led to the *"emergence of new forms of activism and a new gender discourse, no known as 'Islamic feminism', to separate patriarchy from the reading of Islam's sacred texts"*.
192 Tajali, M. (2011). Notions of Female Authority in Modern Shi'i Thought. in *Religions 2011 (2)*. p 450
193 Ibid. p 464

unforeseeable.[194] Tajali's work is written through analysing the Iranian context exclusively. Her writing, like that of Burki,[195] alludes to several factors within the Iranian political framework, which have played a role in influencing reformed approaches by some Iranian *marājiʿ*.

Tajali writes about female Iranian Shīʿa Muslims' efforts in "mobilization for reform of misogynist Shariʻa-based laws".[196] They are using the agency afforded to them by virtue of working within the male dominated framework, primarily by influencing the views of 'reformist' male clerics. It is difficult to imagine them even having the limited success they have achieved were they to try and dissent and push for change from outside of that authority structure. While the agency they are exercising is afforded by the authority structure itself, it can be said that it is being used for 'counter-hegemonic' effect.[197] The space Tajali's participants have, in which to operate, is also constrained by the limited extent of unorthodoxy one can pursue within the confines of the Iranian state.

Clearly, the setting of my research project is socially, politically and geographically distant from the Iranian context. The views and edicts of the *marājiʿ* in Iran, are heavily influential in the legislation of the state's civil law. As a result, the jurisprudential views that are deemed to be patriarchal in their nature, are going to impact upon the position of women in terms of marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance and the like. The disquiet in Iranian society, which has acted as a catalyst for the gender-related developments in Shīʿī jurisprudence, has had one noteworthy consequence. Tajali refers to it as the "democratization of religious interpretation". The term is mentioned recurrently through her work. At one point, she discusses the potential impact on Iran's legal system, were this "democratization" to extend outside the "small minority of conservative clerics".[198] However, again, her discussions are squarely concentrating on the Iranian context. Part of my study sought to explore the degree to which my participants were willing to endorse the idea of democratising, or decentralising, religious interpretation in their own performances, through exercising religious interpretive agency.

The number of works cited above, which discuss women gaining religious interpretive agency within their respective authority structures, including the writings of Davary, Burki and Tajali, are based on either Middle Eastern or South-Asian contexts. In addition to these works, Mirjam Künkler has analysed the lives of two of the most prominent contemporary scholars in Iran, as far as traditional seminary scholarship is concerned: Nuṣrat Amīn (d.1983) and Zuhrah Ṣifātī.[199] Neither of those names are recognisable to the majority of the Shīʿa laity inside Iran, let alone beyond its borders. Secondly, these two personalities, whose lives Künkler has documented, are each recognised as a '*mujtahidah*', not a

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194 Ibid. p 465

195 Burki, S. (2015). Regime Consolidation and Female Status in a Fledgling Theocracy: Khomeini's Vilayet-e-Fiqh, 1979-89. in *Middle Eastern Studies 51(2).* pp 208-223

196 Tajali, M. (2011). Notions of Female Authority in Modern Shi'i Thought. in *Religions 2011 (2)*. p 449

197 Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 245.

198 Tajali, M. (2011). Notions of Female Authority in Modern Shi'i Thought. in *Religions 2011 (2)*. p 465

199 Kűnkler, M. (2012). The Life of Two Mujtahidahs: Female Religious Authority in 20th Century Iran. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H.). *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Boston: Brill Publications. pp 127-160

marjiʿ. That is to note recognition of them as competent in interpreting religious texts for the purpose of jurisprudential law derivation, not that they could be followed or emulated by others.

Therefore, while the title of Künkler's article describes them as 'religious authorities', this needs to be understood. As Friedman points out, there is a difference between being 'an authority' – religious, in this context – and being 'in a position of authority'.[200] While the former may afford a person competence in deriving Shīʿī religious law, in accordance with a defined framework, the latter gives power and ability to "to define correct belief and practice, or orthodoxy and orthopraxy, respectively; to shape and influence the views and conduct of others accordingly; to identify, marginalize, punish or exclude deviance…"[201]; the former is merely epistemic while the latter is more widely effectual; or to use Abou El Fadl's analongy, the former may be akin to the plumber whilst the latter has the policeman-type authority.[202] This influence over masses would not be afforded to the females mentioned. It is understandable that the participants of my research were not impacted by the opinions of these female scholars; and that their perceptions of seminarial scholarly religious authority would not have included recognition of these personalities.

This thesis explores the research participants' perceptions of Shīʿī religious authority, which is bereft of any female representation. In doing so, my research sought to unearth the impact of this male homogeneity on the types of agency the participants opted to endorse, or then if their performances ratified the idea of an authoritarian structure.

Taqlīd: Shīʿism's Authority/Authoritarian Apparatus

This chapter's forgoing sections have discussed the nature and structure of Shīʿī religious authority. The augmentation of the *marājiʿ*'s authority, through theological rhetoric and pedestalisation through association with the shrine cities, has been expounded upon. Despite those factors, the theoretical rationale behind their authority rests on perceived epistemic expertise in the field of jurisprudence and law derivation. This epistemic authority is practically realised through the mechanism of *taqlīd*,[203] which has been touched on earlier in this chapter. It is a convention that has been described as "central to

[200] Friedman, R. (1990). On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. in (ed. Raz, J). *Authority*. New York: NYU Press. pp 56-91.
[201] Krämer, G. & Schmidtke, S. (2006). *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Boston: Brill Publications. p 1
[202] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 19
[203] *Taqlīd*: Put simply, it means to adopt the jurisprudential opinion of an authority, often unquestioningly. In modern standard Arabic, the verb to which this noun is connected, gives the following meanings and connotations: 'to entrust someone with the power of governance; to give someone authority or power; to imitate; to blindly follow the opinion of another'. *(Wehr, H. [1974]. A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. London: Macdonald & Evans Ltd. p. 786).*

Shīʿism"[204], and it is its centrality and criticality to '*Shīʿism*' that brings it into the conversation of my thesis. Whilst the term "*taqlīd*", is not at all exclusive to Shīʿism, the way it is conceptualised and practiced by Shīʿa Muslims does have distinct aspects. *Taqlīd* has emerged, not only as a central aspect of practical authority in Shīʿī Islam, but as a central tenet of lived Shīʿism. Szanto writes on her observations of how Shīʿī children's books, in Syria, "set the scene for the subject's cultivation of responsiveness and his ethical agency, preparing the subject for the practice of taqlīd, or the emulation of an accepted religious authority".[205] This kind of conditioning of children from a young age, with the tenets Shīʿism, is not confined to Syria, but is reflective of trends in Shīʿa communities more widely. Moreover, Szanto's comment spells out *taqlid* as, more than a method of emulation, but more explicitly a method to facilitate the interaction between religious authority and the subject.

Since the inception of its use in the area of religion and Islamic jurisprudence, the term '*taqlīd*', has morphed, evolved and remained ambiguous at any given time. Hallaq demonstrates the various understandings of this term between the different jurisprudential schools in Islam, and through different time periods.[206] Here I am emphasising that this underlines the mutability of *taqlīd* performance within Islamic traditions. Even though Hallaq's examination of *taqlīd* and its evolution does not lack in detail, it concentrates largely on the Ḥanafī school and makes no direct reference to the Shīʿī understanding or practice. The work of Heinz Halm solely focuses on Shīʿa Muslims. In it, he explains:

> They exercise taqlīd, which approximately means 'imitation'… The believer who has not studied and is thus not in a position to make such decisions independently passes to the authority of an expert.[207]

Taqlīd, with such a theoretical definition, seems only rational: the 'lay' or untrained individual referring to the epistemic authority of an expert. There is a disparity, however, between the seemingly rational and intellectual bases for *taqlīd* in Shīʿī jurisprudence, and the more inflexible face of it in the realm of practical performance in Shīʿī societies. Similar to the way it has been depicted above, Al-Subḥānī also justifies *taqlīd* as the incontestable rational practice of recourse (*rujūʿ*) of the lay individual, or one who is unfamiliar (*jāhil*), to the expert or specialist (*ʿālim*) in the field.[208] Bhojani and Clarke have grappled with the authoritative basis of *taqlīd*, theoretically analysing it beyond its Shīʿī usage.[209] They argue that since *taqlīd* denotes reference of a lay person to the expert, who has no (political or military) power of enforceability or coercion. This type of simple epistemic authority, they argue, "is neither a matter of

[204] Clarke, L. (2001). The Shīʿī Construction of Taqlīd. in *Journal of Islamic Studies 12(1)*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. p 40.
[205] Szanto, E. (2012). Illustrating an Islamic Childhood in Syria: Pious Subjects and Religious Authority in Twelver Shi'i Children's Books. in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle-East 32(2)*. Duke University Press. p 173
[206] Hallaq, W. (2004). *Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 86
[207] Halm, H. (2005). *The Shiites: A Short History*. New Jersey: Markus Wiener. p 105
[208] Al-Subḥānī, J. (1988). *Tahdhīb Al-Uṣūl.* Qom: Intishārāt Dār Al-Fiqh. Vol 3, pg. 164-165
[209] Bhojani, A. and Clarke, M. (2023). Religious Authority beyond Domination and Discipline: Epistemic Authority and its Vernacular in the Shi'i Diaspora. in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Cambridge University Press. p 276-277

obedience (still less authoritarianism), nor ‘total’ or ‘absolute’”.[210] Whilst this is correct, in this section I argue for a need to differentiate between the theoretical epistemic underpinnings of *taqlīd* in Shīʿī Islam and what it has become as an established performance in lived Shīʿism. While the former (theoretical) is epistemic and allows for the subject’s autonomy and interpretive agency, the latter (established performance) moulds *taqlīd* into a rigid idea that strips the subject of such interpretive agency. I lean back on Abou El Fadl’s to explain how *taqlīd*, as performed in Shīʿī societies, is a concept that has morphed the authority of the *marājiʿ* into one that is epistemically authoritarian – leaving no room for the explained forms of agency to be realised. How does this seemingly rational notion develop into a mandatory element in Shīʿī jurisprudence, and how does it come to represent “an ever-increasing assertion and rigidity of juridical authority”.[211]

To reiterate, the term, *taqlīd*, to describe a form of practical emulation of juristic authorities, is not exclusive to Shīʿism. Hallaq describes how the non-Shīʿī jurisprudential schools survived through their respective formative periods, through the practice of *taqlīd*.[212] When practiced by the masses, *taqlīd* guaranteed a sense of ‘loyalty’ to the jurists and was a “necessary agent for mediating authority”.[213] In this respect, the clear parallels can be seen with the Shīʿī practice and its affects in garnering loyalty, which then develops into an element of shared identity. This function of *taqlīd* is described by Hallaq as one that has a positive or constructive impact due to its indirect role in facilitating the formation and consolidation of the four orthodox (non-Shīʿī) jurisprudential schools. In its absence, “there would have been no schools but a multitude of independent mujtahids[214]”.[215] In its function of consolidating authority and as a channel for mediating authority, *taqlīd* has also facilitated the institutionalisation of *marjiʿiyyah* in the Shīʿī context, and consolidated the authoritative influence of the *marājiʿ*. Since ‘agency’ has been elaborated upon, in this thesis, to be understood beyond the reductive idea of it being antagonistic to authority, so *taqlīd* cannot be framed as a mechanism that simply restricts agency, even though it does consolidate religious authority. However, since *taqlīd* is the mechanism through which Shīʿī authority is instituted and it has become so *“central to Shīʿism”*[216], the types of interpretive agency exercised will be assessed against normative *taqlīd* as a yardstick. It is important to understand how *taqlīd* has been presented by Shīʿa jurists. Al-Sayyid Muhammad Kādhim Yazdī (d. 1919) was an Iraq-based jurist of Iranian origin. His seminal work on jurisprudence, *Al-ʿUrwat Al-Wuthqā*, is considered a core text in traditional Shīʿī seminaries to this day. In its opening chapters, he asserts:

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[210] Ibid. p 282
[211] Clarke, L. (2001). The Shīʿī Construction of Taqlīd. in *Journal of Islamic Studies 12(1)*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. p 41.
[212] Hallaq, W. (2004). *Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 21-22
[213] Ibid. p 22.
[214] *Mujtahid*: Arabic word; conventionally used in religious discourse to refer to someone who independently derives jurisprudential rulings from their sacred textual sources; jurist.
[215] Hallaq, W. (2004). *Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 22
[216] Clarke, L. (2001). The Shīʿī Construction of Taqlīd. in *Journal of Islamic Studies 12(1)*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. p 40.

“عمل العاميّ بلا تقليدٍ ولا احتياط باطِل”

“The deed(s) of a lay individual, without taqlīd or iḥtiyāṭ,[217] is void”[218]

The discussion around the blunt statement, above, is lengthy. Yazdī means that the untrained individual has no religious substantiation[219] for his or her deeds, except recourse to following someone who demonstrates knowledge in the field. The lay individual, therefore, could not perform deeds acceptable to God, without either ascertaining the validity of the deed through the practice of *taqlīd* (of one individual *marjiʿ*), or then taking such caution (*iḥtiyāṭ*) by ignoring opinions that might allow for some leniency, in order to ensure that one’s duty had been fully executed, leading to exoneration from the possibility of divine chastisement. From which rulings could a lay individual select the least lenient in order to exercise *iḥtiyāṭ*? From those of the recognised *marājiʿ*. Although Yazdī’s statement does not limit validity to his own opinions, it does limit the scope of validity to the standardised methodologies of the *marājiʿ*.

When viewed in isolation and without being unpacked through its further discussion, Yazdī’s statement could be interpreted as one advocating the type of religious authoritarianism explained earlier; one in which the reader’s interpretation is synonymised with the text and is accepted as the sole valid reading, thereby not leaving scope for any possibility of a valid alternative opinion. It is on the back such an understanding that the nature *taqlīd*, in the Shīʿī context, has been reductively described as “openly authoritarian”.[220]

However, deeper discussion on the matter would show that the very theoretical definition of *taqlīd*, intrinsically affords the individual with agency to act in a manner that might be in contradiction to the rulings of the *marājiʿ*. The performance of *taqlīd* is presented as a rational obligation for one who is jurisprudentially unaware of the right course of action. The question ensues as to whether this allows autonomous agency to one who does not identify as ‘unaware’ in a given situation, even if they have not had any formal religious training. For example, would one’s own moral cognition suffice as being authoritative and serve as a means of ‘awareness’ about the correct course of action in the eyes of God? Does that cognition allow for autonomous interpretive agency as a result of *taqlīd*’s very definition? Therefore, while the definition of *taqlīd* gives rise to qualifiers by which *taqlīd* would not be mandatory, these qualifiers are vague. Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī discusses the compulsoriness of *taqlīd* in the following way:

> It is obligatory on every individual who is charged with religious duties, who has not reached the rank of ijtihād,[221] to be one who performs either taqlīd or iḥtiyāṭ, in

[217] *iḥtiyāṭ*: Literally means to take precautions measures. Its meaning in Islamic jurisprudence would require taking the most strenuous approach to ensure certainty that God’s command for the individual has been fulfilled, thereby absolving one from the possibility of divine punishment.
[218] Yazdi, M. K. (1996). *Al-ʿUrwar al-Wuthqa*. Qom: Mu’assasat Al-Nashr Al-Islamiyy. p 13.
[219] As vindication from punishment in the divine court of accountability.
[220] Clarke, L. (2001). The Shīʿī Construction of Taqlīd. in *Journal of Islamic Studies 12(1)*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. p 61.
[221] *Ijtihād*: The ability to independently derive religious jurisprudential laws from their sources.

> all of their acts of worship, transactions and every other performance or non-performance [of a given deed]. Unless they are certain that their deed, or non-performance, will not result in contravening a compulsory religious mandate… …and they acquire self-reliant knowledge or sureness attained by intellectual sources, like [the consensus of] the community, or being informed by an expert in those matters.[222]

The quoted extract certainly makes exemptions to the compulsion of performing *taqlīd*. One could argue that the ambiguity of the exempting qualifications allows a wider window for religious agency to be exercised within the Shīʿī jurisprudential framework, notwithstanding *taqlīd*, but in concordance with it. Despite the theoretical discussions on the flexibility of *taqlīd*, I argue that viewing it through the lens of theory alone betrays a comprehensive understanding of it. Numerous works, like that of Clarke's,[223] have dissected the theories of *taqlīd* in Shīʿī jurisprudence. However, a mere theoretical treatment of it will fail to uncover the nuances between its theoretical appreciation and its performative application. This thesis fills that vacuum.

The seemingly permissive theoretical understanding of *taqlīd* and its function, manifestly contrasts with what *taqlīd* has become as an established rigid practical performance of authority in Shīʿism. Gifford alludes to this gap between the theory and practice of religious authority; this is reflected the theory of *taqlīd* and its performance as part of Shīʿism as a lived tradition.

> Religious authority, in practice, is thus a very complex reality. Understanding its various forms is rendered more difficult because so often the accepted theory does not so much reveal as obscure what is going on. We have drawn attention to three aspects or elements: scripture, or sacred books; tradition, or the living community itself as it survives through time.[224]

Sachedina, through the course of his experiences, seems to have realised the conflict between his assertions about the legitimacy of *taqlīd*, as an intellectual instrument, and its epistemic detriment by slipping into authoritarianism in the way it is normatively performed. In 1998, Sachedina argued:

> There is a misleading connotation in the lexical meaning of the term taqlīd ("girding someone's neck"), which has been alluded to in various opinions that consider taqlīd "blind adherence" and as such, impermissible in religion. The technical sense of the term, as alluded to in judicial texts, denotes a "commitment" (iltizām) to accept and act in accordance with the rulings of the Sharīʻa as deduced

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[222] Al-Sīstānī, A. H. (1993). *Minhāj Al-Ṣāliḥīn*. Qom: Maktab Al-Sayyid Al-Sīstānī. Vol 1, pg. 9
The original Arabic text is as follows:
يجب على كلِّ مكلَّف لم يبلغ رتبة الاجتهاد أن يكون في جميع عباداته ومعاملاته وسائر أفعاله وتروكه مقلّداً أو محتاطاً، إلّا أن يحصل له العلم بأنّه لا يلزم من فعله أو تركه مخالفة لحكم إلزامي ولو مثل حرمة التشريع، أو يكون الحكم من ضروريّات الدين أو المذهب –كما في بعض الواجبات والمحرّمات وكثير من المستحبّات والمباحات – ويحرز كونه منها بالعلم الوجدانيّ أو الاطمئنان الحاصل من المناشئ العقلائيّة كالشياع وإخبار الخبير المطّلع عليها

[223] Clarke, L. (2001). The Shīʿī Construction of Taqlīd. in *Journal of Islamic Studies 12(1)*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. pp 40-64.

[224] Gifford, P. (2005). Scripture, Tradition, Charisma. in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. (ed. Hinnells, J. R.) pp 379-391. New York: Routledge Publications. p 391

> by the independent reasoning (ijtihād) of a well-qualified, righteous jurist (mujtahid).[225]

Here, Sachedina seems to be justifying the practice of *taqlīd*, as he has defined it, which appears to mirror Halm's explanation, quoted earlier in this chapter. However, in a later published article, Sachedina criticises the way in which *taqlīd* is observed in today's age:

> In the age known for its critical thinking in acceptance of any opinion, religious or otherwise, taqlīd [blind emulation of a jurist] seems to negate the fundamental requirement of logical inquiry.

He goes on to further rebut the discussed notion of linking the authority of the *marji*ʿ to the Twelve Shīʿa Imams:

> In fact, the mujtahid who occupies the position of marja`iyya (authoritative reference) has become the conscience of the Shi`ite community, and for the Shi`a masses the marja` al-taqlīd, although neither infallible and nor directly appointed in that position by the Twelfth Imam, is popularly regarded as the Imam's deputy (na'ib). This popular estimation of the marja` as the deputy of the Imam has led to marja's mystification and blind acceptance, even when any person endowed with minimum reasoning in the age of democratization of knowledge and authority is able to discern the practical irrelevance of the institution.[226]

The above passage touches upon a number of issues and requires some unpacking. First is the sociological matter of whether or not the *marji*ʿ has truly become "the conscience of the Shi'ite community". The statement, at least as far as his article is concerned, is quite sweeping and without qualification or substantiation. While not being a sociologist, Sachedina is an '*insider*' with regards to the Shīʿa community in North America and his observations may have informed the assessments he has made.

In the above citation, Sachedina criticises one version of *taqlīd*, which he describes as '*blind following*', as one that '*seems to negate the fundamental requirement of logical inquiry*'. Such an attitude could be seen as classic instance of the Kantian notion of self-imposed immaturity.[227] When looked at through the discussed lens of epistemic authority, the instance is as Abou El Fadl states: "The person who surrenders judgement forgoes the opportunity to personally examine and evaluate the merits of the thing he or she is asked to do or believe".[228] The subject relinquishes all intellectual or interpretive agency, and so engages with the given authority as if were authoritarian. So, while the *marājiʿ* may not have the power of enforcing their jurisprudential rulings, nor that of direct coercion, the nature of practiced *taqlīd* is such that the subject's individual intellectual and religious interpretive agency is relinquished. Agrama has

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[225] Sachedina, A. A. (1998). The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence. Oxford University Press. pp 212-213

[226] Chenai. M. C. (2008). *Recueil de textes du professeur Abdulaziz Sachedina*. Paris: Publibook. p 245

[227] Kant, I. (2009). *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*. London: Penguin Publications

[228] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 19

tried to explain, in more than one way, how and why such religious authority is 'binding' despite its lack of political enforceability. His explanation of the issuance of religious edicts having ethical value, puts religious authority and agency "in an asymmetrical, but reciprocal, relationship".[229] Its translation in the Shīʿī milieu would resemble what Takim has said: "Stated differently, taqlīd generates confidence in the believers that their religious practices, which are based on the juridical pronouncements of the *marājiʿ*, approximate the will of God".[230] However, this 'confidence' is still not sufficient to explain a complete resigning of intellectual agency.

This section has explained the theoretical rationale behind *taqlīd* in Shīʿism, which as an epistemic instrument, by its definition grants interpretive agency to untrained 'lay' individuals. Practically however, the emphasis on *taqlīd* performance is accentuated through the pedestalised perception of the *marājiʿ*; and it is also used as a means to ensure uniformity by inhibiting diverging opinions, to garner a sense of loyalty and consolidate orthopraxy. These functions would necessitate a curtailment in autonomous interpretive agency. The earlier sections of this chapter have also expounded on theories and modes of interaction within the authority/agency relationship.
As the performance of *taqlīd* and the institution of *marjiʿiyyah* are both hugely significant aspects of lived Shīʿism, this research set out to explore the extent to which agency is endorsed by the young student participants, whose social and educational contexts are so removed from that of the *marājiʿ*.

Hijab and ABSocs: Agentic Performance and Space

The previous sections have clarified how the apex of hierarchical Shīʿī religious authority is a space that lacks any female representation, and how the jurisprudence – that forms the basis for its epistemological underpinnings – is also an area in which has a heavy male-dominance. That being considered, it is interesting to see what forms agency would take, when that jurisprudence applied to spaces or practices that were either female dominated or exclusively female. The thesis has already cited Shanneik's work, which talks about her female participants using aesthetic practices to assert forms of agency and empowerment.[231] Observance of the female *hijab* is one of those practices that is outward and sartorial, it applies to Muslim women exclusively and involves jurisprudential rulings.[232] Its prominence in religious discourse leads Khiabany to state:

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[229] Agrama, H. (2010). Ethics, Tradition, Authority: Toward an Anthropology of a Fatwa. in *American Enthologist 37(1)*. Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell. pp 2-18
[230] Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 145
[231] Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 245.
[232] Within western societies, the *hijab* has been defined as a head-covering worn by Muslim women. Jurisprudentially however, *hijab* has a more definitive understanding and the *marājiʿ* only very slightly differ in their rulings about how women ought to dress in

> It has become impossible to talk about Islam without reference to women, and impossible to talk of Muslim women without reference to the veil.[233]

One of the numerous reasons for the skewed concentration on Muslim women in Islamic study discourses, especially in non-Muslim societies, is the fact that their sartorial choices make their Muslim identity more discernible than their male counterparts. Therefore, discussions on women and Islam almost always entail a discussion on the *hijab*, or the veil. For these reasons, the significance of *hijab* observance became pertinent to my research as a practice through which agency was exercised.

One of the most recent studies looking at British Muslims in Higher Education was carried out contemporaneously with my own research, and included a particular examination of its female participants' experiences.[234] For that reason it has been cited on numerous occasions in this thesis. A second useful ethnographical work, this time exclusively concentrating on female experiences on campuses in the western world, is Mir's recently published research set in two college campuses in America.[235]
Both of these works examine female Muslims' experiences with the *hijab*. Mir examines the way her participants have constructed their own religious identities on campus. In contrast, the work by Scott-Baumann (et al) looks at how external perceptions of Islam and Muslims are constructed. The discussion on *hijab* observance, or the Muslim veil, cannot take place without consideration for the multifacetedness of Muslim women. Roces points out how choices on attire and dress are surrounded by political, societal and religious discourses.[236] While my intention is not to reduce the discussions on *hijab* by circumventing all of these surrounding discussions, my research has used the *hijab* as an analytical instance of how Shīʿī religious authority has been negotiated, and how it (*hijab* observance) has become an instance through which individual agency is seen with reference to that authority.

Just as I had not intended to dedicate an imbalanced share of attention to my female participants at the onset of the research, I also did not plan to focus questions on my participants' sartorial choices, including the non/observance of *hijab*. Over the last two decades, ongoing debates about the *hijab* have almost

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public, and which parts of their bodies they are permitted to expose. Looking at the ruling of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, today's most prominent Shīʿī jurist, he does not allow women to expose any part of themselves except for their face and hands from the wrists; even the top part of the feet must be covered. Furthermore, if a woman suspects that exposing her face and hands may cause men to look at her in a forbidden (lustful) manner, then she is obligated to cover those parts as well. [Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West.* London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 223]. The participants' observance of *hijab* is looked at in this context when discussed in the latter chapters of the thesis.

[233] Khiabany, G. and Williamson, M. (2010). UK: The Veil and the Politics of Racism. in *Race & Class 52(2)*, pp 85-96. London: Sage Publications. p 93.

[234] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press.

[235] Mir. S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

[236] Roces, M. (2005). Gender, Nation and the Politics of Dress in Twentieth-Century Philippines. in *Gender & History 17(2)*. pp 354-377.

essentialised Muslim women,[237] eclipsing wider discussions about female agency. The Scott-Baumann et al. work points out that the *hijab* has become a point of contention on campus; with those who oppose it claiming it to be a sign of Muslim women's oppression within Muslim communities.[238] Due to the manifest nature of the *hijab* and its observance, it is one of the prominent instances, but not the sole instance, through which some scholars overemphasise Muslim women's social repression. It is often the case that ethnographic works manage to highlight Muslim women's disempowerment in the spaces they explore.

The *hijab* having become synonymised with Muslim women's identity is undeniable. Mernissi's work, for instance, is actually a wider argument for women's rights and her definition of equality between the genders, in Islam.[239] However, she focuses on the discussions about the veil in a way that characterises it as epitomic of Muslim women's repression. This essentialisation becomes problematic when one realises its effectiveness in othering Muslim women. The protagonist in Kahf's satirical poems demonstrates the affect her *hijab* has on the way non-Muslims perceive her, from alienating her to not seeing her beyond the head-dress at all.[240] Despite these arguments problematising the inseparability of Muslim women and the *hijab*, as suggested by Khiabany and other works that I have already cited, my data also suggested that the *hijab* was an organically-emerging topic of significant salience; it became a subtheme through which perceptions of religious authority, and practice of agency, could be explored.

Mir describes how the observance of *hijab* led to her participants having characteristics inscribed upon them, such as hyperfemininity and exoticism.[241] She also mentions how it engenders an assessment of the wearer's religiosity. This is something I revisit later in the thesis and in the section that discusses my research findings. In her ethnography of Dearborn's Shīʿa Muslim (largely Lebanese) community, Walbridge comments on how the differences in styles of *hijab*-observance is revealing of the person's ethnic background and even political affiliations.[242] How the *hijab* is seen externally, and its impact on non-Muslims' perceptions of Muslim women, is peripherally relevant to my work. My research was more interested in asking questions about how my participants position their own practices, vis-á-vis the *hijab* and the rulings of the *marājiʿ* in its regard.

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[237] To the extent that recent works have cited cases of people becoming surprised when they subsequently realise that a non-*hijab* observing female actually identifies as a Muslim [Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 103]

[238] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p. 98

[239] Mernissi. F. (1987). *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam.* New York: Perseus Books.

[240] Kahf, M. (2003). *E-mails from Scheherazad*. Gainsville: University Press of Florida.

[241] Mir. S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p 87

[242] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 54

For Muslim women, their observance of *hijab*, or lack thereof, is unquestionably a projection of their identity in some form. As cited above, Mir listed 'religiosity' as one of the attributes imposed upon her participants because of it. She describes her participants' frustration at being pigeonholed as a result of wearing the *hijab* and how they wore it. "My participants", she writes, "wrestled with the attempts to categorize and define them".[243] She is correct in that classifying Muslim women reductively betrays, as Khan puts it, "the hybrid and subtle nature of their lives".[244]

However, it seems that Mir is herself guilty of this in the later analysis of her data. Elaborating on general Muslim stances on the *hijab*, she depicts a continuum of modesty, with *"conservative or orthodox"* Muslims on one end, and other Muslims on the *"liberal"* end of it. On this note, she goes on to say:

> From a youth perspective, rigid mandates were less palatable but seemed to stand on surer ground and have a greater following among religious people.[245]

It is the final labelling of *"religious people"*, that I seek to contest. Her statement implies that those less inclined towards a rigidly mandated definition of *hijab*, were less eligible for the *"religious"* label. That would depend on how "*religious*" is defined. In a rather sweeping assertion, Walbridge correlates a strict observance of *hijab* to the extent to which its wearer adheres to the authority structure of the *marjiʿiyyah*: "The kind of covering a woman wears says as much about her as not wearing a scarf at all". Walbridge continues, "Someone who is conscientiously trying to follow a marjiʿ will dress so that only her face and hands, below the wrists, are showing".[246] The findings of my research seek to challenge the generalisation of her remark, and provide a more nuanced understanding of the correlation between *hijab*-observance and affiliation to the authority of the *marjiʿ*. Walbridge's statement suggests that those women who do not observe the *hijab*, in the way she has definitively described, have a greater indifference with regards to following a *marjiʿ*. As I have illustrated in the chapter discussing my findings, the relationship between the strict observance of the jurisprudentially mandated *hijab* and accepting the *marjiʿ* as an authority, is not necessarily correlated. Walbridge has framed those women in her research, who did not observe the *hijab*, as having breached the *marjiʿiyyah* authority structure. My research has shown female participants not necessarily observing the *hijab* as jurisprudentially mandated, and yet exercising that agency through ways that they claim do not infringe or undermine that authority.

As mentioned, this thesis represents an exploration of how the research participants have actualised their own religious agency, given the background of structured Shīʿī authority. Considering the invariable maleness of that structure and the *hijab* observance's exclusivity to women, the practice posed a useful outwardly presented instance of how agency was being played out. As Shanneik had observed how some

243 Mir. S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p 88

244 Khan, S. (2002). *Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora.* Toronto: Women's Press. p xxi

245 Mir. S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p 89

246 Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. P 178

Shīʿa women had used the outward performance of certain Shīʿī rituals to exercise agency in their male-dominant environments,[247] so too in this case, observing my female participants' *hijab* observance presents a similar opportunity. My research shows how Shīʿa women have used the matter of *hijab* observance as an 'agentic mechanism'. Their varied performances stem from a range of forms in which their religious agency is endorsed; some of those forms are 'counter-hegemonic' while others are instances of realising agency through conformity to the existing notions of Shīʿī authority.

Hijab as a headscarf was not the only female-related affair through which different forms of agency were realised. *Hijab* is a word of Arabic origin, the literal translation of which is '*screen'* or '*barrier'*. As such, its performative interpretation can go beyond a sartorial function. As a screen of modesty, it involves limiting interaction with the opposite gender.[248] Along with the physically worn *hijab*, my research has also looked at the issue of 'handshaking' between some of the participants and their colleagues of the opposite gender. This act would ordinarily be considered religiously prohibited, save for in extreme or extenuating circumstances. Walbridge mentioned how some of her participants shook hands with members of the opposite gender despite being aware of the prohibition.[249] I have expanded on this later in the thesis, citing numerous research works that have raised handshaking as a challenging issue, particularly amongst Muslim women. The repeated appearance of these two issues in my data – the worn *hijab* and handshaking – led me to framing them as exemplifications of the interaction between my participants' agency and normative structured Shīʿī religious authority.

The matters highlighted in this section – *hijab* observance and handshaking – are both outward presentations through which different forms of agency are being exercised and shown. The later chapters of the thesis show how they can be seen as "agentic practices" through which my participants were "able to redefine their agentic subjectivities and positions"[250] vis-à-vis the authority of the *marjiʿiyyah*. However, these practices had the ability to be expressed in the religious spaces I was investigating – the ABSoc student societies. Whilst the ABSoc community is not specifically affiliated to a particular mosque or Islamic centre, the ABSoc community is a religious space. My research highlights some of the daily choices that the female participants make, in lieu of orthodox religious teachings. The degree to which they are able to make different choices is partly informed by how enabled they feel within the ABSoc space.

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[247] Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 207.
[248] Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. (2011). Marginalisation or an Opportunity for Dialogue?: Exploring the Hijab as a Discursive Symbol of the Identity of Young Muslim Women. in (ed. Gabriel, T. and Hannan, R.) *Islam and the Veil: Theoretical and Regional Contexts*. London: Continuum.
[249] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 152
[250] Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 241.

When looking at how Muslim religious spaces have been depicted in the literature, in terms of their facilitate standing on female involvement, female representation within the ABSoc communities is contrastively significant. Half of the university campuses I visited had female presidents at the helm of the ABSoc. In fact, for the first time in late 2019, a female was elected as president of the Muslim Student Council (MSC), which is the umbrella body for ABSocs in the UK. This starkly differs from the lack female representation within the conceptual space of Islamic jurisprudence generally, and the institutionalised apex of Shīʿī authority - the *marjiʿiyyah* - more specifically. This contrast between female representation – and indeed empowerment – in the ABSoc space and the complete absence of it in the ecclesiastical space of the *marjiʿiyyah*, positions the ABSocs as 'agentic spaces' for the participants: religious spaces that are allowing them the autonomy of embracing various forms of religious agency while remaining within the recognised frameworks of Shīʿism as it is being lived and represented on campus.

Conclusion

This opening chapter began by a section unpacking theoretical ideas of authority, particularly when being applied to the context of religion. Religious authority alone is not directly enforceable, without being combined with the likes of political authority; it is, therefore, not the type of authority that can be associated with domination or direct coercion. That being said, it does have the functions and utilities of defining orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and by that token, the ability to sideline what might be seen as heresy or divergent standpoints.[251] The notion of authority is discussed alongside the question of 'agency' for the subjects of that authority, and what possible forms that agency can take. Authority and agency have been described, not as mutually exclusive binary opposites, but with a more nuanced understanding of how the latter can be constructed and exercised within the framework of the former. This thesis recognises, and builds on, Mahmood's problematisation of essentialising agency as a resisting force to authority.[252] Agency, then, is discussed in a number of forms, all of which are ironically realised through – and due to – the authority construct itself. There is the idea of Foucault's 'paradox of subjectivation',[253] whereby agency is required by the subject to accept the authority and become 'subjectivised'. However, once that subject has accepted the subjectivation, agency is then relinquished completely within the authority structure. That can be seen in Shīʿī *taqlīd* orthopraxy when the authority of the *marjiʿ* is elevated with pedestalised deference. Another mode of agency is as described in Mahmood's work,[254] whereby subjects manoeuvre within the remits afforded by the authority framework, to empower themselves while not disrupting the authority framework itself. In fact the empowerment acquired would not be achievable

[251] Krämer, G. & Schmidtke, S. (2006). *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Boston: Brill Publications. p 1
[252] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 18
[253] Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[254] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

without the given authority's culture, code and rules of operation. Instances of this have been observed through this research and alluded to in the thesis' later chapters. Then the chapter's first section discussed a mode of agency that built further on Mahmood's model: Shanneik speaks of how female subjects use the agency that given authority frameworks provide, to then use some aspects of empowerment to counter elementary characteristics of that authority structure, like that of male dominance.[255] In her research, among the ways her female participants managed this was through overt religious practices and rites.

When it comes to religious, and particularly Islamic and Shīʿī contexts, authority is described as having epistemic bases. Within that setting, this chapter has discussed the notion of authoritarianism, as one that does not recognise the potential validity or legitimacy of alternate or divergent standpoints.[256] My research does not focus on the holders of authority (in Shīʿism), but the prospective 'lay' subjects of that authority. If the subjects of that authority interact with it in a way that demonstrates a relinquishing of their rational faculty, unwilling to engage critically at all with the teachings, it evinces an attitude that understands the authority as authoritarian. My research has analysed how the participants appreciate and perceive the authority of the *marājiʿ*; the extent of their willingness to manoeuvre, and the methods they employ to do that within the Shīʿī authority framework, demonstrates the extent to which they view the *marājiʿ*'s authority as epistemically authoritarian.

To get an image of the *marājiʿ*'s authority and how it has become an institutionalised structure in lived Shīʿism, the subsequent section looked at the *marjiʿiyyah*, and at the theological and cultural factors that augment the status of the jurists. This augmentation informs how their authority is perceived. I have depicted the *marjiʿiyyah* as an exclusively male space, bereft of any female representation. Further to the ecclesiastic space of *marjiʿiyyah* and Shīʿī authority being male-dominated, I have shown how the abstract – or epistemic - space of Shīʿī jurisprudence is also gender-skewed, such that the prevention of women from becoming *marājiʿ*, is in itself jurisprudentially injuncted.

The mechanism that enables the *marājiʿ*'s authority to be realised is *taqlīd*. I have elucidated on this mechanism, differentiating between its theoretical rational foundations, and its development into an inflexible practice central to Shīʿism. Whilst the theory of *taqlīd* espouses the reasonable exercise of a *lay* person referring to one that has epistemic authority, its practice infers the opinions of the *marājiʿ* as the sole religiously acceptable ones. This understanding suggests that Shīʿī authority is appreciated as a religiously authoritarian construction.
Following the rulings and teachings of the *marājiʿ*, and so the normative practice of *taqlīd*, is given greater weight through two discussed factors: the theoretical rhetoric surrounding the person of the *marjiʿ*,

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[255] Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 245.
[256] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *And God Knows the Soldiers.* University Press of America. pg 101

and the sentimentalised position of the *shrine cities* in Iran and Iraq. The first pedestalises the *marjiʿ*, linking his authority to that of God, and the second augments the credibility of the *marjiʿ* and geographically centralises Shīʿī authority. Taking these into consideration, my research has explored the attitudes of my Shīʿa-identifying participants, since criticising or diverging away from the rulings of the *marājiʿ* would be tantamount to violation of tenets deemed crucial to Shīʿism. The established practice of *taqlīd*, therefore, has become one in which the subject has so much deference for the *marjiʿ*, that they suspend their own epistemic capabilities.[257] This makes that authority, through *taqlīd*, a case of epistemic authoritarianism in Shīʿism as a lived tradition.

My research has shown how participants have managed to use reconstructions of this central aspect of Shīʿism - *taqlīd* - to exercise agency in its different modes. One of the channels by which this has happened for female participants, is by using the agentic spaces and performances that they have access to. Unlike the Shīʿī male-dominated spaces mentioned above, the ABSocs are spaces in which female Shīʿa Muslims are on par with their male counterparts in terms of representation and involvement. These student organisations are spaces through which these female participants are able to preserve, present and perform their Shīʿism regardless of their stances on religious authority.

The matter of *hijab* observance is one that impacts Muslim women uniquely. It is an issue that has been mandated through religious jurisprudence and has been claimed as a symbol of religiosity and even loyalty to established forms of Shīʿism and the *marjiʿiyyah*. This thesis has therefore used it as a lens through which to examine the various ways that the female participants have asserted their religious agency against the backdrop of religious authority in Shīʿī Islam.

[257] Friedman, R. (1990). On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. in (ed. Raz, J.) *Authority*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pg 67

Chapter 2
My Approach

Laying the Groundwork, Opening the Questions

This research examines the perceptions and performances of Shīʿa Muslims on university campuses, individually and organisationally, with respect to the established model of Shīʿī religious authority. In doing so, the research aims to discover the extent and modes of agency are exercised by the participants, in light of the backdrop of established religious authority structures. Considering the discussed literature, my research questions are based on the following established premises.

The established models of Shīʿī religious authority, and the institution of *marjiʿiyyah*, are central features of Shīʿī Islam. Adherence to them are part and parcel of lived Shīʿism, and the recognition of the *marājiʿ* as religious authorities, has become an element of Shīʿī doctrine. It is supported by theological rhetoric that link the authority of the *marājiʿ* to that of the infallible Shīʿa Imams, and – in turn – to the authority of God. As a result of the above, conformity with orthopraxy in seen as a measure of religiosity and devotedness to traditional Shīʿism. The ABSoc members, on account of their activities on campus under a Shīʿī banner, identify as Shīʿa Muslims who are invested with that particular religious identity. As the participants are invested with their Shīʿī identities, any expressions of religious interpretive agency would be in interaction with the outlined authority structures. The *marjiʿiyyah*, as the apex of Shīʿism's institutionalised structure of authority, lacks any female representation. Shīʿī jurisprudence is a largely male-dominated discipline with a general absence of female voices throughout field. This male dominance is contrasted by the university campus ethos in general, and also by the prominence of female Shīʿa Muslims within the ABSoc and MSC organisations.

On campus, the ABSocs are in a religious minority context, with the campus environment itself posing challenges to religious lifestyles as well as established religious ideologies and identities. The ABSoc members share elements of a communal identity despite being ethnically heterogeneous. This religious community also shares common 'homelands' in the Middle Eastern shrine cities to which they gravitate, which are distinguished in Shīʿism by virtue of the accommodating the burial locations of some of the Shīʿa Imams.
Representations and performances of Shīʿism on campus have adjusted over time, as has been seen with the emergence of the ABSocs. The adapted forms of student activism, under the Shīʿī banner, are examples of this. These forms of student activism are outward facing and present Shīʿism to the wider campus community; conversely, religious authority performances are less outwardly demonstrative.

Nevertheless, they are examples of how social environments have factored in the way Shīʿī Islam is performed by higher education students.

Finally, the rational theory behind *taqlīd* in Shīʿism may allow space for the untrained lay individual to have some religious interpretive agency, or act in contrary to the rulings of the *marājiʿ*. However, *taqlīd* as an established practice, does not allow for deviation from their rulings. As such, normative performance of authority in Shīʿism, can be considered as a type of religious authoritarianism. So, while the established model of performed *taqlīd* in Shīʿism is inflexible, its theoretical foundations allow for manoeuvrability and divergence from the rulings of the *marājiʿ*.

Underpinned by the above points, my research sought to answer key questions that probed assumptions about established notions of Shīʿī authority, and about the conceptions and performances of those who actively identify as Shīʿa Muslims.

The research first asks the question about the salient perceptions of religious authority that exist among UK's Shīʿa students. Do they exhibit awareness of the theological backing for the authority of the *marājiʿ*, which may hinder divergent expressions of interpretive agency? What is the impact of Shīʿī authority's transnational nature, on their conceptions of religious authority? To what extent do they express favourable attitudes of deference towards the *marājiʿ* and conformity with normative Shīʿī ideas on religious authority? Is any such deference of the sort that would lead to a suspension of intellectual agency and, therefore, epistemic authoritarianism? And if there are diverging views, contrary to the established Shīʿī mainstream standpoint, to what extent are they expressed by the participants considering the ABSocs' position as spaces representing the Shīʿī minority?

This opens up questions regarding the ABSoc space itself. Does its function, as catering for a religious minority community that presents Shīʿism to the wider campus, impact organisational positions on principles central to Shīʿism – particularly that of religious authority? And what ramifications does this have on its members' ability to exercise modes of religious agency?

Furthermore, bearing in mind the potential challenges to religious identity, posed by the multicultural and multi-faith campus environment,[258] what role do the ABSocs play in protecting (or consolidating) their members' '*Shīʿism*'? And does this involve confirming principles of religious authority that are markers of Shīʿism?

Complimenting the exploration of my participants' conceptions of religious authority, was the enquiry into their performances. To what extent do the Shīʿa students' performances conform with orthopraxical

[258] Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. p 89-90

models of religious authority and the normative practice of *taqlīd*? Their conceptions of religious authority inevitably inform their performances. Do they view the Shīʿī authority structure as authoritarian, and the edicts of the *marājiʿ* as binding? The answers to these questions would be reflected in the type of personal interpretive agency they are willing to exercise. As ABSoc members, if they depart from established models of *taqlīd* in practice, what does this mean for their identities as Shīʿa Muslims?

As the fieldwork proceeded, matters related specifically to female participants became increasingly prominent. As my research was analysing conceptions and performances of agency vis-à-vis Shīʿī religious authority, it progressed to use these matters as an analytic lens for these questions. The patriarchy of Shīʿī authority clearly contrasts with female engagement in the ABSocs. How does this disparity affect attitudes towards the *marājiʿ* and the institution of *marjiʿiyyah*? Secondly, how do these challenges, faced by the Shīʿa students, impact their performances with respect to the traditional orthopraxy of *taqlīd* or exercising of agency?

Using the centrality of religious authority and orthopraxical *taqlīd* performance in Shīʿī Islam, as cardinal aspects of the lived Shīʿī tradition, my research poses the following overarching question: What do divergent conceptions and agentic performances of religious authority by participants, while concomitantly maintaining a claim of Shīʿī identity, mean for Shīʿism itself as a lived tradition?

Procuring data to address these questions required the application of appropriate research methods. The remainder of this chapter expounds on the methodology and approaches that shaped this investigation.

Setting My Scene

This research is situated in the growing milieu of works looking at religion and its practice on campus. Within the breadth of that setting, my research has looked at a very specific segment of a particular religious community of students, representing a subdivision of the Muslim minority, in terms of the UK's wider higher education student population. As well as my research focus being demarcated by both its social setting and the distinct religious identity of its participants, it also concentrates on one aspect of that student community on campus: its members' perceptions and performances of religious authority in light of normative positions in Shīʿī Islam. Despite this very specific focus, the wider and more peripheral aspects of the ethnography cause it to significantly share parallels with other research works exploring religion on campus.

The importance of carrying out research on religious trends in the university campus setting, has been realised in numerous works. In his research, centring on the idea of *"*Salafist radicalisation*"* on campus, Edmunds refers to his participant pool as "elite", by virtue of their position as students in higher education, and thereby having "access to symbolic and economic capital conferred through entry into higher educational institutions and professions".[259] Drawing on Neilsen's work,[260] Edmunds argues that this group has a higher chance of entering and occupying policy-influencing and community leadership positions. His presumption suggests that the views, of the young students in his research, would be carried beyond their years of study and then have significant impact on their communities. Edmunds is not alone in making such an implication. As part of his justification for his sample selection, Appleton also states that his respondents "represented the educated elite of Britain's Muslims, from which some of the community's future leaders are likely to be drawn".[261] He continues to describe the demographic, to which his participants belong, as "the future of Islam in Britain".[262] I do not suggest that the outcomes of my research are a harbinger for the future of UK Shīʿism. However, I am aware of the significance of my pool of participants, as people who may become influential in their wider Shīʿī communities.

The importance of religion, be it individually practiced or communally, and its interaction with the 'secular' campus environment, is also a feature my project shares with other works. The idea that the western university campus is a secularising force has been interrogated by Guest, whose study asks questions about what impact this has on Christian students in particular.[263] There are two primary aspects to Guest's work, to which my project bears similarity: firstly, he uses social science research methods to explore some of the challenges faced by Christian students in the campus environment,[264] and secondly, he ethnographically explores organised Christianity on campuses by looking at Christian student organisations.[265] My research also looks at the challenges faced by Shīʿa Muslim students on campus. My findings show how their challenges are sometimes similar to those in Guest's work, and often dissimilar by virtue of their separate religious identities; and as Guest looks at organisations like the Christian Union, the Student Christian Movement and numerous other societies representing the various Christian denominations, my research focuses on ABSocs, catering specifically for Shīʿa students.

This second point contrasts with Appleton's work, cited above. He acknowledges that, although the Muslim student organisations were used as gateways to some of his respondents, his research does not

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[259] Edmunds, J. (2010). Elite Young Muslims in Britain: From Transnational to Global Politics. in London: *Springer Science Business Media Publishing* (4) pp 215-238. p 218.
[260] Nielsen, J. S. (2000). Muslims in Britain: Ethnic minorities, Community or Ummah? in (eds. Coward, H. et al). *The South Asian religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada and the United States (pp. 109–126)*. Albany: State University of New York Press. p 116.
[261] Appleton, M (2005). The Political Attitudes of Muslims Studying at British Universities in the Post-9/11 World*.* in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25(2). p 173.
[262] Ibid p 174.
[263] Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. p 83
[264] Ibid. p 113
[265] Ibid. p 137

analyse the organisations themselves as re/presentations of those religious groups.[266] Looking at students alone would not have allowed me to gain a deep enough insight into the ABSoc dynamic. To properly understand the religious lives of individual students on campus, of any faith community, analysis of their respective religious student organisations is inescapable since they are inevitably impacted by their involvement within it – and this impact can often be substantial. Bryant looks at how involvement in faith organisations aids the students' adjustment, as it provides them with a social space, and may even influence the likelihood of their academic success.[267] My research also explores the idea of the ABSocs providing its members such a space within which they build new social bonds and consolidate pre-existing ones. Unlike Bryant's research, however, since my research looked at the participants' practice and attachment to certain orthodox religious tenets, my analysis did not include the impact of the ABSocs on students' academic success. Additionally, religious student societies can provide a space of 'safety', shielding their members from various potential challenges faced due to their religious identities. Boyd explains, in some detail, how Jewish students felt the need to come together, especially in environments where antisemitism is seen to be rifer.[268]

This 'space', which the ABSoc affords its members, goes beyond enabling them to form social bonds on the grounds of a common religious identity, or sheltering them from challenges faced on campus. My research has sought to explore the extent to which the ABSoc provides a space for its members to, not merely practice the particularities of their faith, but to further project a face of Shīʿī Islam to the wider campus environment: an environment that numerous sociologists have labelled as 'secular',[269] and have correlated the university setting with all the '*isms*' that modern secularism is associated with. However, many of these writings look at secularism as a contrast to Christianity. This does not necessarily place the campus environment as a counter to religion or religious activity per se. If anything, it can be argued that the evolution of western universities towards becoming religiously plural environments, and "the presence of different faiths on campus, has been a powerful force for change in de-secularizing the university environment".[270] Over the years, the university environment has softened its secular character. Respect for religious diversity is part of the official policy in most universities in the UK.[271] Within such a multi-faith setting, the ABSoc finds itself representing a minority (Shīʿa) within a minority (Muslims).

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[266] Appleton, M (2005). The Political Attitudes of Muslims Studying at British Universities in the Post-9/11 World. in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25(2). p 174.
[267] Bryant, A. (2007). The Effects of Involvement in Campus Religious Communities on College Student Adjustment and Development. in Carolina: *Journal of College and Character 8(3)* pp 215-238
[268] Boyd, J. (2016). Searching for Community: A Portrait of Undergraduate Jewish Students in Five UK Cities. in *JPR Report.* London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.
[269] Berger, P. L. (1999). The Desecularisation of the World: A Global Overview. in (ed. Berger, P. L). *The Desecularisation of the World: Essays on the Resurgence of Religion in World Politics.* Washington: Ethnics and Public Policy Center. pp 1-18.
See also:
Hillard, D. (2010). Australia: Towards Secularisation and One Step Back. in (eds. Brown, C and Snape, M). *Secularisation in the Western World.* Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing. pp 75-91
[270] Gilliat-Ray, S. (2000). *Religion in Higher Education: The Politics of Multi-Faith Campus.* Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.
[271] Voas, D. and Bruce, S. (2019). Religion: Identity, Behaviour and Belief over two Decades. in (eds. Curtice, J. et al.). *British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report.* London: The National Centre for Social Research.

This project does look at how affiliation to the ABSoc organisations influence participants' religious views and practices, and screen them from campus secularism. But furthermore, it reveals how the students use the ABSoc space to display their Shīʿism on campus and thus play a part in that wider desecularising trend.

As my research progressed, its parallels with Mir's study became increasingly apparent.[272] Mir is neither focusing on Shīʿa Muslim students in higher education, nor is her fieldwork based within the UK. Her study, set in two higher education campuses in Washington D.C, looks at the experiences of Muslims without specific denominational attention. What distinguishes her ethnography from other cited works that explore Muslims on campus, is its focus on Muslim women and the challenges facing them as *female* Muslim students. Pioneering ethnographic works, like those of Pamela Prickett[273] and the late Saba Mahmood[274], confirm the need for researching female gender experiences in religious spaces, like mosques and Islamic centres. The ABSoc organisations too can be conceptualised as religious spaces. As my data was accumulating, it was becoming progressively clear to me that the gender dynamic is one that required special attention in my research. Mir, Prickett and Mahmood discuss prominent issues that are common in all of their works. One of the most noticeable themes shared amongst them is their female participants' experiences in observing *hijab*, or not, and the politics with which it is associated. This, among other gender related themes, bore resonance with the experiences of some of my participants. The fact that the highest echelons of Shīʿī authority are invariably occupied by *male* actors, coupled with the fact that female participants consistently related challenges that they were facing specifically because of their gender, compelled me to explore the female-gender question as a distinct strand of my research.

As highlighted in the introductory chapters, being a minority within a minority means that 'Shīʿism', as the collective lived experience of Shīʿa Muslims, is under-researched in the UK. This is then reflected in the proportion of research works devoted to Shīʿī Islam on campus. It is only now that, as the significance of this community is being realised, research works in this sphere are beginning to emerge. Degli Esposti's very recent publication comes closest to my research in terms of her participants' position in education.[275] Her study uses qualitative research methods to explore Shīʿī activism on UK university campuses. Her work differs from mine in that her London-centric data stems from one year of fieldwork. My research does not focus on London primarily. Degli Esposti's research views the Shīʿa Muslims in terms of their relationships and interactions with their non-Shīʿa Muslim colleagues, observing some of the challenges they face due to their denominational specificity. My research does not predominantly

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[272] Mir, S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: UNC Press.
[273] Prickett, P. J. (2015). Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: The Particularities of Patriarchy in an African American Mosque. in *Gender and Society* (29)1. California: Sage Journals. pp 51-72.
[274] Mahmood. S. (2011). Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
[275] Degli Esposti, E. and Scott-Baumann, A. (2019). Fighting for Justice. Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. In *Religions* MDPI Journals (10)189

focus on the participants' sect-related campus challenges. My research also contrasts with Degli Esposti's due to our respective positionalities as researchers. Having been raised a Shīʿa Muslim from birth, within a Shīʿa family and rooted in London's Shīʿī community, I am an *insider* researcher (in terms of religious identity). I grapple with this further, and in significantly more detail, later in this chapter. This position is quite different to the one in which Degli Esposti would find herself, as someone not born and raised with this religious identity. Furthermore, while the contextual parallels her study has with mine make it an invaluable work upon which my research can build, the primary distinctive feature of my work is its attention on the Shīʿa students' perceptions and performances of religious authority.

Scope and Sampling

This research project was based on data procured by qualitative research methods, during the four-year timeframe from January 2016 to January 2020, among ABSocs (Ahlul-Bayt Student Societies) on UK university campuses. The fact that almost half of the UK's ABSocs are located in or round London is reflective of the denser Shīʿa population and the relatively greater number of universities in the city. Being a capital city with a proportionally large number of Shīʿa Muslims and more higher education institutions, non-British Shīʿa students are also likely to be more attracted to the capital.

The density of Shīʿa university students in London means the city's collective ABSoc membership is larger and more active in terms of the frequency of organised events, lectures and seminars. These events also draw larger crowds than those organised at campuses outside London. This reality informed the project's distribution of fieldwork, with a significant proportion of the focus groups being carried out in the capital. The concentration of Shīʿa Muslims in London also facilitated the fieldwork logistically, increasing the number of potential participants and interviewees. In this respect, London's relative density is extended to many religious minority groups, making it an attractive city for religious sociological fieldwork. Shah found that, having planned to conduct a certain number of interviews for her research into a religious (Jain) community, the concentration of Jains in London made it possible for her to conduct more of her fieldwork there than had been planned.[276]

However, I did not want to take a London-centric approach and decided that the research should benefit from a wider and representative geographic spread of the UK, and also benefit from the input of ABSocs in the smaller cities. As with Edmund's study based on British university campuses,[277] the campuses at which I concentrated my research and focused the fieldwork, were also chosen to reflect the range of

[276] Shah, B. (2017). Religion, Ethnicity and Citizenship: The Role of Jain Institutions in the Social Incorporation of Young Jains in Britain and USA. in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *32*(2). pp 299-314.
[277] Edmunds, J. (2010). *E*lite Young Muslims in Britain: From Transnational to Global Politics. London: *Springer Science Business Media Publishing (4)* pp 215-238

ABSoc sizes. This allowed me to explore the attitudes and perceptions of religious authority in both larger and smaller campuses.
Fieldwork for this research was carried out at 10 different locations in the UK, eight of which were university campuses. The distance between the two campuses furthest from each other, where fieldwork was carried out, was more than 250 miles, spanning from the North to the South of England. As with any research project, the feasibility of carrying out fieldwork was bound by the availability of resources.

Another factor for consideration was the activeness of the ABSocs on social media. This provided the research with an array of ABSocs in terms of how operational they were, from those that held regular gatherings and events to those that had less frequent events. Most of the ABSocs have active social media accounts publicising their events. A number of ABSocs, despite being registered with their student guilds, are inactive and their online presence is also relatively dormant.
Monitoring the activities of the ABSocs on social media also allowed me to target some fieldwork by purposive sampling. In one such instance, an ABSoc publicised a discussion circle specifically on the topic of religious authority. This led me to individually interview some of the attendees of that event and carry out a group interview at the campus in question, where related issues were interrogated further.

This research involved a total of 47 participants; 24 male and 23 female.[278] Focus group interviews were carried out with seven different participant groups during this research; one of those groups was interviewed twice. Each of the focus groups was facilitated by the respective ABSoc president. The implications of using the ABSoc presidents as gatekeepers for this aspect of the fieldwork is a matter that I elaborate upon later in this section. The presidents would circulate a message, outlining the research and what participation would entail, on their ABSoc communication networks. The responses were accepted on a first-come basis, without regard for ethnic background, gender, year of study or even position within the ABSoc. Despite that, all the focus group sessions were well-balanced in terms of gender representation (52% male, 48% female). This became evermore significant as gender-based issues emerged as salient themes with the progression of the research. This demonstrated a further advantage of carrying out the fieldwork in the university campus setting, wherein young Shīʿa Muslims of both genders, can be more easily accessed - as opposed to mosque or community settings where gender access can be a sensitive issue. Degli Esposti points out how her own ethnographic research, of Shīʿa Muslims in London, was curtailed due to her only being able to access “female-only environments”.[279]

Another consideration for deciding which university campuses would be selected for fieldwork, was the nature of academic study that the university specialised in. I aimed to get a spread of institutions,

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[278] APPENDIX 7
[279] Degli Esposti, E. (2018). The aesthetics of ritual – contested identities and conflicting performances in the Iraqi Shi’a diaspora: Ritual, performance and identity change. in *Politics* 38(1). London: Sage. p 69

specialising in the hard sciences as well as the humanities. Respondents to the research included students pursuing degrees in engineering, politics, dental hygiene, medicine, pharmacy, business studies, law and even anthropological studies. Most of the participants consisted of students pursuing the 'hard sciences'. This may be a reflection of their ethnic backgrounds, being from cultures that deem those careers as more prestigious.

My sampling methods have resulted in the pool of respondents varying in ethnicity, gender, field of education and year - or stage - of study. A small minority of the participants were even doctoral candidates. An implication of the ABSocs, and so my research participants, not consisting of one particular dominant ethnic background,[280] is discussed later in the thesis. Although there are a nominal number of non-Shīʿa ABSocs members scattered around the country's campuses, my sample of respondents only consisted of students who self-identified as Shīʿa.

My research participants also varied in the degrees they could be described as observably 'Muslim'. That is to say, the extent to which they were compliant with normative Muslim practices in terms of their external appearances, although I am cognisant of the problem of essentialising 'practicing Muslim' in this way. The male participants varied in whether or not they kept a beard, although the majority of male participants were bearded; the female participants varied in their sartorial choices and observation of *hijab*. While some of the female respondents were compliant with the full Shīʿī jurisprudential directive on *hijab*, they were in the minority; and while the majority of female participants did wear a headscarf, there were also participants who did not wear a headscarf at all.[281]

My initial contact with prospective participants was transparent, in clarifying that the research sought to analyse perceptions of religious authority. In hindsight, there was a risk of that being (mis)interpreted as me wanting to talk to people whose performance of religious authority complied with normative Shīʿī stances, thereby dissuading others from participation. That being said, my findings have reflected an array of views in this regard.

The majority of respondents were domestic, or British national, students; all were of minority ethnic and immigrant backgrounds. Considering UK's general Muslim demographic, this was expected. The ethnic backgrounds of the students did not reflect the wider Muslim community, but it was rather more representative of the wider Shīʿa Muslim population in the UK,[282] as detailed in the opening chapters of this thesis.

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[280] APPENDIX 7
[281] I have explained the technical difference between the headscarf and the jurisprudentially recognised '*hijab*' in an earlier chapter.
[282] APPENDIX 7

I did not use conscious variation sampling methods, which I may have contemplated employing had my pool of respondents not organically been so varied. Mir described herself as *'generally fortunate'* in being able to get ethnic diversity in her research sample.[283] However, the causes behind organically attaining a diverse research sample, in any respect, go deeper than good fortune or coincidence. The fact that I did not require variation sampling method is in itself revealing in what it says about the ABSocs, and informs the findings of my research.

Data Collection Methods

As stated, the fieldwork for this project spanned over four years, January 2016 to January 2020. Through semi-structured individual interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic observation, this research project interrogated the conceptions of religious authority amongst the participants and the extent to which their performances of religious authority corresponded to normative Shīʿī models. The specific questions seeking to explore conceptions and practical performances, are complex and have multifaceted elements. Garnering the type of data to address these questions required research participants to respond with their personal narratives. Eliciting these personal narratives was made possible by conducting semi-structured interviews: "the most widely applied technique for conducting systematic social inquiry"[284]. The data gathering methods included group interviews, as well as individual conversations. While each of these posed their own inevitable logistical challenges, both proved to be useful in obtaining relevant data. These interview methods produced data regarding viewpoints on orthodox Shīʿī authority models, as well as the varying ways in which those attitudes were then put into practice by the respondents.

The focus group setting allowed me, as the researcher, to view the young participants' attitudes in a group or organisational setting. The dynamic nature of the focus groups allowed me to assess, not only individual attitudes and standpoints on religious authority, but how they compared with those of their colleagues. In addition to enabling me to compare stances, the focus group setting also allowed me to see how ABSoc members operate with one another despite the array of religious views they might hold; and the kind of space that the ABSoc setting affords them. This method, therefore, presented me with a "level of data gathering, or a perspective on the research problem not available through individual interviews".[285]

The data from the focus group interactions gave some insight regarding the communal desire to preserve a shared representation of Shīʿism among the students. Focus groups are a useful way of witnessing how

[283] Mir, S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: UNC Press. p 26
[284] Silverman, D. (2004). *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice.* London: SAGE. p 113
[285] Fontana, A. & Frey, J. (1998). Interviewing: The Art of Science. in (ed. Denzin, N. & Lincolnm Y). *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials.* pp 47-78. London: SAGE Publications.

the need to present a unified identity may, either consciously or subconsciously. This can cause some participants to frame their contributions in a way that does not overtly contravene the communal stances regarding religious authority. Chiu explains how, in a focus group, individual participants may alter and change their standpoints because of the input and contributions of their peers.[286]

My interviews opened with only asking simple questions about background, field of study, year of study and personal interests. As well as giving me information on my sample's demographics for later analysis, this introductory line of open questioning allowed me to register the voices to the names throughout the recording, for later transcription. I did find, however, that these personal details and questions about personal interests often also became relevant to the research, with some connection to the research questions. For example, some participants mentioned "learning more about Islam" or "travelling to the Middle East" as interests, helping me to probe these ideas further. Subsequent to those opening questions about the participants' backgrounds, questions pertaining to the research itself began with more general and broad ideas about what religious authority means. In each focus group, those initial ideas about religious authority were then probed further, giving insights into ideas about authority and religious interpretive agency. While the participants were not familiar with technical theories about religious authority and agency, their ideas were conveyed through more generic language about how the perceive authority structures and the nature of their performances in their daily lives. The thesis' later chapters unpack how their expressions, about attitudes and performances, reveal their standpoints on religious authority and interpretive agency.

The ABSoc at each campus had a pre-existing network. This had its obvious logistical advantages for arranging focus groups. It also placed limitations on the data. The ABSoc groups on the campuses were approached with the idea of holding a focus group, via their respective presidents. After discussing the prospect with their committees, the president would circulate the information to invite would-be respondents. In this respect, as someone not affiliated with the ABSocs or their membership and identifying myself as an academic researcher, I am an 'outsider' to the researched community. This '*outsiderness*' required me to use the ABSoc presidents as gatekeepers to access the organisations for research, and for them to facilitate the procedural arrangements for group interviews. Bolognani points out how useful gatekeepers can be in this regard, especially when trying to gain research access to communities defined by their religious identities.[287] This can prove to be even more significant with Muslim communities in the UK, who often bear scepticism towards western academia, as a result of feeling scrutinised by the authorities.[288] I believe that going through the ABSoc presidents gave my

[286] Chiu, L. F. (2003). Transformational Potential of Focus Group Practice in Participatory Action Research. in *Action Research,* 1(2), 165-183.
[287] Bolognani, M. (2007). Islam, Ethnography and Politics: Methodological Issues in Researching amongst West Yorkshire Pakistanis in 2005. in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 10(4). pp 279-293.
[288] Gilliat-Ray, S. (2005). 'Closed Worlds: (Not) Accessing Deobandi dar ul-uloom in Britain'. in *Fieldwork in Religion,* 1(1). pp 7-33.

project some integrity and allowed other participants to contribute less hesitantly and without scepticism. My being a Shīʿa Muslim, and being recognised as such, may also have been a contributing element in warding off that sort of scepticism in most cases.
There was a single instance in which a focus group session, and all its logistical prerequisites, had been arranged at a certain campus. Only days before the scheduled session, I was contacted by the ABSoc president there, that some matter had arisen due to which they would no longer be able to participate. When I inquired further, assuming it to be an administrative or operational issue that might be adjusted, the president informed me that they would like to keep the explanation confidential and would not like to get involved in the matter any further. I can only assume that an internal objection to the ABSoc's participation may have been raised, or that the ABSoc may have been advised externally (by another Shīʿī organisation) not to partake. Without any further information or explanation from the ABSoc, it is difficult to speculate about the reason for their withdrawal. This instance was an isolated anomaly, as ABSocs have readily participated with focus groups for this research, before and after this individual instance. Irrespective of the reason behind the sudden withdrawal, this instance does go to show that my Shīʿī identity was not sufficient in granting me full and unlimited access to the ABSoc organisations.

Consistency in approaching the ABSoc presidents, as mediums to access the wider ABSoc membership, allowed my fieldwork to proceed systematically and efficiently. However, their control of access inevitably impacted the data collected.[289] Whilst I do not have reason to suspect the ABSoc presidents to have had any ulterior motives in restricting participation, their network would extend to a limited scope of Shīʿa Muslims on their campus – that is to say those who would have registered their details on the ABSoc database as active members. This might have hindered access to the less active members of the ABSoc, who may have wanted to contribute to this research. Nevertheless, the collected data illustrates a wide spectrum of views on the orthodox structure and practice of authority in Shīʿī Islam. This wide range of views was illustrative of the participants' willingness to speak openly about ideas, about which they differed. Participants can be hesitant to openly discuss sensitive religious issues. Theoretically speaking, this can weaken the richness of the data as potential contributors' voices remain unheard. However, as Krueger suggests, using a group of people who were already familiar with one another diminished the effects of this problem.[290]
Contacting the students through their respective ABSoc presidents may well have resulted in collecting a pool of participants who have a relatively higher degree of commitment to their religion, since 'cultural' or 'secular' Muslims are unlikely to join religious student societies or play an active part therein.[291] The aim of this research project was partly to unearth the array of views, on religious authority, that are salient

[289] Sanghera, G. S. and Thapar-Björkert, S. (2008). Methodological Dilemmas: Gatekeepers and Positionality in Bradford. in *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 31(3). pp 543-562.
[290] Krueger, R. A. & Casey, M. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. London: SAGE Publications. p 84
[291] Appleton, M (2005). The Political Attitudes of Muslims Studying at British Universities in the Post-9/11 World. in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 25(2). Pp 171-191. London: Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. p 173

among this strand of Shīʿa Muslims, who strongly identify with their faith. Non-members of the ABSocs, who identify as Shīʿa, have not been represented in this study. All of the focus group participants were passionate about the ABSoc and its activities, whether they were EC members at their respective campuses or not. This enthusiasm was irrespective of their inter-contrasting views on religious authority and its performances.

All except one of the focus group interviews were convened on the campus premises itself. Arranging the interviews on the respective campuses proved extremely advantageous. The reachability of the location, for the participants, helped in removing factors that might have hindered their attendance. It was also important to choose a location with which they were familiar. The familiarity with the location and setting makes participants feel comfortable and facilitates self-disclosure.[292] This has enabled the research to benefit from richer data being derived from deeper personal narratives.

Along with the stated conveniences of using the campus premises, using locations that are not directly in the researcher's control also poses its own challenges. Roulston mentions case examples and instances whereby researchers have faced unexpected and unforeseen challenges during the interview process.[293] In her examples, however, these challenges posed significant problems for the researchers in trying to elicit data. Although I did not encounter hurdles to that extent, there was one instance whereby a neighbouring room, to the meeting room in which the focus group took place, had a jazz music session scheduled half-way through the focus group. Although I had arranged for two audio recorders to be placed at different locations in the room, as had become a systematic norm for my group interview sessions, the transcription process was slightly more challenging.

Another item that I decided to make a procedural norm, was to serve the young focus group participants with fast food during the sessions. The most convenient option for me was often freshly baked pizza. This meant that, on each occasion, I had to locate a halal pizzeria suitably close to the interview location. Serving food was a deliberate step to facilitate the success of the focus group session and yield valuable data. I believe this helped lessen any feelings of formality and further enabled the participants in expressing their views and opinions. The ability to socialise and eat with their colleagues incentivised participation,[294] in the absence of any monetary enticement. The choice of food could be taken, offered and eaten without the inconvenience of noisy wrapping or loud chewing being a problem for the recording device and subsequent transcription.

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[292] Krueger, R. A. & Casey, M. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. London: SAGE Publications. p 9
[293] Roulston, K. (2003). Learning to Interview in the Social Sciences. in *Qualitative Inquiry* 9(4). London: Sage Publications. p 648
[294] Krueger, R. A. & Casey, M. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. London: SAGE Publications. p 91

The focus group interviews were also used - as is another one of their benefits - to identify 'key informants'[295] to the theme of the research. These individual participants were then approached for one-to-one interviews, with the aim of eliciting even deeper narratives that may not have emerged in the group setting. The fieldwork involved 15 such individual interviews. I am aware that this method may have granted precedence to some voices over others, and recognise this as one of the limitations on the scope of my data. The individual interviews were almost always held in public places, like cafes, either on the university campus or elsewhere. Individual interviews with male participants sometimes took place in private settings, but this was never the case with female participants. Access to female participants, especially for individual interviews, can be a challenge for male researchers. It is possible that my religious identity gave the participants a sense of safety and resulted in their willingness to be interviewed. The research questions included exploring the challenges faced on campus, particularly as a result of being a Muslim, and a Shīʿa Muslim at that. Speaking openly, in a group setting, about such personal matters can be dauting and uncomfortable. The one-to-one interviews allowed me to collect rich data about such matters, which would not have surfaced in the group settings.

Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were also used to approach individual participants for one-to-one interviewing. Executive Committee board members were interviewed about the day-to-day running of the organisation, their personal experiences within it and its relationship with other student bodies on campus. Interviewees were also chosen due to them having conducted, facilitated or participated in certain ABSoc events, the themes of which were particularly relevant to this research. Qualitative researchers have consistently tussled with the question about the amount of data that is optimum to result in useful findings. The ideal number of interviews for qualitative research projects is subjective and dependant on several factors, including the field and nature of the study, the particular research questions and the limitations of time and resources. I had originally planned to conduct 20 to 25 interviews; I had expected that to be sufficient to educe data. Given the nature and framework of this project, the experience of veteran qualitative scientists seems to overwhelmingly suggest that going further than this number would be quite impractical and unnecessarily onerous.[296] In addition to the one-to-one interviews, focus group interviews were conducted across seven campuses, sometimes more than once.

In addition to interviewing, this project has also benefited from data collected through observation. I have been able to carry out observation at ABSoc retreats, conferences, seminars and group discussion circles over the duration of several years - all of which have contributed to the compiled data. Sociological

[295] Fontana, A. & Frey, J. (1998). Interviewing: The Art of Science. in (eds. Denzin, N. & Lincolnm Y). *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. pp 47-78. London: SAGE Publications. p. 54

[296] Baker, S. and Edwards, R. (2012). *How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough?*. Southampton: National Centre for Research Methods. p 41

research of religions, as performances and lived experiences, has been greatly served by researchers using observation as a data collection method. It allows the researcher to see the world from the point of view of the actor.[297] This claim is correct, but to varying degrees. The researcher may accumulate useful data, and even use it to unearth valuable findings to reach plausible conclusions, depending on how that raw data is interpreted. The extent to which a researcher can appreciate the actor's perspective depends on more than the mere ability to observe. For a profounder understanding of why the participants conduct themselves as they do, the researcher should appreciate the deeper cultural contexts in which the observation is taking place. Without the awareness of the theological underpinnings behind certain tenets and practices, the researcher might become perplexed as to why participants insist on particular rites or emphasise refraining from certain courses of action. To that end, the researcher being an *'insider'* to the researched community would prove to be useful. Below, I have commented on how my *'insider'* traits did not merely facilitate my access to the participants, but how my background allowed me to better understand my observational data.
My research questions include examination of the ABSoc and MSC as organisations, and the role they might have in shaping attitudes towards Shīʿī religious authority. In this respect, along with the data from interviews, the observed data collected has proved to be equally rich.

At the seminars and conferences I attended, I consciously took the decision not to 'participate' when participation was avoidable. I spent my time at these events as a 'fly on the wall'; making notes of my observations into the people, procedure and practice at the events. The speakers invited, themes discussed, questions raised and general event procedures all served in forming data responding to the questions about the ABSocs.

Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Protection

Once prospective participants had submitted their contact details via their respective ABSoc presidents, they were each provided with an information sheet outlining the nature and purpose of the research, and the extent of their voluntary participation. As university students, the respondents were not 'vulnerable' participants and so acquiring ethical approval for the research was less hurdle-ridden than it otherwise might have been. Nonetheless, I was cognisant of the possibility of conversations, on religious authority, being deemed sensitive. Exploring performances of religious authority would involve questioning participants about personal aspects of their lives. With this in mind, the aforementioned information sheet also provided the participants with contact details for counselling and chaplaincy facilities, should they choose to avail themselves of those services. Contact details of the research supervisor and the Head of Department were also provided in case someone felt the need to make further inquiries, or even to raise

[297] Davie, G. (2013). *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda*. London: SAGE Publications. p 119

concerns and complaints. Before commencing group interviews, participants were requested to sign a document confirming their consent to participation.

The identities of all participants, without exception, have been anonymised. Participants were notified beforehand that, in addition to their contributions being anonymised, they had a time-limited opportunity to withdraw their contributions after the interviews had taken place. After this window, their contributions may already have been anonymised and combined with the input of others. None of the participants contacted me wishing to withdraw their contributions subsequent to participation.
The names mentioned in any written output stemming from this research, are all aliases used with the aim of guarding anonymity. The pseudonyms used were popular names that would preserve a sense of 'Musilmness' to their identities.

Various details about the social positions of some participants may have been alluded to in my writing. As a result, there exists the slim possibility that people, who are aware of the social scene of young Shīʿa Muslim students in the UK, or in specific cities or universities, may be able to deduce the identity of the interviewees. A concern of this nature, as pointed out by Guenther,[298] would need to be addressed in projects that are undertaken on a larger scale and whose findings are more widely accessible.

Whilst the emerging data can be controlled by the researcher and the participant, in a one-to-one interview, the additional participants involved in a focus group session raises an issue with regards to ensuring confidentiality.[299] Other than emphasising the importance of trust and requesting discretion in advance, there was little that could be done practically to prevent disclosure. Another complication of using a pre-existing group is that members of the group may be connected to one another in some way externally – by being attendees of the same religious community centre, for example. When participants share ethnic, familial, social or religious backgrounds, it is possible that these "complex interlocking relationships can be affected by shared confidences" during the focus group session.[300] However, the data generally shows the participants expressing their - sometimes differing - views freely, without any apparent anxiety about their expressions affecting relationships. University campus spaces are often regarded as "tolerant and liberal" places, giving students a degree of freedom to express their views.[301] The environment of the ABSocs, even more so. This ethos seems to have been absorbed, preserved and even fostered in the ABSoc organisations.

[298] Guenther, K. M. (2009). The Politics of Names: Rethinking the Methodological and Ethical Significance of Naming People, Organisations and Places. in Qualitative Research 9(4). California: SAGE Publications. pp 411-421
[299] Barbour, R (2007). Doing Focus Groups. London: SAGE Publications. p. 67
[300] Ibid.
[301] Hopkins, P. (2011). Towards Critical Geographies of the University Campus: Understanding the Contested Experiences of Muslim Students. in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. pp 157-169

Once the data had been collected, measures were taken to ensure that it was kept secure. The data, in the form of audio recordings, subsequent transcripts, field-notes and any personal information, was stored electronically in password-protected files. Whilst keeping the data away from unauthorised parties, password protection also proved to be useful in that it provided me very quick access, as I needed to update the qualitative data quite frequently.[302]

Reflecting on My Position as an Outsider, Insider…Outsider

While this sociological study draws on conceptual understandings of religious authority, it is primarily an ethnographic analysis of the practices and social constructs of religious authority, as seen within a specific community. The nature of such research poses specific challenges and opportunities to the researcher, in accordance with their position. Some of these challenges and opportunities have already been touched upon, above. These challenges and opportunities impact upon the research in numerous ways, including the ability to gather data and the way in which it is analysed.

The ways, in which a researcher identifies with the researched community and maintains a conceptual distance, are subjects of complex discussions. Singh seems to claim that this complexity might be amplified when it comes to studying religious communities, due to the difficulty of the "outsider, foreigner or non-participant"[303] in accessing the deeper meanings, motivations, and significances of religious performances. Since the ABSoc organisations can be identified as religious communities, Singh's observations are pertinent to my research.
Singh's comments, however, seem to conflate *"*outsider*"* and *"*non-participant*"*. Whilst the two labels are related, there is a need to distinguish between their connotations. Knott distinguishes the *"*insider*/*outsider*"* discussion from the *"*participant*/*non-participant*"* one, by defining the former as a theoretical discussion and the latter as its translation in practice.[304] To assess the impact of my position on that data and its analysis, I will attempt to define my standing in theory. The latter sections of Knott's work cite relatable cases of researchers' struggles when trying to place themselves somewhere along the scale from outsiders to insiders, with respect to their respective researched communities.

The *Insider/Outsider* discussion is completely non-binary. The title of this section, (*Outsider… Insider… Outsider*), firstly reflects the complexity of my position to the research, and my own struggle to place myself accurately with respect to it; but secondly, it speaks to the standpoint from which I have approached this research, as an academic researcher – and so an *outsider* in that respect. My objective

[302] Richards, L. (2015). *Handling Qualitative Data*. London: Sage Publications. p. 76
[303] Singh, D. (1991) *Western Perspective on the Sikh Religion*. New Delhi: Sehgal Publishers Service. p 3
[304] Knott, K (2005). Insider/Outsider Perspectives. in (ed. Hinnells, J. R.) *The Routeledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. Oxford: Routledge. p 246.

was to uncover the salient views, perceptions and performances of my young Shīʿa Muslim participants, with reference to orthodox stances on Shīʿī religious authority. I did not aim to promote, endorse or shape those views. Conversely, I understand that the participants, while fully recognising me as a researcher, since I conducted my research with transparency, may have additionally seen me through my religious identity – and this allowed me easier access to their spaces.

The research revolves around stances towards certain religious tenets among a very specific religiously identified community. Scholars, cited in earlier chapters, have tended towards the idea that 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are useful terms that denote a shared identity, mutual adherence to jointly recognised religious laws and practices. By this understanding, I evidently identify as an *insider* – not only as a Muslim, but as a Shīʿa Muslim. Mirroring the experiences related by some sociologists, sharing religious and denominational backgrounds with the participants allowed me to better understand the connotations behind the religious terminologies used in languages other than English.[305] Participants would occasionally use Shīʿī vernacular, rightly expecting me to understand exactly what they were saying and what they meant. This also allowed them to express their ideas, which were often founded on theological bases, more freely and comfortably. These terminologies have required footnoted explanations when they appear in this thesis.
As I deliberate some of the instances of the data and statements of the participants, I cannot imagine the same expressions, in quite the same tone, being issued to someone not recognised as an openly Shīʿa Muslim. Altorki describes how she came across some of her research participants expressing themselves in particular ways as a result of appreciating her as an *insider*. However, that was, as she admits, after her own consciously adapted "behaviour showed conformity"[306] to the specific social context of her research participants. The expressions from the participants in my research were a result of their perception of me as a Shīʿa Muslim as opposed to any particular (consciously applied) conforming behaviour patterns on my part. For example, when asking about the participants' reasons for being affiliated with the ABSoc, on numerous occasions there were responses to the effect of, "It feels like we're a Shīʿa family".[307] I suspect that such statements might not have been used in front of non-Shīʿa researchers for fear of sounding insular or exclusivist.

To say that understanding religion, or religious social practice, is inaccessible to *'outsiders'* or *'non-participants'*, is reductive. However, the implication that an *'insider'* - one who has been brought up with a given creed's teachings and cultures - might have a deeper comprehension of its adherents' doctrinally

[305] Harvey, G. (2004). Performing and Constructing Research as Guesthood in the Study of Religions. in Hume, L. and Mulcock, J. (eds.) *Anthropologists in the Field: Cases in Participant Observation*. New York: Columbia University Press. p 170
[306] Altorki, A. and Fawzi, C. (1988). *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society.* New York: Syracuse University Press. p 53.
[307] ABSoc President at focus group session, London, March 2018

inspired attitudes, cannot be contested. Twelver Shīʿism, in its specific formulations of religious authority, is an instance of this.

I always presented myself as a researcher while conducting fieldwork. However, my being a researcher and an observer did not detract from my religious identity and affinity with the participants. I was not seen as a "provisional insider, potential real-insider" or "counterfeit insider", as experienced by some sociologists.[308] Frankly situating myself as a researcher did not invalidate my Shīʿī identity or render me duplicitous. This was evidenced by the fact that some of the ABSocs subsequently invited me to their events as a guest speaker, on religious issues unrelated to the subject matter of this research; or that I was asked, on more than one occasion, to lead the prayers at ABSoc gatherings. These instances, in themselves, served as indicators to what the ABSoc members might have perceived as religiously authoritative.

Besides identifying as a Shīʿa Muslim, I have also undergone training in the traditional Shīʿī seminary, and am recognised as a '*shaykh*'. While this helped in dispelling scepticism towards being researched and allowing for participants to unreservedly use Shīʿī vernacular, it also distanced me from their context in some respect. Perceived as a *shaykh*, I might also have been seen by some participants as a constituent part of the hierarchy of religious authority in Shīʿī Islam. It is possible that this might have influenced the respondents in what they are willing to say, or not say, about their standpoints and practices, thereby limiting their expressions to what they think is expected from an orthodox perspective. I tried to ensure that such a perception of me was not reinforced, by avoiding clothing of a 'religious' nature, and instead wearing casual clothing for the focus group sessions and individual interviews. This also aided in minimising the effect of the hierarchical power relationship between me, as the researcher, and the participants.[309]

Throughout the research and continual data analysis, the issue of female gender-specific challenges and female religious authority performances became progressively growing themes. This is yet another position from which I would be considered an *outsider* to the female participants. The challenges female respondents may have faced, by virtue of them being both female and Muslim, are not those with which I could fully empathise. Cross-gender interaction and observance of *hijab* are among such issues. Some of the female participants did raise these matters, in group and individual settings. Yet it is possible that a female researcher may have been able to elicit deeper narratives with the stronger basis of empathy. Some female participants in Walbridge's ethnography expressed their concerns about the sensitive

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[308] Dawson, A. (2010). Positionality and Role-Identity in a New Religious Context: Participant Observation at Céu do Mapiá. in *Religion 40(3).* Science Direct. pp 173-181

[309] Mkandawire-Valhmu, L. and Stevens, P. E. (2010). The Critical Value of Focus Group Discussions in Research With Women Living With HIV in Malawi. in *Qualitative Health Research,* 20(5). pp 684-696.

jurisprudential rulings on menstruation.[310] This was without her identifying as an *'insider'* in terms of religious identity. Since my research has shown how female-specific issues were mediums through which various forms of agency were exercised, the ability to access deeper and more personal narratives may have elicited even more nuanced forms of embracing agency.
Since, in theory, I was both an *insider* and an *outsider* to the conceptual location of my research, the ABSoc community, I was neither the complete observer nor a full participant during my observation.

Thus far, I have discussed my complex position, as both *outsider* as well as *insider*, from the aspects of access, logistical advantages and the extent of my ability to empathise. Trying to translate the theoretical discussions of positionality into practical terms and trying to position myself along the fluid *participant-observer* continuum, was challenging. I am a Shīʿa Muslim. Along with understanding the Shīʿī vernacular, I understand many of the cultural conditionings regarding orthodox standpoints on Shīʿī religious authority and the theological rhetoric that supports it. I am a *participant* with the individual research respondents in this respect. However, all of those aspects that I share with the participants are outside of the ABSoc and campus context, of which I am not a constituent. Hence, I cannot claim *insidership* to the extent that I can fully plunge into the circumstances of the participants and interpret "their worlds",[311] by virtue of my Shīʿī identity alone. It is impossible to evaluate the impact of this on my research, as I tried to mentally simulate their environments and empathise as much as possible. This became inescapably more challenging when considering the experiences of female participants.

My research involved weighing the participants' views and standpoints with normative stances on religious authority in Shīʿism. While identifying as a Shīʿa Muslim, I have endeavoured to speak in the language of "neutrality, impartiality, objectivity" etc.[312] Even though no researcher's position can be value neutral, I maintained an outward position that did not impact upon my participants, or otherwise divulge my own thoughts about normative Shīʿī authority performances, so as not to shape or influence the participants' views about the subject matter.

On the *insider/outsider* question, trying to position myself between adopting classical or indigenous ethnography models, seemed a pendulumlike exercise. Since the classical ethnographer is seen as unfamiliar with the setting and seeks proximity to understand the culture, while the indigenous ethnographer seeks conceptual distance in order to interrogate the culture, I had to place myself on two points along that band concurrently. This awareness has shaped the way I have carried out the research in terms of eliciting data, as well as its subsequent analysis.

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310 Walbridge, L. (1997). *Without Forgetting the Imam.* Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 83
311 Miles, M. and Hubermann, M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Source Book*. California: Sage Publications. p 8
312 Knott, K (2005). Insider/Outsider Perspectives. in (ed. Hinnells, J. R.) *The Routeledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. Oxford: Routledge. p 255.

For the data collection, I sometimes probed deeper with more acute interrogation, when trying to understand issues related to campus life or exclusively female experiences. As for the data analysis, I recall being impressed by the analytical ability of the late Linda Walbridge. Her background was one by which she would be considered an *outsider* to Shīʿa Muslims, and Shīʿī hierarchical authority structures. This allowed her to pick up on the details of some high-ranking scholars' behaviour patterns and interpret them in ways that would have eluded me.[313] I have tried to conceptually distance myself from the setting in my research, to detect relevant subtleties that would otherwise be missed. My analysis of the collected data, aided by software, has aided my endeavour to put forward an impartial illustration of the trends, in perception and performance of Shīʿī religious authority, amongst the participants.

Analysing My Data

The sheer volume of data, in the form of written transcripts, fieldnotes and images, required the aid of a software package for efficient cataloguing and analysis. I used the latest version of QSR NVivo for this task. The software assisted in data categorisation and coding into different themes, allowing a single instance of data to be linked to more than one theme.

The interview schedules had been designed with the research questions in mind. Consequently, some of the emerging themes were expected to arise from the ensuing data. I did not enter the research, nor the data analysis aspect of it, with a purely *grounded theory* approach. While I had a thematic plan, I did not intend it to be rigid and immutable, allowing space for the possibility of new themes emerging from the data, previously not considered vastly significant.[314] As more of the raw data was analysed, it became clear that some of the themes were developing as more meaningful than previously expected. Analysis of the data was a continual process throughout the duration of the research and so I was able to respond to these themes becoming more salient by focusing subsequent fieldwork, by selecting interviewees and structuring interviews. I did not intend to interrogate gender-based issues and the gender dynamic as extensively as can be seen from the research outcomes. This development is comparable to Mir's research. The centring of her project, on Muslim American *women* specifically, was strengthened by the "unique gendered nature of Muslim religiosity and its interactions with campus culture".[315] It is inarguable that women, regardless of religious persuasion, will have unique experiences on campus owing to their gender. However, my research was not limited to analysing Shīʿa Muslims' religiosity on campus. Rather, it focused on how the members of a specific student organisation perceive religious authority in

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[313] Walbridge, L (2014). *The Thread of Mu'awiya: The Making of a Marja' Taqlid*. Bloomington, Indiana: The Ramsay Press.
[314] Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine Publications.
[315] Mir, S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: UNC Press. p 26

light of their campus experiences. So, while my analysis does consider specific gender dynamics, the salience of gender as a theme has not led me to limiting my research to either of the genders.

The organisation of my data into the creation of themes, therefore, was a hybrid practice. I was partly imposing my preconceived data set categories, informed by my initial research questions, onto the raw transcribed data. Other issues became increasingly prominent and unexpectedly so, compelling me to categorise them as a separate set in the data.

Despite it being a time-consuming stage of the project, I personally undertook the task of transcribing the audio data. The transcription of the data and its analysis were not mutually disconnected aspects of the project. Transcribing allowed me to return to the data in written form, and recall thoughts about the interview that were not documented in the fieldnotes. At this stage, the thematic data categorisation and mental processes of data interpretation had already begun.[316]
Choosing to personally carry out the task of transcribing had added advantages. Firstly, issues of data protection and anonymity were not further complicated due to another party being tasked with the transcription. Furthermore, as Mishler points out, the written form of the data cannot be looked at in isolation at the time of analysis.[317] Had I referred to a ready-transcribed text for analysis, it would not have allowed me to recall moods, tone of voice, emotive expressions and other such contextual factors, all of which aid in effective and more accurate data analysis.

The transcribed data then underwent a process of 'meaning coding'; a process that involved assigning keywords to the aforementioned themes that arose from the data. This facilitated responding to the research questions by linking the sections of the data that address them. The themes included, firstly, looking at the participants' expressions that concerned their general notions and conceptions of religious authority. This allowed me to build a picture of what religious authority meant for them; whether they linked that authority to strongly held theological beliefs; the nature of that authority for terms of being based on epistemic grounds or otherwise, and whether or not it is personified; the degree of reverence they paid to figures of authority and the obligation to comply with them; the degrees to which their perception concurred with the literature on Shīʿī authority and its structure. One of the recurring ideas about Shīʿī religious authority was its male-dominance. This led me to adding additional codes to explore this theme particularly, as an area through which normative ideas on authority were challenged. Stemming from that, a second theme explored looked at the ways in which religious authority was performed. Naturally, this examined ways in which they practiced *taqlīd* and if their performances were aligned with normativity and orthopraxy. Analysing through these two strands of the data allowed the

[316] Rapley, T. (2007). *Doing Conversation, Discourse and Document Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications.
[317] Mishler, E.G. (1991). Representing Discourse: The Rhetoric of Transcription. in *Journal of Narrative and Life History*. (1). p 255-280

research to uncover various reconstructions of Shīʿī authority among the participants, which allowed them various modes of interpretive agency that differed from the more established epistemically authoritarian model. As male-dominance was an additional area explored under the theme of authority conceptions, so the *hijab* and female-related issues were also additional specific areas explored under the theme of authority performances.

Coding of bordering ideas that aided in forming the broader narrative of their attitudes towards authority, involved looking at their ideas about Shīʿism more widely, their emotional attachments to the Imams and the cities in which they are buried, and references to the more comprehensive values of Shīʿism.

The coding also included looking at the function of the ABSocs and the space it offered to the Shīʿa participants to express their Shīʿism, preserve their Shīʿī identities through facilitating practices, and to present Shīʿī Islam to the wider campus community, This allowed me to examine the extent to which the ABSoc itself provided a space wherein Shīʿī performance could be redefined in some aspects without breaking from its wider values. The coded themes and subthemes were organised into a complex network of nodes and sub-nodes in the NVivo software. This compartmentalisation facilitated the analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter began by listing the premises established through the literature, granting a footing for the questions posed in this research. The research methods and approaches described thereafter, were chosen as those most efficacious for answering the said questions. The underlying question focuses on how Shīʿī identity is impacted by reimagined conceptions of religious authority, and reconstructed performances, considering its centrality to Shīʿism as a lived tradition. This research has interrogated the above, within the setting of Shīʿa Muslim students on higher education campuses in the UK.

In view of the research questions as well as its setting, my position allowed me to unearth participants' deeper narratives. Combining my seminarial training in the traditional sciences of Shīʿī Islam, with my skills in applying the above-mentioned social science methods, enabled the research to discover shifts in how Shīʿism is presented and expressed.

The rich data elicited has facilitated the exploration of how theoretical notions in Shīʿism are applied to existing contexts. Probing gender related issues led to the unearthing of sophisticated reconstructions and performances of religious authority. It is possible that a female researcher - identifying and being recognised as a Shīʿa Muslim - may have been able to elicit even more profound accounts from female participants.

Chapter 3

A Shifting Shīʿism on Campus: The ABSoc as an Agentic Space?

In the late 1980s, higher education Shīʿa students in the UK and Europe consisted primarily of first-generation migrants from the Middle East. The function of their religiously-identified student societies involved political activism that targeted the unsteady political situations in Iraq and Iran, as documented by Corboz[318] and Spellman[319] respectively. The nature of their activities was clearly influenced by their nationalities, yet they were conducted under the banner of religious (Shīʿī Islamic) societies. More than being a chance outcome of their intersectionality, it demonstrated that their Shīʿī identities were inextricably linked to their national ones. The fact that some of Shīʿī Islam's holiest sites are located in Iraq and Iran serves to further consolidate the association of these geographical places with Shīʿism. While the activities of today's ABSocs are more focused on local issues faced in the West and civic concerns, there remains an emotional attachment to Iran and Iraq as supposed homelands of Shīʿism. This experience was unambiguously articulated by a participant in a London focus group:

> I am Pakistani. But I remember when we were young, the football world cup was on, and I remember saying, "I hope Iran wins this time". Back then, I didn't understand it. But as I got to know more about my religion, I kind of connected the dots now.[320]

Appreciating the complexities in the participants' personal identities is significant to this research. Their emotional attachments to the 'shrine cities', as discussed in earlier chapters, leads to venerating the religious learning emanating from those cities. The guidance from there is then conferred with more credibility than that which stems from seminaries in the West, for example. Moreover, their idea of Shīʿism's connectedness to the Middle East gives the impression of them feeling religiously diasporic.[321] As such, the religious lifestyle in those 'homelands' are considered purer, [322] and the religious authority based there as more credible and authentic. These ideas are explored in more depth through the findings documented in the chapter discussing the participants' conceptions of religious authority. The further

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[318] Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
[319] Spellman, K. (2004). *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain*. Oxford: Berghahn Books
[320] Focus group participant in interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in London [Mar 2018]
[321] Dufoix, S. (2015). The Loss and the Link: A Short History of the Long-term Word 'Diaspora'. pp 8-11. in (ed. Sigona. N, Gamlen. A). *Diasporas Reimagined Spaces, Practices and Belonging.* Oxford: Oxford Diasporas Programme. p.10
[322] Werbner, P. (2004) Theorising Complex Diasporas: Purity and Hybridity in the South Asian Public Sphere in Britain. in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 30(5). p 899

question is asked as to if, and how, these venerative standpoints impact their willingness to exercise degrees or forms of agency.

The connection between these shrine cities and Shīʿī identity is indisputable; and these constructions of identity inescapably form the makeup of ABSocs through their individual members. Second-year medical student, Taqwa, explained her reason for becoming affiliated with the ABSoc organisation at the onset of her course: "When I was young, learning about Shīʿa Islam was quite hard. But then last year I went to Iran for *ziyara*,[323] and I realised religion is more than just a set of things. It's a part of everything".[324] The enduring connection between Iran and Iraq, and Shīʿa Muslims in the western world, is undeniable. This impacts on the construction of their religious attitudes.
Some of the ABSoc members are of Iranian or Iraqi descent. They often look to the Middle East for representation in religious leadership and authority. Hasan Fadhil, an Iraqi student, said the following about the position of Shīʿa Muslims in the UK:

> It's partially because we are really an immigrant population. So, each population kind of looks back to where they've come from as part of their identity. So even though we have a large Shīʿī community in England, large enough to have our own marjiʿiyyah, because people look back to their homes, it might take a bit of time for people here to have their own identity, their own scholarly circle and their own senior scholar to give fatwas,[325] and for people to be comfortable following them.[326]

Hasan is superimposing his own position onto what he deems as the attitude of the wider Shīʿa community in England. His conception, about how reluctant Shīʿa Muslims might be to follow UK-based religious authorities, can be countered by quoting some of the respondents in my earlier study, wherein participants bemoaned the geographical distance from the *marājiʿ* and expressed the need for *marājiʿ* to be based in the UK in a more relatable setting.[327] There is clear evidence of heterogeneous views and performances of religious authority among the community of Shīʿa students.

As this chapter will make clear, what a Shīʿī experience on campus should entail is subjective from one person to the next. Despite that, the Shīʿa students look towards the ABSocs as a supportive base for their Shīʿism, in the challenging environment of the university campus. Sabira, a second-year pharmacist, explained her own reasons for joining the ABSoc at her university: "So when I moved away from home it was, like, a continuation of like, just a continuation of familiarity. I think it would've been kind of hard

[323] *Ziyāra*: Arabic word literally meaning 'visitation'. In Shīʿī circles, the word refers to a religious pilgrimage to the shrines of one or more of the Imams.
[324] Taqwa: focus group participant at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Oct 2019]
[325] *'Fatwa'*: Jursiprudential religious edict.
[326] Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]
[327] Tajri, M. (2016). Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth. in *Muslims in the UK and Europe (2)* (ed. Suleiman, Y.) pp 148-156. Cambridge: Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. p 152

to, personally, stay grounded to my beliefs. I think Shīʿas are quite a minority. So, you see a lot of people around you doing things, like, that you're not really allowed to do".[328] Although, on the one hand, the ABSocs function as an insulating space for the Shīʿa students, on the other hand, their members hold a variety of ideological standpoints under the banner of a Shīʿī framework. Bearing this in mind, the ABSocs are a reflection of UK's wider Muslim community, who are also a heterogeneous bloc under one religious banner.[329] The ABSocs have managed to make this complexity a strength rather than a hurdle. Iqbal proudly portrayed his ABSoc in the following way:

> When you come to ABSoc you see new faces and some social and intellectual stimulation. It's not really about being around like-minded people because we're all quite different, but I mean, people who technically similar values to you and to see the diversity in opinions. It opens your mind a lot more. I feel like, in this ABSoc, with this particular society it's quite unique because I don't think a lot of university students are having really intellectual conversations the way that we are.[330]

In order to successfully cater for people who claim a shared common identity, this complexity of differences in opinion must be accommodated. Since the ABSocs are composed of these individual members, they essentially represent a coming together of these diverse opinions. Shīʿism, therefore, is not represented by the ABSocs in a rigidly uniform way. This lack of rigidity in how Shīʿism can and should be lived, leaves space for variation in performed authority and, therefore, space for modes of agency and non-authoritarian reconstructions.

A case in point is one of the most observable aspects of Shīʿism, traditionally speaking - the annual commemoration of Ashura. Ashura is the tenth day of the first lunar calendar month, Muharram, as mentioned in earlier chapters. Degli Esposti mentions it as a salient aspect of how Shīʿism is represented by the ABSocs on campus through 'Ashura Awareness Week'.[331] Later in this chapter, the Ashura commemoration is used as a case example of how lived Shīʿism is adapted in the university campus setting.

The ABSoc organisations fulfil an important function of catering for a religious minority community within the campus environment. Shīʿa Muslims in the UK have been described as a "minority within a minority";[332] being the smaller of the two main denominations in Islam, in terms of the number of adherents, within a Muslim community making up 5% of the wider UK population. This minority status is reflected in Britain's university campuses, and consciously noted by the participants as a factor driving

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[328] Sabira: focus group participant at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Oct 2019]
[329] Mandaville, P. (2001). *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*. London: Routledge. p 107
[330] Iqbal: focus group participant at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Oct 2019]
[331] Degli Esposti, E. and Scott-Baumann, A (2019). Fighting for "Justice", Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. in Religions (10)189. pg 10.
[332] Scharbrodt, O. (2019). A Minority within a Minority?: The Complexity and Multilocality of Transnational Twelver Shia Networks in Britain. in *Contemporary Islam (13)*. Springer Journals. pp 287-305

them towards joining the ABSocs.[333] This minority community is intra-diverse in their specific ideas about Shīʿism and their outlooks and performances of religious authority. To cater successfully and effectively for such a community, the ABSocs cannot afford to be prescriptive in terms of the specifics of Shīʿism or insisting on some of the traditional markers of Shīʿī identity. On the other hand, the ABSocs are Shīʿī organisations, established to cater primarily for the needs of Shīʿī students. Therefore, observing traditional markers of Shīʿism, in some form, is unavoidable.

One of the themes this chapter explores is how the ABSocs need to organisationally balance their operations, recognising established aspects of Shīʿism while concurrently maintaining diversity – specifically with regards to the performance of religious authority.

Representing Shīʿism on Campus

The numbers of Shīʿa Muslims, in higher education, varies from one academic year to the next. The ethnic makeup of the ABSoc membership is also, therefore, somewhat fluid. One of the features that remain constant is the ethnic diversity among the members. Unlike ethnic makeup of Britain's Muslim population, being largely of South-Asian descent, the ABSoc are not made up of one particular dominant ethnic group. All of the participants were of ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds. Most of them were domestic students. Despite their immigrant backgrounds, instances in the data repeatedly showed expressions of identifying locally. When Yusra was asked where she was from, she simply replied with the British city of her birth. She was then further asked about her ethnic background, which she responded to, before immediately reasserting her own local identity. "I am ethnically Iranian. My parents are both from Tehran", she said, "…but I was born here in ********". Identifying more with their immediate locations is seen in the shift of Shīʿa students' activities over the past decades; from being targeted at political issues abroad to addressing more local and civic concerns, like explaining extremism, racism, social activism, and tackling islamophobia and poverty.[334] Being less involved with transnational activism, and diverting more resources towards local initiatives, may lead to diluting emotional t0ies with religious structures in the Middle East.

The *marājiʿ* are centrally based in the Middle East, but the influence of the *marjiʿiyyah* is a global one and is of relevance to the lives of UK's Shīʿa students. This is also reflected in some of the activities of the student-led ABSocs, as depicted later in this chapter.

The ABSocs cater for Shīʿa students as a minority group; as other religious minority students are catered for and accommodated by their respective organisations, within the challenging setting of the campus. The 'Jsocs', for example, provided Jewish students with a sense of community and belonging in an

[333] One of the participants, of a London focus-group interview [March 2018], when asked about the appeal behind joining an ABSoc, replied: *"Mainly because we're a minority and we don't find many Shīʿas. Whenever you join any organisation or university and then you find someone is Shīʿa, it really makes you happy. That's mainly why I joined the ABSoc, to meet other Shīʿas and make new friends."*
[334] APPENDIX 8

environment where antisemitism was not uncommon.[335] As a point of similarity with the Jsocs, the ABSocs too facilitate a sense of community for the Shīʿas on campus. However, unlike the Jewish students' problem with antisemitism, islamophobia was not among the biggest concerns or challenges to identity for the Shīʿa students, from which the ABSoc provided a safe space.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, the *Ahlul-Bayt* Society naming is an intentional undertaking to give the organisation the obvious image of a Shīʿism. This reality was clear with the participants. After it transpired in a focus group that members of a particular ABSoc, in the North of England, had diverse religious views on some topics, I asked them what it was that brought them religiously together as one functioning organisation. One of the EC members replied, "It will be the love of the Ahlul-Bayt".[336] The subtle implication here, albeit unintended, would be that other Muslims are less inclined to love the Prophet's household. Such sentiments allow for a conceptual demarking of the Shīʿa Muslims away from the wider body of Muslims students.[337]

The ABSoc members, therefore, are clearly self-identified as religiously invested with Shīʿism; they have affiliated with *this* student organisation for that reason. Two questions arise from this understanding. Firstly, in what ways does the ABSocs cater (particularly) for Shīʿa students on campus? Secondly, acknowledging the *marjiʿiyyah* as a central aspect of lived Shīʿism, to what extent is that reflected by the ABSoc activities?

Guest's work points to a number of instances in which students have found the campus environment to be a challenge to their Christian identities; the challenging factors have ranged to those that cannot be defined as directly religious. Often, for religiously invested individuals, the 'heavy-drinking' culture and sexual promiscuity, which have become caricatures of student life,[338] sit at odds with their religious preferences. Weller, Hooley and Moore's research shows how students, who are religiously invested, can feel isolated and excluded in such an environment.[339] Guest cites participants expressing how the Christian student organisations have, not only helped in maintaining their religious identities, but enhance them through various activities in the campus setting.[340] Such sentiments have been echoed by this research's Shīʿa students. A London-based ABSoc president said:

> ABSoc is a lot of things to me personally. I feel like university life isn't, or can be very, not-Muslim-friendly. So, with ABSoc you find a support network, which

[335] Boyd, J. (2016). Searching for Community: A Portrait of Undergraduate Jewish Students in Five UK Cities. in *JPR Report.* London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research.
[336] EC Member of an ABSoc in Northern England, at a focus group interview [Feb 2019].
[337] Delgi Esposti, E. and Scott-Baumann, A (2019). Fighting for "Justice", Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. in *Religions* (10)189.
[338] Magolda, P. (2000). The Campus Tour: Ritual and Community in Higher Education. in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly 31(1)*. pp 24-46
[339] Weller. P, Hooly. T and Moore. N. (2011). *Religion and Belief in Higher Education: The Experiences of Staff and Students*. London: Equality Challenge Unit. p 8
[340] Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

> allows you to maintain and uphold your identity without succumbing to these pressures here and there. It's easy to fall into that. We do see it sometimes. For me, personally, religion is a huge part of my life.[341]

Such expressions, describing this role of the ABSocs as insulated spaces and protection against the hedonistic aspects of life on campus,[342] became a common feature in the collected data. While this ABSoc function became obvious, it is not something exclusive to the Shīʿī religious organisation. Beyond providing an escape from a self-indulgent social campus culture, religious student societies also help to preserve specific identities by facilitating activities that specifically cater for their members religious and spiritual needs. Societies of particular persuasions within the Christian community cater for Christians of different denominations by convening prayer meetings and seminars.[343] Similarly, the ABSocs cater for its members by convening Thursday evening supplication sessions that are coupled with a discussion on a topical theme. These sessions, which take place independently at different campuses, have come to be known as DKDC (*Dua Kumail and Discussion Circle*) – partially named after the supplication traditionally recited by Shīʿa Muslims on Thursdays.[344]

The function of the ABSocs and their evolution, as seen in this research, corroborates previous works that have recognised them progressing "from spaces of minority representation to platforms for public engagement and activism".[345] The ABSoc platform now presents the young Shīʿa students with the opportunity to present a face of Shīʿism to the wider campus community. Aside from the fact that their seminars are open for all students to attend, regardless of faith or affiliation, ABSocs across the country collaboratively work on a number of flagship campaigns, during the academic year, designed to have a broader impact on campuses. These activities essentially help in translating personal Shīʿī identities into public affirmations.

As outlined in the introductory chapters, early activity among Shīʿa student groups in UK higher education revolved around activism engaging Middle Eastern geopolitics. Campaigns aimed at raising awareness of political injustices abroad have not abated completely from Shīʿī student activity today. However, there has been noticeably more attention paid to locally based campaigns related to civic responsibility. The primary campaign of this type, that the ABSocs have collectively championed in recent years, is the yearly *Hungry for Justice* (HFJ) drive.[346] As part of HFJ, ABSoc members are voluntarily involved in collecting food items from retail outlets as well as the general public, and

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[341] 'Hayder': London-based ABSoc President. Focus group interview [March 2019]
[342] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 20.
[343] Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. P 139
[344] APPENDIX 9
[345] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 90.
[346] APPENDIX 10

redistributing them to local underprivileged people with the aim of combatting food poverty in the UK. While, of course, such charitable civic activity is also undertaken by other – religious and non-religious – student groups, the ABSoc members embark upon it with an understanding of performing their own religious duty under the banner of the Shīʿī society.

The transformation of Shīʿa student demographics has resulted in a wide range of ethnicities; many of them are British nationals who do not consider themselves to be part of a community that might be described as diasporic. Their shared Shīʿī identity, therefore, does not seem to have the diasporic mindset as an essential component. In a similar vein, the nature of jurisprudential guidance they require and demand, as young British Muslims, seems to be one that traditional modes of Shīʿī authority has not evolved in step with. The ways in which performances of Shīʿī authority are mutating have been discussed in their own chapter.

While the ABSocs are providing spaces for their members to cater for and preserve their own Shīʿī identities, how these identities are expressed has developed over time and the ABSocs do not organisationally impose an unbending definition of what Shīʿī expressions should entail. Orthopraxical *taqlīd* performance is also one of those central expressive markers of lived Shīʿism. However, just as with communal expressions of Shīʿism have mutated over time on university campuses, so too the individual *taqlīd* performances have scope to develop while not infringing on the group Shīʿī identity. This absence of rigidity enables forms of religious interpretive agency to be realised.

Adapting Ashura and Authority: Campus Cases of Transforming Shīʿism

Representing Shīʿism on campus involves organising events that facilitate the communal expression of features that are fundamental Shīʿism. One such annual event is the commemoration of Ashura. This commemoration has become an annual flagship event within the ABSoc organisations.[347]

Ashura is an occasion that marks the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Husayn, half a century after the Prophet's demise. The story of Imam Husayn and the commemoration of his martyrdom, which falls at the start of the lunar Islamic year, is one of the most significant aspects of lived Shīʿism. Its criticality to Shīʿism cannot be overstated. Eliade has described how Shīʿa Muslims view the occasion and its annual commemoration "as a new dimension of the presence of God in the world".[348]

In the Middle East, South Asia, and even parts of the UK, the occasion is marked with ceremonies of blood-letting and public demonstrations of self-flagellation[349] as expressions of grief; Shīʿī community

[347] Degli Esposti, E. and Scott-Baumann, A (2019). Fighting for "Justice", Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. in *Religions* (10)189. pg 10.
[348] Eliade, M. (1959). *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Melbourne: Elsevier Australia. p 112.
[349] Degli Esposti, E. (2018). The Aesthetics of Ritual – Contested Identities and Conflicting Performances in the Iraqi Shi'a Diaspora: Ritual, Performance and Identity Change. in *Politics 38(1)*. Political Studies Association. p 75

centres in the UK organise programmes that include highly emotionally charged segments, as the violent deaths of Imam Husayn and his family are retold.[350] While these are the ways in which Ashura is traditionally commemorated, the event is not expressed the same way among the ABSocs on campuses.

The transformation in how Ashura is expressed by the ABSocs, has moved it away from the violent imagery seen on Middle East based Shīʿī satellite channels and recited from the pulpits of Shīʿī centres.[351] The ABSocs have converted the story of this martyrdom into an inspiring message of humanness, charity and global justice against modern-day political oppression.[352]

Spellman-Poots has written about how Ashura is commemorated amongst young Shīʿa Muslims in Britain. Her ethnography shows how the above shift, in how Ashura is commemorated, is partly caused by the young Shīʿa navigating their religious lives through the newer context of western society.[353] Degli Esposti's work uses the presentation of Ashura to show how the ABSocs have managed to frame it as a universally acceptable fight against oppression and injustice.[354]

The way in which the marking of this occasion has been transformed within the ABSocs, reveals their adaptability – and that of Shīʿī expression – in the campus setting. The ABSoc adaptations, in the way Ashura is commemorated as an expression of Shīʿism, is not without precedent. In her article, Mirshahvalad refers to the Ashura ceremonies and commemorations as "the so-called pillar of the Shi'a identity".[355] Her work stems from ethnographic research that reveals how the Ashura commemorations have given an expressive representation to the Shīʿa minority in Italy, and also how the wider Italian social context has driven some traditional and symbolic elements to be sacrificed.

Performances of religious authority and adherence to the *marjiʿiyyah* are also seen as central aspects of the lived Shīʿī experience. In his article, Dogra speaks about Ashura expressions and following a *marjiʿ*, as two features by which Britain's South Asians Shīʿa Muslims vie for claims of Shīʿī 'authenticity'.[356]

However, differences in these two fundamental aspects of Shīʿism has led to contrasting organisational positions adopted by the ABSocs.

Organisationally, the lack of a defined or rigid position on religious authority, from the ABSocs, stems from the assortment of performances among its members. There is no imposition from the organisation, upon its members, to perform in a particular way or to be affiliated with any *marjiʿ*. Unlike the 'Ashura

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350 Knight, M. M. (2017). Ashura: Commemorating Imam Husayn. in (ed. Curtis, E.). *The Practice of Islam in America*. New York: NYU Press. pp 104-122

351 Norton, R. A. (2005). Ritual, Blood and Shiite Identity: Ashura in Lebanon. in *TDR Special Issue 49(4)*. pp. 140-155

352 APPENDIX 11

353 Spellman-Poots, K. (2012). Manifestations of Ashura Among Young British Shi'is. in (ed. Dupret, B. and Pierret, T). *Ethnographies of Islam*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp 40-49

354 Degli Esposti, E. and Scott-Baumann, A (2019). Fighting for "Justice", Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. in *Religions* (10)189. p 10.

355 Mirshahvalad, M. (2019). Ashura in Italy: The Reshaping of Shi'a Rituals. in *Religions 10(3)*. p 200

356 Dogra, S. (2017). Karbala in London: Battle of Expressions of Ashura Ritual Commemorations among Twelver Shia Muslims of South Asian Background. in *Journal of Muslims in Europe*. Brill. pp 158-178

Awareness Week' and 'Hungry for Justice' campaigns, there are no centrally led flagship events to celebrate or honour *marjiʿiyyah* as an institution or any individual *marjiʿ*. Despite that, it has become evident that religious authority is a persistent topic of contentious discussion among the members of different ABSocs, leading to the convening of seminars and discussion circles on related themes.[357]

The Ashura commemorations are outwardly directed and communally performed aspects of Shīʿism, whilst religious authority performances are comparatively 'inward' or personal performances. As ABSocs essentially provide Shīʿa students with a space through which to present Shīʿism to the wider community, this necessitates their active facilitation of outwardly directed aspects of Shīʿī identity. In contrast, the way religious authority is practiced, is very much a personal performance, even though discussions about it may seep into communal or public settings. Affiliation to the *marjiʿiyyah*, therefore, is not something that the ABSocs are required to facilitate organisationally. It is neither an aspect of Shīʿī representation to the wider campus nor an aspect of identity that is significantly contingent upon the practice of other Shīʿas as a group.

Although this research has shown a shift in the way Ashura is commemorated on campus, its ubiquitousness means there are no differences of opinion in its regard. Religious authority and the *marjiʿiyyah*, on the other hand, are topics that are far more open for discussion. Unlike religious authority, Ashura commemorations are a unifying factor among Shīʿa Muslims, both in the campus setting and beyond.

The outward adaptations, in how Ashura is commemorated on campus, show a transition that grants grounding to the lived Shīʿī experience in a way that the social setting of the campus allows. The same can be said for adaptations in the way religious authority is performed. As is elucidated in later chapters discussing participants' performances of religious authority, adaptations allowed the participants to consolidate this aspect of their Shīʿī identities by not having to dissociate with the *marjiʿiyyah*. Their agencies are exercised within the wider authority framework, by reimagining what those authority structures look like.

The enormity of Ashura's significance for Shīʿa Muslims is unquestionable. Yet its expression has been tailored, by the ABSoc community, to make it a more relatable idea to young Shīʿa on UK campuses and express a more acceptable representation of Shīʿism to the student communities around them.
This serves as an example of how the experience, presentation and representation of Shīʿism - in certain key aspects - has developed on campus.

[357] APPENDIX 12

Some of the ABSocs, in accordance with their members' outlooks, have not given as much prominence to Ashura as an event in the calendar. An ABSoc President, Yusra, said about her own campus' ABSoc, "In many ways, we aren't a very Shīʿī-orientated society. In terms of, like, Muharram, we don't have any events going on. We've always been more for discussing issues that we face, like organ donation, etcetera".[358] Yusra's statement discloses her awareness that the Muharram and Ashura commemorations are integral to a traditionally understood Shīʿī experience. Despite that, her ABSoc's resources are more oriented towards tackling challenges deemed more pertinent to the ABSoc members there. While Degli Esposti is correct in placing the Muharram commemorations as one of the central aspects of how Shīʿism is expressed – in a traditional sense – some of the findings of this project also show an extent of mutability in how Shīʿism is expressed and what aspects of it are seen as most central – particularly so in the context of a UK university campus. This instance in the data shows that, while the ABSocs are all invariably imbued with the Shīʿī banner and identity, they are not all in tune with traditional paragons of Shīʿism to the same extent.

This research diverges from other ethnographic studies on student life among religious groups, by its specific focus on exploring Shīʿa students' performances and attitudes towards religious authority. As Shīʿism in this new environment has generated adapted demonstrations, with respect to the above cases, the remainder of this chapter looks at how the topics of Shīʿī religious authority and the *marjiʿiyyah* are dealt with by the ABSocs organisationally.

The campus environment offers Shīʿa Muslims, as with all religious groups, an opportunity to present and represent their religious beliefs and practices. Part of that presentation involves the provision of spaces for free discussion amongst its staff and students,[359] of differing religious backgrounds, in ways that can challenge established religious standpoints. As such, the university campus is an arena wherein some expressions of religion may be supported, and others marginalised.[360] The challenges such an environment poses, to ideologically-constructed religious ideas, was not lost on the participants. Hashim mentioned that he had interactions of a religious nature, "all the time". He recalled an interaction he had with a non-Shīʿa Muslim:

> There were things that I said and he said. Now, I've taken a few of the things he said on board. Now, those things I wouldn't have thought of if I didn't have that dialogue with that individual. It opened up my mind a lot as well. I hope my words had an effect on him as well.

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[358] Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]

[359] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 64.

[360] Hopkins, P. (2011). Towards Critical Geographies of the University Campus: Understanding the Contested Experiences of Muslim Students. in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 36(1). pp 157-169

> I think university is an environment where you're meeting so many different people, of so many different beliefs. It depends on the kind of quality of conversations that you have, but it's bound to happen; whether it's theological issues, or like a lot of time, fiqhi issues.[361]

Here, Hashim's experiences correspond with sociologists who have observed the evolution of university campuses into multicultural spaces and multifaith environments.[362] In a minority context, and in an environment that is conducive to religious notions being challenged, what role have the ABSocs played in supporting the religious identity of their Shīʿa members, especially with the key issue of religious authority? This question is asked with consideration of the fact that the Shīʿa students already have a variety of views and attitudes towards the issue of religious authority. As an MSC board member declared:

> Shīʿas on campus are far far [sic] from having monolithic views on any issue; religious authority being just one. The challenge is to embrace this diversity while having the ability to work together to present a face of Shīʿas in the UK.[363]

In having to cater for the array of Shīʿa students on university campuses – who are ranging in terms of their ethnic backgrounds, ideological standpoints and academic disciplines – the ABSoc need to avoid any fragmentation amongst this bloc, in order to present a consistent and coherent face of Shīʿism. This chapter has already discussed how presenting Shīʿism has been transformed into a form that is acceptable to the young Shīʿas and also to the wider campus community. The 'Ashura Awareness' campaign is an example of how central aspects of lived Shīʿism have been observed, allowing them to be marked, but in ways that have developed from more traditional rites and depictions.

Similarly, the ABSocs have also catered for traditional models of religious authority to be explained, discussed and presented. During the course of this research, various ABSocs from around the country have convened discussion circles on the practice of *taqlīd*, advertised publicly on their social media accounts.[364] My research also came across announcements publicising a discussion circle on the *Role of Marja'iyyah*. The organizing of such discussion circles is evidence of conversations on these topics taking place amongst the ABSoc members. This particular discussion was facilitated by a "5th-year Hawza student" from the Qom seminary, as per the poster. The fact that this particular ABSoc elected to have a speaker from the Qom (Iran) seminary to speak at the event, may indicate a move towards seeking to reconsolidate normative ideas on Shīʿī religious authority. Such examples may be seen as instances of "cultural defensiveness"[365], resorted to by communities in minority contexts, who fear a gradual erosion of their identities through the dilution of things that are central to it. Another instance of an ABSoc

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361 Hashim, ABSoc Secretary at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
362 Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. p 89-90
363 Interview with MSC EC board member [10/03/17]
364 APPENDIX 12
365 Daley, K. (2018). *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*. London: Two Roads. p 109

activity indirectly promoting a *marji*ʿ was seen at the 2016 presidential retreat; it has been related in further detail in the chapter dealing with gendered experiences.

This research has shown various ways in which the ABSocs have aided in preserving central aspects of Shīʿism, including the facilitation of its performative aspects with the recitation of certain supplications. The emergence, and increased activity, of such religious student organisations on campuses upholds Guest's contention against the idea that university campuses are forces for secularisation. "If there is a shift in religious orientation at university", argues Guest, "it may not simply be characterised by deconversion or disengagement, but by a reconfiguration of identity along more subjectivized and relational lines". [366] Even though Guest is arguing within a Christian context, his assertion can be echoed in the case of Shīʿa Muslims on campus. Despite the fact that they may have moved from more traditional displays and representations of Shīʿism, that cannot be equated to a disengagement from Shīʿism itself. On the contrary, being in a minority context seems to have spurred young Shīʿa Muslims on to engaging in more activity that can be ascribed to their religious affiliation. As a result, what can be seen is an internal tussle between a transforming Shīʿism on campus and an effort to conserve traditional representations of it. Adherence to established structures of Shīʿī religious authority seems to be but one aspect of this internal struggle. Furthermore, it can be said that certain aspects of the campus setting itself, like its multi-religious environment and the free-flowing nature of intellectual ideas, contribute towards the continuous metamorphosing of the attitudes and perceptions of the young Shīʿa Muslim students.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the ABSoc organisations as a space provided to Shīʿa Muslim students to, not only protect and facilitate their Shīʿism, but to project that identity towards the wider campus community. The ABSocs have provided a platform for students to come together on the basis of their very specific religious and denominational identities. For that reason, it is important to have some understanding of how the ABSocs – as a group – have dealt with the expressions of Shīʿism, especially those that are recognised as central to Shīʿī identity.

Empowering this minority group on campus necessitates the presentation of a unified face and collectively upholding identity markers, despite an internal heterogeneity in views on some issues. There are cases in which those central identity markers may adapt in how they are enacted and expressed. This chapter has used the case of Ashura, a cornerstone of lived Shīʿism, as an example of how expressions of this religious identity have been adapted and moved away from traditional articulations. The transformations in how Ashura is marked, stands as a demonstration of the malleability of Shīʿism as a

[366] Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. p 87

lived tradition; a redefinition of what Ashura, as a core part of Shīʿism, means and stands for. While the same argument can be made for *taqlīd* and the performance of religious authority, this chapter has contrasted these two bases of Shīʿism as outward-facing and inward-facing respectively. Ashura gives a voice and an opportunity for this minority group to convey and propel an aspect of its shared identity, as Mirshahvalad has alluded.[367] The ABSocs have done this through universally recognised messages of sacrifice and justice. Performances of religious authority, on the other hand, are not communally enacted rites and do not have the same illustrative and expressive function of identity. This allows for reconstructed notions and enactments, of religious authority, to be internally diverse.

This chapter sets a useful backdrop of the collective (and organisational) operations of Shīʿa Muslim students, through the ABSoc societies. The way fundamental aspects of Shīʿism are experienced and undertaken, are changeable without compromising personal or communal Shīʿī identity. The following chapters the findings of this research, in how the participants conceive of, and perform, religious authority.

[367] Mirshahvalad, M. (2019). Ashura in Italy: The Reshaping of Shi'a Rituals. in *Religions 10(3)*. p 200

Chapter 4
Conceiving Religious Authority and the Authoritarian

This research has explored the perceptions of religious authority, as well as performative aspects of it, among its participants. Having looked at the nature of the ABSoc spaces and their Shīʿa members on campus, this chapter concentrates on the conceptions of religious authority, held by those Shīʿa students, and some of the factors that shape those conceptions in light of the cited literature on the subject. The ways in which female experiences on campus have affected opinions of religious authority, have not been covered in this chapter; their significance warranted the final chapter to be entirely dedicated to it.

The literature, discussing religious authority in Shīʿī Islam, associates the notion with human actors. This chapter begins by showing how my research largely concurs with that understanding among the Shīʿa student community – most of whom see religious authority as synonymous with the *marjiʿiyyah*.
This chapter then goes further into examining some of the views held about the *marājiʿ*, and exploring the effective influences that play a role in moulding these views. These influences include idealised and venerative notions of the Middle East, particularly the 'shrine cities',[368] and the traditional seminaries of religious learning that are based there. Naturally, this is also going to inform the augmented perceptions and pedestalising of epistemic authority emerging from there. The fact that these cities have a status of sanctity among Shīʿa Muslims, including the ABSoc members, is undeniable. The gravitation of Shīʿa Muslims towards these Middle Eastern cities is exemplified by Asghar – a London-based first-year medical student:

> A lot of the friends that I've made on the *Ziyāra*[369] trips are part of the ABSoc community, from multiple unis. A lot of my friends from [names four other universities], I have met through *Ziyāra* trips, through ABSoc as well.[370]

Asgher's statement clearly shows that such pilgrimages to the Middle East are not uncommon among ABSoc members, illustrating an attachment to the shrines. This is a reflection of practices among Britain's wider Shīʿa community, and presents the ABSocs as a microcosm of that larger sphere.
Part of this chapter explores impact, of this reverence towards the shrine cities, upon the opinions held regarding the *marājiʿ* and the traditional seminaries located there.

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[368] Krämer, G. & Schmidtke, S. (2006). *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Boston: Brill Publications. p 1
[369] *Ziyāra*: Arabic word literally meaning 'visitation'. In Shīʿī circles, the word refers to a religious pilgrimage to the shrines of one or more of the Imams.
[370] Asghar, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in London [Mar 2019]

The religious authority of the *marājiʿ* has often been linked to inviolable theological tenets. Their authority has been seen, in the literature, as an extension to that of the Imams,[371] who are seen as infallible in Shīʿism; the last of whom is believed to be inaccessible in a divinely decreed occultation.[372] The final part of this chapter looks at the extent to which the research participants are consciously aware of these connections, between tenets in Shīʿī theology and the institution of *marjiʿiyyah*, and how that affects their performances of religious authority.

What is Shīʿī 'Religious Authority' Anyway?

The literature describing the evolution of religious authority structures in Islam, describes a development that has brought a clerical class of jurists to be regarded as 'authorities'. Theologically, ultimate religious authority lies with God and any text or person accepted to be sent directly from God. Abou El Fadl opens his deliberation on Islamic authority, which he goes on to qualify, by stating that, "God, God's book, and the Prophet are authoritative in Islam – in fact, they are the only authorities that count".[373] However, the lived reality, in many religious communities, is that contemporary scholars serve as a conduit for God's words to be interpreted to the laity. As such, the *marājiʿ* are now seen as holding that position and so are vested with interpretive authority.

The idea that, beyond *God, God's book, and the Prophet*, present-day *marājiʿ* are what constitutes religious authority, became apparent from the onset. On this note, findings from my earlier research in Cardiff,[374] were echoed. When participants were asked in a focus group,[375] about ideas of religious authority, they used several related, yet nuanced, key terms: "Ayatollahs"[376], "Marjiʿs" and "Wilayat Al-Faqeeh"[377]. The use of these keywords was a repeated feature in the data. They are significant in revealing conceptions of authority. The first, *Ayatollah*, is a term of extreme deference. It is conferred on those who are recognised, by their teachers and peers, as having the ability to deduce religious jurisprudential law from the textual sources. Its literal meaning, however, implies a connection to God – the ultimate authority. The implication of such a title is, in itself, an instance of pedestalisation and a deference that makes it theoretically impossible, as Hobbollah argues in his Arabic writing, to contravene

371 Aziz, T. (2002). The Political Theory of Muhammad Baqir Sadr. in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (ed. Abdul-Jabar, F.) pp. 231-244. London: Saqi Books. p 237
372 Walbridge, L. (2001). *The Most Learned of the Shi'a.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. p 4
373 Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 23
374 Tajri, M. (2016). Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth. in *Muslims in the UK and Europe (2)* (ed. Suleiman, Y.) pp 148-156. Cambridge: Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge.
375 Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2016]
376 *Ayatollah* is an Arabic phrase that literally translates into English as "Sign of God". It is a title in Shīʿī religious hierarchy, bestowed upon those who are recognised as being competent in deriving religious jurisprudential law from the textual sources. The normalised use of the amplified title itself is indicative of the reverence shown to Shīʿī jurists.
377 *Wilayat Al-Faqeeh* is a phrase that translates as "Authority of the jurist". It is a theory the exposition of which is used as a model for national political governance in Iran, whereby the individual(s) at the summit of the political system should be a recognised jurist.

opinions of the one who is conferred with it.[378] Despite the possible modes of agency theoretically conferred by the discussed technical definition of *taqlīd*, examples like this show an extent of deference that leads to the epistemic authoritarianism that Friedman has explained and this thesis has cited.[379]

Further than having acknowledged competence in religious law derivation, the *marjiʿ* is referred to and has a recognised following. *Wilayat Al-Faqeeh* is a term referring to the notion that the religious jurist has complete authority, including in the political sphere, in the absence of the Twelfth Imam; the term was mostly confined to technical seminary discussions until its popularisation with the Iranian revolution in 1979. The use of these terms discloses an acute awareness of formalised religious authority in Shīʿism, as well as some evidence of Shīʿī identity being informed by modern geopolitics. Such responses were observed repeatedly in subsequent focus groups.

The appreciation of the *marājiʿ* as intermediaries to God's ultimate authority, was explained by Ahmad in a one-to-one interview, after he had led an ABSoc discussion circle on 'Authority in Islam'.[380] Describing how the discussion proceeded, Ahmad said:

> The question was asked as to why we can't just rely on the Quran and hadeeth. Then we raised the issue that these texts don't give practical answers to our day-to-day lives, and we need experts to deduce the laws from them.[381]

The need for 'experts', in deciphering religious texts and deducing laws, may seem only logical. However, as we can infer from the stance of Mohammad Baqir Al-Sadr,[382] quoted in the chapter on the constructs of Shīʿī authority, adherence to the *marājiʿ* has become an almost essential aspect of Shīʿism. For this reason, Munira, who was not so inclined to follow a *marjiʿ*, felt a need to reassert her Shīʿī identity before criticising what she saw as an overreliance on the teachings of the *marājiʿ*:

> I think, and this is my personal opinion, obviously I'm Shīʿa and very proud to be part of [the] Ahlul-bayt [Society] now, but I just think that we need to take the Quran as our ultimate authority. We can't just take the word of someone else.[383]

The fact that Munira needed to start by reaffirm her Shīʿism demonstrates her conscious awareness of the *marjiʿiyyah* being a central marker of Shīʿī identity; one from which she wishes to disentangle while maintaining affiliation to Shīʿism.

While the *marājiʿ* are granted authority by virtue of their understood competence in deciphering the will of God, Munira went further in wanting to separate their authority and distinguish it as non-binding.

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378 Hobbollah, H. (2015). *Idhāʿāt fī Al-Fikri wa Al-Dīn. Vol 5.* Beirut: Mu'assasat Al-Buḥūth Al-Muʿāṣirah. p 493-494
379 Friedman, R. (1990). On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. in (ed. Raz, J.) *Authority*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pg 67
380 See APPENDIX 13
381 Ahmad: Former ABSoc President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]
382 Aziz, T. (2002). The Political Theory of Muhammad Baqir Sadr. in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (ed. Abdul-Jabar, F.) pp. 231-244. London: Saqi Books. p 237
383 Munira: London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2019]

When her colleagues in the focus group mentioned the *marājiʿ* as figures of religious authority, she expressed unease:

> I don't know if I fully like the idea of this 'authority figure'. What happens if they're wrong? What happens if I don't believe their interpretation? What does that make me? Just because I don't agree with them, but I still have full faith in Allah.

Munira clearly objected to the *marjiʿ* being an "authority figure". She disputed the notion that the *marjiʿ* should be appreciated as 'authoritarian', which would make his pronouncements being beyond critique and his interpretation unchallengeable. At another point, Munira spoke about the *marājiʿ* reverently, saying, "they have so much more knowledge than I do when it comes to understanding Islam". In the above excerpt, she is not contesting the *marjiʿ* as being an authority. She is opposing the appreciation of the *marjiʿ* as authoritarian. The latter notion would disallow her from having any religious interpretive agency, which she insisted upon by asking, "What happens if I don't believe their interpretation?". This attitude was not uncommon amongst the research participants and it contrasts starkly with Takim's generalised portrayal of Shīʿa Muslims, when he writes that, "For most devout Shiʿis, the marajiʿ's pronouncements are final and beyond critique".[384] The fact that these students, including Munira, are active members of the ABSoc is evidence of their devotedness to Shīʿism. Despite this, they do not take the pronouncements of the *marājiʿ* as final or beyond critique; As "final and beyond critique" implies the appreciation of that authority structure as epistemically authoritarian, Munira insists on embracing a level of agency.

Munira's above-quoted statements were made in a focus group session, in the presence of her ABSoc colleagues, including the ABSoc president. In a subsequent individual interview, she was prepared to go beyond that statement and express her stance more explicitly. Here, she was even critical of the approach taken by people within her own ABSoc:

> Sayyid[385] Sīstānī is so knowledgeable. He has all this knowledge. But Sayyid Sīstānī is not a Nabi.[386] I hear, from people, more about Sayyid Sīstānī than I hear about Nabi Mohammad. Sayyid Sīstānī is brought into the conversation before any of the Imams. This is what frustrates me. This is not what it's meant to be.
>
> If we're discussing a topic in the DKDC,[387] Sayyid Sīstānī is brought in. But he's brought in instantly, without consideration of any other sources sometimes. Sayyid Sīstānī is not the only person that exist in the world! Nor is he the only source of authority. It's like, every DKDC we have, it's like, "Get his website out". It's like an instant reaction.[388]

384 Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147
385 Epithet accorded to someone who has direct paternal ancestry linking them to the Prophet Muhammad.
386 *Nabi*: Arabic word meaning 'Prophet', referring to a divinely appointed individual.
387 DKDC: This acronym stands for 'Duʿā Kumail and Discussion Circle' and is a weekly event among the ABSocs. The first half of it refers to the ritual recitation of a specific supplication, conventionally recited by Shīʿa Muslims on Thursday evenings. This is then followed by a discussion on something topical, among the attendees.
388 Munira, London ABSoc EC member. One-to-one interview [Apr 2019]

The excerpt shows that Munira is not disrespectful or directly critical of *marjiʿ*. If anything, she begins by emphasising the extent of his knowledge. However, what she is objecting to is the over-pedestalising of the *marjiʿ*, Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī in particular, and objecting to the perceived monopolisation of religious authority around him. Even though Munira's comments express her obvious unease, they are not a rejection of authority per se, but the narrow perception of it among her peers. Her words object an individual *marjiʿ* being referred to as the sole source of religious authority, and whose opinions are overbearing in the discussions. As a young female UK-based Shīʿa Muslim, she is questioning the way in which religious authority is being performed. She is not wholly rejecting the authority of the *marjiʿiyyah*, but is seeking a qualified version of it; one that affords her agency and is free of aspects of authoritarianism; one that allows her interpretive agency from within its own framework.

Furthermore, Munira clearly aimed to make the distinction between theological beliefs in the authority of divinely chosen Prophets and the 12 infallible Imams on the one hand, and the fallible *marājiʿ* on the other hand. The final section of this chapter discusses the participants' conceptions on the linking of religious authority between the Prophets and Imams. Munira's seeking that disconnection is another segway away from authoritarian appreciations and towards enabling her own forms of agency.

It was not surprising that allusions to the *marājiʿ* were consistently the immediate responses when participants were questioned about notions of religious authority. It was also somewhat expected that, when asked to explain why those were the immediate responses, participants supported their responses by citing the epistemic or saintly credentials of the *marājiʿ*. These will be looked at later in this chapter. In one instance of a focus group in London, however, the ABSoc President's answer was unexpected and demonstrated some reflection. Donya replied by saying, "I think it's just social conditioning from when we were very young".[389] Her fellow participant and first-year biomedical engineering student, Salman, said, "We've been told, by parents and teachers, that they're [the marājiʿ] the religious authorities".[390] The input of Donya and Salman reaffirmed a statement in a separate individual interview by Yusra, the Vice President of her ABSoc in the North of England. When asked as to why the *marājiʿ* were considered to be religious authorities, she said, "The highest level I knew about was the 'marjiʿ -taqlīd'. That's who I had heard about in my family more than anything else". She continued to relate what she was told at a young age, "You have to pick someone. You have to pick someone! You can't go about not following a certain marjiʿ'. I was 13 or 14, I had no idea what was going on to be honest".[391] While the literature suggests

[389] Donya: London-based ABSoc President. Focus group interview [March 2018]
[390] Salman: London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2018]
[391] Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]

that the *marji*ʿ reaches that position of authority "based on superiority of learning",[392] it is clear that some research participants did not begin to 'follow' a *marji*ʿ through such an informed process.
Szanto wrote on how Shīʿa children's books, in Syria, had been designed in a way so as to prepare them in the practice of following and emulated the accepted religious authorities.[393] Being a significant feature of Shīʿism and Shīʿī identity, it is not surprising that the participants would have been taught about religious authority and *marjiʿiyyah* from their childhood. It was noteworthy that some of them were consciously aware of that nurturing as a factor that influenced their attitudes about religious authority.
As would be anticipated with a sensitive topic like *marjiʿiyyah*, what Donya and Salman had stated was countered by their fellow focus group participant, Khalid. He was uncomfortable with the idea that his persuasions regarding religious authority were moulded by such conditioning:

> If someone told me that I was looking towards the marājiʿ as the utmost authority, because I had been socially conditioned, I'd be very worried. For me, I'd say it comes down to thinking, introspection, discussion, consultation and then coming to a rational conclusion.[394]

The extent to which Khalid had undertaken the rational journey he professed is not relevant. The idea of the *marājiʿ*'s authority, being based on logical and rational grounds, is very important to him. It spurred him to deny any suggestion from his colleagues that it may have been a result of being socially conditioned. His justifications for following the *marājiʿ* do not refer to theological dogma. His reaction, against the suggestion that he has been conditioned, is to reflect and push back by rationalising. His articulation actually reflects the Shīʿī ideal, that *taqlīd* - as reference to epistemic authority - is rationally based. Although he is counter-arguing, he does so by trying to claim some autonomous agency for his compliance with traditional modes of authority. Through this paradox, he has rationally subjected himself to the authority of the *marji*ʿ.[395]

These ideas about religious authority show an array of perceptions regarding the *marājiʿ* and their individual authority in the religion. However, the centralised (yet transnational), hierarchical and institutionalised *marjiʿiyyah* structure would mean that this authority diffuses beyond the person of the *marji*ʿ. Corboz wrote about how the *marājiʿ*, whose circles she had researched, actively appointed representatives around the world, [396] and Walbridge mentioned how these representatives supervised offices that functioned as liaison points for Shīʿa Muslims.[397]

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[392] Kadhim, A. and Alebh, A. F. (2021). *A Shift Among the Shīʿa: Will a Marjʿa Emerge from the Arabian Peninsula?*. Washington: Middle East Institute. p 1
[393] Szanto, E. (2012). Illustrating an Islamic Childhood in Syria: Pious Subjects and Religious Authority in Twelver Shi'i Children's Books. in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle-East 32(2)*. Duke University Press. p 173
[394] Khalid: London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2018]
[395] Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[396] Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
[397] Walbridge, L. (2014). *The Thread of Mu'awiya: The Making of a Marja' Taqlīd*. Indiana: Ramsay Press.

The roles of these representatives, and their derived authority, was also noted by some of the participants. They serve as an effective link between the *marjiʿ* and the Shīʿī laity. In a focus group, a discussion began about the effectiveness of the *marājiʿ* for Shīʿa Muslims in the West, while they were confined to Iran and Iraq. Saleema, a first-year politics student, said:

> I guess that's why you have representatives of the marjiʿ. They help set up centres and make sure that the ʿulama,[398] who are sort of leading the centres, that they know what they're doing. That's why we would trust them.[399]

In addition to recognising the transnational nature of authority in Shīʿism, Saleema has also alluded to the hierarchical aspect of it and the roles played by the different levels in that hierarchy. At the apex of Shīʿism are the *marājiʿ*; their authority is global and tentacular, spread through their representatives around the world; as well as acting as liaison points, the representatives should also oversee local centres and scholars. The laity, then, trust those regional scholars based on their assumed conformity and supposed approval by the *marjiʿiyyah*. Saleema's recognition of the devolution of religious authority, to the *marājiʿ*'s representatives, was not an isolated instance in the data. A participant in another focus group at a London campus had stated, "To me, the religious authority is the marjiʿ or the representative of the marjiʿ. It doesn't have to be the marjiʿ in person, but someone who conveys his teachings to you and would give you the advice from the source".[400]
Saleema's colleague, Hashim, confirmed her picture of Shīʿī authority. When discussing where people would turn to for answers to their religious queries – the offices of the *marājiʿ* or a local scholar (*ʿālim*) – Hashim asked rhetorically, "But what different opinion is an ʿālim going to give you? All an ʿālim does is, he asks you, "whose taqlīd do you do?". Basically, it's an easier way to get your answer"[401].
This idea that religious practitioners or scholars, at local Shīʿī centres, should be approved by the representatives of the *marājiʿ*, or that their guidance would not veer from that of the *marājiʿ* themselves, grants a monopoly of religious authoritativeness to this elite clique of jurists. This allows 'correct' belief and practice – orthodoxy and orthopraxy – to be defined, religious views to be shaped accordingly, as well as the ability to identify, marginalise and exclude differing opinions. This very clearly understood notion of Shīʿī authority allows it to function according to Krämer's outline of religious authority, as having the aforementioned characteristics and powers.[402]

The theoretical understandings, held by the young Shīʿa students, concur with the depictions of Shīʿī authority as suggested by the literature. These understandings can be compared and contrasted with the way religious authority functions performatively in their lives, in the following chapter. Even the

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[398] *ʿUlama*: Plural of *ʿĀlim*; Arabic word meaning "scholar".
[399] Saleema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[400] Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in London [Mar 2019]
[401] Hashim, ABSoc Secretary at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[402] Krämer, G. & Schmidtke, S. (2006). *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*. Boston: Brill Publications. p 1

assertion, that the participants recognise the *marājiʿ* as religious authorities, cannot be stated without further elaboration on what is understood by 'authority' in the first place. Orthodox understandings of Shīʿism would suggest *taqlīd*, as explained in earlier chapters, to be a mandatory obligation. The following statement from Abbas, an ABSoc president, implies that he does not view their 'authority' in the same way.

> At the end of the day, we have however-many religious authorities to tell us, X marjiʿ or Y marjiʿ can tell us this or that, we can choose to follow them or choose not to follow them. In my view, they're there as guides. They're not there as the absolute law.[403]

Even though Abbas recognises the *marājiʿ* as authorities, his conception of 'religious authority' is one whose emulation is not mandatory. His remarks show that he does not see the *marājiʿs* position as an authoritarian one, and hence rejects the 'authoritarian' version of practiced *taqlīd*. It was this same individual, the ABSoc president, who initially said *"*Ayatollahs*"* at the start of the session, when asked about what 'religious authority' meant. In this quotation, he again refers to them as '*religious authorities*'. However, he defines them as *"*guides*"*, saying, *"*they're not there as the absolute law*"*. By this we can further discern his use of the term '*religious authority*'. For Abbas, they have epistemic authoritativeness; they have authority, but are not 'in authority', in any absolute sense.[404]

Abou El Fadl writes about the difference between the jurist speaking authoritatively, after exerting effort to determine the "will of the Divine", on the one hand; and the jurist locking the "will of the Divine" to his own understanding, on the other hand. The former, whilst being 'an authority', allows the interpretive agency of others, whereas the latter's "despotic" attitude does not allow interpretive agency and so slips into the realm of being "authoritarian".[405] The perception of the *marājiʿ*, as held by Abbas, clearly positions them as the former and not the latter, despite the fact that the normative practice of Shīʿī authority would not allow the laity such autonomous interpretive agency. Consequently, there are numerous instances in the data, like this, that challenge Takim's assessment in saying, "For most devout Shiʿis, the marajiʿ's pronouncements are final and beyond critique".[406] For Abbas, as an example, the *marājiʿ*'s pronouncements not being 'final' cannot be held as a marker of his lack of devoutness as a Shīʿa.

Another ideal that religious authority should incorporate, according to Abou El Fadl, is one of 'competence'; by which he means that the scholar should have the necessary expertise to determine

[403] Abbas, ABSoc president, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2016]
[404] Friedman, R. (1990). On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. in (ed. Raz, J). *Authority*. New York: NYU Press. pp 56-91.
[405] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 92
[406] Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147-148

"God's will" from Islam's the textual sources.[407] For participants who saw the *marājiʿ* as religious authorities, it was clear that they perceived them as having this competence and required knowledge – enabling them to guide effectively and define 'correct' belief and practice. Khalid, already quoted above, mentioned in a focus group discussion:

> Sometimes I hear stuff around that people say. Clearly, they [marājiʿ] are more knowledgeable than us. Sometimes it's a pity that people don't take from that; or sometimes they feel they themselves know enough so as to not have to seek further answers. From my understanding, those people [the marājiʿ] often have an insight, and to have that stamp of approval from somebody who is qualified, I feel is very important. Nowadays a lot of things are going on… it allows a lot more opinions to be formed. [People say] 'I have this opinion' or, 'I have that opinion'. A lot of them are just like, you know, whimsical opinions as opposed to educated qualified opinions that have come from studying. If it was the case that we were going to these people and getting verification from them and guidance, then we'd be progressing a lot more.[408]

When Khalid was asked specifically who he was referring to, as "qualified", he replied, "Obviously the marājiʿ would come at the top, and then those who have actually taken the time to study". One of Khalid's fellow participants also cited knowledge as to why the *marājiʿ* were seen as authorities in the religion. "It's got to do with their knowledge as well", said Maliha, "because they spend so much time studying Islamic rulings and things like that. So, they're in a better place to make these kinds of rulings and have this authority, than anyone else. They are the most knowledgeable in the religion of Islam, so how can they not be the authorities?".[409]

It is clear that the participants of this research largely recognise the *marājiʿ* as religious authorities, be that due to epistemic credibility or otherwise. While some participants justified this by referring to the religious knowledge of the *marājiʿ*, others conceded that their perception of them as religious authorities was based on little more than having been taught as such from a young age. The research has also shown instances of disquiet, among ABSoc members, about the authoritativeness of the *marājiʿ* being overemphasised.

Further than understanding the individual *marājiʿ* as authorities, many of the participants were also quite aware of the hierarchical structure of religious authority in Shīʿism, which allows the central authority of a *marjiʿ* to become transnational, through the function of his representatives.

There were no statements from the participants, that explicit deny the *marājiʿ* being 'religious authorities'. However, what is understood by 'authority' is not necessarily unanimous.

As well as the supposition of religious knowledge, the data also revealed that some of the participants held an esteemed conception of the *marājiʿ* that went beyond merely respecting their scholarly expertise;

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[407] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 86
[408] Khalid: London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2018]
[409] Maliha: London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2018]

one that also places them on a pedestal of spiritual superiority as compared to the lay Shīʿa. In response to questions about what factors make a *marjiʿ* a religious authority, one of the participants in a focus group said:

> So, there's two sides. There's the taqwa,[410] there's a necessary need for that. So, as well as their knowledge, saying they are specialists in their field, they are not nominated just because of their knowledge, but also because of their taqwa. This makes them usually be more closer [sic] to the truth than other people.[411]

The above quote implies the participant's belief that the piety of the *marjiʿ* also facilitates his ability to derive jurisprudential law. The reviewed literature on Shīʿī authority talks of the *marājiʿ* having a revered status due to what is perceived of their knowledge and erudition in Islamic jurisprudence. The data in this research has come to demonstrate that some of its participants also see the *marājiʿ* in a spiritually elevated position – which furthers their authority. This also corresponds with Walbridge's description of the *marjiʿ* in the Shīʿī experience. Although, formally, the *marjiʿ* is solely a legal expert, she describes this position as one that "enjoys the dual role of chief legal expert and spiritual model for all Shīʿa".[412]

The idea that the *marājiʿ* were experts in the field of Islamic jurisprudence was never disputed throughout the fieldwork. In this respect, the data came across participants drawing the analogy between the *marājiʿ* and doctors, as experts in the field of physical health. It was fascinating to find this analogy recurring on three separate occasions during the fieldwork, at different times and in three different cities. The analogy was used to support the notion that the rulings of the *marājiʿ* should be adhered to, as well as challenge that same notion. This correlates with Abou El Fadl's analogy about a person's referring to the expertise of a plumber,[413] to show that the authority is epistemic and not coercive or dominating.

Hayder was the ABSoc president at a London campus. Expanding on his understanding of the religious authority of the *marjiʿ*, he said, "When you say authority, I think of like, a doctor. If I wanted medical advice, I'd go to a doctor. If I want religious advice, I go to someone who's versed in that".[414] Hayder's comments explain the *marājiʿ* being perceived as experts in their field, as the rationale behind complying with their rulings and teachings. It coincides with the rational basis behind the theory of *taqlīd*. At another focus group in London, Akbar drew the same analogy:

> Firstly, a person has to recognise that, whether one agrees with them or not, they are far more knowledgeable than you in that area. Like, you wouldn't debate with a doctor when he's talking about medicine. And if 100 doctors prescribe the same

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[410] *Taqwa*: Arabic word meaning "godliness" or "piety".
[411] Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at a university campus in the North of England [Feb 2019]
[412] Walbridge, L. (2001). *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. p 5
[413] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 19
[414] Haydar: ABSoc President at a London campus. Focus group interview [March 2019]

> drug to you, even if it has a weird name, you're not going to debate with that. They know what they're saying. In the exact same fashion, [you have] the Ayatollahs.[415]

Akbar used the analogy to, not only cement the idea that the *marājiʿ* are experts in the science of Islamic jurisprudence, but also to disapprove of challenges or criticisms of their opinions from the laity. Akbar implied that an ordinary Shīʿa Muslim, due to him or her not being an expert in jurisprudence, would be in no position to disagree with a ruling of a *marjiʿ*. This kind of attitude puts the *marjiʿ* into a position of unquestionability. Not because of the *marājiʿ* having stipulated *taqlīd* as mandatory, but as a result of this research participant assuming them to be in a position whereby their opinions cannot be debated. Akbar saying, "even if it has a weird name, you're not going to debate with that", suggests that one ought not to question the ruling of a *marājiʿ* even if the person has misgivings about it. The earlier chapters of the thesis illustrated how demanding a particular construction of *taqlīd* might be tantamount to a kind of intellectual authoritarianism. Akbar's statement, above, seems to show a mindset in which becoming a subject to that type of authoritarianism is self-imposed.

A third time the fieldwork came across the 'doctor analogy' being invoked was at a focus group in the Midlands, when a male ABSoc member used it, ironically, to explain how he would not resign his own agency. In seeing the array of views within the group, he said, "I'm kind of middle-ground. I see the marjiʿ as a doctor. I don't dismiss what he says, but if I'm not totally happy with what he says, I'm going to see another doctor, until I find a convincing answer".[416] Even though he does not dispute the expertise of the *marājiʿ*, him having to be convinced implies that he reserves the agency to criticise a given opinion. Such a stance, whilst accepting the *marjiʿ* as 'an authority', does not consider his authority to be binding.

In the view of ABSoc members, the *marājiʿ* are undeniable religious authorities, and the institution of *marjiʿiyyah* is hierarchical and authoritative. Bearing in mind the reverential status that the *marājiʿ* hold amongst Shīʿa Muslims generally, it was not surprising to that the data saw an absence of any severe criticism of them. The research has unearthed a variety of ways in which their authority is interpreted. While some respondents have portrayed a stance by which they understand their authority as incontrovertible, others have expressed sentiments that would not view it in this authoritarian way. There are two salient factors, discussed so far, that lead to the *marājiʿ* being seen as authorities. The first is them being perceived as knowledgeable and experts in the field of jurisprudence. The second is the idea that the *marājiʿ* are spiritual leaders, closer to God than the average Shīʿa.

[415] Akbar: London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2018]
[416] Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Oct 2019]

The following section illustrates how the *marājiʿ*'s image of credibility – both as experts in jurisprudence as well as spiritual position – is also enhanced by them being geographically located in the traditional cities of Shīʿī learning, in Iraq and Iran.

The Impact of Shīʿism's Romanticised 'Homelands'

The previous chapters have touched upon matters of identity and problematised the notion of viewing the ABSoc community as conventionally diasporic. For communities that are seen as conventional diasporas, there is a tendency to imagine the lifestyles in their 'homelands' as 'purer'.[417] The ABSoc community's members are ethnically diverse. Their intersectional identities converge on the point of their religious affiliation.

In a context wherein Shīʿa Muslims are in a minority, there is a tendency to idealise those geographical places where Shīʿism is in the majority. In addition to certain cities in Iran and Iraq having the feature of a majority Shīʿī population, they also contain the shrines of the Shīʿa Imams and revered personalities. This furthers their status among Shīʿa Muslims across the globe. These cities also happen to be where many of the Shīʿī traditional seminaries have been established. This research has uncovered the influence of these cities' revered statuses, amongst the participants, on the scholarship – and authority – that emanates from there. Najaf (Iraq), for example, is considered the "leading centre of learning in the Shīʿī world".[418] To what extent is this sentiment mirrored by the research participants? Do Shīʿa Muslims at UK universities actually look towards religious guidance from the Middle East as more authoritative and credible? Do the participants hold religious guidance, from those places, as more 'authentic' expressions of Shīʿism?

At one of the first convened focus groups, the discussion arose about whether or not Shīʿī religious authority was restricted for people from a certain part of the world. ABSoc Secretary, Hashim, said, "Yeah, but that's because they live in Iran, because they're specialists and that is where the research centres are based". When Hashim was asked where exactly the "research centres" are located, he replied, "So, you'd say that, traditionally, you have Qom, Najaf, Karbala and Mashhad".[419] All four of the cities Hashim listed are located in the Shīʿī-majority countries of Iran and Iraq. All four have shrines seen as sacred places by the Shīʿa, and visited by millions of Shīʿa pilgrims annually.

The emergence of Shīʿī seminaries in the West, over the last few decades,[420] does not seem to have diluted the perceived authoritativeness of the long-established seminaries in the Middle East. Hashim's

[417] Werbner, P. (2004) Theorising Complex Diasporas: Purity and Hybridity in the South Asian Public Sphere in Britain. in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. 30(5). p 899

[418] Litvak, M (1998). *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-century Iraq: The Ulama of Najaf and Karbala*. Cambridge University Press. Page 80

[419] Hashim, ABSoc Secretary at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]

[420] Van Den Bos, M. (2015). 'Western Seminary': On Transnational Shiite Higher Education in Britain. in *Social Compass 62(2)*. London: Sage Publications. pp 238-254

comments show how they still maintain a very strong position in the minds of Shīʿa Muslims. The consolidation of religious authority amongst fewer individuals in a limited geographical location, reduces the instances of divergent viewpoints and strengthens existing authorities into a more authoritarian form.

In trying to insist that religious authoritativeness was not confined to a certain group of people, but rather could potentially be attained by anyone, Hashim's colleague, Saleema, added, "Yeah, but that doesn't mean we can't go there".[421] Her statement implies the necessity to "go there" in order to be considered a competent religious authority. According to such an attitude, a scholar emerging from the West cannot be seen as on par with one from the mentioned cities in Iran or Iraq.

The authoritativeness of the *marājiʿ* and the perceived credibility of the Middle East seminaries have something of a symbiotic relationship. The presence of the *marājiʿ* there, doubtlessly gives those seminaries a higher standing. Many of them operate under the direct patronage of an individual *marjiʿ*. Conversely, the idealised image of the 'Shīʿī homelands' is a factor enhancing the statuses of the scholars based there – particularly the *marājiʿ*. Following Saleema's comment, I asked her if it was a necessity for a potential scholar to "go there", or whether it was possible for a prospective 'authority' to emerge as a result of having been educated in western seminaries. She replied:

> No, I think it is possible. I just think that becoming a marjiʿ is not just only about the education. It's also about the spiritual purification, and so it's not impossible here, but it's just easier in that part of the world maybe. That's why we have the centres there, in those parts of the world. I don't know, surrounded with the baraka[422] of the Ahlul-Bayt[423] as well.[424]

The previous section of this chapter presented a synoptical idea on how the *marājiʿ* are viewed as the religious authorities in Shīʿism. Saleema's comments show that, among some ABSoc members, as a reflection of the wider Shīʿa community, there exists a perception or expectation of the *marājiʿ* being spiritually superior to the average layman. Her statement suggests that she sees a level of "spiritual purification" as a prerequisite to becoming a *marjiʿ*; a purification that is facilitated by being in proximity to the shrines in Iran and Iraq. Saleema contrasts her own context, in the UK, with the setting of where the *marājiʿ* are based, "in that part of the world". This sentiment chimes with those expressed in the book containing Al-Sīstānī's edicts for Muslims living in the western world,[425] in which the same contrast is made. It reflects Saleema's romanticised view of Shīʿism's 'homelands', as one which is purer and more conducive to spiritual purification, than Shīʿism's 'diasporic' context in the West. This then factors into

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[421] Saleema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[422] *Baraka*: Arabic word that translates as 'blessing' or 'good fortune'.
[423] *Ahlul-Bayt*: As explained in the introductory chapters, *'Ahlul-Bayt'* literally means *The People of the Household*. Shīʿa Muslims believe that the progeny, and members of the immediate household of the Prophet Muhammad, were his rightful divinely-appointed successors. The allusion to the *Ahlul-Bayt*, here, and the presence of their blessings, refers to the shrines of the Shīʿa Imams and other family members, which house their tombs.
[424] Saleema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[425] Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West*. London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 39

her perception of the *marājiʿ*. This shows that the nature of religious authority in Shīʿism goes beyond mere epistemic superiority.

Saleema was also inclined to turn to institutions in the Middle East for guidance on non-jurisprudential matters, even though it may not come directly from a *marjiʿ*. When the focus group discussion veered into politics, she mentioned, "I've got relatives in the hawza[426] in Qom. They're my cousins, so I normally just message them if I have questions. For more social or political questions, I ask them". Saleema is of South-Asian background and so has no ethnic affiliation to Iran. The context of her comment was geopolitical. Her posing social and political questions to her contacts in the Qom seminaries, while the ambit of the seminary (*hawza*) is to train students in classical jurisprudence, shows that her gravitation towards the institutions there goes beyond seeing them as authorities in jurisprudence. While my research has not examined the extent to which this attitude is prevalent, this mindset does speak to matters of Shīʿī identity that were discussed in the previous chapter. Reverence of the shrine cities and whatever is connected to them, is an inseparable discussion from the one on Shīʿī identity. Seeing those cities as homelands of Shīʿism forms an inevitable attachment to them and perpetuates the notion that regards western Shīʿa Muslims as diasporic.

The diasporic mindset, seeing the homelands as having more authentic expressions of Shīʿism, make it more challenging for religious authority figures to emerge in the West. On the question of whether or not it might be possible for a *marjiʿ* to be based in the UK, Hasan Fadhil replied:

> You can, I suppose. It's not technically impossible. But people don't exactly look at England as a source of, you know, religious guidance.
>
> For that study, you'd want someone who goes to those traditional centres of study; Najaf or Qom or somewhere like that, studying under the most senior scholars. Then coming from there.
>
> From the people's perceptions side of things, if we've got this guy coming from Najaf or Qom, for this many years, then it makes it more acceptable for people to say, "Yeah. We can follow this person.[427]

What Hasan says correlates with Seema's comments, that for someone to be seen as a credible authority in religion, they would "go there", to study at the recognised seminaries. In Hasan's opinion, it is the "people's perceptions" that bestow the Iran and Iraq-based authorities with more credibility. It is true, as Van Den Bos points out, that the establishing of Shīʿī seminaries in the western world is a very recent phenomenon.[428] It is understandable, therefore, that long-established seminaries in the Middle East will

[426] *Ḥawza:* The Arabic word literally just means 'region', 'area' or 'territory'. The Shīʿī religious seminaries are vernacularly called *Ḥawza ʿIlmiyyah*, or 'areas of learning'. This is popularly abbreviated to simply "*Ḥawza*"
[427] Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]
[428] Van Den Bos, M. (2015). 'Western Seminary': On Transnational Shiite Higher Education in Britain. in *Social Compass 62(2)*. London: Sage Publications. pp 238-254

have built a reputation over the many decades, which similar institutions in the West lack. This attitude is corroborated by Scott-Baumann's (et al) work, whereby a young Shīʿa Muslim wished to study in Najaf for "just a few years" in order to "get more of that core, deep knowledge from there". [429]

In addition to describing the shrine cities reverentially, Hasan Fadhil's comments also denigrate *"England"* - or perhaps the West more generally – from being a possible source of religious knowledge. Despite living and studying in the UK, he seems to devalue its religious position in contrast to the Middle East, where the traditional seminaries are primarily located. When asked more directly about the prospect of having a UK-based *marjiʿ* - i.e. someone whose religious opinions would be followed as someone at the height of Shīʿī authority, he replied, "Technically, it's possible. Whether it will happen or not depends on if people take that as acceptable". Hasan is right in that the viability of such a prospect requires cultural acceptability. The sentimentalised image of the shrine cities, among some ABSoc members, is preventive to such a decentralisation of Shīʿī authority. This is the "emotional and historical attachment", referred to by Kadhim and Alrebh, cited as a hinderance to the prospect of a *marjiʿ* emerging from the Arabian Peninsula.[430] It is natural that attachment towards those cities, in which the Shīʿa Imams are buried, would be a universally strong aspect of the Shīʿī identity across the world. However, the data from this research has shown this attachment to extend to the contemporary institutions of religious authority in those cities.

In responding to whether it would be helpful to have a *marjiʿ* based in the UK, or if having religious authorities based in the starkly different social context pf the Middle East was problematic, Hasan referred to the transnational network of *marjiʿiyyah* as a solution:

> I don't think it's a problem, per se. You have scholars here who advise us, and they are in contact with the marjiʿiyyah. They can explain the contexts here [to the marājiʿ]. Then you can get an informed fatwa[431] based on the western context. That can work. You don't necessarily need to have a senior mujtahid living in England.

Instances like this in the data show that the *marājiʿ*'s transnational networks of satellite offices and representatives are not only constructs seen by non-Shīʿa 'outsider researchers' like Corboz[432] and Walbridge,[433] but they are actually functioning aspects of performative religious authority for Shīʿa Muslims in the UK.

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[429] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 90.

[430] Kadhim, A. and Alebh, A. F. (2021). *A Shift Among the Shīʿa: Will a Marjʿa Emerge from the Arabian Peninsula?*. Washington: Middle East Institute. p 11

[431] *Fatwa*: Arabic word meaning 'a formal legal or jurisprudential opinion'.

[432] Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

[433] Walbridge, L. (2014). *The Thread of Mu'awiya: The Making of a Marja' Taqlīd*. Indiana: Ramsay Press.

Although this research has seen criticism of the *marjiʿiyyah* with relation to the question of gender, as seen in the final chapter, expressions of disillusionment due to the geographical and social distances of the *marājiʿ*, was not particularly prominent in the data. The absence of such data cannot be used to discount the existence of such sentiments amongst ABSoc members. This research did come across relatively mild statements like, "things aren't the same, for example in Najaf, compared to like, in *****.[434] They should take that into perspective when giving you your answer". In the same focus group, a fellow participant suggested that it may be more fitting to ask scholar who is local due to the difference in social contexts between the UK and the Middle East: "It's actually better to ask someone here. Even a representative of the marjiʿ here may be more appropriate. The answer might be more relevant, even in the way he says it".[435] These comments differ from the stronger remarks made by participants in the Cardiff-based study, which also involved the ABSoc there. Some of the comments in Cardiff, from different respondents, included the following:

> - There's [sic] marāje living right now … they resemble a hermit who's locked himself in a room and doesn't know what's going on sometimes… especially in the UK.
> - I think not only if they were living here, but also if they could work so that they would have a better understanding of what people go through.
> - I think the reason they don't relate to us, is because they don't understand the struggle we go through here as a young Muslim.[436]

Contributions in this research, in this vein, were not as strongly worded as those from Cardiff in 2013. It is clear that reverence of the shrine cities impacts how the scholarship emerging from there is perceived, and that this is a factor in furthering the status of the *marājiʿ* as religious authorities. However, the generalisation that being based in the shrine cities augments their appeal and followability, is rather oversimplified and reductive – given that their geographical and cultural distance is a reason for scepticism towards them, as shown through the research in Cardiff.

Despite the dearth of qualitative research studying Shīʿa communities in the West, the perception of aloofness of the *marājiʿ* is not exclusive to my research. The view, that their rulings are often inapplicable to a life in the West, finds precedent and parallels in other parts of the western world. In her ethnography, Walbridge cites a Lebanese participant who refutes the universal applicability of the rulings form the *marājiʿ*. "In America", he says, "we can't do everything the marjiʿ says".[437] In terms of how it impacts

[434] The participant used the name of the city in which her campus was based. This has been hidden to anonymise the particular campuses at which fieldwork was carried out.
[435] Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at a university campus in the North of England [Feb 2019]
[436] Tajri, M. (2016). Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth. in *Muslims in the UK and Europe (2)* (ed. Suleiman, Y.) pp 148-156. Cambridge: Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. p 152
[437] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 73

the perception of the *marājiʿ* among Shīʿa Muslims in the West, the geographical centralisation of religious authority can be a double-edged sword.

The Role of Theological Rhetoric

> A lot of them look up to the marjiʿ like, you know, there's no one like them. Often, on WhatsApp, you'll find they'll write, "My marjiʿ, Sistani" and then put a little rose emoji next to it, which I find really cringy.[438]

The above quote, from one of the participating ABSoc members, reveals two - somewhat diametric - attitudes. It shows the *marājiʿ* being referred to with reverence and even adoration, in internal conversations between ABSoc members. On the flip side, Alaa (the cited participant) is himself fairly critical of such pedestalising, and this is reflective of his wider attitude towards the *marjiʿiyyah*.
The earlier chapters have clearly illustrated how theological rhetoric has been used to link the *marjiʿiyyah* to Shīʿī theological doctrines, raising the status of this institution to that of an incontrovertible tenet of Shīʿism. This section looks at instances in the data, which show how much of that rhetoric has been received and absorbed by the participants, resulting in the kind of adoration and veneration quoted above.

Shīʿism has distinct aspects of theology that inform orthodox notions of authority. Shīʿa Muslims believe in 12 successive infallible Imams from the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad, as his immediate successors – the twelfth of whom is in a divinely decreed occultation and will reappear messianically at an unknown time. As the Imams are believed to be divinely appointed, their authority is an extension of God's, and therefore, sacrosanct. Whilst the *marājiʿ* are not considered infallible, linking their authority with that of the Imams elevates their status and effectively makes their obedience obligatory.[439] This has been explained in the prefatory chapter of the thesis, which discusses Shīʿī authority. This section of the thesis considers the instances in the data wherein the participants refer to, or endorse, this theological rhetoric and its effectiveness in shaping their perceptions of the *marājiʿ*'s authority.

Participants' implicit statements in the data, alluding to the connection between the authority of the Imams and the *marājiʿ*, were evident from the onset of the fieldwork. The focus group interviews customarily began with open questions about religious authority. At the first focus group to be convened, participants were brainstorming preliminary ideas about what constituted religious authority. Several of them immediately mentioned the *marājiʿ*, as became a typical feature in subsequent focus groups. In response, Hashim commented:

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[438] Alaa: ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]
[439] Eliash, J. (1979). Misconceptions Regarding the Juridicial Status of the Iranian ʻUlamā. in *International Journal for Middle-Eastern Studies* (10). London. pp 9-25

> I guess you could argue that Imam Al-Zamān[440] as well. I mean, he is the ultimate religious authority. But if you're thinking of people that we have direct access to, realistically, then yes, the Ayatollahs and the marājiʿ.[441]

Implicitly imbedded in his statement, is the connection between the authority of the *marājiʿ* and that of the infallible Imam. There were instances in the data making that link more directly. The following quotation shows how that direct linkage could lead to a stance of unquestioning submission to the teachings of the *marājiʿ*. One focus group participant, in the Midlands, said, "I was brought up to be taught that the marjiʿ is the representative of the 12th Imam when he's not here. He's your go-to person. So, I see the marjiʿ as the 'be-all end-all'". Since she mentioned that she was brought up in this way, she was further asked if this was still her approach presently, to which she replied, "Yes". [442] Equating the authority of the fallible *marjiʿ* to that of the infallible Imam, means that his directives are unquestionable and beyond critique. In effect, it connects the interpretation of the *marjiʿ* to the will of God. This attitude makes the conception of the *marjiʿ*, not merely authoritative, but an authoritarian one.

In another instance, Saleema, cited earlier, likened the entire formalised system of religious authority in Shīʿism, to the position of the Imam. "I don't think it's feasible for all of the Shīʿas to look up to one person, except if that was the Imam of the time", said Saleema, "That's why we have the system of marjiʿiyyah, where you have the option to choose between who you think is the most knowledgeable".[443] The idea conveyed by the literature, that the *marājiʿ* are seen to operate in the Imam's stead and carry his authority, is substantiated by some of the examples in the data. However, such a belief in the *marjiʿiyyah* is far from universal amongst the ABSoc members.

Alaa is another ABSoc member, of Iraqi descent, whose input to is looked at more extensively in later chapters. On this question of connecting the *marjiʿiyyah* to the belief in the Imams, he said, "The thing is, we're taught that marjiʿiyyah is something that's enmeshed in Shi'ism". He continued, "We were brought up [to believe] that, just as Imāmah[444] is a necessary part, that marjiʿiyyah [also] is".[445] Contesting the views of other ABSoc members cited above, Alaa insists on a theological disconnection between the central Shīʿī belief in the Imams and the institution through which religious authority has come to be normatively performed. When asked to clarify further as to whether or not the *marjiʿiyyah* was central to Shīʿism, he said, "it's not something that's mandated by God or anything". Detaching Shīʿī authority performances from incontrovertible theological principles also strips it of an authoritarian characteristic.

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[440] *Imam Al-Zamān*: Arabic term meaning "The Imam of the era"; reference to the twelfth Shīʿa Imam, believed to be living and in occultation.
[441] Hashim, ABSoc Secretary at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[442] Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Oct 2019]
[443] Saleema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[444] *Imāmah*: The Arabic word literally means "leadership". Theologically, in Shīʿīsm, it refers to the belief in the 12 Imams as successors to the Prophet Muhammad.
[445] Alaa: ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]

In this case, the authority of the *marājiʿ* is not seen as an extension of God's absolute authority. As such, the will of God is not synonymised with the interpretation of the *marājiʿ*. Alaa's attitude is more comparable to an ABSoc President, Abbas, who had said about the *marājiʿ* that "They're not there as the absolute law".[446]

In discussing the links made between Shīʿī theological beliefs, the *marjiʿiyyah* and the perceived authority of the *marājiʿ*, this section of the chapter has unveiled the disparateness in views amongst the ABSoc members on the question of religious authority, which is thought to be a focal aspect of Shīʿī identity.

In looking at the rhetoric used to link the *marjiʿiyyah* to the Shīʿa Imams, the starkly contrasting stances among the participants are exhibited when analysing two instances of the collected data. One of the participants, cited above, sees "the marjiʿ as the 'be-all end-all'" on account of her deeming him as the "representative of the 12th Imam".[447] Munira bluntly differs from this perspective. She was quoted objecting to Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī being pedestalised, as she saw it, by fellow ABSoc members. In the focus group interview that she attended, she frustratedly made the following comments in the presence of other ABSoc members:

> I'm sorry but Sayyid Sīstānī. Ah! Every gathering I go to. Everywhere I go. Everyone's always going on and on about Sayyid Sīstānī. I think, at one point, I remember my sister was young and she was told so much that she ended up thinking that Sayyid Sīstānī was one of the Imams. And, I was like, "This is a joke!". Because everyone's talking about him so much and revering him. For me, is when it gets too much. Someone can have authority, but they're not the be-all and end-all.[448]

The fact that both participants, in completely separate occasions of fieldwork, have used identical expression of *"be all / end all"* – one to describe the absoluteness of the authority of the *marjiʿ* and the other to refute it – exemplifies polarised attitudes among the ABSoc participants of this research.

Conclusion

The notion that, today, Shīʿī religious authority is centred upon the *marājiʿ*, was unanimously recognised by the participants of this research. The nature of that authority, however, was a point on which stances were diverse.

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[446] Abbas, ABSoc president, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2016]

[447] Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Oct 2019]

[448] Munira: Focus group interview with a London-based ABSoc [March 2019]

The status of the *marājiʿ*, and that of the *marjiʿiyyah* as an institution, is impacted by two factors that this thesis has underlined: the sentimental attachment to the shrine cities in the Middle East, and the theological rhetoric used to promote the *marjiʿiyyah*'s authoritativeness. Both of these factors are principal components of Shīʿī identity – emotional and theological respectively. Probing the discussion around the impact of the shrine cities has shown that the status of the *marājiʿ* is propped up by more than suppositions of their epistemic superiority, but that they are also viewed as being spiritually loftier than 'ordinary' Shīʿa Muslims. This aura of godliness also makes them more authoritative. These ideas facilitate the perpetuation of Shīʿī authority being geographically centralised.

This research has come across participants reflecting on their own conditioning and upbringing, as reasons for their stances on religious authority. Interestingly, the data also includes an instance where this suggestion is rebutted by a participant, who sought to justify his insistence, on following the *marājiʿ*, through a rational process. Anthropologists have suggested that modernity has had the impact driving religious authority away from external human actors to a more autonomous exercise.[449] The rationalising process, as the one described, seeks to maintain the tradition of authority, but qualify the performance through rational means.

Reviewing the literature has shown writings that describe the authority of the *marājiʿ* as an extension of that of the Imams.[450] Other works, citing narrations from the 12 Imams, describe the *marjiʿ* as having been authorised by the "Hidden Imam", thereby depicting his authority as absolute.[451] This research has revealed that, despite the *marājiʿ* being popularly views as the Imam's deputies in Shīʿī circles, contesting this type of rhetoric is not uncommon among ABSoc members.

This study has come across participants who endorse the idea that the authority of the *marājiʿ* as incontestable, as well as contributions from respondents who reject that notion, and so deny a theological basis to their authority. Qualitatively studying the ABSocs, proves that it is wrong to generalise views on how Shīʿa communities perceive the *marājiʿ* and the theological rhetoric used to enhance their authority. The later chapters in this thesis analyse how these varying attitudes towards the *marājiʿ*, and the variety of beliefs about the extent of their authority, translate into how religious authority is practically performed amongst ABSoc members.

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[449] Lambert, Y. (1999). Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?. in *Sociology of Religion 60(3)*. pp 303-333
[450] Aziz, T. (2002). The Political Theory of Muhammad Baqir Sadr. in *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (ed. Abdul-Jabar, F.) pp. 231-244. London: Saqi Books. p 237
[451] Eliash, J. (1979). *Misconceptions Regarding the Juridicial Status of the Iranian 'Ulamā*. in *International Journal for Middle-Eastern Studies* (10). London. pp 9-25

This chapter has revealed a variety of views and conceptions, of the *marājiʿ*, from the research participants. The presence of internal diversities, on matters at the core of Shīʿism, is an issue that the ABSocs have coped with, in order not to project a fragmented face of Shīʿism to the wider community. Furthermore, this variety in views signifies a possibility for those participants, who do not hold the *marjiʿiyyah* as authoritarian, to exercise forms of agency either within recognised forms of lived Shīʿism or beyond those conventions.

Chapter 5
Performing Religious Authority

In the discussion of religious authority performance, the extents and ways that the participants exercise interpretive agency was explored, in light of what has been elucidated in the earlier chapters in which authority and agency have been philosophised, and contrasted with the conventional practice of *taqlīd*. This chapter looks at how those standpoints were translated into practice, examining how religious authority is performed among members of the ABSoc community.
The contributions from the participants show the *marājiʿ* being unanimously understood as religious authorities. However, this part of the thesis shows how the participants also refer to other sources of religious guidance when it comes to their practical day-to-day lives.

At one of the focus groups convened in the North of England, the discussion revealed varying standpoints towards the *marjiʿiyyah*. However, with a show of hands, everyone claimed to 'follow' a *marjiʿ*. I am cognisant of the possibility that pressure from the focus group dynamic may also have played a role. Eliciting deeper narratives exposed a host of different approaches to the practice of religious authority. When asked about what sources of authority and guidance they follow, Rasool's response was a typical one. "For me", said Rasool, "it would be the marājiʿ straight away. In terms of our daily lives, just to make sure you're not breaking any laws here and there".[452] Despite Rasool's unhesitant response, there was a range of what following the *marājiʿ* and referring to them implies practically, among the participants. Some of these practical performances have been analysed in this chapter.

Authority in Shīʿī Islam has been described as centralised and concentrated on a small number of *marājiʿ*, based in a geographically confined area. However, when examining what authoritative sources the young participants turn to, the performance of authority is sometimes more diluted and democratised.
In theory, the majority of participants claimed to follow a *marjiʿ*. What that 'following' entails required further nuanced examination.

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[452] Rasool, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in Northern England [Feb 2019]

Conforming with Established Models: Towards Epistemic Authoritarianism

In one of the focus groups, participants were asked if they had come across any rulings that they felt uneasy about. London-based Salman, a British-born participant of Iraqi descent, brought up the rulings about posthumous organ-donation;[453] an issue which came to the surface more than once at different stages during the fieldwork.

> It's actually happened to me, like, they've told me, "This is the ruling". For example, regarding organ donation. They say it's not allowed unless the organ goes to a Muslim. To me, I don't understand why that's the case, because at the end of the day, we're all humans. But, I guess, because they are more knowledgeable than me, I just have to take it and move on. I tried to understand why, but maybe I just don't have the knowledge to make that kind of decision on my own.[454]

Despite Salman's own misgivings about the ruling, he opted to act in accordance with it, citing the epistemic authoritativeness of the *marji*ʿ. His last sentence, from the abovementioned contribution, demotes his own interpretive ability in favour of that of the *marji*ʿ, despite not knowing the reasoning and rationale behind the edicts. The thesis chapter, discussing the background of Shīʿī authority, likens Salman's performance to an instance of the Kantian notion of self-imposed immaturity.[455] However, this would be a reductively judgemental explanation considering the numerous factors that inform any individuals performances of religious authority. This performance is a reflection of a trusted reliance on the jurist, in the belief, as Takim puts it, that the practices will "approximate the will of God".[456] It is this confidence in the *marji*ʿ and the perception of his far superior knowledge, which results in some Shīʿa Muslims, like Salman, subjecting themselves to his religious authority. This 'paradox of subjectivation' has been touched upon in earlier chapters and revisited in the chapter discussing the impact of gender-related issues on religious authority performances.[457]
Salman expressed ambivalence about the ruling that he ultimately decided to conform with. The understanding of some participants was that conformity with the rulings of the *marji*ʿ is mandatory, regardless of one's own opinions about any given ruling.

The issue of shaking hands with the opposite gender has been covered more extensively in the chapter discussing gender-related matters. However, at one of the focus groups where this topic came up, Kumail

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453 Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's ruling limits the permissibility of posthumous organ donation, from a Muslim, to instances wherein the beneficiary is also a Muslim. [Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West*. London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 194]
454 Salman: London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2018]
455 Kant, I. (2009). *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*. London: Penguin Publications
456 Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 145
457 Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

said about the ruling of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, “You can criticise him, but at the end of the day he’s still your marjiʿ, so you still have to follow him”.[458]

Kumail insists upon the compulsion of having to “follow him”, which is to obey his rulings. Kumail’s understanding of *taqlīd* did not allow for autonomous agency, even though the theory behind *taqlīd* and its definition technically allows for an untrained individual’s agency. Kumail’s insistence on having to follow the *marjiʿ* even if one is inclined to criticise, reflects his perception of Shīʿī authority as an authoritarian structure. Kumail’s standpoint is on the more rigid end of the spectrum of how Shīʿī authority is performed. In a range of ways, the practice of following the *marājiʿ* and performing *taqlīd* largely persisted among many of the ABSoc members. Not all of these applications of *taqlīd* coincided with its established model.

In an interview with a London-based ABSoc member, Hasan Fadhil, he was asked about any challenging incidents he had faced whereby the rulings of the *marājiʿ* became relevant. He recalled a university convention at which alcohol was being consumed. He explained, “So, I told the organiser, that for religious purposes, I can’t sit on the table where there is alcohol. [459] So, they arranged another table for those who don’t want to drink. It was only because I raised the issue”.[460]

Hasan then compared Middle Eastern and UK contexts. He has given an example of an instance where the disparity in cultures may encourage Shīʿa Muslims, based in the West, to refer to locally based authorities:

> Obviously, if I was living in the Middle East and somebody said to me, “You can’t sit at a table where there is alcohol”, I’d be like, “Of course!”. But here, people face it from a different angle. So, if you have the shaykhs being involved with the people. The people would then be like, “Our shaykhs, here, they’re in touch with us. They identify with our problems.[461]

Hasan gives a practical example of why diasporic Shīʿa Muslims may be drawn away from the orthodox practices of religious authority, and from following the rulings of the *marājiʿ*. The idea that the *marājiʿ* do not relate to Shīʿa Muslims in the West, and lack cultural empathy, is a factor that could lead to a divergence away from the established models of authority.

Of course, there are additional factors that influence their performances. In the above case, despite suggesting that the ruling might not be appropriate in a western context, Hasan Fadhil still took active

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[458] Kumail, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Mar 2017]

[459] The participant is referring to the prevailing opinion in Shīʿī jurisprudence, that does not allow a person to sit at a table upon which intoxicants are consumed or served. Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī’s edict on the matter is quoted on his website: https://www.sistani.org/arabic/qa/02201/ [Accessed: 30/04/21]:

"يحرم الاكل من مائدة يشرب عليها شيء من الخمر أو المسكر، بل يحرم الجلوس عليها أيضاً... يجب الانصراف عن تلك المائدة"

“It is forbidden to eat at a table upon which any kind of wine or intoxicant is consumed. Rather, it is also forbidden to sit at it… It is obligatory to move away from that table”.

The ruling has also been mentioned in a collection of laws compiled specifically for Shīʿa Muslims living in the West:
Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West*. London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 118

[460] Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]

[461] Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]

measures to comply with the ruling – an indication that he held some sort of an allegiance to established conventions of religious authority, in spite of his personal opinions. He was questioned further, as to whether he would have sat at that same table where alcohol was being served, had Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's prohibitive ruling not existed. He replied, "Yeah. To avoid a social awkward thing, I would probably have just sat there". There seems to be a noticeable effort to avoid nonconformity with normative Shīʿī authority performance.

Whilst the ABSocs, institutionally, do not actively promote any particular performance of Shīʿī authority, they do provide sheltered spaces on campus in which their performances would not be questioned or challenged. As such, despite the fact that Shīʿa Muslim students are in the minority on campus, the ABSocs serve as a platform within which different aspects of Shīʿī identity can be preserved. Normative performances of authority and *taqlīd* form one central aspect of that identity for some of the participants.

My research has shown examples of participants complying with the rulings of the *marājiʿ*, and complying with the practice of *taqlīd*, regardless of whether or not they hold their own independent stances on a given matter. These can be seen as clear instances of how Friedman describes "the case in which no reasons have to be given to a person to gain his compliance with a prescription because he "accepts" the person who prescribes it".[462] Takim's statement, that "taqlīd generates confidence in the believers that their religious practices, which are based on the juridical pronouncements of the marājiʿ, approximate the will of God",[463] also insinuates that these participants lack confidence in their own opinions. The examples of authority performances in this section are those that stem from participants viewing Shīʿī as an epistemically authoritarian construct and engaging with it as such. Despite their own reservations, the sole valid interpretation of God's law is the reading of the *marjiʿ*.
However, the subsequent sections of this chapter show an array of ways in which the research participants described their performances; many of them did not correspond with *taqlīd* as it is traditionally understood.

Widening the Circles of Authority

Although the *marājiʿ* are accepted at the ultimate authorities in Shīʿism, the way authority is 'performed' among some participants, revealed a recognition of the hierarchy expanding the ambit of the *marjiʿ*'s authority. The centralised authority of the *marjiʿ* is extended, while also being diluted, as the Shīʿa Muslim students turn to more immediately accessible sources of guidance.

462 Friedman, R. (1990). On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy. in (ed. Raz, J.) *Authority*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pg 67
463 Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 145

My earlier research, in Cardiff, unearthed sentiments of disquiet among some of the participants, at the fact that the *marājiʿ* were so distant in terms of their location as well as their cultural contexts.[464] The geographical and socio-cultural aloofness of the *marājiʿ* is inescapable. The impracticality of approaching the *marjiʿ*'s person, led to participants turning to more localised sources of guidance.
Although Hasan Fadhil decided to act according to the ruling of the *marjiʿ*, his comments implied that a hypothetical authority figure in a more local context and more relatable, may have resulted in a different ruling.[465]

The disparity in cultural contexts, between the research participants and the *marājiʿ*, became most evident in matters involving gender, thus making gendered issues a prominent theme in the data. The following comments from Homam, a male focus group participant of Bahraini nationality, are with regards to the inter-mingling between the genders and women's sartorial customs:

> The principles are mainly the same. But when it comes to the issues like mixing with genders and everything, some of the rulings actually depend on the place you are. That's what I feel like. For example, for females, there is a code of dress in Bahrain which is different from here, for example. So, it's more relevant to ask a shaykh from here than asking someone from the Middle East.
>
> So, I can still contact [them], but in certain topics, it's actually better to ask someone here. Even a representative of the marjiʿ here may be more appropriate. The answer might be more relevant, even in the way he says it.[466]

The matters of interaction between the genders and the *hijab* have both been discussed at length in later chapters. Homam's comments here gave an insight into some of the decisions he would make when deciding which sources of religious guidance and authority he turns to; and how his perceptions of the *marājiʿ*, based in the Middle East, informs those decisions.
Homam's comments suggest that scholars based in the Middle East are not best placed to give guidance on some of the social issues arising in the West, due to a lack of cultural familiarity. One alternative he suggests is to approach "a representative of the marjiʿ here" as a more appropriate course. Although Homam felt it was not be suitable to refer some social matters to the distant *marjiʿ*, he was reluctant to disconnect from the institution of *marjiʿiyyah* altogether. His suggestion of referring to a representative of the *marjiʿ* shows his awareness of the hierarchical system of authority in Shīʿism. The use of representatives dilutes authority away from the central figure of the *marjiʿ*'s person, while simultaneously consolidating the authoritativeness and ambit of the *marjiʿiyyah* as a system.

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464 Tajri, M. (2016). Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth. in *Muslims in the UK and Europe (2)* (ed. Suleiman, Y.) pp 148-156. Cambridge: Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. p 152

465 *"So, if you have the shaykhs being involved with the people. The people would then be like, "Our shaykhs, here, they're in touch with us. They identify with our problems"*. Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]

466 Homam: A focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at a university campus in the North of England [Feb 2019]

Homam's female colleague and ABSoc secretary, Aiman, added to his comments on the appropriateness of approaching local authorities as opposed to those based abroad: "It makes you see things differently. It's important that the marājiʿ know [the contexts], because in different places you have different struggles. So that they're aware of that. That things aren't the same, for example in Najaf, compared to like, in *****.[467] They should take that into perspective when giving you your answer".[468] When asked directly whether or not she thinks the *marājiʿ* do take differing social contexts into perspective when giving an answer, she replied, "I'm not sure". The later chapters of this thesis refer to examples of female participants seeking representation from the Shīʿī structure of authority, given that the *marājiʿ* are invariably male. The participants quoted here are looking for representation for the aspect of their identities that categorises them as western, or aligned with western culture. All of these participants are people who strongly identify as Shīʿa Muslims. However, the gap between their social situations and that of the *marājiʿ*, dissuades them from following their rulings unambivalently.

This distance from the *marājiʿ*, literal and figurative, has led to many of the participants obtaining religious guidance from more immediate sources. However, oftentimes this does not necessitate a detachment from the institutional *marjiʿiyyah* as a system. The literature is rife with examples of how the *marājiʿ* have extended their authority and influence by establishing a network of representatives and offices round the world, especially so in the city of London. Getting religious guidance from these representatives and their offices allows Shīʿa Muslims, in the UK and elsewhere, to remain connected to the *marjiʿiyyah*. The continuing connectedness to the *marjiʿiyyah*, in whatever form, allows the association with Shīʿī authority to endure. Referring to the representatives of the *marājiʿ* demonstrates a recognition of Shīʿī authority's hierarchical nature as well as a willingness to operate within it. The following comments, from Asghar, an ABSoc member in London, highlight how the perceived authority, set in the person of the *marjiʿ*, can be extended through his appointed representatives. The authority of anyone else, however, is contingent on being in line with the *marjiʿ* and his teachings, as the utmost authority.

> To me, the religious authority is the marjiʿ or the representative of the marjiʿ. It doesn't have to be the marjiʿ in person, but someone who conveys his teachings to you and would give you the advice from the source.[469]

The data has shown the participants' awareness of the central authority of the *marājiʿ* being broadened through their representatives. In this way, this research supports observations that describe Shīʿī

[467] The name of the city in which she was based and where the focus group interview took place.
[468] Aiman: A focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at a university campus in the North of England [Feb 2019]
[469] Asghar, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in London [Mar 2019]

authority's hierarchy, and affiliation with it, as a ubiquitous aspect of the lived Shīʿī experience – especially for Shīʿa Muslims in the West or in 'diasporic' contexts.
The following exchange, among ABSoc members at a focus group in the Midlands, shows how decentralised authority is appreciated as hierarchical and as an extension of the *marjiʿiyyah*. The inclination to ask for guidance from someone more immediate, with the expectation of a better cultural understanding, is also reflected in the final comments. The undermentioned conversation ensued from a discussion about whether it would be better to approach the website of the *marjiʿ*, or simply approach a scholar at the local Islamic centre:

> **Faheema**: You can take the advice of like, local shaykhs, like there's so many around us.
> **Hashim**: But what different opinion is an ʿālim[470] going to give you. All an ʿālim does is, he asks you, "Whose taqlīd do you do?", and then he would…basically it's an easier way to get your answer.
> **Huda**: It just feels more personal. You can ask questions back, you can have a discussion and understand the answer, rather than just accepting an answer. And they'd base the answer on your context.[471]

Huda's comments also reflected a desire to, not only receive religious direction, but also critically engage with 'religious authority' in whatever form it takes; to "ask questions back" and "have a discussion", as opposed to "just accepting an answer". While she did not express a desire to contravene any teachings, her statement is beginning to open the door of critical engagement, and so step towards exercising interpretive agency. Lambert describes autonomisation, away from formalised authority, as an effect of modernity on religion.[472] Even though this thesis will go to mention ways in which participants have been more explicit in exercising that agency, Huda words reflect the opening towards that trend of autonomy and away from a rigidly authoritarian outlook. While there is no explicit demand for religious interpretive agency, her comments show a pursuit of some empowerment that would go beyond Sachedina's depiction of *taqlīd* performance as "blind emulation of a jurist".[473]

Approaching local scholars for guidance widens the scope of religious authority; it dilutes it from the *marājiʿ* but simultaneously reaffirms it. While guidance may be obtained from someone locally, the expectation is that the guidance would always be in line with the teachings and rulings of the *marājiʿ*. The local scholar is not expected to act with independent authority in asserting a personal opinion. On the one hand, authority is disseminated away from the *marājiʿ* themselves; on the other hand, it is cemented with the understanding that only their opinions are propagated.

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470 '*Alim*: Arabic word meaning 'scholar'.
471 Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2016]
472 Lambert, Y. (1999). Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?. in *Sociology of Religion 60(3)*. pp 303-333
473 Chenai. M. C. (2008). *Recueil de textes du professeur Abdulaziz Sachedina*. Paris: Publibook.

The study also came across participants referring to religious authority unconnected to *marjiʿiyyah* as an institution. Previous chapters have shown that the perceptions of the *marājiʿ*, among the participants, involves a view of them having an exceptional degree of knowledge. The criterion of knowledge is one by which authority is vested to individuals within, and sometimes beyond, the *marjiʿiyyah*. In an interview, ABSoc Vice President, Yusra, said:

> If I do have questions, I tend to turn to people around me who are very well-read and well-educated. For example, I'll get the opinion of a few different shaykhs around us. But no, I don't follow anyone in particular, I just tend to get general opinions.[474]

A number of things can be inferred by unpacking Yusra's description of how she seeks religious guidance. Firstly, Yusra tends to turn to "people around" her, or local to her. This practice alone does not necessarily dissociate an individual from the *marjiʿiyyah*'s hierarchical structure, but it shows the dilution of religious authority from the centrally based *marājiʿ*.
Furthermore, Yusra's practice does not fit with the established orthopraxy of *taqlīd*. She takes guidance from local individuals that she has identified as being learned in religion and does not align herself to any particular *marjiʿ*. The Shīʿa students almost unvaryingly view the *marājiʿ* in extremely high regard, but following them through the performance of *taqlīd* is far from an inevitable corollary. The performances of numerous ABSoc members suggest that the criteria of relatability, accessibility and perceived knowledge grant religious authority to people who are then turned to for religious guidance. The fact that Yusra was the Vice President of her ABSoc, show that while the ABSocs operate under the banner of Shīʿism, they are not rigid defenders of orthodoxy. They aid the Shīʿa students in espousing their Shīʿī identity without an insistence on all of the established conventions.

In some cases, the mere perception of religiosity was a factor that bestowed religious authority on people beyond the *marājiʿ*. Taqwa was a second-year medical student who was unsure about whether or not she could continue with her field, due the complex issue around abortion:

> There were people saying you can't take part in persuading patients [against abortion] because nowadays there's this whole ideology about autonomy and giving the patient the decision. You're not allowed to give them your advised opinion. Only as much impartial information as possible.[475]

Taqwa was worried that her religious duty, which would mean possibly advising women against the procedure, would violate her medical obligation to be impartial. Considering the dilemma she found herself in, Taqwa was asked if she turned to anyone for religious guidance on the matter.

[474] Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]
[475] Taqwa, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in The Midlands [Oct 2019]

> There was this religious lady coming to the mosque. I asked her. She said, because it's in the name of making people better, she wouldn't see a problem with me practicing medicine.

The 'religiosity' of the lady, as well as the mosque as a religious space, has given her authority and satisfied Taqwa in validating her choice of pursuing medicine. Whether or not they represent the views of any given *marjiʿ*, those seen to be 'religious' in local centres are being referred to, either diluting or fragmenting the authority of the *marjiʿiyyah*.

The appearance of religiosity and being affiliated to local Islamic centres are not the only criteria participants considered when turning to people, other than the *marājiʿ*, for religious direction. When Yusra was asked who she turned to when faced with a religious issue, she replied, "To be honest, my parents, for the majority of the questions I had. And they never brought about the issue of following a certain person".[476]

The *marjiʿ* may stand at the apex of religious authority in theory, but this research has repeatedly seen pragmatism lead participants to more proximate sources for religious direction.

Some participants have described how their strong affiliations to the *marjiʿiyyah* were consequential to their conditioning from a young age;[477] Yusra's last words, above, show that the idea of such training cannot be generalised as prevalent in Shīʿī societies; even amongst 'devout' Shīʿa Muslims who take up leading roles in Shīʿī student societies. This serves as a further indication that young Shīʿa Muslims in Britain are forging a reconstructed version of Shīʿism and Shīʿī identity, in which the *marjiʿiyyah* is not such an integral component.

Reimagining Shīʿī Authority:
Constructing Non-Authoritarian Models

This section recounts a number of ways in which participants have diverged away from practicing *taqlīd* as it has been normatively established, sometimes concurrently claiming to follow a particular *marjiʿ*. Observing such an approach is not completely without precedent. Walbridge quoted one of her participants also being *"*selective*"* in how she follows her *marjiʿ*.[478] Her anecdote is specifically to do with the observance of *hijab*. However, Walbridge avoids delving into her participants' rationale behind such performances and uncover their reimagined ideas of religious authority.

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[476] Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]

[477] This was expressed by London ABSoc President, Donya [March 2018] as well as another focus group participant based in Midlands [Oct 2019]

[478] Walbridge, L. (1997). *Without Forgetting the Imam.* Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 82

Imagining Shīʿī authority as an authoritarian construct would not allow an individual to apply his or her agency in making religious or jurisprudential decisions; it would also put the views and rulings of the *marājiʿ* outside the bounds of any possible criticism. The literature on Shīʿī authority has depicted the appreciation of *marjiʿiyyah*, by Shīʿa communities, as one whose pronouncements are "final and beyond critique".[479] Furthermore, scholars have quoted narrations to imply the equivalence of contravening the *marjiʿ*, with the religious transgression of polytheism.[480] As a result, Sachedina sweepingly describes the practice of the "Shīʿa masses" as "blind acceptance" of the *marājiʿ*.[481] While this study's findings challenge Sachedina's generalisation of this attitude among the *"Shīʿa masses"*, the research has found evidence of such *blind acceptance* approaches among the participants.

Kabeer, for example, is a Mechanical Engineering student in the West Midlands. He was explicit in renouncing the idea of adopting religious agency, even using the phrase, "follow blindly", to acknowledge his own stance:

> We are not in a position to say what's right or not, because we don't know why God gives the command. Like they used to say men can't wear gold. We don't know why we can't. Sometimes we just have to follow blindly what they [the marājiʿ] say.[482]

Kabeer disclosed his own appreciation, that Shīʿī authority should be adhered to as an epistemologically authoritarian construct, in that one cannot diverge from the rulings of the *marājiʿ*. His words also imply a synonymising between the rulings of the *marājiʿ* and the command of God; completely overlooking the fact that the former are interpretations stemming from fallible human endeavour. Kabeer continued:

> Like, for us, maybe organ donation saves a life, so it makes sense to us. But still they say we're not allowed to donate an organ [to non-Muslims]. We might not know why. So, we just have to accept what they say.

Going beyond rejecting the notion of personal interpretive agency, Kabeer even denies the right of an individual to question the reasoning behind rulings. For participants like Kabeer, the extent of authoritarianism in Shīʿī authority seems to disallow any intellectual engagement with the rationale behind the pronouncements of the *marājiʿ*. The research participants are all students in UK's Higher Education institutions, presumably intellectually interacting with a host of notions in their respective fields. Despite that, some participants eschewed intellectually engaging with jurisprudential concepts when doing so undermines the authoritativeness of the *marājiʿ*. Kabeer again mentions the ruling regarding organ donation.[483] This chapter has already quoted London-based Salman in raising the same issue, about which he expressed some uncertainty before choosing to comply with the ruling. This suggests that Kabeer's comment did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather discussions on these rulings - and

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479 Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147-148

480 Eliash, J. (1979). Misconceptions Regarding the Juridicial Status of the Iranian 'Ulamā. in *International Journal for Middle-Eastern Studies* (10). London. pp 9-25

481 Chenai. M. C. (2008). *Recueil de textes du professeur Abdulaziz Sachedina*. Paris: Publibook. p 245

482 Kabeer, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in The Midlands [Oct 2019]

483 Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's ruling limits the permissibility of posthumous organ donation, from a Muslim, to instances wherein the beneficiary is also a Muslim. [Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West*. London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 194]

therefore on the authority of the *marjiʿiyyah* - are taking place within the ABSoc communities and among wider circles of young Shīʿa Muslims.

In spite of these instances in the data, my research findings challenge the generalisation that Shīʿī authority is appreciated and performed in this this way.
In stark contrast to Kabeer, this study has observed instances wherein participants have explicitly expressed their readiness not to comply with the edicts and opinions of the *marājiʿ*. Retorting to Kabeer, in the same focus group, Hiba said, "I'm not going to take what someone says and just take that as 100%. Every single person on earth has a different idea about something. That doesn't change when it comes to religious scholars".[484] Quite unlike Kabeer, Hiba's outlook grants her the space to disagree with the *marājiʿ*; their pronouncements are neither final,[485] nor is their disobedience tantamount to polytheism.[486] Kabeer and Hiba are members of the same ABSoc, at the same campus, participating in the same focus group. I observed numerous occasions in the fieldwork, where views were diametrically opposed to each other, on the subject of Shīʿī authority and the *marjiʿiyyah*, emerging from a single ABSoc. As is typical of any religious community, members of the ABSoc organisations are far from identical in their religious views, even when it comes to a matter that is supposedly central to Shīʿī identity. The ability of the ABSocs to function and cater for Shīʿa students – under a banner of Shīʿism – despite the internal diversity of views, shows that their members have succeeded in constructing a practiced and performed 'Shīʿism', which does not hold the ultimate authoritativeness of the *marjiʿiyyah* as an essential marker of Shīʿī identity.

Hiba's statement, allowing herself the space to question and disagree with a *marjiʿ*, displays her unwillingness to conform with an authoritarian religious structure. It is interesting that this research has seen both male and female participants strongly challenging and objecting to certain rulings emanating from the *marājiʿ* - the issue of organ donation being a case in point. In light of the unwarranted generalised depiction, and tacit acceptance, of Muslim women being 'subordinated' in Muslim societies,[487] these findings in my research speak to the confidence and voice of my Shīʿa female participants in the ABSoc environments. Although this thesis has allotted an entire chapter discussing gender-related challenges to *taqlīd*, I have highlighted this point here to show a female participant objecting to rulings emerging from a male-dominated ecclesiastical space, on a topic that is not related to gender.

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[484] Hiba, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in The Midlands [Oct 2019]
[485] A reference to Takim's depiction of Shīʿa attitudes towards the *marājiʿ* - [Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147-148]
[486] Eliash, J. (1979). Misconceptions Regarding the Juridicial Status of the Iranian 'Ulamā. in *International Journal for Middle-Eastern Studies* (10). London. pp 9-25
[487] Fish, S. (2002). Islam and Authoritarianism. in *World Politics 55(1). pp 4-37*. Cambridge University Press. p 24

The practice of *taqlīd* has been extensively discussed through the thesis. Sachedina mentions how the word, *taqlīd*, can lexically mean "girding someone's neck";[488] and how this understanding would lead to "blind adherence". Such a performance would mean completely shifting the onus of religious decision-making around the neck of the *marjiʿ*. Contradicting that idea would naturally place the onus – either wholly or partially – onto the subject, thereby giving them agency in religious interpretation.
Saadiya, a female ABSoc President in the Midlands, expressed her potential willingness to act contrary to the rulings of the *marājiʿ*, embracing her own agency to use her moral inclinations as the criteria for possibly vetoing the rulings. While discussing the idea of following the *marājiʿ* in a 'blind' way, she said:

> I feel like it's also our responsibility. It [what I am going to say] might be bad, but if I consulted a marjiʿ on something, if they said something - even if they've done all the research on it and whatever - if it doesn't sit well with me then I'm not going to go with it. Even if there's quite a few of them. If it does not sit well with me and I don't feel like I'm doing the right thing, or if it's not morally right, I probably won't go with it.
>
> Saadiya was asked whose opinion she might follow if not that of any marjiʿ:
>
> Mine. I know you can't always trust that, but if it just doesn't sit well with me, I won't follow it.[489]

From the onset, Saadiya concedes that the ideas she is about to express are seen as religiously improper. She is aware that her views obviously contradict orthodox standpoints on religious authority in Shīʿism. Despite the numerous instances of participants' willingness to go against the rulings of the *marājiʿ*, this study has seen little evidence awareness about the processes, epistemic mechanisms and methodologies used by the *marājiʿ* in exercising law derivation. Hence, there was seldom any engagement with those 'specialised' processes when critiques of the rulings were voiced. Participants who presented such critiques seem to have definite views on what is 'morally right' in certain cases, and furthermore, are willing to challenge orthodoxically established religious authority figures on those grounds. The previous chapter listed some of the elements that gave authority figures credibility; among them was the view that those vested with religious authority had gone through long years of study, had exceeding knowledge and were specialists in their fields. Here, Saadiya overlooks "all the research" that the *marājiʿ* might have carried out, in favour of her own ideas of what is "the right thing". Despite the discussions about what constitutes religious authority in Islam theoretically, and what its sources are, the practical reality is that the participants at the grassroots will also rely on their own intuition as authoritative. My elaboration on *taqlīd* proposes that, by its own rational definition, the subject's intuitive knowledge is sufficient for that person not to perform *taqlīd* in any given matter.

488 Sachedina, A. A. (1998). *The Just Ruler in Shi'ite Islam: The Comprehensive Authority of the Jurist in Imamite Jurisprudence*. Oxford University Press. p 212-213
489 Saadiya: Midlands-based ABSoc President. Focus group interview [Oct 2019]

It is also noteworthy that Saadiya was a female participant who took up the leadership position of being the President at her ABSoc. Her position is in spite of the Shīʿī religious authority structure lacking female role models; the likes of Ayatollah Al-Khū'ī even insisting that women should be confined to administering domestic affairs and screened off from public life. [490] Although it seems that the *marjiʿiyyah* is theoretically revered among Shīʿa Muslims generally, including the research participants, it does not serve as a source of inspiration on practical aspects of their daily lives in the UK. If anything, it can be said that Saadiya's position at university, as well as her career aspirations ensuing from her course in International Business Studies and French, defy the apparent ethos being imparted by the *marjiʿiyyah* when it comes to ideas about gender roles.
As the president of the ABSoc at her campus, Saadiya's attitude towards Shīʿī religious authority further corroborates the idea that the ABSocs are not organisations through which orthopraxy – in this regard – is actively supported or promoted.

The varying performances of religious authority, seen among the participants, have not always veered away from the *marājiʿ*, even though the performances would not be considered aligned with Shīʿī orthopraxy. Hayder, a London-based ABSoc president, took an approach that did not restrict him to following one single *marjiʿ*. "I have respect for every single marjiʿ out there", said Hayder, "and I don't know if I'm right or wrong in doing this; I've reached the stage where I would take the opinions and read the rulings of all prominent marājiʿ. I'd see how their rulings are on one particular issue and see which is best".[491] Whilst his method would lead him to complying with at least one of the rulings from amongst the *marājiʿ* in any given instance, his practice is not one recognised as orthopraxical. It is an approach that gives Hayder a degree of agency in choosing amongst the rulings – yet allows him to feel that he has not breached the rulings of the *marājiʿ* as a revered collective body.
It became increasingly evident, through analysing the different approaches to religious authority, that strictly following the *marājiʿ* in one's daily life, and technically conforming to their rulings on authority itself, were not necessities for being generally aligned with the Shīʿī identity. An appreciation of their status, reverence of their position and some veneration of the *marjiʿiyyah* seemed to suffice.

Despite the non-compliance of both ABSoc Presidents, Saadiya and Hayder, with the orthopraxy of Shīʿī religious authority, they began their comments with words of hesitation. In describing their performances, they started with, "It might be bad, but…" and, "I don't know if I'm right or wrong in doing this…", respectively. As Shīʿa Muslims, committed to Shīʿism, their ambivalence shows their awareness of what normative Shīʿī authority performance entails. It is indicative of how well-ingrained normative practices are among Shīʿa youngsters at the grassroots in the UK. Similarly, the data garnered in this research is

[490] Al-Khū'ī, A. [d. 1992] (2009). *Al-Tanqīḥ Fī Sharḥ ʻUrwat Al-Wuthqā. Vol 1.* London: Al-Khū'ī Islamic Foundation. p 187
[491] Hayder: London-based ABSoc President. One-to-one interview [March 2019]

replete with instances that substantiate the literature, which suggests that the *marjiʿiyyah* is such a central aspect of Shīʿism. It is this 'established Shīʿism', and particularly this feature of religious authority, that many of the participants are attempting to reconstruct.

The issue of organ donation arose recurrently during this research. It has already been mentioned in this chapter to illustrate how some participants resorted to complying with the ruling of the *marjiʿ* despite their own misgivings. When the discussion developed in her focus group, Hiba, already quoted above as being ready to disagree with the *marājiʿ*, said:

> I'm signed up as an organ donor. It says in the Quran that if you save one life you save humanity. So, if my organs can save someone from dying, then surely I've done something that should be a blessing. There are somethings that I am dead set on and believe to be true. If people disagree with me that's completely fine. I asked quite a lot of people. At the end of the day, I was going to have to decide.[492]

The idea, that 'lay' individuals require intermediaries to interpret sacred texts for them, is not exclusive to any religion. It is relatively more distinct and formalised in Shīʿism than in other creeds. Hiba has justified her decision with reference to the Quran alone, without resorting to any such intermediary. It is clear from its repetitive occurrence in the data, that the question of posthumous organ-donation (to non-Muslim recipients) is an issue that has been a factor in the Shīʿa participants questioning their own standpoints, in respect to the rulings and predominant opinions among the *marājiʿ*. The extent, to which the campus environment has been a cause for this issue to play on the minds of the participants, is unclear. However, one can imagine that coming into constant contact with friends and colleagues from various religious backgrounds, may have been influential in leading some participants to deliberate on the discriminatory aspect of the ruling. Additionally, university campuses have also been locations wherein organ donation campaigns have been increasingly active, especially targeting students of ethnic minority backgrounds.[493] The emergence of religious student societies has allowed students to have stronger affiliations with their religious identities; this is typified by the ABSocs as a platform wherein the 'Shīʿī identity' can be expressed. On the other hand, instances like the one mentioned above, serve as examples of how the campus environment instigates the students to question aspects of Shīʿism that are considered central – such as the mandatory *taqlīd* of the *marjiʿ*.

Hiba's attitude to organ donation shows an individual embracing interpretive agency of religious text, the Quran in her case, in order to arrive at a decision and choose a course of action. There have been other instances in which participants declared their own willingness to approach the Quran directly. In response

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[492] Hiba, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in The Midlands [Oct 2019]

[493] Organ donation campaigns have been launched at some of UK's leading universities. These have included:

- The University of Birmingham: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/university/colleges/mds/news/2018/08/birmingham-donor-city.aspx [Accessed 20/10/21]
- The University of Brighton: https://www.brighton.ac.uk/news/2021/university-of-brighton-leads-drive-to-boost-bame-student-organ-donation [Accessed 20/10/21]

to a question about what course of action is taken when faced with a religious matter, Fareeda, for example, unhesitantly declared that she would immediately refer back to the Quran.

> I would refer back to the ultimate religious authority, which is God, by reading His words, which I don't think you can get more concrete than that. Of course, there are issues surrounding interpretation and all that, but I think Quran is complex, but also very simple. I am quite reliant on the Quran. It's just because I think, "Why not go to the source?[494]

Hallaq describes scholars as conduits of God's message, between God and the laity, in interpreting text;[495] this reality is neither exclusive to Shīʿism, nor to the wider Islamic experience. Fareeda's approach empowers her, as a 'lay' individual, circumventing jurists as intermediaries. Takim comments on how the practice of "taqlīd generates confidence in the believers that their religious practices, which are based on the juridical pronouncements of the marājiʿ, approximate the will of God".[496] Takim is talking here about *"religious"* practices. The young Shīʿa Muslim participants of this research would not be expected to independently scour through the religious texts in order to discover the methods and intricacies of the ritual prayer, fasting or the annual pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). However, the research has shown that the participants who express any ambivalence towards the mainstream Shīʿī authority constructs, or the rulings of the *marājiʿ*, do so either when their day-to-day lives are impacted, or on socially topical issues. In the UK, the authoritativeness of the *marjiʿiyyah* is seldom challenged with regards to personal religious rites and rituals; the data in this research has certainly not encountered any instances of it. This would suggest that the disparity in the social contexts, between the research participants and the *marājiʿ*, is one of the main effective factors behind the participants' divergence from what is seen as orthopraxy in Shīʿī religious authority. Alaa, from London, described how the dilemma he faced in his position as a university student, led him to making a decision - involving the religious practice of fasting - without regard for any rulings from any particular *marjiʿ*:

> A few years ago, during my exams, they completely coincided with Ramadhan. I don't know of any marjiʿ that says, you know, "Exams are something to excuse you from fasting". The thing is, I knew that, personally, when I haven't drunk water or anything, I know that I can no longer function and start to make loads of mistakes. I knew this would be extremely detrimental to my exam. I didn't fast.
>
> I guess it was on my own authority. I don't just do things willy-nilly. I was thinking about things like, "Al-aʿmāl bi al-niyyāt",[497] and stuff like that. I had the conception that, "Allah will understand".[498]

494 Fareeda, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in London [Mar 2018]
495 Hallaq, W. (2004). *Authority, Continuity and Change in Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
496 Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 145
497 The Arabic words used paraphrase a universally recognised hadith from Prophet:
"Deeds are only [judged] in accordance with their motivations".

قال رسول الله (ص): "إنما الأعمال بالنيات"

Al-ʿĀmilī, Ḥ. {d. 1693} (2007). *Wasāʾil Al-Shīʿa*. Beirut: Mu'assasat Al-ʿĀlamiyy. Vol 1. pg 49
498 Alaa: ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]

This is another example of a participant's university setting being linked to the guidance of the *marjiʿ* being disregarded. The university setting may not have necessarily influenced Alaa overlooking the *marjiʿ*'s rulings, but his context - in the university setting - has allowed the circumstances to surface, through which the rulings of the *marjiʿ* have been unheeded. Alaa assumed religious agency, or agency in religious interpretation with regards to his personal circumstances, even in an aspect of 'religious practice', i.e., fasting. This instance showed the participant referring to a hadith text, which has largely theological implications, to interpret 'God's will' in his own position, and come to a practical conclusion, completely omitting the need for clerical authorities as intermediaries between him and the text. Such performance obviously conflicts with Shīʿī orthopraxy in religious authority, as defined by the literature. Further probing into Alaa's performances of religious authority showed that his stance did not utterly discount the *marjiʿ*'s rulings. His idea of following a *marjiʿ*, Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī in his case, was selective and far from absolute. During an interview, Alaa stated, "I sort-of follow Al-Sīstānī". When asked what '*sort-of*' implies practically, he elaborated:

> When it comes to things like, about chess, these things are very nonsensical.[499]
> I 'sort of' follow him. Do I follow everything blindly? No. I'll follow those things that don't wildly grind up against my common sense.[500]

Alaa's labelling of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's ruling as *"*nonsensical*"*, is a censorious comment that would contradict the reverence usually afforded to the *marājiʿ*. It suggests that he does not hold them in a position that pedestalises them uncritically. In fact, his own *"*common sense*"* is sometimes used as authoritative over the rulings of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī. Moreover, Alaa rejects the idea that his performance of religious authority might be described as following *"*blindly*"*. The portrayal, 'blind following' or 'blind adherence' is yet another echo of Sachedina's depiction of how *taqlīd* is largely performed in Shīʿī communities.[501] Alaa was not alone in painting a picture of 'hybrid following', to describe the way religious authority is performed.

Zahra, a graduate medic who was a founding member of the ABSoc at her university, described how she approaches situations where she requires religious guidance from a religiously authoritative person:

> If I was in that situation, I'm not sure how I would react. I don't have a 100% 'adhere-to-him' kind of style. But I'd like to think that, in questions that are difficult, I would at least like to seek their opinion or opinions of different people and different religious authorities if I'm not getting the answer I want.[502]

While Zahra would consult the *marjiʿ*'s opinion, she sees no obligation to comply with his rulings. Her final words above, "getting the answer I want", imply that the ruling should be agreeable to her in order

499 Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's ruling regarding playing chess, is that it is completely forbidden, regardless of whether or not it is associated with gambling and whether the opponent is live or virtual (computer).
[Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West*. London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 246]
Also available on his website at: https://www.sistani.org/english/qa/01161/ [Accessed: 12/11/21]
500 Alaa: ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]
501 Chenai. M. C. (2008). *Recueil de textes du professeur Abdulaziz Sachedina*. Paris: Publibook. p 245
502 Zahra, Former ABSoc President and current MSC EC member. One-to-one interview [May 2019]

for her to conform with it. This makes her own standpoints the ultimately authoritative, rather than the *marjiʿ*. This attitude was mirrored a number of times through the data, with participants mentioning that they may disregard the rulings of the *marājiʿ*. In this vein, the participants' comments included the tendency to, "go with my gut"[503]; conforming with the ruling only, "If I connect with the answer"[504]; not accepting it "until it made sense to me"[505]; or that they would "keep asking until I'm happy with something"[506]. The recurrence of such statements serve to rebut the idea that religious authority is appreciated as an authoritarian construct in Shīʿī circles; or at least that such a caricature cannot be extended to generalise the attitudes of young representatives of Shīʿism on UK campuses. Despite the way the performance of religious authority is widely portrayed and represented as Shīʿī orthopraxy, these young students elect to function outside of that rigid mould. In a way, they are democratising religious authority and endowing themselves with the agency that many would reserve for the *marājiʿ* exclusively. Huda's comment summed up this stance succinctly:

> Islam isn't as simple as being given an X, Y or Z rule and you have to follow it regardless of the context. Otherwise, we wouldn't be responsible for our own free will. It goes back to Saleema's point about us being authorities unto ourselves; and sometimes it is just your gut feeling.[507]

The data has shown numerous approaches in the way religious authority is practically performed by the participants. For a notion suggested to be centrally significant to Shīʿism, those conducting themselves under the explicit banner of Shīʿism on campus – and functioning as representatives of it – are not a monolithic group in their attitudes or performances of it. The differences, in how Shīʿī religious authority is perceived and performed, have extended even to the presidents of the ABSocs at individual campuses. The ABSocs have displayed the ability to function cordially and efficiently, catering for the needs of Shīʿa students as well as operating as a presentation of Shīʿī Islam to the wider campus. This is despite the aforementioned internal differences, and it brings the alleged centrality of *marjiʿiyyah* to Shīʿī Islam and Shīʿī identity, into question.

Through the different described modes of endorsing interpretive agency, the participants have managed to reimagine normative Shīʿī authority performance practices in ways that do not infringe on reverence of *marjiʿiyyah*. Their agency is not explicitly one that is a resistance to authority models.

Conclusion

503 Fatema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in The Midlands [Oct 2019]
504 Sameer, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in The Midlands [Oct 2019]
505 Saleema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
506 Hadi, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
507 Huda, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]

The data has witnessed a wide range of performances, of religious authority, among the participants. On one end of that spectrum are performances that conform with established modes in Shīʿism, rigidly complying with the rulings of the *marājiʿ* and at the suspension of interpretive agency. I have described this approach as one that considers Shīʿī religious authority to be of an authoritarian nature and engages with it on that basis.

Along the spectrum depicted, factors have led to performances that would decentralise Shīʿī authority by referring to more local or immediate sources for religious guidance. Oftentimes these are performed in ways that do not completely sever engagement with the *marjiʿiyyah* structure, and do not detract from the conceptually authoritative position of the *marjiʿ*. Even though these practical approaches do not comply with orthopraxy, continued reverence of *marjiʿiyyah* seems a sufficient association to the authority aspect of lived Shīʿism.

Further along that spectrum, my research has come across participants whose practice has moved further from the established model of *taqlīd* and adherence to the rulings of *marājiʿ*, to those that grant them more autonomy and agency. These approaches have included directly referring to religious scripture to justify stances, in addition to consulting personal moral stances. By embracing this personal religious interpretive agency, it can be argued that the participants have reconstructed the practice of *taqlīd*, from that which is normatively performed in the wider Shīʿī circles, to that which is notionally defined – albeit unknowingly.

In most of the cases covered by my fieldwork, the orthodox practice of Shīʿī authority was not adhered to. This diminishes the tenet of *taqlīd* as a vital aspect in a reconstructed Shīʿī identity. The ability of the ABSocs to continue operating smoothly under the banner of Shīʿism, despite the diversity in performances and shifts away from established conventions, shows that the wider alignment with Shīʿism is unaffected by the reimagined notions of authority.

The approaches to authority that grant the subjects more agency and autonomy, can be seen as significative – or even symptomatic – of modernist trends on religious traditions. This research has seen such trends appear more saliently in matters pertaining to gender.

Chapter 6

Reconstructing Religious Authority: The Impact of Female Experiences on Campus

Gender Representation in the ABSocs

Issues pertaining to gender feature, in some way or form, through most of the chapters in this thesis. Due to the salience of the gender theme weaving through the data, this final chapter places the issue of gender at its centre. It looks at how the orthodox structure of Shīʿī religious authority is perceived, amongst the ABSoc community, in light of its patriarchal characteristics. This chapter then specifically concentrates on what the participants expressed as their most significant challenges on campus, involving interaction between the genders and the observance of *hijab* - the latter, of course, particularly impacting female participants. The earlier chapters of this thesis have discussed the potential of *hijab* observance to be seen as a practice through which interpretive agency is perceptible.

Previous chapters have explored a range of ways in which religious authority has been practiced by the participants of this study, including an inclination towards adopting autonomous religious interpretive agency, disconnected and independent of the rulings of the recognised *marājiʿ*. Here, I discuss the instances of the data that show how participants sought to tackle female-specific challenges, through negotiations of conventional *taqlīd*, thereby showing modes of agency being exercised and endorsed.

In the chapter that explained Shīʿī jurisprudence's dilemma with male-dominance, the *marjiʿiyyah* was portrayed as a wholly patriarchal institution. This contrasts starkly with female representation within the ABSoc community. Each campus, where fieldwork was undertaken, had female members on the Executive Committee of the ABSoc; at half of those campuses, the ABSoc president was female. In December of 2019, the national umbrella body for the ABSocs - the MSC - elected a female president for the first time.

Standing out against the patriarchal ethos of the *marjiʿiyyah*, there seems to be no obstacle for women to take up leadership positions in the ABSoc spaces. This highlights the dissimilarity between the organisational character of the ABSocs and that of the *marjiʿiyyah*. The geographical distance between the two is paralleled by contrasts in the culture of gender representation. It goes further to show that the female ABSoc members are, and feel, empowered to assume these leadership roles, despite the lack of female authoritative role models within the sphere of Shīʿī religious authority. Al-Khūʾī's insistence that

role of women should be limited to administering domestic affairs,[508] through which he (and his successors) justified the barring of women from becoming a *marji*ʿ, is clearly not an organisational stance adopted by the ABSocs. This mindset, maintaining that women should be limited to assuming a domestic role, will be revisited and further contrasted with the ABSocs' organisational attitude, in the next section, where I recount an episode from the MSC's 2016 Presidential Retreat.

Owing to external factors, the gender demographic of the ABSoc membership is not balanced throughout each individual campus. To account for the gender disproportion in his own London-based campus, Iraqi-born Hasan Fadhil pointed to female students' tendency to enrol in degree programmes other than engineering:

> The University itself is male-dominated, since it's a heavily sciences and engineering university, so that's reflected in the ABSoc as well. That's why we have this issue of having more guys. Now we have a couple of girls on the committee. The rest are guys.[509]

Hasan's observation has been repeated in the Scott-Baumann et al. work[510] and corroborated by the Higher Education Student Agency records.[511] It highlights the gender disparity seen in the disciplines studied on UK campuses. Naturally, it is less likely for female students to take up leadership roles on these campuses. Even on this campus there were two female members on the ABSoc's Executive Committee, illustrating the enabling of female members to assume such positions, even when the ABSoc is generally male dominated. Quite distinct from the situation at that campus, Ahmad described his former campus based in Northern-England, at which he was the ABSoc president during his undergraduate course. Not only did he mention the female prominence at that particular ABSoc, but also indicated to being pleased about that development:

> All of the senior positions of the ********* ABSoc are held by girls: The President, VP, Treasurer and Secretary, which I'm quite happy about.[512]

Such views seem to directly contravene the stance of Al-Khūʾī and his successors, as mentioned above. Although his edict, excluding women, is strictly referring to the position of being a *marji*ʿ, his rationale behind it is wider reaching.[513]

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508 Al-Khūʾī, A. (2009). *Al-Tanqīḥ Fī Sharḥ ʿUrwat Al-Wuthqā. Vol 1.* London: Al-Khūʾī Islamic Foundation. p 187
509 Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]
510 Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 97.
511 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/16-01-2020/sb255-higher-education-student-statistics/subjects [Accessed: 12/06/2020]
512 Ahmad: Former ABSoc President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]
513 See chapter on Female Representation in Shīʿī Jurisprudence. Al-Khūʾī strongly opposes the idea that women should put themselves in a consultative position and insists that God would not be pleased with her in such a position [Al-Khūʾī, A. (2009). *Al-Tanqīḥ Fī Sharḥ ʿUrwat Al-Wuthqā. Vol 1.* London: Al-Khūʾī Islamic Foundation. p 187]

The higher proportions of female members in the larger ABSocs, allows them the ability to cater for female students specifically, by facilitating gender-exclusive events.[514] This is further evidence of the ABSocs acting as a religious space through which its female members are empowered, and enjoy the benefits that representation brings. It differs considerably from Sullins' description of some religious spaces, like mosques, in which "institutional barriers" restrict women's participation.[515]

That being said, the MSC only had its very first female president elected at the end of 2019, more than a decade after its inception. Having graduated in 2013, Zahra is now a practicing doctor. She was the founding member of the ABSoc at her university and now serves on the EC of the MSC. Regarding this inconsistency between the ABSocs and the MSC, in terms of gender representation, Zahra said:

> I think ABSocs have a very good gender diversity within their committees. However, when you go higher up, the diversity does come down. So, the MSC has only had one female president, and only one regional vice-president. I think it's important that women are empowered to, not only be part of committees at that level, but also to go forward into leadership positions.[516]

I suggest a possible explanation for the disparity in female participation, at the national MSC and individual ABSoc levels. Members are able to serve on MSC's Executive Committee (EC) after having served at their respective ABSocs during their studies. This means that MSC EC members are often those who, like Zahra, have already graduated from university. While female ABSoc members may have occupied public roles during their degree courses, many of them come from cultural backgrounds that have rather defined understandings of societal gender roles, not dissimilar to the outlook of Al-Khū'ī. Female members may be settling into more domestic and maternal roles subsequent to graduating, inhibiting their availability to play significant roles at the MSC level. The impact of their cultural background, in constructing gender expectations and societal roles, is still significant in later life despite many of the female ABSoc members having adopted leading or public roles during their time on campus. The recent developments within the MSC structure show the female participation becoming more prominent, and more comparable to the gender balance at the ABSoc level. The ABSoc space can be seen as one where its female members are empowered as active decision and policy makers; equal to their male counterparts in activeness and leadership. Considering this disparity with the *marjiʿiyyah*, this chapter looks at individual instances that have emerged in the data, examining how the *marājiʿ* and their teachings are viewed by the respondents to this research.

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[514] SEE APPENDIX 5 [Images may have been edited to protect organisers' personal details, and for individual campuses and venues to remain unidentifiable]
[515] Sullins, P. (2006). Gender and Religion: Deconstructing Universality, Constructing Complexity. in *American Journal of Sociology (112)3*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p 844
[516] Zahra, Former ABSoc President and current MSC EC member. One-to-one interview [May 2019]

Making the Authority Acceptable:
MSC Presidential Retreat, Feb 2016

As the previous chapters have stated, the ABSocs have no formal policy with regards to religious authority. Neither the MSC, nor any individual ABSoc, is organisationally affiliated to any of the *marājiʿ*. The ABSoc members' practices of religious authority, and attitudes towards *taqlīd*, are also very diverse. However, the *marājiʿ* are still respected icons that symbolise Shīʿī religious authority. Their reverence is part and parcel of the common Shīʿī identity. Criticism of them and voicing dissent, within the ABSoc community, would be a step towards fracturing that identity; within a setting where the Shīʿa students are already in a minority. The collected data recorded an instance where MSC board members circumvented the possibility of such fissure-inducing dissent on the theme of gender.

In late-February 2016, I was invited to participate in the MSC's Annual Presidential Retreat: a weekend-long convention for presidents and selected EC members of the different ABSocs from across the UK. Although I was invited in my capacity as a religious scholar, to lead workshops on Islamic spirituality, having explained my ongoing research to them I took the opportunity to ask the organisers for permission to make observations and take notes throughout the retreat. In addition to MSC EC members, the 40 attendees consisted of representatives from numerous London ABSocs, Cardiff University's ABSoc and even as far north as Leeds University, in addition to delegates from other UK universities.

One of the workshops held at the retreat was entitled '*Agents of Change*'. Its objective was to encourage the attendees to think of ways by which they could better their personal activities and those of their respective ABSocs. The entire workshop revolved around a single document of 'advice' from the grand *marjiʿ*, Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī in Najaf, to Muslim youth around the World, particularly in the West. The document, translated into English, appeared on the jurist's official website[517] and was widely shared on social media. The points of advice touch on personal, familial and social themes.

The two workshop facilitators, both MSC EC members at the time, described the document as "effective", "useful", "eloquent", "relevant" and "incredibly intelligent". Many of the attendees were already familiar with the document, which had first appeared online in December 2015, and it was unanimously well-received. There was no apparent disagreement, challenge or critique towards any part of it. I subsequently spoke to one of the workshop facilitators, enquiring about the impetus behind using this particular document. He explained that the document, from the esteemed personality of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, was agreed upon by the organisers since it was expected to be well-received by the attendees. While, arguably, any such document from any Islamic source could have been used to suggest ideas about faith and conduct, the fact that this one was selected, was revelatory. On the one hand, the MSC committee members recognised what would be acceptable to their membership, due to the personalities

[517] http://www.sistani.org/english/archive/25240/ [Last accessed: 30/03/23]

they revere; on the other hand, selecting this document plays its own part in further consolidating those attitudes of reverence, towards the *marjiʿ*, among its membership. The MSC played an active role in fortifying that aspect of Shīʿī identity amongst its membership, by perpetuating normative notions of authority in Shīʿī Islam.

The MSC members' proactiveness in cementing views around this document, and its source, went further than merely using it as a background tool for this workshop. When I brought up the subject of using the said document with a female MSC board member, she mentioned that in a preparatory meeting, the EC members had decided to neglect any mention of point number five in the document, which encourages young women to concentrate on domestic roles and prepare for maternity, rather than focusing on building a professional career. It was thought that this point would not be well-received by the workshop partakers, half of whom were female. The segment in question, in point number five, is as follows:

> Let young unmarried women and their guardians not favour getting a job over starting a family, because marriage is a necessary course of life, while a job is more of a complement to it. It is not wise to abandon the former for the sake of the latter. Those who do not understand this principle will regret it later in life when regret is of no use. Life's experiences attest to this.[518]

The undertone of this advice, assigning domestic roles for women, chimes with the justification of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's predecessor, the Late Ayatollah Al-Khū'ī (d. 1992), in his justification for barring women from potentially becoming a *marjiʿ*:

> … we deduce from the 'proclivity of the [Divine] Legislator', that the desired role of women is merely to be screened and concealed away, to administer the domestic affairs, without meddling in what would be incompatible with those affairs.[519]

The admission from the female board member showed that there was an active willingness from the MSC body, as a group, to portray a tailored version of the marjiʿ's advice, when its full version might not have been as agreeable. For that reason, they had decided to mould the *marjiʿ*'s advice in order to avoid potential critique of the document and its origin. With the *marjiʿiyyah* being such a central aspect of lived Shīʿism, facilitating dissent among the delegates may well have proved injurious to the communal Shīʿī identity among ABSoc members. Furthermore, the willingness of the female board member to disclose this, to someone external to the organisation, may indicate her lack of complete satisfaction with the situation.

The MSC's decision in selecting this document for the workshop, on the one hand, and their circumvention of point number five, on the other hand, exemplifies the hybridity of the individual stances many of my participants held. Relating their individual religious identities to the *marjiʿiyyah* was not as binary as simply connecting or disconnecting from the institution; nor as simple as either following or

518 http://www.sistani.org/english/archive/25240/ [Last accessed: 30/03/23]
519 Translated from: [Al-Khū'ī, A. (2009). *Al-Tanqīḥ Fī Sharḥ ʿUrwat Al-Wuthqā. Vol 1.* London: Al-Khū'ī Islamic Foundation. p 187]

contravening the *marājiʿ*. The reality of how religious identities are constructed is far more nuanced. This will be elaborated upon further in the impending discussion on *hijab*-observance among some of the participants. This incident also speaks to the tussle, amongst young Shīʿa Muslims, between traditional conservative attitudes and newer expressions.

The *marjiʿiyyah* is distanced from the female respondents to this research in two ways. Firstly, being confined to the Middle East means that the *marājiʿ* are surrounded by a social environment in which gender roles are more defined and women are expected to assume domestic functions. Secondly, since the *marājiʿ* are exclusively male, the female gender lacks representation in the *marjiʿiyyah* institution of religious authority. The fact that the workshop facilitators recognised the need to tailor the advice from the *marjiʿ*, shows their awareness of it being unacceptable to their audience, and underlines the recognised disparity between the two cultural contexts.

The following section of this chapter cites contributions, from both male and female participants, demonstrating the range of standpoints among the ABSoc community, with regards to the gender homogeneity in the *marjiʿiyyah*.

The Problem with Male Homogeneity

Since the institution of *marjiʿiyyah* holds a significant position in the construction of Shīʿī identity, and attitudes towards it can be quite diverse, discussions about it are not uncommon amongst Shīʿa university students. Hayder, a London-based ABSoc president remarked, "Actually, marjiʿiyyah is quite a hot topic, a very controversial one. Within the ABSoc, a lot of the time the topic that people want to discuss, is marjiʿiyyah".[520] The fact that all of the *marājiʿ* are male, and that this exclusiveness has been stipulated jurisprudentially, has not been lost in these discussions. However, considering the scope and scale of this research, expressions of unease and criticisms from the participants, about the *marājiʿ* being invariably male, were relatively isolated. In fact, when asked about this matter, Munira, a female participant quoted earlier, disagreed with it being problematic. "I don't see that as an issue", she said, "As long as they [the marājiʿ] can empathise".[521] The fact that the *marājiʿ* do not directly empathise with her specifically gendered experiences, or that her gender lacks representation in the *marjiʿiyyah*, did not seem to concern her.

It may well be the case that the immense reverence of the *marjiʿiyyah* in the minds of many, makes them insusceptible to problematising this aspect of it. Hence, it is largely treated with indifference. On this

[520] Hayder: London-based ABSoc President. One-to-one interview [March 2019]
[521] Munira: London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [April 2019]

matter, Hasan said, “I have heard that issue being raised only once. I think we’re so culturally used to the marjiʿ being male, that they’re [women] fine with it”.[522]

The main expressions of discontent, about the *marājiʿ* being unvaryingly male, were voiced subsequent to two separate ABSoc discussion circles; the first of them took place at a campus in Northern England, in February 2018, and the second was held in London, in January 2020.[523] The titles of the discussion circles included the phrases “Islamic Authority” or “Religious Authority”. Neither title makes any explicit mention of the *marājiʿ* or the *marjiʿiyyah*, even though that is what both discussions revolved around. This is a reflection of the accepted idea that ‘authority’ is synonymised with the jurisprudential class of scholars - *marājiʿ* - in the Shīʿī mindset.[524]
The first, of the two events, was conducted by Ahmad, a former ABSoc president at the same campus, who had graduated from there a year earlier. During the discussion, Ahmad spoke about the various facets of the *marjiʿiyyah* and then facilitated conversations. One of those facets was the idea that Shīʿī authority’s uppermost rank can only be occupied by a man. I interviewed Ahmad subsequent to the event:

> One of the sections of my discussion was dealing with this question, “Can women be mujtahids?” According to my research, which I presented, Ayatollah Al-Khū’ī says, “No”. The girls were not pleased with that.[525]

To say that Ayatollah Al-Khū’ī forbade women from potentially becoming *mujtahids* is not entirely accurate. According to Al-Khū’ī, a woman is not prevented from being able to competently derive jurisprudential law from its textual sources (as a *mujtahid*), but rather from being in a position whereby people would follow her opinions and perform *taqlīd* of her (as a *marjiʿ*).[526] The distinction is beside the point here. It is interesting, from Ahmad’s comments, that the male attendees did not raise concerns about it. Ahmad went on to explain that this was due to the female members of the discussion feeling unrepresented; and furthermore, that the lack of representation led them to question the normative structure of Shīʿī authority. “It’s because of this”, said Ahmad, “that the girls were more, how do I put it? More opposed to the idea of an encompassing authority whilst they don’t have a seat at the table”. Some of the reviewed literature points to the belief that the *marājiʿ* were the representatives of the Imams, who Shīʿa Muslims believe to be infallible;[527] and that their authority is also thought of as equivalent to that of the Imams. However, the data collected on this theme has not shown the *marjiʿiyyah* to be beyond critique among segments of the UK’s Shīʿa university students.

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[522] Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]
[523] SEE APPENDICES 13 and 14 [Images may have been edited to protect organisers’ personal details, and for individual campuses and venues to remain unidentifiable]
[524] Cole, J. (2002). *Sacred Space and Holy War*. London: I.B.Tauris. pp 161-162
[525] Ahmad: Former ABSoc President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]
[526] This subtlety has been explained in the chapter on Female Representation in Shīʿī jurisprudence.
[527] Eliash, J. (1979). Misconceptions Regarding the Juridicial Status of the Iranian ‘Ulamā. in *International Journal for Middle-Eastern Studies* (10). London. pp 9-25

On this occasion, it seems that the disillusionment with this aspect of *marjiʿiyyah* ultimately led to a sense of resignation among the attendees of that discussion circle. Ahmad described them conceding to societal gender biases: “Then they agreed that even if there were female mujtahids, no male would follow them as a marjiʿ. So, practically speaking, it would never happen”.

Subsequent to the interview with Ahmad, I interviewed a female attendee at the same discussion circle. Yusra was a second-year medical student and her ABSoc’s Vice President. Whilst being of Iranian descent, she was born and raised in the same city as her university campus. She attended the event because Shīʿī religious authority was a topic she was very interested in discussing. “I was more than down for it”, she said, “Because it’s something that has come up a lot at home. I’ve discussed with my parents, things about it, and it was something that I wanted us to have a go at talking about”.[528]

The notion, that ABSocs are spaces in which the members work together while simultaneously holding starkly different views on matters as central as religious authority, was reinforced through Yusra’s account of the event. Yusra said, “People were very open, but as soon as it came to this topic, it did seem like there was a bit of a split between the men and the women in the room”. Corroborating Ahmad’s account, only the female attendees voiced unease about women’s prevention from Shīʿī authority’s highest ranks.

Yusra’s remarks, about the fact that the *marājiʿ* are all exclusively male, were very frank:

> It is something that I have questioned a lot, because at the end of the day, they’re setting out rules for both men and women, but they only know what it’s like to be a man. None of them have experienced being a woman. So, it does seem slightly unfair and illogical that men are making decisions on behalf of women as well. To me, it would make more sense if both genders were making the decisions.[529]

Here, Yusra has not expressed unease or disagreement with any particular ruling that directly impacts her daily life and conduct. She does not cite a specific ruling that she believes might be inapplicable for a female Muslim in her environment. She is simply voicing her concern over a lack of female representation in the *marjiʿiyyah*. Hasan was quoted above, playing down the existence of unease at the gender homogeneity among the *marājiʿ*. He had said, “I think we’re so culturally used to the marjiʿ being male, that they’re [women] fine with it”.[530] However, being a male Shīʿa Muslim, he has not had to contend with a lack of representation within the structure he holds to be religiously authoritative. The very obvious male-dominant feature of the *marjiʿiyyah* has not been lost on young Shīʿa Muslims on campus.

Yusra’s statement displayed the willingness, of a sitting ABSoc vice president, to critique the institution of Shīʿī authority - the *marjiʿiyyah* - with forthright language, like “unfair” and “illogical”, as a result of

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528 Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]

529 Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]

530 Hasan Fadhil, London-based ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]

feeling unrepresented. Her language suggests that Yusra is going beyond simply 'questioning' this aspect of the *marjiʿiyyah*. She is protesting. The ABSoc space has allowed Yusra to voice opinions, critical of the *marjiʿiyyah*, even when her male colleagues were not in agreement with her. The ABSoc is a student organisation identified as 'Shīʿī'. Within the ABSoc, which is a religious space, the Muslim women clearly have agency to interpret the religion in a way that may be considered unorthodox. If anything, it is the ABSoc space itself that has enabled them to express their opinions in this way and facilitated it through such discussions. This counters generalised notions that paint Muslim religious spaces as disempowering to women. Citing Foucault,[531] the Scott-Baumann (et al) work references female participants who recognised that knowledge gave them power in their communities, confidence in their religious activities and made them a cog in the turning wheels of knowledge production.[532] Female Shīʿa students, Yusra included, have ascended to positions of influence – and authority – within their social and academic environments on campus. The enabling feature of these spaces contrast them even more starkly with the *marjiʿiyyah*, which claims to be a hierarchy based on knowledge, but bars women from its peak. Critiquing the *marjiʿiyyah* structure, adherence to which is deemed so central to Shīʿism, while continuing to play leading roles within the religiously defined organisation, shows the participant's desire to reimagine aspects of Shīʿī identity without largely subverting the traditional religious values encompassed by the Shīʿism banner. And the ABSoc space is enabling that reimagination. This probably stands as the clearest instance in this thesis, of female participants using the this enabling ABSoc space of empowerment, in a "counter-hegemonic" way as far as Shīʿī jurisprudence is concerned, "by redefining their subject-positions" towards a structure that otherwise downgrades female voices.[533]

Yusra also expressed her disappointment that some of her colleagues, despite their positions in higher education, agreed with the idea that the *marjiʿ* should necessarily be male. "It was the fact that these individuals were well-educated, studying quite difficult degrees, and it just seemed strange that they could come out with things like that", she said. Her comments suggest that she believed studying at this level should impact upon the individuals' stances on gender. When it comes to views about the *marjiʿiyyah*, that did not seem to have been the case.

Yusra's strength of feeling led to her not following a *marjiʿ* in the conventional way, despite having been brought up with those teachings. When asked more directly, about whether or not she follows a *marjiʿ* and performs *taqlīd*, she said, "When I was 13, I was told, by a friend, 'You have to pick someone! You have to pick someone! You can't go about not following a certain *marjiʿ*". Then she added, "but at this point in time, no, not really to be honest, because I'm still not completely comfortable with the notion".

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[531] Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Harmondsworth: Penguin. p 27.
[532] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 89-90.
[533] Shanneik, Y. (2022). *The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi'i Women in the Middle East and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 245.

While concerns about women being completely unrepresented in the body of the *marājiʿ* were isolated, the data shows instances of ABSoc EC members willing to voice them. Furthermore, it shows that the lack of female representation has resulted in instances where female Shīʿa Muslims have ceased following any *marjiʿ* and disengaging from the performance of *taqlīd*. As a result of questions and concerns around issues that impact female participants specifically, a reimagined Shīʿī identity may grant a lesser role to established authority structures.

The second 'Discussion Circle' was convened by a London ABSoc, in January 2020. This event, entitled '*What is the Role of Religious Authority in our Lives*',[534] was held at a campus where the make-up of the ABSoc was predominantly male.

The event began with a 20-minute recitation of a supplication in Arabic, during which the seven all-male attendees sat in a dutiful solemn silence. This ABSoc and its events are geared to attract Shīʿa students who are more enthusiastic about traditional religious rites and practices, making it particularly appealing to a specific segment, even among the Shīʿa student minority.

Thereafter, the facilitator, Hasan Fadhil, began the discussion by asking the attendees what they thought 'religious authority' was and what it meant to them. As the literature suggests, all of the attendees' responses centred on human actors who were considered learned in jurisprudence. Not a single response proposed the Quran, or any other text or non-human entity, as possible candidates embodying religious authority. A London-born student of Iraqi descent, Alaa, was quite involved in the discussion. He was one of the attendees interviewed individually subsequent to the event. My conversations with Alaa have contributed to the data in other chapters. However, here I concentrate on the instances that are relevant to the gender of the *marājiʿ*.

There was no specific mention of gender in the discussion circle itself. However, Alaa revealed to me that when this discussion was initially proposed by a female ABSoc member, gender was intended to be an important element in the proposed title.

> She said, "Can we discuss how the power of religious men impacts on our beliefs and our daily lives?". That was slightly changed for the DKDC.[535] I think, when it was originally proposed by Zahida,[536] she had an emphasis of 'men' in the title. I've had discussions with her long before this and she was mentioning that we definitely need a discussion about this at some stage. *Marjiʿiyyah* is quite patriarchal. There are even some marājiʿ who say that women shouldn't be marjiʿ.[537]

[534] SEE APPENDIX 14 [Images may have been edited to protect organisers' personal details, and for individual campuses and venues to remain unidentifiable]
[535] DKDC: This acronym stands for 'Duʿā Kumail and Discussion Circle' and is a weekly event among the ABSocs. The first half of it refers to the ritual recitation of a specific supplication, conventionally recited by Shīʿa Muslims on Thursday evenings. This is then followed by a discussion on something topical, among the attendees.
[536] This is an alias. Attempts were made to interview Zahida directly, but this did not materialise.
[537] Alaa: ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]

We have already seen how the MSC sidestepped potential criticism of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, on account of his views on societal gender roles, at the 2016 Presidential Retreat. A possible reason for the amendment, from the originally proposed title, may have been to avoid criticism of the *marjiʿiyyah* at the local ABSoc level. The final two sentences from Alaa's statement, shows he is consciously aware of feature of the *marjiʿiyyah* being gender imbalanced. The *marjiʿiyyah* is inarguably a male dominated space - he referred to it as *"*patriarchal*"*. He is also cognisant that the ineligibility of a woman becoming a *marjiʿ*, is currently the prevailing opinion among the *marājiʿ*. For some young British Shīʿa Muslims, like Alaa, concerns about gender play a part in moulding their views about what religious authority should look like, and how the current Shīʿī authority structure should be modified. "If it's objective and just a matter of how much you've studied and how much you've read, then what's the difference if you have a male marjiʿ or a female one?", asked Alaa, "If it's a theoretical exercise and if you've got the knowledge then it doesn't matter who it is".

Having come through the educational system, experiencing the learning process, and seeing it as ungendered, Alaa is contesting the basis of *marjiʿiyyah*'s gender invariance, given that the authority is supposedly based on epistemic excellence.

Alaa also claimed to have approached the offices of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī in London, to inquire about the rationale behind the stipulation barring women from potentially becoming a *marjiʿ*.

> I've actually gone to the Ahlul-Bayt foundation,[538] in London, and I posed this question. We had a few meetings and eventually, at one point, they said, "Why do you care so much? This doesn't affect you. If anything, these things are in your favour". I found that very antithetical to what being a Shīʿa is.[539]

Alaa has defined Shīʿism for himself. "Being a Shīʿa" involves conforming to certain ethical standpoints. If the *marājiʿ*, or statements from their offices, negate that definition, Alaa disconnects that from his conception of Shīʿism.

The following sections also cite further instances of research participants exercising their agency to question established stances within Shīʿism. Saba Mahmood had observed how the participants in her ethnography had acquired a sense of religious interpretive agency within a largely male-dominated environment. She cites instances of women adopting an extent of 'agency' by functioning *within* the framework of those patriarchal settings. Her female participants, for example, apply their interpretations to male narratives of the religion and exegetic traditions, not by contravening those existing structures.[540] In my research, I have shown how some of my participants have expressed restructured understandings of Shīʿism by questioning, as well as objecting to, the male-dominance of the Shīʿī structure of religious authority.

538 This is the office, in London, representing Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī. [https://en.alulbayt.com/]
539 Alaa: ABSoc member. One-to-one interview [January 2020]
540 Mahmood. S (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersy: Princeton University Press. p 100

The Hijab: An Agentic Instance and a Challenge to Shīʿī Taqlīd

This study has observed a number of ways in which *taqlīd* is perceived and practiced by Shīʿī students as they negotiate challenging social situations. Some of the female participants expressed how the observance of *hijab* was an instance for such challenges becoming significant. While recent valuable works have highlighted the challenges faced by young Muslim students, due to their *hijab*-observance, in terms of being negatively perceived and even essentialised by others,[541] my research did not focus on *hijab* from this perspective. The focus of my study concentrated on my participants' attitudes towards religious authority. Within western societies, the *hijab* is understood as a head-covering worn by Muslim women. Jurisprudentially, *hijab* has a more definitive understanding and the *marājiʿ* only very slightly differ in their rulings about on the parameters of women's public sartorial appearance, and which parts of their bodies they are permitted to expose. Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, today's most prominent Shīʿī jurist, does not allow women to expose any part of themselves except for their face and hands from the wrists; even the top part of the feet must be covered. Further still, if a woman suspects that exposing her face and hands may cause men to look at her in a forbidden (lustful) manner, then she is obligated to cover those parts as well.[542] All the female Shīʿī students who expose their arms any higher than their wrists, or whose hair is fully or partially exposed, are effectively contravening Al-Sīstānī's edicts on *hijab*. Many of my participants did not comply with Al-Sīstānī's rulings on the *hijab*, whilst simultaneously claiming to do his *taqlīd*. A similar tendency can be found in Walbridge's ethnography. She describes one of her participants, *"*Ghalia*"*, as a woman with "pretty hair, of which she is proud", and whose hair is "never covered by a scarf".[543] Further on, on the very same page, Walbridge describes Ghalia as someone who "considers herself to be religious" and "claims to follow Khomeini as her marjiʿ". Walbridge successfully brings this apparent contradiction to light, within the performances of the Shīʿa Muslims featuring in her study. However, her work fails to unearth the subtleties and nuances in how and why her participants are able to operate in a seemingly contradictory way. She reductively categorises her participants as being on a linear scale, from traditionally religious to liberal, as if to depict the latter as having moved away from the traditional Shīʿism. One way she does this is by analysing her participants' sartorial choices. For example, she says, "Someone who is conscientiously trying to follow a marjiʿ will dress so that only her face and hands, below the wrists, are showing.[544] However, her own research, through her depiction of 'Ghalia', shows that the reality is not so binary and that Shīʿa Muslims' sartorial performances do not tally with her conclusions in terms of how they relate to the *marjiʿiyyah*.

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541 Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press.
542 Al-Hakim, A. H. (1999). *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West*. London: Imam Ali Foundation. p 223
543 Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 74
544 Ibid. p 178

Similarly, one of the focus groups convened for my research featured Maysara, the female ABSoc President and a third-year medicine student.[545] During the focus group, she claimed to be a follower of the Iran-based *marjiʿ*, Ayatollah Khamenei. Her half-sleeves meant that she was not complying with his rulings on *hijab*. In spite of that, the fact that she was the ABSoc president implies a commitment to working under the banner of Shīʿism on campus. Her non-compliance with the jurisprudential rulings on *hijab* did not indicate disconnection from the *marjiʿiyyah*, nor from mainstream constructs of Shīʿism.

Faheema, another female participant in a focus group session, wore a short-sleeved top, her arms partly showing. During the course of the session, she explained that she was studying Dental Hygiene. In this profession, she explained, one is not permitted to cover the arms up to the wrists. Faheema presented herself as a follower of Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī - a *muqallida* of his.[546] This is how she explained the contradiction between her dress code and his guidance:

> Like hijab: whereas for one it's wearing an abaya[547] and for me it's wearing jeans and a shirt every day. My marja's not saying that "it's wrong". He's very open. As long as you feel like you're fulfilling your, kind of, idea of hijab.
>
> That's not the ruling, but that's what I interpret from the ruling. As long as you've got these limits, the rest is, kind of, up to you. You do what you want. I don't think Islam is a very limited religion. I think it's quite open to a lot of the issues we face and very accommodating.[548]

In fact, the opinion of her *marjiʿ* is far more puritanical and austere than Faheema's representation of it, and far less subjective and conceding than her interpretation. Her words demonstrate how she manages to negotiate the practice of *taqlīd*, convincing herself that she is acting within the teachings of the *marjiʿ* while living her life as she feels is appropriate in her own context. Faheema manages to justify her own performances by constructing reimagined notions of the *marjiʿ*, his rulings and of *taqlīd*. That reimagined structure of authority then, has afforded her religious interpretive agency without overtly and candidly breaking with the Shīʿī tradition of authority. Her reconstruction of Shīʿī authority has transformed it into one resembling Al-Qarāfī's explanation of how the scholar/follower dynamic functions in the Mālikī school. He describes how those who are in the position of following, or emulating, may practice a level of interpretive reasoning of the rulings, according to their specific contexts.[549] This is not the case in Shīʿism's distinct concept of religious authority. Through such a reconstruction, Faheema manages to find some interpretive agency, ergo a form of personal religious authority, within the male-dominated arena of Shīʿī jurisprudence. Such a relationship between the female Shīʿa student, in this case, and the Shīʿī authority structure is not dissimilar to Mahmood's insightful elaboration of Foucault's discussion on

545 Maysara, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in Northern England [Feb 2019]
546 *Muqallid* and *Muqallida*: A male and female practitioner of *taqlīd*, respectively.
547 *Abaya:* A full-length outer tunic worn by Muslim women
548 Faheema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
549 Al-Qarāfī, S. (2010). *Anwār Al-Burūq fī Anwāʿ Al-Furūq*. Cairo: Dār Al-Salām. pp 543-544

power and authority.[550] It would be too simplistic to imagine the authority dynamic, between the *marjiʿ* and the subject (or *muqallid*), as merely a one-way, or top-down, system. While the authority of the *marjiʿ* uses religious texts as justification, it requires the *muqallid* to confer that authority and become subjected to it. Butler explains this connection in explicating Foucault's 'paradox of subjectivation'.[551] Foucault's analysis, of power and authority, focused on the methods through which authority comes to be exercised on its subjects. In contrast, my research has sought not to explore the systems of Shīʿī religious authority per se, but questions of performativity on the part of its 'would-be' subjects. In this case, Faheema does not confer the type of authority normatively understood in Shīʿism. Rather, her reconstructed version of it rejects a rigid authoritarian form and, instead, endorses a version in which the female 'subject' retains agency within the hierarchy of male-dominated jurisprudence.

Huda, a female colleague of Faheema, studying the same course, also wore clothing by which her arms were exposed below the elbows. She admitted that she did not check or ask about the ruling before embarking on the course, fearing the response she would receive and the ramifications it might have on her ability to pursue this field. Huda's hesitant voice disclosed less confidence in the potential reconciliation between the guidance of the *marjiʿ* and her career choice. She began by giving the reason she did not enquire about the ruling of her *marjiʿ*:

> Perhaps maybe because I was even scared to find out the answer to that, in case it might affect my choice of the course that I'm studying.
>
> It's one of those tricky situations where you just convince yourself, in your head; and you'll take it lightly, because it's one of those things that you have to adapt to, but then at times, I do question it.
>
> The tutors for the particular course are extremely strict about the infection control policy. So, some of us will wear a long sleeve shirt underneath, but would have to roll it up the moment we're inside clinic.[552]

The two approaches, of Faheema and Huda, show a subtle variation in how the *marjiʿ* is perceived. The fact that Huda did not ask about the ruling, afraid that the response may hamper her career aspirations, disclosed her opinion of the teachings of the *marjiʿ* as rigid, alongside which she would have no agency of her own through which to reinterpret or amend the laws. Her apprehension reveals her perception of the stringency in the *marjiʿ*'s opinion, forcing her to concede to uncertainty. Faheema's understanding, on the other hand, seems to incline towards Saba Mahmood's idea of agency, whereby an extent of personal agency is being conferred by conforming to the system,[553] - albeit a reconstructed version of it.

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[550] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 17
[551] Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[552] Huda, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
[553] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 18

Walbridge's work cites yet another participant, Um Mousa, who was a follower of Al-Khū'ī and yet did not wear a headscarf in public.[554] About her, Walbridge says that she was "obviously being selective about the points on which she is willing to be a follower". Had Walbridge delved deeper into Um Mousa's experiences and managed to elicit an explanation, she may have come to a more nuanced understanding in her approach, as in the case of Faheema or Huda, above. It may be that Walbridge's outsider status, not being of a Shīʿa or even Muslim background, prevented her from accessing a deeper narrative. This chapter continues to demonstrate how gendered experiences are a weighty factor contributing to reconceptualisations of Shīʿī authority, especially so in the example of *hijab*-observance.

In the non-Shīʿī context, Dessing has explored how this religious interpretive agency, to a limited extent, has been adopted by women in a Dutch society.[555] Her participants faced challenges in obtaining tailored religious guidance, as a minority religious group in the wider secular society. The research ambit she explores, while it is a primarily non-Shīʿa setting, has noteworthy parallels with my own research context. Some of Dessing's female respondents were more inclined to the approach of, "using one's own faculties" to reach religious conclusions, as opposed to reverting to the teachings of any authority figures.[556]

Faheema and Huda, the two aforementioned participants in my research, were not the only female respondents who, like some of the participants in Dessing's research, used their own reasoning to justify their manner of observing the *hijab*. Concurring with the jurisprudentially-stipulated rulings on *hijab*-observance was a particular challenge for female participants pursuing studies in the medical fields. Medical practitioners and trainees in the UK are mandatorily required not to cover the bottom half of their arms during clinical practice, in order to minimise the risk of disease transmission, in a policy vernacularly known as 'bare below the elbows' (BBE). Of course, adhering to this policy would prevent the female practitioner, or student, from complying with the rulings from the *marājiʿ* regarding *hijab*, which require the arms to be covered down to the wrists.
Yusra, a participant already cited previously in the discussion on the invariable maleness in *marjiʿiyyah*, was a second-year medical student. She was the Vice President of her ABSoc. She had mentioned, during an interview, that she did not follow any one particular *marjiʿ*, and as such, did not conform to the conventional Shīʿī practice of *taqlīd*. Her noncompliance with *taqlīd* was exemplified in her way of observing *hijab* and her justifications for it.

[554] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 82
[555] Dessing, N. M. (2011). Thinking for Oneself? Forms and Elements of Religious Authority in Dutch Muslim Women's Groups. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H.). *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Boston: Brill Publications. pp 217-233
[556] Ibid. p229

> So for example, when I'm on a placement in a hospital, we have to roll our sleeves up to the elbow, and that's not something I would do, generally, when I'm out and about, but I adapt to that because obviously it's because of infection risk.
>
> For me there was no issue in it. To me, because it's for the greater good, I feel that my arm being shown was such a petty thing compared to the reason why I do it. For me, personally, it wasn't a big deal. That was basically my thought process.[557]

Yusra's awareness, that revealing her arms contravenes the jurisprudential rulings on *hijab*, is clear from her comments. She was also quite frank about referring to her own standpoints in making her sartorial choices; her justifications cited "infection risk" and included phrases like "there was no issue in it", "greater good" and "it wasn't a big deal". Yusra has tried to explain the rationale behind her decisions, and it does not include *taqlīd* or the views of any *marjiʿ*. While the *marjiʿ* may be venerated and seen as a symbol of religious authority, that authority is not universally seen as absolute, among the ABSoc members. Here, it has become secondary to what Yusra deemed to be "the greater good". While the literature purports the notion that, "For most devout Shiʿis, the marajiʿ's pronouncements are final", [558] these instances reflect an obvious challenge to that perception being generalised.

Huda's contribution has been cited above. She did not consult any *marjiʿ* about the ruling on *hijab*, fearing that the ruling would prevent her from progressing in her field. Although Yusra had already admitted that she did not perform *taqlīd* of any of the *marājiʿ*, she went on to state that their opinions would not have impacted her performance, since it would not have allowed her to continue in her field.

> I didn't [ask about the opinions of the marājiʿ on it], and to be honest, even if I had wanted to, you basically are not allowed in hospital as a member of staff, if you don't follow that rule. So, it was kind of, my degree or arms being exposed. Do you know what I mean? Like, even if I had questioned it, it wouldn't have been practical for me not to do it, because it wouldn't have been possible for me to carry on with my placement.[559]

Regardless of the female participants' attitudes towards the *marjiʿiyyah* and *taqlīd* generally, *hijab*-observance was a recurring instance in which they would part from the mainstream rulings and would rather incline towards their own reasoning.
Contentions with the practice of *taqlīd*, especially when having to deal with the BBE clinical regulations, was most evident in the case of Zahra, the doctor who had graduated in 2013 and now serves on the MSC Executive Board. During a one-to-one interview with her, she spoke of Ayatollah Khamenei[560] as "my marjiʿ", stating that she would refer to him if and when she faced a dilemma. Her approach, however, was one that regards the *marājiʿ* as authorities whose opinions may be consulted; not as personalities who

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557 Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]
558 Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147
559 Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]
560 Currently the 'Supreme Leader' in the Iranian political structure.

have an authoritarian monopoly on religious interpretation. “I don’t have a ‘100% adhere-to-him’ kind of style”, she explained, “but I’d like to think that, in questions that are difficult, I would at least like to seek their opinion or opinions of different people and different religious authorities if I’m not getting the answer I want”.[561]

Zahra saying, “…if I’m not getting the answer I want”, raises questions about the nature of the authority of the *marājiʿ*. Ultimately, the *marjiʿ*’s view would have to correspond to her predetermined stances in order for her to accept them. Of course, Zahra’s approach challenges the model of “most devout Shiʻis”, as described by Takim. For them, he says, “the marajiʿ’s pronouncements are final and beyond critique”.[562] Having been a very active member of her ABSoc during her time in university, and further serving the MSC subsequent to graduating, it would be difficult to query Zahra’s commitment to Shīʿism and devotion to its established values. On the other hand, it is on the issue of traditional Shīʿī *taqlīd* that she has developed an unorthodox approach. The application of Zahra’s approach to *taqlīd* can be seen in her having to comply with the BBE policy. When asked about any challenges she came across, specifically as a Shīʿa Muslim, during her time studying, she said:

> The first thing was the bare below the elbow rule. That came into play when I was a third-year student. I remember that being an issue. I remember talking to the head of our med-school and holding a little meeting to speak about that and seeing the ways we could get around that. That’s the only issue really that I can remember.
>
> In the end, I am bare below the elbows in my working environment. There is some evidence that not being BBE could transmit infection between patients and practitioners. As a Muslim and a working professional, if I’m putting my patients at risk, that is not allowed. So, I do pull up my sleeves. But I ensure that’s only when I’m in contact with patients and not in other places.[563]

Like Yusra, Zahra also uses the idea of an increased risk of infection as part of her justification. She then proceeds to cite her Muslim identity to explain why it would be unethical, and unallowable, to put her patients at such risk. Not having consulted or taken guidance from her *marjiʿ*, Ayatollah Khamenei, Zahra assumed her own jurisprudential agency to choose a course of action. As discussed, the Shīʿī structure of religious authority does not afford such agency to ‘lay’ individuals or ‘non-*mujtahids*’. Yet it would seem that Zahra is unwilling to detach from Shīʿī religious authority entirely in her day-to-day practices. When asked what she would do if a similar dilemma were to reoccur, she replied, “I would probably refer to my marjiʿ, who is Ayatollah Khamenei”. Yet she did not refer to him on this occasion.

It is clear that the exclusively female challenge of observing the *hijab*, the meaning which goes beyond the mere donning of a headscarf, is a particular one through which some Shīʿa students are digressing

[561] Zahra, Former ABSoc President and current MSC EC member. One-to-one interview [May 2019]
[562] Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147-148
[563] Zahra, Former ABSoc President and current MSC EC member. One-to-one interview [May 2019]

from the normative performance of Shīʿī authority, and the orthodox understanding of *taqlīd*. Furthermore, contrary to Walbridge's assertions,[564] one cannot reductively correlate strict *hijab*-observance with a conscientious effort to follow the *marjiʿ*, or vice versa. My research has uncovered instances of female Shīʿa Muslim ABSoc members observing the jurisprudentially acceptable form of *hijab*, while not being affiliated to the *marjiʿiyyah* in the least, as was the case with Amira.

Amira was a female participant in another focus group. During the discussion on *marjiʿiyyah*, she openly said, "from childhood, I never grew up with marjiʿ stuff. It's all very new to me. So, I don't relate to that".[565] Amira was very forthright about being oblivious of any obligation to follow a *marjiʿ* and had never practiced *taqlīd*. Amira did observe the *hijab*. In fact, unlike Faheema, Huda, Yusra or Zahra, her observance of it was in line with the rulings of the *marājiʿ*. This was despite her admitting that she does not follow any *marjiʿ*.

Amira's case demonstrates the fact that *hijab* is observed for a plethora of reasons, including being used as an identity marker,[566] as well as a device representing cultural understandings of modesty.[567] To view Muslims women's sartorial choices as a marker to measure adherence to orthodox religious authority notions, as Walbridge suggests, is far too simplistic. As the Scott-Baumann et al. work confirmed, some female students on campus, for example, may adhere to a conservative form of *hijab* as a result of "expectations of gendered modesty";[568] their *hijab*-observance having no direct relevance with complying with the teachings of any religious authority. This contravenes Walbridge when she claims a correlation between the conscientious following of a *marjiʿ* and the extent to which *hijab* is observed.[569] This research has seen instances where female participants who observe the *hijab* in its jurisprudentially legislated form, while claiming not to follow any *marjiʿ*; and, conversely, female participants who claim to adhere to a *marjiʿ* in his rulings, but contravene his rulings on *hijab* in practice. Both, *hijab*-observance and revering the *marjiʿiyyah*, are matters that cannot be evaluated reductively, so as to draw simplistic correlations between them.

In the cases of Yusra and Zahra, it would seem that they have reconstructed a version of Shīʿī Islam; one within which they are afforded the interpretive agency to come up with rulings that they see as applicable to their given contexts. In Faheema's case, while the interpretive agency she endorsed allowed her not to

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[564] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. P 178
[565] Amira, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Mar 2017]
[566] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p. 101
[567] Mir. S. (2014). *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. p 87
[568] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 104.
[569] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 178

comply with the ruling of the *marjiʿ*, she felt compelled to validate her version of *hijab*-observance by linking it with his ruling.[570] Using *hijab* as an examinable instance of how the young Shīʿa Muslims have adopted interpretive agency, the participants can be seen to have used an array of approaches.

Within that array was Munira, a participant who expressed reverence towards the *marājiʿ* during a one-on-one interview. When asked about whether or not she would adhere to their rulings on a given matter, she immediately contrasted her lack of religious knowledge with their perceived expertise:

> The thing is they have so much more knowledge than I do when it comes to understanding Islam. I am nothing. My knowledge is nothing. So, they have so much rich knowledge. Of course, I should go to them. They have a greater understanding than I do.[571]

However, Munira does not observe the *hijab* at all and wears no headscarf. This non-observance seems to contradict her insistence upon having to revert to the *marājiʿ*. When asked about this inconsistency and her reasons for not observing the *hijab*, Munira made no reference at all to the *marājiʿ* or their rulings. The interpretive agency that her own construction of Shīʿism afforded her, allowed her to interpret the religious texts directly, circumventing the opinions of the *marājiʿ* altogether.

> For me, I think, if the hijab was really, really, really, really compulsory [sic], it would be as explicit in the Quran as wine and pork [prohibition]. I think it just lies in different interpretations. I cover my chest, for example. I don't cover my hair because I don't think that in this moment in time, in how I am interpreting it, that I am being less of a mu'minah[572] and being less devoted to God.

Looking at these two quotations together, we see Munira firmly aligning herself with orthodox ideas of religious authority in Shīʿism, in theory, but then applying her own religious interpretive agency – completely independently from the *marājiʿ* - when it comes to the observance of *hijab*. She does not see this autonomous performance as problematic. In fact, she bases the 'validity' of her actions on whether or not they accord with devotion to God, which does not necessitate adherence to the ruling of the *marjiʿ*.

Having seen some of the ways female ABSoc members have negotiated normative standpoints on religious authority, in their own daily lives, a number of conclusions can be drawn.
Firstly, as a wider observation, while the ABSoc organisations present a face of Shīʿī Islam to the wider campus community, they clearly do not have any formal policies regarding adherence to the orthodox Shīʿī religious authority structure of the *marjiʿiyyah*. The myriad ways in which female participants have justified their practices with regards to *hijab*-observance, while still comfortably being part of the ABSoc

[570] Faheema's has already been quoted as saying about her *marjiʿ*, Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, *"My marja's not saying that 'it's wrong'. He's very open. As long as you feel like you're fulfilling your, kind of, idea of hijab... That's not the ruling, but that's what I interpret from the ruling."* [Faheema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2016]
[571] Munira, London ABSoc EC member. One-to-one interview [Apr 2019]
[572] *Mu'minah*: Arabic word meaning "female believer".

community and even serving on the ECs, demonstrates the lack of any formal organisational guidelines in this regard. Analysing the matter of *hijab* again shows that, even though the ABSocs cater for the Shīʿa students on campus and organise activities under the Shīʿī Islam banner, they are not bastions of Shīʿī orthodoxy, particularly with regards to compliance with normative understandings of religious authority. It may be said, therefore, that while the literature has suggested the institutionalised *marjiʿiyyah* to be a principal and central element in the Shīʿī experience, practices amongst ABSoc members present a reconstructed image of it.

As for the specific instances of *hijab*-observance that have been recorded in this research, they reflect different reconstructions of *taqlīd*. These instances have illustrated an array of positions that the participants have adopted, in relation to the orthodox Shīʿī religious authority model. Each reconstruction affords the subject with some kind of autonomy, through which they function in a way that contravenes the laws of the *marjiʿ*. The participants' varied approaches show that, while they have each adopted some autonomy and interpretive agency, there is no one particular model, adjusted from the one explained as normative, by which they abide. The approach of each participant is subjective. So, while the Shīʿī authority paradigm may not be adhered to, it is not substituted with a single definite alternative model of religious authority.
At the same time, those same female participants have not spoken critically of the *marjiʿiyyah*, the *marājiʿ* or their rulings. Even though the participants may be choosing not to comply with the decrees of the *marājiʿ*, they still occupy a revered status in the shared Shīʿī identity.

The examples from the data, referred to in this section, show that the performance of *hijab*-observance cannot be used as a yardstick against which one can measure an individual's affiliation to the normative ideas on Shīʿī authority and the *marjiʿiyyah*. Delving deeper into the experiences of some of the participants, shows how reconstructions and reconceptions of the *marjiʿiyyah*, allows them an agency to reinterpret the meaning of *hijab* whilst also safeguarding their attachments to Shīʿism and Shīʿī identity more widely.

Hijab was not the only gender-related matter that brought to light different attitudes towards religious authority in my research. Dessing's work shows that, along with *hijab* observation, handshaking was also an issue that her participants mentioned as causing them to ponder about religious authority and sources of guidance.[573]

Gender Segregation and (Not) Shaking Hands

[573] Dessing, N. M. (2011). Thinking for Oneself? Forms and Elements of Religious Authority in Dutch Muslim Women's Groups. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H.). *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Boston: Brill Publications. pp 227

Gender segregation, in social settings, is a common characteristic in Muslim societies, particularly in religious spaces. Prickett has observed that "most American mosques segregate worshippers by gender".[574] My observations also confirmed this tendency in the ABSoc gatherings, meetings and conventions. The focus groups convened for this research consistently saw the participants arrange themselves in a gender-segregated way, without having been given any prior instructions or guidelines. The phenomenon of Muslim students segregating according to gender, on UK university campuses, has come under noticeable scrutiny. It is even more controversial when there is a suspicion of Muslim student organisations enforcing such segregation,[575] which goes against the ethos of the 'non-religious'[576] campus environment.

In December 2018, I participated in a workshop at the MSC's Annual Conference. As the partakers entered the room, the (female Shīʿa Muslim) facilitator commented on how it was interesting that "we always seem to self-segregate" in such settings. Although I would have expected this in a gathering of Muslims, her remark is indicative of the fact that this would not necessarily have been observed in other student gatherings.

Questions around social interaction between the genders have been discussed by the *marājiʿ* and rulings have been issued. Since Islamic jurisprudence originated in the Middle-East's socially conservative setting, and the emergence of these questions in the Shīʿī diaspora is a relatively recent development, the rulings dealing with such social interactions are seldom found in the jurists' books. However, these matters are discussed on their websites, often in 'question and answer' format. Questions addressed on Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī's official site,[577] for example, include whether women are permitted to use taxis if it means they would be alone with a male driver; whether women are allowed to work in companies that have a male-dominated workforce; whether it is permissible to attend mixed-gender sports clubs, and the like. The most pertinent question in this section asks whether one is permitted to study at coeducational universities. In response to this, Al-Sīstānī's ruling states that it is impermissible if there is a risk of religious transgression as a result of the social mixing between the genders; and even in the absence of such a risk, it is discouraged at best. The implication of such an edict is that every Shīʿa student, in higher education at any coeducational setting, is pursuing an unideal lifestyle.
The aim here is not to analyse the rulings themselves, but the practical negotiations of the research participants in light of such rulings emanating from Shīʿism's utmost authorities.

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574 Prickett, P. (2015). Negotiating Gendered Religious Space: The Particularities of Patriarchy in an African American Mosque. in *Gender and Society (29)1*. California: SAGE Publishing. pp 54-55.
575 Ibraheem, H. (2013). *Islamic Society Investigated over Gender Segregation*. [Times Higher Education] Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/islamic-society-investigated-over-gender-segregation/2003263.article [Accessed: 23 Sep 2022]
576 I hesitate to use the word "secular" for its complexity, loaded nature and the discussion about secularism on campus that this thesis has already touched on.
577 https://www.sistani.org/arabic/qa/0295/ [Last accessed: 16/10/20]

The matter of mixing between the genders, and the idea of it being religiously indiscretionary, was something that the participants were aware of and it had been discussed among a number of the researched ABSocs. For one London-based ABSoc, the concern extended further than the ABSoc's 'actual' social meetings:

> The most pressing issue last year was about the question over whether we should have one group chat for all of the boys and girls or a separate one for each. In the end it was decided that we would have one for everyone.[578]

The statement shows how sensitive the matter of gender-interaction is amongst ABSoc communities. However, in resolving these matters, there was no recourse or reference to any religious authority.

The concern about gender-interaction was a reoccurring issue in the data and, as such, had also been debated at the London ABSoc that Huda and Faheema, whose contributions have been cited, were members of. Huda mentioned that the issue had been discussed in the ABSoc, in how their activities should be organised logistically. To resolve the matter, Faheema explained, "we just debated it within ourselves. It's such a personal issue that everyone's opinion is going to be different".[579] She went on to explain how contentious the subject is. "Although we're quite similar in other areas, on this issue, we disagreed. Or agreed to disagree about the extent of free-mixing. Even the EC, its four board members, wouldn't agree on it. We kind of let people decide for themselves". Despite this disparity in views, some of Faheema's colleagues revealed why a scholar, or religious opinion, may not have been consulted. One of her fellow participants added:

> There was a feeling that if we did ask, we would've got a "no". It might not seem like a big deal to us, but I'm pretty sure if we would've asked a traditional scholar, he's going to say "no", which is why we didn't ask at all.[580]

The hierarchy of religious authority has been expounded upon in the earlier chapters of these thesis. A "traditional scholar" here, would have been someone not willing to contravene the rulings of the *marājiʿ* in any way. There are a number of deductions that can be made from this ABSoc's unwillingness to approach any external religious authorities for guidance on this matter.
Firstly, that they already had a preconception of what the response would have been. This is indicative of how they perceive "traditional" religious scholarship; as having and disseminating conservative and restrictive outlooks on matters of interaction between the genders. Secondly, that the way the ABSoc wished to proceed was in conflict such an inflexible social attitude. And thirdly, that as an organisation, the ABSoc was willing to break from conventional attitudes towards religious authority, which would

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578 London-based ABSoc member. Focus group interview [March 2018]
579 Faheema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
580 Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]

have led them to seek guidance from the *marājiʿ* or their intermediaries. Consequently, the decision on whether to hold such social events, was made within the ABSoc itself. "As an EC", said Hadi, "we proposed the idea that, if enough of us wanted to do it, we then went ahead and did it".[581] Prior to the focus group, the participants had already been informed about the theme of the research; the onset of the session revolved frankly around discussions on religious authority. At this point in the session, Hashim, the then ABSoc Secretary, made an observation about the course of action the organisation members had decided to take: "I think this comes to the point about us being our own religious authorities".[582]
Unlike *hijab*-observance, the gender-mixing question impacts both genders, and presents yet another example of the Shīʿa participants moving away from the normatively accepted model of authority in Shīʿism, towards endorsing a more autonomous approach and assuming personal religious agency.

The segregation of the genders, in social settings, is recognised as convention in Muslim societies and can also be regarded as a marker of religiosity. Interestingly, the university campus context has been used as justification to reconsider this custom. Hayder, a medical student and president of another London ABSoc, said during a focus group interview:

> Even within the ABSoc, there are people on different ends of the spectrum in how they want things to be done. For example, with gender-segregation. We have people who want 100%, like, you cannot be in the same room as the opposite gender. Whereas, on the other hand, there are people who are like, "it's fine. We're at university".[583]

One aspect of this research sought to explore the extent to which the university campus setting itself was a factor impacting the participants' religious attitudes, particularly with regards to authority. In addition to highlighting the stark disparity in opinions within a single ABSoc, on this issue of gender-mixing, Hayder's comment also presents an example of how the university campus may be influential in shifting attitudes towards this religious norm with which Muslim societies often identify. On this point, Hayder continued to elaborate:

> Those conservatives who are very pro gender-segregation are a minority, maybe 10-20%. But the majority of people, they understand that they're at university, which is a social environment, where interaction with the opposite sex is inevitable.

Hayder comes from a religious family background and his father is a recognised Shīʿa cleric. For Hayder to use the 'conservatives' label for some of the ABSoc members who are more inclined towards gender segregation, juxtaposing them with the majority who "understand that they're at university", is telling of the effect of the campus setting on traditional religious attitudes.

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[581] Hadi, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2016]
[582] Hashim, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2016]
[583] Hayder: London-based ABSoc President. Focus group interview [March 2019]

Discussions about cross-gender interaction have been observed by Mahmood in her ethnography of Muslim women in Cairo's mosques.[584] Many of the women, quoted in her research, are of some scholarly pedigree when it comes to the Islamic sciences and texts. As such, one of the women Mahmood refers to for example, is able to cite a hadith that discusses the social mixing of the genders in a way that would prohibit it, consider the authenticity of the hadith and then discuss its contextual applicability in a way so as to look at gender intermixing in a more flexible way.[585]
In contrast, the participants of my research were not primarily engaged with the study of Islamic jurisprudence or its textual sources. It is not surprising that they did not often cite religious texts, debate their applicability and suggest their reinterpretation. They only referred to their university setting as a justification for why gender-segregation was not appropriate, despite the world's most prominent *marjiʿ* labelling the attendance at such a coeducational environment as "discouraged".[586]

For the participants, concerns surrounding cross-gender interaction went beyond the idea of coming together in social environments. Some of the research's respondents faced the challenge of physical contact as a result of the course they were pursuing. One such example is of Donya, a second-year female medical student of Iranian descent, based at a London campus. It is worth noting that, while being the president of her ABSoc, Donya did not publicly observe the *hijab*. Despite this, she had reservations about coming into physical contact with her male colleagues:

> Sometimes we have to practice (medical) examinations on each other. And they do try to accommodate for Muslims so that girls are paired with girls. But you need to be familiar with how a man's body works too so I don't quite know how I can navigate that. I've come to a decision for myself that if it's necessary, then I will do it, but if it can be avoided; if I can practice the same clinical skills on a woman, then I would rather do it on a woman, but if not then I have no choice and that's the career I have chosen.[587]

Donya decided to come to a decision on her own accord, without reference to anyone considered to be a religious authority. Alongside the other examples documented in this research, this instance shows that the orthodox notions of Shīʿī authority are not widely or formally held in practice, despite the literature presenting them as central to Shīʿism. The fact that Donya was the ABSoc president at her campus, actively promoting and representing Shīʿism, once again shows the potential for Shīʿī identity to be endorsed and presented in a way that does not involve the *marjiʿiyyah*.

[584] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 107-109
[585] Ibid. p 108
[586] https://www.sistani.org/arabic/qa/0295/ [Last accessed: 16/10/20]
[587] Donya: London-based ABSoc President. Focus group interview [March 2018]

The nature of the concern regarding physical cross-gender contact, presented in Donya's case, was isolated in the data of this research. However, the question of shaking hands with the opposite gender has been cited as an issue in numerous ethnographic works that focus on Muslim communities, and was also raised a number of times in my data. The Muslim culture, of not shaking hands with the opposite gender, is part of the wider duty to avoid any physical contact with people of the opposite gender outside one's immediate family. This, coupled with the fact that handshaking is a norm and expected custom in western societies, can lead Muslims to feeling conflicted where they are in the minority.[588]

In Walbridge's work on Dearborn's Shīʿa Muslim community, she devotes several paragraphs to this topic when discussing the challenges her participants face.[589] Dessing also quotes one of her student participant's querying whether or not it was religiously permissible.[590] My own research, based in Cardiff in 2013, found that participants cited handshaking as a dilemma that culturally separated them from the *marājiʿ*, as this was not a challenge faced in traditional Middle-Eastern societies.[591] It was not surprising to find this topic being raised again, numerous times, as a concern for the ABSoc members in this research. At the MSC's 2018 Annual Conference, attendees participated in several workshops; one of which invited the participants to share matters on campus about which they were anxious. A number of people raised the issue of handshaking.

Describing the performances of some of her participants, Walbridge writes:

> Although people realised it was religiously forbidden, they could not understand why this was so and made the decision for themselves to shake hands.[592]

Walbridge does not speak explicitly about the concepts of 'religious authority' or 'interpretive agency'. The central idea of her work is not focused upon these themes. However, the idea that her Shīʿa participants have "made the decision for themselves to shake hands", demonstrates their willingness, in practice, to break from the normative notions of Shīʿī authority. One of Walbridge's female participants, Iman, does shake hands when faced with that situation, in order that she does "not cause bad feelings".[593] My research came across a similar example. During a focus group discussion at a Midlands ABSoc, Amira did not expression any inhibitions when asked whether she would shake hands with a man, if she found herself in that situation:

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[588] Minganti, P. K. (2011). Challenging from Within: Youth Associations and Female Leadership in Swedish Mosques. pp 371-391. in (Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H. ed) *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Leiden: BRILL. p 388.
[589] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. pp 151-152
[590] Dessing, N. M. (2011). Thinking for Oneself? Forms and Elements of Religious Authority in Dutch Muslim Women's Groups. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbach, H.). *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Boston: Brill Publications. p 227
[591] Tajri, M. (2016). Assessing Perceptions of Islamic Authority amongst British Shia Muslim Youth. in *Muslims in the UK and Europe (2)* (ed. Suleiman, Y.) pp 148-156. Cambridge: Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. p 155
[592] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. p 151
[593] Ibid.

> Yeah. I would extend my hand for courtesy. I think it's quite rude not to. I would, yeah. I think it comes down to niyyah[594] as well.[595]

Like Iman in Dearborn, Amira's justification behind shaking hands was her own assessment of what it means to be civil and courteous, with no intention of referring to any external authority. In effect, interpretive agency was assumed by Amira and Iman; and in both circumstances, the norms and values of their immediate non-Muslim social context, have been factors that have informed their decisions.

Amira's co-participant in the focus group, Kumail, did not share her opinion that such a decision should be made without consulting the rulings of the *marājiʿ*. The handshaking question, as far as he was concerned, was one of jurisprudential allowability or prohibition. This was the role of the *marājiʿ* and not the laity.

> Well, it is a jurisprudential issue, because some Ayatollahs say you can do it, some say you shouldn't. That's what it comes down to. What do you do in that situation? Is it ḥarām[596] to do that? Do you not do that? That's why it's a jurisprudential issue.[597]

It was not the permissibility of handshaking that Kumail was disputing. He was disagreeing with Amira's practice, in her having assumed the agency to reach her decision without reference to those he saw to be in authority.

Some participants admitted that the social atmosphere, in the campus environment, led to uncomfortable interactions beyond the simple handshake. During a focus group interview in London, Salman, an ABSoc EC member, gave an example describing how the environment made him feel obliged to interact:

> Some people in the environment are very, 'huggy' and that. So, yeah. It gets a bit awkward sometimes, you know. Like if they go for a hug, and it's gone too far for you to say, "no". You know, just put one arm around and…[awkward chuckle] yeah, it gets a bit weird.[598]

Despite the fact that such occurrences were not uncommon for Salman, he had not resorted to asking anyone about the religious rulings regarding such interactions. Yet, his serving on his ABSoc EC illustrates him identifying with Shīʿism and commitment to it.

Conclusion

[594] *Niyyah*: Arabic word for 'personal intention' or 'motivation behind performing a given act'.
[595] Amira, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Mar 2017]
[596] *Ḥarām*: Arabic word for 'unlawful'.
[597] Kumail, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Mar 2017]
[598] Salman: London-based ABSoc EC Member. Focus group interview [March 2018]

This chapter began by contrasting the balanced gender demographics of the ABSocs, with the male-dominated space of Shīʿī authority. This distinction is demonstrative of the wider cultural gap between the two contexts and their respective attitudes to gender related issues.
The differences in gender-ethos was brought to the surface at the ABSoc Presidential Retreat. The organisers' need to modify Al-Sīstānī's document of advice illustrates the struggle of young Shīʿa university students, between upholding traditional aspects of Shīʿism and shifting to a Shīʿism that corresponds less to icons of established authority.

The challenges that participants faced on campus, which have been specifically mentioned in this chapter, have had the subject of gender at their core. Consequently, the stances adopted by the ABSocs and their members, pose degrees of criticism, contravention or infringements of the mainstream position with regards to religious authority in Shīʿism.
The gender demographic of the ABSocs, especially when looking at leadership positions, starkly contrasts with that of the *marjiʿiyyah* – the body of religious authorities that the young Shīʿa Muslims are taught to emulate. Despite some disquiet expressed about that, from some of the participants, a wider commitment to Shīʿī identity remained unaffected. The ABSoc provides the space wherein that affiliation to Shīʿism can be catered for regardless of some members' views objecting to the *marjiʿiyyah*'s gender homogeneity.

The campus setting has presented gender-related situations in which the participants' performances of religious authority have diverged from the normatively stipulated and established practice of *taqlīd* in the Shīʿī context.
While the range of ways, in which *hijab* has been observed by female participants, may have links with a commitment to their understanding of religion, that does not necessarily involve commitment to orthodox practices of authority. In the array of ways they observed the *hijab*, participants were seen to reconstruct and reimagine religious authority structures, transforming them from having characteristics of authoritarian rigidity, to more malleable formulations that allowed them degrees of interpretive agency to autonomously deduce their practices. The reformulations of Shīʿī authority and *taqlīd* have shown female participants' attempts to claim agency while avoiding dissociation with the *marājiʿ*. This disproves understandings that try to correlate *hijab* observance with adherence to the *marjiʿiyyah*; or then place its non-observance against wider loyalty to Shīʿism – including notions of Shīʿī authority.

Chapter 7 – *Conclusions: A Shift* in *Shīʿism*

This thesis has managed to capture the transformation in the conceptions and performances of Shīʿī religious authority on UK university campuses, thereby demonstrating the malleability of lived Shīʿism more generally.

This study used qualitative research methods to examine the attitudes of Shīʿa Muslim students in higher education, towards established constructs of Shīʿī authority. The research saw the emergence of three distinguishable, but intersecting and interrelated themes, which have then informed the structure of this thesis as a whole, and this concluding chapter in particular.

The literature had suggested that normative performances of religious authority were central aspects of Shīʿism; and that and conformity with established religious authority structures – the *marjiʿiyyah* – was inseparable from the lives of committed Shīʿa Muslims. Analysis of the positions and practices of Shīʿa Muslims in higher education, primarily through semi-structured interviewing and participant-observation, has shown this aspect of lived Shīʿism to be something far more adjustable than the literature suggests. The thesis explores the extent to which the campus environment itself is a factor effecting this transformation in how Shīʿism is experienced and represented. As Shīʿa Muslim students are represented on campus by the ABSocs, the operation and function of the ABSocs, as spaces wherein Shīʿa students are catered for, are also examined in this research. While ABSocs cannot be seen as strongholds of 'traditional' Shīʿism on campus, they are organisations that support their members by providing spaces in which established features of Shīʿism are supported.

The findings from this research have served to highlight the nuances between the participants' perceptions of the *marājiʿ*, being at the apex of Shīʿī religious authority, and the participants' performances, which often contravened the prevalent rulings of the *marājiʿ*. The data revealed issues related to gender to be a striking factor impacting the attitudes of the participants towards the *marjiʿiyyah*, as well as performances of female participants – not conforming with the *marājiʿ*'s rulings. This study has

unearthed several ways in which participants have reconstructed established understandings of practical religious authority in Shīʿism, with approaches that confer them with religious interpretive agency.

The orthopraxical version of *taqlīd* can be argued to be authoritarian, in that it does not allow for such autonomy and agency. This thesis argues, however, that while the mentioned reconstructions may be contradicting orthopraxy, they are not necessarily contradicting the theoretical basis of *taqlīd*.

The thesis has presented several instances in which researchers' observations and generalisations have fallen short of recognising certain trends among young Shīʿa Muslims, and some of the factors behind them. Juxtaposed to the cited writings, this research has benefited from the fact that I, as the researcher, am someone whose experience and formal training intersects. Beyond being an 'insider' researcher, as one who identifies as a Shīʿa Muslim from birth,[599] I have also gained from years of training in the tradition Islamic sciences, particularly focusing on the theological, legal and theoretical texts of Shīʿī Islam. This allowed me access to the jurisprudential texts and the ability to extrapolate subtle aspects of the *taqlīd* notion, to which untrained Shīʿa Muslims – like my participants – would not have access and of which they would not have been aware. Coupled with this background, of deep-rootedness in Shīʿism and instruction in the traditional Islamic sciences, I am also a trained social scientist. The qualitative research tools that I applied allowed for a profound exploration of the attitudes towards religious authority, as opposed to assumptions based merely on limited experiences within the Shīʿa community. My education in the sociological sciences, coupled with my knowledge of Britain's Shīʿa community, supplements my traditional theological training. As a result of this interdisciplinary approach, this research has bridged intellectual gaps in the study of Shīʿism. The conclusions reached through this research, therefore, have benefitted from multiple lenses and are outcomes of exploring religious texts as well as the contexts in which they are applied. They have allowed me to recognise the aforementioned shifts, the identification of which would not have been possible for a researcher not having these intersecting proficiencies.

Shifting Shīʿism's Campus Representation

The first of the thesis' chapters on the research findings – Chapter 3 – reveals the way in which Shīʿism is presented and represented within the campus environment. On this front, the researched discovered an evolution in the initiatives and activism undertaken by the Shīʿī student organisations. This transformation is seen alongside the changing demographics of Shīʿa students on UK campuses; from a largely first-generation immigrant and foreign student makeup to a body with principally British-born or domestic student composition. Shīʿa Muslim students in the 1980s could be viewed as a conventional, or

[599] Knott, K (2005). Insider/Outsider Perspectives. in (ed. Hinnells, J. R.) *The Routeledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. Oxford: Routledge. p 246.

modern, diaspora. The constituents of today's Shīʿī student groups do not share a common ethnicity or nationality, and so cannot be regarded in the same way.[600] This demographic shift is one of the factors resulting in a change in the kind of activism that the students focus upon – from involvement in transnational politics to more emphasis on local civic engagement.[601]

The shifts in how Shīʿism is presented on campus is typified by the nature of activities marking the commemoration of Ashura. The activities and imagery associated with Ashura, on campus, can be contrasted by those in more traditional Shīʿī settings, like Islamic centres. This suggests that the dynamics of the campus environment itself is a context that impacts how Shīʿism is represented.
Aspects of that campus environment and of student culture, like excessive drinking and sexual promiscuity,[602] also make an uncomfortable atmosphere for those who are religiously orientated.[603] Consequently, students who identify as Shīʿa, and for whom religion forms a significant aspect of their identities, are even more inclined to join the ABSoc organisations as an alternative to the social activities in which others partake. This grants even more import to the presentation of Shīʿism that is projected by the ABSocs organisationally.

Like the Ashura commemoration, another principle central to lived Shīʿism, is religious authority performance and recourse to the *marjiʿiyyah* - as the structure through which religious authority has been institutionalised. The thesis has illustrated how attitudes towards the *marjiʿiyyah* have shifted among the campus Shīʿa community. Voices expressing dissent and objection to the *marājiʿ*'s rulings are no longer exceptional. This is a clear move away from Takim's portrayal of "most devout Shīʿīs".[604] The basis of Takim's comment seems to be merely anecdotal, as someone who identifies as a Shīʿa Muslim and is generally familiar with Shīʿī communities. His remarks are not alleged to be founded on formal sociological research. Furthermore, his experiences do not involve specific ethnographic study of Shīʿa Muslims in the campus environment. My research fieldwork began in 2016 and witnessed numerous instances of participants' disquiet towards the *marjiʿiyyah*. While the gradual emergence of such sentiments may well have accelerated over the last decade, Takim seems not to have noticed the earlier undercurrents of such trends.
In pointing out this emergent trend, this thesis highlights the nuance between orthodox Shīʿism and loyal adherence to the *marjiʿiyyah*. While the literature has claimed orthodox Shīʿī authority to be central and essential to lived Shīʿism, or even 'devout' Shīʿism, the findings of this study rebut such generalisations.

[600] Dufoix, S. (2015). The Loss and the Link: A Short History of the Long-term Word 'Diaspora'. pp 8-11. in (ed. Sigona. N, Gamlen. A). *Diasporas Reimagined Spaces, Practices and Belonging.* Oxford: Oxford Diasporas Programme. p.10
[601] Degli Esposti, D. and Scott-Baumann, A. (2019). Fighting for "Justice", Engaging the Other: Shi'a Muslim Activism on the British University Campus. in *Religions 10(3)*.
[602] Magolda, P. (2000). The Campus Tour: Ritual and Community in Higher Education. in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly 31(1)*. pp 24-46
[603] Weller. P, Hooly. T and Moore. N. (2011). *Religion and Belief in Higher Education: The Experiences of Staff and Students*. London: Equality Challenge Unit. p 8
[604] Takim, L. (2011). *Shi'ism in America*. New York: New York University Press. p 147-148

One of the primary observations was that of non-equivalence between strongly self-identifying as Shīʿī and adhering to the normative performances of religious authority in practice. Despite that, participants still held the *marājiʿ* in esteemed reverence. This is partially due to the influence of claimed theological underpinnings, as well as the perception of enhanced credibility due to the *marājiʿ* being based in the sentimentalised shrine cities. The heterogeneity in attitudes within the community of Shīʿa students has led to the array of religious authority performances touched on in the next section. This array of performances and stances cannot simply be interpreted as a loyalty-gradient towards the wider values of Twelver Shīʿī Islam.

The absence of formal direction on religious authority from the ABSocs, as an organisation, is due to the variety of attitudes and performances amongst their members. The ABSoc's active organisational involvement with the Ashura commemorations starkly differs from the organisation's stance on religious authority, despite both being aspects of lived Shīʿism. This is partially owing to the disparity in the nature of these two aspects of Shīʿism, as explained earlier in this thesis.

In a setting where Shīʿa Muslims are in a compounded minority context, the student societies catering for them have a responsibility to avoid internal fragmentation. As a result, the data includes instances of the umbrella body for the ABSocs, the MSC, helping to ensure an environment in which reverence of the *marājiʿ* is maintained and, perhaps inadvertently, sustaining established notions of religious authority. Unlike in many Shīʿī community or familial settings, the campus does not have a structure that imposes any particular method of religious authority performance. The ABSoc provides a space that transcends cultural and ethnic differences among its members. It similarly transcends differences in viewpoints regarding the *marājiʿ*, allowing for a space wherein its members' Shīʿism is supported regardless of their leanings on the matter of religious authority. Their differing viewpoints on religious authority are not judgements on their attachment to Shīʿism as a whole.

On the whole, this research has revealed how Shīʿism on campus has developed, from the late 20th century, to the 21st century and how it has come to be represented under the ABSoc banner. These changes include transformations in the students' demographic makeup, the ideological drivers that inform their activities and, consequently, their interpretations and representations of Shīʿism. By looking at certain prominent aspects of lived Shīʿism, and how their representations on campus differ from other Shīʿī settings, the research shows how Shīʿī identity is adaptable and open to reconstruction.

Quite unlike the demographic spread of Muslim higher education students more widely,[605] the ABSocs do not have one dominating ethnic group. This results in the ABSocs transcending ethnic, or cultural, inflections that inform the way Shīʿism in practiced within ethnically defined communities. Religious authority is one such aspect of performed Shīʿism. The varying attitudes towards the *marjiʿiyyah*, including issues surrounding the gender-related concerns, have each stemmed from an array of participants in terms of their ethnicity. In its transcendence above ethnicity and nationality, the ABSocs are not structurally framed by the topic of *marjiʿiyyah*, even though they are engaging with it.

Shifting Shīʿī Attitudes towards Religious Authority

In tandem with the transformation in other aspects of lived Shīʿism in UK university campuses, ideas and performances of religious authority have also mutated when compared to previously established notions. In spite of that, this research has found that, among its young Shīʿa participants, there is a general recognition of the *marjiʿ* - at least in theory - as the apex of religious authority. Views on the specific nature of that authority, and the compulsion to follow it, were more diverse. The hierarchical structure of established Shīʿī authority was also acknowledged. This confirms suggestions that the traditional construct and conceptions of religious authority in Shīʿism are quite deeply ingrained in lived Shīʿī doctrine. Instances in the data demonstrated the understanding that local scholars were conduits of the *marjiʿ*'s authority and were there to convey his teachings, even though they might have more empathy with the participants as a result of shared geographical and cultural contexts. The data also encountered one participant's assessment that it was the role of the *marājiʿ*'s representatives to oversee local Islamic centres and the scholars who preside there.[606] As well as this demonstrating awareness of the institutionalised hierarchy, it also substantiates Corboz's work describing the functions that the *marjiʿiyyah* carries out and the influence it seeks to wield.[607]

For many participants, the esteem they had for the *marājiʿ*, as religious authorities, was inextricable from their sentimental attachments to the shrine cities. The reverence of both, the *marājiʿ* and the shrine cities, are salient aspects of Shīʿism. Despite the data recurrently showing ABSoc members identifying with their immediate geographical contexts, through their verbal expressions and through their activities, the emotional attachments to those cities in the Middle East is enduring. The status of these cities, in the shared Shīʿī psyche, influences the assessment of credibility of the *marājiʿ* as learned authorities. This

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605 Very recent research studying UK Muslim higher education students shows the obvious majority (60%) ethnic background to be from the Indian subcontinent. [Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 56]
606 Saleema, at focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in the Midlands [Feb 2017]
607 Corboz, E. (2015). *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

research has confirmed the inferences made in the literature[608] and previous qualitative research,[609] that the prestige of these cities augments the standing of scholarship, as well as the estimation of spiritual uprightness, in the authorities emerging from there; thereby vesting the *marjiʿ* with the inseparable "dual-role" of being a jurist and a spiritual guide.[610] This poses a challenge to emerging Shīʿī seminaries in other parts of the world, especially in the West.[611] The challenge would be amplified further for those seminaries that are not aligned or accredited by a particular *marjiʿ* or his offices.
Evidently, such reverent ideas about the *marājiʿ*, be it with regards to their scholarly excellence or their spiritual superiority, do not develop in a vacuum. The inculcating of these standpoints is a part of lived Shīʿism and the literature has born witness to instances of this through children's teaching materials.[612] Corroborating this, some participants shared how ideas about the *marjiʿiyyah*, and normative positions on performed Shīʿī authority, were cultivated through their upbringing. Parts of the data, therefore, validated hypothesised impressions on how salient a notion religious authority is within lived Shīʿism. This is also revealing about the nature of religious authority in Shīʿism, challenging the claim that Shīʿī authority is an epistemic one. The fact that the authority of the *marājiʿ* has epistemological facets is undeniable. However, that is supplemented further by factors beyond epistemology. Had the authority been merely epistemic, it would be more open to interpretive agency within that structure, as is with the theoretical basis of *taqlīd*. The performance of *taqlīd* morphs into its normative established performance (with authoritarian understandings) when the basis of the authority structure exceed epistemic considerations.

Besides the shrine cities playing a role in shaping attitudes towards the *marjiʿiyyah*, the shibboleth linking the *marājiʿ* to the Shīʿa Imams also contributed to some participants' stances. Equating the authority of the fallible *marājiʿ*, to that of the doctrinally infallible (and divinely appointed) Imam, characterises the standpoint of many Shīʿa scholars.[613] Accordingly, the data has mentioned examples in which participants overtly articulated that connection and, consequently, believed the word of the *marjiʿ* to be final and binding. This doctrine, instilled in many Shīʿa Muslims from a young age, has resulted in some participants appreciating the position of the *marjiʿ* as an authoritarian one, as described in earlier chapters: A position that is considered the solely correct one and exclusively acceptable to God.

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[608] Kadhim, A. and Alebh, A. F. (2021). *A Shift Among the Shīʿa: Will a Marjʿa Emerge from the Arabian Peninsula?*. Washington: Middle East Institute. p 11
[609] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 90
[610] Walbridge, L. (2001). *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. p 5
[611] Van Den Bos, M. (2015). 'Western Seminary': On Transnational Shiite Higher Education in Britain. in *Social Compass 62(2)*. London: Sage Publications. pp 238-254
[612] Szanto, E. (2012). Illustrating an Islamic Childhood in Syria: Pious Subjects and Religious Authority in Twelver Shi'i Children's Books. in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle-East 32(2)*. Duke University Press. p 173
[613] Eliash, J. (1979). Misconceptions Regarding the Juridicial Status of the Iranian 'Ulamā. in *International Journal for Middle-Eastern Studies* (10). London. pp 9-25

This attitude would is one where those participants have decided to 'subjectivise' themselves to the unquestionable authority of the *marjiʿ*.[614] This outlook falls on one end of the spectrum of approaches witnessed during the research. Although it falls in line with established ideas on Shīʿī authority, it only represented a small fraction of the various approaches that the data came across.

Many of the participants did not recognise the *marājiʿ* as having such encompassing and indisputable authority. The data does reveal the participants' overall respect towards the *marājiʿ*, the confidence in their scholarship and their high esteem. However, the data also captured instances of disquiet around the idea of centralised fallible human actors, as authority figures, having an extensive and overbearing influence. Some participants expressed frustration at the *marājiʿ* being referred to in every matter and being pedestalised by their colleagues; others stated that ultimate authority belonged only to God and His message in the Quran. This latter appreciation of religious authority has the crispness and simpleness to it, that Abou El Fadl has described,[615] whereas religious authority is far more complex as a practical performance. In any case, this latter appreciation of the *marjiʿ*'s authority denies it any divine backing and rids it of being mandatorily binding. Though this theoretical reconstruction then translated into performances that afforded (lay) individuals with religious interpretive agency, it did not result in a complete lack of respect and reverence for the *marjiʿ* as a religious authoritative figure. These reconstructions of Shīʿī religious authority is at the heart of this study, which is in itself indicative of a change and transformation of Shīʿism.

Just as the theoretical perceptions and attitudes towards the *marājiʿ* were varying, so their translations into practical performances were also ranging, consisting of numerous negotiated approaches to practical Shīʿī authority. The approach of some participants reflected what the literature would suggest as the normative standpoint. That is to say, they would adhere to the ruling of a *marjiʿ* even if they entertained some ambivalence to the ruling and were not aware of the jurisprudential reasoning behind it. This was seen in the examples to do with organ donation. This mindset is the one that Sachedina censures as the "blind acceptance" that clashes with "reasoning in the age of democratization of knowledge".[616] These aspects of the data seem to evince the enduring deep-seated nature and strength of the *marjiʿiyyah*'s authority over sections of the Shīʿī community, who are unwilling or unready to exercise independent religious interpretive agency. Their commitment to this approach, which is informed by their religious positions, is in spite of them being based at post-Enlightenment western university campus environments, described as being at odds with such religiously backed attitudes.[617]

[614] Foucault, M. (1980). *Truth and Power*. in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans C. Gordon 109-33. New York:: Pantheon Books.
[615] Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*. London: Oneworld. p 23
[616] Chenai. M. C. (2008). *Recueil de textes du professeur Abdulaziz Sachedina*. Paris: Publibook. p 245
[617] Guest, M. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. p 85

In addition to this type of resolute adherence to a particular *marjiʿ*, there were also contributions from the participants that reflected their commitment to the overall structure of Shīʿī authority. This was seen, for example, in a participant's assertion that religious teaching could be taken from the representative of the *marjiʿ*, or any person who conveys his teachings, as "the source".[618]

This project uncovered numerous ways in which established models of Shīʿī authority have been reconstructed amongst its student participants. The earlier chapters have given more detail on how the orthopraxy of *taqlīd* was circumnavigated through various adjustments to it. The practices included a) exercising interpretive agency by directly referring to the Islamic scriptures and deriving personal judgements from them, b) reinterpreting the known rulings of the *marjiʿ* while maintaining an amended version of *taqlīd* and c) seeking recourse in one's ignorance of a given ruling so as to practice without the guilt of having openly contravened the orthopraxy.
These reconstructed authority models, particularly the latter two, allow for the untrained (lay) individual to select a given course of action without completely dissociating and disconnecting with the core meaning of *taqlīd* and 'emulation' of the *marjiʿ*'s rulings. In somehow adhering to semblances of normative Shīʿī authority models, this significant aspect of lived Shīʿism and identity can be retained. The need for such recreated models, without simply disengaging from the *marjiʿiyyah*, once again, speaks to the immense importance of this institutionalised religious authority as a facet of Shīʿism. This dichotomy speaks to the ongoing tussle between established or traditional Shīʿism, and the endeavours to reformulate Shīʿism in newer contexts.

The vast majority of participants were unaware of the intricacies behind the technical definition of *taqlīd*, or the contrast between its theoretical definition and its conventional practice; the former allowing for an extent of autonomy of the lay individual and the latter being restrictive of such autonomy. In their different explanations and justifications for their approaches, none of the participants cited the theory of *taqlīd* itself as enabling them agency and autonomy. The participants' obvious familiarity with the term '*taqlīd*' and the concepts of Shīʿī religious authority more generally, coupled with their obliviousness of its technical subtleties, attests to the overwhelmingly standardised and singular way that the understanding of *taqlīd* is instilled in Shīʿī communities. Nevertheless, some of their practical approaches are evolving to break from that singular tradition.

In addition to the above, the research also found that some participants sought religious guidance from authority figures that were more accessible to them; those who were seen to be religious, those who they considered better educated and even parents were sometimes referred to. Despite the emphasis put on

[618] Focus group participant. Focus group interview with ABSoc members at one of the university campuses in London [Mar 2019]

taqlīd and following the *marājiʿ*, immediate accessibility and pragmatism are also factors that widen the ambit of sources for religious guidance.

Through all of the points covered above, which have been elicited through the data acquired by way of qualitative ethnography, this study has captured a phenomenon that clearly refutes the oversimplistic way in which Shīʿī religious authority performances have been generalised in the literature. Shīʿa Muslims on campus are negotiating the notions of *marjiʿiyyah* and *taqlīd* in nuanced and sophisticated ways, not observed and documented before. It has also become clear from the data that there is a disparity between the theoretical notions of Shīʿī religious authority and the practical applications of it.

Of the most salient factors, that effected a shift away from normative attitudes on Shīʿī religious authority, was the impact of gender related issues. The impact of matters concerning gender, specifically those that had a direct bearing upon female participants, led to digressions from established conceptual stances as well as practical performances.

How Female-Related Issues Have Affected Attitudes

Since the core of this thesis studies the change and malleability of lived Shīʿism, with a particular focus on attitudes to religious authority, gender has become a special case and its impact is explored.
The *marjiʿiyyah* is an authoritative body of emulation for Shīʿa Muslims. That being considered, its lack of female representation was starkly contrasted by the ABSocs' extensive female participation and engagement. This contrast was perceptible from the onset of data collection. This served as an immediate indicator of the cultural differences between the Middle East-based authority structure and the UK-based ABSocs. This particular aspect of cultural dissimilarity is exacerbated when taking into account the fact that the absence of any female leadership, within the *marjiʿiyyah*, is actually jurisprudentially stipulated and not merely a result of arbitrary circumstances.
The countering of culturally imposed gender roles and stereotypes of Muslim women, being meek and oppressed, is not without precedent in the campus setting. Research of Muslim higher education students in Britain, has noted Muslim women in notable professorial positions as well as assuming leadership positions on student unions and Islamic Societies (Isocs).[619] In the specific context of Shīʿa female students on campus, in addition to also assuming similar leadership positions, there have been instances of voiced dissent against the impermissibility of women ascending to the apex of religious authority. The jurists' rationale behind this impermissibility is the imposition of gender roles and limiting the women's function to domestic administration.[620] The campus, even within the ABSoc organisations, are

[619] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 115-116
[620] Al-Khūʾī, A. (2009). *Al-Tanqīḥ Fī Sharḥ ʿUrwat Al-Wuthqā. Vol 1.* London: Al-Khūʾī Islamic Foundation. p 187

empowering spaces that rise above gendered cultural expectations, even those advocated by religious authority figures.

The lack of female representation, among the *marājiʿ*, is a factor in the data leading to some diminishing in deference towards the *marjiʿiyyah*. Although the number of such instances was limited, it has been highlighted in the thesis as a significant theme that was raised on more than one occasion, and in contributions of both male and female participants. That being said, the majority of participants – including the female ones – did not raise it as an issue. It seems that, over time, male homogeneity in the *marjiʿiyyah* has become an accepted reality and established norm. The aforementioned instances of dissent, however, may be indicative of changing attitudes among the younger generation of Shīʿa Muslims in the West, and especially among those in the western university campus environment. One of the quoted participants had expressed her disappointment at the fact that her "well-educated" male colleagues held views favouring the male invariance among the *marājiʿ*.[621] This reflected her belief that a western university education should have driven them away from such a mindset. It also suggests that, in her view, the exposure to western academia would contest epistemically authoritarian structures, as her "well-educated" colleagues were expected to exercise some agency due to being in positions of knowledge value.

Female Shīʿa students have taken up active leadership roles on individual ABSocs at various campuses, and recently filled the leadership positions at the MSC – the national umbrella body of a religiously defined organisation. This is despite a lack of female leadership role models within the highest echelons of the Shīʿī religious leadership structure. These female ABSoc members have empowered themselves by moving away from the patriarchy that the *marjiʿiyyah* embodies.
Leadership is one aspect of societal engagement. It is one function that would require a person to operate outside of a mere domestic environment. The most prominent amongst the *marājiʿ*, Ayatollah Al-Sīstānī, encourages young women to strive towards performing domestic roles over seeking a career.[622] The fact that MSC Executive members recognised this segment of his advice as potentially objectionable,[623] goes to further illustrate the mismatch between the two cultural contexts.

Aside from the issue of female representation within the *marjiʿiyyah*, instances of day-to-day gender-related jurisprudence, which had more of a direct impact on female participants, also posed challenges to the established model of Shīʿī authority performance. Among the most conspicuous of these, was the question of *hijab* observance in its technical jurisprudential meaning. This matter emerged iteratively among the female interviewees involved with some branch of clinical practice due to the mandatory

[621] Yusra: ABSoc Vice-President. One-to-one interview [February 2018]
[622] http://www.sistani.org/english/archive/25240/ [Last accessed: 04/07/22]
[623] Refer to the observations at MSC Presidential Retreat, Feb 2016.

BBE[624] policy. Circumventing the *marājiʿ*'s rulings on the matter gave rise to numerous approaches that altered normative Shīʿī practice. These various manoeuvres, and reconstructions of religious authority, each afforded their executors a degree of autonomy in action, and agency in interpreting the divine 'rationale' behind the stipulations of *hijab*.

These reconstructions show a need, or want, for the female participants in question, to move away from the orthopraxy of *taqlīd*. These reconstructions were often framed in a way that would not be articulated as explicit, open and direct contraventions of *taqlīd*. While this can be interpreted as evidence of the social impediments of overtly flouting the *marjiʿ*'s rulings, it can also indicate a desire to retain aspects of established Shīʿī performance of authority, in preserving important aspects of traditional Shīʿism.

In the context of *hijab* observance among the participants in her ethnography, Walbridge also remarks that, "one does not have to be very strict about following the decrees of a marjiʿ to claim to be a follower of one".[625] However, it seems that Walbridge does not manage to see the cause of this incongruity, which may speak to her 'outsider researcher' status and unfamiliarity with the deep-rootedness of *marjiʿiyyah* in lived Shīʿism. While personal preference or pragmatism may be pulling the quoted participants, in Walbridge's study, away from the *marjiʿ*'s decree, the attachment to traditionally established features of Shīʿism does not allow them to openly dissociate or disconnect from him. Their Shīʿism, therefore, is preserved by claims of adherence and affinity to the *marājiʿ*, whereas their practices often display nonconformity with their rulings. That being said, the practice of wearing *hijab* is often an identity marker in itself and an expected presentation of modesty. By and of itself, it is not an effective measure of conformance with normative Shīʿī authority. This study has not merely observed the extents and ways participants have observed the *hijab*, but analysed their justifications that informed their actions in this regard.

Another instance related to gender issues, which showed the participants' willingness (or not) to conform with features of 'traditional' Islamic settings, was the matter of gender segregation. While segregation of the genders is a norm in conventional Islamic gatherings, it is claimed to be in conflict with the culture of western university campus environments and has been a point of controversy.[626] Discussion about holding mix-gender social events were a point of disagreement within some of the ABSocs. Some of the participants suggested their colleagues' attitudes in this regard was indicative of how 'traditional' someone was; others suggested that the university environment should be a situation in which this traditional mould is broken. In instances such as these, one can see the 'university environment' being understood as a counterweight to 'traditional Islamic' values.

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[624] Bare below the elbows.

[625] Walbridge, L. (1996). *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community*. Michigan: Wayne State Uni Press. P 81

[626] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 9

The interaction between genders became more of a jurisprudential issue when it potentially involved actual physical contact, mostly to do with the custom of handshaking. This performance goes beyond mere sartorial choices and so offers another vantagepoint to assess approaches to religious authority. In these cases, too, some female participants were seen to follow a methodology that allowed them their own religious interpretive agency – sometimes even with direct references to religious scripture. The female participants, who exhibited a range of approaches, included those who were in leadership positions within their respective ABSocs. This shows that despite their commitment to, and investment in, 'Shīʿism' as an identity, they were willing to breach the ideas of religious authority that would be considered normative.

The approaches taken by some of the female participants can be likened to the attitudes of some Muslim women in Swedish mosques. Minganti writes about how some women, in lower social positions than their male counterparts, were open to reinterpreting Islamic texts in a way that enhanced their positions within the Muslim community as well as Swedish society as a whole. Their re-evaluation of religious texts, however, was not carried out in a way that would oppose or challenge the traditional recognised authorities within the Muslim communities.[627] The existing religious spaces, in Minganti's research, are being used to renegotiate normative ideas about the position of women. The equivalent process seems to be taking place among some of the female Shīʿa students in my research. Without overtly opposing established authority structures, their conceptual reconstructions of religious authority allow them a degree of interpretive agency while seeming to remain within the ambit of normativity.
Gender playing such a role of divergence from normativity and orthopraxy is not without precedent. The particular inflection it has taken in this Shīʿī community has been uncovered by this research. That being said, gender-inspired reconstructions of religious authority cannot always be described as divergences away from traditional authority per se. Mahmood confutes the oversimplification of consistently viewing religious authority and agency as diametrical.[628] My research has shown participants use their agency to reconstruct traditional models of authority in order to retain association with them.

Concluding Reflections

Scott-Baumann's recent invaluable contribution, to the discussion of Muslims on campus, was deliberately designed to "disrupt the tendency towards the homogenization of Islam within the popular imagination".[629] My research has successfully taken this ethical imperative deeper and further, in contesting impressions of Shīʿa Muslims as a monolithic bloc – particularly with regards to their attitudes towards, and performances of, religious authority.

[627] Minganti, P, K. (2011). Challenging from Within; Youth Associations and Female Leadership in Swedish Mosques. pp 371-391. in (ed. Bano, M. and Kalmbacj, H). *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*. Brill Publications.
[628] Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p 18
[629] Scott-Baumann, A. et al. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*. Oxford University Press. p 45

All of the examples of participants endorsing some type of religious interpretive agency, are illustrations of divergence away from the established orthopraxy. Ultimately, through various negotiations with the established model, they chose not to be 'subjectified' to that authority in a way which would recognise it as authoritarian and unequivocally binding. Regardless of theological rhetoric and scriptural justifications, the authority of the *marjiʿ* is ultimately shaped by the 'lay' Shīʿa masses in how they envisage his authority upon themselves.

This research has shown that to correlate Shīʿī devoutness, in a generalising manner, with conformity with the established model of authority, would be erroneous. Despite the criticality of *marjiʿiyyah* to traditional Shīʿism, many of the participants have managed to redefine Shīʿism and rearticulate its tenets, in a way that they find more suitable, so as to preserve their investedness with Shīʿism.

It would be wrong, therefore, to describe the array of religious authority performances as some sort of binary structure: with advocates of orthodox religious authority on one side, and those who defy it on the other. Rather, it is important to recognise the nuances and spectrum of conceptions and performances, reconstructions and expressions, negotiations and recreations of religious authority – all seeking to fit into a wider redefined Shīʿī tradition.

While not being the sole factor for these rearticulations, the context of the western university campus environment certainly plays a role. Sociologists have suggested that divergences away from formalised religious authority in Islam, is partly a result of mass higher education.[630] Operating in such a higher education setting, the ABSoc organisations successfully manage to strike a balance that allows its members, including executive members, the freedom to practice any variation of religious authority, while simultaneously working to cater for their needs as people who self-identify as Shīʿa. In highlighting this function of the ABSocs, this study sheds light on the importance of student organisations that cater for minority communities, especially religiously defined groups, which are in themselves representations of heterogeneous blocs.

The very specific context of Shīʿa Muslim students in higher education, means that it would be inaccurate to superimpose the conclusions of this research to Shīʿa Muslims in another social context. Doing so would be to repeat the error of generalisations, about Shīʿa Muslims and authority, cited in earlier chapters. The particular social contexts of this study's participants had a hand in steering them in their performances away from orthopraxy. If anything, it can be said that this speaks to the malleability of

[630] Eickleman, D. (2000). Education, Sacred Authority and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Muslim Societies. in (ed. Bahmanpour, M. and Bashir, H). *Muslim Identity in the 21st Century: Challenges of Modernity*. pp 205-217 London: BookExtra.

Shīʿism as it is experienced as a lived tradition. Drawing attention to this fact is another way this research breaks the lens of homogeneity through which this minority segment of Muslims is often viewed.

Many of the gender-related issues, faced by the participants, are not exclusive to Shīʿa Muslim students. However, the method in which my project has approached this area is by looking at the impact of Shīʿī authority particularly, on Shīʿa Muslim students – and conversely – the attitudes of Shīʿa Muslim students towards religious authority, especially as a consequence of that authority structure's gender-exclusive characteristic. This opens the doors for further exploration of Shīʿa attitudes to traditional religious constructions like authority, based on the patriarchy often associated with them; and particularly for Shīʿa Muslims in the West.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of this research is that, through focused exploration of this segment of Shīʿa Muslims, it has successfully uncovered the discrepancies between theoretical attitudes towards religious authority and their practical performances. This is a feature that previous works have failed to recognise, resulting in a reductive appreciation of Shīʿī authority notions.
Furthermore, while this thesis has drawn attention to the various ways Shīʿa students have reconstructed normative ideas on Shīʿī authority, it would be both unfair and oversimplistic to frame their performances as clear-cut contraventions of *taqlīd*. These reconstructions are not aligned with *taqlīd* in what has become defined as orthopraxy. However, there is space to argue that their performances are within the ambit of the theoretical definition *taqlīd* – as a concept that allows for individual religious interpretive agency.

Bringing the above discussions together, the thesis makes the overarching argument that Twelver Shīʿī Islam, as one lived tradition with shared values and doctrines, cannot be thought of as an unchanging monolith when it comes to attitudes and performances of religious authority. While the thesis recognises the centrality of religious authority tenets in traditional Shīʿism, it has also demonstrated how attitudes and performances in this regard can shift without conceding claims to a Shīʿī identity. This has been shown by unearthing the participants' reimagined and negotiated models of Shīʿī authority, in ways that afford them the religious interpretive agency that the orthopraxical model would not. Transformations in how Shīʿism is expressed, allow the participants retain affiliation to the wider principles of Shīʿism, but present them in manners that are shaped and influenced by their social and cultural contexts.
As a lived tradition, Shīʿism cannot exist in a vacuum. It inevitably comes into contact with cultures with which traditional Shīʿism will find points of convergence, and those that diverge from it on some values, norms and tenets. This thesis has focused on Shīʿī religious authority to show that in the latter cases, lived Shīʿism is open to reinvention and reconstruction.

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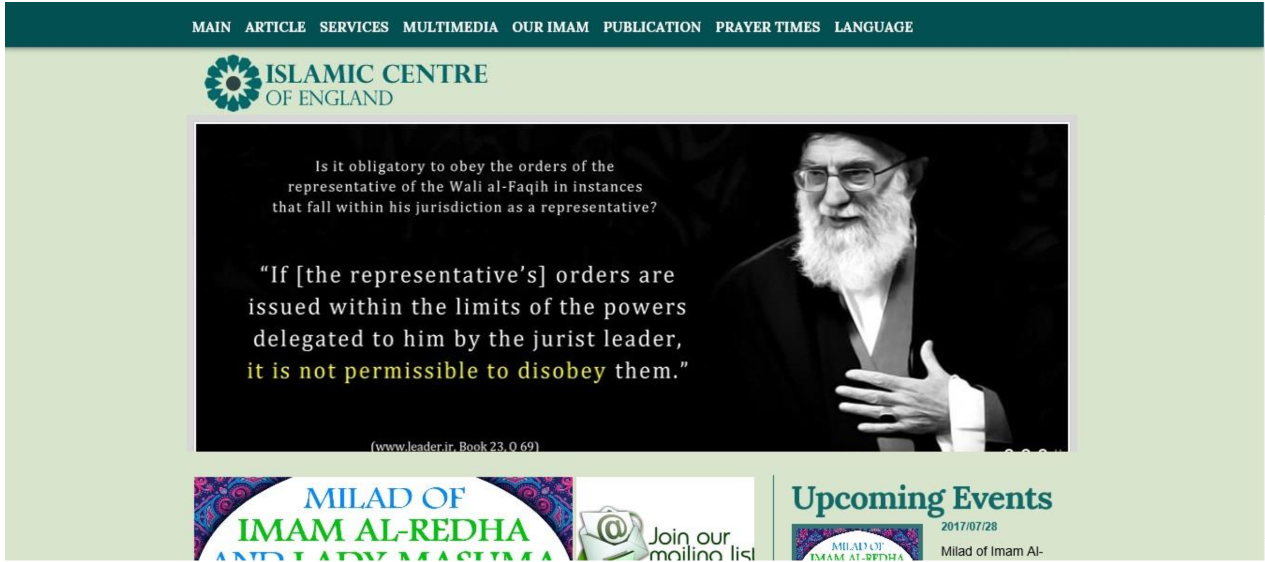
Appendices

APPENDIX 1



APPENDIX 2

APPENDIX 3

APPENDIX 4

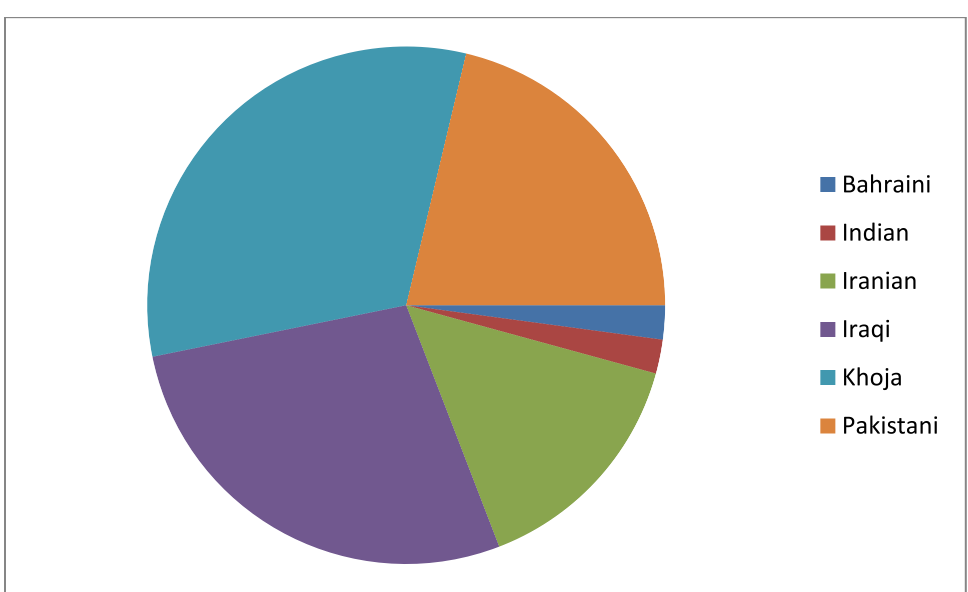
APPENDIX 5

APPENDIX 6

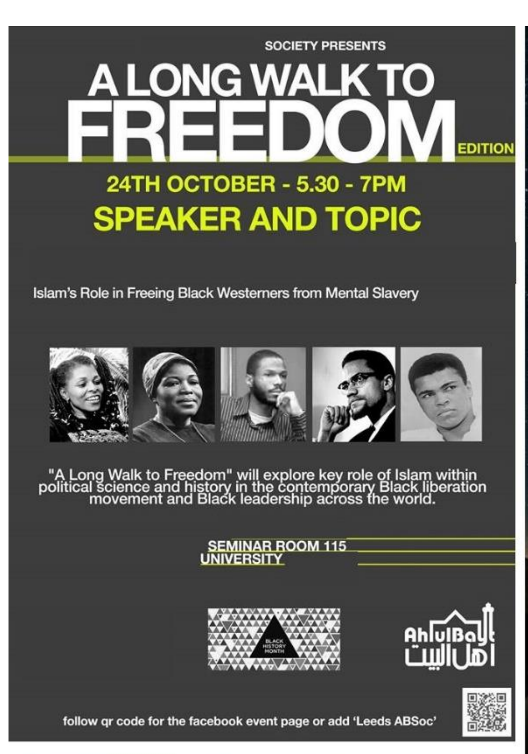
APPENDIX 7

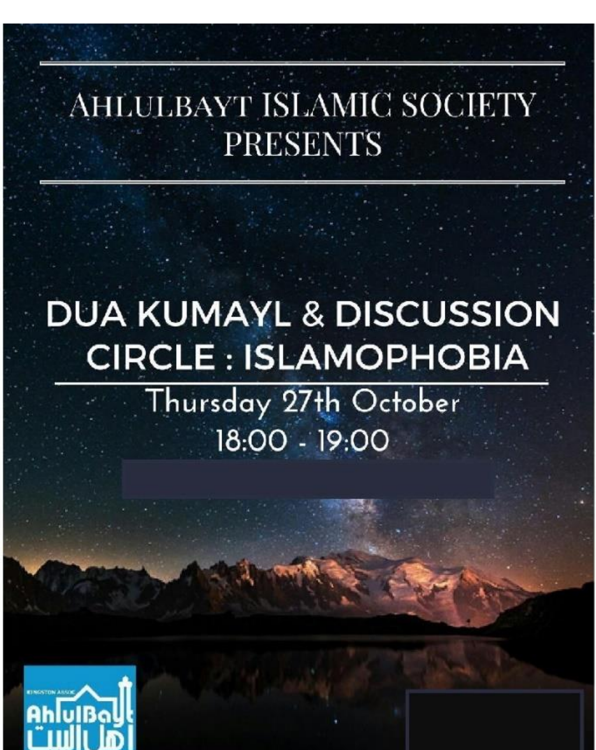
Ethnic or National Backgrounds of Participants

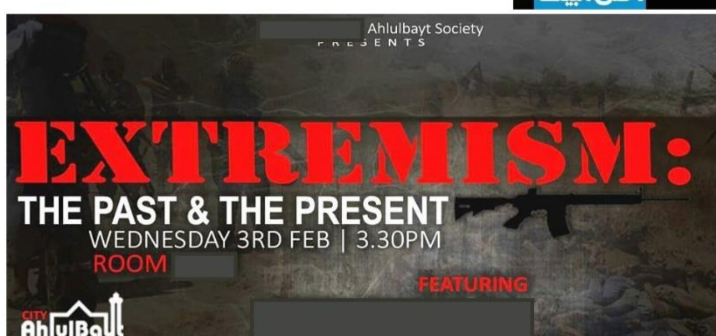
Bahraini	Indian	Iranian	Iraqi	Khoja	Pakistani	**Total**
1	1	7	13	15	10	47



APPENDIX 8







APPENDIX 9

APPENDIX 10

HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE

15th – 19th February 2016

In the UK, over 900,000 people need food banks to survive

Over 750,000 children sleep hungry

Donate or volunteer at our stalls!

Items you can donate:

Milk (long-life)
Juice/Squash
Sugar/Sweetener
Tea/Coffee
Jam/Marmalade/Honey
Cereal/Oats/Porridge
Biscuits/Crackers
Cereal Bars
Instant Noodles
Cooking Oil
Rice/Pasta/Spaghetti
Pasta Sauce/Curry Sauce
Lentils (yellow/red)
Fruit and Vegetables (tins)
Stock Cubes (vegetarian)
Tuna (tins)
Salt/Pepper
Rice Pudding/Custard
Baby Milk/Baby Food
Toiletries: Shampoo/Soap/Toilet Roll
Hand-Wash/Washing-Up Liquid
Soups (tins/boxes)
Baked Beans/Spaghetti Hoops
Chick Peas/Kidney Beans (tins)

Where to find us!

Mon 15th Feb	Union
Tues 16th Feb	Union
Wed 17th Feb	Union
Thur 18th Feb	Union
Fri 19th Feb	Tesco Express

JOIN THE FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER!

HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE

NOVEMBER

21th-25th EVERYDAY IN THE JCR

TACKLING POVERTY IN THE UK

HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE

MSC

MONDAY: FIND OUR AWARENESS STALL IN THE MAIN BUILDING UPPER FOYER. FREEBIES & SNACKS!

TUESDAY: JOIN US TO FEED THE HOMELESS IN TOWN! REGISTER VIA EMAIL

HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE

5TH-9TH DECEMBER 2016

ASTONABSOC@GMAIL.COM

WEDNESDAY: WE'LL BE COLLECTING FOOD DONATIONS FOR THE HOMELESS AROUND CAMPUS OR DROP IT OFF AT OUR TESCO FOOD BIN!

THURSDAY: AN OPEN TO ALL "UNITY IN THE COMMUNITY" DISCUSSION 7-9PM MB404A

MSC

UNITY IN THE COMMUNITY:
JOIN US FOR AN EVENT ABOUT TACKLING FOOD POVERTY CRISIS

HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE

There's someone out there who is in need,
It's up to me and you to take on the deed,
Let's go to the homeless who we will feed,
It's starts with you to give and you to care,
Let's combat food poverty everywhere!

8TH DECEMBER 2016 | 7-9PM

HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE

IS COMING BACK.

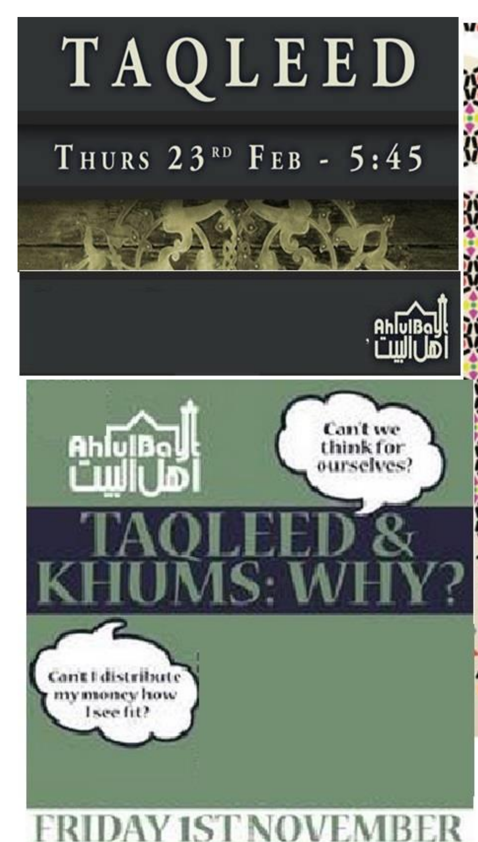
Tackling London's Food Poverty: 6TH - 10TH FEB

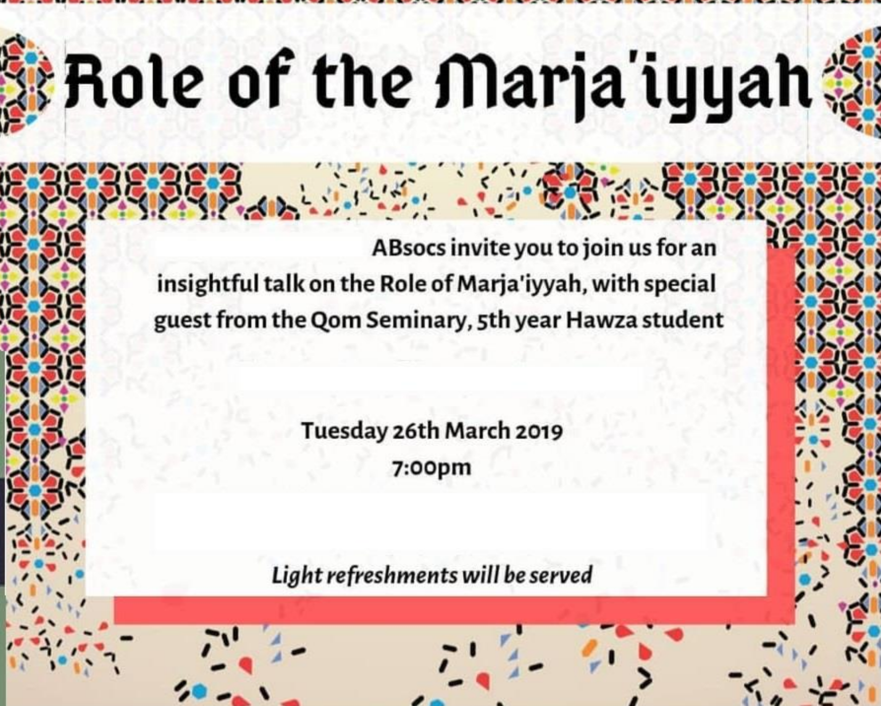
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, MOTIVATION AND TO VOLUNTEER, WATCH THIS SPACE:

UCL Hungry For Justice

APPENDIX 11

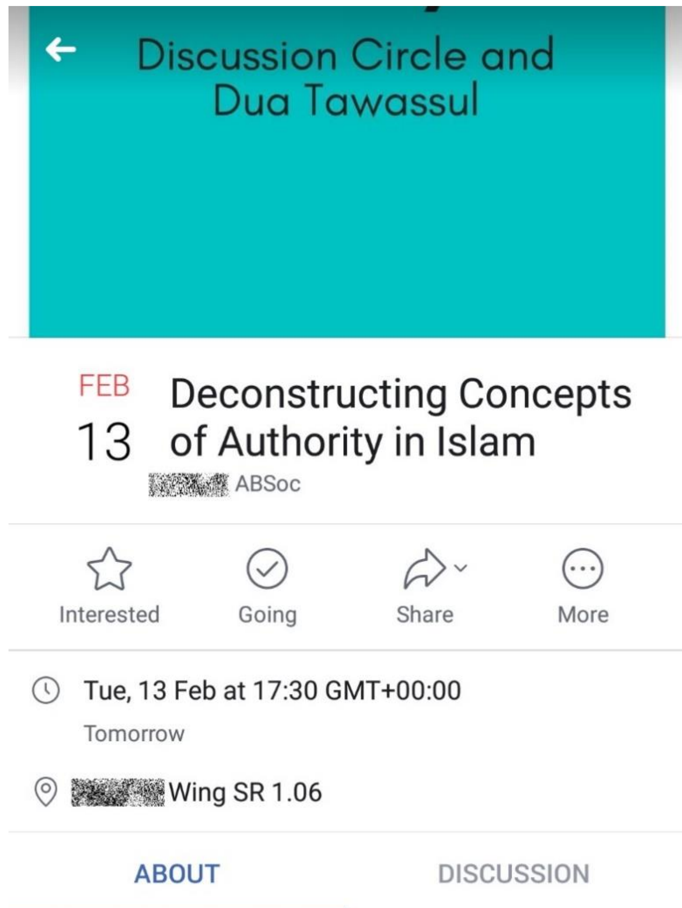
APPENDIX 12


TAQLEED
THURS 23RD FEB - 5:45
AhlulBayt
اهل البيت
AhlulBayt
اهل البيت
Can't we think for ourselves?
TAQLEED & KHUMS: WHY?
Can't I distribute my money how I see fit?
FRIDAY 1ST NOVEMBER


Role of the Marja'iyyah
ABsocs invite you to join us for an insightful talk on the Role of Marja'iyyah, with special guest from the Qom Seminary, 5th year Hawza student
Tuesday 26th March 2019
7:00pm
Light refreshments will be served

AhlulBayt
اهل البيت

APPENDIX 13



APPENDIX 14