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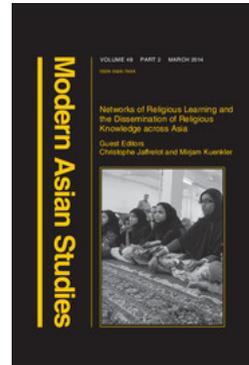
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SIMON WOLFGANG FUCHS

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*Failing Transnationally: Local intersections of science, medicine, and sectarianism in modernist Shi‘i writings**

SIMON WOLFGANG FUCHS

*Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, USA
Email: swfuchs@princeton.edu*

Abstract

This paper adds to the growing literature on transnational Shi‘ism which has so far mostly focused on social history and political contestations. By tracing the thought, transnational legacy, and ultimate failure of the reformist Shi‘i scholar, Muhammad al-Khalisi (d. 1963), I argue for the crucial importance of local contexts and ideas for the genesis of Islamic modernist projects. In his native Iraq, al-Khalisi not only distinguished himself as a guerrilla fighter and political activist but also was shaped by prevailing notions about the compatibility of Islam and science. Exiled to Iran for his opposition to the British from 1922 to 1949, he encountered there specific medicalizing discourses on modernity. This exposure and his experience as a practitioner of medicine in the Iranian countryside led al-Khalisi to identify medicine as the master key to unlocking the secrets of the divine law, the *sharī‘a*: his major work on Islamic law singles out human health as God’s supreme concern. Back in Iraq during the 1950s, al-Khalisi’s medical-scientific vision of modernity was finally complemented with an uncompromising call for intra-Muslim unity. This stance led to furious attacks against al-Khalisi which continue unabated in contemporary Pakistan where his name has become a term of abuse.

Introduction

The Iraqi Shi‘i scholar, Muhammad b. Mahdi al-Khalisi (1890–1963), had pinned his hopes on Ayatollah Borujerdi.¹ When the two men

* I am grateful to Sabrina Mervin, Werner Ende, Miriam Younes, Daniel Stolz, Cyrus Schayegh, Mirjam Künkler, Christophe Jaffrelot, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Michael Feener, Christian Sahner, and the participants of the Inter-Asian Connections III workshop, ‘Networks of Religious Learning’, who all contributed valuable feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

¹ On Borujerdi, see Hamid Algar, ‘Borūjerdī, Ḥosayn Ṭabāṭabā‘ī’, in Ehsan Yarshater (ed), *Encyclopedia Iranica* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1990),

met in the mid-1940s in the holy Iranian city of Qom, they spent a whole day in conversation. Al-Khalisi tried to convince the newly elected head of the seminary of Qom—the *hawza*—that its system of education was in dire need of reform. The way young Shi‘i clerics were taught was outdated and resulted in no palpable benefit for the Muslim community. To remedy this deplorable state, religious education should be combined with an intensive focus on the natural sciences. Borujerdi, according to al-Khalisi’s account, frankly acknowledged the deficiencies of the *hawza*’s structure but nevertheless dismissed the suggestion of his Iraqi interlocutor as too radical: ‘The minds of the people are not able to bear this sort of reform. We fear that if we carry it out, the people will splinter and we will remain here alone without being able to do anything.’²

Yet the cold shoulder al-Khalisi received from the Shi‘i establishment did not deter him from continuing to be extremely vocal about his reformist and modernist project. This paper is especially interested in tracing the various stages of his thought and his legacy, attempting to connect them to the specific local circumstances of Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. Al-Khalisi embodied nothing less than all the characteristics of an activist transnational Shi‘i scholar of the twentieth century: he wrote in highly accessible Arabic and Persian prose and styled himself as a global (and the single truly modern) spokesman for both Shi‘i Muslims and Islam more generally, attending international conferences in Lebanon and travelling to Egypt. In his political activism, he repeatedly clashed with various governments in Iran and Iraq. In 1922 the British exiled him to Iran, where he remained until 1949. His early Iraqi and Iranian publications urged Muslims to close the gap on the scientifically advanced Western countries so that Islam could remain relevant in a world dominated by a hegemonic discourse of science. While the view of a complete harmony between Islam and science was shared among modernist Sunni Muslim thinkers at the time, al-Khalisi’s experience of living in Iran decisively shifted his focus. There he encountered specific medicalizing discourses which led him to identify the preservation of human health as God’s primary concern. Beginning in the mid-1940s, al-Khalisi attempted to discern a medical rationale for every single

Vol. IV, Fasc. 4, pp. 376–379. Borujerdi had taken over the leadership of the *hawza* of Qom in late December 1944.

² See Muḥammad b. Maḥdī al-Khālīsī, *Risālat Jāmi‘at Madīnat al-‘Ilm ilā al-‘ālam: waqfiyyatuhā, murāfaqatuhā, ahdāfuhā* (Al-Kāzimiyya: Madīnat al-‘Ilm, n.d.), p. 12.

ruling of the *shari‘a*, an effort that dominated his major work on Islamic law.³ Medicine and physiology could, as he saw it, finally unlock all the secrets of divine law. Instead of simply pointing to the well-ordered character of the universe in which God had assigned galaxies, suns, and planets their proper place, al-Khalisi became deeply interested in the workings of the human body as a marker of God’s unity (*tawhid*). Late in life and following his return to Iraq, his reformist interests shifted yet again. Al-Khalisi suddenly began styling himself flag bearer of intra-Muslim unity, with clearly transnational consequences: even decades after his death, a heated debate over his legacy lingers on in Pakistan, a country he never visited.

In discussing these stages of al-Khalisi’s reformist thought, my paper makes three contributions. First, it widens our understanding of the scarcely studied field of Shi‘i approaches to Islamic modernism. Second, it emphasizes the decisive importance of local contexts in the development of such seemingly universal modernist concerns. Finally, it enriches the growing body of studies on transnational Shi‘ism which often focus primarily on political contestations.

Al-Khalisi’s diverging Iranian, Iraqi, and global calls for reform, combined with his later, selective reception in South Asia, can provide us with a useful supplement to Sabrina Mervin’s important work on Shi‘i thought in the first half of the twentieth century. She has argued that until 1950 and the publication of *al-‘Aqa‘id al-imamiyya* (*The Imami Articles of Faith*) in Najaf by the Iraqi reformist Muhammad Rida al-Muzaffar (d. 1963), no Shi‘i writer had attempted to compose a systematic modernist vision of theology similar to Muhammad ‘Abduh’s *Treatise on Divine Unity* (*Risalat al-tawhid*).⁴ Earlier reformist projects advanced by Muhsin al-Amin and other clerics stemming from Jabal ‘Amil in South Lebanon were, in Mervin’s eyes, only ad-hoc

³ There is some confusion as to when he actually wrote *The Revival of the Shari‘a within the School of Law of the Shi‘is*. Al-Khalisi himself is quoted in the work, published in 1957, as saying that he penned the first volume 27 years earlier during his exile in Yazd and completed the second and third volumes during a prison sentence he served in Tehran. See Muḥammad b. Mahdī al-Khālīsī, *Iḥyā al-sharī‘a fī madhhab al-shī‘a* (Baghdad: al-Burhān, 1957), Vol. 2, ‘ayn. Islam Dabbagh, relying on an extensive collection of Iranian government records, however, has shown that al-Khalisi remained in Yazd from May 1947 until he was shifted to solitary confinement in Tehran in 1948. I am inclined to follow this chronology. See Islām Dabbāgh, *Mubārāzāt-i Āyatallāh Shaykh Muḥammad Khālīsīzādah bih rivāyat-i asnād* (Tehran: Markaz-i Asnād-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī, 2011), pp. 325–336.

⁴ Sabrina Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite: Ulémas et lettrés du Ḡabal ‘Āmil, actuel Liban-Sud, de la fin de l’Empire ottoman à l’indépendance du Liban* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), p. 197.

patchwork. Yet, even these limited approaches remained intimately tied to Lebanon. Unconventional ideas spread among Shi'is along the Mediterranean coast but not in Iraq or Iran due to a combination of such diverse causes as the direct experience of the Ottoman *Tanzimat*, the influence of the Persian Constitutionalist Movement, the boom of printing houses in Lebanon as well as the immediate clash with Europe as manifested by the French mandate and, later, the necessity to integrate the Shi'i community into 'un petit État-mosaïque'.⁵ As far as recent studies on transnational Shi'ism are concerned, questions of social history and political conflict usually take centre stage. Laurence Louër, for example, provides an excellent account of exile politics in the Gulf during the Iran–Iraq war. In carefully delineating the tensions between Iraq's two main Shi'i organizations—*al-Da'wa* and the so-called *Shirazi* group—Louër discusses varying conceptions of the relationship between politics and religion but does not enter into a discussion of the bases on which these diverging arguments rest.⁶ Similarly, Elvire Corboz explores in her groundbreaking forthcoming book the many facets of prominent Shi'i clerical families' attempts to project global authority. She very skilfully studies such initiatives through the lenses of interpersonal networks, patronage, and political activism. Corboz is less concerned, however, with the transmission of religious knowledge and its various local manifestations.⁷ A close reading of al-Khalisi, I hold, can supplement such concerns of structure by taking seriously the role of ideas and their reshaping in the intersection of the national and transnational arenas of Shi'ism.

In the following sections I will provide a short biographical account of al-Khalisi before examining the role of science in his early work. I will contextualize his thought by contrasting it with similar discussions in the wider Muslim world before moving on to the specific environment of Iran and al-Khalisi's development of a medical lens on the *shari'a* during his exile. Finally, the last section of this paper departs from science to trace the continued polemics surrounding al-Khalisi in Pakistan, a country where his reformist demands to overcome sectarianism have drawn—and still draw—heavy criticism.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 127–141.

⁶ Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and political networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2008).

⁷ Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred authority and transnational family networks* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

The making of a transnational *'alim*

For about a decade, al-Khalisi was set to become a leading figure for the Shi'ī community of the 1920s in both Iran and Iraq. As the son of one of Najaf's leading clerics,⁸ he received a privileged education from his father, Mahdi al-Khalisi, and reached the stage of independent legal reasoning (*ijtihād*) in his early twenties.⁹ The cooperation between Mahdi and Muhammad al-Khalisi did not stop here, as both distinguished themselves in the *jihad* against the British authorities. Serving as the right hand of his father, Muhammad al-Khalisi coordinated guerrilla-style operations in the Iraqi countryside between 1917 and 1919.¹⁰ He participated personally in several battles, in one of which a British bullet hit his right eye.¹¹ When exiled to Iran in 1922 for these activities, al-Khalisi quickly built up his following in Tehran, founding anti-British organizations and publishing a treatise on their crimes in Iraq. Putting to use his self-appointed position as preacher and Friday prayer leader of the *Sultani* mosque in the city's bazaar, he repeatedly mobilized large crowds of, at times, up to 20,000 participants to stage demonstrations in front of several Western embassies in the capital.¹² Consequently, the British envoy in Iran, Percy Loraine, identified al-Khalisi as the principal agent of anti-British agitation.¹³ Yet, it was probably his equally brazen outspokenness against the plans of Reza Khan, later the Pahlavi dynasty's founder and then Iran's prime minister, to

⁸ Al-Khalisi wrote an extensive biography of his father, Mahdi al-Khalisi (d. 1925). For a French translation of the original work, entitled *The Hero of Islam (Batal al-Islam)*, see Muḥammad b. Maḥdī al-Khālīsī, *La vie de l'ayatollah Maḥdī al-Khālīsī*, trans. Pierre-Jean Luizard (Paris: Éditions de La Martinière, 2005).

⁹ See Dabbāgh, *Mubārāzāt*, p. 19.

¹⁰ On his role in the fighting and a discussion of his transmission of the collective decisions by the highest-ranking Shi'ī scholars (*marajī 'al-taqlid*) regarding *jihad* to the public, see Pierre-Jean Luizard, 'Shaykh Muhammad al-Khālīsī (1890–1963) and his Political Role in Iraq and Iran in the 1910/20s', in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times. Religious culture and political history* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 230.

¹¹ See Dabbāgh, *Mubārāzāt*, p. 34. See below how this injury made him lose his eyesight later in life.

¹² Al-Khalisi himself writes that he was not officially appointed to the mosque but simply assumed this position by climbing into the pulpit every day (al-Khālīsī, *La vie*, pp. 319–321). See also 'Abd al-Karīm Milāyarī, 'Mubārīz-i nā āshinā. Naqsh-i Āyatallāh Khālīsī dar Mubārāzah bā istibdād-i ziddīnī-yi Rizā Shāh', *Kayhān-i Farhangī* 19, 195 (2002), pp. 41–42.

¹³ Islām Dabbāgh, *Rasā'il-i siyāsī-yi Āyatallāh Shaykh Muḥammad Khālīsīzādah* (Tehran: Markaz-i Asnād-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī, 2007), pp. 18–19.

transform the country's political system into a republic, that led to his sudden marginalization and disappearance from the public scene. Al-Khalisi had expressed his fear of 'despotism' and rejected the idea that the state should be turned into a 'fake' (*qallabi*) republic. He also strongly condemned the presence of 'Bahais, Bolshevik sympathizers and materialists among government functionaries'.¹⁴ These positions forced him into internal exile in Iran until 1949, a period he spent *inter alia* in Khawaf near the border with Afghanistan, in Toyserkan in Kurdistan, Kashan, and Yazd, interrupted only by a comparatively short return to Tehran during the war years.¹⁵ Even though the shah kept him under constant surveillance and al-Khalisi was occasionally imprisoned and banned from writing, he proved to be quite prolific during his years of exile.¹⁶ Al-Khalisi repeatedly lashed out against other 'ulama during this time, accusing them of utter backwardness and of being opposed to progress and civilization.¹⁷ He never gave up on political agitation either, but rather published opinion pieces in newspapers and wrote personal letters to Iranian politicians.¹⁸

After his return to Iraq in 1949, al-Khalisi dedicated himself to intra-Muslim unity, calling upon his fellow Shi'i believers to adopt an ecumenical outlook. He urged them to abandon specific Shi'i practices like the third *shahada*¹⁹ in the call to prayer in order make rapprochement with the Sunnis (*taqrib*) possible. He believed that if the two sects did not manage to close ranks, the Muslim world would continue to be helpless in the face of the threat of both imperialism and communism. This attitude was reflected in al-Khalisi's journal *Madinat al-Ilm* (*The City of Knowledge*) which identified striving for unity among Muslims as its primary goal, despite their divergent beliefs. Even though an editorial in his journal acknowledged the strong opposition this provoked, it simultaneously stressed al-Khalisi's determination

¹⁴ See Dabbāgh, *Mubārazāt*, pp. 54–58, and Luizard, 'Political role', p. 233.

¹⁵ Even though most accounts of al-Khalisi's 27 years in Iran mention the same locations of exile, the secondary literature is not entirely in agreement regarding the specific amounts of time he spent at each of these places. Compare Rasūl Ja'fariyān, *Jarayānhā va sāzmānhā-yi mazhabī-siyāsī-i Īrān: az rū-yi kāramādan-i Muḥammad Riżā Shāh tā pīrūzī-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī, sālhā-yi 1320–1357* (Tehran: Khānah-i Kitāb, 2009), pp. 140–141; Luizard, 'Political role'; Milāyarī, 'Mubāriz'; Dabbāgh, *Rasā'il-i siyāsī*; and Dabbāgh, *Mubārazāt*.

¹⁶ Regarding his exile in Toyserkan, cf. Dabbāgh, *Mubārazāt*, pp. 119–123.

¹⁷ See, for example, al-Khālīshī, *La vie*, pp. 328–329.

¹⁸ Dabbāgh, *Rasā'il-i siyāsī*, pp. 117–218.

¹⁹ In addition to confirming the unity of God and Muhammad's Prophethood, the Shi'is also testify that 'Ali is the friend (*wali*) of God.

to overcome such setbacks by relying on a call to reform infused with 'the spirit of science' (*ruh al-ilm*) in order to increase the religious knowledge of the people.²⁰ The Shi'i establishment was indeed quick to denounce al-Khalisi's suggestions as a complete sellout of Imami identity. Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Muhsin al-Hakim Tabataba'i (d. 1970) and others insisted that 'the third *shahada* [in the call to prayer] was not only a recommended act, but also the cornerstone (*ruk'n*) or secret (*sirr*) of the true faith, the perfection (*kamal*) of religion, the symbol (*ramz*) of Shi'ism and its distinguishing mark (*shi'ar*) which must not be abandoned'.²¹ These high-ranking scholars might have been additionally worried by al-Khalisi's increasing attempts to claim far-reaching authority to speak for Islam while dismissing—once again—Najaf's backwardness and ignorance.²² Criticized for taking part in a Christian-Muslim conference in Lebanon in 1954 on the invitation of Professor Philip Hitti of Princeton University,²³ al-Khalisi lashed out against all the isolationist and reactionary (*in'azaliyun jamidun*) Islamic men of religion whose voices did not reach beyond the confines of their own madrasas. It was precisely because they were not attempting to influence the discourse abroad that the world had such a distorted, caricatured image of Islam and perceived Muslims as universally backward and a threat to civilization. By accepting the invitation to go to Lebanon, al-Khalisi argued, he was offered a unique chance to finally show the world what Islam really is and to effectively avert further destruction of Muslim lands.²⁴

²⁰ *Madīnat al-Ilm* 1, 1 (April 1954), pp. 3–4.

²¹ See Werner Ende, 'Bid'a or Sirr al-Imān? Modern Shi'i controversies over the third shahāda in the adhān', in Mohammad A. Amir-Moezzi, Meir M. Bar-Asher and Simon Hopkins (eds), *Le Shi'isme Imāmīte quarante ans après. Hommage à Etan Kohlberg* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), p. 213.

²² Muḥammad Ḥasna'ayn al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah* (Multān: Markaz-i Tabliḡhāt-i Islāmī-yi Shī'a, 1987), p. 56.

²³ His participation was particularly controversial since this conference, convened at the initiative of the American Friends of the Middle East, was supposed to explore the common spiritual foundations of Christianity and Islam in order to devise a strategy of how to most effectively counter the threat of irreligiosity and communism. It is reasonable to assume that Hitti, who had close personal connections with the American Friends, invited al-Khalisi to Lebanon since the two men met in al-Kazimiyya in 1953. Al-Khalisi's book *Rāhzanān-i ḥaqq va ḥaqīqat* in the Princeton University Library bears a personal dedication to Hitti, and al-Khalisi also mentioned their encounter in the second volume of his fiqh work, *Iḥyā' al-sharī'a fī madhhab al-shī'a*, emphasizing that he drew Hitti's attention to many errors in the depiction of Islam in the latter's historical work, *The Arabs*.

²⁴ *Madīnat al-Ilm* 1, 3 (May 1954), pp. 232–233.

Quite understandably, such a career, in combination with al-Khalisi's opposition to communism and the Ba'ath party in Iraq, has led to his classification in the literature as an uncompromising firebrand. Said Amir Arjomand frames al-Khalisi as a forerunner of Khomeini, hinting at their shared activism, along with the unusual step they both took in assuming (or at least not to objecting to) the highly charged title of 'imam'.²⁵ Pierre-Jean Luizard credits him with mediating between two generations of activist 'ulama: following his father's death in 1925, al-Khalisi kept the flame of clerical involvement in politics alive—until this torch was taken over by Khomeini and Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (d. 1981) in Iraq.²⁶ Others have argued that al-Khalisi never managed to build a broad following since he was constantly embroiled in conflicts with the state, other 'ulama, secular modernists, and, in his eyes, heterodox Shi'i sects. Werner Ende has thus labelled his project of Islamic modernism as 'failed': al-Khalisi simply advanced ideas so radical to Shi'i ears—like abolishing the third *shahada* in the call to prayer, refraining from self-flagellation in Muharram (the Shi'i month of mourning) or praying together with Sunnis—that at least about a dozen anti-Khalisi writings were published in Iraq, bearing such telling titles as *Al-Khalisi, the Musaylima*²⁷ of the Twentieth Century or *Al-Khalisi, the Madman in the Morass of his Lies and Slanders*.²⁸ Iranian opponents, tempted by the possible pun on his name, which can also mean 'the pure one',²⁹ have regularly referred to him as *makhlut zadah* (of impure descent).³⁰ Later on, Pakistani Shi'i scholars like Muhammad Husayn al-Najafi Dhakku (b. 1932), Mufti Ja'far Husayn (d. 1983) or Husayn Bakhsh Jara (d. 1990), who saw it as their mission to reform the practices and beliefs of the Shi'i community in their country, were dismissively referred to as 'Shi'i-Wahhabis' or simply

²⁵ Said Amir Arjomand, 'Ideological Revolution in Shi'ism', in Said A. Arjomand (ed), *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 188–189.

²⁶ Luizard, 'Political role', p. 235.

²⁷ Claiming to be a prophet, Musaylima b. Habib (d. 632) was an important anti-Muslim figure in the *rida* wars after Muhammad's death, with a strong following among the tribe of the Banu Hanifa.

²⁸ Werner Ende, 'Success and Failure of a Shiite Modernist: Muhammad ibn Muhammad Mahdi al-Khalisi (1890–1963)', in Alessandro Monsutti, Silvia Naef and Farian Sabahi (eds), *The Other Shiites. From the Mediterranean to Central Asia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 243.

²⁹ As a 'noun of relation' (*nisba*), al-Khalisi refers to the village of al-Khalis which is located some kilometres north of the Iraqi city of Baqubah.

³⁰ Ja'fariyān, *Jarayānhā*, p. 901.

the 'Khalisi group' by opponents such as Muhammad Hasnayn al-Sabiqi (d. 1999) or Muhammad Bashir Ansari (d. 1984).³¹

Discourses on science

As we have seen, al-Khalisi never hesitated to denounce the lack of scientific knowledge among his fellow *'ulama*, suggesting at one point that there was no single *'alim* present in Tehran who would truly understand that a conflict between science and Islam could never arise.³² Despite this claim, the notion of harmony between science and religion was not unusual among reformist authors, both Sunni and Shi'i, who attempted to come to terms with perceived Western world domination. Already Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1889) in India had maintained that both the revealed text and science refer to the same factual, descriptive truth and that this makes it necessary to provide an interpretation (*ta'wil*) of the Qur'anic text if its literal meaning appears to be in disagreement with modern discoveries.³³ While the influential Egyptian reformist, Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), did not share the same optimism, urging his readers to accept that the Qur'an is too elevated to be contradicted by modern science, Khan's approach proved to be very attractive.³⁴ 'Abduh's disciple, Rashid Rida (d. 1935), embarked on such a path even more boldly, crediting inventions like the telephone or the radio with shedding light on some of God's hitherto simply incomprehensible, miraculous ways since the former revealed how human voices could cover vast distances.³⁵ Daniel Stolz has argued recently that even though Rida's *fatwas* on materialism were of a rather conservative character, he usually attempted to 'engage directly with the scientific knowledge in question, to accept its basic validity, and, framing it in the traditions of *kalām* and natural theology, to show its consistency with Islamic

³¹ Sayyid Hussain Arif Naqvi, 'The Controversy about the Shaykhiyya Tendency Among Shia "Ulamā" in Pakistan', in Brunner and Ende (eds), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times*, p. 143. See also Ṭāhir 'Abbās A'wān, *Mard-i 'ilm maydān-i 'amal men* (Liya: Jāmi'ah-i Valī al-'Aṣr, 2005), pp. 55–56.

³² Muḥammad b. Mahdī al-Khālīṣī, *Ulamā al-Shī'a wa-l-ṣīrā' ma'a 'l-bida' wa-l-khurāfāt al-dakhīla fi 'l-dīn* (Beirut: al-Hilāl, 2009), p. 409.

³³ Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan. A reinterpretation of Muslim theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), pp. 168–170.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³⁵ Jacques Jomier, *Le Commentaire coranique du Manār. Tendances modernes de l'exégèse coranique en Égypte* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve, 1954), p. 153.

belief.³⁶ Similarly, the Egyptian physician, Muhammad Tawfiq Sidqi (d. 1920), a frequent contributor to Rida's journal *al-Manar*, was especially concerned with demonstrating that recent discoveries in the field of astronomy were in line with Qur'anic teachings.³⁷ Sidqi was, of course, a layman but Lebanese Shi'i 'ulama in the early 1930s voiced similar opinions regarding the structure of the universe.³⁸

From there, it was only a short step to more radical readings which attempted to locate all modern discoveries within the Qur'an. From 1923 onwards, Tantawi Jawhari (d. 1940) published an explicitly 'scientific' commentary on the Qur'an that went as far as to suggest that the well-ordered natural world should be regarded as a second direction of prayer (*qibla*) for the Muslims beyond the Ka'ba in Mecca.³⁹ Consequently, he chastised his co-religionists for their lack of interest in science and for being in a state of slumber, content to waste away their years with mysticism since the time of al-Ghazali (d. 1111).⁴⁰ The Turkish scholar, Bediuzzeman Said Nursi (d. 1960), asserted that the Qur'an predicted *inter alia* aviation and the discovery of electricity.⁴¹

Al-Khalisi's early works, I argue, fit well into such a general—even though by no means unchallenged—'hegemonic culture of science'⁴² which spanned the broader Muslim world in the first half of the twentieth century and was also reflected in Shi'i journals.⁴³ Claiming 'true' science for Islam while rejecting the anti-religious orientation

³⁶ Daniel A Stolz, "'By Virtue of Your Knowledge": Scientific materialism and the *fatwās* of Rashid Riḍā', *Bulletin of SOAS* 75, 2 (2012), pp. 225–226.

³⁷ J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. 44.

³⁸ Mervin, *Un réformisme chiite*, pp. 200–201.

³⁹ Jacques Jomier, 'Le Cheikh Tantawi Jawhari (1862–1940) et son commentaire du Coran', *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales* 5 (1958), p. 154.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴¹ Ahmad S. Dallal, *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 170. For a critique of Jawhari's approach by his contemporaries, see Jacques Jomier, 'L'Éxégèse scientifique du Coran d'après le Cheikh Amin al-Khouli', *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales* 4 (1957), pp. 269–280.

⁴² *Ibid.* Ahmad Dallal, 'Science and the Qur'ān', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2001). <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/science-and-the-quran-SIM_00375>, [accessed 23 November 2013].

⁴³ The Lebanese journal *al-'Irfaan*, for example, devoted special sections to the discussion of recent technological inventions. See Silvia Naef, 'Aufklärung in einem schiitischen Umfeld: die libanesische Zeitschrift *al-'Irfaan*', *Die Welt des Islams* 36, 3 (1996), p. 372.

of scientific materialism was an attitude which, in fact, remained a lifelong topos for al-Khalisi.⁴⁴ This inclination was primarily kindled, he recollected, by his father. During the last years of Ottoman rule, the latter attempted to establish in Iraq a religious school modelled along the lines of a modern university. This institution was supposed to comprise 14 individual faculties that would cover all the sciences and branches of industry (*jami' al-'ulum wa-l-sana'i*). Mahdi al-Khalisi was convinced that they collectively pointed to God's unity.⁴⁵ Even though the outbreak of the First World War halted this ambitious project, Muhammad al-Khalisi nevertheless managed to finish one philosophical work which his father had commissioned to be used in the school's curriculum. In the introduction to his *Al-Ma'arif al-Muhammadiyah* (*Muhammadan Sorts of Knowledge*), published in 1922, al-Khalisi expressed his intention to write not only in an accessible style but also to take the contemporary requirements of sensual perception (*matalib al-mahsusa*) into account.⁴⁶ Echoing earlier notions developed by Shi'i *mujtahids* who emphasized the existence of a wise sage (*mudabbir-i hakim*) in devising and sustaining the order of the universe,⁴⁷ al-Khalisi quoted Henri Milne-Edwards, the French zoologist, to drive home the point that 'proper science' always refuted the fanciful notion of imagining nature without a creator.⁴⁸ The concept of a well-structured cosmos was more fully developed in a commentary al-Khalisi wrote on the 1928 Persian translation of Camille Flammarion's *Dieu dans la nature*, originally published in 1867.⁴⁹ Here the Iraqi scholar tied Flammarion's discussion of Kepler and the laws of planetary movements to quotations from the Qur'an and the Shi'i Imams, emphasizing the overarching harmony of the universe.⁵⁰ He once again expressed his astonishment that the 'ulama

⁴⁴ For a brief discussion of al-Khalisi's attempts to integrate theology and science, see also Elisheva Machlis, 'The Cross-Sectarian Call for Islam: A sample of Shi'a reformist thought', *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 2,2 (2009), pp. 211–214.

⁴⁵ Al-Khālīsī, *Madīnat al-'Ilm*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Muḥammad b. Maḥdī al-Khālīsī, *al-Juz' al-awwal min Kitāb al-Ma'arif al-Muhammadiyah* (Tehran: Markaz-i Wathā'iq al-Imām al-Khālīsī, 2002), p. 12.

⁴⁷ Compare Kamran Arjomand, 'In Defense of the Sacred Doctrine. Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Shahristani's refutation of materialism and evolutionary theories of natural history', *Hallesche Beiträge zur Orientwissenschaft* 25 (1998), pp. 1–18.

⁴⁸ Al-Khālīsī, *Al-Ma'arif al-Muhammadiyah*, p. 46. On Milne-Edwards, see Marcelin Berthelot, *Notice historique sur Henri Milne-Edwards* (Paris: Didot, 1891).

⁴⁹ For a biography of this famous French astronomer, see Danielle Chaperon, *Camille Flammarion: entre astronomie et littérature* (Paris: Imago, 1998).

⁵⁰ Werner Ende holds that the same argument is predominant in Hibat al-Din al-Shahristani's *Al-Hay' a wa-l-Islām* which was published in 1910. See Werner Ende,

displayed such negligence (*ghuflat*) in failing to establish a connection between Newton's discoveries on gravity and several, seemingly explicit, sayings of the Imams which were already spelling out this truth in the first Islamic centuries.⁵¹ Al-Khalisi also wholeheartedly condoned Flammarion's critique of Ernest Renan, who praised man as the most intelligent being in the universe. By relying on Shi'i works of law, our author identified the strong nuclear force with *jinn*s and the weak interaction with angels to make sense of the Qur'anic accounts.⁵² Al-Khalisi followed Flammarion in a shift of scale from the level of stars and planets to the workings of an individual cell, claiming that God's dictum in the Qur'an of having created everything in pairs perfectly applied to the atomic nucleus and its surrounding electrons. Yet, unlike in later writings, in 1928 al-Khalisi did not yet display any sustained interest in delving into more substantial discussions of medicine and physiology and he barely commented on Flammarion's remarks on the human body.⁵³

Rather, besides hinting at God's management of the world's affairs, science provided al-Khalisi with one of his most powerful weapons with which to attack his opponents. Such a strategy came to the fore in his dealings with internal Shi'i opponents and the communist threat alike, and is clearly reflected in a polemical treatise dating back to the late 1940s. The book *The Shi'i 'Ulama and the Struggle with Unlawful Innovations and Internal Superstitions in Religion* was written during al-Khalisi's involuntary stay in Yazd. In this work, our author was most of all concerned to inform his fellow believers and the secular authorities about the dangerous creed to which the speculative school of theology known as the *shaykhiyya* adhered.⁵⁴ Al-Khalisi intended to dispel any confusion as to whether the *shaykhiyya* might still belong

'Von der Resignation zur Revolution: wie ein Molla 1928 den schiitischen Lehrbetrieb reformieren wollte und was daraus geworden ist', in Benedikt Reiner and Johannes Thomann (eds), *Islamische Grenzen und Grenzübergänge* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 173.

⁵¹ Camille Flammarion, *Khudā dar Tabī'at. Shāriḥ: Muḥammad Khālīsī* (Tehran: Ḥāji Mīrzā A'lā Aqā-yi Farshchīyān, 1928), pp. 175–180.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 198–199 and 215–217. It is interesting to note that al-Khalisi was obviously not aware of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani's writings. This early reformist and pan-Islamist thinker had entered into an exchange with Renan in Paris and had refuted some of the nineteenth century materialists, like Ludwig Büchner, who also appear as Flammarion's main opponents. On al-Afghani and materialism, see Stolz, 'By virtue of your knowledge', pp. 226–229.

⁵³ Flammarion, *Khudā dar Tabī'at*, p. 228.

⁵⁴ For more information on the school, compare Denis MacEoin, 'Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Nineteenth-Century Shi'ism: The cases of Shaykhism and Babism', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110, 2 (1990), pp. 323–329; and Mohammad A.

to 'orthodox' Shi'ism, attacking their conception of the Imams as *übertmenschen*.⁵⁵ In a second, quite Rawlsian, move that transformed a religion-based argument into a claim in line with public reason, and avoiding any resort to comprehensive doctrines,⁵⁶ al-Khalisi warned the government against employing adherents of the school because they would hamper the country's progress. The *shaykhi* worldview simply could not stand up to modern science. It was not compatible with Islam, the religion of science and knowledge (*'ilm wa-ma'rifa*), the truths of which would only become strengthened with further scientific progress.⁵⁷ By contrast, the life sciences and modern astronomy both refuted *shaykhism*. For instance, the *shaykhis* still believed that the world was only made up of four elements, thus taking over Greek superstitions, whereas modern science had proven the existence of at least 90 elements and more discoveries were expected. Adherents of *shaykhism* committed nothing less than high treason against the truth of science and religion (*khiyana kubra bi-haqq al-'ilm wa-l-din*). But that was not all: by buying into a Platonic-inspired cosmology, they still insisted that some parts of the universe did not move. Al-Khalisi attacked this view as having a blatant disregard for the advancements of modern physics which would necessarily result in society mocking its propagators.⁵⁸ In short: the *shaykhis* relied on a Ptolemaic conception of the universe, on a Greek theory of nature, on the philosophy of Illuminism,⁵⁹ and the doctrine of the Zoroastrians. Since modern science refuted all of these ideas, there was no real need to add anything to such obvious ignorance.⁶⁰ Their beliefs were those of the Middle Ages and science revealed them as mere fairy-tales (*turrahat*).⁶¹ It was thus a collective obligation for Muslims to strive day and night against adherents of the doctrine, eliminating all traces of their teachings in order to protect religion, the natural law (*namus*), independence, and the national sentiment (*wataniyya*) of every single

Amir-Moezzi, 'An Absence Filled With Presences: Shaykhiyya', in Brunner and Ende (eds), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times*, pp. 38–57.

⁵⁵ See, for example, al-Khālīsī, *Ulamā al-Shī'a*, pp. 295–297.

⁵⁶ For Rawls' demand to 'take religion off the political agenda', see John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁵⁷ Al-Khālīsī, *Ulamā al-Shī'a*, 216.

⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 229 and 380.

⁵⁹ On this current, see Henry Corbin, 'Shiite Thought', in Henry Corbin, Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard (eds), *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul, 1993), pp. 121–124.

⁶⁰ Al-Khālīsī, *Ulamā al-Shī'a*, p. 395.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 396.

Muslim nation. Al-Khalisi bluntly stated that the *shaykhis* prevented the reform of Muslim countries and the cultural progress of the whole community of believers (*yamna 'un islah al-bilad wa-raf' al-mustawa 'l-thaqafi lil-umma*).⁶² Appealing specifically to the context of Iran, he demanded that the Ministry of Culture remove such people from all posts of responsibility because their convictions were diametrically opposed to the ideas of advanced modern sciences and they would go out of their way to block their spread.⁶³ An immediate, international solution to this burning problem, suggested by al-Khalisi, consisted of the closing of the clergy's rank and the imposition of internal discipline. The Shi'i *mujtahids* should issue a religious ruling that only those who could produce an authorization (*ijaza*) from one of the sources of emulation and were aware of what happened in the world (*ma yajri fi 'l-dunya*) could gain access to the pulpit.⁶⁴

Before moving on to the medical transformation in al-Khalisi's thought, I would like to consider one last work in which the shifting character of his argument is already palpable. *The Highway Robbers of Justice and Truth or the Returnees Towards Barbarism and Ignorance* was written in 1951 in Persian when al-Khalisi had already returned to Iraq.⁶⁵ Meant as a refutation of a critique of religion published by the Marxist Tudeh party,⁶⁶ al-Khalisi attempted to counter their claim that Islam was a thing of the past. In turning the tables on them, he accused the communists of superstition and being the real enemies of science (*dushmanan-i 'ilm*).⁶⁷ The ignorant (*jahil*) Marx, the unknowing (*nadan*) Engels, the stupid (*bi-'ilm*) Lenin, and the cobbler Stalin all displayed their lack of insight by ignoring the secrets of nature (*asrar al-tabi 'at*) since modern discoveries and inventions pointed to the unity of God.⁶⁸ Being trapped in the prison of materialism,⁶⁹ they did not

⁶² Ibid, p. 405.

⁶³ Because al-Khalisi very much adopted a polemical tone, he did not feel compelled to provide any actual examples of such an anti-rational attitude leading to the problems he described.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 408.

⁶⁵ Muḥammad b. Maḥdī al-Khālīshī, *Rāhzanān-i ḥaqq va ḥaqīqat yā bāzgashtigān ba-suyī barbariyyat va jāhiliyyat* (Baghdad: Ma'ārif, 1951).

⁶⁶ For a classic account of the party, compare Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 281–325. The book in question published by the Tudeh was entitled *The Guardians of Magic and Incantation (Nigahbānān-i sahr va afsūn)*.

⁶⁷ Al-Khālīshī, *Rāhzanān*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

realize that even though science changed and revealed new aspects every day, Islam stayed the same. If the telescope at the University of California discovered stars at a distance of ten million light years from earth, this only confirmed Islam's insight of *Allahu Akbar*, of God being greater than all discoveries.⁷⁰ Importantly, in this work al-Khalisi transcended such familiar observations about the universe and explicitly drew attention to the human body with each of its organs following a clearly defined function, thus pointing to God's role as the originator of life.⁷¹ He made the claim that all stipulations of the divine law were meant for human benefit and specifically human health, referring readers to his *Ihya' al-shari'a* (which was in the process of being printed) for a full exposure of the principle.⁷² Consequently, those who ignore God's law do not fare well: al-Khalisi hinted at the fate of Taqi Arani,⁷³ the supposed leader of the Tudeh party in Iran. When Arani was infected with typhus in prison through microbes carried by a tiny louse and was not able to resist the disease, this was the result of waging war against God.⁷⁴

These comments, which go beyond a mere interest in science to defend Islam and establish its compatibility with progress, warrant closer attention. They also lead me to one of the central arguments in this paper, namely the need to emphasize the various local contexts in which reformist thought originated. Al-Khalisi, who spent 27 years in Iran, confronted particular, dominant medical discourses there, which reoriented his general interest in science to medicine specifically.

Iran's medical modernity

Discussing Iran's experience of modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, Cyrus Schayegh has drawn our attention to the prominence throughout the 1920s of discourses on medicine and its benefits, displacing questions of 'political modernity' which had held sway after the Constitutional Revolution of 1906:

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 64.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 17.

⁷² Ibid, pp. 68–69.

⁷³ On him, see Ervand Abrahamian, 'Arānī, Tāqī', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Encyclopædia Iranica* (Routledge and Keegan Paul: London, 1986), Vol. II, Fasc. 3, pp. 263–265.

⁷⁴ Al-Khālīsī, *Rāhzanān*, p. 71.

Increasingly, progress seemed feasible only through sociocultural reforms based on modern, and especially biomedical, science. This was considered to be of special importance now, because it was only since the revolution that political, social, cultural, technological, and economic changes had really gathered pace. This created the feeling that Iran was waking up to the world. However, this entry into modernity held not only promises but also dangers—which were precisely the target of the medicalizing strategy.⁷⁵

This debate was tightly connected to a reductionist conception of science which focused on practical application rather than on research. Schayegh shows how theory and socially relevant behaviour were brought together in order to eradicate ‘useless knowledge’ and ‘harmful practices’ among the Iranian public.⁷⁶ While ‘useless’ knowledge was often identified with pre-modern knowledge and thus religious learning, hygiene was extolled as a way of solving Iran’s perceived lack of population growth and propelling the country forward economically.⁷⁷ Cleanliness even took on patriotic connotations, centring on the need to ‘shield the homeland from pestilence and on the desire to forge a vigorous and physically fit citizenry—a public that could better serve the state’.⁷⁸ In order to achieve this goal, the attention of both policy and public discourses turned to endemic and venereal diseases which had claimed many lives in the nineteenth century. The need for preventive measures and unrelenting personal vigilance was stressed.⁷⁹ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet emphasizes that the hygiene movement in Iran—with its ‘maternalist preoccupations’ and especially the fight against venereal diseases—upheld the traditional virtues of society, which could have been a potential area of agreement between secular modernists and the Shi’i clergy. Yet the divide between the two camps could not be bridged.⁸⁰ Rather, it was the secular modernists who claimed Islam for themselves: a number of medical dissertations at Tehran University in the 1930s emphasized Islam’s contribution to the science of hygiene, referring to prescriptions on water, ritual ablutions, and infant care.⁸¹ Ensuring personal cleanliness was framed as obligatory since ‘all

⁷⁵ Cyrus Schayegh, *Who is Knowledgeable is Strong: Science, class, and the formation of modern Iranian society, 1900–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the politics of motherhood in Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 17.

⁷⁹ Schayegh, *Who is Knowledgeable*, p. 77.

⁸⁰ Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, p. 11.

⁸¹ Schayegh, *Who is Knowledgeable*, p. 50.

worldly and otherworldly duties are dependent upon hygiene'.⁸² The modernists even suggested a new path to achieving the status of a perfect human being: they claimed that through rigorous attention to hygiene one could not only achieve a long and fulfilling existence, but even turn into an *insan-i kamil*.⁸³

I would argue that al-Khalisi was deeply influenced by the specific social and political climate in Iran which awakened in him a strong interest in countering the challenges of modernity⁸⁴ and reconciling new insights in the field of medicine with religion.⁸⁵ His specific approach manifested itself most clearly in his major treatise on Shi'i law, his *risala 'amaliyya*, entitled *The Revival of the Shari'a within the School of Law of the Shi'is*.⁸⁶ It has to be kept in mind that this work was not just another piece of writing thrown at the market by al-Khalisi. Rather, its publication underlined his aim to secure a place among the highest ranking Shi'i scholars by providing a law manual for his emulators—the common people who relied on his opinions in their daily worldly and religious activities.⁸⁷ Therefore it is highly significant that this treatise reads at times more like a medical handbook, which explains bodily functions at length.

Laying out the healthy Shi'i life

In this work al-Khalisi interpreted science almost exclusively as medicine, and turned the protection of the body's health into an

⁸² Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, p. 22.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 21. The phrase translates literally as 'the perfect human being' and has a long tradition in Islamic thought. See R. Arnaldez, 'al-Insān al-Kāmil', in P. Bearman et. al. (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, Brill Online, 2012. <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-insan-al-kamil-COM_0375>, [accessed 23 November 2013].

⁸⁴ As he puts it, for example, in al-Khālīshī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 1, p. 15: 'the time has been transformed (*wa-qad tabaddala al-zaman*) and the structure of kingdoms and states has changed so that humankind has entered a new age (*tawr jadid*)'.

⁸⁵ This argument about the likely influence of the Iranian milieu on al-Khalisi, without going into further details, has also been made by Elisheva Machlis. See Machlis, 'The Cross-Sectarian Call for Islam', p. 213.

⁸⁶ Muḥammad b. Maḥdī al-Khālīshī, *Ihyā' al-Sharī'a fī madhhab al-Shi'a*. I am relying for the first volume on the second imprint by *Matba'a al-Azhar* in Baghdad from 1965 and for volumes two and three on the first imprint by *Matba'a Burhān* in Baghdad from 1957. The first imprint of the first volume was originally carried out in 1951.

⁸⁷ On the process of joining the highest-ranking Shi'i scholars in the twentieth century, see Linda S. Walbridge, 'The Counterreformation: Becoming a *Marja* in the modern world', in Linda S. Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The institution of the Marja' taqlid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 240–246.

overarching goal in understanding divine rulings. A hidden public benefit (*maslaha mursala*) could be extracted from every single *shari'a* ruling, be it on questions of adultery (*zina*) or the structure of an Islamic economic system. All the laws of the *shari'a* were meant primarily to prevent illness, regardless of whether they regulated ritual obligations or interactions among humans. Qur'anic verses and *hadiths* amply testified that if humans would just follow all of God's commands, no malady could ever afflict them.⁸⁸

In attempting to justify such bold claims, al-Khalisi at times covered quite familiar territory, known from other Muslim modernists like Muhammad 'Abduh or Rashid Rida. In order to get the divine message across, the Qur'an did not talk about microbes, which are discoveries of the modern age, but would employ concepts like the 'work of Satan' (*'amal al-Shaytan*) or attribute effects to *jinn*s.⁸⁹ The people of seventh century Arabia simply could not comprehend the real rationale behind these rules.⁹⁰ Similarly, al-Khalisi's statements on the consumption of pork and wine are not so different from the way European authors, labelled 'medical materialists' by anthropologist Mary Douglas, have reduced 'primitive ritual' to its hygienic functions or turned Moses into an 'enlightened public health administrator'.⁹¹ In the case of pork, al-Khalisi cited unnamed studies that showed how this type of meat was affected by worm-born diseases. Some of these parasites did not perish before they had reproduced themselves tens of thousands of times, spreading all over the body of the consumer. All efforts to cleanse the meat of this impurity carried out by medical specialists had so far been utterly unsuccessful. This last comment is interesting in that it demonstrates the limits of modern science: all efforts intended to tear down a divinely prescribed boundary are supposedly doomed to fail.⁹² Similarly, it took until the advent of modern science to vindicate

⁸⁸ This is how al-Khalisi puts it in the original Arabic: '*Lā yaṣībuhu marḍ min al-amrād muddat hayatihī*'; al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 3, pp. 6–7.

⁸⁹ For a similar identification of microbes with *jinn*s in the journal *al-Manar*, see Lutz Berger, 'Esprits et microbes: l'interprétation des *ginn*-s dans quelques commentaires coranique du XXe siècle', *Arabica* 47, 3 (2000), p. 557. Compare also Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung. An der Universität Upsala gehaltene Olaus-Petri-Vorlesungen* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), p. 356.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 14–15.

⁹¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 41. See also Faradj Khan, *Hygiène et Islamisme* (Lyon: Bourgeon, 1904), pp. 90–91.

⁹² Al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 1, pp. 321–322. He also hinted at other negative effects of pork, which modern medicine has discovered, such as a tendency on the part

the Prophet's ban on wine because recent findings confirmed that no worse substance exists for society, for the human body, and its mind. Alcohol abuse leads to a broad variety of bodily malfunctions, affecting the digestive system and the heart, damaging the liver, and leading to blindness, etc., in addition to all the societal ills and crimes that are the result of its consumption. Yet, being true to his own medical mission, al-Khalisi was quick to assert that alcohol could be used in medication as long as it was not intoxicating.⁹³

Despite these affinities with other lay Muslim thinkers and certain *'ulama*, al-Khalisi was no run-of-the-mill modernist. It is not possible to reduce his thought to the usual scientific bent, which is discernible in Rashid Rida's *Tafsir al-Manar* or more ambitious projects like Tantawi Jawhari's scientific exegesis of the Qur'an.⁹⁴ Unlike them, for him medicine was not just one part of the divine plan, rather it constituted its undeniable core. Al-Khalisi saw the medical light shining everywhere. He even attempted to apply such a lens to explain the purpose (*hikma*) of rulings which, at first glance, might appear to be rather far removed from any immediate health-related concerns. Consequently, the main reason that adultery and homosexuality were banned by Islam had to do with the possible transmission of acquired and inherited diseases.⁹⁵ The obligation for men to wear a beard could be explained by the sensitive skin on the cheeks, possible negative consequences for the gums if they were exposed to heat or cold, and the protective qualities of facial hair as far as dust and germs were concerned.⁹⁶ In his discussion of silk and why men were not supposed to wear clothes made from this material, al-Khalisi adduced first of all its mode of production, which started with the unclean silkworm. If the latter's germs survived the production process, they

of the consumer to become more aggressive and to develop skin problems and bad odour.

⁹³ Ibid, pp. 324–327.

⁹⁴ Al-Khalisi, of course, also had the advantage of being able to look back at several additional decades of the popularization of science. Rida, for instance, had to deflect the question of a reader who wanted to know how one can logically solve the puzzle of molecules on the day of resurrection. Some of these molecules, the question went, might have been part of a large number of living beings, but to which of those did they ultimately belong? Whereas Rida had to argue that resurrection would take place in a different universe which contains more material, al-Khalisi could simply point out that at every given moment our universe contains far more matter than is needed. See Stolz, 'By virtue of your knowledge', p. 235; and al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 1, p. 100.

⁹⁵ Ibid, Vol. 2, p. 15.

⁹⁶ Ibid, Vol. 3, pp. 299.

could cause depression (*inqibad*) among men and extroversion (*inbisat*) among women. Even more dangerous, according to tests carried out by many doctors, is that silk formed the ideal breeding ground for etiologic agents and lethal diseases which men could pick up easily due to their work outside the home.⁹⁷ Finally, women were banned from taking part in *jihad* because of the composition of their blood, which contained fewer red blood cells and less fat and haemoglobin, a fact which ultimately rendered them weaker physically.⁹⁸

In al-Khalisi's view the same level of medical truth applied to Islamic rituals which all had secret health benefits as well. Consequently, he discussed the five canonical prayers as the ultimate workout. They provided an ideal and regular combination of rest and action. Compared to other physical activities, prayer was not a one-sided movement, which might affect the body adversely, but instead required that all its parts were set in motion.⁹⁹ Similarly, in his treatise al-Khalisi gave a ten-page long explanation of the benefits of various vitamins and dietary minerals, including a handy list of which foods were especially rich in these. He suggested that Muslims of the seventh century CE simply had been ordered to consume certain foods without being told which essential vitamins they contained or how suitable they were for their children's growth. It was only through the advancements of the sciences that believers could finally understand that the meat they were ordered to eat is rich in fat, proteins, and vitamins, whereas those types of meat from which Muslims were obliged to abstain would release substances harmful to the liver or the kidneys.¹⁰⁰ Amazing discoveries are not restricted to food of course: Shi'a *hadith* about the proper way to wash the male sexual organ revealed that the sequence of movements amounted to a massage conducive to preventing prostatitis, as spelled out in the Egyptian medical journal *al-Duktur*.¹⁰¹ The underlying wisdom of the Imams' warning to hold one's breath while drinking could be summarized as an action that prevented carbon dioxide from altering the chemical

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 350.

⁹⁸ Ibid, Vol. 2, p. 52.

⁹⁹ Ibid, Vol. 3, pp. 391–392. A similar idea is expressed in the medical dissertation of the Iranian physician, Faradj Khan, submitted in Lyon in 1904. See Khan, *Hygiène et Islamisme*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 3, p. 274.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, Vol. 1, 334. This is one of the few instances where al-Khalisi actually makes references to his sources, or rather to the texts that confirm his original reasoning—more about this intriguing question below.

structure of the water.¹⁰² The consequences of the rulings of the *shari'a* surely transcended the realm of the individual: Al-Khalisi took the Iranian *'ulama* to task, for example, for neglecting to point out the rationales of divine rulings pertaining to water and the necessity of preserving its purity. Discarding dead animals or human waste into the canals of cities helped to spread malaria and other diseases.¹⁰³

Medicine revealed secrets of the divine rulings (*asrar ahkam al-shari'a*) behind these essential tasks, and al-Khalisi also praised the discipline for substantiating further the reality of *tawhid* and the Prophet's truthfulness. Delving into physiology allowed al-Khalisi to expand on the well-ordered nature of the universe on the micro-level: for him, the 50.5 million red blood cells, 6,000 white blood cells, and 300,000 platelets, which all fulfilled specific, clearly defined functions in every millilitre of human blood, not only constituted a strong proof for God's control over life on earth, but also demonstrated His unceasing acts of creation since new cells continuously sprang into being.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, in human blood he witnessed a constant resurrection (*ma'ad*), a constant dying and creation of new blood cells—even though each human being remained the same person. Consequently, bodily resurrection, which over the course of history had always remained just an intellectual concept (*amr fikri*), was now rendered into a concrete, palpable affair (*amr mahsus*).¹⁰⁵ God's benign management did not end here: human saliva, for example, enables us not only to speak, but also to transport food into the stomach and to produce glucose. Even the smallest part of the body has its unique task, including organs which at first seem to be superfluous like the male breast or the appendix: the first provides a cushion for the organs, the second had been discovered to release crucial hormones during illnesses.¹⁰⁶ Just by observing these arrangements and processes, al-Khalisi noticed God's planning (*tadbir*) and providence (*qudra*) at work. All sciences—astronomy, chemistry, and natural sciences alike—present very diverse 'books' (*kutub*) of God's oneness, all hinting at the wisdom of the maker.¹⁰⁷

Moreover, al-Khalisi turned these observations into modern miracles that confirmed the truth of Muhammad's mission: the

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 44.

¹⁰³ Ibid, Vol. 2, pp. 192–193.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, pp. 42–43.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 45.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, Vol. 1, 38.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, Vol. 1, 24–26.

Prophet's humble background would never have provided the resources for him to devise such beneficial purity laws (here of course Mary Douglas's description rings particularly loud).¹⁰⁸ The same applied, al-Khalisi continued, to the invention of hydrotherapy. While no other religion devoted much attention to water, its healing powers were unlocked by Islam and used in Islam's ritual ablutions (*ghusl* and *wudu'*) centuries before Vincenz Priëbnitz popularized this method in Europe.¹⁰⁹ After listing on several pages the different acids and elements contained in human urine, al-Khalisi used the occasion to argue that the Prophet's different rulings on *wudu'*, depending on whether one has come into contact with the urine of a suckling boy or a girl, was supported by modern doctors and physiologists who noticed its varying chemical composition. Should we not take these insights, al-Khalisi asked, which cannot have originated in the mind of an orphan from the Arabian peninsula, as compelling proof for the truth of prophethood?¹¹⁰

Identifying the *shari'a* with human health and essentially bypassing the entire Muslim legal and exegetical tradition was a daunting project. Al-Khalisi, to be sure, was aware of his unusual approach. He defended his *Ihya al-shari'a* as a piece of scholarship that could actually be used in the present age by his emulators (*muqallidun*) and, indeed, the whole of humanity. Echoing Iranian conceptions of beneficial knowledge, he lamented that other *mujtahids* only discussed questions of law along the established divisions of obligations of worship (*al-'ibadat*), human interactions (*al-mu'amalat*), positive law (*al-ahkam*), and politics (*al-siyasat*). Someone who was interested in learning about hygiene (*hifz al-sihha*) in Islam, for instance, would have to consult scattered remarks in the books on fasting, ritual purity, the pilgrimage, and so on. Thus nothing less was needed than an outright rearrangement of the chapters in the books of law (*fiqh*) to organize them according to the needs of the present age.¹¹¹ Besides this more technical aspect, al-Khalisi deplored the general neglect in contemporary *fiqh* of questions related to theology and the basic truths of Islam. The unwillingness of the *'ulama* to take up challenges

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 285–287.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 287–288. Al-Khālīsī spells him 'Ibrīsniṭ'. For further details on Priëbnitz's (d. 1851) hydrotherapy movement, see Jürgen Helfricht, *Vincenz Priëbnitz (1799–1851) und die Rezeption seiner Hydrotherapie bis 1918: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Naturheilbewegung* (Husum: Matthiesen, 2006).

¹¹⁰ Al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 1, 294–300.

¹¹¹ Ibid, Vol. 1, p. 14.

to theology left the common people helpless when faced with relentless and menacing attacks on their faith by the atheists (*ahl al-ilhad*), which threatened to lead them astray.¹¹² Yet even in the field of human interactions, his peers were predominantly simply not fit for the task and suspended judgement under the pretext of precaution (*ihhtiyat*). Al-Khalisi regarded it as essential that the *'ulama* acquainted themselves with modern sciences since this would show the way to interpret the *shari'a* and to make sense of Islam's truths, thus lifting the veil from the great secrets of the divine law.¹¹³ Al-Khalisi labelled it 'strange' (*min al-'ajab*) that other *'ulama* had pushed aside such an interpretation, thereby depriving the people of the light of guidance (*nur hidayatha*).¹¹⁴

This criticism of his colleagues, paired with his own self-confident lack of any qualms in providing very specific and entirely novel justifications for the rulings of the divine law, might have contributed to his later loss of influence as a scholar.¹¹⁵ Studying a very different context, namely South Asian Sunni scholars, Muhammad Qasim Zaman has observed that even such prominent *'ulama* as Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (d. 1943) were caught up in a comparable dilemma: they feared that by explaining the rationales behind the stipulations of the *shari'a* they might make the law vulnerable to a plethora of individual understandings and, finally, contribute to its dissolution—this might open the door for people 'to seek a rationale *irrespective* of the ruling'. Yet, on the other hand, these *'ulama* also felt obliged to address the needs of a new, modern, educated elite, hoping that they could be brought back under the guidance of the scholars for the benefit of the larger Muslim community.¹¹⁶ Thus, Thanawi reluctantly went ahead with publishing *Rational Reasons for the Transmitted Legal Rulings* in 1915–16: 'a dizzying array of "rational" explanations, not least for various purification rituals, or why particular rituals are performed in the way they are, or why the amount of the obligatory alms-tax (*zakat*) varies according to the items on which it is due'.¹¹⁷ Usually, however, only

¹¹² Ibid, p. 17.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 18.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, Vol. 2, pp. 14–15. Compare also his statement on p. 6 that Islamic divine law rendered the preservation of health obligatory.

¹¹⁵ In a foreword for the second volume of *Ihya' al-shari'a*, which was published six years after Volume 1, the publisher remarked on the intensive opposition al-Khalisi faced from 'heterodox' Shi'i groups and the educated (*al-muthaqqafun*). See al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 2, jīm-nūn.

¹¹⁶ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi: Islam in modern South Asia* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), pp. 41–42.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 42.

outsiders, non-*'ulama*, like the South Asian 'camp-follower of European fascism', Inayatullah Khan Mashriqi (d. 1963), were willing to go as far as al-Khalisi did.¹¹⁸ Mashriqi hoped to turn Islam into a 'science of religions' which would grant religion the same absolute truth-claim as science.¹¹⁹ Combining this vision with the idea of a constant struggle, he interpreted the purpose of the famous five pillars of Islam in mostly military terms, conceptualizing prayer (ideally carried out in uniform) as a military drill or the pilgrimage to Mecca—the hajj—as a 'grand counsel of Muslim soldiers where plans against enemies could be hatched'.¹²⁰

For al-Khalisi, as we have seen, it was of course medicine that dominated his approach to the divine law and made him describe in about 30 pages the details of the human digestive system¹²¹ or inspired him to a discussion of various vitamins, their specific benefits, and which food is most suitable for acquiring them.¹²² His intensive focus on the human body and questions of medicine in his magnum opus took precedence over other, potentially salient questions of the day, such as the economic system. Even though al-Khalisi labelled communism as the greatest threat to society and its economic well-being, he only devoted a very superficial discussion to the topic: a communist society implied that the individual would not enjoy any freedom, either in his personal life or his work, and would not be able to accumulate any property. For communist rulers, individual human beings lacked any intrinsic value (*la qima li l-fard*). How could a society function if it was composed only of entirely worthless individuals? In fact, any communist system reduced man to a position more degraded than those of insects or worms since they were able to exert the freedom that man was denied.¹²³ It was of course the Islamic system which steered the appropriate middle course between the communist nightmare and an equally appalling capitalist system, characterized by injustice and a lack of concern for the poor. Islam did not tolerate exploitation, banned usury, and put an honest imam in charge who administered the public finances for the common welfare of Muslims.¹²⁴ There was

¹¹⁸ Markus Daechsel, 'Scientism and its Discontents: The Indo-Muslim 'fascism' of Inayatullah Khan al-Mashriqi', *Modern Intellectual History* 3, 3 (2006), p. 443.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

¹²¹ Al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 2, 83–104.

¹²² *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 264–274.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

no question about Islam's staunch commitment to the protection of private property.¹²⁵

This is all we find in a three-volume work of approximately 930 pages in total. In fact, even in his sections on economics, al-Khalisi focused predominantly on issues of health, arguing, for example, that the ceilings of new buildings should not be too high because then cleaning tools could not reach the germs residing there.¹²⁶ Covering economics meant for him a discussion of the proper treatment of one's stomach: al-Khalisi spelled out on the subsequent pages that too opulent meals were very destructive for the body as such a *habitus* was the real cause behind the many illnesses and the effeminacy of the rich.¹²⁷ Similarly, in his essay, *The Truth of the Hijab in Islam*, al-Khalisi also brought his medical approach to bear on questions of gender. He accused the modernists of freely entering into sexual relationships with women, thus infecting them with gonorrhoea and syphilis.¹²⁸ The traditionalists, on the other hand, locked women into a black grave (*gur-i siyah*)—the chador—in which they could neither move, see the sky nor breath properly. This directly led to tuberculosis, mental illnesses, epilepsy, and neuropathies.¹²⁹

What do we make of such an imbalanced viewpoint and a remarkably one-sided quest for the secrets of the divine law? I would argue that the key lies with al-Khalisi's long stay in Iran, where his bold modernist reading was shaped. Residing for 27 years in this neighbouring country, he was confronted with a particular manifestation of modernity which, as Cyrus Schayegh has demonstrated, was dominated by discourses on health, biopolitics, and psychology. The debate especially picked up speed in the early 1920s, at the moment when al-Khalisi was deported by the British. He quickly made use of the ideas and sources available to him and proudly displayed his familiarity with scientific discoveries, thus building on his earlier conviction regarding the compatibility of science and Islam. A number of medical dissertations written in the 1930s in Tehran closely echoed some of al-Khalisi's arguments, for example, the congruence of Islamic prescriptions regarding water with the demands of modern

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 511.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 369.

¹²⁷ Ibid, pp. 482–485.

¹²⁸ Muḥammad b. Maḥdī al-Khālīsī, 'Ḥaqīqat-i Hijāb dar Islām', in Rasūl Ja'fariyān (ed.), *Rasā'il-i hijābiyyah: Shaṣṣ sāl-i talāsh-i 'ilmī dar barābar-i bid'at-i kashf-i hijāb* (Qum: Dalīl-i Mā, 2001), pp. 715–716.

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 718.

hygiene.¹³⁰ Additionally, al-Khalisi received a hands-on exposure to medicine in Iran. Living in a small village for 14 years without access to a doctor, he had to step in and treat the sick with cupping, which might have increased his interests in current debates in the country even more.¹³¹ Visitors noted that he relied on specialized medical literature when carrying out this task.¹³² Al-Khalisi also reported conversations with physicians that helped him to further clarify his thinking on the divine law.¹³³ Ten years after the original publication of his *risala*, al-Khalisi included in the second imprint some additional references from Arabic medical journals of the time, providing proper footnotes.¹³⁴ Of course, these were only meant to back up his conviction that health was the master key to unlocking the secrets of the *shari'a*—a conviction he had acquired decades earlier in Iran.

In the final section I would like to expand on the importance of local contexts for transnational messages by taking a brief look at al-Khalisi's reception in Pakistan. Werner Ende has already elaborated on how al-Khalisi became interested in intra-Muslim unity when he returned to his native Iraq. Given the lack of salience of the question in a country that was (and is) overwhelmingly Shi'i, efforts at Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement had not been on al-Khalisi's mind either before or during his exile in Iran. Back in Iraq, however, al-Khalisi became convinced that unity between the sects was required if Muslims wanted to confront imperialism and communism.¹³⁵ Even though we know that some of al-Khalisi's suggestions, like removing the third *shahada* from the Shi'i call to prayer, drew fire, unfortunately no clear picture has yet emerged of the precise character of the intra-Shi'i controversy in Iraq surrounding his proposal in the 1950s. Werner Ende only states that 'for many of the Grand Mujtahids, al-Khalisi's ambitious activities in general and his demands for religious reform in particular were unacceptable'. This obviously involved polemics against al-Khalisi's *Ihya' al-shari'a*, but we can only speculate whether these were directed against his scientific approach.¹³⁶ While the study of al-Khalisi's legacy in Iraq is affected by a lack of available sources, his transnational

¹³⁰ Schayegh, *Who is Knowledgeable*, p. 50.

¹³¹ Al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 3, pp. 301–302.

¹³² Dabbāgh, *Mubārāzāt*, p. 75.

¹³³ Al-Khālīsī, *Ihyā' al-sharī'a*, Vol. 1, p. 337.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 332 and 346.

¹³⁵ Muḥammad Hādī al-Daftar, 'Kalimat al-taḥrīr', *Madīnat al-'Ilm* 1, 1 (1954), pp. 4–8.

¹³⁶ Ende, 'Modern Shi'i controversies', pp. 205–206.

impact and his ultimate failure can be traced with more certainty in the context of Pakistan.

Reading al-Khalisi in Sargodha¹³⁷

Anti-Khalisi writings reached a peak in Iraq in the mid-1950s, when al-Khalisi was still a key player in these debates; in Pakistan the controversy surrounding him emerged only after his death. Andreas Rieck has pointed out that many of his opponents display a superficial acquaintance with his work. In particular, a ‘lobby’ of popular preachers (*zakirs*) ‘deliberately inflated his importance as the founder of a “sect” within Shi‘ism [...] to create a bogeyman’. According to Rieck, it was primarily al-Khalisi’s attacks on many forms of Shi‘a popular religious practices and ‘extremist’ (*ghuluw*) beliefs, echoed in the writings of the influential reformist scholar, Muhammad Husayn al-Najafi Dhakku, that angered these preachers.¹³⁸ Diatribes against al-Khalisi always went hand-in-hand with attacks on Dhakku, who was frequently labelled his disciple (which he was at pains to deny) and the ‘Khalisi of the present age (*Khalisi-yi ‘asr*)’.¹³⁹ Dhakku, without quoting al-Khalisi directly, indeed reflected his concern that *shaykhi* propagators managed to dupe the common people by presenting their

¹³⁷ In the context of Pakistan, I will concentrate on the discussion surrounding the writings by Muhammad Husayn al-Najafi Dhakku. Based in the Punjabi town of Sargodha, he is not only the most influential and undoubtedly the most controversial Pakistani reformist *‘alim* but also one of the earliest supporters of al-Khalisi, already defending him in his work *Uṣūl al-sharī‘a fi ‘aqā’id al-shī‘a* (The Principles of the Shari‘a in Shi‘i Beliefs), published in 1967. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how the Dhakku-Khalisi connection was construed, I have consulted works by his opponents, such as Muhammad Hasnayn al-Sābiqī’s *Khālīsiyyatnāmah* (The Book on al-Khalisi), as well as Dhakku’s reaction to these challenges. See also Naqvi, ‘The Controversy’, pp. 141–143.

¹³⁸ Andreas T. Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan. An assertive and beleaguered minority* (London: Hurst, forthcoming), p. 202. I am grateful to Dr Rieck for sharing his important study prior to its publication. Please note, however, that the final page number might differ from the one I indicate. Dhakku has his own website at: <<http://www.najafy.org>>, [accessed 24 November 2013].

¹³⁹ Dhakku repeatedly stated that while studying in Najaf he and other Pakistani students only visited al-Khalisi ‘three or four times’ in al-Kazimiyya, raising some controversial questions with him (*ba ‘z-i ikhtilāfi masa‘il*). See Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Najafī Dhakkū, *Uṣūl al-sharī‘a fi ‘aqā’id al-shī‘a* (Sargodha: Maktabat al-Sibṭayn, 2006), p. 267. See also Muḥammad Ḥasnayn al-Sābiqī, *Khālīsiyyatnāmah* (Multan: Markaz-i Tablighāt-i Islāmī-yi Shī‘a, 1987), p. 5.

deviant beliefs as sound Shi'i doctrine.¹⁴⁰ He also shared the view that customs such as bowing to a representation of Imam Husayn's horse are not only contrary to Islam but also contradict 'civilization, human renewal, and dignity' (*tahzib o shayastigi aur insani mujaddad o sharafat*).¹⁴¹

In addition to these 'established' controversies, I argue that the debate in the 1980s took on a different dynamic. Al-Khalisi's efforts on behalf of *taqrib* were demonized by his opponents, who labelled him a 'Wahhabi'. They were not satisfied, however, merely to apply this loaded term, with its long polemical history in South Asia, to al-Khalisi,¹⁴² but also attempted to construe a clear personal connection with the *wahhabiyya*, the stern, anti-Shi'i branch of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia.¹⁴³ Al-Khalisi was accused of explaining away the Saudi destruction of Imam Husayn's tomb in Karbala in 1801 as merely a wrong legal opinion (*khata'-i ijthadi*).¹⁴⁴ The *Khalisiyyatnamah*¹⁴⁵ quoted extensively from al-Khalisi's journal, which covered some of the trips he undertook to Saudi Arabia where he also participated in discussions with Sunni scholars, conducted in a purportedly very friendly atmosphere.¹⁴⁶ One edition of *Madinat al-'Ilm* even featured a letter written by the Saudi ruler, Sa'ud b. 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Sa'ud (r. 1953–1964) in which the king thanked

¹⁴⁰ Al-Najafī, *Uṣūl al-sharī'a*, pp. 424–426.

¹⁴¹ Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Najafī Ḍhakkū, *Iṣlāḥ al-rusūm al-ẓāhira bi-kalām al-'itra al-tāhira* (Sargodha: Maktabat al-Sibṭayn, 2009), p. 40.

¹⁴² For an overview of the different variations this label took, see Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India. Ahmad Riza Khan and his movement, 1870–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 240–255. See also Martin Riexinger, *Sanā'ullāh Amritsarī (1868–1948) und die Ahl-i-Ḥadīs im Punjab unter britischer Herrschaft* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2004), pp. 138–141 and 523–536.

¹⁴³ Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) emphasized that strict monotheism (*tawhid*) was not restricted to the recognition of and the mere belief in one God but also extended to human actions and specifically worship. In this view Shi'is who venerate the graves of their Imams commit polytheism (*shirk*). See Esther Peskes, *Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–92) im Widerstreit. Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahhābiya* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993), pp. 22–27.

¹⁴⁴ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁵ Its author, Muḥammad Hasnayn al-Sābiqī, was born in 1945 in Talagang (North Punjab) and studied in Khairpur and Sargodha before leaving Pakistan for Najaf. He later opened his own seminary in Multan and *inter alia* wrote a reply to Dhakku's *Usul al-Sharī'a*. Husayn 'Arif Naqvi describes him as a distributor of Shaykhi literature in Pakistan. For more details, see Sayyid Ḥusayn 'Arif Naqvi, *Tazkīrah-i 'ulamā-yi Imāmiyyah-i Pākistān* (Mashhad: Bunyād-i Pazhūhishā-yi Islāmī-yi Āstān-i Quds-i Rażawī, 1991), pp. 290–291.

¹⁴⁶ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah*, p. 19.

al-Khalisi for a book he had received from him and emphasized his own role as a propagator of Muslim unity, working to spread God's pure religion (*din Allah al-khalis*).¹⁴⁷ While such a letter might have seemed rather harmless in the mid-1950s, given the general efforts towards rapprochement at the time,¹⁴⁸ the connection appeared in an entirely different light in the mid-1980s, with the Afghan jihad raging next door, abundantly supported by Saudi funds, and in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution which spread its own, particular message of Muslim unity.¹⁴⁹ Inside Pakistan 'humanitarian aid' from Saudi-Arabia extended to financing virulently anti-Shi'a tracts like *Al-Shi'a wa-l-sunna* written by Ihsan Ilahi Zahir, who dismissed Shi'ism as 'the religion of falsehood, and the religion of deceit and cunning'.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, the Shi'a of Pakistan began to perceive the Islamizing state of General Zia ul-Haq as increasingly hostile as it attempted to impose a Sunni, Hanafi version of the charitable tax (*zakat*) on them. The military ruler was also held responsible for the murder of Sayyid 'Arif Husayn al-Husayni, the most outspoken pro-Iranian Shi'i leader, in 1988.¹⁵¹ One should also not forget the rise of the extremist anti-Shi'i organization of the Sipah-i Sahaba, which displayed a zealous adoration for the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, at around this time.¹⁵²

It is thus understandable that al-Khalisi was chastised for trying to play down his own sectarian identity by claiming that he was neither a Sunni nor a Shi'i, and even more so for defending the first two Caliphs

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 31–32. It is indeed tempting to see a reference to al-Khalisi's name here.

¹⁴⁸ See Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between rapprochement and restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 153–207.

¹⁴⁹ In the *Khalisiyyatnamah* this debate was reflected by al-Sābiqī's statement that he and his supporters were not opposed to intra-Muslim unity, but they deemed intra-Shi'i unity to be a much more important concern (al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmāh*, p. 7).

¹⁵⁰ Iḥsān Ilāhī Zahīr, *Al-Shi'a wa-l-Sunna* (Lahore: Idārat Tarjumān al-Sunna, 2008), p. 184. Zahir himself was assassinated in 1987. See Maryam Abou Zahab, 'The SSP: Herald of Militant Sunni Islam in Pakistan', in L. Gayer and C. Jaffrelot (eds), *Armed Militias of South Asia. Fundamentalists, Maoists and separatists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 167–168.

¹⁵¹ On him and his adaptation of hallmark themes of the Iranian revolution to the Pakistani context, see my forthcoming 'Third Wave Shi'ism: Sayyid 'Arif Husain al-Husaini and the Islamic revolution in Pakistan', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2014.

¹⁵² Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'Sectarianism in Pakistan: The radicalization of Shi'i and Sunni identities', *Modern Asian Studies* 32, 3 (1998), p. 700.

as having had faith (*iman*).¹⁵³ Quoting once again from *Madinat al-‘Ilm*, al-Sābiqī¹⁵⁴ tried to make the point that al-Khalisi acknowledged the second Caliph, ‘Umar b. al-Khattab (d. 644), as the compiler of the Qur’an and son-in-law of the Prophet, while labelling any vilification (*bughḥ rakhna*) of the third Caliph, Uthman, as a mere *shaykhī* belief.¹⁵⁵ Al-Sābiqī even sent a request for a *fatwa* to several leading reformist scholars in Pakistan, Dhakku among them. Without mentioning al-Khalisi, he asked whether someone who adhered to the abovementioned beliefs and labelled the Saudi government as ‘believing’ (*mu’min*) could still be viewed as remaining inside the Twelver Shi‘i fold. Since all the replies he received were in the negative, al-Sābiqī used this to pin down Dhakku. He demanded an apology from Dhakku for having committed treason against his own community by extolling such a vilifier of the *ahl al-bayt*,¹⁵⁶ Wahhabi, friend of the Americans, and enemy of Iran as a wronged *mujtahid* (*mujtahid-i mazlum*).¹⁵⁷ The flip-side of rehabilitating Sunni figures long reviled by the Shi‘i community was, of course, that al-Khalisi supposedly turned infallible imams like Ja‘far al-Sādiq into simple jurists and *mujtahids*, denying their divinely inspired knowledge (*‘ilm-i ladunni*).¹⁵⁸

Besides quotations from his journal, it seems as if al-Khalisi’s will, which early on was translated into Persian and later into Urdu, played a prominent role in such debates. Those works written as rejoinders to Muhammad Husayn al-Najafi Dhakku’s controversial book *Islah al-Rusum (The Reform of Customs)*, published in 1995, drew almost exclusively on al-Khalisi’s testament to criticize him.¹⁵⁹ His adversaries seized upon this document to make the case that the Iraqi was entirely opposed to self-flagellation (*‘azadari*) which—in its more bloody version—is an integral part of the commemoration of Imam Husayn’s death in the South Asian context. In his will al-Khalisi

¹⁵³ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah*, p. 22.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133. For discussions among Shi‘is about a possible corruption of the Qur’anic texts, compare Rainer Brunner, *Die Schia und die Koranfälschung* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2001).

¹⁵⁵ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁶ The *ahl al-bayt* comprise the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, his son-in-law and cousin Ali, their sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and the remaining nine Shi‘i Imams.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁵⁹ See for an overview, Malik Iftikhār Ḥusayn A‘wān, *Tabṣarat al-maghmūm ‘alā ajwabat Islāh al-rusūm* (Sargodha: Maktabat al-Sibtayn, 2009), pp. 143–149.

advised his son Mahdi not to organize such practices for his funeral procession and to refrain from visiting and circumambulating (*tawaf*) the grave of the seventh Shi'i Imam Musa al-Kazim in al-Kazimiyya with his coffin. All of these actions, in al-Khalisi's view, amounted to unlawful innovations and superstitions, propagated by the *shaykhis*.¹⁶⁰ For al-Khalisi's opponents, these stipulations demonstrated that even in death he refused to be treated as a Shi'i and was perfectly in line with the flag bearers of Wahhabism.¹⁶¹ As his follower, Dhakku would hence be well advised to leave his native country in order to propagate his version of Khalisiism abroad, because Pakistan is not Khalistan.¹⁶² Interestingly, topics pertaining more to al-Khalisi's scientific-medical project were not picked up by his detractors, even though such themes are clearly spelled out in his testament as well: al-Khalisi urged his son not only to safeguard the work of his madrasa from being hijacked by those who made use of false traditions and attributed lies to the Prophet and the *ahl al-bayt* under the pretext of praising their virtues. The Iraqi scholar also, crucially, expressed his hope that his school in al-Kazimiyya might develop into a fully fledged university (*danishgah-i buzurg*) which taught that all natural sciences (*'ulum-i maddi*) pointed to God's unity and the truth of Muhammad's mission.¹⁶³

In attempting to enlist transnational support for their attacks on al-Khalisi and Dhakku, their opponents frequently appealed to the 'high' Shi'i scholarly tradition. Al-Khalisi, for example, was charged with a lack of scholarly credentials as he had not received an endorsement (*ijaza*) as a *mujtahid*. His antagonists pointed out that none of the relevant Shi'i biographical works listed him with such a rank.¹⁶⁴ Additionally, frequent reference was made to polemical works published in Iraq, including the reproduction of entire pages of the original Arabic. These nine books demonstrated, in al-Sābiqī's view, a shared mood towards al-Khalisi in the Najaf of the mid-1950s.¹⁶⁵ The fact that even Abu 'l-Qasim al-Khu'i, a prominent source of emulation, explicitly condoned one such book made it impossible to dismiss al-Khalisi's critics as extremists, they claim. No one could

¹⁶⁰ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah*, p. 59.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 44.

¹⁶² *Ibid*. For the usual Sikh connotation of this word, see Laurent Gayer, 'The Khalistan Militias: Servants and users of the state', in Jaffrelot and Gayer (eds), *Armed Militias of South Asia*, pp. 237–257.

¹⁶³ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālisiyyatnāmah*, p. 65.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁵ This view resonates with Werner Ende's findings; see above.

discount the respected seminary (*hawza*) of Najaf as a misguided, *shaykhi*-run institution. When Dhakku wrote that al-Khalisi was the victim of a *shaykhi* smear campaign, al-Sābiqī asked why they singled him out from all the other prominent scholars, who were spared?¹⁶⁶ It was clear to al-Sābiqī that Pakistan's Shi'a were not following the 'children of Ibn Taymiyya'¹⁶⁷ and al-Khalisi in their betrayal of the Imams but rather clung to the guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini who affirmed that the Imams had been endowed with superhuman powers and guardianship over creation (*vilayat-i takvini*).¹⁶⁸ Dhakku and al-Khalisi were nothing more than isolated *muqassirs*¹⁶⁹ who had given in to the temptation of petrodollars:¹⁷⁰ not only the weight of the Shi'i tradition but also the statements by 16 *marajī 'al-taqlid* in the twentieth century (including, once again, Abu 'l-Qasim al-Khu'i) confirmed the Imams' creation out of light.¹⁷¹

The reformist camp, in turn, also enlisted transnational Shi'i support, arguing that al-Khalisi and, ultimately, they themselves were only drawing water from the same, much broader reformist well. Like them, Khomeini also spoke out against the circumambulation of the Imams' tombs.¹⁷² It was not only them, but also Husayn 'Ali Borujerdi, Muhsin al-Amin al-'Amili (d. 1951),¹⁷³ and Iran's present leader, Ali Khamenei, who all condemned the bloody self-flagellation with swords.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, by demonstrating an intimate familiarity with a broader range of al-Khalisi's works, Dhakku attempted to rectify the distorted picture of a Shi'i-Wahhabi: referring to relevant passages in the *Ihya' al-shari'a*, he argued that al-Khalisi never denied the merit of visiting the Imams' graves. He explained at length al-Khalisi's position on the infallibility of the members of the Prophet's household, calling them protected from sins, slips, and forgetfulness.¹⁷⁵ All accusations

¹⁶⁶ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālīsiyyatnāmah*, p. 13.

¹⁶⁷ This is a reference to the Damascene jurist, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who is often credited as one of the main sources of inspiration for the Wahhabi movement.

¹⁶⁸ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālīsiyyatnāmah*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁹ This derogatory term denotes those who downgrade the exalted position of the *ahl al-bayt*.

¹⁷⁰ Al-Sābiqī, *Khālīsiyyatnāmah*, p. 50.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁷² A'wān, *Tabṣarat al-maghmūm*, pp. 141–142.

¹⁷³ On him, see Mervin, *Un Réformisme Chiite*, pp. 161–177.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.

¹⁷⁵ See, for example, Şafdar Husayn Doğar, 'Muḥammad Husayn Dhakkū se 150 sū'āl', *al-Qiyām* (1987), p. 101, where Dhakku refers to pp. 58–59 and 87 of the first volume of *Ihyā' al-shari'a*.

of inclinations toward the Saudis were utter nonsense since al-Khalisi had repeatedly refuted their interpretation of Islam. Dhakku challenged his opponents to come up with any text from al-Khalisi's writing to the contrary, promising them a financial reward if they were able to do so.¹⁷⁶ This offer tied in with Dhakku's repeated accusation that his opponents were in reality only after material gains: according to him, they were not ready to sacrifice their own benefits, their cheaply gained respect, and reputation (*sasti shuhrat aur maqbuliyyat*) by opposing the beliefs of the people and leading them to the truth.¹⁷⁷ These world-focused scholars (*'ulama-yi dunya*) were only concerned with their own bellies, selling *fatwas* and religion along with the blood of Husayn. Dhakku contrasted them with the upright scholars (*'ulama-yi haqq*) who did not mind accepting poverty for defending honourable principles.¹⁷⁸ He also used this line of argument to counter the question of why he never attempted to translate any of al-Khalisi's works into Urdu, given his claims that the Iraqi scholar's opinions always belonged squarely in the Shi'i mainstream. Dhakku answered that he simply had neither enough free time nor sufficient financial resources at his disposal to do so.¹⁷⁹ Finally, he emphasized that al-Khalisi was never embroiled in any real quarrels in Iraq beyond mere gentleman-like disagreements, which are the hallmark of the Shi'i system of learning.¹⁸⁰ While al-Khalisi was thus on good terms with the international Shi'i scholarly elite, his opponents were to blame for exporting an entirely different, negative kind of transnational Shi'ism to Pakistan: they were mere agents of the two branches of the *shaykhi* school in Kerman/Iran and Kuwait which were trying to disseminate their despicable ideas.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 83.

¹⁷⁷ Dhakkū, *Iṣlāh al-Rusūm*, p. 37.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 38.

¹⁷⁹ Dogar, *150 su'āl*, pp. 104–105. This lack of concern for financial benefits is repeatedly stressed in Dhakku's biography. His only son, for example, died when he was studying in Iraq since he could not pay for the required medication, having spent his money mostly on books. See Tāhir 'Abbās A'wān, *Mard-i 'ilm maydān-i amal men* (Liya: Jāmi'ah-i Valī al-'Aṣr, 2005), p. 45.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 84.

¹⁸¹ Even though *shaykhis* in Pakistan today are only a very minor group, the connections with Kuwait are still strong, as I witnessed first-hand in 2011 while visiting the main *shaykhi* centre in Islamabad.

Conclusion

Muhammad al-Khalisi is an intriguing figure. He did not shy away from confrontations with powerful opponents, political and religious alike. Having been prevented by the British and the shah of Iran from continuing his political activism, he shifted to a full-blown modernist project. Al-Khalisi tried to construct an entirely new, health-based, and rational foundation for legal rulings in the Shi'i tradition. He strove not only to eradicate prevailing 'superstitions' but also to bridge the gap with the Sunni majority.

In this paper, I have argued that we might be well advised to pay close attention to the particular local contexts in which reformist teachings emerge, rather than restricting our inquiries solely to transregional trends. In the case of our author, the typical shared, 'global' Shi'i concerns were not absent. Al-Khalisi, too, preached against despotism, called for a 'rationalization' of *'ashura*, and advocated new approaches in the *hawza*-system—all aspects that are part of a modern Shi'i ideology, as Sabrina Mervin argues.¹⁸²

As I have tried to show, however, al-Khalisi's thinking about modernity was crucially shaped by his long exile in Iran. Whereas he located himself early in life in a broader trend of efforts to reconcile Islam and science, al-Khalisi encountered in Iran specific medicalizing discourses which had gained prominence in society during the 1920s. The Iraqi scholar was not only an interested observer, he also participated personally in those debates: gaining medical knowledge through the perusal of medical handbooks, al-Khalisi treated patients in the Iranian countryside.

Even when he returned to Iraq and finalized his *risala 'amaliyya* there, he conceived of a *fiqh* project suitable for the modern age: an elaboration of how God is concerned with the believer's bodily health. Yet, this in itself unique and arguably radical approach was not what later spurred controversies in Iraq and Pakistan alike and led to his ultimate marginalization. Rather, he was labelled as a dangerous fake-Shi'i who attempted to strip the community of all its distinct markers of identity and thus deserved the derogatory label of being a 'Shi'i-Wahhabi'.

The Pakistani debate over al-Khalisi and Shi'i orthodoxy in particular might well be a modern replay of controversies discussed

¹⁸² Sabrina Mervin, 'Transnational Intellectual Debates', in Sabrina Mervin (ed), *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran* (London: Saqi, 2010), p. 327.

by Justin Jones in his recent book on Shi'a Islam in colonial India. Jones aims to deconstruct an understanding of sectarianism among Muslims which restricts itself to the conflicts between Shi'is and Sunnis. Instead, many of the most decisive contestations in fact took place *within* each of these sects. Jones observes that new and clearly sectarian practices like the inclusion of the third *shahada* into the Shi'i *adhan* or the public cursing of the first three caliphs (*tabarra*) were often introduced by up-and-coming *maulvis* and preachers, who thereby hoped to 'procure public visibility, and secure themselves a role in an increasingly crowded religious marketplace'. To put it differently: discussions and disputes that 'took place under the outward cloak of apparently Shi'a-Sunni conflict', Jones argues, were primarily meant for internal consumption and struggles over leadership within the community.¹⁸³ Without having looked extensively into the matter of Pakistan, Jones suggests in the epilogue of his book that we might be able to find similar phenomena there and invites a more detailed study of the complex interactions between established scholars, young activist *'ulama*, and lay preachers who all intended to stake out their claims.¹⁸⁴

Precisely this point requires further research, however. Many of those who spoke out against Dhakku cannot simply be dismissed as popular preachers nor can we construct a clear-cut dichotomy between local, Pakistani traditionalists and reformists who received their training in the centres of Shi'i learning. Al-Sabiqi, for example, studied in Najaf as well and mentioned Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr as one of his teachers.¹⁸⁵ Additionally, the transnational aspects of *shaykhism*, with both money and literature flowing from Kuwait to Pakistan, render such classifications even more untenable. Further research into the polemics surrounding Muhammad al-Khalisi, which focuses on the background of the actors and educational institutions involved, could, I suggest, prove to be a suitable lens through which to consider internal struggles, aspects of sectarianism, and the transnational negotiation of Shi'i doctrine side by side.

¹⁸³ Justin Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, community and sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 113.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹⁸⁵ Naqvi, *Tazkirah-i 'ulamā*, p. 291.