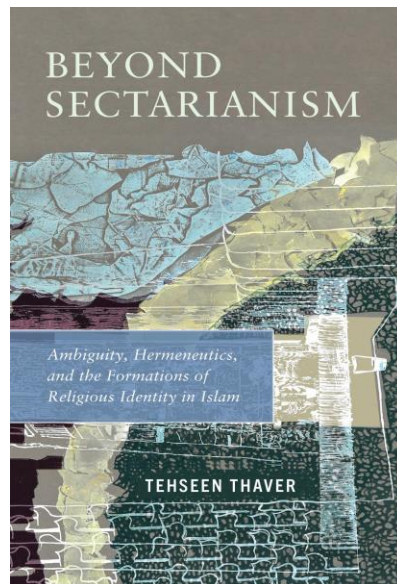


Book Reviews

Tehseen Thaver. *Beyond Sectarianism: Ambiguity, Hermeneutics and the Formation of Religious Identity in Islam*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024. Pp. 303. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781512825947.

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At this study's core is al-Sharīf al-Raḍī's (d. 1015 CE) only surviving volume of his literary Qur'ānic exegesis *Ḥaqā'iq al-Ta'wīl fī Mutashābih al-Tanzīl* in which he tackled thirty-seven ambiguous verses in the Qur'ān. Tehseen Thaver persuasively demonstrates that when read with a keen scholarly eye and against the backdrop of the "general episteme that dominated the social and intellectual currents" (p. 219) of Buyid Baghdad in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE, al-Raḍī's work presents numerous and surprisingly compelling fruits. In six chapters, Thaver's careful reading of al-Raḍī's exegesis in the backdrop of the intellectual milieu of Buyid Iraq and methodological nuance successfully achieve several ambitious goals, all fittingly captured in the title of the book. There are significant takeaways vis-à-vis Qur'ānic ambiguous verses, but also in relation to "hermeneutics," i.e., the questions of language's origins and its relationship to ontology, theology, law, and even political power in the Buyid period. Most significantly, Thaver's study challenges scholars of Islamic (and Shī'ī) studies to revisit and reconsider their "predispositions" towards "sectarianism" and "religious identity"—two other significant keywords within the book title—the ways in which they influence their scholarly apparatus and working assumptions, and ultimately determine their narratives and conclusions about the Islamic and Islamicate world. The case in point here is the Shī'ī sectarian identity. Given its centrality to the study, let me take that on first.



There has been within the Western academy an overarching scholarly narrative about Shiism, its formative era, Shī'ī identity, and Shī'ī hermeneutics. The *Ḥaqā'iq*, Thaver shows, defies and overturns it and its concomitant scholarly expectations. For instance, when it comes to political authority, al-Raḍī, although a Twelver Shī'ī himself, surprisingly asserts his own rather than that of the Shī'ī Imam (ch. 2). Similarly, given its predisposition towards Shī'ī sectarian identity, Western scholarship presumes *ta'wīl* or *bātinī* esoteric hermeneutic to be the hallmark of the Shī'ī approach to scripture and reality and expects it in all things Shī'ī. Yet, al-Raḍī disappoints again, asserting that the “hidden” scriptural meaning needs to be uncovered from within the deeper layers of language itself (ch. 3). Then there is the prevalent scholarly consensus of the Mu'tazilī influence on the “critical rationalist turn” Twelver Shī'īs took in the tenth century CE, i.e., the well-known “Rationalization Thesis.” Here again, al-Raḍī defies expectations. Comparing al-Raḍī with his Mu'tazilī teacher al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE) reveals only partial concurrences. Not only do they differ in their identification of ambiguous verses in the third Qur'ānic chapter (only 11 out of 31 are shared—see the chart on pp. 190-91), but they also classify ambiguous verses on fairly different grounds (ch. 6). Invariably, while thoroughly plunged into his intellectual milieu and familiar with deliberations of his intellectual interlocutors, al-Raḍī stood his ground as an independent and original thinker.

At the broadest level perhaps is the scholarly consensus on dubbing the tenth century “the Shī'ī century.” Underlying this characterization is the view that, with three Shī'ī families occupying the seats of political power, the tenth century must have been a time during which Shiism flourished through more intellectual and sociopolitical space for its scholars, the establishment of Shī'ī rituals, and formulation of the Shī'ī hermeneutic. Drawing on scholarship on the Buyid era, however, Thaver puts forth an alternative account in which al-Raḍī's life and works are shown to be situated within and dynamically intertwined with the intellectual (and political) currents of the tenth and eleventh centuries more broadly construed. Thaver insists that “religious identities cannot be isolated from the larger sociopolitical and intellectual networks” (p. 106). Thus, instead of turning to al-Raḍī's “Shī'ī” identity, Thaver argues that his exegesis is better understood when thought of in relation to a culture of “literary competition” (p. 48), public debates by scholars from various schools of thought (p. 47), “extreme valorization of rhetoric” (p. 61), increasing “professionalization of the poetic enterprise” (p. 58)—in which “poetry came to function as a social and political commodity” (p. 57), which to al-Raḍī's dismay was displacing the older poetic tradition—,

and theological debates. The Buyid era was also a time of political fragmentation and the “canonization of the Arabic language” (p. 45). It is in the latter, above all else, that the key to understanding al-Raḍī’s Qur’ānic exegesis lies. That is, in the centrality of language and the “intimacy of language and hermeneutics” (p. 45). Language, in this intellectual milieu mirrored “both ontological and social realities (p. 165), was inseparably tied to ontology and theology, and via rhetorical and poetic excellence was even an arbiter of political excellence and power (p. 71). It is also this strong correlation between language and lineage that permitted al-Raḍī to assert his own political authority.

Thaver’s exposition of an “epistemic turn to wonder” (p. 12) and “ambiguity in the Qur’an as a gateway to experiencing the wonders of language” (p. 17) in the Buyid era must also radically unsettle the prevailing scholarly wisdom about ambiguous Qur’ānic verses as daunting theological problems. The author shows how al-Raḍī saw the Qur’ān’s ambiguous verses as “primary repositories of the most subtle secrets of the Qur’an which were only accessible through the equally subtle mysteries of the Arabic language” (p. 161). Within the cultural ambience of al-Raḍī that cherished wonder, “the Qur’an’s ambiguous verses also extended an invitation to such affective states as awe and wonder” (p. 72). Indeed, ambiguity was not merely a theological conundrum and a headache; for Buyid intellectuals like al-Raḍī, it was an exciting intellectual prospect replete with awe-inspiring possibilities.

A “linguistic” and “literary” hermeneutic then is at the heart of the *Ḥaqā’iq*: “Language is the ultimate arbiter of Qur’anic meaning” (p. 12) and as such, is privileged by al-Raḍī “as the primary hermeneutical key to determining the meaning of the Qur’an” (p. 106). Ambiguity may be polysemic, grammatical, theological, ethical/social or logical—all formulations that al-Raḍī accepted (p. 85)—but the resolution *must* come from within the language and with recourse to the tripartite canon of the Arabic language: 1) the Qur’ān, 2) the poetic tradition, and 3) the everyday speech of the Arabs (p. 112). Examples abound in every chapter to show how by drawing upon this tripartite canon, al-Raḍī as the expert linguist, poet, and rhetorician decoded the Qur’ānic ambiguities. With this, Thaver demonstrates how “language and its underlying normative authority were at [*sic.*] the centerpiece of al-Raḍī’s analytic apparatus” (p. 201).

Yet, with a predominant focus on Shī‘ī sectarian identity, all these nuances are bound to be lost. Al-Raḍī then becomes just another “Shī‘ī thinker,” with his “Shī‘ī” sectarian identity presumed to lay out the parameters of his texts, and predicting what may or may not happen in the texts produced by a “Shī‘ī scholar.” A “predetermined essence to

Shi'ism" (p. 53) underlies these scholarly predispositions, one that bars a critical engagement with the intellectual, textual, and sociopolitical currents of the historical milieu, and a close and careful reading of the text in view. Yet, as Thaver argues, al-Raḍī's "identity as a scholar was not bound to any predetermined or a priori assumption on what being a Shi'i scholar entailed" (p. 99).

So if scholars were to bypass the temptation of sectarianism and look "beyond" it, where and to what should they turn? Thaver models a "conceptual approach . . . through a focus on analyzing the multivalent intellectual and political currents that informed al-Radi's Qur'anic hermeneutic" (p. 227), one that recognizes the embeddedness of the text in multiple intellectual traditions. Al-Raḍī's own "enumeration procedure" where he lists opinions of other named or unnamed interlocutors on a given ambiguity or theological issue is ably presented as proof of this plurality within Islamic intellectual traditions of the Buyid milieu. Moreover, Muslim humanities, the internal logics of a discursive tradition, intellectual and sociopolitical terrains, language and literary hermeneutics, and "critical purchase of his [i.e., al-Raḍī's] arguments at the specific historical juncture" were ably demonstrated to be much better avenues of exploration and explanation (pp. 8, 11, 126).

Convincingly, throughout these chapters, Thaver shows both how limiting and pervasive sectarian readings of Shī'ī texts and history are. These factors explain why a prominent figure like al-Raḍī was marginalized from the study of Qur'ānic exegesis, and his text was not viewed as a "*tafsīr*." To be sure, Thaver does not downplay al-Raḍī's Shī'ī identity nor does she ignore how it may influence his views. Rather, she warns us of the conceptual and methodological baggage that an overemphasis on his sectarian identity may entail. A privileging of sectarianism as the sole lens for approaching Shiism has simply clouded scholarly judgment.

Shī'ī studies must therefore be rethought. As suggested by the author in the conclusion, the implications of this study clearly extend beyond the study of just one text (namely, al-Raḍī's *Ḥaqā'iq*), or one context (here, Buyid Baghdad). It has inevitable implications for the study of sectarianism and religious identity across Islamic (and perhaps other religious) traditions and history. In Thaver's passionate case, the internalization of heresiographies or projection of modern sensibilities that deem the Buyid era as "humanistic," "pluralistic," and "tolerant" must both be resisted.

In passing, I must point to a few other underdeveloped yet significant interventions and tropes in the study. First, the case for the *Ḥaqā'iq* as a "politically charged manifesto through which al-Radi

sought to announce his own supreme candidacy for the office of the caliphate” (p. 73) needs more evidence. However, this claim is perhaps at cross purposes with Thaver’s own reluctance to search for “underlying” or “real” motives. As she perceptively notes, “the quest for ‘underlying motivations’ of early Muslim arguments over language can also function as another framing through which identity politics are privileged as the primary governing principle and template for approaching these texts” (p. 138).”

The desire for “having Baghdad speak back to Europe” (p. 127) and decolonizing “the study of religion and language by enlarging and diversifying our canvas of analysis” (p. 144) is another underdeveloped theme. Chapter five by far comes closest to articulating what that may look like. There, Thaver builds a thematic bridge between Western debates on the “origin of language” in the contemporary era, and those taking place among the Muslim intellectuals of the Buyid period. Yet, Thaver does not ultimately deliver on the promise of a “dialogical encounter between Western theory and the Muslim humanities” (p. 145). The question of what insights for the “humanistic study of the interaction of language, theology and knowledge” (p. 144) could today’s Euro-American thinkers reap from their Buyid era Muslim interlocutors is left for the reader to parse out. The theme of “awe and wonder of language” too had immense humanistic potential and contemporary relevance but remains regrettably underdeveloped.

These minor points, however, take nothing away from the significance of this study and its groundbreaking interventions. Clear and highly accessible, Thaver’s prose excels in elucidating complicated theological and linguistic debates of a bygone era even to a lay reader. Instructors can hence confidently assign chapters of this book in graduate or undergraduate courses on hermeneutics or/and the Qur’ān.

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