Book Review

Thaver, Tehseen. *Beyond Sectarianism: Ambiguity, Hermeneutics, and the Formations of Religious Identity in Islam*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024. ISBN 9781512825947. xii + 320pp. $49.95 cloth and ebook.

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Tehseen Thaver's book is a study of the Qurʾān commentary of the tenth- to eleventh-century Muslim theologian and writer, al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 1015), entitled *Ḥaqāʾiq al-taʾwīl fī mutashābih al-tanzīl (Hermeneutical Realities in [Uncovering] the Ambiguities of Revelation)*. Al-Raḍī is primarily known as the compiler of *Nahj al-balāgha (The Way of Eloquence)*, a collection of speeches and epistles by ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661). Al-Raḍī was also a respected poet and an important figure within the Imami Shiʿi community of Baghdad, both as an intellectual and as a leader. He was the brother of another famous Imami author and the syndic (*naqīb*) of the Shiʿis of Baghdad, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044), who had broad connections in high places.

Beyond Sectarianism does several things. It first situates al-Raḍī in his political and cultural milieu and the *Ḥaqāʾiq* in its literary and intellectual context. It also carefully studies the exegetical strategies of the text while focusing on a number of themes prevalent in ʿAbbasid culture: theories of language, ambiguity, and the relation between all of these and the Qurʾān. Along the way, the book raises some larger methodological questions for Islamic studies. In particular, it challenges some prevalent historiographic assumptions that have reigned in Islamic Studies for over a century. These assumptions have to do with the nature of sectarian difference, and the nature of Shiʿism and its relationship with Sunnism in particular, and have provided the framework through which medieval Islamic intellectual, social, and religious history has been viewed. To sum up this conventional approach: it is often assumed in studies on Islamic religious and intellectual history that what a Shiʿi scholar or a political figure did or wrote was mainly informed by his/her being Shiʿi. What exactly being Shiʿi means differs from one place to another, but it is

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often implied that it involves being prone to blindly following authority by virtue of one's adherence to the Imams. It is against this presupposition that the main thrust of Thaver's critique is directed. She dedicates the entire introduction and a large part of the conclusion to discussing and critiquing this approach, following a handful of other scholars who have offered similar critiques of recent scholarship.[1]

Chapter 1 is dedicated to al-Raḍī himself. Thematically it can be divided into three parts: a study of al-Raḍī's biography proper, a study of how he is remembered in the later tradition, and a survey of his literary oeuvre. Thaver explores the social position of al-Raḍī and his family members and their involvement in politics. She also explores al-Raḍī's use of invective poetry as a political tool. Thaver notes that al-Raḍī was chiefly remembered as a remarkable poet and, secondly, as a descendant of the prophet, a sayyid, and explores how dream narratives have been deployed to underscore his eminent connection to the Prophet Muḥammad. She concludes the chapter with a discussion of al-Raḍī's writings, some of which do not survive.

Chapter 2 broadens the scope of historical investigation and studies the intellectual and cultural milieu of Baghdad where al-Raḍī was active. Thaver here offers a critique of the notion that Shiʿi scholarship during the Buyid period flourished thanks to the fact that the Buyids were Shiʿi, thereby providing a safe space for Shiʿi writing by "creating a climate of tolerance" (p. 46). She rather suggests, drawing on Samuel England's excellent monograph, *Medieval Empires and the Culture of Competition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), that the flourishing of Shiʿi thought in this period should be understood as a result of courtly competition, involving literary contests and intellectual debate. This point is spot on, as the ʿAbbasid period was indeed a time of lively intellectual competition and exchange, not just between Muslims of various persuasions, but also between Muslims, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and others.

The remaining four chapters offer a close study of the *Ḥaqāʾiq*'s hermeneutic technique, its approach to ambiguity, and its approach to language. Chapter 3 examines al-Raḍī's conceptualization of ambiguity in the Qurʾān and his method of resolving and making sense of it. Unlike the speech of poets, for al-Raḍī every word of the Qurʾān had a meaning, and its ambiguous parts were for him a source of wonder and awe, rather than a hurdle to be overcome. He also proposes ways of understanding the intent behind these ambiguous parts, namely by referring back to the "clear" verses of the Qurʾān. One of the arguments of this chapter is that for al-Raḍī and some of his contemporaries, "the additional intellectual labor" required of making sense of ambiguity demonstrated mastery of language that increased a scholar's political as well as intellectual standing (p. 70). In other words, the ability to masterfully deal with ambiguity was a way to perform class, as linguistic authority carried with it political authority.

1. See the following: Najam Haider, "The Myth of the 'Shīʿī Perspective': Identity and Memory in Early Islam," in *Routledge Handbook on Early Islam*, ed. Herbert Berg, 209–22 (London: Routledge, 2017); Hussein Abdulsater, *Shīʿī Doctrine, Muʿtazili Theology: Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā and Imami Discourse* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); George Warner, "What Is Shiʿi Writing? Nahj al-Balāgha, Identity, and Adab Literature in the Būyid Period," *Journal of Religious Minorities under Muslim Rule* 2, no. 1 (2024): 28–61.

Chapter 4 presents a case study of how *Ḥaqāʾiq* deals with ambiguity on the example of three Qurʾānic verses (3:143, 3:61, and 3:8). The ambiguities of these verses pertain to their logic, ethical content, grammatical structure, and theology. For example, verse 3:143—"You were longing for death before you met it; now you have seen it [*raʾaytumūhu*], while you were seeing [*tanẓurūn*]"—which the exegetical tradition says depicts the Battle of Badr in 624, is ambiguous for three reasons according to al-Raḍī: first, on account of its logic or plausibility (how can anyone see death?); second, on account of the redundant phrasing of its second part ("you have seen it, while you were seeing"); and third, on account of its ethical implications, as it depicts believers desiring martyrdom at the hands of unbelievers. Through a close reading of al-Raḍī's interpretation of these verses, Thaver demonstrates al-Raḍī's method for overcoming these ambiguities, namely, through reference to non-ambiguous verses and extra-Qurʾānic fields, such as grammar and poetry, as well as through discursive reasoning.

Chapter 5 discusses the Qurʾān's ambiguity in relation to the question of the connection between language and theology. Thaver starts by painting a broad picture of the attitudes to language in the thought of medieval Muslim philologists. She discusses their views on whether human language is revealed or the result of human convention, whether words are ontologically connected to their referents, and, by extension, whether there is a connection between God's essence and His names and attributes. To illustrate al-Raḍī's approach to language, Thaver offers two case studies of al-Raḍī's interpretation of Qurʾānic verses (4:42 and 3:133).

The final, sixth chapter discusses two interconnected questions relating to the history of Imami Shiʿi and Muʿtazili thought. One is the popular idea that Shiʿi thought became gradually "rationalized," and the second is that this rationalization took place under the influence of Muʿtazili thought. According to this narrative, Shiʿism started out as an esoteric and mystical movement which deferred to the inerrant authority of the Imams in theological questions, but then under the influence of Muʿtazilism acquired more "rational" methods of dealing with theological questions. Hence, Thaver notes, scholars have classified authors like al-Raḍī as "Muʿtazili-Shiʿi." Now I should add that this picture is not entirely inaccurate, if simplistic. After all, the early Shiʿi corpus of sayings attributed to the Imams does have many ḥadīth that indeed derive their authority from the figures of the Imams without engaging in dialectical reasoning (but some do), and in the eleventh century we do indeed see the rise of well-known Shiʿi thinkers who used dialectical reasoning in their theological writings instead of solely relying on scripture or the authority of the Imams (al-Raḍī's own brother, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, was one of them). It is rather that, as Thaver shows, the rational/irrational binary is not a useful categorization in the first place, and the notion of "influence" is imprecise and beset by polemical presuppositions.[2]

2. Crystal Addey offers a good critique of the simplistic rational/irrational binary on the topic of Neoplatonic thought in her *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 183–13. Hussein Abdulsater elaborates the problematic nature of discussions of influence in intellectual history, stating that there are "no exact rules" for ascertaining influence and that discussions of influence often devolve into

Thaver illustrates her position by providing a comparison between al-Raḍī's *Ḥaqāʾiq* and the Qurʾān commentary, *Mutashābih al-Qurʾān*, by his teacher the Muʿtazili ʿAbd al-Jabbār, while also examining their respective approaches to the questions of human agency, God's sovereignty, and prophetic intercession and infallibility. ʿAbd al-Jabbār's work was chosen, Thaver explains, because due to the shared features between his commentary and al-Raḍī's, the relationship between the two texts is "most susceptible to being explained through a relationship of 'influence'" (p. 185). The goal of the comparison then is to demonstrate that arguments about influence are overly imprecise and simplistic, and they obscure the dynamic ways in which authors draw on each other's work. Indeed, the comparison, visually illustrated through a helpful table (pp. 189–92), reveals a series of divergences as well as overlaps between the two texts. I note that Thaver's already convincing argument could be considerably bolstered by reference to the fact that the Imami Shiʿis did not in fact have to wait until the eleventh century to have their own dialectical, rational theologians. In the early ninth century, the very period when Muʿtazilism was taking off as a theological school, the Shiʿis had theologians who were actively debating theological subjects using the same dialectical methods as the Muʿtazilis. Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. early 800s) is only the most famous among them.

The conclusion recapitulates some of the main arguments of the book. Chief among these is the idea that a medieval Muslim author's sectarian identity should not be the main lens through which his methods and arguments are to be understood and analyzed.

Beyond Sectarianism is a significant contribution to Islamic studies, but I do nonetheless have a couple of minor quibbles with regard to some of Thaver's points. First, in reference to the environment in Buyid Baghdad, Thaver states that tolerance and pluralism (which have been often invoked in scholarship to characterize the Buyid period) are both "thoroughly modern desires" (p. 48), hence suggesting that these are incompatible with earlier historical epochs, while the prevalent mood in Buyid Baghdad, she argues, was that of competition. Now while it is true that some contemporary North American and European performances and articulations of tolerance and pluralism are indeed specific to their time and place, in their broad sense these two phenomena are not something out of the ordinary in the premodern world. Thus one should not assume that because the premoderns did not speak of pluralism and tolerance (or did not speak of them the way we do today), pluralism and tolerance—or a desire for them—did not exist. Secondly, and relatedly, competition and tolerance do not exclude one another, and ʿAbbasid intellectuals were well aware of this fact. The ʿAbbasid culture of interreligious debate did arise as a result of fierce competition between sectarian groups and schools of thought, such as Christians and Muslims, Muʿtazilis and Shiʿis. At the same time it implied respect and acceptance among representatives of various religions and sects, a point explicitly articulated in ʿAbbasid discussions of the art of debating.[3]

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positing a hierarchy between two parties, which "translates, intellectually, into a claim of originality versus imitation, genuineness versus spuriousness"; Abdulsater, *Shiʿi Doctrine, Muʿtazili Theology*, 6.

3. See, for example, the rules of debate explicitly articulated by the tenth-century Muslim theologian, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 936), as recorded by Ibn Fūrak, *Maqālāt al-shaykh Abī l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sāyiḥ (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thiqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2004), 319, 327–40; see also Josef van Ess, "Disputationspraxis in der islamischen Theologie: Eine vorläufige Skizze," in *Kleine Schriften*, ed. H. Biesterfeld,

My third disagreement with the author has to do with her approach to Islamic sectarianism. While she eloquently and convincingly argues against reducing premodern Muslims' motives to their minoritarian religious identity (Shiʿism, in this case), she does something quite similar when speaking about Sunnis and the relations between Shiʿis and Sunnis. Thus she writes about the Buyids' adherence "to Shiʿi principles *even* as they paid subservience to the Sunni ʿAbbasid caliph" (p. 54, emphasis mine). This implies that because the Buyids were Shiʿi they had to be naturally opposed to a Sunni caliph. Thus, while herself criticizing the explanatory power of "Shiʿi" in discussing al-Raḍī, Thaver implicitly relies on the same power when speaking about the Buyids. If indeed "Shiʿi" has little explanatory power in historical analysis when taken by itself, "Sunni" has even less of it. This is primarily because sectarian affiliation need not and does not always determine people's choices (as Thaver herself convincingly argues with regard to Shiʿism). Moreover, because Sunnism as a group and a self-definition came into being much later than Shiʿism, it did not imply the same communal feeling of togetherness as Shiʿism, its minoritarian counterpart, did.[4]

These points aside, *Beyond Sectarianism* is an important addition to studies of medieval Qurʾān commentary and Islamic intellectual history. The thrust of Thaver's analysis is convincing, and she makes welcome efforts to make her arguments relevant beyond the confines of studying one particular text or tradition and to draw conclusions that could have applicability for intellectual historians more broadly.

2:946–47 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

4. From the little that is written on this subject, the following two works are very insightful: Ahab Bdaiwi, "The Origins of Sunnism," leidenarabichumanitiesblog, March 17, 2023; Christine Baker, *Medieval Islamic Sectarianism* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 59–74.