

Mushegh Asatryan

The 'Abbāsīd Culture of Debate and Imāmī Hadith

My paper studies how the 'Abbāsīd culture of debate is reflected in the Imāmī hadith corpus. Anyone who has read enough Imāmī hadith will have noticed one pervasive characteristic: most of them derive their authority from the words of the Imām. Thus, something is the case, according to most hadith, because the Imām told us so. The Imām, then, derives his authority from his position as Imām: what he says is true because he is the Imām, no questions asked. There is a handful of hadith, however, preserved mostly in Kulaynī's *al-Kāfī* and al-Kashshī's *Rijāl*, which present a drastically different picture. In these several traditions, the Imām Ja'far al-Šādiq's words are true because they are well-argued. Essentially, the Imām here engages in a dialectical debate and convinces his questioners or opponents of his rightness through the strength of his arguments, and not through a reference to his position *qua* Imām: he is right because his words are convincing. Alongside these hadith, there are some which express a very ambiguous attitude toward debate. Here, the Imām condones debate but then in the same breath restricts it to a purely traditionalist framework. One senses a tension in these texts between the permissibility and the impermissibility of debating. As I will show in my paper, these hadith reflect the rich and diverse culture of debate (*munāẓara*) which was in full bloom in the 'Abbāsīd empire during the period when the traditions that made up some of the Imāmī compilations were circulating and being collected. The culture of *munāẓara* flourished thanks to a number of phenomena – a religious and cultural diversity, a relatively open religious field, and patronage by the elites – and formed an important part of courtly life, the urban fabric, and of scholarly gatherings in mosques and private homes. Such was the religious environment that not only different groups of Muslims debated one another, but Muslims debated Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians, and even atheists. In the 9th-10th centuries, debate had its opponents in the purveyors of prophetic tradition, the so-called *ahl al-ḥadīth* (mostly made up of Ḥanbalīs, but of others as well), who criticized those who engaged in debate for being two-faced and frivolous sophists who lacked true knowledge of religion. The several traditions depicting the Imām engaging in, or with, *munāẓara* reflect the full range of 'Abbāsīd attitudes toward debate and are a testament to the tensions that existed between proponents and opponents of debate on the one hand, and to different views regarding the Imām's knowledge on the other. Thus, they are important not just for studying the history of Imāmī Shi'ism, but they are a reflection of an important moment in 'Abbāsīd culture as a whole.



Mushegh Asatryan

University of Calgary

Mushegh Asatryan is Associate Professor of Arabic and Muslim Cultures and Director of the Language Research Centre at the University of Calgary (Canada). His research interests include the history of Islamic sectarianism, interreligious debate in the Abbasid empire, esoteric movements in Shi'ism, and Late Antique trends in Islamic thought. His works include *Controversies in Formative Shi'i Islam*, the forthcoming study and critical edition of *Manhaj al-Ilm wa l-Bayān* by the Nuṣayrī author 'Iṣmat al-Dawla (co-authored with David Hollenberg), and the forthcoming article "The Emergence of Sunnism: When did the Sunnis Become a Sect?" He is currently working on a book on the culture of debate (*munāẓara*) in the 'Abbāsīd empire.