“After the Ayatollah: routinisation and succession in the marja’iyya of Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah”

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Abstract;

The death of the marja‘ brings a moment of crisis. The modern Usuli Twelver Shi‘i tradition’s emphasis on the primacy of living religious authorities should entail the passing of the authority of the deceased. But some figures leave enduring legacies. In this paper I examine the efforts of those who worked for and supported the Beirut-based marja’iyya of Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah to nurture and sustain his legacy. The emphasis placed by Fadlallah’s school on the ‘contemporary’ and engaged nature of his jurisprudence would seem to pose the problem of posterity especially sharply. I describe in particular the continued running of his offices and institutions, the intensified activity of his website and the public engagements and pronouncements of two of his sons who have adopted the clerical profession.

Morgan Clarke is an anthropologist of the Arabic-speaking Middle East with a particular interest in contemporary Islam, especially Islamic law and its relationship to positive law, secular ethics and the civil state. His fieldwork to date has been in Lebanon (2003-4, 2007-8), although he has developing interests in the Arab Gulf States. His doctoral work (Oxford, 2006) focused on Islamic bioethics, concerning assisted reproduction in particular, and was published as Islam and new kinship: reproductive technology and the shariah in Lebanon (Berghahn, 2009). He continues to be interested in global medical, ethical and legal assemblages, and contributes to teaching in medical anthropology within the department.

His current book project, developed through postdoctoral work at Cambridge (British Academy PDF, 2006-9) and Manchester (Simon Research Fellowship, 2009-11), is an ethnography of sharia discourse in Lebanon, focusing on the sharia (family law) courts and their relationship to non-state Islamic institutions. That involved fieldwork in both Sunni and Shi‘i contexts, including mosques, Sufi circles and the offices of major religious authorities, most notably Lebanon’s late Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah. With regard to the latter, Clarke has an enduring interest in Shi‘i Islam, with recent and forthcoming publications on the impact of the Internet and other new media on the social construction of religious authority within the tradition.