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## Some Remarks on Aḥmad al-Kātib's “Criticism of Shiite Methods in the Prophetic Tradition”

by  
Rainer Brunner

It is difficult, not to say virtually impossible, to overestimate the significance of the *ḥadīth* corpus for Shiite intellectual history and religious identity. Twelver Shiism in particular, the latest and most successful branch of Shiism, is totally inconceivable without the legacy of the Imāms as laid down in these traditions. It is safe to state, therefore, that “hadith established itself in Shiite consciousness more firmly than any other literary form” and moreover “reflects the oldest stage of Shiite literary activity.”<sup>1</sup> From the earliest compilations by aṣ-Ṣaffār al-Qummī and al-Kulaynī that have come down to posterity, via Muḥammad Bāqir al-Maḡlisī's monumental *Biḥār al-anwār* up to Ḥusayn an-Nūrī aṭ-Ṭabrisī's no less impressive *Mustadrak al-wasā'il* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – the repetitive reference to the Imāms and the constant rearrangement of material that had previously already been collected served not only as a huge reservoir of cultural memory, but also as a means of reassurance, especially in times of crises and turns of eras – re-collection in the double meaning of the word.<sup>2</sup> However, it is precisely here, too, that we find the most controversial bones of contention between Shiites and Sunnites: the defence of the dogma of the Imāmate, the supposed occultation of the Mahdī, the super-human qualities and the suffering of the Imāms on the one hand, the rejection of the Sunnite worldview and the authority of the caliphs on the other. If anything, the conflict between the two groups has to be described as a struggle for history, or rather, from a Shiite point of view, for history as it should have been.

<sup>1</sup> Kohlberg, Etan. “Shīī Ḥadīth”. In: Beeston, A.F.L. et al. (eds). *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*. Cambridge 1983, p. 303.

<sup>2</sup> Brunner, Rainer. “The Role of Ḥadīth as Cultural Memory in Shīī History”. In: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005), 318–360.



Given these preliminaries, the approach taken by Aḥmad al-Kātib in his contribution to this conference cannot be considered but iconoclastic. In order to avoid misunderstandings, let me make it clear from the outset that my following remarks intend to be thoroughly disinterested. Being myself a non-believing outsider, I do not see it as my task to decide whether he is right or wrong and whether his proposals are desirable, nor to protect traditional, mainstream or any other kind of Shiites against what they might perceive to be a renegade's attack on the core of their beliefs. As a historian of Shiite intellectual history, however, I venture to give some assessment as to Aḥmad al-Kātib's position within Shiism and to the prospective chances of success of his criticism.

Aḥmad al-Kātib's criticism of Shiite *ḥadīth* is not restricted to certain procedural issues. Where he addresses these questions – such as the time gap between the reported *ḥadīths* about Muḥammad and their fixation, dubious *isnāds*, the oral character of transmission and the inherent potential danger of distortions or outright fabrications – he ignores the fact that all these things existed in Sunnite Islam as well and gave rise to fierce debates that have continued well into present times.<sup>3</sup> But this is far from being his main concern; instead, he aims at a fundamental rejection of Shiite principles. This, however, would amount to the factual abolition of Shiism, to a reformation by means of extinction, as it were. The last sentence of his paper: “Thus all Shiite hadiths fall into doubt and it means we cannot readily accept them”, could easily have been taken from any *salafiyya* inspired anti-Shiite polemical treatise. So, too, could his main points of criticism: repudiating the sinlessness and omniscience of the Imāms, or ridiculing the Mahdī have also counted among the standard arguments of Sunnite heresiography ever since.<sup>4</sup> But once one subtracts the twelve Imāms – what is then left of Twelver Shiism? How prosperous is a reform that declares its

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Juynboll, G.H.A. *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature. Discussions in Modern Egypt*. Leiden 1969; Brown, Daniel. *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*. Cambridge 1996; Musa, Aisha Y. *Ḥadīth as Scripture. Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam*. New York 2008, esp. pp. 83–109.

<sup>4</sup> Brunner, Rainer. *Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century. The Azhar and Shiism Between Rapprochement and Restraint*. Leiden 2004, pp. 14–24, 255–275, 320–337.

own fundamentals to be resting, to a large extent, upon *taqiyya*, dissimulation? What is more, al-Kātib's rush is apparently dissociated both from past and contemporary Shiite debates on *ḥadīth* and history at large. Nowhere does he connect to other authors, neither theologians nor secular-minded thinkers – and there is certainly no dearth of them, especially in modern Shiism: one need mention only the names of Iranian reformist thinkers such as Mohammed Mojtahed Shabestari, Mohsen Kadivar, Hasan Yusefi Eshkevari or Abdolkarim Soroush.<sup>5</sup> By disregarding other reformist voices, however, he sometimes preaches to the converted, such as in his judgement of *taqiyya*, which has already in the past been repudiated by several eminent Shiite scholars (such as Muḥammad Jawād Mughnīya or, for that matter, Khomeini).<sup>6</sup> It comes as no surprise, therefore, that al-Kātib makes do with the rejection of Shiite *ḥadīth* lock, stock and barrel, without offering a new interpretation of the exiting sources or a new method of dealing with them. It is fair to conclude that the chances that such an approach will fall on fertile ground among other Shiites, be it in the Middle East or elsewhere, are virtually nil.

The sweeping character of his criticism suggests, however, that it may not be addressed to a predominantly Shiite audience in the first place at all. Rather, it should be understood as a contribution to the ongoing debate about relations between Sunnites and Shiites and about chances to overcome the sectarian tensions which – after the Iranian revolution in 1979 perhaps even more so than in the past – have developed into one of the most urgent problems in large parts of the Islamic world. Aḥmad al-Kātib suggests this interpretation himself by stating, right at the beginning, that “there are no fundamental disagreements among different Islamic sects regarding Islam's pillars and branches” and that “the differences between Shiites and Sunnis are not rooted in Islam itself but in political thought”. This is a distant echo of two arguments which could also be found in the

<sup>5</sup> Amirpur, Katajun (trans. and ed.). *Unterwegs zu einem anderen Islam. Texte iranischer Denker. Hasan Yusefi Eshkevari, Mohsen Kadivar, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari*. Freiburg 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, p. 218; Göbel, Karl-Heinrich. *Moderne Schiitische Politik und Staatsidee* (...). Opladen 1984, pp. 176–184.

writings of ecumenically-minded authors of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when the debate about a rapprochement was at its height.<sup>7</sup> I have to confess that I have always found the assertion that the sectarian split within Islam was by no means religious but purely political a somewhat peculiar pseudo-argument, considering the extent to which Islamic legal and theological literature in general purports, as a matter of course, to encompass both spheres. What is more, from the point of view of history, it is manifestly wrong: the acerbity of a political struggle between competing states came into the picture only in the course of the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward.<sup>8</sup> Yet in the context of the ecumenical discussion, this evasion answered a dire need, namely the avoidance of any discussion of early Islamic history and *ḥadīṭ*, since the protagonists knew perfectly well what the result of such a discussion would have looked like. Dealing with early Islam and politics would immediately have rendered ecumenical activities completely futile (not that their strategy was of any use: polemics eventually won the day anyway).

Aḥmad al-Kātib, now, tries to have his cake and eat it. He does so by deliberately going into the heart of the matter, namely the succession to Muḥammad as the leader of the Muslim community and the question of divine leadership in Islam – and by declaring it more or less irrelevant, “marginal events”, as he puts it with regard to the election of Abū Bakr as the first caliph. But these events are not marginal by any standard – and if they should have been so at the time in real history, later hagiography succeeded in overlaying them and in thoroughly changing their character. After all, al-Kātib himself speaks of “divine leadership” and “divine inspiration”. Tilman Nagel once aptly defined *ḥadīṭ* as the “annihilation of history” in the sense that it expresses the constant longing of the Muslim community for keeping the state of salvation as embodied in the life and times of its

<sup>7</sup> Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, pp. 228–248.

<sup>8</sup> Eberhard, Elke. *Osmanische Polemik gegen die Safawiden im 16. Jahrhundert nach arabischen Handschriften*. Freiburg 1970.

prophet alive and present for all times.<sup>9</sup> However, there are two versions of this salvation history, a Sunnite and a Shiite one, and both represent different – and mutually incompatible – approaches to religious charisma. The Shiite version, according to which the Prophet's charisma was hereditary and was therefore directly transferred to the Imāms, contrasts diametrically with the Sunnite opinion, according to which it devolved upon the *umma* as a whole. And this is why in Shiism the process had to be extended for good, once the lineage of the living Imāms finally dried up; Twelver Shiism in this regard was only the last stage of a development that had already made the Mahdī a familiar figure earlier on in Islamic history. Today, after several centuries plus one revolution that turned the 'ulamā' into the Mahdī's vice-regents on earth, we face the paradoxical situation that, on the one hand, the messianic expectation of the Mahdī is codified in the Iranian constitution (and in Ahmadinejad's crude speeches), whereas, on the other hand, in practical terms he must not return, as this would mean the end of Shiism as we know it.<sup>10</sup> Neither scenario, however, supposes his abolition.

Aḥmad al-Kātib is not the first Shiite iconoclast in recent decades. In the late 1980s, the Iraqi Mūsā al-Mūsawī managed to cause quite a stir when he published his book *aš-Šī'a wa-t-taṣḥīḥ*. Being himself the grandson of a famous Āyatollāh, he wrote a scathing critique of the religious leadership in Shiism and a fundamental refutation of all central tenets of Shiism. Except for several fierce counter-polemics, the echo, let alone practical consequences, of his efforts remained rather limited.<sup>11</sup> When Aḥmad al-Kātib emerged, nearly ten years later, for the first time with a bold criticism – in his book *Taṣawwur al-fikr as-siyāsī aš-šī'ī min aš-šūrā ilā wilāyat al-faqīh*, in which he strongly criticized Shiite political thought as embodied in Khomeini's

<sup>9</sup> Nagel, Tilman. "Ḥadīṯ – oder: Die Vernichtung der Geschichte". In: Wunsch, C. (ed). *XXV. Deutscher Orientalistentag, Vorträge, München, 8.–13.4.1991*. Stuttgart 1994 (*Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Suppl. 10), 118–128.

<sup>10</sup> Maghen, Zeev. "Occultation in Perpetuum. Shi'ite Messianism and the Policies of the Islamic Republic". In: *Middle East Journal* 62/2 (2008), 232–257.

<sup>11</sup> Brunner, Rainer. "A Shiite Cleric's Criticism of Shiism. Mūsā al-Mūsawī". In: Brunner and W. Ende (eds). *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times. Religious Culture & Political History*. Leiden 2001, pp. 178–187. A more detailed treatment of Musawi's criticism can be found in Siddons, Julian. *Die Korrektur der Irrtümer. Mūsā al-Mūsawī Versuch, die schiitische Glaubenslehre zu reformieren*. Würzburg 2005.

well-known theory –, the reverberation he managed to arouse within Shiism was – unfortunately, I should like to add – equally meagre.<sup>12</sup> I am afraid that his proposals of how to deal with Shiite *ḥadīth* will not fare any better.

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<sup>12</sup> Badry, Roswitha. “‘Much ado About Nothing?’ Remarks upon a Recent Controversy about Religious and Political Authority in Twelver Shiism”. In: Michalak-Pikulska, Barbara and Andrzej Pikulski (eds). *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam*. Leuven 2006, pp. 1–15.