

ALI RAHNEMA, *Shi'i Reformation in Iran: The Life and Theology of Shari'at Sangelaji* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015). Pp. 183. \$109.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781472434166

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The book under review is a tapestry of simple designs woven with ample colorful threads of the religiopolitical framework of 1920s to 1940s Iran. We get to understand the religious and political culture of Iran through the prism of Shari'at Sangelaji's (1891–1944) ideological view of how Islam, and particularly Shi'ism, should be reformed and assessed. This is the first serious work done in English on Sangelaji, one of the leading advocates of religious reform in modern Iran. His disapproval of the established Iranian Shi'i clerics of the time was an attempt to break away from the superstitious web that permeated and hindered many aspects of Iranian cultural progress in the early 20th century. His work in Persian covered a range of subjects from Qur'anic exegesis, jurisprudence, music, and monotheism to eradicating superstitions and beyond. Sangelaji's goal was not to alter the thought and ideology of Shi'ism within the established clerical class, but rather to reach his intended audience of young educated intellectuals who saw the progressive West as a model and a window to a more developed country that leaned less on its Islamic cultural identity.

The book is written in a beautiful and succinct style; it is skillfully organized, with an introduction and nine chapters. One could easily divide the book into three distinct parts: the Iranian religiopolitical environment of the 1920s through 1940s; Sangelaji's ideological views on "true" Islam and how Shi'ism should be reformed from its immersion in superstition; and finally, unyielding opposition to his views by the established Shi'i clerics of the time. In the introduction, Rahnema compares two important reformers from two separate eras: Shari'at Sangelaji and Martin Luther, the catalyst behind the Protestant Reformation of early 16th-century Christianity. In the subsequent two chapters, Rahnema provides a genealogy of Sangelaji's highly influential and reformist family, which helped shape his view of Islam and particularly his "emphasis on the Qur'an and his attempt at freeing Muslims from non-Qur'anic practices" (p. 25). Applying human reasoning in understanding the Qur'an and Islam was also interpreted as a direct threat to the established clerics and their monopoly of the faith. Early 20th-century Iran was also being transformed politically and intellectually with the rise of Reza Shah and the implementation of his modernist policies. One religious intellectual in particular, Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), spearheaded a new faith-based movement by claiming that all monotheistic religions, including Islam, are "sunk in ignorance, error and misinformation," and thus are outdated (p. 44). Sangelaji's attempt to purify Shi'ism from what he saw as its irrational and superstitious elements not only made him the target of the Shi'i clerical establishment, but also subjected him to piercing criticism by Kasravi who believed that Islam, and Shi'ism, are incompatible with any type of modernist reforms.

In Chapters 3–6, Rahnema delves into the ideological assessment of Sangelaji with an initial explanation of how he saw Islam reverted to the age of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) with "corruption of beliefs" and widespread popular superstitions (p. 57). A remedy to this age of ignorance, he felt, was deracinating superstitions. To Sangelaji, a true understanding of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet was the single most important element needed to achieve that goal. Rahnema describes how through his sermons Sangelaji encouraged human reasoning when explaining sensitive subjects such as music, sculpture, painting, and charging interest in financial transactions, all forbidden deeds in traditional Islam. In doing so, he had recourse to the kind of interpretations that would make such actions compatible with the teaching of Islam. It was this human reasoning aspect of his argument that put him on a direct course against mainstream practices of Shi'ism and their established custodians. Popular practices that he objected to included

intercession (*shifā'āt*), reliance on divine intervention (*tavakkul*), visiting and worshipping shrines (*ziyārat*), the return of prophetic figures (*raj'at*), people's imitation of learned clerics (*taqlid*), the existence of antichrist (*dajal*), the necessity for shedding tears (*geryeh*), or the belief in sense-based miracles (*mu'jizāt hassī*) (p. 68). Sangelaji argued that these practices and rituals, which were encouraged and propagated by the renowned conservative cleric Mohammad-Baqer Majlisi (1616–98), fashioned the core of what Twelver Shi'ism had come to be since the 17th century. They also detracted from the true spirit of Shi'ism which he considered to be a religion of protest rather than submission. Hence, Sangelaji believed in the necessity to revert back to interpreting “true” Shi'i Islam by way of the Qur'an as a guide. He also advocated for the application of human reasoning to the world around oneself in order to advance one's material and spiritual situation. This right, he argued, had been taken away from people by the clerical establishment who argued that “the Qur'an was incomprehensible to ordinary people” (p. 79). The traditional clerics argued as well that only the Prophet and infallible imams could read and interpret the Qur'an in a proper way. In their absence, it was the clerics who could discharge that task in however imperfect a way. Sangelaji argued that if human intellect and independent thought (*ra'i*) were not applied to the different and unprecedented cases of our time, then Islam would be incapable of adjusting itself to modern changes. Nor did the clerics have any monopoly over independent thought and reasoning. Sangelaji saw that ordinary people were always reliant on their *mujtahids*, rather than themselves to interpret Qur'anic verses. His reforms were meant to contain a popular practice that perpetuated the privileged status of the clerics. One cannot help but see the similarity of this approach with that of Martin Luther who tried to reform what he saw to be the superficial aspects of his faith and remove the monopoly of power from the clergy.

Rahnema also enlightens his readers that Sangelaji challenged the validity, the importance, the authenticities, and substantial reliance on reports (hadiths) of the imams in post-Majlisi Shi'ism while underscoring the significance of the Qur'an in understanding modern Iran. Rahnema further elucidates in Chapters 7 and 8 that to perpetuate their domination and monopoly on faith, certain popular practices were encouraged by the established clerics. These included for example “sacrificing animals for ‘others’ or asking for favors, or intercession from others” (p. 125). Sangelaji's unyielding and relentless campaign for reform caused his opponents to label him a Wahhabi. Rahnema expertly examines Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahhab's (1703–92) writings and ideology with those of Sangelaji and interweaves the inconsistency of the two ideologues, showing that although there are certain commonalities between the two, their approaches and understandings are vastly separate.

In conclusion, Rahnema's book is a well-argued addition to the field of Islamic, Shi'i, and Iranian studies. It is valuable to students and scholars alike who are pursuing the subject of the Iranian Revolution and the formation of its theocracy. The book will also be appreciated by those who advocate religious reform in Islam.

JOSEPH SASSOON, *Anatomy of Authoritarianism in the Arab Republics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Pp. 325. \$94.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper. ISBN: 9781107618312

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Political scientists devoted to the study of Arab politics have long grappled with the “exceptionalism” of authoritarianism's durability, robustness, and resiliency in the Arab world, whether among republics or monarchies. Even as other world regions experienced moments of democratic transition, Arab states seemed immune to such changes. A robust literature of its own developed