Translating Al-Kafi: how to make a classical Shii text accessible to 21st century readers

The act of translating is often taken for granted in Religious Studies. The translation of religious texts plays a central role in any type of research on different religious beliefs, practices and various other discursive acts and formations. Often seen as just preliminary to the actual analysis of the research data, it is either looked down upon as a necessary chore or undertaken without further reflection. While traditional approaches to translation have emphasised linguistic skills and accuracy the postcolonial and postmodern turn in the humanities has created an awareness of the politics of translation. The contested nature of the act of translating appears central when it comes to the translation of authoritative religious texts - however, little reflection often occurs when such translations are produced. How to bridge the often immense historical, cultural and linguistic gaps between a text and the intended audience of its translation? How to deal with the diverse and contested reception history and exegetical traditions of authoritative texts and with the status a text is held in within religious communities?

This issue will be addressed by looking at the example Al-Kafi fi ‘Ulam Al-Din by Muhammad ibn Ya’qub Al-Kulayni (d. 941), the first major collection of traditions attributed to the Shii Imams. Divided into several thematic volumes, the Kitab Al-Hujja contains traditions outlining the Shii understanding of wilaya and imama and is therefore central to the formation of Shii doctrine and identity. By investigating several examples taken from these traditions, issues and challenges in making such a classical text accessible to 21st century readers will be discussed.