Manifestation of Religious Authority on the Internet:
Presentation of Twelver Shiite Authority in the Persian Blogosphere

by

Narges Valibeigi

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# Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Narges Valibeigi

# Abstract

Cyberspace has diversified and pluralized people's daily experiences of religion in unprecedented ways. By studying several websites and weblogs that have a religious orientation, different layers of religious authority including "religious hierarchy, structures, ideology, and sources" (Campbell, 2009) can be identified. Also, using Weber's definition of the three types of authority, "rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic" (1968), the specific type of authority that is being presented on blogosphere can be recognized.

The Internet presents a level of liberty for the discussion of sensitive topics in any kind of religious cyberspace, specifically the Islamic one. In this way, the Internet is expanding the number and range of Muslim voices, which may pose problems for traditional forms of religious authority or may suggest new forms of authority in the Islamic world. The interaction between the Internet and religion is often perceived as contradictory, especially when it is religion at its most conservative practice. While the international and national applications of the Internet have increased vastly, local religious communities, especially fundamentalists, perceived this new technology as a threat to their local cultures and practices.

If we look at the Internet as a central phenomenon of contemporary modernity that interacts with practiced fundamentalist religious traditions, we can ask how broad the interactions are between religious fundamentalism and the Internet and whether these relations can be reconciled. More specifically, this thesis presents a study of the junction of the Internet and religious fundamentalism reviewing the presentation of Shiite religious authority on the Persian blogosphere.

As a case study, Persian weblogs are studied for content analysis for this thesis. Weblogs' texts are analyzed to find evidences for Shiite beliefs and shared identity, usages and interpretations of the main Shiite religious texts, references to the role of recognized Shiite leaders, and descriptions of Shiite structural patterns of practices and organizations.

This research will demonstrate how the Internet has been culturally constructed, modified, and adapted to the Iranian community's needs and how the Shiite fundamentalist community of Iran has been affected by it. Based on one of the most structured research in this area, the study by Baezilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005), in this article I identify four principal dimensions of religious fundamentalism as they interact with the Internet: hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline, and seclusion.

# **<u>Acknowledgement</u>**

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

The Information Technology Revolution, as Manuel Castells (1997) writes, is the biggest revolution experienced by humankind; it affects economies, politics and social interactions, as well as cultures and religions in the current global order.

Religious environments are dominated by social and cultural elements. As a result, social communication is one of the critical forces that influences people's religious orientations. As Ameli (2009) explains, with the emergence of the Internet as a new technology, an innovative "world communication space" has been added to the people's cultural space and religious environment in the real world. The level of religious debate and discussion by participants in the virtual world has increased the number of religious websites and weblogs demonstrating the demand for religious discourse in cyberspace. Almost all religious groups try to apply this new technology to fulfill their goal. As Dawson (2000) writes, "both new and old religious groups have migrated to cyberspace with some enthusiasm" (p. 26). Cyberspace has created a "global ground" for the expression and reproduction of religion, without any distinction between those with a merely local base or religions with a global following. This may develop the potential for a distinctive understanding of religion that arises from both a new self-consciousness and the accumulative knowledge of religion, made accessible for everyone in cyberspace (Ameli, 2009; Lovheim, 2004).

The emergence of the Internet significantly changes the speed of transmitting religious information. The shift from oral and paper-based communication tools to the Internet has influenced our understanding of religious texts, religious rituals, religious identity, and communities of believers. Religious resources such as holy books and other text-based information, as well as audio files of sermons and religious speeches by religious leaders, are

now available online for all people who have access to the Internet. Also, new communication tools such as online networks and chat rooms make connectivity among people easier. In this way, searching for and understanding religious beliefs and practices can occur more rapidly and comfortably. For instance, nowadays the Quran is available in an electronic version online and is equipped with simple and advanced tools to search for its words and meanings. Therefore, there is less need to access libraries, seminaries and religious professionals to find out a specific Quranic term; all this information can be found quickly online.

Additionally, because of the openness of the Internet, it can reveal differences between religions, as well as the contradictions and challenges that exist among believers within a particular religion. This technology provides a new public forum for religious debates. For example, personal weblogs play a key role in representing personal ideas about religious matters. They present a level of liberality for the discussion of sensitive topics in any kind of religious cyberspace. By studying several websites and weblogs that have a religious orientation, one can examine whether or not people interpret various subjects, creeds, or scriptures differently and whether such discrepancies in interpretations sometimes come into conflict with official views. In fact, as Anderson (2003) mentions, religious authority has often been challenged by mass media, such as radio, television and, currently, the Internet.

The relationship between Islam or the broader Muslim community and the Internet is one of the areas currently being researched. From the early stages of the development of the Internet, Muslims – like other religious groups – have employed the Internet in at least two main and somewhat contradictory ways. First, they use it to alter existing religious authority structures by putting forward new approaches to Islam and new interpretations of the holy texts. Second, they

use the Internet to express their religious identity and to spread Islamic ideas and viewpoints, as well as to preserve traditional and charismatic authorities and to defend established perspectives.

As Scholz et al. (2008) mention, in the history of Muslim thought and belief, new media very often played a key role in the introduction and spread of new religious interpretations, as well as the structure of authority. Nowadays, the Internet, like other mass media devices such as television and radio, has become the major factor that contributes to the emergence of a Muslim counter-public that is not entirely under state control. As Scholz et al. note, one of the principal reasons for the strong impact of these forms of media is their accessibility and easy reproducibility. Considering these two characteristics, besides other remarkable features such as "anonymity", the Internet creates a new and open ground for individuals to express their understandings and perspectives of religion regardless of the directions of religious authorities. This illustrates one of the deepest impacts of the Internet on religious structure, religiosity and, traditional religious behaviour, which usually includes a strict system of hierarchy and discipline.

This leads us to the main reason to study this subject, which is to analyse the reciprocal influence of the Internet and religion on each other. This thesis defines "religious authority" as the main theme that is subjected to challenge in Muslim communities confronting the new technology of the Internet. Two major frameworks have been used simultaneously to analyse the relationship between the Internet and religion in this thesis. In fact, this research tests a new case for the results of the two major studies that have been done by Heidi Campbell (2005, 2007) and Karine Barzilai-Nahon and Gad Barzilai (2005).

Campbell focuses on how religion online provides an important space for studying what she refers to as "multiple layers of authority", which she considers to be religious hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. She examined Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities to

analyse whether religious authority is being influenced by the new technology of the Internet in any of these layers in these communities.

The second framework is Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's study (2005). They introduce a new conceptual lens in their study to comprehend how new technology is being utilized in a religious community, based on its beliefs and needs. They present a comprehensive study of the junction of information technology (IT) and religious fundamentalism among ultra-Orthodox Jews. The study aims to demonstrate how the Internet has been culturally constructed, modified, and adapted to the community's needs. It also examines how the Jewish fundamentalist community has been affected by the Internet in general and presents new challenges occurred in the mutual relationship between the Internet and fundamentalist society.

Based on the findings of this study, they introduce a new term called "cultured technology". Culture contains flexible variables while technology is believed to have determined characteristics and results. This means that culture which is defined as "the shared products of a human group or society, including values, language, knowledge, and material objects" (Popenoe, 2000, p. 518) is affected by material and non-material phenomena. Conversely, technology is generally known as a rigid and inflexible phenomenon not influenced by culture. Therefore, the term "cultured technology" contains two contradictory elements since there is always a tension between culture and technology. However, Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai show that communities do not use technology as is; rather they suggest that technology becomes infused with cultural characteristics. For instance, based on their findings it is too simplistic to think that Internet technology makes every society more liberal and open to new ideas. In fact, one should not be trapped by technology determinism in analysing the impact of the Internet on different

communities. In other words, the fact that people can find diverse beliefs and ideas in cyberspace does not necessarily make people less fundamentalist.

After defining religious fundamentalism as "a system of absolute values and practiced faith in God that firmly relies on sacred canonical texts", Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) refer to cyberspace as "a reflection of contemporary rationale and scientific modernity" (p. 25). The rationality of cyberspace confronts the non-rational essence of religious fundamentalism, and so religious fundamentalists "see cyberspace as a threat to the cultural preservation of their community" (p. 26). Four major dimensions for religious fundamentalism that are challenged by the rational essence of the Internet are identified as hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline, and seclusion; "the community has become more multifaceted and somewhat more pluralized, but also more empowered and more efficient by making the Internet a complimentary space for the offline community" (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 37).

The initial approach from the Muslim communities toward the Internet was the same as what Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai describe in the Jewish Orthodox community. Both groups tried to overcome the threat to their religion and tradition posed by the Internet by first warning their members to avoid using it. Later they became Internet users who used the capability of this new technology to preserve their religious authority and utilized it in the way that served their goals.

By studying the Orthodox Jewish community with regard to the four themes, Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai conclude that although the usage of Internet technology has not drastically changed the basic foundations of religiously fundamentalist communities, but more plurality in terms of hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline, and seclusion can be seen. Their study shows that how religious fundamentalists adapt the Internet to the needs of their religious

culture, and how technology has affected the community. Through studying Orthodox Jewish community they explain:

> The complex processes that have injected the cyberspace onto the communal space, and how and to what degree the traditional structures of the community have been affected, preserved and even empowered. The ability to shape … [Internet] usage has assisted religious fundamentalists not only to survive, but also to use it for their religious needs. As a result, the community has become more multifaceted and somewhat more pluralized, but also more empowered and more efficient by making the Internet a complimentary space for the offline community. The Internet has been localized, since its essence was altered and reconstructed. On the one hand, … [the Internet] penetration has not drastically changed the basic foundations of the religious fundamentalist communities. (p. 37)

To date there have been no studies of religious authority on the Internet that examine the reciprocal impact of the Iranian Twelver Shiites and the Internet. Thus, this study uses this community as a new case test for Campbell's and Barzilia-Nahon and Barzilai's frameworks. First, the manifestation of Shiite Muslim religious authority on the Internet is analysed, and then the major areas of tension in the relationship between the Internet and the Iranian fundamentalist Twelver Shiites are studied.

This thesis examines a part of the Persian blogosphere of Iran in which bloggers discuss and explain religious issues such as religious authority and different interpretations of Islamic concepts, laws, beliefs, and debates. In their blog posts, they may follow the formal way of reading Islamic concepts and present religious authority in a traditional sense. Alternatively, they may present new viewpoints for understanding Islamic dogma and present new perspectives about religious authority from their own understandings.

Shiite Persian weblogs have been chosen for this study firstly because Iran is the only country that is run by a Shiite government. The consolidation of modern political viewpoints and Shiite ideology was the result of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Although the country has had a

Shiite central government of the Safavid since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, religious scholars and clerics did not govern the society until the recent revolution. However, the Shiite clerical body always had authority over the society, whether in support or opposition of the state. Religious scholars and clerics played key roles as a collegial party to the kings in the traditional historical kingship system.

The revolution in 1979, led by the charismatic figure Ayatollah Khomeini, established a fundamentalist Shiite clerical regime that has headed the state since then. Thus Shiite dogma has become the main framework of the ruling system of Iran. This way, religious scholars and the clerical body have run the society as the official government instead of becoming collegial institutions functioning besides the political system. The controversial theory of "*wilayat al-faqih*" (the rule of the jurist), which is rooted in the Imamate (the authority of the Shiite Imams) ideology of the Twelver Shiites, forms a new context for Shiite authority in Iran.

Since the revolution, specifically after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian society has experienced a more fundamentalist religious viewpoint. Restrictions on discussing religious hierarchy, structure, ideology, and interpretation of the religious texts have increased severely. At the same time, more rigid disciplines have been applied towards different and oppositional perspectives.

The second reason for choosing Iranian blogosphere in this thesis is that the leaders of the Iranian society have always tried to preserve the society from outside ideologies and new interpretations of the Shiite dogma. Since the Iranian press is under control by the government, oppositional groups have used the Internet to express their views. This can seriously challenge the authority of the traditional clerical perspectives, particularly with regard to the role of the supreme leader as the highest clerical position leading the society. The Internet thus creates a

public sphere for groups to freely express their thoughts and challenge each other as well. As Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) state "the blogistan[1] has become a space of contention between the people and the state". This occurs despite the government's use of several tools and techniques to restrict access to the Internet to prevent people from arguing about controversial religio-political issues. As Kelly and Elting mention (2008), "given the repressive media environment in Iran today, blogs may represent the most open public communications platform for political discourse" (p. 2). In fact, serious unveiled clashes have occurred in the online public sphere of Iranian community, which never happened in its offline world pertaining to religious authority and its eligibility to run the society.

The third reason is that for the study of Iranian blogosphere, which is linked to the previous one, is that the Internet gives Iranians the opportunity of being heard. The inherent freedom of the Internet, which includes anonymity and decentralized control, has allowed infamous Iranian journalists and intellectuals to be known publicly both inside Iran and internationally. The Iranian of the Diaspora, a large number of Iranians who live outside Iran,[2] has also played a critical role in presenting different perspectives with regard to religious ideology through the Internet. The Persian blogistan has become a space for getting informal information about Iranian's beliefs and their everyday life, which contains several religio-political complexities. The online life of the new generation of Iranians around the world is directly associated with different layers of offline religious authority. Studying the Persian

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[1] The whole body of the Persian blogosphere.
[2] The rate of the immigration from Iran to Western countries and the US has increased drastically in the 30 years after the revolution of 1979. The first generation of these immigrants were mostly concerned about political issues and their situation in the Shah's regime. The war between Iran and Iraq (1980s) was another reason for the immigration. However, during the last 20 years, the number of refugees (who were in danger because of their political and religious perspectives) and university students who seek for a better educational level and a better life standards were increased.

blogistan can also reveal the tensions that have been generated as a result of a confrontation between the Internet and the religious fundamentalist community.

**Research Questions**

Following the frameworks that Barzilia-Nahon and Campbell suggest, this research is looking to answer these major questions:

1) How does a religious fundamentalist community, such as the Iranian Twelver Shiites, adapt to the Internet to fulfil its needs; and how does the Internet technology, specifically weblogs, affect the community?

2) What are the major areas of tension between the Internet and the Iranian religious fundamentalist community? Could hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline and seclusion be considered as major dimensions of tension for this case?

3) What forms of religious authority—roles, structures, theology/beliefs and texts—do bloggers refer to in their weblogs?

4) Do bloggers affirm or challenge the sources of religious authority they refer to and in what ways?

5) Do new forms of religious authority shape on the Internet? Do bloggers become new source of authority for the Iranian society? Do women or the Iranians of the Diaspora play authoritative roles online?

The following steps help answer the above questions: 1) reviewing the literature for the meaning of authority, religious authority and the presentation of religion on the Internet; 2) looking briefly at the history of Shiism and the characteristics of religious authority among Shiite

communities; 3) outlining the related incidents in the contemporary religio-political context of

Iranian society that are reflected on the Internet; 4) analysing the blog posts based on the

literature and the theoretical framework; 5) discussing the relationship between the Internet and

the religious fundamentalist community. These steps enable us to analyse the manifestation of

Shiite religious authority on the Persian blogosphere to see what forms of religious authority are

being presented, and determine whether they are being challenged or affirmed. Also these steps

will help us to analyze four dimensions of tension and symbiotic relations between the Internet

and Iranian society as a religious fundamentalist community.

**Methodology**

In the online world, blogs which publish personal stories and perspectives in a global and

public sphere have a significant role in challenging and affirming religious authority among

different religious communities. To explain the role of this new online tool and its effects on

religious communities, we should first define what a "weblog" is. Nardi and Herring (as cited in

Campbell, 2010) define the word "blog" as a short form for "web log", that is

> an online journal focused on personal content, composed of individual entries, which are
> frequently updated by a human author and whose contents are intended for a public
> audience… blogs allow individuals the opportunity to self-publish narratives on a variety
> of subjects and passions using text, images and even video to help express their thoughts.
> (p. 253)

The weblogs that are being analysed in this paper are not developed by 'official' Muslim

organizations and/or government. These weblogs may present the existing forms of religious

authority or offer new perspectives that are defined as more liberal/democratic viewpoints.

Although the Internet is still ultimately controlled and dominated by offline authorities, as Turner

(2007) mentions, bloggers use the Internet as a means of bypassing the traditional gatekeepers of

Muslim orthodoxy. Bloggers usually tend to provide opportunities for discussion and discourse outside the official culture.

For this project, a qualitative method was used. As Creswell (2009) writes, qualitative research is a tool for uncovering and analysing the meaning that a person or group of people attribute to a social issue. One of the other characteristics of qualitative methods that will enable this research to answer the main research questions is that qualitative methodology allows researchers to collect data themselves through examining documents (Creswell, 2009); such as investigating weblogs' posts for specific concepts.

This research can also be defined as a case study, which is one of the strategies in a qualitative approach. Case studies are a type of inquiry that explores a programme, event, activity, process, or even one or more persons, in depth (Creswell, 2009). The method that is applied for gathering data in this research is 'content analysis' of five cases. Content analysis offers a foundation for a multidimensional look at the text of weblogs in order to investigate the concepts and symbols of religious authority that are expressed therein.

The text published in the weblogs has been read and coded in order to analyze the relationships between the different variables. The existence of religious authority and power relationships can be examined through those posts in the context of the stated research questions regarding what forms of religious authority – roles, structures, beliefs and texts – bloggers refer to and whether they affirm or challenge traditional sources of religious authority. Moreover, the blogs' posts have been analyzed to see whether any type of tension between religion and the Internet has arisen in the areas of hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline and seclusion.

Information has been gathered about the traits of Persian Shiite bloggers as to how they present their religious beliefs in the blogging context, and how their blog commentary presents

their perceptions of religious authority. In order to answer the research questions, the study focused on only one religious group – Shiite bloggers – in order to draw more cohesive conclusions. The sampling process involved selecting blogs whose authors explicitly identified themselves as Shiite Muslims or otherwise connected themselves with the Shiite faith (e.g., through Shiite organizations) in the blog's profile or the content of the blog posts.

Five Iranian blogs have been chosen based on their posts, which are directly related to religio-political issues of the Iranian Shiite community, and their popularity, based on the number of readers. All the bloggers write in the Persian language. Among these five weblogs, two of them are in support of the fundamentalist perspective and three of them are categorized as modernist-reformist.

**Introducing Cases: Five Weblogs from the Persian Blogosphere**

Referring to Lawrence's study (2002), this thesis is focusing on the private vector of contemporary Islamic religion online, weblogs and bloggers, which includes individuals who have neither institutional nor political clout, but they present issues from a Shiite fundamentalist community, namely Iran, on the Internet.

The history of blogging dates back to 1994, when Justin Hall started to post his diary entries on his website (Rettberg, 2008). In September 2001, Salman Jariri from Iran wrote the first post of a weblog in Persian. In November 2001, Hossein Derakhshan,[3] nicknamed the "Blogfather" for spawning Iran's spectacular blogging revolution, wrote a simple coding system in Persian by which many Iranians could create weblogs for themselves. Nowadays, Iranians host their blogs using local websites such as Persianblog.ir, Blogfa.com, as well as global sites

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[3] In September 2010, after two years of being in prison, Hosein Derakhshan was sentenced to 19 years of prison mostly because of his online political and social activities.

such as Blogger.com and Wordpress.com. Like all bloggers, Iranian bloggers write about various subjects such as daily events, politics, economics, literature, social events, and many others.

Kelly and Etling (2008) performed a mapping study of Iran's politics and culture in the Persian blogosphere. They indicate that the Persian blogosphere is a large discussion space of approximately 60,000 routinely updated blogs featuring a rich and varied mix of bloggers. In a more recent study, Omid Ali Masoudi (2011) explains that, based on statistics, there are two million weblogs registered in Iran among which only 400,000 are active. About 40,000 weblogs have introduced themselves as religious weblogs and have published religious-related material.

Kelly and Etling (2008) find that the Iranian blogosphere contains four major network poles based on the subject of the published posts. These include: secular/reformists, conservative/religious, Persian poetry and literature, and mixed subjects. However, they mention that according to a popular trope, 'everything is political' in Iran. There has always been an endless struggle between religious and secular ideologies in Iranian everyday life. Discussions on numerous social issues, such as ethics, women's clothing (*hijab*), freedom of the press and media, popular music, temporary marriage, power and government, revolutionary values, the Iran-Iraq war and its consequences, elections, and religio-political duty to support the Islamic regime, have freely continued in the Persian blogosphere. While common sense would suggest that the Internet and specifically weblogs are the place for reformist and intellectual expressions, it should also be noted that it is a place for conservative and fundamentalist ideologies. As Kelly and Eliting (2008) write, "the Iranian blogosphere is full of advocates on all sides" (p. 10).

For this thesis five Persian language weblogs have been studied: Tourjan, Menbar, Sibestan, Gol-dokhtar, and Raaze Sar be Mohr. All of them are published in Iran except for Sibestan which is published in Europe. Tourjan, Raaze Sar be Mohr, and Sibestan are

categorised as reformist weblogs, while Menbar and Gol-dokhtar are considered conservative-traditional. Tourjan, Menbar, and Gol-dokhtar are known as religious weblogs, but Raaze Sar be Mohr and Sibestan are known as social weblogs that publish religious-based issues. The primary reason for choosing these weblogs is that the subject of religion is the main issue discussed. All of them have a large and broad audience and have published frequently without any notable gaps, showing that blogging is taken seriously.

### *http://www.tourjan.com/*

The first weblog that is studied in this thesis is Tourjan.com. This weblog has two authors, Ali-Ashraf Fathi and Morteza Abtahi. They present themselves as students of Islamic studies in the main religious seminary in Qom[4], *Hawzeh Elmieh (Feizieh)*, one of the biggest and best known Shiite seminaries *(madrasas).* They are Shiite Muslims who support the modernist-reformist movement of Iran. Ali is also a Master's student in the "history of Islam" at Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran. He was imprisoned for several months after the presidential election of 2009 because of his blog posts and political activities.

Their weblog is written in Farsi and has about 2000 views per day; it is among the most popular weblogs in Farsi. The name of the blog, Tourjan, comes from the name of a city in which Ali's father was killed during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). By using this name, they want to acknowledge Ali's father and other *shaheed* or "witnesses" of the war between Iran and Iraq, which happened during the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. *Shaheed (Shohada: plural)* is a religious term in Islam that is used as an honourific term for Muslims who have laid down their

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[4] The City of Qom is among the top five important cities for Shiites because of the famous seminaries, famous religious scholars and leaders who live in the city, and also because of the holy shrine of Fatemeh al-Masoumeh, the daughter of the seventh Imam.

life fulfilling a religious commandment, or have died defending their country or protecting their family.[5]

These bloggers do not blog anonymously. Rather, they introduce themselves with their pictures and their complete names. As students in Qom, these bloggers write about their lives, their studies, their teachers, who are among the great religious scholars, and the socio-political issues of Iranian society and Qom's seminaries. The blog posts are based on historical analyses, interviews, magazine-style of reporting, and also personal commentaries. Finally, the subjects of the weblog posts are categorized using the following headings: society, Imam Khomeini and religious intellectuals, thoughts (*andishe*), *hawza*, self-expression, religion, politics, humour, pictures, culture and art, and *Ghila*. *Ghila,* meaning "as it is said" is an online magazine within the weblog published monthly reporting news related to the seminary *(hawza)*.

### *http://menbar.ir*

The second weblog is Menbar.ir, which belongs to another religious scholar who has also disclosed his real identity. The picture of the author, Ahmad Najmi, shows him wearing a turban, illustrating that he is at a level of his study that he can appear in a Muslim scholar's dress. He lives in Qom and is an active blogger. He runs two other online digital magazines and wrote several articles in his area of research: the construction of Qom's *hawza* and its theorists. He is a neo-fundamentalist who wrote several posts in support of the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* to support Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme leader of Iran, in particular. However, he published

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[5] The root of this belief is in the Quran, such as verses 111, chapter 9, which says: "Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the garden (of Paradise): they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in truth, through the Law, the Gospel, and the Qur'an: and who is more faithful to his covenant than Allah? then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: that is the achievement supreme."

several posts criticising the fundamentalist president Ahmadinejad's performances as well. Najmi's father is a cleric who is the official Imam for Friday prayers in the city of Khoi. This shows that he is continuing his family's tradition of Shiite religious scholarship.

Menbar.ir is one of the most professional Persian weblogs in terms of technology and design. The posts of the weblog are categorized by these subjects: society, religion, politics, media, diary, culture, photo-blog, and uncategorized posts. Weblog posts are based on the author's analyses and experiences in *hawza*, and are written in the form of personal reflections, reports, and letters to well-known people.

His viewpoints and analyses illustrate the traditional system of *hawza* and the Islamic Republic's theoretical bases. In comparison, Fathi and Abtahi maintain a critical analysis of the traditional system of *hawza*. Although Menbar and Tourjan provide two different perspectives in regard to political and even religious issues, Najmi, Fathi and Abtahi claim to maintain a good friendship.

### *http://sibestaan.malakut.org/*

The blogger in this case is Mehdi Jami who is a famous professional journalist who lives in Amsterdam. He worked with the BBC for several years and also established a Farsi radio station, Radio *Zamaneh.* He is also a documentary filmmaker. Jami is widely known as an Iranian intellectual who cares about and studies Iranian politics and religion. He runs several news websites and has published many articles and books on social and religious dilemmas in contemporary Iranian society. Conservative and fundamentalist journalists in Iran have labelled him an enemy's ally and a non-religious person. However, even the name of his weblog, Sibestan (apple garden), contains a religious metaphor. As he wrote in the fourth post of the

weblog, apple (*sib*) refers to the story of Adam and Eve who were seduced by the apple tree. The weblog dates back to May 2003 and it is one of the weblogs from the Malakut Realm.[6] Jami labels his posts based on 44 titles, such as: We and America; Iranian identity; elections; Iran; Iranology; social matters; religion; the religion of the Islamic Republic; the religion of despotism; intellectuals; tradition and modernism; cinema; media; and language.

### *http://mmoeeni14.blogspot.com/*

Raaze Sar be Mohr (a concealed secret) is written by Mohammad Moeini, a freelance journalist, from Iran. The name of the weblog comes from one of the poems by the most famous Persian poet, Hafiz. He started blogging in 2003 and his weblog has been filtered several times; making this his 14th weblog. The previous ones are no longer accessible from inside Iran for those without any anti-filter software. He publishes this weblog using his real name and labels his posts with  such headings as: international policy, justice and injustice, democracy, the revolution, history, the parliament, people, freedom, media, censorship, environment, ethics, art, Ahmadinejd and many other subjects. He does not declare that he is religious, however there are many posts that reveal he is a moderate Shiite. He has also worked for several reformist-modernist newspapers, which explains his political viewpoint. There is a small window on the right side of the weblog showing thousands of pictures from the Green Movement, the protestors and the reformist political leaders. His own picture is also on the weblog. He lives in Bandar Abbas, one of the southern cities of Iran.

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[6] The Realm of Malakut contains a group of about 43 intellectual weblogs, most of which are published outside of Iran. It contains weblogs about various topics in humanities and social sciences. The bloggers are friends and they are well known in the offline world. The Malakut Realm was created in 2003 in order to criticise and understand social and political dilemmas in contemporary Iranian society.

*http://goldokhtar.parsiblog.com/*

Gol-dokhtar (literally: *"gol"* meaning "flower" and *"dokhtar"* meaning "girl") is

published by six women living in Qom. They are religious scholars at *hawza Jame'at al-Zahra*.

Most of them are also students in various universities in Iran. They do not blog under their real

names but their identities are not hard to recognize simply by referring to the links in the side bar

of the weblog. In addition to Gol-dokhtar, they also publish an online journal, Charghad (scarf),

which is mostly about the issues affecting the everyday life of Muslim women. The bloggers of

this weblog are also among active writers in other online religious websites publishing from

Qom. Their political viewpoint is fundamentalist-conservative and they believe president

Ahmadinejd creates better opportunities for women, especially religious ones, to be heard. They

have published many posts under the titles of: *hijab*; stereotyped women; women and war;

women and media; marriage and family; recreation, sport, and health; children's education,

reports, politics, and some other subjects.

All the posts of these five weblogs from June, 2009 to June, 2010 have been studied for

this thesis, which amounts to more than two hundred posts. This time period was chosen for at

least two reasons. First, the Internet, including blogs, have played a key role in providing a

relatively free space for criticizing the society and the government, and for arranging gatherings

and protests after the controversial Iranian presidential election in 2009. Second, the

confrontation of the state with protesters, and a series of aggressive attacks against and the

imprisonment of reformist leaders and their supporters, motivated people to criticise the religious

structure of the state, specifically the *wilayat al-faqih* institution. Choosing from both pro-

fundamentalists and pro-reformists, both inside and outside Iran, will help us to focus on how

religious authority is being captured in Persian weblogs and what kind of impact the technology of the Internet is having on Iranian society, and vice versa.

All the block quotes and direct quotations in this analysis are the author's free translation, from Farsi to English, of blog postings.

**Religio-Political Status of the Bloggers**

| Name of weblogs | Political party | Religious view |
|---|---|---|
| Tourjan | Reformist | Traditionally religious |
| Menbar | Fundamentalist | Traditionally religious |
| Raaze Sar be Mohr | Reformist | Moderately religious |
| Gol-dokhtar | Fundamentalist | Traditionally religious |
| Sibestan | Reformist | Not revealed |

# Chapter 2: Religious authority

**Defining Authority**

Authority is one of the most complex concepts in sociology. Many sociologists, philosophers, political scientists, and historians have tried to explain authority within their own field of interest. In general, authority is understood as a moral power that is necessary for any group to perdure for any length of time in attaining certain goals (Adelmann, 1974). The general definition of authority that is commonly used in different texts considers authority as a term that is directly related to "power" and its relationships (Aycock, 1995; Campbell, 2007; Denegri-Knott, 2004). To establish a clear definition of authority based on its specific context, thinkers define authority by its characteristics. For instance, Peter Starr's definition considers authority as "a power to define and describe reality" (as cited in Campbell, 2007, p. 1045), and emphasizes the cultural features of authority. Other thinkers, such as Ralf Dahrendorf (1959),  who highlighted the role of individuals to define an authoritative position in a social structure of a group, are more interested in an understanding of authority that "involves referring to a specific role … or a specific individual/entity and his/her position of power" (Campbell, 2007, p. 1045).

Political scientists such as Antonio Gramsci, Hanna Arendt, and lately Joseph Raz and Christopher McMahon (1994) define authority as a "normative power, consisting of the ability to change behaviour by providing other overriding reasons for action legitimized by a sufficient number of people" (Miller, 2008, p. 8). In their view, the meaning of authority hinges on political power. They put emphasis on the power of government and usually analyze authority as a reciprocal relationship between political leaders and the common people in a society.

Philosophers and historians such as Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, and recently Bruce Lincoln define authority as a part of discourse, and they are more interested in its labile

dynamics than its institutional incarnations. In this sense, authority results from the conjunction of a speaker, a speech, the staging, time, place of the interaction, and an audience willing to respect the speaker (Lincoln, 1994). In this analysis, the frequently imagined distinction between the authority of those who are "in authority" versus those who are "an authority" is transcended by the emphasis on the discursive: both "have the capacity to produce consequential speech, quelling doubts and winning the trust of the audiences whom they engage" (Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

Sociologists examine authority both in terms of institutional embodiment and labile dynamics. The study of the meaning and characteristics of authority in sociology began with Max Weber who was one of the first writers to talk about domination, legitimacy, authority, and different types of embodiment of an authoritative system.

**Sociological Views on Authority**

Weber begins with the meaning of domination, which is defined as "the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (Weber, 1968, p. 212). He notes that "every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience" (Weber, 1968, p. 212). This definition of dominance is very broad; it could include parent-child relationships, employer-employee relationships, teacher-student relationships, forms of political rule, and the relation between a religious leader and his/her followers. This definition of domination also eliminates those types of power that are based on unveiled force, because force may not lead to acceptance of the dominant group or voluntary compliance with its orders. Situations of overt conflict and force are also relatively unusual.

The broad nature of his definition of domination is the reason why, after Weber, other

thinkers struggled to find new ways to characterize authority that can cover all forms of

authoritative relationships and be applied in different eras with different structures of power.

Weber (1968) defines authority as legitimate forms of domination, that is, forms of domination

that followers or subordinates consider to be acceptable. Being legitimate does not necessarily

imply any sense of rationality, right, or natural justice. Rather, domination is legitimate when the

subordinate accepts, obeys, and considers domination to be desirable, valid, and not worth

challenging. It is not so much the actions of the dominant party that creates this, but rather the

willingness of those who are subordinate to believe in the legitimacy of the claims of the

dominant.

Weber also outlines three major types of legitimate domination: traditional authority,

charismatic authority, and legal- rational authority. These three forms do not constitute the

totality of types of authority, besides, they identify pure types of authority; according to Lewis

Coser (1977) "[Weber] was aware that in empirical reality mixtures will be found in the

legitimation of authority" (p. 227). However, they show how it is possible for some people to

exercise power over others. Also, based on this categorization Weber refers to the conditions

under which people come to accept the domination as a regular and structured phenomenon. He

notes that long established social forms and structures become customs that can emerge within a

group or society on the basis of continued interaction, and require little or no enforcement by any

specific group. Also, a stronger degree of conformity in a society, as Weber (1968) writes, is

convention, where the compliance is not just voluntary or customary, but where some sort of

sanctions may exist for those who do not comply with convention. These may be informal

sanctions, leading to mild disapproval, or they may be strong sanctions associated with discipline

or exclusion (Weber, 1968). Where adopted by an individual or a group that has the legitimate capacity and duty to impose sanctions, the convention can become law. This creates a legal order where a group assumes the task of applying sanctions to punish transgressions. Where this is applied over a territorial unit, a political order can be created through the threat and application of physical force by an administrative staff with legal, administrative, military, or police functions.

**Different Types of Authority**

Weber (1968) believes that, depending on the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority, fundamentally different types of authority will appear in society. As indicated already, he thinks the validity of authority may be based on three main grounds (Weber, 1968, p. 15-16):

1- Rational grounds: where authority rests on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands, known as legal authority.

2- Traditional grounds: where authority rests on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them, known as traditional authority.

3- Charismatic grounds: where authority rests on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him, known as charismatic authority.

Legal-rational authority is a type of authority that is based on the legality of patterns of standard rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.

Authority is held by legally established impersonal orders and extends to people only by virtue of the offices they hold. Legal-rational authority may be challenged by a minority, but this challenge would not result in any changes within a small period of time.

Traditional authority is authority in which the legitimacy is based around custom. Legitimacy and power to control are handed down from the past and can be exercised in quite dictatorial ways. This is a type of authority in which the traditional rights of a powerful and dominant individual or group are accepted, or at least not challenged, by subordinate individuals. According to Weber (1968), traditional authority is an apparatus by which inequality is created and preserved. If no one challenges the authority of the traditional leader or group, they are likely to remain dominant. Also, for Weber, traditional authority blocks the development of legal-rational forms of authority.

Charismatic authority exists when the control of others is based on an individual's personal characteristics, such as extraordinary ethical behaviour, heroism, or religious virtuosity. Charismatic leaders are obeyed because people feel a strong emotional bond to them. This type of authority is different from rational or traditional forms; it develops not from established orders or traditions, rather from the special trust the charismatic leaders induce in their followers, the peculiar powers they exhibit, and the unique qualities they possess (Weber, 1968). Whether such powers actually exist is irrelevant; the fact that followers believe they exist is what is important. Weber also considers charisma to be a driving and creative force that surges through traditional authority and established rules. The sole basis of charismatic authority is the recognition or acceptance of the claims of the leader by the followers. Charismatic authority can be revolutionary in nature, challenging traditional and sometimes legal-rational authority. However,

this type of authority could also easily degenerate into traditional authority, in which power is exercised by those who surround the charismatic leader or into legal-rational forms.

As Dawson (2011, p. 7) mentions, although Weber (1968) applies his description of charisma in a secular context, "charisma referred originally to a divine gift" and "in human history most charismatic leaders have been deemed semi-divine, and in its purest form charisma is a magical-religious notion." Thus, it is more likely for charismatic forms of authority to emerge based on religious beliefs, although religious authority is not tied to any particular form of authority. Religious authority entails a specific type of legitimization that can be presented in any of traditional, charismatic, or even legal-rational forms of authority, because these pure forms of authority exist only in the abstract. As Weber (1968, p. 246) realized, "[charismatic authority] cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both" through the process of routinization. This process makes it possible for religious authority to become legitimated even in legal-rational ways. In other words, religious authority can emerge as a charismatic form of authority, but continue as a legal-rational form. As an example, both during and after the 1979 revolution, Iran experienced a movement that tried to legalize religious dogma based on the Shiite's legacy of the Imams.[7] The Iranian government has tried to establish a republican constitution, while being religious and keeping the position and power of the charismatic leadership in charge.

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[7] The concept of "*wilayat al-faqih*" (the rule of the jurist) was coined by a group of *ulama* after the Iranian revolution, and is based on the charismatic authority of the Imams in Shiite beliefs.

**Religious Authority in Shiite History and Contemporary Iran**

*Quranic Bases of Authority*

Searching for the roots of charismatic authority in Shiite dogma leads us to the text of the

Quran as it is the main source of religious knowledge in Islam.[8] Verse 26 from chapter 3 says:

> [O prophet] say [to people]: O Allah! Lord of all dominion! You give dominion to
> whom You will, and take away dominion from whom You will, and You exalt whom
> You will, and abase whom You will. In Your Hand is all good. Surely You are All-
> Powerful.

This verse directly reveals that Allah is the ultimate power and He gives authority to whom He

will, which means that according to Islam, authority has a supernatural-divine source.

Many verses in different chapters of the Quran also talk about prophecy and authority of

the Prophet Muhammad. For instance, Chapter 4, verse 59 of the Quran says:

> Believers! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those from among you who are
> invested with authority; and then if you were to dispute among yourselves about anything
> refer it to Allah and the Messenger if you indeed believe in Allah and the Last Day; that
> is better and more commendable in the end.

This verse also refers to Allah as the ultimate source of authority but it legitimizes the authority

of the Prophet[9] and "those from among you who are invested with authority" as well. According

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[8] A search by the keyword "authority" of the English translation of the Quran by Yusuf Ali gives us 56 items. Since many scholars translate the Quran from Arabic to English, searching in different translations may result in a different number of items. In other translations we can find the phrase "qualified leaders" being used interchangeably with "authority". Therefore, the number of the items cannot be strictly determined. However, what is important here is that within all the verses commenting on the notion of authority in the Quran, the source of power and leadership is specified to Allah (God), the Prophet Muhammad (the Messenger) and particular Muslims who are invested with authority by Allah and the Prophet.

[9] There are also other verses with the similar content, such as verse 40, chapter 33: "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets: and Allah has full knowledge of all things." Also chapter 47 (called "Muhammad") verse 2 says: "But those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, and believe in the (Revelation) sent down to Muhammad - for it is the Truth from their Lord, He will remove from them their ills and improve their condition."

to Shiite beliefs, this authority belongs only to Allah and, with His permission, the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams.[10]

Imam is the title given to a person who takes the lead in a community in a particular social, political, scientific, or religious form of ideology and thought (Motahhari, 2005; Tabataba'i, 1960). Shiism believes that Islamic society is in need of supervision in three areas of religious concern: 1- government, 2- science, and 3- guidance in the spiritual life. In this perspective, the person who occupies the function of giving that guidance is the leader of the community who must be appointed by God and the Prophet (Tabataba'i, 1975).

According to Shiite beliefs, the Imams represent God's presence among mankind. There have been twelve Imams since the Prophet Muhammad. They are seen as the Imams of guidance and justice, and that God guides people through them; they are the leaders of humankind in their life and religion. It is believed that the Imams inherited the Prophet's extraordinary qualities, including his divine knowledge, and this grants them charisma, according to Shiite sources.[11] As Takim (2006) states: "since the purpose of the [I]mamate is to perpetuate the Prophet's charismatic authority and guide humankind, a corollary to the principle of hereditary charisma is that the [I]mams partake in the peculiar extraordinary traits hitherto reserved for the prophets" (p. 26). Therefore, for the Shiites, "those who are invested with authority", in verse 59 in chapter

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[10] Shiism has studied and investigated the primordial nature of man and the continuous tradition of wisdom that has survived among men. It has penetrated into the principle purpose of Islam which is to revivify man's primordial nature, and has investigated such things as the methods used by the Prophet in guiding the community; the troubles which entangled Islam and the Muslims and which led to division and separation; and the short life of the Muslim governments of the early centuries, which were characterized by negligence and lack of strict religious principles. As a result of these studies Shiism has reached the conclusion that there are sufficient traditional texts left by the Prophet to indicate the procedure for determining the Imam and successor of the Prophet. This conclusion is supported by Quranic verses and *ahadith* of *Ghadir*, *Safinah*, *Thaqalayn*, *Haqq*, *Manzilah*, *Da'wat*-i *'ashirah*-i *aqrabin* and others. But of course these *ahadith*, most of which are also accepted by Sunnism, have not been understood in the same way by Shiism and Sunnism (Rabbani Golpayegani, 2003; Tabataba'i, 1975).
[11] See Appendix.

4 of the Quran, could be no other than the Imams.[12] Similar to other charismatic leaders, Shiite Imams were the religious and social locus of power and had an intimate connection with their disciples which are the main two characteristics that Weber mentions for a charismatic figure (Dawson, 2011).

What distinguishes Shiite and Sunni is their belief about the successors of the Prophet. According to Shiite dogma "Muhammad's personal charisma, which he received from God, is transmitted genealogically only in his family traditions" (Waida, 1986, p. 5). However, Sunnis believe in the legitimacy of the four great Caliphs[13] who led society after the Prophet died. Shiites reject the source of authority for Caliphs and believe that Ali – Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law – is the true Imam[14] after the Prophet and that Imamate (the authority of the Imams) continues in his family alone. They always considered the Caliphate to be far from the sacred authority of their Imams (Motaharri, 1989; Tabataba'i, 1975). As Hussein Nasr (1975) mentions:

> The distinctive institution of Shi'ism is the Imamate and the question of the Imamate is inseparable from that of walayat, or the esoteric function of interpreting the inner mysteries of the Holy Quran and the Shari'ah. According to the Shi'ite view the successor of the Prophet of Islam must be one who not only rules over the community in justice but also is able to interpret the Divine Law and its esoteric meaning. Hence he must be free from error and sin (ma'sum) and he must be chosen from on high by divine decree (nass) through the Prophet (p. 10).

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[12] According to Shiite interpretation (*tafseer*) of this verse, 'those in authority' must refer to the individuals from the *ummah* who are preserved from error and sin in their actions and saying [*ma'sum*]; refer to Appendix.

[13] Three Caliphs: Abubaker, Omar, and Othman, were among the famous disciples of the prophet and Ali, the fourth Caliph, is the first Shiite Imam.

[14] "The very life of Ali [the first Imam] and his actions show that he accepted the previous caliphs as understood in the Sunni sense of *khalifah* (the ruler and the administrator of the Shari'ah), but confined the function of *walayat*, after the Prophet, to himself. That is why it is perfectly possible to respect him as a caliph in the Sunni sense and as an Imam in the Shi'ite sense, each in its own perspective" (Nasr in Tabataba'i, 1975, p. 11).

Therefore, authority in twelve Imami Shiite[15] can be categorized specifically as hereditary charisma, in which "charisma is a quality transmitted by the heredity; thus it is participated in by the kinsmen of its bearer, particularly by his closest relatives" (Weber, 1968, p. 248). According to Weber (1968) when charisma is inherited, the charisma of the leader is perpetuated down a particular line. This is certainly the case in Shiite history in which the Imams had "the authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership" (Weber, 1958, as cited in Takim, 2006, p. 24).

However, except for five years in the life of Ali and six months in the life of Hasan (the first and the second Imam), none of these Imams were in charge politically. Instead Sunni Caliphs ruled the majority of Islamic society. In the first Islamic dynasty (the Umayyad) and the second one (the Abbasid), the Caliphs paid much attention to the social and religious activities of the Imams and restricted their social activities.

The Imams experienced restrictions in their relationships with people, since they held all the attributes that charismatic leader are supposed to hold; specifically they tended to be energetic people and displayed a consistent faith in the fulfillment of their mission. The Imams were the object of devotion since they were believed to represent the correct way of living; they were believed to be the criterion for distinguishing wrong and right based on the purest form of Islamic ideology. Shiite Imams were believed to have extraordinary and uncanny powers.

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[15] Twelve Imami Shiites are those Muslims who follow twelve Imams, who were all from the Prophet's family, his son in law and his grand children, after the Prophet. Moreover, the two main sects in Islam, Shiites and Sunnis have major differences in how they define the principles of religion. There are five principles (*usul al-din*) as stated by Shiism, including: 1- *tawhid* or belief in Divine Unity; 2- *nubuwwah* or prophecy; 3- *ma'ad* or resurrection; 4- *imamah* or the Imamate, belief in the Imams as successors of the Prophet; and 5- *'adl* or Divine Justice. In the three basic principles-Unity, prophecy, and resurrection Sunnism and Shiism agree, but in the other two they differ.

Another related point here is, Shiites, on the basis of several *ahadith,*[16] believe the twelfth

Imam is not really absent from the earth but is alive and merely hidden from the eyes of

mankind.[17] The Occultation began in 939, and it is believed that it will continue as long as God

wills.[18] As Liyakat Takim (2006) explains, "Shi'ism posited a distinctive charismatic lineage of

redemptive figures who offered salvation to the faithful. This is because soteriology, as

envisaged in Shi'ism, was contingent on the recognition of and loyalty to the [I]mams in general

and to the imam of the time in particular" (p. 26).

Two main points can be concluded from this history. The first is that the Shiite Imams

were always able to influence society because of their divine charismatic authority. The second

is that Shiites always believed in the authority of Imams and their roles as supreme political

leaders and teachers of religion. This means that Shiites always differentiated the political

authority of the Sunni Caliphs from the charismatic political religious authority of the Imams.

Moreover, Shiism is categorized as a messianic sect that expects the Savoir, the twelfth Imam.

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[16] *Hadith (plural: ahadith)* a text based authority, second only to the Quran, which is a record of the words and deeds of the Prophet. *Hadith* frames the normative view of Shiism that guides Shiites in their religious practices. *Hadith,* as a form of practical guidance, explain the deeds and words of the prophet, which are considered divine, connecting the disciples with the Imams, and with each other. It creates a unity in religious practices of everyday life for all Shiites. Furthermore, *hadith* helps to cultivate certain images about the Imams and their opponents (Takim, 2006).

[17] He is the son of the eleventh Imam and was born in Iraq (Samarrah) in 868 and until 872 when his father was martyred, lived under his father's care and tutelage (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2009; Tabataba'i, 1975). He was hidden from public view and only a few of the elite among the Shiites were able to meet him. After the martyrdom of his father he became Imam and by divine command went into Occultation (*ghaybat*).

[18] The occultation of the twelfth Imam is divided into two parts: the first, the minor occultation (*ghaybat-i sughra*) which began in 872 and ended in 939, lasting about seventy years (Ashuri, 2004; Montazer Ghaem, 2001; Savory, 1974); the second is the major one. In the minor occultation, he appeared only to his four deputies (*na'ib*) and even then only in exceptional circumstances. After the death of the last deputy in 939, the special deputation of the Imam came to an end (Ashuri, 2004; Montazer Ghaem, 2001; Savory, 1974) and the major occultation (*ghaybat-i kubra*) began (Motaharri, 1989; Tabataba'i, 1975).

This perspective drives the Shiite communities to establishment a Shiite state in preparation for the appearance of the twelfth Imam.[19]

*Authority and Leadership after the Imams*

After the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, based on one of the most famous saying of the Prophet: "the scholars are heirs of the Prophets" (Crone and Hinds, 1986, p. 81), the *ulama* became the heirs of the Imams. Because of their legal learning and their knowledge of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet, their legal injunctions were to be obeyed, as Amir Arjomand (1988) writes. This means that the Imams' power (both religious and political) was attributed to the *ulama*, since they were revered as the most reliable sources for religious knowledge. From the eleven century onward, great *ulama* were raised who inherited not only the knowledge but also the authority of the Prophet as the guardians of the community; this tradition further enabled people to refer to them by the title of Imams (Takim, 2006).[20]

Among the precious Shiite *ulama* Allama al-Hilli was the one who accepted the suggested concept of *ijtihad*[21] and whose definition of *ijtihad* is always cited in Shiite works. This new concept made Shiite *figh*[22] a dynamic knowledge, since it allowed the Shiite jurists to drive new legal norms legitimately base on the holy text of Quran and *Ahadith* (Madelung, 1982). *ijtihad* was followed by another related concept, *taqlid* (imitation). This concept led to the rise of a new class of *ulama*, called *mujtahid* (the scholar who is the source of immitations), who

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[19] Since the Shiites believe that the appearance of the twelfth Imam will happen under specific social, political, and religious conditions, all members of the society are responsible for practicing religion correctly and they must pray to make his appearance possible.
[20] Such as Imam al-Ghazali (Sunni/Sufi) and Imam Fakhr al-Razi (Sunni) both in 12th century; and Imam Khomeini in Iran and Imam Sadr in Lebanon and Iran, both Shiite, and in 20th century.
[21] The endeavour of a top ranked Muslim scholar (mujtahid) to derive a rule of divine law from the Quran and *hadith*.
[22] Islamic jurisprudence.

have the ability to interpret, define, and articulate the law, as well as the authority to issue

*fatawa.*[23] Therefore, each Shiite Muslim is supposed to choose a well-known *mujtahid* to follow

his *fatawa*. The difference between the authority of the Imams and *mujtahid*s is in the notion that

the Imams are believed to be the infallible (*ma'soum*) heirs of the Prophet whose knowledge is

delivered from God, while the *mujtahid*s obtain their position after a very long education and

they are not infallible.

Many believe that during the Safavid period in Iran, not only were Shiite's political

viewpoints being theorized by the *ulama*, but the commands of kings and political leaders were

also being authorized as religious tenets. This means that the commands made by the ruler of a

Shiite state were given equal value to religious commands and should be obeyed by all

citizens/believers.

> If the *ulama* are the builders of religion after the Prophets, the Kings are the protectors of
> that building. The construction of religion is done by the lords of knowledge (*'ilm*) but its
> protection by the lords of command… [and] justice is the pillar of the arcade of
> sovereignty and equity the guarantor of the order of the kingdom. (Qazvini, as cited in
> Amir Arjoman, 1988)

This combination of the duties of the *ulama* and political leaders illustrates another aspect

of the evolution of charismatic authority: the routinization of charisma. As we discussed, the

charisma of the Prophet and his knowledge were inherited by the Imams. Since the Occultation

the charismatic authority of the *ulama*, as the heirs of the Imams, had become institutionalized,

specifically because the political system/rulers (particularly in Iran) needed to legitimize their

government, they assigned *ulama* to political positions.

Weber's analysis of charismatic authority and his analysis of the forces leading to the

routinization of this authority provide important tools for analyzing the social changes in the

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[23] *Fatwa* (plural: *fatawa*) A juristic ruling concerning Islamic law issued by a *mujtahid.*

Shiite community. However, his model of routinization of charisma is too simplistic to explain the diverse forces that emerge and the tensions that are generated in Shiite history. As Takim (2006) mentions, the Imams tried to institutionalize their authority in their time by establishing education systems and sending representatives to the Caliphates to address religious, cultural, political and financial dilemmas. Therefore, the process of routinization and rationalization began during the life of the Imams and has continued more formally since the occultation and the rise of the concept of *mujtahid* (Takim, 2006). Although they did not replace the Imams, the *mujtahid*s gradually became important leaders in Shiite community. This institution combined religious and communal leadership, and reflected the unstructured nature of the Shiite establishment, which included numerous leaders coexisting with each other (Takim, 2006). Their authority evolved not only by transmitting the *hadith* of the Imams, but also by interpreting them in light of current practices and needs. This new feature linked them to the political issues of their society even more than before.

### *Consolidation of Religious Authority with Politics: The Genesis of a Charismatic Leader in the contemporary Iran*

From the 18th century, the *ulama* initiated several oppositional movements in Iran since they had emotional bonds with people and had an influential relationship with different classes of society. Since that time, the *ulama* have been identified as one of the most critical forces that can give or take the legitimacy of the political system, as Floor (1980) says: "religious leaders, with their large legal, social, and educational functions, to a large extent defined the limits of power of the ruling class" (p. 501). The *ulama* were not only religious leaders, they had also been involved in the political attitudes of the state, whether directly or indirectly, through either their resistance

or support of the political rulers. The oppositional perspective of the *ulama* during the 18th and the 19th centuries in Iran was based on two objections: 1) anti-imperialist oppositions against the penetration of Western countries, such as the British Empire and Russia whose ideological perspectives (Christianity and later on Marxism) were not acceptable to the majority of the Iranian population who were Shiite Muslim; 2) anti-dynasty objections arose due to two main factors. First, Shahs tried to acquire more influence where the *ulama* had held traditional, local, and family-based authority for a long time.[24] Second, in the very beginning stage of the secularization, the state tried to increase attempts to restrict the importance of the religious courts to cut down the level of state pensions to the *ulama* (Floot, 1980).

Under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925 – 1979), Iran became an increasingly modern and secular country despite a great segment of the society being religious. This basic contradiction between the religious part of the society and government's secular and pro-West polices created tensions in Iranian society. As a historically specific phenomenon, charisma is, as Weber (1986) argues, "the product of crisis and enthusiasm" (Bendix, 1977, p. 301). What motivated Ayatollah Khomeini and other *ulama* to rise up against the political system was the non-religious modern procedure that had been shaped by the government ignoring the needs and religious culture of the great segment of the society.

In the years of crisis before the revolution of 1979 and in the beginning years, he was the leader of a diverse coalition of communist, socialist, Islamic Marxist, constitutionalist, liberal, moderately religious, and secular men and women. There is general agreement that the main segments of the Iranian society who supported Ayatollah Khomeini were the urban lower class

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[24] Although Iran formally had a central government, the Shah's power normally did not extend beyond the capital city. The local elite families were allowed to control and manage their region while they saw the Shah as their legitimate ruler; in this regard they were paying taxes to the capital (Floot, 1980).

and lower-middle class (Akhavi, 1987; Sanasarian, 1995) because the ideals of social justice and

equality of Shiite ideology resonated well within their ranks. From the beginning of the

revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini's devotees give him the title of Imam, which elevated him to a

status above ayatollah.[25] Therefore, his followers wanted to illustrate that he had unique qualities

of divine power and authority. Also many believed that his influence was not restricted to Iranian

society, rather his authority had a great impact in other Muslim societies as well.

> No one can doubt that he was a charismatic leader whose impact was felt beyond his
> country and with enormous force throughout the world. Islamic fundamentalist
> movements (Sunni and Shiite) were deeply affected by him, and the Western world,
> caught by surprise, paid heavily in a storm of events that followed the 1979 revolution in
> Iran (Sanasarina, 1995, p. 190).

While he was alive, revolutionary zeal was kept alive by creating new institutions in a

new organizational apparatus. New organizations that were directly influenced by the

fundamentalist interpretation of religious laws and ideology followed the orders and main goals

of Ayatollah Khomeini. This resulted in the destruction of any remnants of the monarchy and its

replacement with his vision of an Islamic regime (Sanasarian, 1995). All of the previous

organizations and government ministries, including the justice and education systems, were

subjected to an ideological cleansing process. Clerics penetrated the bureaucracy and were

placed in various ministries.

As Weber writes "charisma cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or

rationalized or combination of both" (Weber, 1968, p.246). By writing the Constitution of the

Islamic Republic based on the critical concept of "*wilatay al-faqih*",[26] new political system of

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[25] As mentioned previously, in the Shiite tradition the title of Imam refers to the twelve divine successors of the Prophet.
[26] "*Wilayat al-faqih*" (Persian*: velayat-e faghih*) has been variously translated as "rule of the jurisconsult," "guardianship of the jurist," "mandate of the jurist," "trusteeship of the jurist," "the discretionary authority of the jurist," and "governance of the jurist"*. Wilayat* (authority) is an important feature of Islamic jurisprudence, as well as Islamic philosophy. Allah is the "original incumbent" of *wilayat*, and the prophet acquires it by devolution.

Iran was considered to become rationalized based on the traditional Shiite perspective. This was while the social and political system was being institutionalized and rationalised as an element of the transformation into a "republic" regime. "*Wilayat al-faqih*" is considered to be the deputy of the infallible Prophet and the Imams. *Wally al-faqih* (the person who is in the position of *wilayat al-faqih*) is not only the sole leading *mujtahid*, he also heads the political system. As Ayatollah Khomeini writes "the jurist-ruler will possess the same authority as the most noble messenger (upon whom be peace and blessings) in the administration of society, and it will be the duty of all people to obey him" (Khomeini, 1981, p. 62). All other official and unofficial organizations in the society should therefore perform under his command, although Ayatollah Khomeini divided power into three sections (presidency, juridical, and parliamentary) to rule society professionally.

Religious authority has continued on after Ayatollah Khomeini, however, the second leader, Ayatollah Khamenei's (from 1989) charismatic power is not nearly equal to that of Ayatollah Khomeinei's. The second leader was elected by *Majlis-e Khobregan* (the Assembly of Experts),[27] however, his authority cannot be identified as purely legal-rational or traditional since he is a *mujtahid* who holds some qualities of charismatic characteristics. Under his leadership, a more exaggerated style of the fundamentalist Shiite traditions has been running in the society. Also, the repeated allusions of "the enemy" – the United States and other Western states – plays a key role in Khamenei's speeches which influences all the local and international policies of the Islamic republic of Iran.

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Sunnis believe that *wilayat* then devolves from the Prophet upon the Caliphs, while the Shiites reject this view and maintain that it inheres, instead, in the Imams. There are some *mujtahids*, among them Ayatollah Khomeini who believe in the notion that jurists would acquire the quality of substantive or "original" *wilayat* from the Imams. Therefore the person who runs the position has relatively the same authority as what the Imams had (Akhavi, 1996).
[27] Council/Assembly of Experts is a deliberative body of 86 mujtahids who are charged with electing and removing the supreme leader of Iran and supervising his activities.

During his leadership, the society fragmented in two main political segments: modernist-reformists and fundamentalist-conservatives. The reformist group believes in political and cultural freedom, more open debates in the press, and changing the language and style of Iranian politics. This perspective has generated a wave of intellectual, literary and political activism that has since become a fixture of Iranian society and politics. As Nasr (2005) mentions, by 1998 Iran had 740 newspapers, some with a daily circulation in excess of 100,000 readers. Today there are an estimated 60,000 Iranian Weblogs, which has made Persian the third most widely used language on the Internet, after English and Mandarin Chinese. There are also thousands of student publications, some of which are influential news outlets. All of these deeply affected the authoritative power of the fundamentalist-conservatives in Iranian society, which means that different layers of religious authority have been subjected to different interpretations. Ayatollah Khatami, the reformist president, has become a symbol of a moderate cleric who emphasises the role of the "public" and "intellectuals" in running society rather than the personal authority of the supreme leader. The reformist movement challenged different layers of religious and political structure and authority in the society but it remained ineffective and did not have much chance of reaching the cherished reformist goals (Nasr, 2005).

The conservative consolidation of power left Khatami's presidency restricted and the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, came to play an increasingly active role in social matters, exerting more direct control and authority over state organs such as the parliament and government (Nasr, 2005). After an unexpected win in the presidential election of 2005, Ahmadinejd, as the representative of the hard-liners, effectively created a popular base of support for conservative rule and the supreme leader. As Kamrava (2010) writes, serious radical changes occurred in the tone of politics away from Khatami's emphasis on dialogue and

inclusion towards more of the sloganeering and confrontational rhetoric reminiscent of the revolution's early days. The political, religious, and cultural atmosphere of the society became constrained because of a series of extremist orders from the supreme leader, and the government and the military organizations of the regime. The reason for all the extreme decisions and orders is the ultimate goal of "preserving the system" (*hefz-e nezam*) at any expense. As a result of this extremist viewpoint, freedom in publishing newspapers, books and journals became restricted and urban movements such as the students and women's rights movements were suppressed aggressively.

However, one of the most important developments in Iranian culture and society that has affected the religious political atmosphere in recent years has been the increased use of the Internet and the explosion of weblogs in the Persian language. This has created a new context in which to discuss the Shiite regime, its government and particularly the role of *walli al-faqih*. Weblogs contain arguments about moving toward a more secular society, as well as the fundamentalist viewpoints supporting traditional and rigid clerical perspectives. In fact, weblogs replaced many of the suppressed newspapers and attracted journalists; university students now express both personal and political feelings and exchange ideas as never before. There are more than 60,000 Persian weblogs on Blogspot.com (Kelly and Elting, 2008) alone, and they are routinely being updated. Although the government filters enormous numbers of weblogs and websites, this technology is still the freest mode of expression for religious and political views.

The presidential election in 2009 and the formation of the Green Movement, as a modernist-reformist movement, mark a significant breaking point in the religious political history of the Islamic Republic and even in the entire history of Iran. Many people suffered from the brutal clampdown after the elections, which directly affected their beliefs and views of the

Islamic regime, specifically the unrestricted ability of regulations for the *walli al-faqih* to interfere in the political and social issues of the society. It is obvious that the election has changed the nature of the Islamic Republic's political system and its relationship with Iranians politically and socially. The authority of the supreme leader has been questioned and the core point of the Constitution has been challenged, and by different classes of the society. This means that the election has raised critiques of both the institutional and ideological authority of the clerical body (Kamrava, 2010).

The 2009 Iranian presidential election unveiled several political challenges to the religious establishment and conservative politicians. The Green Movement (Wave) believes that the hard-liners, supported by Ayatollah Khamenei, tried to remove the "republic" part of "the Islamic Republic" and give absolute power to the supreme leader. The signs and slogans they used, such as "death to the dictator" were a surprise for the regime and also the inactive segment of the society. The supreme leader, who was supposed to lead the society based on the pure heritage of the Imams, was accused of being a dictator who should resign or, according to people's statement in the street marches and protests, the regime should move toward secularism, ending the institution of *wilayat al-faqih*. The legitimacy of the religious political system was broken after the increased and enlarged silent protests and street marches were met with the massive repressive actions, including the use of teargas, arbitrary arrests, torturing of prisoners (Afshari, 2009; Kamrava, 2010, Sahliyeh, 2009).

A significant part of the debate about the legitimacy of the supreme leader and the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* is taking place in the blogosphere. Persian bloggers within Iran, as well as abroad, bring their support and criticisms into the public arena of the Internet. The notion of "anonymity" helps the people argue their thoughts in this regard. Despite the fact that many of

the bloggers from inside Iran who revealed their real identity end up in prison because of their criticisms, and the filtering regulations that prevent many weblogs and websites from being reached legally in Iran, a massive body of discussion and argument can be found in Persian weblogs about the presidential election and its aftermath. As Amir-Ebrahimi (2008) writes, despite government censorship and self-censorship in *blogistan* by all kinds of bloggers, "[*blogistan*] has become a place where the hidden half of Iranian society is revealed in a global public space" (p. 239). This way, not only the weblogs writing by non-religious or religious intellectuals challenge the religious government of Iran, but also, weblog written by traditional religious bloggers has become an important challenge for the Islamic Republic. For Instance, religious girls, same as secular ones, find a new space to disclose issues about Muslim women. This type of issues has never been evoked in physical spaces before the Internet time in Iran. Through *blogistan* "one can learn a lot about the life and opinions of the younger generation, from the religious to the secular, for whom limits and borders do not have the same meaning they had for their parents and their elders" (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008, p. 239).

**Theorizing Religious Authority on the Internet**

"Modern information technology has changed the social conditions by which political and religious authority are produced" (Turner, 2007, p. 117). The free flow of information today – whether through the television, print media, or the Internet – cannot be controlled easily, by governments, traditional religious leaders, or any other organizations (Bunt, 2000; Castells, 1996; Turner, 2007).

The Internet is a device that provides a free flow of information about/and for all new and old religions. It also provides a public sphere to talk about and negotiate the concepts and

customs in various religions. Since the Internet is a new technology, there are few studies about its influence on religious life or the manifestation of religion in cyberspace. There is also little research on religious authority in the blogosphere.

One of the pioneering efforts in this area is the work of Lorne Dawson (2000) who discusses the implications of the Internet for religious recruitment, religious conflicts and authority, and the mediation of religious experience. He suggests three areas that sociological researchers should consider for studying the presentation of religion on the Internet: (1) the content of the material that has been published on the Internet; (2) the audience who receives this information, and; (3) the effects of the Internet on religion and vice versa, since "almost every religion, no matter how small or unusual has a presence on-line" (p. 28).

Dawson (2000) believes that religion, "as a mode of social life on the Internet" (p. 31), can be studied through two main themes: identity and community. With regard to identity, he discusses the characteristics of online communication, such as anonymity and fragmented identities. These characteristics provide some positive and some negative consequences. For example, anonymity, as a positive feature, opens the door to talking about religiously sensitive subjects that could not be discussed freely in face-to-face situations. However it contains some negative consequences such as creating fake identities to commit crimes. In addition, talking about the features of virtual communities, Dawson (2000) mentions that these groups contain "boundary-breaking" interactions. This feature also has a great impact on arguing about religious issues more openly on the Internet, since real religious communities usually follow strict rules and strive to defend the boundaries of their beliefs.

Dawson (2000) suggests that two major concerns regarding the emergence of the Internet and its impacts on religion include the emergence and spread of new cults, as well as issues

around religious conflict and authority. He believes that the second concern is more serious

because the Internet provides a huge body of religious information that costs almost nothing and

can be accessed for free. This situation conflicts with the authoritative aspects of many religions

because the Internet constitutes "a prime illustration of one of the most lamented features of the

cyberspace: the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation" (p. 43).

One of the studies to look at the consequences of free and open access to religious

information through the Internet is Bruce Lawrence's (2002) work, which specifically focused

on the authority of the Islamic tradition. He introduces authority in Islam as having three aspects:

scriptural, charismatic, and juridical. It is scriptural because it is based on the holy book of

Quran; it is charismatic since it is based on the Prophet's deeds and words through *hadith*; and it

is juridical because it contains specific codes and definition of norms and values within the

Shari'a. Lawrence goes on to discuss Hoover and Venturelli's (1996) work on geo-political

diversities and boundaries in Islamic communities, and their identification of three

complementary vectors of contemporary Islamic religion online: 1- the institutional, meaning

how cultural associations present Islam in cyberspace; 2- the public, meaning how governments

put information about Islam online, and; 3- the private, which includes individuals who have

neither the institutional nor political clout of the other two vectors but are also committed to

projecting Islam on the Internet. Lawrence's study monitors and explains the content of some of

the Islamic websites in each vector and concludes that,

> we should learn to expect the unexpected: digital dreams will have their counterparts in
> digital dramas, and those outcomes no seer will dare predict. This much, however, is
> certain: Muslim cybernauts will be pivotal players in the information revolution: women,
> men, Sufis, Shi'is, and Sunnis will all play their distinctive, if not equivalent, roles (p.
> 251).

However, the level of analysis in this article is not complex. Lawrence does not move toward analysing the content of these websites and only focuses on introducing them. Also, the main question of the study, "the consequences of the new technology on Islam and the notion of religious authority", remains essentially untouched.

Bryan Turner (2007) studied the challenge this new media poses to religious authority, focusing on the different nature of the pedagogical system in the network society. Like Dawson, he believes that web-based information systems challenge both the printed-based authority of secular governments and the traditional authority of world religions because there cannot be any strict control over the content of this new medium.

Turner also reminds the reader that in Abrahamic religions, knowledge about God is not disclosed through rational discussion. Rather, revelation is the basis of knowledge about God. This results in the formation of charismatic authority for those people who have received these revelations (i.e., the prophets). After the prophets, religious scholars became the religious authorities that could interpret and decode religious texts. The emergence of web-based media essentially makes every person a translator and interpreter of religious texts, which threatens the traditional voices of those scholars because of "the flexibility and volume of this religious traffic in information" (p. 118) online.

Comparing the authoritative system in the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and Islam, Turner focuses on the charismatic essence of authority in Muslim countries. He mentions how Islamic charismatic authority became routinized (applying Weber's analysis of authority, 1968), explaining that this occurred due to the way in which the Quran was being transmitted and transferred among Muslim people. Turner describes the era in which the main way to learn the holy Quran was through memorization, the era in which the written format of the text was the

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main way of spreading religious knowledge, and the current era of web-based information. He explains that each of these three formats result in different authoritative relationships. In the Internet era, which we are living in, the legitimacy and uniqueness of the source of interpretation breaks down since the Internet provides a ground for every person to increase his/her religious knowledge. In the current era, an individual does not necessarily need to memorize the Quran or study in a religious college to be eligible to discuss religious issues. Therefore, the Internet has put religious/charismatic authority on a different stage entirely.

Turner (2007) believes that Weber's classification of authority is unable to explain the source of religious authority online. This authority cannot be considered traditional since it has arisen in a network society based on "e-democracy". In particular, Turner points to two main characteristics of the network society as the main factors of "e-democracy": freedom of access and horizontal communication, and the right to unimpeded self-steering (freedom of self). Additionally, it cannot be assumed as charismatic because networks cannot be legitimized by deeds and words of a single person. Further, it cannot be considered as legal-rational since the flow of information is not the product of a hierarchical organization of a set offices issuing commands in a linear chain. Rather, "the authority of the Internet is devolved, dispersed, and dissipated" (p. 124). Although the current research can use some of the Turner's points regarding religious authority, specifically in terms of the hierarchical authority of the charismatic leaders and religious texts, it does not focus on the authority of the Internet, as Turner does. Rather, this thesis specifically looks at the interchanges between the Internet and Shiite religious authority.

There are some criticisms of Turner's research. For instance, he compares Islamic authority with the Papacy in the Catholic Church, as Lawrence (2002) does as well, and he claims that Islam does not have a hierarchical system (i.e., in which the mullahs or the Imams are

given authority by a superior). This is not an accurate claim since, at least in the Shiite tradition, religious scholars must spend several years studying in *madrasa* (*hawza*)[28] and pass several exams. After that, their teachers and the *hawza* system will approve their eligibility of being *mujtahid*s to issue *fatawa* (plural of *fatwa*). It is not as hierarchical as the Catholic Church, but it is not free of hierarchical ordering either, and this current research is going to analyze how the hierarchical system of *hawza* and charismatic figures are being presented on the Internet.

Another study by Jon Anderson (2003) focuses on the role of the Internet as a significant new medium in expanding the public sphere for religious discussions. In this new environment, "Islamic discourse is altered by new positioning and new interpreters" (p. 56). He mainly focuses on the role of Muslim Diaspora; young Muslims who study at higher levels of education and become professionals – mostly in technology and science fields – in Western countries, and he claims that these are Muslims reshaping the public sphere of Islam.

Both Anderson and Turner refer to the impact of the Internet on the Muslim Diaspora which only a small part of this research. However, the results of their studies are related to the main questions posed in this thesis, especially with regard to how different layers of religious authority are being presented on the Internet. Turner provides an example, referring to the tendency of young Muslims overseas to seek information about their religion through the World Wide Web, instead of referring to the Imams or other traditional sources of authority. For Turner, this is a challenge to the traditional authoritative system of religious education. Related to this, Anderson believes that the Internet has extended the power of the middle class Muslim professionals who use their skills in computers and other technologies to "cast religious talk in

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[28] *Hawza* is a seminary of traditional Islamic school of higher learning. It is a term used mostly by the Shiite Muslims communities to refer to a traditional Shiite centre where clerics are trained. In *hawza* students are trained through a study of classic Islamic texts in their original languages, Arabic.

idioms of speech and thought previously or otherwise allocated to separate speech communities, forming a continuum instead of a dichotomization between elite and mass, literate and folk" (Anderson, 2003, p. 56). Therefore, as Anderson says, Islam on the Internet not only forms a new class of interpreters with different opinions and interests, but it also presents "intermediate contexts that reflect a more nuanced diversity of views, settings, projects, and expressions of Islam today" (p. 57).

What is unclear in Anderson's article is why he downplays the role of other Muslim professionals in comparison to technical people. In fact, the direct influence of Muslims who study in the areas of philosophy, literature, social sciences, and religious studies in shaping religious discussions online cannot be understated. Moreover, although it is true that Muslims living in Western society have more opportunities to challenge religious authority online because of their open access to the Internet, religious intellectuals from inside these Muslim countries play a key role in breaking traditional boundaries by arguing about sensitive issues in religious debates – especially in cyberspace.

Another study that discusses the Muslim Diaspora and their usage of the Internet was completed by Jan Scholz, Tobias Selge, Max Stille and Johannes Zimmermann (2008). This study focuses on how the orientation to this technology has added new interpretations and linguistic dimensions to the Muslim world that could challenge traditional authorities. This article attempts to analyze how far the use of podcasts by Muslim groups and individuals contributes to the emergence of a Muslim online counter-public, one that is sometimes challenging and sometimes reinforcing of existing authority structures in the real world. The writers identify four outcomes of using this technology that change and renegotiate authority structures in Muslim societies: (1) voiceless people now have a chance to speak in a public

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platform; (2) different and controversial types of interpreting Islam have been appeared in the virtual space; (3) the Internet creates a new ground for the Islamic thoughts, a new Islamic context, and (4) it changes how Islam is presented, meaning that a specific modern on-line "communication style" is applied.

As with Anderson, they believe that because the so-called third world has restricted access to this new technology, it is the Diaspora that makes the main contribution in presenting and interpreting religion in this new public sphere. This article makes some remarkable points regarding how religious authority on-line can be formed based on authority in the real world, resulting in similar structures of power relations. By analysing two traditional Muslim websites, this article concludes that despite being forms of new media, "the contents and the style of the two institutions' podcast and videocast programmes are oriented towards classical concepts of Islamic scholarship and belief forming the basis of religious authority" (Scholz et al., 2008, 486).

On the other hand, this article also demonstrates that the Internet provides the opportunity for expressing a diversity of opinions and interests that challenge the traditional structure of religious authority. One of the websites analyzed identifies this new technology as a device that turns consumers into prosumers:[29]

> [I]n contrast to the consumer, the prosumer is mainly characterized by the specific way in which he makes use of media: With the help of the wide range of applications offered by the Web 2.0,[30] he/she autonomously publishes his/her opinion and thereby contributes to an alternative online discourse having the potential to challenge established views and interpretations. (Scholz et al., 2008. 463)

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[29] "The term prosumer was coined as early as 1980 by the futurist Alvin Toffler in his book *The Third Wave*" (Scholz et al., 2008. p. 463).

[30] The term "Web 2.0" was coined by Dale Dougherty and Craig Cline in 2004 and popularized by Tim O'Reilly, founder of O'Reilly Media, a publishing house specialized in computing and software publications, by publishing his article 'What is Web 2.0?' (2005). (Scholz et al., 2008)

Therefore, they can challenge the strict traditional structure of religious authority by debating religious issues based on their knowledge and interests.

One of the main criticisms of this detailed article is that while it is looking for the structure of authority on podcasts, this article does not clearly define "authority" and its characteristics. The reader has to presume what authority means through the examples used in analysis. The second criticism is that this article does not describe its theoretical base. It only contains a case study of four Muslim podcasts and an analysis of whether they affirm or challenge existing religious authorities, based on their contents and form.

As mentioned before, Karine Barzilai-Nahon and Gad Barzilai (2005) studied the interaction between religious fundamentalism and the Internet among ultra-Orthodox Jews. This study is one of the most structured analyses about the interaction between religious fundamentalism and the Internet which explains whether the relationship between the two can be reconciled. They identify four principal dimensions of religious fundamentalism that are in tension with the Internet: hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline, and seclusion.

The first tension, hierarchy, is about charismatic authority (as defined by Weber) that imposes restrictions on using the Internet for their members; either by restricting access through censorship, filtering, and blocking, or by deletion of the information and issuing punishment for the publisher of the data. At the same time religious elites engage the Internet in maintaining their power and upholding religious beliefs by using email and encouraging people to attend religious practice (i.e., through their websites). Therefore, the community may use the Internet and still maintain its original institutional patterns of hierarchy and traditional authority. But, as the authors explain, "even under the harshest conditions of communal surveillance, individuals find ways to circumvent censorship, access forbidden material, and employ applications that

might contrast and challenge the community's character and basic principles" (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 27). This means that religious authority is undermined and challenged by this new technology. In general, "it may be said that religious fundamentalist communities are a part of the globalization process, being tied to it, inter alia, through the usage of the Internet. At the same time, however, they continue to preserve their power structure" (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 27).

The second tension refers to patriarchy. The main issue discussed here is the notion of how this new technology gives voice to the voiceless, especially women. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) explain two contradictory results of using the Internet in religious fundamentalist communities. While using the internet can stabilize the power relations of religious fundamentalism, it can be a public means of liberation and freedom from traditional patriarchy and other elements of religious fundamentalism as well. In their view, "the Internet has created better opportunities for feminine voices to be heard in religious fundamentalist contexts, although these opportunities are framed within the communal context and its hierarchy. Cultured technology mitigates the possible conflict between feminism, religiosity and community" (p. 28).

Discipline is the third tension that Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai address, and they discuss how printed texts have hierarchical authority and hyperlinks/texts do not contain those restrictions. By this they mean printed texts are disciplined in a sequential way by and through religious hierarchies; they are "linear, bounded, structured in a certain logic, and fixed" and also they have "a particular focus, a clearly defined audience and a single voice" (Wills, as cited in Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 29). While the innovation of hypertext is that it enables interactions that break the rigid boundaries of the structure and firm logic. As they discuss, based on Wills (1999), "hypertext links information through associations and not sequentially. It

therefore breaks traditional hierarchy among texts" (as cited in Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 29).

The last tension is about seclusion which may decrease and/or increase through use of the Internet in religious fundamentalist communities. This dimension shows the level of affinity and empathy among the members of a fundamentalist community which secludes the community from the world. The Internet can be used as a device through which people look for information about their own religion and beliefs but not others, while surfing the web. Therefore "the scope of seclusion may be enhanced through the Internet rather than reduced" (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 30). However, the Internet also opens up the ways for interactions among different ideas within a religion or among different religions; members of a religious community may create anonymous identities to reach alternative content that is forbidden or unacceptable in their own community (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005).

Although they focus on the Jewish community, they have done very valuable work in analyzing the effect of the Internet on religious fundamentalism. Their work is one of the most important frameworks for analysing the impact of the Internet on traditional forms of religious life and authority, and it can be employed to examine the same impacts on Muslim communities.

Heidi Campbell, as mentioned, is another thinker who has done several studies on the subject of religious authority on the Internet. Her work in 2007 "Who's got the power? Religious authority and the Internet" focuses on how religion online provides an important space for studying what she refers to as "multiple layers of authority", which she considers to be religious hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text. Campbell examined three communities – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – in a case study to analyse whether religious authority is being influenced by the new technology of the Internet in these communities.

Regarding the first layer, religious hierarchy, Campbell refers to the roles and perceptions of religious leaders/authority figures as interpreters of religious knowledge. She explains how Christians and non-practicing Jews are apt to reflect critically on the influence of religious authority figures on community beliefs and practices, especially through the Internet. In discussing Islam's presence online, she refers to Anderson (1999), who mentions that three new communities of interpreters of Islamic faith have arisen:

1. Creole pioneers: those with professional-technical qualifications and transnational backgrounds who bring religious interest on-line as after-hours interests;

2. Activist interpreters who recruit others toward certain discourses or groups and use the Internet to address a wider audience, and;

3. Officializing discourses or recognized leaders from governmental councils and religious groups that affirm the universal access and a sense of participation in public spheres of listeners, watchers or browsers; this means that "webmasters or online moderators function as new agents of authority" (p. 1055).

This illustrates that the Internet adds to religious life and challenges existing forms of religious authority.

In terms of the "religious structure" layer, Campbell mainly refers to Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's (2005) analysis of the role of the Internet in creating better opportunities for feminine voices. However, she adds that the online environment seems to both inform and stabilize traditional views of religious structure and discourse. For instance, most of the Christian websites contain information about traditional views of religion.

To define "religious ideology", her discussion focuses on the construction of the image of a single or global religious community. Based on her case study, the idea that religious ideology

takes precedence over other forms of identification shows that "community affiliation is not only important for individuals' personal identification, but of critical importance with respect to solidifying corporate investment and acceptance of community belief" (Campbell, 2007, p. 1057).

With regard to the Internet, she looked for nuanced images of religious communal ideology that emerge from online interaction in all three religions. Campbell explains how the Internet is used to confirm or control religious identity construction, and how a strong emphasis is placed on trying to link the local religious structure, such as a church, to the global or worldwide Church. With regard to Islam, Campbell refers to Lawrence (2002), who says cyber-Islam employs metaphors from the discourse of traditional, conservative Islam as a way to reinforce global structures, images, and beliefs about Islam online.

Finally, to explain the "religious text" layer, she investigates questions such as: Are religious texts cited as sources of truth or community policy as frequently and in the same ways in online religious community conversation? Are traditional texts affirmed or criticized online with the same consistency as they are offline? Do the same texts serve the same roles in both contexts?

She has completed a literature review on all studies in this area to help frame her theories about religious authority. However, she never explains why she applies the term "layer", and she does not explain whether these "layers" should be ranked. Moreover, she tries to include Weber's theoretical framework for defining authority but never explains the relationship between the layers that she identifies for authority and Weber's definition of the different types of authority. Also, she does not elaborate how this multi-layered approach is more useful in studying authority online than Weber's classification.

Furthermore, Campbell defines charismatic authority as "based on devotion to an individual who exhibits a particular characteristic, ideal, or exemplary quality that motivates others to adhere to the normative patterns sanctioned by that individual" (p. 1046), but this is misleading if we consider Weber's definition. She reduces charisma to a person/individual whose words and deeds are obeyed because of him/her. However, Weber does not define charisma based on the personality of the individual who has authority, but bases it on the beliefs, words, and deeds of that person. Campbell's definition is the other way around.

There are some additional criticisms to be made of Campbell's study. For instance, while she chooses Sufis as a group to represent Islam in her study, they are rarely known as Muslims. Therefore, she cannot infer what she found in their community as acceptable in all other Muslim communities. Secondly, in the section where she provides evidence with regard to the Jewish community, she argues about off-topic issues that do not pertain to the main research question of whether the Internet has influenced religious authority. Instead, she talks about the perspectives of religious people towards the new technology of the Internet and whether their religiosity is being affected by cyberspace.

Overall, Campbell's work is the best study on this topic and is referenced because this research asks the same question about the relationship between the online and offline religious communities and how the Internet affects different aspects of religious authority. This research is trying to respond to Campbell's call for continued research on the four layers of religious authority. Therefore, this study will discuss the same issues that Campbell mentions, but will specifically focus on the Shiite Muslim community as expressed in the Persian blogosphere. In this regard, Campbell brings up useful questions that should be considered in forthcoming studies, such as: Do the online moderators perform a similar role as the religious leader? How

can religious organizations monitor and influence online groups? How do online discourse communities accept, reject, or redefine the dominant theologies and traditions? Do religious texts continue to serve as a primary source of authority in online groups, similar to the offline/official religious organizations?

In a more recent study, Campbell (2010) focuses on religious authority in the blogosphere, specially addressing the claim that the Internet flattens hierarchies and gives voice to marginalized populations. The main question of her research is "how traditional forms of religious authority—namely roles, structures, beliefs and texts—are being presented and framed online" (p.252). Her exploratory study wants to answer the question of "how authority is framed within religious blogs in order to contribute to our understanding of how religious authority is regarded online in general, as well as what types of traditional religious roles, structures, beliefs and texts are primarily affirmed or challenged online" (p. 252). Although her discussion is limited to Christian weblogs, her study is one of the most fruitful regarding religious authority online.  Her quantitative analysis of the data she gathered from weblogs illustrates how Christian bloggers affirm or challenge traditional forms of religious authority. She concludes that

> while early studies of religion online suggested that the internet might primarily be used by religious users to challenge traditional sources of religious authority, this study is consistent with more recent claims that the Internet instead can serve as a source to empower religious authorities. (p. 269)

She made this statement based on analysis of the blogs using the four layers of religious authority that she identified in her previous work.

The same criticisms about the lack of connection between her work and Weber's categorization of authority and definition of charismatic authority are still valid in this study. She refers to religious authority as a kind of legitimacy that comes from a divine/supernatural

referent, but she does not talk about the essence of religious authority and where we can locate it based on Weber's categorization.

This will lead to an analysis of the selected blog's posts according to Campbell's classification of four forms by which authority is expressed and based on the four dimensions of tension that Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai suggest.

## Chapter 3: The Presentation of Shiite Authority in the Persian Blogosphere

In countries where freedom of expression is limited due to religious fundamentalism and political restrictions of its political regime, the Internet as a technology which contains various forms of social media, such as weblogs, is playing an increasingly visible role in the areas of religion and politics. In the months after the Iranian presidential election, Iranians blogged heavily to express themselves and to challenge or support the unpredictable incidents following the election in 2009. Analyzing the content of these blogs presents a novel opportunity for analysts to gain insight into the public opinion and mood of Iranian society in general and about their opinions regarding religious authority in particular. Besides, this kind of study documents the truism suggesting that the Internet and society have mutual influences on each other. It also elucidates the statement that each political and religious group benefit from this technology to fulfil their needs. This research also tries to explain any possible unrevealed effects the Internet, as a secular and liberal technology, has on religious fundamentalist communities.

This thesis analyses a selection of Persian blogs cases in two ways simultaneously. The first analysis is based on Campbell's (2007) suggestions regarding the presentation of religious authority online. Campbell identifies four layers to be analysed: (1) religious hierarchy, (2) religious structures, (3) religious ideology, and (4) religious texts. Accordingly, this exploratory study seeks to address the question of how authority is framed within Shiite Persian weblogs in order to contribute to the understanding of how religious authority is regarded online in general, as well as what types of traditional religious roles, structures, beliefs and texts are primarily affirmed or challenged online. This research seeks to identify which specific layer is being affected in the interference of the Internet. Is it the power position of traditional religious leaders that is presented on the weblogs, such as the *ulama,* and *mujtahids* in the contemporary context

of Iranian society? Is it the established structure by which policy decisions are made and information is passed on to Shiite community members, such as *hawza* and religious educational system of Iran, mosques and holy places, or the Shiite-run government? Is it the whole shared ideology of Shiite community or the particular interpretation of official religious rhetoric and teaching from the Quran and *hadith*? By differentiating between these layers of Shiite authority, more accurate claims can be made as to which specific forms of authority are being challenged or otherwise supported through the Internet.

The second level of the study is based on Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's work (2005). Since religious fundamentalist communities are generally suspicious of technology and cyberspace, they see the Internet as a threat to the cultural preservation of their community (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005). This thesis is interested mainly in the interchanges between the Internet and Iranian Shiite community as a fundamentalist religious group. More specifically, following Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's (2005) study, this research analyses the utilization of the Internet by religious fundamentalists to maintain and strengthen the essential origins of fundamentalism in the Iranian society, while modernist reformists also use this technology in order to reach their goals. Moreover, based on Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's (2005) study, this thesis is in search for any hidden tensions or changes that may be caused by utilizing the Internet in the religiously fundamental society of Iran.

As noted, Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) introduce four principle dimensions of religious fundamentalism that are affected by interaction with the Internet: (1) hierarchy, (2) patriarchy, (3) discipline and (4) seclusion. Based on this analysis, this thesis seeks to identify the various forms of tension that are involved in the Persian Weblogs, as illustrated through examples from the weblog posts. Do the Iranian Shiite weblogs create any tension with the

hierarchical essence of the Shiite authority of the *ulama* by strengthening individuals' voices and the free flow of information? Or are the weblogs tools serving the authority's goals and preserving their situation? Do Persian weblogs downgrade patriarchy by giving women more of a chance to be heard and acknowledged, empowering their feminine identity in the Iranian Shiite community? Do Persian weblogs create any tension with the highly disciplined behaviour encouraged by the traditional ways of interpreting the Quran and *ahadith's* sacred texts? Do Persian weblogs reduce the seclusion of religious fundamentalist Shiite community? Does the Internet prevent community members from external cultural transplantation? Is the Internet utilized to spread the Shiite ideology beyond its boundary?

Following the model that Campbell suggests for studying religious authority on the Internet, this chapter is divided into different topics, based on the layers of authority. In each section, there are related subjects that are discussed through examples from the blog postings. The selected examples from the weblogs also expose any possible tension that may cause by the Internet in the fundamentalist community of Iran.


**Religious Hierarchy**

In Campbell's (2007) study, religious hierarchy refers to the roles and perceptions of recognized religious or community leaders. In our case, it refers to authority figures or traditional leadership figures such as the Prophet Mohammad, Imams, political leaders and the clerical body of *ulama* and *mujtahids*.

*What history tells us about wilayat al-faqih?*

Many Shiite *mujtahid*s, clerics and charismatic figures have been discussed in these weblogs. Tourjan heavily focuses on the *ulama's* life and the historical background of the *hawza*, *mujtahid*s and clerics. The bloggers of Tourjan tend to discuss the *ulama* and the religious-social issues of the current society from the perspective of a historical understanding of the origins and the essence of the *ulama's* ideas and efforts.

For example, when they want to talk about the source of the *wilayat al-faqih* theory they refer to Ayatollah Burujerdi and his unique charismatic authority over the Shiite society. They mention that since the death of Ayatollah Burujerdi – about fifty years ago – there has been no sole grand *mujtahid* for the Shiite society all over the world. Even Ayatollah Khomeini, with his powerful charismatic leadership of the revolution, did not have a remarkable population of followers outside of Iran.

Ayatollah Burujerdi revived the *hawza* of Qom in 1945, which had waned after the death of its founder, Ayatollah Abdul Karim Haeri. Tourjan explains how he empowered the *hawza* and introduced it as the main seminary for Shiite clerics.

> Burujerdi, with his wisdom and leadership, made Qom the main centre for Shiites. After his death, his students restored his legacy and the power of Qom's seminary. In Burujerdi's time, many of the *ulama* could not even think about changing the centrality of the thousand years old seminary of Najaf [Iraq] to Qom. However, with the charisma and authority of Ayatollah Burujerdi, that visionary idea came true. (Tourjan, 2009)

Moreover, the political aspect of Ayatollah Burujerdi's opposition to the Shah should not be ignored in this context. Borujerdi's belief in quietism in state political matters extended to keeping silent in public on such problematic issues. It is thought that with this silence, the Shah ensured more religious instruction in state schools, tightened control of cinemas and other offensive secular entertainment during the holy month of Ramadan and the Muharram

ceremonies (Algar, 1972). Although he had been in contact with the Shah, many believed that Ayatollah Burujerdi did not agree with the growing despotic totalitarianism of the Shah's government (Cottam, 1965). Ayatollah Burujerdi did not try to conceal his disapproval of some of the regime's policies, but made it clear that he was in no way prepared to promote disorder.[31]

Regarding the theory of *wilayat al-faqih*, Fathi and Abtahi write that although Ayatollah Burujerdi resisted participating in any political issues of his time – such as the Oil Nationalization Movement and the coup d'état against Mosadeq or the *Fadayeean's* uprising[32] – he was the first *mujtahid* who believed in the expansion of the official authority of the clerical body. He believed that people have to obey all the rules that a political system defines for its society whether the rulers are religious or not. In this regard, the bloggers present a story from

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[31] What is meaningful here is that Ayatollah Burujerdi had even more power than the Shah in mobilizing people toward a specific political and ideological direction and also put pressure on the Shah to change in his decisions. This was the reason that the Shah never confronted him directly, instead he sought good relation with Burujerdi and his followers. For instance, when the Shah's government introduced the "land reform bill" to parliament, landlords appealed to Ayatollah Burujerdi and other religious leaders to speak out against this policy, which they believed it was unconstitutional and in violation of the Shiite laws. This time, Ayatollah Burujerdi took action and sent a letter to Ayatollah Behbahani. Ayatollah Behbahani was a member of parliament and pro-constitutionalism, but he was strictly against the anti-monarchy movements that had begun during that time. The division between those religious leaders who were in a collegial position to the Kingship and those *ulama*, such as Ayatollah Burujerdi, who were not in any official position, but held great power of charismatic authority, had continued from the Safavid era until that time.

[32] Navvab-e Safavi was a cleric who established the *Fadaeeyan-e Islam* (Devotees of Islam) organization, a Shiite militant organization (1945) who later assassinated two prime ministers. Mentioning the *Fadayeean* organization is important for this thesis because not only was Navvab identified as a charismatic figure by his followers, but he also was one of the few clerics that clearly opposed the Shah while Ayatollah Burujerdi was quiet. This means that he even confronted the traditional way of religiosity which remained quiet against the pro-secular regime of the Shah. Moreover, *Fadaeeyan'* similarities in fundamentalist ideology and methods to the contemporary religious hard-liners in Iran cannot be ignored, especially when its younger members later joined *Hey'at*-e *Mo'talefeh* Islam (the Coalition of Islamic groups), which is considered to be the most important hard-liner group in post-revolution Iran. Navvab was one of the first religious leaders who strictly believed in an Islamic government and suggested a rough plan for it. He suggested a new type of ideological political system in which the *ulama* would not be a collegial party. Rather, they became the head of the political system. He argued that in the Shiite state the leading faqih should head the government and that parliament should be a consultative body (not a legislative one) which would find ways of dealing with problems on the basis of Islamic principles and under the supervision of the leading *ulama*. He also argued that there must be a free parliamentary election in order to elect Islamic, Shiite pure and competent representatives. No Islamic, impure or anti-religious people had the right to be elected (Taghavi, 2004). The *Fadayeean* organization and their ideology were confronted by society; they neither had support from the intellectuals nor from the *ulama*, except for a few. However, their ideology for the Islamic Shiite government was supported during and after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, because Ayatollah Khomeini was one of the few *ulama* who indirectly supported Navvab.

Ayatollah Burujerdi's life when some of the *ulama* and clerics revolted against the construction of the shrine and the mosque in Qom by the government. It was not traditionally acceptable for them that the government destroy a part of the mosque in order to expand it. But Ayatollah Burujerdi reminded them that the rulers have the authority to make social decisions and people should accept and obey the official law, even if it seems not to be traditionally acceptable. Based on this belief, Tourjan writes:

> By giving the government complete authority for ruling society, Ayatollah Burujerdi cultivated the theory of "*wilayat al-faqih*", which says that if the *ulama* become the rulers of the state, their power must be unrestricted. However, he never tried to take action based on this theory. Many of his close adherents believed that he, like his grand mentor Akhound-e Khorasani, doubted the ability of the clerical body of the *hawza* to rule society. However, based on this belief, eight years after the death of Ayatollah Burujerdi, Ayatollah Khomeini, who was one of his disciples, officially introduced the theoretical structure of "*wilayat al-faqih*" by publishing a series of lectures and notes in Najaf while he was in exile. (Tourjan, 2009)

By conveying the story of this very basic stage of the *wilayat al-faqih* theory, Tourjan directly presents the first layer of the authority that Campbell (2007) suggests: the role of the grand Ayatollah in proposing a new structure for the Shiite society. By referring to this history, Tourjan raises some important points. First, it presents the idea that the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* was not an innovation of Ayatollah Khomeini; this statement is against what the regime always promotes about the basis of this theory. Second, by stating that "although Ayatollah Burujerdi proposed the theory, he never got involved in any political activities" and "his close adherents believed that he doubted the ability of the clerical body of the *hawza* to rule the society" (Tourjan, 2009), Tourjan wants to clear the ground for thinking about the inadequacies and failures of the clerical leadership of the current political system in Iran. As it explains, Ayatollah Burujerdi – the sole *mujtahid* with charismatic authority, not only inside Iran, but also worldwide – suspected the consequences of the clerical rulership. Therefore, Tourjan maintains that it is

essential that the theory of *wilayat al-faqih*, which has been held by Iranian society for more than 30 years, be revised and discussed, based on its achievements and failures. This statement is supported by other posts that discuss the *ulama* who were among the opponents of the theory of *wilayat al-faqih*, such as Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, Ayatollah Khoie, and Ayatollah Bahjat.

This notion is a new way of thinking about the theory of *wilayat al-faqih.* In fact, as Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) mention, the Internet provides a new level of discussion about religious matters in a fundamentalist community. Although debates about the theory of *wilyat al-faqih* were common in the early years of the revolution, it has since been marked as a sensitive issue, for it religious and security reasons, and has not been discussed publically. There were many newspapers and journals during the president Khatami of the reformist which were forcibly closed as a result of having published such articles. However, the blogosphere creates a new public ground for these sensitive debates. The Internet generates a public sphere in which the supporters and the opponents of the *wilayat al-faqih* theory present their ideas and have discussions.

### *Religious intellectuals perspective*

Moreover, regarding the theory of *wilayat al-faqih*, there is another remarkable point among Tourjan's posts. Fathi and Abtahi, the bloggers, conducted a series of interviews with religious intellectuals about their relationship with Ayatollah Khomeini, before and after the revolution. Among these, there is an interview with Mohammad Basteh-Negar, who is known as a member of the Religious-Nationalist Movement and was a political activist before and after the revolution. He raises a different meaning of "the absolute empowerment of *wilayat al-faqih*". Traditionally *wilayat al-faqih* refers to the rule of the jurist who heads the state, but there are

legal institutions in the political system that run society, including the government, judicial

system, and the parliament that are independent of him. As one of the posts in Tourjan explains,

the main developer of the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* after the revolution, Ayatollah Montazeri,

says:

> The main duty for the *"wilayat al-faqih"* is to lead, advise and guide society, but he is
> not supposed to make decisions for parliament… even Ayatollah Khomeini cannot
> intervene in the duty of the government and the parliament. (Tourjan, 2010)

Some of the *ulama*, among them Ayatollah Khomeini, however, believe in "the absolute

empowerment of *wilayat al-faqih*". There is a general agreement on the meaning of "the absolute

empowerment of *wilayat al-faqih*", which is that the authority of the supreme leader (as the

"*wally al-faqih*") is unrestricted and above the constitution. But, as initiated, some people have

tried to interpret it differently. Baste-Negar is among those people who believe in decreasing and

restricting the power of the *wally al-faqih* to divine knowledge and Shari'a law. He says:

> I believe that by proposing the doctrine of "the absolute empowerment of *wilayat al-
> faqih*", Imam[33] [Ayatollah Khomeini] wanted to present a type of religious leadership
> that can act free of the traditional restrictions from the traditional *fiqh* [Shari'a law]. That
> way, he wanted to make the doctrine flexible to be applicable in modern society. I believe
> the title of the Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine should be changed from *wilayat al-faqih* to
> something less problematic. (Tourjan, 2010)

Although this claim illustrates the belief in the hierarchical position of Ayatollah

Khomeini, at the same time it contains the notion of reducing the power of the supreme leader to

the religious aspects of society and empowers the idea of secularism. Furthermore, by this claim

he introduces Ayatollah Khomeini as a pioneer and anti-traditional religious leader who

proposed a theory involving revolutionary and modern perspectives at odds with the traditional

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[33] Imam is an honorary title for the successors of the Prophet Muhammad in Shiism. But there are some other
leaders who are called Imam because of their spiritual closeness to the Prophet's guidance (both deeds and words) in
Shiite history. For example, in recent centuries, the Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Musa Sadr were known as
Imams. What is interesting here is that many Iranian religious intellectuals have avoided using this tile for Ayatollah
Khomeini in recent decades to demonstrate their criticisms of the political system that he established after the
revolution.

*fiqh*. Here again the points of Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai's study make sense. Different ideas which challenge the dominant ideology generally do not have chance to be published in the printed media, newspapers and other official media. The Internet provides this new opportunity for the modernist bloggers to reflect new and veiled thoughts. However, hardliners also use this technology to prove their own viewpoints. The hierarchy is being challenged by both groups of modernists and fundamentalists.

Related to this point, as Campbell (2007) notes, attention should be given to how the religious authority of the leaders emerges online, and how it is described. Also, the influence of the description within the local faith community and tradition as a whole should be considered. By introducing Ayatollah Khomeini as a charismatic Shiite leader who revolutionarily broke the traditional borders of *hawza* and Iranian society, Tourjan brings a new aspect of his religious charismatic leadership into light which may create tension with the religious hierarchy. The Internet enables individuals to re-define and analyse a restrictive role and functional power of authority based on his/her understanding and make it public. So that when Tourjan reflects an undiscovered and less approved aspect of Ayatollah Khomeini's perspective (anti-tradition of *hawza)* through Baste-Negar's interview, the usual traditional understanding of the role of Shiite revolutionary charisma, Ayatollah Khomeini is challenged.

Another notable point here is that in the free space of the Internet, not only the famous and religious professionals and politicians present their thoughts, but common people and infamous religion students and unknown politicians also have the chance to make their views known. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai discusses "hierarchies constitute and are based on elites that control the flow of information" (p. 27), however, the Internet makes the opportunity non-elites to spread their thoughts and becomes one of the sources of tension in a religiously

fundamentalist society such as Iran. This is one of the consequences of the usage of the Internet, the free flow of information by which unknown religious students, such as Fathi and Abtahi, can present thier controversial viewpoints about a sensitive issue, the theory of *wilayat al-faqih.*

### *Reformist and conservative ulama*

Religious-political crises in Iran today are approached differently in these five weblogs. For instance, while Tourjan has questioned the current hierarchical system of religious authority based on the historical background, Menbar tends to discuss its support for a specific political party (the conservative-fundamentalist party) and reports the special events going on around the author in Qom. In Menbar, the historical documents that appear about the *wilayat al-faqih* mainly refer to the author's criticisms of the *mujtahid*s who do not believe in this theory. More particularly, Najmi, Menbar's blogger, uses historical documents to explain that some of the pro-modernist-reformist *mujtahids* were among the actual supporters of the "absolute empowerment of *wilayat al-faqih*" and only became opponents of the theory recently. He aggressively attacks Ayatollah Saneiy who was the attorney general in the era of Ayatollah Khomeini and even Ayatollah Khamenei, but who recently became one of the main challengers of the *wilayat al-faqih* since the emergence of the reformist government of Ayatollah Khatami in 1997. Najmi presents some quotes from Ayatollah Saneiy from twenty years ago which demonstrate his belief in the "absolute empowerment" of the *wally al-faqih*:

> "*Wally al-faqih*" governs everything, he can even rule against the Constitution and parliament's laws, but he would not use his power to do so except for very specific problems. The value of the Constitution relies on the supreme leader's approval. Since our reference is God's law, which is the basis of the supreme leader's actions and decisions, […] disobedience of his commands is considered as a big sin. If he commands a rule, no one can refer to other *ulama* or any ruler to act differently since his statements are the exact statements of the Hidden Imam. (Menbar, 2009)

This illustrates that regardless of Saneiy's political perspective, Najmi strongly believes in the role of the *ulama* as the main authority in Iranian society. Since he believes that his audiences will be convinced to support the theory of "the absolute empowerment" by this rationale, he cites the quotation from Ayatollah Saneyi. He cites this example for at least two more reasons, first to state the importance of the position of *wilayat al-faqih* and second to show that Ayatollah Saneiy, who is one of the Green Movement's supporters, has been challenging his own beliefs about the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* and Ayatollah Khamenei, as the supreme leader. This way, he tries to prove that the reformists do not have adequate reliability since they have changed their mind during the past 30 years. This is one of the examples that shows how the traditional authority of religious leaders is being challenged by a young religious scholar. This type of criticism was rarely published in the public sphere of society before the emergence of the Internet. This is because *ulama* were always known as the respectful heirs of the Imams in the pre-modern society of Iran and their political-religious beliefs could not be questioned by a journalist or a student.

Moreover, the notion of gathering and publishing historical data is one of the most useful methods that every blogger uses to convince their audience. In this case Najmi uses old newspapers to show his point of view against the modernist-reformist. This notion refers to another dimension of tension between the Internet and a religious fundamentalist community that Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) refer to, discipline. Discipline is defined as "a set of practices and a consciousness that exist anywhere and anytime in communal life" (p. 29) and is not solely a textual phenomenon. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) mention, using hypertext in the Internet era is a phenomenon which challenges the existing discipline of the linear and structured format of the texts. This means that by referring and making links to old newspapers and

publishing it in a blog post, Najmi unintentionally creates a slight but invisible tension in the

bases of the religious fundamentalist community. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) write,

although religious fundamentalists apply this new technology as a tool for their own goals, the

tensions are unavoidable even if they do not consider it as a tension or one of the consequences

of this new secular technology.

### *Charisma against the traditional system*

Tourjan and Menbar discuss different political and social aspects of the charismatic

leadership of the *ulama* in different eras. Although these bloggers support opposite political

parties, by reviewing their weblogs we repeatedly encounter statements that describe the major

characteristics of charismatic leadership. For instance, when Tourjan published an interview with

Ehsan Naraghi, a sociologist known as a religious intellectual, Dr. Naraghi says:

> No other Ayatollah can compare to Imam Khomeini. His goal was establishing a
> religious state […] today one of the main issues with *mujtahid*s is that they are too
> worried about public perceptions. Ayatollah Khomeini did not worry about what common
> people would think and say when he issued *fatawa*; he was convinced of his religious
> knowledge and power. For example, his *fatawa* that made it legal and religiously
> acceptable to play and learn music and chess were totally anti-traditional. (Tourjan, 2009)

Referring to Campbell's theoretical framework, religious hierarchy, specifically in its

charismatic form, is evidently present in the Persian blogosphere. The example above illustrates

how Ayatollah Khomeini was self-confident about his divine knowledge and about the reaction

of Iranian society toward his *fatawa*. Naraghi mentions a *fatawa* that caused controversy among

traditional *hawza* scholars and *mujtahid*s to show the differences between a charismatic leader

and a traditional one. Although there are other examples in this weblog that talk about the

charismatic characteristics of Ayatollah Khomeini, Tourjan does not heavily invest in describing

this aspect of the Shiite leadership. What is more important in this [reformist] weblog is the way

that the critiques of the current political system are being pictured in the larger framework of the *ulama's* social leadership during the Shiite political history.

We may also consider some of the posts on Tourjan as a sign of a reduction in the seclusion of the Shiite fundamentalist perspective. The Internet may actually both decrease and increase the level of seclusion of religious fundamentalist communities. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) explain, fundamentalist communities modify and localize Internet technology in ways that preserve the community's seclusion in different ways; for instance by forcing their members to interact through local and controlled Internet platform, by motivating members to use the Internet to gather information about their own religion and not to learn about other religions, or by censoring and filtering the unaccepted data. However, this new technology creates opportunity for people to search for new perspectives and outside sources that may not be acceptable and/or are forbidden in their community.

Tourjan does not include any external religious or secular sources in its posts, however, by posting the series of interviews that the bloggers conducted about the relationship between Ayatollah Khomeini and religious intellectuals, they refer to non-traditional sources which define and interpret religious hierarchy differently from the communal understanding. The consequences of Ayatollah Khomeini's charismatic leadership and the revolution have been described and analysed in a very strict and biased context within Iran. In fact, it is not considered acceptable for the state to talk about Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolution in a critical way.

Even discussions and arguments by religious intellectuals who had official positions in the government during the life of Ayatollah Khomeini are not considered acceptable, since they raise fundamental criticisms of the institutionalization of religion in Iran. Since, Fathi and Abtahi, Tourjan's authors, are both from a clerical background, this type of posts, which refer to

religious intellectuals' experiences and arguments, can be considered as a sign of reducing

seclusion within the Iranian Shiite fundamentalist community. This is because the political

regime of Iran draws a line between acceptable sources and inacceptable ones. Fundamentalist

authority would like people to refer only to the certain type of information. The fact that these

bloggers, who work within the system, are drawing people's attention to new and alternative

sources of information about Ayatollah Khomeini is potentially problematic. Their work breaks

down the barriers that the regime creates between the official interpretation of Ayatollah

Khomeini's ideology and other types of interpretation. In that sense, these interviews and posts

are considered an attack on the attempt of the regime for maintaining seclusion in the Iranian

society.

In this sense, when Tourjan published at least eight posts about Ayatollah Khomeini that

contained interviews with religious intellectuals, it relied on a source that is not officially

approved. Furthermore, one of the interviewees, Ebrahim-Yazdi, has been a member of the

"Freedom Movement"[34] since before the revolution. Although he was one of the closest

acquaintances of Ayatollah Khomeini during his exile in France, and had been politically active

in the very first years of the Shiite state, after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini he spent many

years in prison for his support of the reformist party and was labelled as an ally of the United

States (enemy).

Tourjan published an interview with Ebrahim-Yazdi in January 2010, some months after

the presidential election, yet they had originally interviewed him five years earlier. One of the

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[34] *Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran* is an Iranian political organization which was founded in 1961 by some political and religious figures; religious intellectuals. Despite being outlawed by the prevailing regime in Iran, the group continues to exist. Most of the founders were in the government in the beginning years after the revolution. Now this organization is labeled as a threat to *wilayat al-faqih*'s status and most of the well-known members of this organization experiences hardship and prison during the resent two decades.

unstated reasons why they decided to publish such posts was that after the election,

fundamentalists tried to analyse Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology in a specific way, to provide

support for their goals and the aggressive attacks and restrictions they imposed on the people.

Within this context, referring to the nationalist-religious movements (such as Freedom

Movement) can be considered as a form of reduction in religious and political seclusion that

shows a series of small changes that affect the fundamentalist atmosphere of Iranian Shiite

policy.

Moreover, although the subject of these interviews was specific to the relationship

between Ayatollah Khomeini and religious intellectuals, the interviews presented aspects of

Ayatollah Khomeini's life and beliefs that have not been explored for many years. For example,

Ebrahim-Yazdi explained that,

> A year before the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, some clerics, for the third time, asked for
> his permission to dissolve the "Freedom Movement organization". He refused to permit
> them and said that Bazargan, Sahabi, and Yazdi are not our allies, but they are Muslims.
> Later on, when some other clerics asked Ayatollah Khomeini why he did not let them
> dissolve the "Freedom Movement organization" when it opposed the clerics, he replied,
> "they do not oppose the clerics, they oppose you!" Then they said, "but they are against
> you, too". And Ayatollah Khomeini answered, "So what? Am I one of the principles of
> faith (*Usul-i Din*)?"[35]  (Tourjan, 2010)

These types of references could not be found in official sites. It is rare that

fundamentalists talk about Ayatollah Khomeini from the perspective of an opponent. Therefore,

the series of interviews with religious intellectuals published in Tourjan again reflect the fourth

tension between the Internet and religious fundamentalism: that of seclusion (Barzilai-Nahon &

Barzilai, 2005). Readers of these types of weblogs consider these bloggers, regardless of their

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[35] The statement means that he considered himself as a political leader who has opponents in the state. Being
opposed to him neither warrants shouting down other voices nor saying that their opposition makes them non-
religious.

reformist or conservative perspective, as supporters and presenters of the traditional and charismatic religious authority of the fundamentalist community of Iran. However, the information that has been published about the leadership of the society in these posts has never been released in the official media. The power of this new technology opens accessibility to information which can be used to challenge religious fundamentalism, especially since most of the information is not based on officially acceptable and approved sources. They can be considered as the outside sources which were not available for the public before in the pre-Internet era.

In the traditional way, unknown and non-official clerics, such as Fathi, Abtahi and Najmi, would not have the opportunity to reveal their viewpoint for the public of the Iranian community in the pre-Internet era. This is because they should first become eligible, after many years of study, to run a *majlis*[36] or talk on a *menbar*, which are the two practical ways to be officially heard in the public. This notion refers to the term "counter public" that Scholz et al. (2008) mention in their study of the Muslim podcasts. In their research, they found that these new small digital media, such as podcast, weblogs, and social networks create a new level for making dialogue about religious issues which are not presented in the formal media and by the officials. Therefore, individuals and groups take this opportunity to make a counter public sphere which is relatively untouched by the state control.

### *Fundamentalist perspective*

However, as Scholz et al. (2008) state the Muslim online counter public sometimes challenges, sometimes reinforces, the existing authority structures. For instance Menbar blog

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[36] Religious gathering.

repeatedly emphasizes the charismatic characteristics of Ayatollah Khamenei, the current

supreme leader, by referring to local and official sources. When Najmi reports the last visit of

Ayatollah Khamenei to the *ulama* in Qom, he mainly talks about the welcoming atmosphere of

the formal and informal meetings. He explains that Ayatollah Khamenei, is such a friendly leader

in face-to-face interactions that he did not feel that Ayatollah Khamenei is the supreme leader

but a friend of all those *ulama*. He says,

> Each Ayatollah comes in the room and heads toward Ayatollah Khamenei to greet him. They are talking quietly while smiling; the journalists around the room are curious about the reason for the smiles […] some of the *ulama* are accompanied by their sons and grandsons/daughters […] a little girl recites a poem for the supreme leader and Ayatollah Khamenei asks one of the *ulama* to give her a gift… (Menbar, 2009)

Related to this passage, as Dawson (2011) writes, charismatic leaders "are known for

their seeming sensitivity to the needs of others – they make a personal connection with those

they meet, showing interest in their lives, no matter how brief the encounter may be" (p. 6). This

is the exact situation that Najmi narrates for the reader on his weblog. He pictures Ayatollah

Khamenei as a charismatic leader who makes a friendly and close bond with his disciples. He

shows that Ayatollah Khamenei is aware of the needs of the people, even the children. However,

it is clear that Najmi and other fundamentalists believe in the usage of the Internet and moulding

its application to their own needs. However, it is not clear whether they aware of the

consequences of their own usage in terms of moving their audience toward a more rational, anti-

traditional society.

Considering these examples of characteristics of charismatic leadership confirms

Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) and illustrates how they are applicable to Shiite society as

well. In their study of the Jewish ultra-Orthodox community and the effect of the Internet on

hierarchy, they found that although the rabbis warn the community against the dangers of having

the Internet in their homes, they have also had to adapt to the changing reality and to allow some

connections to cyberspace. Therefore, "the Internet, in ultra-Orthodox society, has been

culturally modified to fit the context of its communal needs and structure" (Barzilai-Nahon &

Barzilai, 2005, p. 33). Although there are many secular weblogs published in the Persian Shiite

community, the religious bloggers use the Internet as a tool for preserving and strengthening the

communal hierarchy. Moreover, since these two bloggers are students in *hawza*, they are

monitored by the religious authorities and the intelligence service. This means that even the

reformist-modernist bloggers of Tourjan know that if they question the hierarchical system or

make a direct critique, their weblog will be filtered and censored and they may end up in

custody.[37] Therefore, they do not challenge the hierarchy directly and openly. Rather, they use

methods such as historical analysis, for example through the life of the great *ulama,* to compare

the current problems of religious hierarchy with the previous models. The coercive methods, that

the Iranian regime uses toward the reformists' online activity explains the power of the Internet

and its influences on the society. This is shows that not only the new generations of Iranians pay

much attention to the Internet content and use it to assert their viewpoints, the political regime is

also aware of the effects of the Internet on the society.


### *The issue of legitimacy: internal and external viewpoints*

Other bloggers, such as Jami in his weblog, Sibestan, directly criticizes Ayatollah

Khamenei's behaviour and policy. He frequently publishes posts which contain analyses of the

sources of violence and hatred of the fundamentalist segment of the society for the reformist part,

before and specifically after the election in 2009. He condemns Ayatollah Khamenei for his law-

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[37] In fact, Tourjan is filtered at least two times, and the authors know people cannot read it freely without filter-breakers. Ali, one of the bloggers, spent some month in prison after the Presidential election in 2009.

breaking policies that follow the example of Russian, Chinese and North Korean regimes in deceiving the public in order to get their vote and preserve the prestige of the regime. Jami directly questions and challenges the eligibility of Ayatollah Khamenei for the leadership of the society in addition to the criticism about the theory of *wilayat al-faqih*. As he writes:

> I think the hypothesis being confirmed that Ayatollah Khamanei is trying to establish an Islamic regime but not a republic one… During these years, he has trained a new generation of managers who have key positions in the regime. One of the remarkable characteristics of all these managers is that they are not religious clerics so they cannot oppose Ayatollah Khamenei's commands and statements in politics and leadership. Mr. Khamenei whose eligibility for being *mujtahid* has being questioned since the very first days of his leadership, always tries to train his own official people. His religious knowledge is not comparable with the knowledge of the great *ulama* of the current *hawza's* clerical body and he cannot parallel himself with them. He is the leader of the panegyrists who are less educated than him. His style of leadership is for people like Ahmadinejad who are not so clever or sharp. (Jami, 2009)

As it is obvious, he is judging and questioning the knowledge and the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei who is known to have charisma, after Ayatollah Khomeini, for a part of the Iranian population. In his weblog, Jami has published many posts under this theme and perspective. The above quotation shows how religious authority in the layer of hierarchy and leadership is being challenged. What is more important in these types of posts is that not only is Ayatollah Khamenei being judged, but also the structure of charismatic authority is being challenged by a journalist who has no chance to express his criticism in an offline public sphere. However, through the free space of the Internet, he can speak up and inform the public about the malfunctions of current religious structure of Iran. He runs some news websites and his major profession and goal is establishing a democratic and free media for the Iranian society. He would not have any power and influence on the Iranian society without his weblogs and websites. Moreover, there are two more points to consider here: first, it is important to note that Jami, and many other bloggers with the same perspective, are people of the Iranian of the Diaspora; he

lives in the Netherlands. It should not be ignored that the idea of challenging the charisma of the leadership is more common among the Iranian of the Diaspora, as compared to those who live inside Iran. The restricted access of common people to the internet, in addition to the filtering of such sites, and the threats of retaliation by the Iranian government, have all played their part in hindering the voice of many in opposing this layer of authority.

This notion leads us to the second point: people who live abroad have a better chance of being heard and they become potential leaders, or at least guides, for those who are silent. In fact, the Internet has created opportunities for leadership (Campbell, 2007) for those who are active and have loud voices in cyberspace. However, it seems that by filtering the Internet and restricting the voices of those who live inside Iran, the religious fundamentalist regime of Iran creates more chance for the Iranian of the Diaspora, who are mostly non-religious, to become active and progressive. Even religious clerics from outside of Iran, such as Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, have been better heard in comparison to their time in Iran. This is because the Internet and virtual communication give power to such individuals in their respective communities.

Moreover, even considering all circumstances that restrict access to the Internet in Iran, the censoring and filtering process, as well as political threats, there are still many critics from inside Iran who try to develop their virtual life through their weblogs and other ways on the Internet. A weblog such as Raaze Sar be Mohr (unveiled secret) that publishes controversial posts about religio-political and social issues of the Iranian society, indirectly challenges different layers of religious authority. It is an obvious fact that professional people, like the blogger of Raaz who is a journalist, would not directly attack the hierarchy, specifically Ayatollah Khamenei, since it would result in the deletion of their weblog by the officials and in some cases it may even threaten their freedom and life. Also many of the weblogs and posts from

other weblogs that published posts about religious authority and the events that followed the election in 2009, have been removed by the officials or by the bloggers due to fears and security reasons. Some of the previously researched weblogs (as read by the author) can no longer be found due to this very reason. However, there are still many published analyses in the weblogs that indirectly criticize and challenge the authority of Ayatollah Khamenei.

For example, Mohammad Moeini, the blogger of Raaze Sar be Mohr published a post on October 2009, five months after the election, in which he talks about one of the meetings of a group of university students with Ayatollah Khamenei. He quotes what one of the student said[38] in front of Ayatollah Khamenei:

> Vahidnia said: "I have been reading newspapers and magazines more seriously since five years ago and I have not seen any serious criticism of the supreme leader in any of them. There can be general criticisms by people of the society and a professional type of criticism by the *ulama* in *Majlis Khobregan"*… he added that the violence caused by the armed forces in the streets toward common people after the election would not result in peace and unity and therefore it seems that it is not the correct way. (Moeini, 2009)

Moieni then explain one of the statements of Mousavi (the main reformist candidate from the reformist party in the presidential election in 2009) which refers to a valuable and persistent awareness that people gained in the process of the election and the uprising of the Green Movement despite the violence and harsh action of the officials. He indirectly wants to say that the charismatic authority of Ayatollah Khamenei is being challenged when a student allows himself to do what he did in that session. It was an ironic situation for Ayatollah Khamenei. He could not reject the request of that student because he had to present himself as a fair and popular leader. At the same time, no one could know what the student would say to Ayatollah Khamenei in front of all the journalists and cameras since it was not a scheduled event. Moieni tries to

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[38] He was not one of the students who have been scheduled to talk in that session. He just stood up and asked Ayatollah Khamenei to let him say what he wants.

unveil the meaning of the situation for the readers and mentions that democratic appeals and the

rise of the Green movement provide a braveness and awareness for common people to challenge

the charismatic hierarchy and the position of *wilayat al-faqih*.

Although at first glance it is obvious that the blogger is challenging the role of the

supreme leader of Iran and presenting his reformist perspective, by looking deeper, it is apparent

in this statement that he first approved of the status of Ayatollah Khamenei as a charismatic

leader. By providing this example, Moieni makes two contradictory claims at the same time: first

he describes the role of traditional religious leaders and their affirmed place of importance on the

Internet. Therefore, Moieni unintentionally approves the status of religious hierarchy in his

weblog. Second, he challenges the status of the supreme leader by claiming that common people

should have a permission to question Ayatollah Khamenei.

Jami, the blogger of Sibestab, also mentions another point under the same subject. He

discusses the way in which the two general controversial segments of Iranian society, the

fundamentalist and the reformists, have been confronting each other in the public sphere after the

election. He believes that Ayatollah Khamenei and his followers do not want to recognize the

other half of the society. He believes that this ignorance is Ayatollah Khamenei's Achille's heel.

He writes:

> Mr. Khamenei speaks in a way where everyone stands on his side and there are no other
> people. But we are saying "Sir! We are the other people who stand on the other side".
> Suppose we and the Green Movement are the minority, we are still people. Is there any
> space for us in your claimed democracy? … It does not reveal any fairness for a leader to
> support a specific group, even the majority one, in a society and forget others. he must
> not undermine the minority's rights. (Jami, 2010)

Similar to Moieni, Jami presents the charismatic authority of Ayatollah Khamenei and

then makes an oppositional perspective on his leadership. He questions Ayatollah Khamenei's

sense of justice, which is known as one of the primary requirements for a religious scholar to

become a *mujtahid,* or even for an Imam who is leading prayers. Jami believes that Ayatollah Khamenei is no longer eligible to lead the society. The notion of awareness is once again raised in this example. He notifies people, especially the religious segment, to review the eligibility of the supreme leader.

Reviewing all these examples, it can be concluded that the presentation of religious hierarchy online is as strong as its offline presentation, in these Persian Shiite weblogs, similar to what Campbell concludes in her study of the Christian weblogs. Conservative fundamentalists utilize the Internet as a new platform to affirm the structure of religious hierarchy in its traditional and charismatic form. This statement also works in terms of the reformist-modernists' perspectives. They tend to challenge the rigid religious hierarchy of the society more freely for broader audiences. Therefore, as Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) explain, although religious fundamentalist communities, as well as others, apply this new technology as a new tool to serve their needs, by using the Internet, which is a secular platform, they make small changes in their communities. The term "cultured technology" is an exact explanation for the reciprocal impacts of technology and culture on each other, specifically in the layer of religious hierarchy which could be considered as the first dimension of a challenge in a religious fundamentalist community.

**Religious Structure**

The second layer of religious authority that Campbell (2007) identifies is religious structure, which refers to community structure, patterns of practice and official organizations. In this section, religious structures will be discussed from two perspectives. The first perspective is Campbell's (2007) discussion of how online religious groups manage to replicate the same

practices they engage in the real world online, and how the structure of the Church is thus repeated on the Internet. In this sense, Campbell tries to analyse any possible connections between the channels of authority emerging and functioning online and traditional offline religious structures. The second perspective is an analysis of the presentation of religious structure on religious weblogs. The five selected weblogs will be used to discuss whether they propose any kind of religious practices online, as well as how they represent Shiite structure on their weblogs.

### *Online religious structure*

In reviewing all the posts on five weblogs over one year, it is evident that they do not try to offer any religious practices, or support specific religious online organizations and institutions. There are many other weblogs and websites that offer religious services which can be made into online religious institutions, however, these five weblogs function simply as sites for the spread and analysis of information in the Persian blogosphere. However, two of these weblogs, Menbar and Tourjan, are heavily under the influence of offline religious structures such as *hawza* and the political system of the state, as mentioned before.

### *Presentation of religious structure*

Religious structure covers a very broad range of organizations and practises that contain religious functions and content. In the Iranian Shiite state, not only are *hawzas* (as the seminary) and holy places such as shrines and mosques considered the prime institutions within the religious structure, but the bazaar, the political body of the state (including parties), the judicial

system, and the formal education system are also considered part of the body of the religious structure.

*Holy Places*. Mosques and shrines embody theology, identity, uniqueness and unity, for Shiites. Historically, each city in Iran has a grand mosque in which Friday prayers takes place. Friday prayers in Islamic traditions are not a simple form of prayer with only a religious purpose. They also contain political meanings communicated through the sermons of the Imam before the actual prayer. Fundamental social issues would be considered in the sermon. It is supposed to illustrate the unity of the Islamic society against its enemies. Other than that, each region in each city has its own mosque for daily prayers and a permanent Imam to lead the prayers. After the revolution in Iran, mosques functioned as more than just places for prayer. They became institutions with several official sections for different economic, political, military, and educational purposes.

The Shrines of the Imams and their heirs – mostly their children –also have structural functions. Since the cities in which the shrines are located have become religious cities, the most important *hawzas* were built in those cities and around those shrines. Moreover, Shiites make *ziyarah*, pilgrimages to these cities; the large numbers of pilgrims make these cities similar to other tourist sites around the world with the same financial, spiritual, and cultural functions. Cities such as Mashhad, where Imam Reza, the eighth Imam, is buried, and Qom, where the sister of Imam Reza is buried have become the most significant holy places in Iran. As previously mentioned, Qom has become the main Shiite seminary since the 20<sup>th</sup> century and Mashhad has another important *hawza* run by a number of famous *mujtahid*s. Shiites from all over the world come to Qom and Mashhad for pilgrimage and religious studies.

Holy cities in Iraq, such as Karbala, Najaf, Kazemein and Samarra, play a strategic role in Shiite pilgrimage and religious education as well. For the new generation of Iranians, going to Iraq for the *ziarah* of Imam Hosein, the third Shiite Imam,[39] and other Iraqi historical and holy sites is a whole new concept as Iran and Iraq did not have any political, economic, and cultural relations for more than 20 years. Although visiting and making pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Hosein is strictly recommended in religious Shiite texts and by all religious leaders, under the Ba'thist regime, Iraq had closed its borders to Iran since the Iran-Iraq War of the1980s. Today, Iranians visit the holy cities of Iraq regularly under the supervision of official organizations.

These places function as one of the layers of religious authority that is defined as structure. They provide religious services and define the rituals of the pilgrimage, which is one of the most important parts of the religion. Also, these holy places are run by a governing body that includes the *ulama* and is accountable to the *hawza* of the city.

Abtahi, one of the bloggers of Tourjan, wrote about his visit to Iraq in a post. The post contains an explanation of both the spiritual and social experience he had. Although he talks about the importance of visiting the shrines since "they are the last physical symbols of the Imams on earth" (Tourjan, 2009), and about his feeling of *ziyarah*, he mainly focuses on his visit to the grand Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf. It is quite impossible for common Shiites, even Iraqis, to visit him because of security issues. However, because Abtahi accompanied a group of official

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[39] What happened in the battle of Karbala (680) to Imam Hosein, the third Imam who was also a son of Ali, made him symbol of devotion to God. In brief, the Caliph ordered the governor of Medina either to force a pledge of allegiance from Imam Hosein or kill him. The Imam was determined not to give his allegiance to the Caliph and knew full well that he would be killed. He moved from Mecca to Iraq. While on the way, the Imam and his entourage were surrounded by the army of the Caliph. On the tenth day of Muharram the battle happened, and the Imam, the several grandsons of the Prophet, and his companions were all martyred. What happed during that battle is clearly documented in history. For more than 1400 years, Shiites mourn during these days of the month *Muharram* each year. It is one of their most important rituals, which become one of the most significant symbols of charismatic authority of the Imams and also the unity of the Shiites.

Iranian *ulama*, including his father who is a cleric, he was able to visit him. This is a surprising and unique event in a Shiite's life, especially because Abtahi and his father are part of a pro-modernist-reformist group that is counted as an oppositional perspective to the current government of Iran. These types of visit create validity and eligibility for the modernist party of Iran for two main reasons: 1) Ayatollah Sistani's office rarely accepts politicians even from the Muslim states, and 2) the Iranian officials who are fundamentalists, always try to present the modernists as an anti-Islam group, supported by the Western governments. The mere fact that Ayatollah Sistani accepted a visit from a group of modernist-reformists not only shows their importance in his view, but also reflects the group's positive perspective on Islam. By publishing this post, in a popular weblog such as Tourjan, an unknown reformist cleric, Abtahi, presents his religious beliefs about the *ziyarah* of Karbala and also the visit of the grand Ayatollah Sistani. Therefore, the claim that the Internet gives a chance for voiceless individuals and groups to be heard in the public sphere is once again proven. More importantly, the Internet creates the opportunity for the reformist groups to gain legitimacy because the Iranian government could not fully control all the Internet content. If there was not the Internet, there was not any opportunity for the people outside the hierarchy to gain legitimacy in public sphere to prove their beliefs and remove the labels that the dominant power gives them.

He describes all the details of this event from the very beginning when they approached the security gates, to their last minutes with the grand Ayatollah Sistani. In the post, the absolute authority of the *mujtahid*s is again presented, but more than that, this post contains information about the atmosphere of security in these cities, with notes of the author who calls Muslims to become aware and united against their enemies. Abtahi does not challenge any structural patterns or suggest any new online tools or institutions for the Shiite pilgrimage in his post. But in

showing such reverence and deference for Ayatollah Sistani and the idea of making pilgrimages, he is significantly reinforcing a traditional religious worldview, and one that highlights the key role of charismatic religious leaders.

Although he is reinforcing these traditional views, he is using a new tool for publishing his ideas: a weblog that had been known as a secular tool that allows people to read and talk about various subjects that suited their needs, interests, and curiosity. Although during and after the revolution of Iran, *ulama* have applied different kinds of technology to publish their idea and empower their voices, many aspects of their life remained hidden from the public sphere. The unknown life of the *ulama,* especially charismatic ones, helps make them more mysterious and sacred for common people. Only fifteen years ago, there were few people found in Iran who had seen Ayatollah Sistani's portrait picture. Even his follower (*moqaledeen)* had not seen his pictures or had any particular information about his life; all the information they had was limited to Ayatollah Sistani's *fatawa*, which had been published in religious books and rare journals. But by using the Internet and the free flow of information, each individual who visits him, or any other grand Ayatollah, has  the opportunity to talk or write about the time that he or she spend with the Ayatollah. This data gathering from the Internet is a new and non-traditional concept in the fundamentalist Shiite community of Iran in which everyday life of the religious leaders had remained veiled and unknown for so long. This may have positive or negative consequences for the society and the *ulama* at the same time. By revealing this information, people may become more motivated to follow the *ulama* or they may find that some Ayatollahs are not as qualified for their positions as they had originally thought. Through this medium common people may gain a new perspective for judging the life and function of the *ulama* in their society. This is

created by the Internet and the free flow of information and it will challenge the structure layer of religious authority that is run by the *ulama*.

    *Religious rituals.* Regarding holy places and religious pilgrimages as a part of the religious structure, there are some posts on the Menbar weblog as well. In one of the posts, Najmi discusses the momentous and unique experience of Hajj. Mecca and Medina are the two major cities for all Muslims, regardless of which sects they belong to. Each Muslim who has the possibility of doing so should undertake the Hajj once in his or her lifetime and visit Mecca to perform the religious rituals. Najmi describes the experience of being amongst more than three million Muslims. However, since he studies and works in the Mass Media field, he explains the event from this specific perspective. Najmi writes about how news agencies from around the globe cover this event creatively and criticises the Iranian news agencies that repeat all the same pictures and stories each year. He does not describe the structure of this religious event; rather, he includes nine hyperlinks that connect this post to other websites such as CNN's website, Youtube, The Boston Globe, the official website of a non-religious Iranian woman who photographed the event, and some other Iranian websites, all of them having reported Hajj from their own viewpoints.

    There are at least three remarkable points in this post. First, although he criticises the method and the content of the Iranian reports of the event, he mentions that "the Western media agencies come to Hajj to present Islam deceptively for the world!" (Menbar, 2009). He takes the same perspective that the official Iranian government, specifically Ayatollah Khamenei, takes in talking about and judging the West, and especially the United States. This means that he uses new technology to connect the different layers of religious authority online – including hierarchy, ideology and structure – to offline sources. This means that 1) Hajj as one of the most

important religious rituals is presented in his weblog, 2) he repeats the same claim about the

West, as an enemy of Muslims, and 3) by repeating this, he emphasizes on the beliefs of the

supreme leader, and other officials of the hierarchy using his weblog.

Second, the usage of hyperlinks in the weblogs can be considered as presenting a

challenge to religious authority because they not only refer to external sources that are not

Islamic sources, they disturb the discipline of traditional learning about a religious pilgrimage.

As Barzilai (2003) mentions, fundamentalist religious communities follow strict disciplines that

are embedded in the collective consciousness through spiritual authorities, law, systems of

learning and education, and daily practices. The learning procedure has rigid boundaries based

on sacred texts and religious leaders' interpretations of the texts. By using hyperlink technology,

the traditional hierarchy in the traditional system of education is broken since anyone who has or

does not have any religious education can search for and write about religious beliefs and rituals

publically. Muslims and non-Muslims have access to all religious sources and can publish their

own viewpoints without any specific restriction. Hyperlinking is a non-linear and interactive tool

that can repudiate the limitations of traditional sources and lead to new interpretations of

religious concepts and rituals. In this sense, Najmi refers to the non-Muslim news agencies who

reported on Hajj:

> It is interesting how the CNN and BBC persist in sending their journalists, even Christian
> ones, to Mecca and Medina, [while it is forbidden for non-Muslims to enter these holy
> cities], and even more fascinating when they reach the high-secured locations to cover the
> event more accurately so their audiences can have a better sense of what is going on in
> Hajj. Even the Boston Globe photographs the event from above with its giant helicopter.
> (Menbar, 2009)

As mentioned, by making links in the paragraph to the CNN website, Boston Globe

website and a video on Youtube, Najmi breaks the discipline of referring to traditional sources

for getting information about religious rituals. He basically provides a non-traditional and non-Muslim source for the readers to find out about a purely Islamic ritual, namely Hajj.

Third, he refers to a female photographer as a source that presents the Hajj pilgrimage very well. Although Newsha Tavakolian is a famous freelance Iranian photojournalist, by mentioning her and linking the post to her work, Najmi exemplifies another dimension of tension with regard to religious authority and the Internet: the challenge to patriarchy (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005).

By referring to the work of a professional Iranian female and describing her work as a masterpiece, Najmi's post contributes to a new quiet revolution happening under the surface of the traditionally religious context of Iranian society in the face of this new technology. Najmi does not refer to Newsha as a religious source for getting information, however, rather he admires her photography, which captures a religious event. In fact, while he criticizes the official Iranian journalists for their boring and unprofessional coverage of the Hajj, he is quite excited about Newsha's braveness, skills and persistence in overcoming the difficulties she encountered with security forces in order to do her job. This point should be considered as one of the small changes that are happening in cyberspace to moderate the fundamentalist view of religion, including Shiite Islam. This is an important point because by becoming an official religious cleric, Najmi is not traditionally allowed to talk about a female photographer and her braveness on the actual *menbar*. The patriarchal system still does not desire this type of viewpoint. However, by including this subject in this post, Najmi shows that even a fundamentalist conservative segment of the body of *hawza*, is under the influence of the Internet. In fact so much that he is working to limit the patriarchal discourse, even if he is not fully aware of. This further shows that incremental changes have finally begun. What is more important in this

example is that by acknowledging Newsha's work, Najmi, as a fundamentalist religious scholar, legitimizes females to become active members of the religious society. While he cannot promote this view in the conventional media, the Internet allows him to picture women in a different way which gives them more credit and legitimacy to be heard and seen in the society. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005, p. 28) write:

> [The Internet] is perceived as a platform to communicate within and outside the community in ways that empower feminine identity…the Internet has created better opportunities for feminine voices to be heard in religious fundamentalist contexts, although these opportunities are framed within the communal context and its hierarchy.

There is another example in this regard in Tourjan that specifically talks about the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, entitled "Fatima is not only Fatima; she is also the daughter of Khadija."[40] In this post, Morteza discusses that although Prophet Muhammad is father of Fatima, believed to be the perfect pattern for Muslim women in their religious life, Fatima also has a great mother whose role should not be ignored in her religious upbringing. Morteza says:

> Khadija said "no" to all of the incorrect aspects of Arab culture and rituals when she married Muhammad before he was chosen to be the Prophet by Allah. She was a great woman who had a very hard time during her life because it took a long time for Arab society to accept Muhammad as the Prophet. As a rich business woman, she spent all her wealth for the distribution of Islam and all that she left for Prophet Muhammad was Fatima. Fatima was the result of the marriage of two anti-traditions: Prophet Muhammad and Khadija. Fatima like her mother was one of the most influential women in Islam's history. Her role as a political/religious opposition toward the Caliphs made her a political activist who did not choose to be quiet about the malfunction of the religio-political system of Caliphate and Muslims society.

By talking about Islamic history from a different feminine angle, Morteza presents a hidden aspect of Muslim history which is built by women. The status of Fatima and Khadija are not ignored in the traditional and fundamental perspectives, but referring to them as the source of

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[40] The Prophet's first wife Khadija, mother of Fatima, who is known as the mother of all Shiite Imams and the source of Shiism.

anti-traditionalism and political activism is not a familiar concept. This perspective has been

exposed in Shariati's speech and lectures about Fatima and Zainab[41] and continues in other

religious intellectuals' thought. Its appearance on the weblogs reveals that this challenge to

patriarchy can be considered even more seriously due to the Internet's broad range of audience

and free access.

In this sense, special attention should also be paid to the countless number of female

bloggers in Iran who blog to analyse and explain the problem of patriotism and strengthen their

feminine identity in the fundamentalist community. Therefore, the Internet primarily strengthens

the weak feminine voices in Iranian society; whether or not men of the society talk about their

needs and beliefs, they find a way to publish their ideas publically. For instance, a weblog such

as Gol-dokhtar, which is written by female bloggers, talks about different subjects related to

women. The weblog is published by a group of young religious women who gain the opportunity

of being heard publicly by using the Internet. Furthermore, this weblog provides a public sphere

where women actively share their viewpoints and argue about their social and religious

dilemmas. This phenomenon creates a predictable tension in the dimension of patriarchy as an

important element of a religious fundamentalist community.

*Religious practices as presented by women bloggers.* As Bastani states: "findings show

that women may use the Internet to voice disputes with the patriarchal hierarchies in their

fundamentalist religious communities, all the while remaining loyal to their community culture

and discourse" (as cited in Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 28). This is the case for

religious females in Iran, who accept the structure of the official religious hierarchy and remain

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[41] One of daughters of Ali and Fatima who was present in the battle of Karbala and her harsh speech in Yazid's palace is known as the most reliable historical source of the battle. She is known as the messenger of Karbala and a great figure of sacrifice and strength.

loyal to the rules of the patriarchal society. However, since they are educated and belong to a

new generation of Iranians, they tackle new subjects and problems, showing hidden aspects of

their religious beliefs that had not been revealed publically before the Internet era. Therefore two

issues should be pointed here: first, Shiite female bloggers have been breaking the traditional

barriers that avoid them to present in the public sphere. Second, Shiite female bloggers have

been invisibly and softly breaking the rules of the fundamentalist society. Two examples from

Gol-dokhtar will clarify these points. The first one is when one of the writers of this weblog

describes how it was hard for her to find a fitness center that meets her religious condition and

needs in Qom, where she lives. She explains that she is sensitive about the music that is played

during the work out classes. A while later she writes that the *hawza* has opened a fitness center

and that she has registered there. A place where she no longer needs to worry about the music, [42]

cell-phones with cameras[43] and inappropriate dress codes.[44] She continues:

> This summer I've become super active in sports and I am so pleased that I could finally find a place to work out. I have been thinking about different abilities that each sport requires and how many girls have the required conditions and facilities to do sports…nowadays there are many debates about why Iranian women cannot participate in international sports competitions in swimming, soccer, and boxing. I wish they put their energy towards providing facilities for a broader range of Iranian women instead of thinking about a limited group of athletes. They should try to improve the level of women's health by building fitness centers around the country. Why should women put themselves on severe diets to get thinner like deformed models when they can become healthier by doing sports?

It may seem that this is not a religious-related example but it directly presents the

fundamentalist-conservative perspective of Iranian officials. Due to their type of reading of

religious laws, women of the Muslim community cannot participate in international sports

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[42] Music is a controversial issue in *fiqh*. Many *mujtahids* believe that listening to music is not religiously allowed.
[43] Since religious women wear *hijab*, it is not allowed to get pictures and videos of them without their permission. Obviously in a women-only workout place, they take off their *hijabs* but they are always worried about cellphone which have cameras.
[44] It is necessary for Muslim women to have appropriate and modest dress code. However, it is not a rare event to see religiously inappropriate dress codes in streets and particularly in workout places.

competitions because they are not allowed to take off their *hijab*. Even if they do not practise Islam individually, they must wear it when they officially represent the Islamic Republic of Iran abroad.

This can be considered both as a hierarchical and patriarchal issue. The government enforces the Islamic dress code for women even if they are not Muslims. By making this ruling, the government not only restricts women inside Iran, but also it prevents them to represent Iran in any athletic, artistic, or other types of contests, outside the country, without *hijab*. All the athlete and artist women who formally represent Iran in other countries have to wear *hijab*, even though they may not believe in to it. It is also a patriarchal issue, since there have been more sport facilities built for men than women, due to these restrictions. There is an unfair sexist division with regard to the quality and quantity of sport facilities. In addition to female restrictions, men have access to more facilities of higher quality. In this post, although the blogger does not challenge the hierarchy and the structure of the laws regarding women, she obviously questions the unfairness of the dispersion of sport facilities and the different benefits for men and women in society.

*Women bloggers against patriarchy.* The second example is a post about the role of Iranian women during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980s. In this post the blogger talks about the women who were injured during the war and became disabled thereafter. She begins the post with a link to an official website containing the statistics of these women and the percentage of their disability. She mentions that most of these women live in underprivileged cities that were involved in the war. These cities would have had little to no access to appropriate health or educational facilities. She then makes a link to another news websites which reported the speech of the vice-president of the Martyrs and Warfare Disables' Foundation (*Bonyade Shaheed*) who

refs to these women as ideal types of freedom and braveness. He praises the women who

fought besides their men to defend their religion and land during Islam's history, specifically

after the revolution of Iran. The vice-president mentions that people need to learn from these

women and spread the culture of sacrifice they exemplify. The blogger then continues:

> Although we are proud of these martyr and disabled women, we should not ignore that they are now living in an underprivileged situation. Their braveness is a result of the break that they made in the structure of gender inequality of our society. But, still those men who are in charge of society believe that "the most important duty (*jihad*) of a woman is to take care of her husband" and "*jihad* is not obligatory for women."[45] They don't say that it's "not obligatory" but that it's "not prohibited" for women to take part in *jihad*. You! Whoever is in charge, while you feel proud of them, you have to answer the question of whether these women will receive any help from you and whether you feel responsible for their life. What have you done for the future of these women? (Gol-dokhtar 2009)

This post contains at least four important points: first, it obviously challenges the leaders

of society and whoever is in charge for being careless in the way they have dealt with the lives of

women who are believed to be an honour to society.

Second, the blogger refers to the abilities and braveness of the women as compared to the

men. She then criticizes the structural gender inequalities that have been promoted by the

society. In this, she is challenging the patriarchal element of the fundamentalist community.

Third, the blogger provides a new interpretation of the Shari'a law regarding *jihad* for

women. As it is believed, based on several Quran verses and *ahadith* from the Imams, women

are not required to participate in war while it is mandatory for men to defend their land and

religion. Here, the blogger emphasizes the point that, although it is not the duty of women to

participate in war, they are not prohibited to do so. This means that, not only does the blogger

breaking the patriarchal boundaries, but she is also revising the traditional way of interpreting

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[45] These two quotations are *ahadith* from Shiite Imams.

these verses and *ahadith* using a new feminist perspective. This is an example of a challenge to another layer of religious authority: the authority of the text, as Campbell called it since *hadith* is one of the main written based sources of authority after the Quran that has to be taught and interpreted in a traditional way as the fundamentalists believe. Therefore, here, not only the blogger apply the *ahadith* outside of the traditional context, she also interprets it in a way she thinks is correct.

Fourth and most importantly, as Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) explain, by reviewing all the posts that have been studied, women of these religious communities do not completely challenge the dimension of fundamentalism by using the Internet, rather, they emphasize their religious beliefs. As Bunt (2000) mentions, they are apt to create a new desirable religious public sphere online where they can raise their voices to re-define, promote advertise, and practice their religion in a modern reasonable and peaceful public sphere. They have indeed cultured this technology to fulfill their needs based on their religious perspective. However, as Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) point out, this technology makes a series of small and hidden impacts on the fundamentalist society and its people's perspective as well. As mentioned above, different characteristics of religious fundamentalism, in addition to at least two layers of religious authority, are being challenged in the context of this post. Moreover, blog posting is not the only way allows female to present their ideas. Their presentation is even more serious in the weblogs published by males. They interfere with the patriarchal discourses that dominate the atmosphere of the religious context, by making comments on the posts and attending online discussions. As Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai (2005) sate "cultured technology, mitigates the possible conflict between feminism, religiosity and community" (p.29).

*The education system: hawza as the main body of religious structure.* Although religious-based education has a long history in Iranian society, after the establishment of *Dar al-Fonoun*, less people choose that system for their children. An important incident during the Qajar Dynasty that affected the situation and authority of the *ulama* was the establishment of *Dar al-Fonoun* as "the first higher school, in Tehran, which included both technical-scientific and military instruction. It was mainly taught by European teachers with the aid of local translators" (Keddie, 2006, p. 49). This directly influenced the Iranian traditional pedagogical system that had always been run by clergies. The traditional system of learning was founded on the religious Islamic culture that promoted oral transmission through a student-master relationship between the common people and the elders and religious teachers (Anderson 2003; Turner, 2007). It was a face-to-face system of learning in which only divine science had been taught by the *ulama* in *maktabs* (traditional schools).

With the emergence of new schools such as *Dar al-Fonoun*, the pedagogical authority of the *ulama* was threatened, although they still ran the *howzas* for divine science and Islamic philosophy. Therefore, not only did the role of religious theologians become more professionalized and centralized in *howzahs*, a division emerged between the common people who studied in the modern system of schooling and those who studied at *howzeh* for divine knowledge.

Paying attention to this division is critical for at least two reasons. First, Keddie (1980) categorises Iranian society of the mid-19th and 20th centuries as a dichotomy with regard to religious beliefs and practice. On one hand, there was a traditional group of people, who were among bazaar bourgeoisies, that received education throughout the traditional system and were overwhelmingly Islamic. On the other hand, there were people who were educated in a modern,

Western-based educational system. As Keddie explains, these people, most of whom lived in the

bigger cities such as Tehran, were sceptical of religious beliefs and followed almost a wholly

Western lifestyle. The Shiite *ulama* had lost their authority over a considerable number of urban

inhabitants during that period of time.

Second, during and after the Revolution of 1979, whether they studied in the traditional

or modern system, the young generation of Iranians united in supporting the religious and

charismatic authority of Ayatollah Khomeini to become their revolutionary leader. Moreover, the

particular socio-political atmosphere of the 1970s also resulted in the formation of a new class of

"religious intellectuals" who consisted of students from the modern schooling who were

religious at the same time, such as Ali Shariaty. Most of them were among the successful

students in the universities who continued their professional education in European universities.

These groups, such as the Religious-Nationalist and Freedom Movement parties, were also

among the supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Nowadays, the common people have little information about *hawza*, its bureaucracy, the

fields that are being taught there, and its general atmosphere. Still, it is one of the most powerful

and influential institutions of Iranian society and has a great impact on the political relations of

the state.

Iranian newspapers, news agencies and cyberspace today talk about news related to

*hawza* and analyse the issues related to it. The *mujtahid*s and the *ulama* have their own

webpages, whether run by themselves or by their offices. They enter the online public sphere

simply to be connected to the newer generation that uses the Internet regularly, but also to reach

the Muslim Diaspora. However, they find that cyberspace provides abilities and capacities that

the *hawza* had not experienced before. Now it is hard to find a popular *mujtahid* who does not

have a webpage. Their websites provide a great opportunity for their followers to ask them Shari'a-related questions. There is a huge body of *fatawa* to be found on the Internet. Many articles in various formats are now available online. Also, news about the *ulama's* life and works can be discovered online, either on their individual websites or on others. Some *ulama* provide services such as consulting online or downloading sections of religious books and podcasts. Although these services are now online, they can be considered as a continuation of the offline *hawza* system, with regard to the content and structure of the websites. As Bunt (2000) mentions, authority in the virtual space of the World Wide Web is still projected from the real world.

One of the most popular weblogs to visit to get information about the *hawza's* system and the *ulama* is Tourjan. As previously mentioned, the bloggers of this weblog are both advanced students in *hawza*. They mostly focus on historical events and analyzing the *hawza* and the *ulama*'s social activities and their political involvement in Iranian society. There are also posts that discuss current events in *hawza* and its educational system. One of the posts in the time period of this study was a review of a sociological book called *Development and Conflict* by an Iranian sociologist, Dr. Rafipour. As Fathi describes, there is a section in the book that Rafipour wrote based on his observations and attendance in the *hawza* of Qom. Rafipour analyzed the education system and its bureaucracy, and the clerical life in *hawza*. Fathi presents several quotes from the book that describe *hawza* well. In one part, Rafipour wrote about the system of "making notes" in the *hawza* classes and made a criticism of the common system. He mentions that he saw students who made notes word by word without paying much attention to the reasoning and the content of the teacher's ideas (a *mujtahid*), and this makes them unable to make any arguments about the content. He also mentioned that the students in *hawza* classes do not make

notes in the same way that Western scholars do.[46] He thought that the notes students made and

their notebooks in *hawza* classes were not in a reasonably neat order. Fathi makes the following

comment on this notion:

> Rafipour is unfamiliar with the education system in *hawza* since he did not study there.
> What he mentions in his book is not a common way of making notes in *hawza* classes.
> However, making this type of notes is suggested from grand *mujtahid*s such as Ayatollah
> Buroujerdi, who believe that since not all students can attend the grand Ayatollahs
> classes, the students who do attend must make "word for word" notes to present to others.
> This way, they can talk and discuss the content of the texts and it makes for an even more
> fruitful discussion. Furthermore, in each *hawza* class there is a student or a group of
> students who are more knowledgeable and make comments on the teacher's thoughts.
> Many constructive arguments often occur in this way in *hawza's* classes. (Tourjan, 2010)

Rafipour earlier wrote "*hawza* has an interesting atmosphere for scientific debates compared to

the Iranian university that mostly do not have this unbiased and productive spirit". Moreover, he

mentions that,

> The relationship between people in *hawza* is respectful and it contains no trivial issues.
> The sense of collective cooperation is very high, something unattainable or unimaginable
> in universities. Also the discussions are deep and follow very reasonable patterns.
> (Tourjan, 2010)

Presenting all these quotations from Rafipour illustrates that Fathi wants to describe the

*hawza'a* environment and education system from a scientific perspective. But more than that, he

wants to make people more familiar with the *hawza* system of education. What common people

think about the *hawza* is that it is a strict traditional form of education; it is based on a close

master and pupil relationship. But this post shows that this perspective is not completely right.

Although the authority of the *ulama* and the structure of the system are rigid, the scientific

atmosphere of this education system is productive, constructive and improving. What makes this

post noteworthy is that it describes a very important part of the structure, one of the layers of

Shiite authority. It shows that Shiite authorities are utilizing the Internet for its continuation

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[46] Dr. Rafipour received his degrees from Germany.

online and more than that, the new online ground has been used as a defensive and protective device for it. As Barzilia-Nahon and Barzila (2005, p. 27) write, "the community is able to affix the hierarchical order online, not less than offline". Moreover, it is important to note that how a religious weblog becomes a space for criticizing and analysing an academic and university style book.

*Digital menbar.* Similar to Jewish and Christian traditional rules, Islam has a strict discipline for educational, judgmental and other social aspects of religious life. As previously mentioned, in the education system, *hawza* is the main organization where *ulama* study to become *mujtahids* and religious leaders. One of the focal concepts in Islamic educational system is *menbar*. Menbar is the mosque's equivalent of a pulpit from which religious leaders, *ulama*, *mujtahids*, deliver sermons. It identifies the status of the teacher over the students, or a *mujtahid* to common people. As Bunt (2000) writes, "in the age of the Internet, the *menbar* can be digital… the *khutba* [sermon] can be online" (p. 104). This statement applies in investigating in these five weblogs. For instance, since the bloggers of Tourjan and Menbar are students in *hawza,* they utilize their weblogs as *menbars* to argue about social and religious issues. One of the posts in Tourjan was published after Ali's release from the jail. It is an interview with Ali published in *Talabe [scholar] Weblog,* which talks about how, when and why Ali was captured. While answering one of the questions, Ali mentions that

> I saw weblog as a *menbar*. The only difference among these two is that *menbar* is a one way tool while weblog is a reciprocal one. I believe this is my duty, as a religious scholar to run an online *menbar*… if religious scholars do not use the Internet, they will lose one of the most influential grounds for their religious advertisement. Their power on the Internet depends on their online performance and the functionality of their weblogs. Therefore clerics should pay more attention to their role in this new public sphere. (Tourjan, 2010)

Although Ali refers to a traditional and disciplined way of teaching, by using this new technology, he applies the functions of online technology such as hyperlinks, search options, and receiving comments from the audience, all of which are in contrast with the strict and linear base of the traditional religious system of *hawza*. Referring to other offline and online sources while discussing religious issues and getting feedback from audiences are among those notions that cultivate challenge to religious fundamentalism. In addition, a remarkable segment of the audiences are females who cannot attend male classes in *hawza* (there is a separate *hawza* for women). As a result, in these types of weblogs women make comments, critiques and participate in discussions, which rarely happens in the offline Shiite society of Iran. Multiple voices – from different weblogs who discuss the same dilemmas and issues –also disrupt the hierarchical order of the Shiite fundamentalist perspective of the educational system. Therefore, as previously discussed, the Internet can profoundly challenge the traditional disciplines of religious fundamentalist society.

**Religious Ideology**

Ideology, the third layer of religious authority online, which for Shiite includes the main principles of the religions, such as *Tawhid* (Unity of Allah), *Nabowwat* (Prophethood), *Imamate* (authority of the heirs of the Prophet including the subtitles of Infallibility and Salvation), *Adalat* (Justice of Allah), *Qiamat* (Afterlife) and other concepts such as Spiritual realms, is not directly discussed in these five weblogs. The bloggers do not try to interpret or challenge these topics.

*Same ideology, different interpretations*

Almost all these weblogs are published by religious bloggers, except for Sibestan whose blogger does not declare anywhere in his weblog that he is a Shiite Muslim, but whose posts

shows that he is a believer who reads Islam differently from the traditional perspective.

Therefore, the statement by Lawrence's findings in his study of the reciprocal influence of

cyberspace and Islam is confirmed. He found that traditional perspectives and conservative

approaches are mainly reinforced through the structure, images, and beliefs communicated

through the Internet (Lawrence, 2002, p. 240). However, there are many indirect, conscious or

unconscious themes and statements in these weblogs, that seek to explain that are explaining the

ideology from a different angle, which may challenge the traditional perspectives. For instance,

in the month of Muharram of the same year of the election, the Green Movement had decided to

protest one more time to show its existence and objection against the official regime, to

commemorate all who had been killed after the election and all who had been captured in the

terrifying atmosphere of armed groups in the streets. In that situation, Moieni published a post

about Imam Hosein in which he used a quotation from Dr. Shariaty, the most famous religious

intellectual before the revolution, who said:

> You won't be able to analyze the battle of Hosein if you do not understand the socio-political condition of his time. Hosein was responsible for the revolution that had been led by his grandfather, Muhammad, and then had continued by his father and brother. In the time of Hosein, the revolution whose result was the establishment of a pure Islamic government based on justice and reality did not have any supporter under the Umayyad's Caliphate. Islamic values had been forgotten, the rulers were spoiled, and the political system, which had complete domination over the religious and social life of people, was rotten. In that situation, there was no other choice for Imam Hosein than to rise against that system despite the martyrdom that faced him. This was the only option that would wake up the society and warn them of what the deterioration was doing. His martyrdom was a tool like a sharp sword against injustice. In the battle field, when all his family had been killed, Hosein raised his voice and asked for any help and companionship despite the fact that he knew there was no one to support him. He yelled "is there anyone who is ready to support and help the Phophet's family?" of course there was no one at that time, but Imam Hosein was calling to the future; for the history of humankind; for us. He asked us to help him.

The main point that can be inferred from this passage is that, although the regime of Iran

declares that it has an Islamic perspective, it is rotten from inside. The Green Movement should

raise its voice and react against the misleading ideology that has been introduced as Islam during

the years of Ayatollah Khamenei's leadership. The post talks about Imamate and the ideology

behind the actions of the Shiite Imams and the true meaning of *jihad* which is a sacred war (in

this case, against injustice). On the other hand, the fundamentalist bloggers, such as Gol-dokhtar'

writers, saw this situation differently. They believe that the supporters of the Green Movement

disobey the *wilatay al-faqih* who is the current heir of the Imams. Based on their perspective,

whoever challenges the authority of the supreme leader, violates the Imams' authority. Therefore

on the day of Ashura when the Green Movement protested in the streets, the government and the

fundamentalist traditional segment of the society took it as a non-respectful action and it resulted

in the riot police attacking the demonstrators. However, in a post, one of the bloggers of Gol-

dokhtar says:

> Why are religious modernist bloggers such as Tourjan being quiet about what the
> followers of the Green Movement have done? These protestors did not respect *wilayat al-
> faqih* and public morals and properties. They just ruin the atmosphere of Muharram's
> sorrow … it seems that the religious modernists have forgotten that Imam Hosein
> revolted against injustice, tyranny, and distortion of religious concepts. (Gol-dokhtar,
> 2009)

In contrast with what Campbell (2007) finds in her study of the Christian and Jewish

online communities, the Iranian Shiite blogosphere does not have any claim about "the

community of one voice" (p. 1057). As these different weblogs show, Iranian Shiites have a

different reading and interpretation of the same religious ideology. While the reformers interpret

Imam Hosein's battle as a model for the reformist to be brave against the regime which misleads

the Muslim society, fundamentalists believe that the reformists are rebels who follow anti-

Islamic ideologies, which is in contrast with Imam Hosein's viewpoint.

As Lawrence (2002) mentions, the image of Islamic concepts such as *jihad* and

martyrdom in the "straight path" (*sirat al-mostaqim* which contains all religious beliefs and

practices that lead Muslims to meet Allah), are strongly presented on the blogosphere though the interpretation and contextualization is different between the modernist and fundamentalist groups.

**Religious Texts**

*Validation of discussions through the Quran and hadith*

The selected weblogs do not contain any kind of interpretation of the verses of the Quran or *hadith*. However, in various cases they refer to some Quranic verses and present some *hadith* within their posts to prove their points, which also shows the authority of religious texts. For instance, a post on Menbar refers to a *hadith* from Imam Ali providing evidence for the authority of Ayatollah Khamenei as the true figure of *wilayat al-faqih* in the structure of the political system of Iran. By presenting a *hadith* from Imam Ali, Najmi compares Ayatollah Khamenei's authority and his performance with that of Imam Ali in the very first stages of the establishment of the Muslim society. In the post that he writes about the 20$^{th}$ anniversary of the beginning of the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei, he states:

> Two of the Prophet's main followers, Abbas and Shaybah, were talking about their honours in the Muslim community. Imam Ali asked them "what are your honours?" Abbas answered "I have a special honour that no one else has: I bring water to the people who are coming to Mecca for Hajj". Shaybah said "I am one of the repair men who reconstruct Ka'ba and I have its key". Ali told them, with modesty, "I have an honour that neither of you have: I did Jihad with my sword, until you believed in God and the Prophet".

By mentioning this *hadith*, Najmi explains that none of the current opposition leaders (in Iran) have the same honour as Ayatollah Khamenei, because none did anything of the same value for the improvement of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. These kinds of comparisons have a long history in Iranian politics and social commentary. Through this assessment, Najmi tries to

conclude that the Islamic Republic is operating a government based on a very pure essence of Shiite beliefs.

In Sibestan, Jami frequently refers to the Quran as the main source of the authority of Shri'a and ethics in the Shiite community of Iran. However, his way of interpreting the Quran and his understanding is different from the official government's viewpoint. In a post after the election, he criticizes the Friday prayers of the Imam of Mashhad. Referring to one of the verses of the Quran, the Imam accused the protesters of the Green movement of being "Evil's ally," in contrast with "Allah's ally." Jami believes the Imam inferred a reversed meaning of those verses in the Quran which talk about *Hizb a-Allah* and *Hizb a-Shaytan* (the party of God/the party of Evil). He writes:

> Being fair, just, and peaceful is necessary for whoever refers to and adapts the Quran verses…there is nothing more sinful than lying about the Quran… and the worst lie is labelling of believers by a person who introduces himself as a supporter of the Quran. The Quran suggests to argue about the problems in a peaceful and reasonable way and more than that, in the Quranic context, all life is a contest for being good and peaceful (Kahf, verses 7)…the Quran that I and most of the Muslims know is the Quran that promotes good will and peace. Muslims have to obey the Quran and not reverse its meaning to what they need to… also in many verses the Quran tells the Prophet not to worry about people's beliefs since they are free to choose between wrong and right…in this sense, Friday Imam's speech does not follow the way that is suggested in the Quran. These types of *ulama* are very far away from the pure dogma of the Quran. He labelled the protesters as the party of Evil because of their demonstration on the Ashura day, but he forgot all the illegal actions that the army and police have done to people in the name of Islam.

As it is obvious, Jami refers to the Quran as the most eligible and authentic text for guiding the life and behaviour of Shiites. He also believes that the commands and concepts suggested in the Quran are solid and have to be obeyed truly and completely by whoever believes in Islam. However, his take is different from that of the Imam. Therefore, he not only questions the authority of a Friday Imam, he also provides a different understanding of the holy text. Therefore, he affirms the authority of the text but from a different angle. The most

important point here is that Jami criticizes the hierarchy by the most trusted religious text, the Quran. He did not use any modern or secular sources to explain how the hierarchy tries to deceive people by interpreting the holy text of the Quran in a misleading way. The Friday Imam was positioned in this role as a professional in religious matters; however, Jami believes that he failed in his job since he interpreted the Quran in a wrong way. In this post he mentions that the Quran is the ultimate source of authority in Islam, therefore, he uses the authority of the texts to criticize the hierarchy. This is one of the complex situations in the Persian blog postings where the bloggers use one layer of authority, the textual, to override the other layer, the hierarchical. In these situations, the bloggers use the official and acceptable sources of authority, not any outside sources, to challenge different layers of authority particularly the hierarchy. It also shows that how non-traditional authority, a journalist from the Iranians of the Diaspora, criticizes traditional authority, the Friday Imam, using this new technology. This is one of the moments that reveal the tendency of liberalization in the society.

These two examples from Sibestan and Menbar, which are taken as cases of the fourth layer of authority that Campbell (2007) suggests, authority of religious text, can also be considered as indications of the dimensions of religious fundamentalism (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005) that have been affected by the Internet: hierarchy and discipline. As they mention, religious fundamentalist communities are characterized by a tight hierarchy which is the representative of the divine. In this sense, accusing one of the most important roles, a Friday prayer Imam of wrong doing, is one of the many examples of challenges to this religious authority. What is more important here is the role of the Internet in creating this opportunity for Jami, who lives abroad, to listen or read the speech of one of the Friday Prayer's Imams of Mashhad, and to write about the way that he interpreted the Quran. It is true that none of the

people who attended the Friday prayer will read Jami's post, but the impact of these challenges have gradually opened new windows for criticizing the dominant reading of the religious texts.

The post in Menbar is an example showing how the Internet enhances the communal discipline and enables collaboration by the users to empower the communal consciousness (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzial, 2005). By turning to a reference from a *hadith,* Najmi stabilizes the existing communal discipline in the fundamentalist community. Shiite ulama and clerics use the same method in their sermons, study classes, on the actual *menbars*, and in their professional books. The Internet has just added a new stage for the scholars to empower the traditional discipline of religious dogma. Furthermore, in this way, "the internet has become a significant element in the communal social capital, for good and for bad" (as cited in Barzilai-Nahon and Barzial, 2005, p. 29). Najmi tries to explain the values of Shiite culture and consequently adapt them convincing the reader to accept the supreme leader's high status and impact on Shiite society. This means that the Internet assists in the maintenance of communal religious discipline by preserving basic cultural attributes.

However, at the same time, using the same religious methods and concepts online may have some dissimilar consequences for society. Since the essence of the Internet, the openness and free flow of information, allows a wide range of audiences to read these types of religious texts on weblogs and it also allows them to make different conclusions regarding the blogger's thoughts. The audience also has the opportunity to make comments on the blogs' posts and question the interpretation and understanding that the blogger offers. In this way, although the Internet has become a religious service provider in the Iranian community, it can also enforce the canons of modernity on the fundamentalist community. In this sense Najmi and other religious bloggers, by bringing *ahadith* to prove their thoughts, provide the opportunity for the readers to

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become involved in interpreting the holy texts and thinking about them in a new context. This

development is not acceptable in the traditional and disciplined education system of the religious

fundamentalist community; it disturbs the traditional discipline of *hawsa's* education system.

This is also one of the complex consequences of the penetration of religious society by the

Internet.

### *The Constitution as a religious text*

There are also discussions on Tourjan about *tafseer* books (interpretation of the Quran),

their historical background and their authors, the *ulama*. However, this section will not focus on

this type of post. Rather, it will concentrate on a post that represents the linkages between state

politics and laws in the current era and religious texts. As Campbell (2007) suggests, to

investigate the authority of religious texts online one should pay attention to the role and

perceptions of religious text on the Internet. That means the role that traditional religious texts

serve offline, and whether they play the same role as a source of authority in the online religious

context that they do offline (Campbell, 2007).

There is a post published on Tourjan under the title "The Story of *ulama* and the

Constitution," which focuses on one of the most religious reference texts in Iran, "The

Constitution of the Islamic Republic." The Constitution of Iran is based mainly on the core

beliefs of Shiite Islam and the ideology of *wilayat al-faqih*, which was proposed by Ayatollah

Khomeini.[47] All the existing laws are based on Shari'a and all proposed bills should be approved

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[47] The role of clerics in law: The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran repeats many times that the basis of
political life and loyalty is Islam and that the goal of political activity is the realization of an Islamic vision.
Furthermore, the constitution states the basis upon which the *ulama* claim their right to rule. It also specifies the
mechanisms by which the *ulama* will secure the right to define what is Islamic as well as the legislative means in
particular by which they will enforce this definition. The Constitution specifies the institutionalization of clerical

by the majority of the parliament. However, at least one council (*Shoraye Negahban*, the Council of Guardians),[48] and sometimes one more council,[49] have to review the proposed bills to authenticate them from the perspective of Shari'a, before they are approved

As with other posts on Tourjan, the framing of this article is historical-analytical. The bloggers want to explain four main points here. First, they provide a brief history of the *ulama's* approach to the Constitution during the Constitutional Revolution (in the last century) and explain that the main Shiite *mujtahid*s during that time supported or at least did not oppose this approach. Second, they discuss how the idea of *wilayat al-faqih* became one of the principles of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic after the revolution. Third, they focus on the role of Ayatollah Khomeini, as a charismatic leader, in stabilizing the Constitution, although some traditional *mujtahids*, at that time, believed it was an unnecessary institution that only moves society toward secularism. Therefore, the traditional perspective emphasised that the Shari'a law is enough for a Shiite Islamic state. However, Ayatollah Khomeini approved the establishment of yet another council, *Tashkhis Maslahat Nezam* (Expediency Discernment Council of the State), because even a Shiite-run state needs accurate and applicable laws. Finally, the notion of the

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rule through *wilayat al-faqih* (the rule of the jurist). The authority base of the Constitution is in the hands of those who know God and who are reliable in and responsible for matters having to do with what He permits and forbids. *Wilayat al-faqih'*s power flows through a kind of charismatic authority, known as a kind of divine election. This means that after a long time of opposition, the *ulama* formally became rulers, based on a sacred law and in a semi-democratic state. Their charismatic authority has become routinized and institutionalized as a quasi-rational and quasi-traditional government, since it has a constitution and election yet the laws are based on a religion.

[48] The Council of Guardians: the twelve appointed members have the authority to veto legislation they judge to be inconsistent with the Constitution or Islamic law and they also screen all potential candidates for the Assembly of Experts, the Presidency, and the Parliament.

[49] Shoraye tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam (Expediency Discernment Council of the State). The Expediency Discernment Council of the State was established in 1988, on the orders of Ayatollah Khomeini, to overcome the differences of views between the parliament and the Council of Guardians. Article 112 of the 1989 amended Constitution states: The Expediency Discernment Council of the State shall be convened at the order of the Leader to determine such expedience in cases where the Council of Guardians finds an approval of the parliament against the principles of Shari'a law or the Constitution, and the parliament in view of the expedience of the State is unable to satisfy the Council of Guardians, as well as for consultation in matters referred to it by the Leader, and for discharging other functions laid down in this law.

routinization of the charismatic leadership is a remarkable point in this post. As the bloggers claim, Ayatollah Khomeini wanted the authority of the Constitution and law over the state, rather than the authority of an individual. In a common procedure, he allowed the routinization of charisma and yet institutionally preserved a key measure of charismatic authority by putting it in the Constitution. However, he believed that *wali al-faqih* should screen and monitor all the activities and performance of the society and lead the people toward God. In this regard, the post also contains several quotes from the *mujtahid*s. For instance, Ayatollah Makarem says,

> Imam [Ayatollah Khoemini] strictly suggested that any issue in the state should be analyzed under and by the Constitution. He may have believed that "*wilayat al-faqih*" is above the Constitution but he never acted on this belief. He always firmly emphasized the structure of the Constitution. (Tourjan, 2009)

Thus, the Constitution is presented as a religious-based text that also contains a modern meaning of law and order. This post strongly refers to the role of this text as an authoritative institution in society that should be obeyed under all circumstances and by all people, even the supreme leader. Similar to what Campbell (2010) finds in her study, bloggers of both weblogs supported their personal claims and arguments by employing pure religious texts, such as *hadith*, as well as more social religious-based texts, such as the Constitution. There are many religious weblogs in the Persian blogistan that contain information and analyses about religious texts which strictly affirm the authority of these texts. However, the number of weblogs that question the authority of Shiite religious texts should not be ignored.

So far, by looking at these findings, it can be concluded that as Campbell says, the Internet has become a new public sphere for presentation of different levels of religious authority. As it is discussed through the examples, hierarchy and structure, the two of the four religious authority layers, are strongly reflected on these blog postings, regardless of the bloggers' level of religiosity or their political view. Based on these findings, an important

question was raised: have any kinds of tensions occurred within the interchanges of the fundamentalist Iranian Shiite community and the Internet as a secular technology? Does the regime completely dominate the public sphere of the Internet? Are there any specific instances that show religious fundamentalism is being challenged through the Persian blogosphere?

Applying the framework of Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai helped these questions to be answered. Using their four dimensions of religious fundamentalism reveals that hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline, and seclusion have not been drastically challenged by the users of the Internet in the selected cases of the Persian blogosphere since both fundamentalist and modernist groups apply this technology in the way that fulfills their goals. However, many subtle changes have happened because of this new communication tool which creates a free public sphere for the presented of various understandings of religious beliefs. Also it cannot be ignored that the Internet helps the public sphere of the society to be more liberalized.

In blogistan, religious hierarchy is presented and mostly affirmed by the bloggers, but there are specific posts found in the weblogs that challenge the authority in particular ways; for instance referring to the unofficial sources and historical documents may challenge the current condition of the religious hierarchy in the Iranian society. Patriarchy is one of the main subjects that have been challenged in many ways online, although the society is still dominated by this perspective. The voice of women cannot be censured from a free public sphere of the blogistan and their issues and perspectives have been appeared progressively online. Discipline as the third dimension of religious fundamentalism has been also challenged by users' online activity. Whether they are from the reformist group or fundamentalist one, the bloggers who apply *ahadith* or other religiously specific knowledge in their posts, disturb the traditional discipline of *hawza's* education system. They use the religious knowledge out of the original context and this

opens the door for any person on the net to expose his or her own understanding of *ahadith* in the way that he or she wants without having special knowledge. Moreover, who has the eligibility to adapt the historical Islamic incidents from the days of the Prophet to analyse the current social dilemmas? It seems that in the Internet era, anyone has the opportunity to do so, based on his or her logic. In terms of seclusion, although the Internet can increase the seclusion in a fundamentalist community, it may be decreased by the users' online activity to find new sources of information about Shiite Islam and other religions that are not acceptable by the regime. These sources can be found in some of the postings that have been looked through. For example, the posts that contain the religious intellectuals' statements about Ayatollah Khomeini is considered as an inacceptable and external source, since the regime categorizes religious intellectualism as an inacceptable perspective.

Overall, although this research shows that religious authority still dominates the online public sphere, specifically inside Iran by using filtering, censorship policies and applying more coarse actions toward the oppositional opinions, there are many occurrences that explain the influence of the rational and secular essence of the Internet on the fundamentalist Iranian Shiite society.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how religious bloggers, specifically Shiite Persian bloggers, challenge or affirm the existing religious authority through their blogging content. This was accomplished by looking at which authority layers are presented and what possible tensions exist in the interchanges between religion and the Internet in Iranian society.

To answer the question of which layers of authority are presented in the Persian blogosphere, the framework of Campbell's studies (2007 and 2010) was mainly followed. She categorises four layers of religious authority: hierarchy, structure, ideology and texts. Also, to find any possible dimension of tension, Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilia's (2005) identification of four major areas in which tensions can occur between the Internet and fundamentalist forms of religion: religious hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline and seclusion, were applied.

While early studies of religious authority on the Internet suggested that the Internet might mostly be used by religious users to challenge traditional sources of religious authority, this study shows that the Internet can instead serve as a source for empowering existing forms of religious authority. This study provides evidence that religious users spend a considerable portion of their discourse online affirming, rather than challenging, religious leaders, structural bodies, theologies and core texts. However, there is evidence that using this new technology, as a modern form of public sphere, has influenced the beliefs of the fundamentalist groups and the way they present their thoughts as well. Moreover, more religious scholars become active interpreters of religious texts, specifically with regard to the current social problems, which the traditional *hawza's* education system prevents them from doing.

The major points that have been found in terms of the presentation of the four layers of Shiite religious authority on Persian blogosphere are as follows:

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**Religious hierarchy** is identified with roles such as religious leaders and charismatic figures. This layer of religious authority is appears frequently on the weblogs, in both the reformists and fundamentalist ones. It seems that religious hierarchy and charismatic figures play a critical role in the everyday life of these bloggers. Therefore, the first subject that they refer to when they want to analyze the society is religious leadership. Persian Shiite bloggers in this study invoked many traditional sources of authority, namely appeals to the grand *mujtahids* and *ulama*. Although the presentation of the hierarchical authority becomes the main issue of their posts, fundamentalist bloggers discuss why they support the hierarchy as much as the reformists criticize the religious hierarchy directly or indirectly.

Based on the findings, it seems that religious bloggers, regardless of their fundamentalist or modernist view points, largely affirm the charismatic-traditional form of religious authority, only in different ways. While the fundamentalist weblogs demonstrate existing authority based on traditional ways of understanding religious texts and ideology, the reformist-modernist weblogs apply new ways of understanding Shiite dogma and religious authority, which is more compatible with contemporary modern society.

Although the above claim is true, after analysing the Persian blog posts, it is found that there are some particular moments when the qualification and the eligibility of the charismatic leadership are questioned with or without intention. This is because the Internet is not a neutral communication tool. It affects the content of the communication since it is free to access and mostly free of powerful controls. The Internet's secular essence influences the information that has been published on it. Therefore, even if the fundamentalist users are not fully aware of its essence and effects, by being active in the online public sphere discussing charismatic leadership, they indeed become a part of the liberalization process in their society.

As stated at the beginning of this thesis, based on Weber's (1968) explanation - charismatic authority is defined by all the powers and qualities that a charismatic figure possesses. Fundamentalist blogs attempt to affirm the charismatic authority of the leaders by posting their analyses using religious beliefs and texts to convince others. The process of convincing others explains that the charisma does not have the quality of influencing the crowd anymore. In fact, this situation shows that the charisma needs to be proven by his particular followers for the common people who do not believe in his legitimacy anymore. Therefore, although the fundamentalist bloggers try to affirm the qualification and the authority of the charismatic figure, the quality of the relationship between the charismatic leader and society, are being challenged.

Another aspect of the challenge is when charismatic authority gradually transforms to another type of authority; whether to the rational or traditional form, as it is discussed in examples from the weblogs. When the religious bloggers try to explain the traditional or rational bases of religious authority in the religio-political system of Iran, they indeed challenge the charismatic essence of it. This is because, as it is revealed in these weblogs, they increasingly recognize that they need to define a more traditional or rational system of authority in which the religious leader is accepted by public opinion, whether based on the traditional bonds or rational institutions such as the Constitution. These types of challenges are mainly revealed in the religious-modernist weblogs; for instance, when the bloggers of Tourjan explain the traditional style of the leadership of the *ulama* based on the historical documents and when they explain rational bases of the theory of *wilatay al-faqih* through the thoughts of Ayatollah Khomeini in their interviews with the religious intellectuals. Modernist bloggers, directly or indirectly, question the situation of the charismatic leader and the system. They make their effort to move

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public opinion toward a more rational and democratic system of charismatic power. This way, the religious hierarchy may be weakened but still perseveres.

However, since religious authority can be presented in traditional, rational or charismatic forms, and it is not restricted to any of these forms, we cannot conclude that through the weblogs or any other kind of online social media, religious authority is actually being challenged in significant ways. We only can claim that the Internet, as a rational and secular technology, has a series of unpredictable effects on the religious fundamentalist community of Iran, such as the creation of an open public sphere for sensitive issues and the increase in the number of religious theorists and interpreters. At the same time we should pay attention to those effects that the religious society has on the Internet. There are some examples in this study of how the Internet becomes a ground for discussing the traditional or charismatic types of religious authority by the fundamentalist users. This proves the fact that although fundamentalist groups apply this technology in the way that fits their needs, the religiously fundamentalist society of Iran and the Internet have mutual effects on each other. It shows the tendency of the society toward liberalization with regards to religious issues.

**Religious structure** is identified with the mosque and other holy places, the religious education system, as well as religious practices and pilgrims which are situated in the second rank of presentation on the five weblogs. In this layer, both fundamentalist and modernist bloggers are apt to connect the offline structure of education system of *hawza* and religious rituals to the online authority. Although, they use the Internet as a new public ground to re-define traditional religious structure, there are evidences that this new technology has gradually influenced the traditional structure. For instance, by looking at the posts by female bloggers, it has been found that religious women find a public sphere to empower their voice based on their

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religious beliefs and needs. However, not only their presentation in the free public ground of the

Internet can be considered as a way to weaken the patriarchy, but also their statements consist of

feminist claims in essence. From the findings of this study, even the fundamentalist male

bloggers break the rules of patriarchy by writing about women's issues and acknowledging their

professional work. By respecting the women's presentation, they legitimize the feminine voices

in religio-political discussions as well as women's issues.

**Religious ideology** and **religious text** have appeared less frequently on these five

weblogs. Since these bloggers are not the formal representatives of any of the *ulama* or a

religious institution, they do not tend to interpret religious texts or define the principal concepts.

They use religious texts or ideology only when the bloggers need to provide a religious proof for

their assertions.

Based on these findings, we can reveal that although there are thousands of non-religious

Persian bloggers who post radically anti-religious discussions from inside and outside Iran, the

power of religious bloggers should not be underestimated. This notion leads us to another

remarkable point here. There is some evidence showing the formation of a new type of religious

authority in the study of these weblogs. Since there are still few weblogs that analyse the

hierarchy of the religious leaders from within, the bloggers, who have clerical backgrounds, are

considered to be reliable sources of information with more accurate criticisms. Therefore, it is

predictable that after a while a new form of online authority will be shaped that can at least

influence the online religious Shiite environment. This is partly happening right now since by

searching with any keyword (in *Farsi*) about *hawza* and related issues in a search engine like

Google.com, the first source that appears is Tourjan.com. This gives the authors of the weblog

the power to distribute their own understanding and viewpoints more easily and influence religious authority by challenging or even affirming it.

Another aspect of the shaping of new authorities online is provided by the weblogs, websites, and other online social networking communities run by Iranians in the Diaspora. This seems obvious that the bloggers and the managers of these weblogs and websites have unrestricted access to the Internet and their voices are heard more effortlessly than those bloggers in Iran who are facing filtration and censorship of the Internet. However, except from some examples from the blog postings discussed in this study, this subject needs more effort to be documented and analysed.

This thesis has also explored and conceptualized the interaction of religious fundamentalism and the Internet with regard to four dimensions: hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline and seclusion, as Barzilai-Nahon and Barziali (2005) suggested. Based on what was studied, religion, even in its fundamentalist form, does not perceive the Internet with irreversible hostility. In the Shiite Iranian context, this new technology is perceived as a potentially welcoming tool that can be used to disseminate religion internally and externally. Additionally, it is being utilized for political mobilization by both controversial Iranian parties.

Overall, "cyberspace is dynamic in nature, fast and easy to access, providing users with more discretion, power and wealth of communication possibilities" (Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai, 2005, p. 37). These features have given the Internet a special value among religious believers. The Internet has assisted the religious communities, specifically the fundamentalist ones, to survive in the modern era. This is because the Internet is a tool that supports them to provide their religious needs. As a result, the community has become more multifaceted and pluralized, but also more empowered and more efficient by making the Internet a complementary space to

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the offline community. As we see in this study, the Internet penetration has not drastically changed the basic foundations of religious authority in the community, but it surely has created small but progressive changes in the society.

Following Barzilia-Nahon and Barzilai (2005), this research analyses the blog posts to find any possible tensions between the Internet and Shiite religion in the areas of hierarchy, patriarchy, discipline and seclusion. The main point identified in this regard is that religious hierarchy is not radically threatened by the Internet in Iran. However, since the Internet is a public sphere with a flattened hierarchy, more people have the opportunity to challenge or affirm the existing hierarchical system, and more plurality will be found in terms of interpretation of the religious dogma.

Also, it seems that patriarchy is subjected to challenge in the Internet era. Even among hard-liners, such as the members of the fundamentalist party in Iran, the voice of women is becoming heard and their work is more appreciated and seen. Women, specifically the highly educated ones, who empower their voices do not solely discuss female issues, they raise serious questions for the political and religious systems of the society.

Regarding discipline, the situation is the same: the Internet disturbs the traditional religious education and interpretation system through the use of hyperlinks. Moreover, the mostly free access to religious websites/weblogs, texts and other sources challenge the existing discipline in Shiite learning and information gathering traditions. For instance, referring to the usage of *ahadith* in the blog postings, it should be noted that it is obviously an anti-traditional way of stating *ahadith* since the great *ulama* always believe that only religious scholars should state a hadith in its context for those who have the minimum knowledge of Arabic language and other related knowledge.

As for seclusion, the Internet may threaten the religious community's seclusion. Since the Internet provides open access to other cultures and religions, it also creates a free ground for discussing sensitive religious issues. Whether being anonymous or identified, Iranian bloggers can refer to unofficial and disapproved sources to discuss religious matters. But, the Internet can play a contradictory role as well. Official leaders and fundamentalists lead people to follow their own online sources. This means that religious authority can preserve its power through the use of this very modern device.

As Scholz et al. (2008) concluded in their study of Islamic podcasts, although the Internet provides the opportunity for expressing a diversity of opinions and interests challenging the traditional structure of religious authority, the content of the Persian blogistan is still oriented toward the traditional and classic scholarship and beliefs that form the basis of religious authority.

Referring to the study of Scholz et al. (2008), the Internet has four major outcomes for Iranian society that have been revealed through this analysis of blog postings. First, the accessibility and flexibility of the Internet facilitates the participation of individuals and groups in the overall Islamic discourse which would have been ignored before the spread of this new means of communicating. Second, the Internet facilitates the increase in the quality and the quantity of Shiite counter public areas, where people can debate sensitive issues with less fear. Third, the emergence of an Iranian Shiite online landscape is not totally distinct from those authority structures existing in the real world. However, it seems that the existing structure has been challenged in some aspects. The Persian blogosphere has gradually unveiled new aspects of the Iranian religio-political structure that had not been revealed in the public media inside Iran. It could also present a new face of Shiite Islam to the world, especially if one considers the roll of

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the Iranian diaspora, as Anderson (2003) asserts. Fourth, the new online public sphere provides new opportunities for presenting religious authority and its layers. This creates a new context and innovative types of discourse in the Shiite community of Iran. This is another small and unpredictable change that the Internet imposes on the fundamentalist community of Iran.

In this study, there are three major instances that are considered more significant in liberalizing the public sphere of the Shiite fundamentalist community of Iran using the Internet: 1) The bloggers, regardless of their political viewpoints, use the outside or unofficial sources of information that consist of alternative views of Shiite practices, principles and religious leaders. The role of the Internet in the exposition of this information cannot be ignored either. 2) The unseen aspect of the life of the *ulama* is now can be seen though the Internet. The information about their personal life and activities is as reachable as their religious works and perspectives. Their characteristics and life are not visionary anymore. 3) The Internet allows non-traditional authorities, whether the journalists or unknown religious scholars, to use one layer of authority to criticize the other layers. For instance, they state the verses of the Quran (textual authority) to attack the religious leaders (hierarchical authority). 4) The presentation of women's voices is another strong instance in this study. How women expose their issues and needs and how they are presented by male bloggers, as legitimate sources in religio-political matters, are remarkable points in this study.

These are only a few examples that illustrate the point that the Internet challenges, in subtle ways, some aspects of the religious authority. It should be also mentioned that users of this free and secular technology, for example the fundamentalist groups, may not be fully aware of its liberating effects on their society and beliefs. This conclusion is in line with Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilia's point about how the Internet is gradually changing the essence of the fundamentalist

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communities in a delicate way. However, it should be also mentioned that the Iranian political regime uses more coercive ways to maintain the dimensions of fundamentalism in the society. The political regime still strongly controls people's online activities in any way possible, but on the flip side, as Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai say, just by using this technology, particularly by using certain features of this technology, such as weblogs, the subtle process of liberalization is taking hold in the society.

**Future Work**

This preliminary study sets the stage for a more sophisticated research project in the area of religion and the Internet in the Iranian Shiite community. More research needs to be conducted to review additional Persian weblogs, from inside and outside Iran, that make posts on religious authority and religious dogma, in order to analyse the contemporary reciprocal influence of the Internet and religion. One of the most important areas that should be studied in more depth is the role of the Iranian Shiite diaspora and the role of religious intellectuals in creating new understandings and interpretations of religious texts. Their role becomes more important and influential because the Internet allows them to publish their perspectives freely and common people can therefore have access to them easily. Therefore, a more in-depth study of the notion of religious authority in conjunction with the Internet is needed.

Also a more intensive study can be conducted about women bloggers, which could potentially open doors to the analysis of how patriarchal traditions have been vigorously challenged, changed or affirmed in online communities of Shiite Iranians. This, undoubtedly, could have a great impact on the offline context of contemporary Iran.

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# Appendix

**Shiite Hadith collection**

*The four major hadith collections for Shiites are:*

- *Al-Kafi* by al-Kulayni,

- *Man la Yahzarohol Fagih* by al-Sadugh

- *Tahzib al-Akhlagh* by al-Tousi

- *Al-Estibsar fima khtolefa men al-akhbar* by al-Tousi

*Other collections:*

- *Al-Bihar al- Anvar* by al-Majlisi,

- *Al-Istibsar* by al-Tusi,

- *Wasael al-Shi'a* by al-Ameli

**Shiite Books of Tafseer:**

- *Al-Meezan* by Tabatabayie

- *Nemooneh,* by Makarem Shirazi

- *Tafseer Majma al-Bayan* by al-Tabarsi