The transmission of scholarly eminence within a given family has been a frequent occurrence in the history of Islamic Iran, particularly after the adoption of Shi’ism during the tenth/sixteenth century. Few, however, are the lineages that could compete for continuity of erudition with the ancestry of ʿAllāma Ṭabarānī, the author of ʿTafsīr al-Mīzān. From the Aq Qoyunlu through the Safavid, Qajar and Pahlavi periods into the era of the Islamic Republic, members of this family have been consistently prominent as scholars of religion, qādis, and shaykhs al-ʿIslām, especially in Tabriz. The progenitor of this illustrious line was a certain Sayyid ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Hamadānī who, born and bred in Samarqand, succeeded to the position of his father, Sayyid Najm al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ghaffār Tabātabāʾī, as shaykh al-ʿIslām of Tabriz not long before the Safavids displaced the Aq Qoyunlus in 907/1501. Successfully negotiating the delicate transition between dynasties, Sayyid ʿAbd al-Wahhāb gained the trust of Shah Ismāʿīl sufficiently to be entrusted with a diplomatic mission to Istanbul, where, however, he was detained until his death in 930/1524.1

From Sayyid ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, ʿAllāma Ṭabarānī was separated by twelve generations.2 His ancestor in the seventh generation, Mirzā Muḥammad ʿAlī Qādī, had been qādī al-qudāt of Azerbaijan, and the

---

1 For a detailed account of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb and his responses to the turbulence of the age, see Hamid Algar, ‘Naqshbandis and Safavids: A Contribution to the Religious History of Iran and Its Neighbors’ in Michel Mazzaoui (ed.), The Safavids and Their Neighbors (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003), 9–13.

2 For the complete genealogy, see Muḥammad al-Husayn al-Husaynī al-Tībrānī, al-Shams al-Sāṭṭā (Beirut, 1417/1997), 31–2. (This is the Arabic translation, made by ʿAbbās Nūr al-Dīn and ʿAbd al-Rahīm Mubārak, of a Persian original, Mihr-i Tābān [Tehran, 1401 št/1982], unavailable to the present writer).
designation ‘Qāḍī’ clung as a proper name to later members of the lineage, whether or not they exercised the profession of judge. Among the ancestors relatively close in time to the ‘Allāmā particular mention may be made of his great-great-grandfather, Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī Qāḍī ʻṬabāṭabā’ī, pupil of the great Uṣūlī jurist, Āqā Muḥammad Bāqīr Bihbahānī, and of Bihbahānī’s gnostically inclined student, Mīrzā Mahdī Baḥr al-ʻUlūm (d. 1212/1797). Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī’s son, Mīrzā ʻAlī Aṣghar, was a man of somewhat different temperament and accomplishment: as shaykh al-islām of Tabriz during the reign of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh he was involved in many of the disturbances that pitted the townsfolk against the corruption of the Qajar dynasty and its local agents.

Destined to overshadow all of his ancestors in scholarly accomplishment, ‘Allāmā ʻṬabāṭabā’ī was born in the village of Šhādābād (or Šhādaqān) near Tabriz on 29 Dhū l-Hijja 1321/16 March 1904. He lost his father, Sayyid Muḥammad ʻṬabāṭabā’ī, at the age of five, and his mother died four years later while giving birth to his brother, Sayyid Muḥammad Hasan. This experience of being orphaned doubtless contributed to the closeness that bound the brothers together throughout their lives, a closeness which came to manifest itself in virtually identical interests and inclinations. The guardianship of the two boys fell to a paternal uncle, Sayyid Muḥammad ʻAlī Qāḍī, and it was under his guidance that ʻṬabāṭabā’ī began his primary education. In accordance with well-established convention, he first memorized the Qur’ān, studied Persian texts such as the Būstān and Gulistān of Saʿdī, and learned calligraphy before moving on to the specialized study of the ‘Arabic sciences’—Arabic grammar, syntax, and rhetoric, the essential prerequisites for the serious study of Islam—some ten years later.

This was a relatively late initiation into the world of scholarship, not at all presaging the eminence that the ‘Allāmā was ultimately to attain. He recounts, indeed, that he was initially averse to study and discouraged by his inability to understand fully what he was reading, a condition that continued for about four years. A turning point was reached when he failed a test on Suyūṭī’s well-known treatise on grammar, a staple of the traditional elementary curriculum, and his exasperated teacher told him: ‘Stop wasting my time and your own.’ Shamefaced, he left Tabriz for a while to engage in a devotional practice

---

3 ʻAllāmā ʻṬabāṭabā’ī himself was initially known as Qāḍī after his arrival in Qum in 1946, but he discouraged this practice, preferring to use Šhīrāzī as surname. See al-Tihrānī, al-Shams al-sātī a, 13, n. 1.

4 See Nādī Mīrzā, Tārikh va-jughrāfī-yi dār al-saltana-yi Tabrīz (Tehran, 1323/1905), 118, 244.
that resulted in the divine bestowal on him of an ability to master whatever difficulty he encountered; this remained with him to the end of his life. In keeping with his general reticence on personal matters, he never identified the practice in question. What is certain is that he now acquired a passionate love of learning. He later recalled:

I ceased entirely to associate with anyone not devoted to learning, and began to content myself with a minimum of food, sleep, and material necessities, devoting everything to my studies. It would often happen, especially during the spring and the summer, that I would remain awake studying until dawn, and I always prepared the next day’s class on the previous night. If I encountered a problem, I would solve whatever difficulty I encountered, however much effort it cost me. When I came to class, everything the teacher had to say was already clear to me; I never had occasion to ask for an explanation or for an error to be corrected.

It was presumably during these early years that Ṭabāṭabā’i also acquired a surprising variety of athletic skills that in later life were belied by his frail and ascetic appearance: horsemanship, swimming, mountaineering, hunting, and marksmanship. He must have maintained these skills at least long enough to pass them on to his son, ‘Abd al-Baqī.

After completing the suṭūḥ level of the religious studies curriculum in 1343/1925, ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’i went together with his brother to Najaf in order to benefit from the ample opportunities offered by that centre of Shi‘i learning, traditionally designated as Dār al-‘ilm (‘The Abode of Knowledge’). Jurisprudence, then as later, was the principal focus of instruction in Najaf. Ṭabāṭabā’i accordingly spent many years studying that discipline at the kharjī level with authorities such as Mirzā Husayn Nā’īnī (d. 1355/1936), Āyatullāh Abū l-Ḥasan Ḥasānī (d. 1365/1946), Āyatullāh Ḥājj Mirzā ‘Alī ʻIravānī, and Āyatullāh Mīrzā ‘Alī Asghar. Among his teachers in fiqh it was however Muḥammad Husayn Gharavī Ḥasānī Kumpānī (d. 1361/1942) to whom he became particularly

---

5 It may, however, have been a lengthy prostration, in the course of which Ṭabāṭabā’i beseeched God either to bestow on him the ability to master whatever difficulties he encountered, or to take his life. Conversation of Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn Há’īrī Shīrāzī with the ‘Allāma, cited in l-Tīhrānī, al-Shams al-Sāṭī a, 34, n. 1.


attached during a decade of study; he would later always refer to him as ‘our master’ (shaykh-i mā). This closeness was due in part, perhaps, to the interest in philosophy that the pupil increasingly had in common with his teacher.\(^8\) Fiqh never became Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s main focus of concern, but he was thoroughly competent in the discipline. He attained the rank of ijtihād while in Najaf but, disinclined by temperament to extensive social involvement, he never sought to become a marja’ al-taqlīd.

It was instead philosophy that, together with tafsīr, came to preoccupy Ṭabāṭabā’ī for most of his career. He was initiated into this discipline while in Najaf by a cousin, E·jj Mīrzā ‘Alī Qādī Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1286–1365/1869–1947; hereafter, Qādī); it was he who more than anyone else helped to mould his spiritual personality. In later years he declared himself indebted to Qādī for everything he ever attained, and he would always refer to him, and to him alone, as ustād (‘the master’), deeming it presumptuous to speak of him by name. Qādī was a scholar of typically wide-ranging achievement. He had been trained in fiqh and usūl by his father, Sayyid Husayn Qādī, a foremost pupil of the celebrated Mīrzā Ḥasan Shīrbāzī, and having qualified as a mujtahid he could have

\(^8\) Although celebrated primarily for his writings on fiqh, Ayatullāh Kumpānī also composed a versified treatise on philosophy, Tuhfat al-hakīm, which has been described as ‘a prodigious work’ (Shaykh Muhammad Ḥirz ad-Dīn, Ma‘ārif al-Rijāl, Qum, 1405/1985, ii. 264).


\(^{10}\) See al-Tīhrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī a, 21.
successfully vied with other scholars in attracting students of fiqh, the main focus of the Najaf curriculum. His defining characteristic, however, was an immersion in the world of ‘practical gnosis’ (‘irfān-i ‘amali), a strict regimen of ascetic self-purification leading to the direct perception of the suprasensory realm. Undeniably reminiscent of Sufism in a number of ways, this discipline involves affiliation to a teacher who is himself the heir to an initiatic chain. Qādī’s initiating guide on the Path had been Sayyid Ahmad Karbalā’ī Tihrānī ‘Bakkā’ (d. 1332/1914), whose chain led back first to Ākhūnd Husayn-qi Hamadānī (d. 1311/1893) and then to Sayyid ‘Ali Shūshtārī; the links farther removed in time are somewhat obscure. The known aspects of Qādī’s adherence to ‘practical gnosis’ were night vigils at blessed locations such as the mosque in Kufa and the Masjid al-Sahla and constant dhikr when not teaching; in addition, he would entirely disappear from view during the last ten days of Ramaḍān every year.

Tabātābā’ī sought out Qādī soon after his arrival in Najaf; he was, after all, his cousin, and as an experienced scholar thirty-five years his senior was in a position to dispense advice on what classes to attend. Qādī came to his house, and not only suggested a course of study to follow but also counselled him to devote himself above all to moral and spiritual development while in Najaf. He remained a regular visitor to the ‘Allāmā’s home, advising the family on a variety of matters. A number of Tabātābā’ī’s children had died in early infancy, and when his wife became pregnant once more, Qādī suggested that the expected son be named ‘Abd al-Bāqī in the hope that the divine attribute of permanence (al-Bāqī, ‘the Eternal’) contained in this name might be reflected in the child.

The ‘Allāmā’s more intimate involvement with Qādī began a full five years into his sojourn in Najaf. Qādī passed by ‘Allāmā Tabātābā’ī when he was standing one day at the entrance to a madrasa, and for some

11 Ibid, 27–29. See also Ja’far Subhānī, ‘Maqām-i ‘ilmī va farhangī-yi ‘Allāmā-yi Tabātābā’ī’, Kayhan-i Farhangī, 6:8 (Abān 1368/November 1989), 7. Shūshtārī may have been a pupil of Șadr al-Dīn Kāshīf Dīzfülī, the heir to a line of Dhaḥabī transmission; see Sayyid ‘Abbas Qā’im-maqāmī, ‘Āthār va afkār-i Șadr al-Dīn Kāshīf Dīzfülī’, Kayhān-i Andīsha 38 (Mihr–Abān 1370/November 1991), 82, 85. In addition to Sayyid Ahmad Karbalā’ī Tihrānī, Hamadānī trained at least two other pupils of note: Mīrzá Jāvād Āqā Malik Tabrīzī, an early teacher of Imām Khomeini in ‘irfān, and Shaykh Muhammad Bahārī of Hamadan. Other noteworthy propagators of this spiritual lineage are Āyatullāh Muhammad Taqi Bahjat and Āyatullāh Hasan-zāda Āmulī, both trained, like the ‘Allāmā, by Mīrza ‘Ali Qādī. (Personal communication from Hujjat al-Islām Sayyid ‘Abbas Qā’im-maqāmī).

12 Al-Tihrānī, al-Shams al-sāti’a, 25, 29.
reason regarded the occasion as appropriate to enjoin on him the regular performance of the supererogatory night prayer. For whatever reason, this injunction had a transformative effect on Ṭabāṭaba’ī, and he spent as much time as he could during his remaining years in Najaf with Qāḍī.¹³

Qāḍī’s influence on him was profound. He used to say that before studying with him he thought that he had understood the Fusiṣṣ al-Ḥikam of Ibn ‘Arabī, but on re-reading it with him he realized he had understood nothing of it at all. Qāḍī also instructed him in another key work of Ibn ‘Arabī, the Futiḥāt al-Makkiyya. The path of ‘practical gnosis’ involves, however, far more than immersion in mystical texts. It may therefore be presumed, despite Ṭabāṭaba’ī’s chaste reticence on such matters, that under Qāḍī’s guidance he began to engage in practices such as dhikr, murāqaba, night vigils, and various supererogatory acts of devotion, more regularly and intensively than before. In full conformity with the traditions of his discipline, Qāḍī used to warn Ṭabāṭaba’ī and his other pupils to ignore the manifestations of the suprasensory realm, the forms reflecting the divine beauty, that they might see while engaged in dhikr. Ṭabāṭaba’ī had at least one occasion to act on this advice. He relates that while absorbed one night in dhikr at the mosque in Kufa, a houri appeared before him and proffered him both her own person and a goblet of the wine of paradise. He gently rebuffed her advances, and she departed—slightly offended, as Ṭabāṭaba’ī recalled.¹⁴

In 1354/1935, Ṭabāṭaba’ī returned from Najaf to Tabriz, again accompanied by his brother. Newly promulgated regulations had made it impossible for them to receive the minimal funds from the family’s land holdings in the village of Shāhābād that, together with extensive and repeated borrowing, had made it possible for Ṭabāṭaba’ī to lead a frugal existence in Najaf. Matters reached the point that he could no longer afford to buy groceries, and there was no one left from whom to borrow. He went to the shrine of Imām Ṭabul and unburdened himself of his predicament. Soon after he returned home, a person appeared to him in the courtyard. Introducing himself as Shah Ḥusayn Valī, the figure gave Ṭabāṭaba’ī greetings from the Imām (presumably Imām ‘Alī) together with the message that God had never deserted Ṭabāṭaba’ī during the eighteen years he had spent in the study of religion. After the figure disappeared, Ṭabāṭaba’ī remembered that Shah Ḥusayn Valī was a dervish who had lived some two hundred years earlier in Tabriz and was buried there in the cemetery of Sayyid Ḥamzā. Just before dawn next morning, someone knocked at the door of Ṭabāṭaba’ī’s home, delivered a packet containing three hundred Iraqi dinars, and hastened

away before he could be identified. This sum happened to be exactly enough for Tabataba’i to pay off his debts in Najaf but not for anything more, so he took it as a sign that he should return to Iran. It later transpired that the money came from an Arab shaykh who had vowed to donate it to a man of learning if his son should recover from a serious illness. 15

The return to Tabriz occasioned something of a hiatus in his scholarly activity for roughly a decade, during which he devoted himself to farming the family lands. Despite the degree of erudition he had already attained, he was almost entirely unknown in the city. It was therefore only with difficulty that a visitor to Tabriz, a certain Shaykh Al-Ahmad Miyanjii, was able to locate his teaching circle; this consisted of only two students to whom he was lecturing on Sura al-Fatiha. 16 Thus isolated from scholarly contact and preoccupied with material affairs, Tabataba’i characterized this period in his life as one of ‘spiritual loss’. He was able nonetheless to complete during this involuntary residence in Tabriz no fewer than nine treatises (including the series al-Insani: qabl al-dunya, fi l-dunya, wa-bad al-dunya), a history of his ancestors, and a relatively brief commentary on the first seven suras of the Qur’an. 17

During World War II, the Soviet Union invaded northern Iran and established a separatist regime of Marxist orientation in Azerbaijan. This impelled Tabataba’i to leave once more, this time for Qum, where he arrived in March, 1946. His choice of refuge had been confirmed when he sought an omen in the Qur’an and alighted on the verse, ‘There, protection comes from God, the True One; He is the best to give reward and the best to give success’ (al-Kahf, 44). 18 The family lands in Shadbod, the sole source of income for the Allama and his brother, had apparently been usurped, in whole or in part, so there was no longer any reason for him to stay in Tabriz, a location he evidently found irksome or at best unrewarding. 19 The migration to Qum was, however, far from

16 Ibid, 48.
17 Tabatabai, Barrasib-yi islami, 11; al-Tihran, al-Shams al-sati’a, 58.
19 Precisely what became of the family lands is unclear. Al-Tihran cites Tabataba’i to the effect that the lands had been usurped (presumably by the separatist regime), but then remarks, while describing Tabataba’i’s economic plight in Qum, that the income they provided was insufficient for even the necessities of life (al-Shams al-Sati’a, 96–97). Tabataba’i’s brother, Sayyid Muhammad Hasan Ilahi, chose to remain in Tabriz, where he spent the few years that were left of his life teaching philosophy. He also wrote a book on the spiritual benefits to be had from music, but destroyed it, fearing it might be subject to misinterpretation (al-Tihran, al-Shams al-Sati’a, p. 37).
being motivated by a quest for more comfortable circumstances. The monies gathered and distributed there under the heading of sahm-i imām were devoted almost entirely to the students and teachers of fiqh, a category to which Ṭabāṭabā’ī did not belong, and all his years in Qum were destined to be spent in ascetic conditions of near-indigence. The turbulence in Azerbaijan provided at most the proximate cause for his departure; what was truly at issue, as he himself made plain, was a profound desire to help provide for the spiritual and intellectual needs of the students.

Qum was to be Ṭabāṭabā’ī’s home for the rest of his life and the scene of the most fruitful portion of his career, as teacher and author. The city had intermittently enjoyed prominence as a centre of learning since the earliest days of Shi’ism in Iran, but it was often overshadowed by the shrine cities of Iraq and, in the Safavid and Qajar periods, by Isfahan. Despite the anti-religious policies of the Pahlavi dynasty, Qum had begun to flourish anew under the stewardship of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm Ḥā’īrī, which lasted from 1922 to 1936, a period that included the entire decade Ṭabāṭabā’ī spent in Najaf. A relatively large number of students had begun to cluster around the scholars of the city, and the situation remained stable during the eight years after the death of Ḥā’īrī in which the teaching institution (hauza-yi ‘ilmīyya) was administered by a triumvirate of its most senior scholars. Unified leadership was restored in 1944 with the arrival of ‘Āyatullāh Husayn Burūjirdī, who succeeded in building further on the foundations laid by Ḥā’īrī. Despite these institutional accomplishments, Ṭabāṭabā’ī viewed some aspects of the situation critically:

When I came to Qum, I weighed the teaching programme of the religious institution against the needs of Islamic society. I found it to be deficient in a number of respects and considered it my duty to remedy the situation. The most important deficiencies in the syllabus concerned the exegesis of the Qur’ān and the rational sciences (‘ulūm-i ‘aqīlī). I therefore began teaching tafsīr and philosophy. In the atmosphere prevailing at the time, tafsīr was not regarded as a science requiring precision of thought and investigation, and to engage in it was thought unworthy of persons capable of scholarship in the fields of fiqh and ushul.

---

20 Al-Tihrānī remarks with some bitterness that ample funds were available in Qum even for the most incompetent and pretentious among them, and that scholars working on disciplines other than fiqh had to accept poverty as the price of their choice. As an example additional to that of Ṭabāṭabā’ī, he cites a close acquaintance of the ‘Allāma, Āqā Buzurg Tihrānī (d.1389/1970), compiler of the great Shi’i bibliographical encyclopaedia, al-Dhārī’ a ilā tašānīf al-shī‘a (al-Shams al-sāṭī‘a, 97–8).
Indeed, to teach *tafsir* was seen as a sign of deficient erudition. I did not regard any of these considerations as an excuse acceptable to God, and I continued teaching *tafsir*...  

If *tafsir* was regarded as intellectually unchallenging, philosophy was viewed by some elements in Qum as positively subversive, and they accordingly attempted to have Burūjirdi curtail Tabātabā’ī’s classes on the subject. Bowing to their pressure, Burūjirdi cancelled the stipends of the roughly one hundred students that were attending the objectionable lectures. This placed Tabātabā’ī in a dilemma. Were he to persist in the teaching of philosophy and the students in attending, they would be deprived of the funds they needed to continue their studies. But were he to cancel his classes, the students would be deprived of what he regarded as an important part of their education. After prolonged reflection, he sought an augury in the *Divān* of Hāfīz and happened to alight on the following line of verse: ‘This reprobate will not abandon beloved or goblet; such is not my habit, as the morals police knows full well.’ The message was clear, and Tabātabā’ī made known his intention of continuing to teach philosophy. Burūjirdi thereupon wrote him a letter, recalling that he had himself studied philosophy while a student in Isfahan with the celebrated Mīrzā Jahāṅgīr Khān, but done so secretly, and advising him to do likewise; the open teaching of philosophy in the *ḥauza* was impermissible.  

Tabātabā’ī’s response, skilfully worded and apparently submissive, expressed his belief that the teaching of philosophy was a matter of religious duty, not the result of a personal predilection. He was profoundly convinced that Muslim (or, more precisely, Iranian Shi’ī) society faced an intellectual crisis that could be confronted only by means of philosophy:

> I came from Tabriz to Qum only in order to correct the beliefs of the students on the basis of the truth and to confront the false beliefs of the materialists and others. When the Āyatullāh [Burūjirdī] was studying with a small group of students with Jahāṅgīr Khān, the students and the people in general were believers, praise be to God. Their beliefs were pure, and they did not need public sessions for the teaching of the *Asfār*. But today every student who comes to Qum comes with a suitcase full of doubts and problems. We must come to the aid of these students and prepare them to confront the materialists on a sound basis by teaching them authentic Islamic philosophy. I will not therefore [voluntarily] abandon the teaching of the *Asfār*. At the same time, however, since I consider

---

21 Cited in Bīd-i-Hindī, ‘Mufassir va hakīm-i ilāhī,’ 49.

Áyatullah Burújirdí to be the repository of sharí’i authority, the matter will take on a different aspect if he commands me to abandon the teaching of the Asfár.23

Ṭabāṭabá’í thus placed on Burújirdí the moral responsibility of preventing him from meeting his responsibilities, as he perceived them. Not surprisingly, no explicit command was forthcoming, and the instruction in philosophy continued.24 The exchange does not seem to have harmed relations between the two scholars. Evidence for this is that when Burújirdí was approached for an explanation of the Islamic prohibition of alcohol to be read at an international conference on alcoholism, it was to Ṭabāṭabá’í that he assigned the task of preparing a statement.25 Burújirdí is additionally said to have read appreciatively each volume of al-Mízān as it appeared.

Ṭabāṭabá’í had attracted a devoted group of students soon after his arrival in Qum. As one of them, Sayyid Muhammad Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Tihrānī, relates, he and his friends had long been eager to study philosophy. They had extracted from Mírzā Mahdī Āshtiyānī a promise to teach them the Manzūma of Mullā Ḥādī Sabzavārī, but Āshtiyānī abruptly left Qum for Tehran before he could fulfill the promise. Greatly impressed by the person as well as the erudition of Ṭabāṭabá’í, the group now approached him with the request for a class and he readily agreed. The class met openly in the Ḥujjatiya madrasa, but certain sensitive topics were discussed while Ṭabāṭabá’í was walking home in the company of his closest students—an implicit grant of validity, perhaps, to some of the objections raised by Burújirdí.26

The principal philosophical texts Ṭabāṭabá’í taught were the Shiṣa’ of Ibn Sinā and the Asfár of Mullā Ṣadrā. By and large, he can be regarded as an adherent of the school of the latter sage. Although he deemed Ibn Sinā superior to Ṣadrā with respect to rational deduction, he credited Ṣadrā with having enriched philosophy with some five hundred topics that had not occurred to Ibn Sinā or his Greek predecessors and thus deserving the title, ‘renewer of Islamic philosophy’. Ṭabāṭabá’í was, however, far from being an uncritical propagator of Ṣadrā’s views, unlike, for example, Mullā Ḥādī Sabzavārī. He never taught the section of the Asfár on the hereafter (ma’ād)—or its reflection in Sabzavārī’s Manzūma—because he found Ṣadrā’s concept of ma’ād as being a matter

24 Ibid, 49.
25 For the text of his communication, see Ṭabāṭabá’í, Barrasibā-yi Islāmī, 67–72.
26 Al-Tihrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī’a, 12–14.
of forms, devoid of all substance, contrary to the outer meanings of the relevant Qur’anic verses. Although he never expounded in detail his own views on this topic, he appears to have regarded mā‘ād as the final point in man’s progress to perfection, as ‘a transfer from one realm to another’. In addition, he elaborated a number of new philosophical principles himself. One of these was the distinction between ‘realities’ (ḥaqā‘iq) and ‘constructs’ (i‘tibārāt), the former embracing all matters pertaining to being and external existents, ‘realities’ in the sense that they can be proven by rational evidence, and the latter including such subjects as jurisprudence and its principles, for they depend on social convention rather than rational evidence. He elaborated this distinction in an unpublished Arabic treatise, al-Haqā‘iq wa-l-i‘tibārāt, as well as in one of his major systematical works on philosophy, Nihāyat al-hikma. He also made an original contribution to the question of potentiality and actuality, devoting a separate treatise to the subject, and developed further Mullā Ṣadrā’s concept of substantial motion (ḥarakat-i jawhari) by treating time as the fourth dimension of bodies.

Ṭabātābā’ī also distinguished himself from Mullā Ṣadrā by strictly separating the methods and principles of philosophy from those of ‘theoretical gnosis’ (‘irfan-i naṣarī) and he praised Mullā Muḥsin Fayz-i Kāshānī (d. 1090/1679), a pupil of Ṣadrā, for having done the same. Ṣadrā’s ‘transcendent philosophy’ (al-hikmat al-mutā āliya) is based on the insight that reason, gnostic illumination, and revelation, all furnish paths to the perception of truth. It might therefore be argued that the commingling in a single discussion of arguments and evidence derived from all three is legitimate, if not inevitable. From a different point of view, however, precisely the autonomous adequacy of each path suggests that the evidence it provides should be allowed to stand on its own. Ṭabātābā’ī’s belief in the necessity of keeping the two

30 This is not to say, however, that the intellect is omnicompetent, in the view of either Ṭabātābā’ī or other exponents of traditional Islamic philosophy. There are matters which lie entirely beyond its scope, above all resurrection and the hereafter (mā‘ād); here, the task of the intellect is to confess its limitations and to submit entirely to revelation.
complementary disciplines of philosophy and theoretical gnosis separate from each other showed itself, *inter alia*, in the lectures he delivered in Qum on a correspondence on *tauhid* that had taken place in Najaf. The parties to the exchange were Ayatullah Kumpānī, one of Tabātabā’ī’s teachers in *fiqh*, and Sayyid Ahmad Karbalā’ī, Qādī’s master in *‘irfān*; Kumpānī had approached the matter from the viewpoint of philosophy, and Karbalā’ī from that of *‘irfān*. Tabātabā’ī also wrote a series of notes on this correspondence, explaining the arguments advanced by the two scholars, each set of arguments valid in its own right. This commentary was completed after his death by one of his foremost students, Ayatullah Muhammad Husayn Tihrānī.31

The primacy Tabātabā’ī gave to philosophy in his teaching and writing meant, too, that he had little time to devote to ‘theoretical gnosis’, despite his mastery of the subject and his lifelong immersion in the closely related discipline of ‘practical gnosis’. He never authored a separate book or treatise on the subject nor taught any class on it; a promise to teach Qāybar’s celebrated commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* of Ibn ‘Arabī remained unfulfilled. However, he did encourage the study of the *Iṣbāl al-A’māl* of Ibn Tā’ūs, the *Jāmi’ al-Sāʿādat* of Ahmad Narāqī, and, most emphatically, the *Risāla-yi Sāy-o-sūlāk*, a treatise on spiritual wayfaring attributed to his ancestor, Sayyid Mahdī Bahr al-‘Ulūm Tabātabā’ī, and in 1368–69/1949–50 taught classes on ethics, a subject that may be regarded as overlapping with gnosis.32

We have seen that part of Tabātabā’ī’s motivation for the teaching of philosophy was his desire to help students who were arriving in Qum ‘with a suitcase full of problems’. Many of those problems arose from acquaintance with contemporary Western thought, particularly its materialist dimensions. Tabātabā’ī therefore accepted an invitation by ‘Izz al-Dīn Zanjānī to devote an hour every week to the logical analysis and refutation of materialist thought.33 According to a different account,

---

31 Al-Tihrānī, *al-Shams al-sātī a*, 18–19.

32 In the introduction to his edition of *Risāla-yi Sāy-o-sūlāk* (Tehran, 1360 șī 1981, 11–12), Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tihrānī cites Tabātabā’ī as adhering to the view of Qādī that the work was indeed authored by Bahr al-‘Ulūm Tabātabā’ī, with the exception of three chapters inserted in some manuscripts by ignorant copyists. The *taqrīrat* of Tabātabā’ī’s lectures on *akhlāq* were published by Ayatullah Husayn Tihrānī under the title ‘Lubb al-albāb dar sāy-o-sūlāk-i ülī l-albāb’ in *Yādnāma-yi ʿustād-i shahid Murtadā Muṭahhari*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karim Surūsh (Tehran, 1360 șī/1981), 193–255.

it was the publication in 1950 of Nigahbānān-i sihr va afsūn (‘The Guardians of Magic and Mystification’), a book ridiculing all religions, that impelled Ţabāṭabā’ī to take up the fight against materialism. The study circle began meeting the following year every Thursday and Friday evening, with the participation of many figures that went on to play important roles in the Islamic Revolution and the early years of the Islamic Republic. As a basic text, the participants were asked to study Muhammad ‘Ali Furūgā’ī’s Sayr-i Ḥikmat dar Urūpā. What was primarily at issue was a rebuttal of the claim of Marxism to possess a scientific worldview and of its positing of materialism and idealism as the only two conceivable explanations of the world; the choice of a third European word, ‘realism’, to convey the Islamic perspective of ontology was no doubt deliberate. Islamic philosophy is ‘realist’ in that it accepts the reality of an existence that lies beyond human perception, and the materialism of Marxism is in fact ‘idealist’ because of the primacy it accords to the human mind. These private sessions ultimately resulted in Murtaţā Muţahhari’s multi-volume series, Uṣūl-i falsafa va ravish-i r’ālism.

If the cultivation and propagation of philosophy was one of the principal goals Fabāb: philosopher, exegete, gnostic had set himself in coming to Qum, the other was the revival of Qur’ānic exegesis. He began teaching the subject soon after his arrival in Qum, but it was not until 1374/1954 that he set to work on writing his own twenty-volume commentary, Taṣfīr al-Mīzān, a monumental task that he completed on the Night of Power (laylat al-qadr), i.e. Ramādān 23, 1392/October 31, 1972. Superlatives have been justly lavished on this great work. It has been called ‘an

36 Whether the refutations of Marxism and other forms of materialist thought essayed by Ţabāṭabā’ī and others were decisive for the defeat of Marxism in Iran may legitimately be questioned. The eclipse of the left in Iran may well have been due in far greater degree to the shallowness of its social roots and the growing clarity and coherence of the Islamic alternative as a vehicle of revolution, not to mention the ultimate collapse of the Soviet bloc.
encyclopaedia of the Islamic sciences’ and regarded by some as the fruit of divine inspiration, and is deserving of more detailed analysis than is possible in this sketch of its author’s life. Nonetheless, given its centrality to his legacy, some of the leading characteristics of Tafsîr al-Mîzân must at least be delineated.

Foremost among those characteristics is the method it espouses, ‘interpreting the Qur’an by the Qur’an’. Like much else, Tabâtabâ’î had learned this method, at least in a formal sense, from Qâdî, who had himself written a commentary on the first six chapters of the Qur’an. Underlying this mode of interpretation is the insight that each part of the Qur’an serves to delineate the meaning of the whole, for the Qur’an represents a single instance of speech, derived from a single and unique source, whatever be the chronology of the revelation of its parts; the Qur’an is therefore the primary source for its own understanding. Tabâtabâ’î’s careful examination of the wording of each verse, taken in conjunction with all other verses pertinent to its subject matter, regularly yields fresh and convincing results. The result is that the Qur’an—if the expression be permissible—is enabled to speak for itself, without the concepts, concerns and terminology of the various traditional disciplines being imposed upon it. Moreover, by contrast with the atomistic approach of most of his predecessors, who were content to comment on one verse at a time, Tabâtabâ’î pays attention to the structure of each chapter of the Qur’an; he groups the verses into cohesive segments and clarifies the relationships existing between those segments and the chapter as a whole. It should not, however, be thought that Tafsîr al-Mîzân is simply a protracted essay in textual explication, leaving unexamined the manifold implications of the Qur’an for all spheres of learning and life. The strictly exegetical portion devoted to each group of verses (headed bayân, ‘explanation’) is followed not only by a summation of traditions relevant to them (headed bahth riwâ’î) but also by essays, sometimes quite lengthy, on various philosophical, historical or sociological topics. In accordance

37 The former is the opinion of Ayatullâh Jâvâdî Âmulî (see his ‘Sâyîr dar andishahâ-yi dînî va falsafî-yi ‘Allâma Tabâtabâ’î’, Kaybân-i Hava’î, no. 958 (Âdhar 6, 1370/November 27, 1991), 12), and the latter was the belief of Ayatullâh Mu’tahharî (cited in Ayatullâh Mîshâh Yazdî, ‘Hukûmat dar Qur’an az nazar-i mufassir-i al-Mîzân’, Yâdbûd: Yâdvara, 204).
38 Tîhrânî, al-Shams al-sattî a, 26, 58.
39 None other than Imâm ‘Ali is reported to have said: ‘Enable the Qur’an to speak, for it will not speak (of itself)’. Cited in Tafsîr al-Mîzân (3rd edn., Tehran, 1397/1977), ii. 275.
with Ṭabāṭaba’ī’s method of ‘permitting the Qurʾān to speak for itself’, these are, however, clearly separated from the strictly exegetical paragraphs.⁴⁰

Many earlier commentators on the Qurʾān had regarded traditions of the Maʿṣūmin—the Prophet and the Twelve Imāms—as the primary source for their understanding of the text; the classic works of al-Tabarsī and al-Qummi, which are little more than accumulations of ḥadīth, are perhaps the most important examples of this genre of tafsīr. Plainly enough, and for good reason, Ṭabāṭaba’ī chose a different path. Nonetheless, he was deeply learned in the ḥadīth and insistent that the sayings of the Prophet and the Imāms be correctly transmitted and understood. He therefore accepted an invitation to oversee the publication of a new edition of Muḥammad Bāqir Majīṣī’s vast compendium of ḥadīth, the Bihār al-anwār. However, although he approved thoroughly of the way in which Majīṣī had arranged the subject matter and included commentary when warranted, he had serious reservations about some of his explanations. Majīṣī had occasionally fallen into error, Ṭabāṭaba’ī believed, because of his ignorance of philosophy, an important deficiency considering the philosophical content of numerous ḥadīth; some of his errors were significant enough to distort the plain meaning of certain traditions. He therefore took it upon himself to add corrective notes to the new edition of the Biḥār. This did not sit well with those in Qum who regarded the authority of Majīṣī as beyond question, and the publisher pressed Ṭabāṭaba’ī to eliminate or modify his criticisms. He refused, and his participation in the project did not extend beyond the sixth volume.⁴¹

Less well known than this somewhat abortive venture are the explanatory notes the ʿAllāmā contributed to an edition of another ḥadīth collection, Kulaynī’s al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfī. Few in number, these notes deal with important credal matters such as bādaʾ (the appearance


of change in the divine will), the difference between the divine will
(irādat) and the divine wish (mashhūt), free will and predestination,
and the means of attaining either felicity or wretchedness in the
hereafter.\textsuperscript{42} It was also on the basis of a manuscript prepared
by Ṭabātabā’ī that a new edition of another compendium of ḥadīth,
al-Hurr al-ʿĀmili’s Wasāʾil al-Shīʿa ilā Tahṣīl masāʾil al-Sharīʿa, was
published in Beirut in 1971, together with an introduction by the
ʿAllāma himself.\textsuperscript{43}

Ṭabātabā’ī’s awareness of Western intellectual life included a critical
interest in the writings of Orientalists on Islam and a prolonged
acquaintance with one of the most celebrated among them, Henry
Corbin (d. 1978). Corbin, director of the French Institute for Iranian
Studies in Tehran, was in some ways an ideal interlocutor for Ṭabātabā’ī.
His orientation, too, was primarily philosophical; he contested the then
dominant view among Western scholars that philosophical activity in the
Muslim world had come to an end with Ibn Rushd; he profoundly
admired the work of Ṣadrā and his school; and, most importantly, he was
convinced of the primacy of Shiʿism in the intellectual and spiritual life of
Islam.\textsuperscript{44}

Ṭabātabā’ī’s first meeting with Corbin took place in the fall of 1958.
He had come to Tehran for various purposes of his own and while
visiting Dr. Jazā’īrī, a professor at Tehran University and sometime
minister of justice, he was informed that Henry Corbin was in town and
was interested in meeting him. Ṭabātabā’ī had already heard favourable
mention of Corbin’s work and he readily agreed to meet him. An
encounter was accordingly arranged at Dr. Jazā’īrī’s home, which

\textsuperscript{42} Sayyid Ibrāhīm Sayyid ʿAlavī, ‘Mitud-i naqd va taḥqīq-i ḥadīth az nazār-i
ʿAllāma Ṭabātabā’ī’, Kayhān-i Andishah, 36 (Mihr–Ābān, 1368/October–

\textsuperscript{43} On the ʿAllāma’s general contribution to the study of ḥadīth, see Shādī
Nafṣī, ʿAllāma Ṭabātabā’ī va Ḥadīth (Tehran, 1384 SH/2005).

\textsuperscript{44} For an estimate of Corbin’s oeuvre, see Hamid Algar, “The Study of Islam:
Concerning his complex, prolonged impact on intellectual life in Iran, see
Daryush Shayegan, La topographie spirituelle de l’islam iranien (Paris: Editions
de la Différence, 1990); Dar Ahvāl va andibābā-yi Hānī Kūrban, a collective
volume published by l’Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, Tehran 1379
SH/2000; Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Iranian Intellectuals and the West: the Tormented
Triumph of Nativism (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 85–6, 125
n. 20, 150; and Matthijs van den Bos, Mystic Regimes: Sufism and the State in
Iran from the Late Qajar Era to the Islamic Republic (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002),
31–44.
passed off very cordially. Three other professors were also involved in facilitating this and subsequent meetings: Mahdi Bāzargān, professor of thermodynamics but better known for his literary and political activity; Muhammad Muʿīn, a professor of literature now best remembered for his six-volume Persian dictionary, and Seyyid Hossein Nasr, already celebrated at the time for his numerous writings on philosophy and mysticism. The second meeting took place the following year in a village near Damavand, where Tabātābāʾī was staying for a while before returning to Qum from his annual summer sojourn in Mashhad. Thereafter, according to Nasr, weekly sessions were held every fall until 1977. Despite his frailty and growing infirmity, Tabātābāʾī would take the bus from Qum to Tehran to attend these sessions, presumably an indication of the significance he accorded to them.

Tabātābāʾī drew up a brief record of his first session with Corbin. The French scholar proclaimed, to the evident satisfaction of the ʿAllāma, that the Orientalists had been mistaken in approaching Islam purely on the basis of Sunni sources, an error leading to the assumption that Islamic philosophy had effectively ended with Ibn Rushd. If they had been aware of the reality of Shiʿism, he contended, they would have found there an uninterrupted tradition of wisdom and spirituality. Corbin went still further the following year. He described Shiʿism as ‘the only religion that has always maintained the link of divine guidance between God and man’, an achievement made possible by its belief in the continued reality of the Twelfth Imām: the link had been broken in Judaism and Christianity with the departures from this world of Moses and Jesus respectively, and in

---

45 Tabātābāʾī, Shīʿa: Majmuʿa-yi Mudhakarāt bā Prufsīr Hānī Kurban, eds. ʿĀli Ahmadi and Hādī Khusraushāhī (Qum, 1397/1977), 10. Nasr reports that he served as translator and interpreter for these sessions (introduction to Tabātābāʾī, Shiʿite Islam (Albany NY, 1975), 24). It is remarkable that despite lengthy residence in Iran and a passionate devotion to the study of what he called ‘Iranian Islam’ Corbin was evidently unable to express himself adequately in Persian.


47 Al-Tihrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī ā, 70. One wonders whether Corbin ever reciprocated this gesture of respect by going to visit Tabātābāʾī in Qum.

48 For an example of the approach rightly criticized by Corbin, see T. J. de Boer, The History of Philosophy in Islam, first published in 1903 but often reprinted as an authoritative work as late as 1967.
Later sessions were devoted to the systematic presentation of salient facts about Shi‘i doctrine and history. It may be that no written record exists for some of the meetings, for the published texts give no indication of the dates involved, nor are all of them in question-and-answer format. Set one of questions posed by Corbin does appear, however, in the record of his sessions with Tabataba‘i. They concern the importance of the traditions of the Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt for deducing the esoteric meanings of the Qur’ān; the origins of Shi‘i thought during the Imāmates of Muḥammad al-Baqir and Ja‘far al-Sādiq, i.e., before the bifurcation of the Shi‘i tradition into Ihnā‘ashari and Ismā‘ili; the reasons for the (supposed) restriction to Iran of philosophical thought among Muslims in recent times; and the (alleged) origins of Sufism in Shi‘ism, as varyingly manifested by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār and ‘Ala‘ al-Dawla Simnānī. These topics represented almost the entire range of Corbin’s scholarly concerns with Shi‘ism. It is interesting that in the detailed answers Tabataba‘i gave him, he did not accord Ismā‘ilism any particular significance in the history of Shi‘i thought, despite Corbin’s obvious hope that he would do so. He also did not follow Corbin in claiming specifically Shi‘i origins for the entire discipline of Sufism, contenting himself with the observation that the teachings of the Imāms were indeed influential on many Sufis, and that all their initiatic chains bar one go back to Imām ‘Ali. Tabataba‘i’s sessions with Corbin are said to have been devoted in part to the study and discussion of non-Islamic texts such as the

49 Ţabataba‘i, Shi‘a: Majmū‘a-yi Mudhakarat ba Prufisur Hanri Kurban (Qum, 1397/1977), 12–16. It is curious that Corbin should have thus asserted the superiorit y of Shi‘ism despite his self-description as ‘a Protestant Orientalist’ (ibid, 13). Hearing that Corbin had reportedly been moved to tears while reading the Sabiţat al-Sajjadiyya, Tabataba‘i ultimately came to believe that Corbin had embraced Islam, but that he was too shy to make his conversion public (according to the ‘Allâma’s son, ‘Abd al-Baqi, cited in al-Tîhrânî, al-Shams al sâti‘a, 73, n. 1). If this be the case, Corbin was evidently unable to conquer his shyness by the time of his death, for he went to his grave a Christian (see obituary in Le Monde, October 11, 1978).

50 See, for example, the section entitled ‘Chigūna Shi‘a ba vujūd miyāyad’ (Țabataba‘i, Shi‘a: Majmū‘a-yi Mudhakarat, 18–66; also printed separately as Țabataba‘i, Zubûr-i Shi‘a (Tehran, n.d.)).

51 Ţabataba‘i, Shi‘a: Majmū‘a-yi Mudhakarat, pp. 67–70.

52 Ibid, 77.

Tao Te-Ching, the Upanishads and the Gospel of St. John, conceived of as an exercise in ‘comparative gnosis’. Any such exercise, it is important to note, can hardly have been inspired by an ecumenical motive. It seems rather to have been part of a broad agenda for the critical study of a wide variety of religious and philosophical traditions, and it was not, therefore, wholly dissimilar from the study of materialism. For Ṭabāṭabā’ī plainly regarded the gnosis of Islam as unambiguously superior to all other forms, and he expressed quite critical views of Hindu and Christian texts. Thus while conceding that the Upanishads, especially the Vedas, contain elements of ‘profound monotheism’, he claimed that the explicit mode of discourse they employ is bound to lead the unwary into incarnationism and idolatry. Hindu gnosis, moreover, encourages neglect of the phenomenal world, by contrast with Islam which encourages man to see in nature a vast display of divine indications, and additionally errs by depriving certain classes of men as well as all women of a spiritual life. As for Christian gnosis, as expounded at the beginning of the Gospel of St. John, it falls into the same trap as Hinduism at the level of practice, for the trinitarianism of Christianity is an ‘idolatrous trinitarianism’ (tathlīth-i wathāni). Christian beliefs concerning Jesus have little to distinguish them from Hindu beliefs concerning Krishna. In a short piece entitled Dāstān-i Masih va Injil (‘The Story of Jesus and the Gospels’), Ṭabāṭabā’ī also discusses the numerous contradictions existing among the books of the New Testament and their collective unreliability as a historical record. Drawing on the terminology of hadith scholarship, he suggests that the whole scriptural basis of Christianity is essentially a khabar-i vāhid, a tradition going back only to a single person, except that in the case of the Christian scriptures neither the name, life, nor characteristics of the person in question are known.

Corbin made little substantive mention of Ṭabāṭabā’ī in his own writings, and it was thanks to the initiative of another Western scholar, Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University, that the ‘Allāma became internationally known as an authority on Shi‘i Islam. Accompanied by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Morgan met with Ṭabāṭabā’ī in the summer of 1963 and proposed to Nasr that Ṭabāṭabā’ī be entrusted

---

56 Ṭabāṭabā’ī, Bārssihā-yi Islāmī, 54–8.
with writing a series of works on Shi‘ism for translation into English.\textsuperscript{57} The first in the trilogy, \textit{Shi‘ite Islam}, appeared in 1975, with a lengthy introduction and appendices contributed by Nasr, who also undertook the translation. It was followed in 1979 by \textit{A Shi‘ite Anthology}, consisting of selections from fundamental Shi‘i texts chosen by Ṭabāṭaba‘ī, translated by William Chittick with an introduction by Nasr. Finally, in 1987, came \textit{The Qur’an in Islam}, translated by Assadullah Yate, again with an introduction by Nasr.\textsuperscript{58}

Throughout the period following World War II, and especially after Imām Khomeini’s emergence on the national scene in 1963 as the foremost leader of opposition to the Pahlavi regime, Qum was a centre of political and social activism as well as scholarship. Not only were grievances against the Shah and his array of foreign patrons insistently voiced; contemporary problems of the Muslim world as a whole were also addressed in lectures, books, and periodicals. Despite his immersion in the scholarly pursuits we have described, Ṭabāṭaba‘ī did not remain untouched by these developments. For example, he devoted an essay to the frequently discussed topic of women’s status in Islam that went beyond the reiteration of the relevant legal provisions to address certain contemporary concerns.\textsuperscript{59} On another occasion he criticized ‘the so-called civilized world’ for its complicity in the crimes then being committed by France in Algeria under the pretext that it was an internal affair of the French government.\textsuperscript{60} He was also well aware of what Jalāl Āl-i Aḥmad called \textit{Gharbzadagī} (‘Occidentosis’) in his 1341 st/1962 essay of that name, as the following sentence indicates: ‘The logic followed by those who run our affairs, the leaders of society, and also the intellectuals, is that today’s progressive world—by which they mean the European world—is at variance with religious concerns, and that the norms governing our society must be acceptable to the world—i.e., to Europe’.\textsuperscript{61} Numerous topics of contemporary concern are also treated in sections of \textit{Tafsīr al-Mīzān} entitled ‘baḥth ijtīmā‘ī’.

\textsuperscript{57} Nasr, introduction to \textit{Shi‘ite Islam}, 17–18.
\textsuperscript{58} The fourth book of Ṭabāṭaba‘ī to have been made available in English, \textit{Islamic Teachings: An Overview} (trans. R. Campbell, New York, 1989), was not part of the same project.
\textsuperscript{59} Ṭabāṭaba‘ī, \textit{Barraṣībā-yi Islāmī}, 93–122. (It is unfortunate that this collection of Ṭabāṭaba‘ī’s occasional pieces does not provide information about the original places and dates of publication).
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, 258.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 31.
Illustrative of the ferment in Iranian society in general and religious circles in particular was another book published in 1962, *Bahthi dar bāra-yi marjā’iyat va rūhāniyat*, a collective volume that sought to examine and enhance the functioning of the religious leadership. It is remarkable that Tabāṭabā’ī’s contribution, a lengthy chapter entitled ‘Vilāyat va za’āmat’ (‘Governance and leadership’), was the only one in the book devoted to the topic of Islamic government.\(^62\) The subject may have been suggested to him by the publishers, but it is equally likely that he selected it himself as urgently relevant to the circumstances of the day. After the death of Burūjirdī in 1961, he is reported to have suspended his classes on philosophy in order to address precisely the theme of Islamic government.\(^63\)

Tabāṭabā’ī’s approach to the topic is in the first place philosophical, in that he argues for the necessity of governance as rooted in the essential disposition (*fitrat*) of man and confirmed by revelation. Nonetheless, his essay is more than a philosophical exercise, for he takes issue with contemporary political ideologies and systems. Marxism, he points out, has discredited its own view of history by triumphing not in advanced capitalist countries but in the underdeveloped world, and the parliamentary democracies of the West, apart from functioning domestically as dictatorships of the majority, are precisely those states that have done their best to enslave and exploit the rest of the world.\(^64\) As for the proper system of governance for Shi’a Muslims during the continued occultation of the Twelfth Imām, Tabāṭabā’ī appears at first to equivocate. After raising as possibilities the devolution of governance on the whole community, on the collective body of the *fuqahā’,* or on the most learned of the *fuqahā’,* he remarks that ‘these are matters which lie beyond our current concern and must be solved in the context of *fiqh*’.\(^65\) His purpose may therefore have been to stimulate discussion of these various possibilities among the *fuqahā’.* He nonetheless concludes: ‘The individual who excels all others in piety, administrative ability (*busn-i tadbi‘r*), and awareness of contemporary circumstances, is best fitted for this position [the leadership of society].’\(^66\) This sentence suggests an endorsement of the thesis of *vilāyat-i faqīh* (‘governance of the faqīh’) as


\(^{63}\) Ahmad Luqmānī, ‘*Allāma Ţabāṭabā’ī, Mizān-i ma rifat* (Tehran, 1374 šī/1995), 78, citing Ayatullah Javādī-Āmulī.

\(^{64}\) Tabāṭabā’ī, ‘Vilāyat va za’āmat’, 91–2.

\(^{65}\) Ibid, 97.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.
propagated by Imãm Khomeini, and bears indeed some similarity to Article 109 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, which spells out the qualifications required in the leader (rabîb). It seems indisputable that Tabãtabã‘i endorsed the theory of vilãyat-i faqîh, at the very least in its general outlines.

This essay was by no means the only contribution made by the ‘Allâma to the theoretical elaboration of Islamic governance. He touches on the theme at numerous places in Tafsîr al-Mizân, most notably perhaps in his discussion of Qur‘ân, 3. 200 (‘O you who believe, persevere in patience and constancy…’), where he lists what he regards as the ten essential elements of Islamic government. Æyatullah Mu‘ta‘hharî, who chaired the Council of the Islamic Revolution from its inception in January 1979 until his assassination in May of that year, went so far as to remark, ‘I have not yet encountered any problem relating to Islamic government the key to solving which I was unable to find in Tafsîr al-Mizân’. 69

To all outward appearances the very quintessence of the ascetic and retiring scholar, Tabãtabã‘i was thus by no means negligent or unaware of the political sphere. Nonetheless, he played little if any discernible role in the intense and prolonged struggle led by Imãm Khomeini and his associates that culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 and the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Only once did Tabãtabã‘i sign a joint communiquã issued on topics of the day by the ‘ulama’ of Qum. This was in late 1962, when he joined eight other signatories in denouncing government plans for the enfranchisement of women. 70 By the time the revolution began, he was too physically frail to have participated even marginally. However, the leading role played by many of his students in the revolution indicates that the attitudes and teachings he had inculcated in them were at the very least compatible with support

68 Tafsîr al-Mizân (Tehran, 1362 sh/1983), iv. 97–141. See also Subhãnî, ‘Shahkhsiyatî ki ba tanhâ’i millatî bûd’, 114.
of the new Islamic order. Several of them were assassinated: Ayatullah Murtadâ Mu’tahhari in May 1979; Ayatullah Muḥammad Ḥusayn Bihishti in June 1981; and Ayatullah ‘Alî Quddûsî, Ṭabâṭabâ’î’s son-in-law who had served as revolutionary prosecutor-general, in September 1981.

Finally, among the interests of the ‘Allāma, some mention must be made of his devotion to Persian poetry and its traditions. He was in particular an avid reader of the Šīrāzī of Hâfîz, whose verse he would often cite and interpret in the course of his lectures on philosophy, despite his general insistence on keeping separate the language and topics of philosophy on the one hand and gnosis on the other. Ṭabâṭabâ’î is thus said to have found the following line helpful for understanding the relationship between the Necessary Existent and contingent existents: ‘How did it happen that the shadow of the beloved fell on

71 S. H. Nasr has sought repeatedly to insinuate, however, that a basic discrepancy exists between ‘the traditional Islamic perspective’ represented by ‘Allāma Ṭabâṭabâ’î and the fundamental tendencies of the Islamic Revolution. Thus in 1979 he remarked that an anthology of Shi’i texts prepared by Ṭabâṭabâ’î was ‘particularly pertinent at the present moment when volcanic eruptions and powerful waves of a political nature associated with Islam in general and Shi’ism in particular have made an authentic knowledge of things Islamic imperative’ (introduction to A Shi’ite Anthology, ed. and trans. William C. Chittick (London, 1980), 11). Seven years later, Nasr went so far as to speak of ‘the current aberrations propagated in the name of Islam in general, and Shi’ism in particular’, these again supposedly furnishing a particular reason for reading the works of the ‘Allāma (Nasr, foreword to Ṭabâṭabâ’î, The Qur’an in Islam: Its Impact and Influence on the Life of Muslims, trans. Assadullah Yate (London, 1987), 13). Nasr, the only prominent associate of Ṭabâṭabâ’î to leave Iran in the wake of the Islamic Revolution, wrote the following in a text prepared for a seminar to be held in the summer of 1960 but published in 1967, a full four years after the Shah’s massacre of demonstrators in June 1963: ‘…in Shi’ite political theory, until the re-establishment of the true caliphate by the Hidden Imām, kingship is the best possible form of government, and so it is that in Persia, with the coming of the Safavids, kingship became the major support of Shi’ism and has ever since been inextricably tied to the religious life of the country’ (see his Islamic Studies (Beirut, 1967) 18). This view—which may be fairly characterized as an ‘aberration’—can hardly be supported by reference to any of the writings of the ‘Allāma.

72 It has been plausibly suggested that the ‘cultural revolution’ Ṭabâṭabâ’î inaugarated with the teaching of philosophy and tafsîr served as the necessary complement to the political movement that was launched by Imâm Khomeini at around the same time. See Muhammad Taqī Miṣḥâb, ‘Naqsh-i ‘Allāma Ṭabâṭabâ’î dar ma‘ārif-i islâmi’, Yâdnâma-yi ‘Allāma Ṭabâṭabâ’î, 190.
the lover? We were needy of him, and he was yearning for us.⁷³ Among Arabic poets, he felt a special kinship with the Sufi, Ibn al-Fārid.⁷⁴ He composed a certain amount of poetry himself, including versified treatises on learned topics such as grammar, logic and calligraphy, as well as ghazals of gnostic content, some of the latter being in ‘pure Persian’ (fārsi-yi sara), i.e., a Persian making no use of Arabic loanwords.⁷⁵

Weakened for many years by cardiac and neurological problems, Ṭabātabā’ī withdrew from teaching activity and became increasingly absorbed in private devotion as the end of his life drew near. In 1401/1981, he stopped as usual in Damavand while returning to Qum from his annual summer visit to Mashhad. He fell seriously ill and was taken to hospital in Tehran. The prospects for recovery were seen to be dim, and he was therefore taken to his home in Qum, where he was rigorously secluded from all but his closest students. Somewhat later he was admitted to hospital in Qum, and after roughly a week he passed away, at nine o’clock in the morning of Muḥarram 18, 1402/November 7, 1981. It is said that during the last moments of his life he had a vision of the Ma’sūmīn, and remarked with perfect lucidity to those present: ‘Those whose arrival I was awaiting have now entered the room.’⁷⁶ He was laid to rest the following day, close to the tombs of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karīm Ḥā’irī and Ṭaytullāh Khwānsārī; the funeral prayers were led by Ṭaytullāh Gulpāyagānī.⁷⁷

This sketch of the events and scholarly accomplishments that constitute the biography of Ṭabātabā’ī falls inevitably short of depicting the totality of his spiritual persona, that essential nature of which his various achievements were so many manifestations. The deficiency may, however, be remedied to some degree by drawing on reminiscences by his foremost students and associates.

---

⁷⁴ Al-Tīrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī’a, 83.
⁷⁵ No complete collection of Ṭabātabā’ī’s poetry appears to have been published. For samples, however, see Kayhān-i Farhangī, 6.8, 4, 7, and 9; Ja’far Subhānī, ‘Shakhšiyati ke ba tanhā’i millāti būd’, 114; the newspaper Āstān-i Quds (Mashhad), 2.249 (24 Ābān 1368/November 15, 1989); and al-Tīrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī’a, 83–92.
⁷⁷ Al-Tīrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī’a, 123. For Imām Khomeini’s message of condolence to the family and students of the ‘Allāma, see Khomeini, Sahifa-yi Nūr (Tehran, 1361 šī/1982), xv. 220.
They report with unanimity that utter devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt was one of his foremost characteristics. On his annual summer visit to Mashhad, he would kiss the grille enclosing the tomb of Imām ʿĀdīrād with great passion, and often spend the night in front of it, engaged in supplication. Throughout the year, but especially during Muḥarram and Ramadān, he would attend sessions of rauza-khwānī and lament the sufferings that had befallen the Household of the Prophet. As for ‘Āshūrā, this was the only day during the year when he suspended his scholarly activities. Apart from these signs of devotion observable to others, it seems plain that Ṭabāṭabaʿī was also one of those select Shiʿi gnostics and scholars who, according to tradition, beheld and conversed with the Maʿṣūmīn by way of visionary experience.78

A second and no doubt related characteristic was the extreme modesty and humility the ‘Allāma displayed throughout his life. He was never heard to utter the pronoun, ‘I’, whether in Persian or Arabic.79 Unlike many if not most of the luminaries of Qum, he would never permit his hand to be kissed, withdrawing it into his sleeve if anyone made an attempt to do so.80 He always refused to lead anyone in congregational prayer, even his own students, and when in Qum regularly joined the sunset prayer led at the Fayziya madrasa by ʿAyatullāh Muḥammad Taqī Khwānsārī. The same humility displayed itself in his scholarly and pedagogical activities. When criticizing scholars of the past with whom he differed on certain matters—as, for example, Maḥlīsī—he did so with the utmost courtesy and circumspection. When ʿAyatullāh Naṣīr Makārīm-Shirāzī, entrusted with the task of translating Tafsīr al-Mīzān into Persian, informed Ṭabāṭabaʿī that he disagreed with certain of his views, he unhesitatingly authorized him to record his dissenting point of view in footnotes to the translation.81 When teaching, he never permitted himself to assume the position of authority implied by leaning on a cushion or against the wall, instead sitting upright on the ground, just like his students.82 He was patient and forebearing with the questions and objections raised by his students, giving generously of his time even to the immature among them.

80 Al-Tihrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī ‘a, 106.
81 Luqmānī, ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabaʿī, Mizān-i maʿrifat, 82.
82 Al-Tihrānī, al-Shams al-sāṭī ‘a, 75.
Tabatabâ’î’s material circumstances in Qum were of a piece with this utter lack of self-importance. As already remarked, he had no access to the funds reserved for the students and teachers of fiqh, and sometimes he lacked even the money to light a lamp in his modest home in the Yakhchal-i Qâdi district of Qum.83 The house was too small to accommodate the throng of students that would come to visit him, and he would therefore sit on the steps in front of it to receive them. Unlike many scholars, he did not amass a vast personal library, although he did leave behind a small collection of manuscripts.84 It was not only his students who benefited from his modest and unassuming nature. Such was his affection for his family that he would often rise to his feet when his wife or children entered the room, and when it became necessary to leave the home and buy those two essential lubricants of daily life, tea and cigarettes, the ‘Allâma himself would undertake the task instead of imposing it on his family.85

Such was the outward demeanour of one who, in the view of his disciples, had become ‘a mirror for the spirits of the Ma’sûmîn’, who had attained a degree of detachment from this world that permitted him to observe directly the forms of the unseen.86

E-mail: algar@calmail.berkeley.edu

83 Ibid, 97.
84 For a list of these manuscripts, see al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Ḥusaynî ‘Maktabat al-‘Allâma al-Tabâtabâ’î’, Turâthunâ, 8.7–8 (Rabî‘ II–Ramadân, 1407/December, 1986–April, 1987), 150–63.
85 Bid-i-Hindi, ‘Mufassir va ḥâkim-i īlāhî’, 76.
86 Al-Tihrâni, al-Shams al-Sâṭî’a, 101; Bid-i-Hindi, ‘Mufassir va ḥâkim-i īlāhî’, 63, citing Ayatullâh Muţahhari.