Pedagogies of Piety: Shi'i Children's Books, Ethics and the Emergence of the Pious Subject
Edith Szanto
Centre for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto
edith.szanto@utoronto.ca

It was the last day of summer-school at one of the dozen or so Shi'i Muslim seminaries in Syria. Female teachers dressed in black abayas were running around hurriedly setting up a little party which was going to include a speech, small gifts and a three-story vanilla cake. I was chatting with my classmate Fatima, a mid-twenties single from Baghdad, when the party finally started. After the girls from the first level, who all below the age of nine, had discordantly sung a religious hymn or two, Um Hussayn the theology teacher and back-up mullah also led a couple of chants as a prelude to the Islamic law instructor's sermon. "You can't expect your kids to pray when they get older and you can't expect your girls to feel obliged to wear their hijāb unless you have taught them to adhere to the ahl al-bayt, the Prophet's family and his descendants!"1 She explained that at the age of three, one should teach toddlers how to say ‘lä illāha ill allah,’ (‘there is no God but God,’) and seven months later, how to say ‘Muhammadun rasūl-Allah,’ (‘Muhammad is God's Messenger’). At the age of five, one should teach children the difference between left and right, as this is crucial for table manners, bathroom-hygiene and prayer. Next, children need to be shown how to perform the individual units of daily prayer, and when they reach six, they should be taught how to pray. Just before reaching the age of nine, daughters must be instructed on how to ritually wash, so that they may start praying regularly when they turn nine. "First and foremost, however, a girl must be committed to the ahl al-bayt. It is easier for mothers if daughters pray and wear hijāb for the sake of the ahl al-bayt. Of course, you have to teach them early!"2

Introduction

Shi'i children's books constitute one possible technique parents may use to teach their children pious behaviour from an early age. These can be bought, for instance, in bookstores near the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet, just 12 km South of Damascus. Though the

1 For Twelver Shi'i Muslims the ahl al-bayt designates the family of the Prophet beginning with his daughter Fatima, her husband Imam 'Ali and their (male) descendants. Imam 'Ali is considered to be the first of twelve Imams and he is followed by his sons, Hassan and Hussayn. The line of Imams continues through the third Imam Hussayn in a succession of nine male descendants. The last is the Hidden Imam or the Mahdi who entered into Occultation ca. 940 CE and is expected to return near the End of Time. Together, Fatima, the Prophet and the Twelve Imams are collectively referred to as the Fourteen Infallibles, as they are considered to have been divinely protected from error.

Note on transliteration: For the sake of non-specialist readers, diacritical marks have been restricted to a minimum throughout the article. Most Arabo-Islamic terms are defined in a short glossary at the end.
Syrian Twelver Shi'i community is rather small. Shi'i bookstores serve a wide readership. Customers include Shi'is from Lebanon, Iraq, summer-vacationers from the Eastern Arabian Gulf, Arab expatriates on religious pilgrimages – and the occasional researcher. For this study, I have examined a selection of Shi'i children's books I bought in Sayyida Zaynab. The selection includes an Arabic primer set, several series on the lives of the ahl al-bayt in both English and Arabic, an Arabic series on the Mahdi, four prayer and legal manuals and four booklets on “Spiritual Governance.” Except for the primer series, which will be this article’s first object of investigation, the books are intended for roughly eight to thirteen year old children. The selection is roughly representative of children’s books for sale at Sayyida Zaynab, most of which are imported from Lebanon, Iran or Iraq, as Syria produces few Shi'i books. The books were all published in the last decade and most include glossy, colourful pictures which makes them a bit pricey, limiting their accessibility and their readership (and by implication this study) to those families who can afford them. The books are sold as either complete series of thinner booklets or as hard-back compilations containing similar collections of shorter sections. Each series is organized around a central theme such as ritual, doctrine, or the lives of the ahl al-bayt. As these are often repeated, readers re-encounter the same basic stories from a variety of perspectives.

Though the mass consumption of books specifically dedicated to children’s religious education is a relatively recent phenomenon as it requires means, literacy and leisure-time, there has been a long-standing tradition within Islamic thought and literature emphasizing religious education. There are numerous sayings attributed to the Prophet, which encourage Muslims to seek knowledge. In the eleventh century, the famous theologian al-Ghazali wrote an entire treatise on the etiquette of teachers and students in his magnum opus. The fourteenth century historian Ibn Khaldun included a chapter on pedagogy in his Muqaddimah. In reaction to colonialism, numerous Muslims intellectuals such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abdu struggled to reform Islamic learning as the key to progress, modernization and independence. More recently, Islamic schools have become the subject of heated debates even in Western media, where they have been blamed for producing extremists groups such as the Taliban. Rather than focusing on the books’ reception, socio-political effects and other potential Austinian misfirings, however, this article examines Shi'i children’s books with regard to how they attempt to instil religious values.

According to Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, a contemporary Shi'i intellectual and pedagogue whose book I acquired in one of the bookstores where I bought children’s books, ‘Western’ education has ignored religion and thus, has failed to bring about ‘true’ progress. He points out that while scientific progress has helped humankind reach new heights, it has also aided the proliferation of war and mass destruction. In order to bring about peace, prosperity and ‘true’ progress, children’s education must incorporate moral, ethical or religious training – all of which are interchangeable terms for al-Qarashi and will consequently not be strictly

4 Ibid., 74.
5 Ibid., 3-4.
differentiated here either. Both al-Qarashi and Shi‘i children’s books (at least implicitly) agree that the immediate solution is to be sought within the context of the family where children should be taught religious beliefs and pious behaviour. The following analysis takes seriously the concern for a proper pious formation and therefore examines how Shi‘i children’s literature spells out and intervenes in Shi‘i children’s formation, especially within familial settings. As mentioned above, an evaluation of the books’ actual impact is beyond the scope of this article, yet I think it nevertheless ought to be of academic interest to think about the intimate ways in which contemporary religious imaginaries structure and transmit ethical ways of being-in-the-world.

Theoretical Considerations

As part of a larger discourse on Shi‘i piety and pious formation, Shi‘i children’s books demonstrate a particular vision of how to become pious and in this sense they are prescriptive rather than normative. However, as pedagogical tools, Shi‘i children’s books also have disciplinary functions. Drawing on Judith Butler’s philosophical insights, this article examines the books’ disciplinary and productive aspects and asks: How do Shi‘i children’s books describe and compel the (trans)formation of emerging subjects into pious subjects? How does the literature participate in the sedimentation of piety? And how are we to understand agency in this context?

It should be noted that the use of the term ‘subject’ and its various derivatives (e.g. ‘intersubjective’) is not meant to carry heavy philosophical baggage, but rather highlight how selves are constituted as subjects through encounters with others and disciplinary regimes, such as religious children’s books. I draw on but also depart from Butler’s language and theory of subject formation, not in order to arrive at a thorough theory of ‘Shi‘i subjectivity’ which would require reading more into the books than is actually there, but rather in order to draw attention to critical convergences that speak back to our own assumptions about ethics and pious subjectivity. For this reason, the following analysis begins with a discussion of how Shi‘i children’s books construct pious behaviour as an apt response to others. It thereby reverses Butler’s account according to which the subject is formed through encounters with others who impinge upon the emerging subject, which further implies that the subject is neither autonomous nor fully determined from the outside. For Butler, this means that the subject’s capacity to act ethically cannot be grounded in autonomy but must instead be based in intersubjectivity, the subject’s openness and capacity to respond to others. In invoking close personal relationships such as those between mother and daughter or a little boy and his grandfather, Shi‘i books situate religious knowledge and ethical behaviour literally, metaphorically and pictorially in the realm of the familial, within the space of Lacanian primary relations. It is within this space that

---

6 Following the language of Muslim thinkers such as Qarashi, this article will not strictly distinguish between the terms ‘morals,’ ‘ethics,’ ‘virtue,’ ‘piety’ and ‘religion.’ For many Muslim thinkers these terms are not only interrelated, they are only possible within the context of (ideally Islam, but more generally) revealed religion.

7 Qarashi, Educational System, 32-38.

fictional pious elders cite the exemplary acts of the Prophet Muhammad and his ahl al-bayt and thereby introduce children/readers to the Infallibles as citable and therefore knowable others. The elder’s performances constitute the Shi’i pious norm as both a ‘sedimented effect’ and as a ‘productive power,’ productive of pious subjects. Fictional but familial others compel young readers to relate to and to cite the ahl al-bayt, perform the pious norm and become recognizable as pious subjects. According to Butler, the emerging subject desires to be recognized by primary others and for this reason appropriates the norm.  

Butler does not philosophize beyond the point of recognition, other than some of its misfirings, nor about what it means to appropriate the norm. Yet, these are crucial issues for Shi’i children’s books. There, pious subject formation begins within the space of the familial and proceeds by demanding performative and emotional responses and attachments. Books for children below the ‘age of responsibility’ not only introduce pious norms, but also base these norms in interpersonal relationships and apt forms of responsiveness. Notably, the process of cultivating responsiveness continues throughout childhood and adulthood, and it can be (mis)used for political purposes, as will be discussed below. Generally, the process whereby Shi’i books demand prescribed responses from children/readers corresponds to Butler’s theory of impingement by primary others, whereby emerging subjects are compelled to respond by appropriating norms in order to become recognizable as, for example, pious subjects. Shi’i pious formation, however, does not stop at this point. Legal and ritual manuals for slightly older children contribute to the cultivation of piety by emphasizing not only the importance of responsiveness, but also the habituation of ethical practices and dispositions until these become sedimented in the “slow rhythms of everyday life.” Shi’i children’s literature thus not only spells out and demands what Talal Asad has called ‘apt behaviour’ but also guides readers on how to accomplish what has been called the ‘Greater Jihad’ – the struggle of the self for the self, the cultivation of piety.

---

10 Butler, Giving an Account, 29-30.
11 The ‘age of responsibility’ generally corresponds with puberty, but has been fixed in modern Shi’i legal manuals at nine years for girls and fifteen for boys.
12 For example, mourning the death of Imam Hussayn is a central feature of Shi’i ritual piety. Both adults and children renew their relationship with the ahl al-bayt by participating in ritual mourning ceremonies.

---

Responsiveness as Piety

According to Shi‘i fiqh or jurisprudence, children are not required to perform rituals, such as daily prayers, until they have reached the ‘age of responsibility.’ Their early participation is however mustahabb (not obligatory, but liked and encouraged). Booklets such as Munāsabāt Khālida (or “Eternal Relations”), for example, promote children’s participation by explaining how the pious should respond to the various historical events and holidays that punctuate the Shi‘i calendar. Each page reveals a short text and two images, a small colourful picture and a larger one waiting to be coloured. Each image has two parts: an item or scene signifying a specific event and a young Shi‘i child responding to the signified event. The accompanying text explains the import of the event and names the appropriate physical and emotional reaction.

The first page of the booklet shows a little boy pointing his finger at the minaret of a mosque. The first two stanzas of the call to prayer, the adhān, are printed on the upper left side. Below, a boy explains that “it is the voice of the mu‘adhin (the one who performs the adhān) which invites us to prayer.” Through a rhetorical move from the mu‘adhin to ‘us,’ ‘we’ are called upon to be pious and respond to the call to pray.

Another page is dedicated to the feast of Ghadir Khumm which celebrates the day Muhammad chose ‘Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, as his successor. The images reveal two robed figures, one holding up the arm of the other: “By God’s order, the Prophet appointed ‘Ali imām and wālī upon Muslims.” Adjacently, a smiling boy dressed in red and surrounded by flowers is clearly delighted by this occasion.

The next page depicts the same boy dressed in black, his hand raised to his chest suggesting a ‘light’ form of self-flagellation. He looks up with wide-eyed sadness unto a scene depicting Hussayn, ‘Ali’s son, lying in a pool of blood on the desert plain of Karbala. The accompanying text has two parts. The first is a saying by the fifth Imam: “Revive our [the ahl al-bayt’s] concerns, may God have mercy upon him who revives our concerns.” The second part constitutes an explanatory elaboration of the first: “The revitalization of the nights of ‘Ashūra during the first ten [days] of Muharram and the attendance of mourning gatherings for Abu ‘Abdallah al-Hussayn (peace be upon him) are among the most important mustahabb

16 Munāsabāt Khālida. Beirut: Al-Aalami Est., 2007. All the translations from Arabic are my own unless noted otherwise.
17 Countless volumes have been dedicated to defining the terms imām and wālī. Suffice it to say here that Imam ‘Ali, according to Twelver Shi‘is, was to be the heir of the Prophet Muhammad in every field except for prophecy.
practices." The booklet thus pictorially demonstrates and verbally explicates how Shi‘i Muslims should mourn in response to the death of Hussayn. More generally, by calling for embodied and emotional responses to specific events, the booklet posits pious practice as apt responsiveness and implicitly equates the pious subject with the appropriately responsive subject.

In Lacanian terms, children encounter norms through primary social relations, such as parents, who compel children to appropriate and perform pious norms in order to become recognizable as pious subjects. This means that the subject can never be truly independent or autonomous, because the subject is not only constituted through her relationships with others, but also because she is always already ‘displaced,’ changed and conditioned by her primary relations. Judith Butler posits that primary relations "form lasting and recurrent impressions on the history of [the subject’s] life."18 Thus, the subject remains partially opaque to herself because she can never fully recuperate the conditions of her own emergence, which bars her from attaining complete autonomy. Moreover, the subject’s relationships with others are always already preconditioned by existing norms, which concurrently constitute the conditions for mutual intelligibility. In other words, it is through norms that people come to understand one another. Children learn norms through interactions with others and they become intelligible subjects through their encounters with others.

Taking as her starting point the idea that the subject is never actually autonomous, Butler theorizes that ethical agency must be grounded in the subject’s vulnerability to others.19 In this case, vulnerability designates the subject’s inherent relationality or openness to others rooted in the fact that the subject’s emergence is irreversibly the product of intersubjective encounters. For Butler, recognizing this vulnerability opens up a space for ethical practice. She bases her argument on Emmanuel Levinas’s theory of responsibility, which allows her to posit ‘ethical responsibility’ in terms of ‘responsiveness to others.’20 It means that the subject’s openness to others becomes the condition for ethical practice: she becomes ethically ‘responsible’ when acting upon her vulnerability to others.21 The responses outlined in booklets such as Munāsabāt Khālida can be described as a Butlerian ethical practice, because they constitute a mode of inhabiting and maintaining a responsive relationship with the ahl al-bayt.

Butler’s theory can be applied both to those relationships fictional characters have with one another and to those between literary figures and readers. While children’s books depict primary relationships by setting instructive stories in the context of fictional pious families, they also create relationships by demanding emotional responses from readers to events which occurred in the lives of the Prophet and the ahl al-bayt. Through outlining appropriate responses, the books define Shi‘i love and loyalty, which according to scholars such as Toby Howarth and Vernon Schubel constitute Shi‘i piety.22 Structurally similar to Shi‘i Muharram

19 Ibid., 19.
20 Ibid., 88-93.
21 Ibid., 91.
22 Howarth, Twelver Shi‘a, 151.

---

18 Butler, Giving an Account, 39.
mourning gatherings for adults, children’s storybooks help create emotional attachments by retelling the lives of the ahl al-bayt through highly formulaic narratives. They first describe an Imam’s noble attributes: his illustrious background, his miraculous birth, his noble character, his knowledge, courage and generosity, his contributions to society and lastly, his undeserved suffering and tragic death.

A good example of an emotionally demanding storybook is the fifth booklet in the English series entitled Introduction to Infallibles. In summary, the booklet recounts the life of the third Imam, Hussayn and begins with an angel telling Prophet Muhammad that his newborn grandchild should be named ‘Hussayn.’ In his early years Hussayn enjoyed the loving devotion of his parents and grandfather, though his good fortunes were soon reversed and his mother died shortly after her own father, the Prophet, passed away. Meanwhile, Hussayn’s father Imam ‘Ali was denied the right to guide and rule the Muslim community. After ‘Ali was killed, Hussayn was oppressed by Muawiya, the Umayyad Caliph, and later by Yazid, Muawiya’s son and successor. An outspoken critic, Hussayn was invited [ca. 680 CE] by the people of Kufa (a city in southern Iraq) to lead their rebellion against Yazid. The Kufans, however, had previously been unfaithful to Hussayn’s father Imam ‘Ali and thus, Hussayn "sent his cousin ‘Muslim’ to Kufa so that he might observe the whole affair closely and invite Imam [Hussayn] if he deemed" the situation suitable. When Muslim reached Kufa, "he met a warm, noisy, grand welcome. Thousands of people took [an] oath of allegiance and offered prayers behind him." Convinced by this show of support, Hussayn decided to heed the Kufan’s request and left Medina for Kufa. However, the Caliph learned of the imminent revolt in time and dispatched an army: first, in order to intimidate the Kufans and second, to intercept Hussayn. When Hussayn reached the desert plains of Karbala, around eighty kilometres from Kufa, he was met and outnumbered by Yazid’s army. The Kufans never came to help and after several days of fierce fighting, Hussayn was killed on ‘Ashūra, the tenth day of the Islamic month Muharram. According to the text, Hussayn had intended "to disgrace Yazid’s regime" and to restore justice to the Islamic empire. The text explains that Hussayn was not defeated even though he died, because success means "achieving one’s… goals and aspirations and ideology [even if] one is killed. Defeat does not mean being killed… it means the death and annihilation of objective, aspiration and belief." The story ends describing how ‘people’ (i.e. Shi‘is) began to express their love and allegiance to the ahl al-bayt by visiting their shrines, praising their virtues, cherishing their memories and cursing their enemies.

Even the structure of such stories is emotionally compelling: the juxtaposition of an Imam’s virtues and his tragic death evokes moral outrage. This outrage should be understood as an ethical potential. The booklet not only aims at transforming this outrage into pious practice by prescribing the proper forms

Howarth, Twelver Shi‘a, 136-149.
Ayatullahi, Syed Mehdi. The Introduction to Infallibles, no. 5, Hazrat Imam Hussain (s.a.). Qum, Iran: Ansaryan Publications, 2001, 3-4.
it should take, but also compels readers to establish relationships with the Imams through, for example, praising their virtues and mourning their deaths.

‘Ec-Static’ Inaugurations

By demanding a predetermined normative and therefore, recognizable response, primary relationships ‘displace’ and thereby, irrevocably change the emerging subject. According to Butler, "I am invariably transformed by the encounters I undergo; recognition becomes the process by which I become other than what I was and so cease to be able to return to what I was." The subject is displaced by her primary relations in the sense that she is not only de-centered and transformed through her encounters, but that her ‘I’ is only established through impingement by others from whom her emergence remains inseparable. Butler explains that the subject’s displacement by others is a result of her desire for others and her desire to be recognized by these others. She is compelled to appropriate norms in order to be able to recognize others and in turn, to become recognizable to these others.

In a story entitled al-Hijāb (modest dress, but here specifically the head-scarf), one of five stories in a hardback for adolescent girls, a mother carefully broaches the implications of her daughter’s upcoming ninth lunar birthday, her ‘age of responsibility.’ With another piece of hiliwa (a sweetmeat), the mother tells her daughter, Maryam: "You’re a good girl and you have excellent manners. I wonder what it is you lack?" Curiously, Maryam responds: "What [do I lack], oh mother?" "Your impending maturity requires commitment to hijāb." At first, Maryam remains ambivalent, "you said my hair shines like gold!" "That is true and did anyone say that the hijāb will reduce your beauty? On the contrary, it will only enhance your prestige and dignity and it will not diminish your femininity." Suspiciously, Maryam asks: "Oh mother, considering how often as you have spoken to me about hijāb, have you been preparing for this step?" Softly but firmly, the mother re-directs the conversation: "Darling, it is not me who makes the hijāb obligatory upon you. It is a form of worship demanded by God." Maryam demands proof and so her mother quotes a verse from the Qur’an and explains that God commanded it for the protection of individuals and families. In order to think about her mother’s words, Maryam goes to her room, though sleep soon overtakes her.

In her sleep, Maryam sees a dream. She is sitting in a garden as an angel (al-khayr) descends, offering her a gift: a pink hijāb. The angel calls her a virtuous girl (fatah sāliha) and tells her she deserves the gift, which will protect and

30 Butler, Giving an Account, 27.
31 Ibid., 29-30.
33 Ibid., 4.
34 Ibid., 6.
35 Ibid., 8.
36 Ibid., 8-12.
suit her innocent face. Then, Maryam hears another voice. A black demon (ash-sharr) tries to persuade her not to cover her beauty with a piece of cloth. The angel warns Maryam: "He is completely evil, don't be convinced by his words." The devil defends himself: "I'm your friend and want what is best for you." But the angel insists: "If you listen to the whispering devil, you will lose God's favour. Your beauty lies in your modesty, not in the display of your adornments."

While good and evil continue to fight, Maryam wakes up and calls for her mother: "Are you going to the market today? I'd like to buy a hijāb!"

Maryam explains that in the realm of visions, she saw a battle between good and evil, which made her recognize that hijāb is the preferable choice (‘arafatu in al-hijāb fadhila) and that she desires to please God.

Throughout the story, recognition plays an important role. Maryam is repeatedly told that she is an innocent, good girl, but she is also simultaneously called upon to become recognizable as a responsible, pious adolescent by adopting the scarf. While it is her mother who confronts Maryam with the issue, the mother makes it clear that donning hijāb is a matter of pleasing God, not a matter of pleasing parents. In a sense, Maryam already acknowledges the desirability of pleasing and being recognized by God as a pious subject by asking her mother for proof from the Qur’an. Nevertheless, she remains ambivalent as to whether she must really actively respond to her mother’s words and God’s command until the urgency of the matter is impressed upon her in a dream. The angel's warning, "if you listen to the whispering devil, you will lose God's favour," finally impels Maryam to act upon her desire to be recognized as a pious subject. Her desire thus allows her to be impinged upon by others and results in her inauguration as a virtuous adolescent girl (fatah sāliha).

The notion that pious subjects are inaugurated as a consequence of impingement by others is common throughout Shi‘i children’s literature, which often depicts children in what Butler calls ‘scenes of address.’ The displacing encounter with an other is a particularly important theme throughout the at-Tufūlat al-Mahdawiyya series (“The Mahdian Childhood Series”), wherein the characters change though the plot generally remains the same: A child seeks out her grandfather, her aunt, an elderly neighbour or a teacher, and asks questions regarding the

---

37 Ibid., 12-16.
38 Ibid., 17.
39 Dream-visions are traditionally considered to be a legitimate source of divine guidance.
40 Butler, Giving an Account, 9-22.
Mahdi, the twelfth Hidden Imam.\textsuperscript{41} Invariably there is a picture that accompanies the elder’s textual instructions. It shows a child and her mentor underneath a second image, enclosed in a bubble, the subject-matter of their conversation. As the mentor conveys the lesson, the child is moved. She becomes ‘ec-static.’ Her ‘ec-stasy’ (her dis-placement, from the Greek root meaning ‘to stand outside oneself’) marks her inauguration, which allows her to understand the other, become content and eager to follow.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{The (Mis)uses of Pious Formation}

Fictional elders also open up possibilities for misfirings or (mis)appropriations where, for example, love for the \textit{ahl al-bayt} is employed for the service of the state. The \textit{al-Walaya} ("Spiritual Governance") series, for instance, seeks to initiate Arabic speaking Shi’i children into an impinging relationship with Iranian religio-political authorities by employing a strategy similar to the ‘scene of address’ in the \textit{at-Tufūlat al-Mahdawiyya} series.\textsuperscript{43}

In the booklet entitled \textit{al-Qā‘īd al-Khamene‘ī} ("The Leader Khamene‘ī") a father hangs a poster, a portrait of Ayatollah Khamene‘ī, on the wall. When his son asks about the face on the poster, the father replies: "It is the leader whom we must be obedient to." The son responds: "How must we obey him?" Thus, the process of displacing and inaugurating a pious subject begins.\textsuperscript{44}

The last four pages of \textit{Al-Qā‘īd wa az-Zuhd} ("The Leader and Renunciation [or Discipline]”) directly engage children. They encourage participation through activities that require reflection on the booklet’s meanings and messages: the first is a list of questions that invites emerging subjects to allow themselves to be displaced. "Do want to be humble like the leader? Which one is your favourite story regarding

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Al-Qā‘īd al-Khamene‘ī}, 4-7.
\end{itemize}


\textsuperscript{42} Butler, \textit{Giving an Account}, 27.

\textsuperscript{43} The \textit{al-Walaya} series is composed of a number of booklets, each of which describes exemplary acts by either Ayatollah Khomeini or Ayatollah Khamene‘ī. Crucially, these booklets were published in Lebanon where both Khomeini and Khamene‘ī are considered official religious authorities by Hezbollah.

\textsuperscript{44} Al-Qā‘īd al-Khamene‘ī, 4-7.
renunciation/discipline and humility? What did the leader say to the soldiers who offered him a meal?"  

Similar to other religious booklets, the al-Walaya series seeks to work upon multiple registers of subjectivity and intersubjectivity and ground loyalty to specific Shi’i authority figures in the openness of the subject and in her capacity to aptly respond. While these books’ reception is beyond the scope of this article, it would be fascinating to find out whether or not this approach which attempts to link loyalty to the ahl al-bayt with loyalty to Iranian religio-political leaders is successful in the long term. Moreover, should children one day become disillusioned with, for example, Ayatollah Khamene’i, how will this impact their attachment to the ahl al-bayt?

### Agency and the Cultivation of Piety

For Judith Butler, subject formation ends with the appropriation of norms and the recognition, which thereby becomes possible. However, for Muslim thinkers such as Baqir Sharif al-Qarashi, this is only the beginning. Becoming a pious subject is a life-long project, the goal of which is to develop and practice a variety of virtues including chastity, willpower, courage, endurance, generosity, etc.  

Crucially, these virtues cannot be cultivated without scholarly guidance, a more detailed form of impingement and response. Once Shi’i

children have reached the age of responsibility and have learned how to properly respond to the various events in the lives of the ahl al-bayt, legal and ritual manuals teach and demand a more disciplined and thorough kind of responsiveness on the part of young Shi’is. The following excerpt from a children’s legal manual addresses itself to girls above the age of nine and boys above the age of fifteen:

Islam forbids us from and commands us to perform obligations and we, as Muslims, [should] act according to the best of our knowledge. Though we know the principles of our religion, [such as] how to pray and fast, we do not know everything. Sometimes we encounter new situations, wherein we do not know how to act. In such cases it is important to know there is a correct Islamic response to every situation, and that there are those who specialize in religion and study and ponder such issues (darasū wa hafathū wa tafaqqahū fi tik al-ahkām) and who know more than we or others know. We need those who study and bear the responsibility for our actions in front of God (yatahhammad al-masʿūliya aʾmalna amām allah). We need to follow (nahṭāj ilā taqlīd) those who have studied and it is best to follow the most knowledgeable among them.

---

45 Al-Qāʾīd wa az-Zuhd, 20.  
46 Qarashi, Educational System, 126-146.  
47 Governance (walaya) is a central concept in Twelver Shi’ism. In short, Twelver Shi’is argue that God would not leave humankind without a perfect guide and ruler who is able to interpret the Qur’an and give Islamic legal rulings. After the Prophet, there were Twelve Imams who (at least in theory) had this function of guiding and governing the Muslim community. After the Twelfth Imam entered into Occultation, most Shi’i scholars argued that religious rule is the responsibility of religious scholars. Ayatollah Khomeini went beyond the consensus when he argued that even political governance should be taken over by religious scholars.  
Ritual emulation or taqlid in this excerpt is based on the presumption that both lay Shi'is and Shi'i scholars of Islamic Law are capable of responsiveness. Religious scholars contemplate and respond to questions posed by lay followers and thereby become answerable and responsible for the actions of those who follow them regularly and habitually. Citing Shi'i scholars' decisions, however, does not mean that pious subjects lack moral agency. Saba Mahmood explains that "agency [is] not simply a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but... a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable."\(^{49}\) In Butler's fitting words, agency constitutes "a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power."\(^{50}\) Shi'i moral agency, thus, is not resistance to scholarly authority but rather the capacity to act within specific relations of power.

Similar to the Aristotelian point of view, moreover, Shi'i moral agency is not "a product of the critical faculty of reason."\(^{51}\) Instead, it lies in the subject's capacity to inhabit norms and live "a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life, not a mere preparatory exercise to secure such a life."\(^{52}\) The apt practice of virtues can be learned according to Aristotle and their repeated performance cultivates "dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways," enabling practitioners to desire 'the good.'\(^{53}\) In other words, Aristotelian (and Shi'i) moral agency is a habituated, "acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person."\(^{54}\)

Shi'i children's books facilitate the acquisition of pious habits by gradually expanding and disciplining their readers' capacity to aptly respond to others, be they familiar, infallible or learned others. Legal and ritual manuals further develop Shi'i children's ability to respond appropriately not just to primary others, but also to everyday situations and actions. For example, by explicating and demonstrating what prayers to say in everyday circumstances, the children's

---

51 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 25.
Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 120-126.
54 Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 136.
version of the traditional prayer-manual, *Mafātīh al-Jīnān* ("The Keys of Paradise"), contributes to the process of sedimenting pious behaviour. The book presents the pious norm as a citational practice and demonstrates what prayers readers should recite during daily activities, such as going to bed, leaving for school and visiting the sick. The book presents each prayer divided into segments: lines written in red are directly followed by lines in black, an explanatory simplified version of the lines in red. A colourful picture accompanies each of these segments and encourages children to correlate specific *du’a* (non-obligatory, mustahabb prayers) with particular bodily movements, physical environments and social encounters. To further assist memorization and the habitation and sedimentation of pious practices and dispositions, longer prayers are reprinted undivided after each illustrated-annotated version.

For example, the picture above shows a boy leaving his house, presumably on his way to school. The illustration is surrounded by text explaining what prayer to say when leaving the home. The first line begins: "One must say three times: ‘God is Greatest!’ Three times: ‘By God I go out, by God I come in and I trust in God.’" In repeating such prayer formulas, Shi’i children not only acquire pious habits, but also the desire to act piously. Through repetition and a "particular coordination of the soul, the eye, and the hand," prayer thus becomes rooted in ordinary existence.

**Conclusion**

Judith Butler’s theory that the subject’s ethical capacity lies in her responsiveness, her ability to act upon her openness to others, in itself constitutes a call for ethical responsiveness. It is a call for a general awareness of human vulnerability and the ethical possibilities inherent in this vulnerability. In particular, she posits that the US-led wars following 9/11 constitute a reaction that disavows vulnerability and openness to others and seeks to maintain an ultimately illusory ideal of autonomy and sovereignty. Shi’i children’s books specifically, but also contemporary Twelver Shi’i ritual practice generally, orient the recognition of vulnerability primarily towards familiar others and the *ahl al-bayt*. This does not mean that Shi’i forms of responsiveness cannot be re-interpreted or directed towards other others. However, in the Shi’i children’s books surveyed for this article, readers are compelled to cultivate certain kinds of vulnerability, an openness towards particular others and specific kinds of responses.

In sum, the children’s books participate in their readers’ pious formation literally and pictorially by explicating and demonstrating pious norms and by shaping Shi’i children emotionally through, for example, juxtaposing the *ahl al-bayt*’s virtues with their underserved suffering. The books prescribe how Shi’i children are to relate to the *ahl al-bayt* and thereby, establish piety as responsiveness to the *ahl al-bayt*. Moreover, by fostering affective relations between readers, fictional elders and members of the *ahl al-bayt*, the books set the scene for the subject’s cultivation of responsiveness, her ethical agency and a pre-requisite for the

---

56 Ibid., 4.
practice of taqlid. By focusing on certain practices, such as mourning for Hussayn and waiting for the Mahdi, the books define not only pious norms, but also the terms by which the pious subject becomes intelligible to others as a pious subject. Yet, while the norm dictates the terms of intelligibility, it does not mean that the subject is fully determined by the norm. How exactly this process of pious formation can misfire will have to be investigated elsewhere. However, it is significant that Shi‘i children’s books in particular seek to forestall misfirings by tying pious practice to inter-subjective responsiveness on the one hand, and their habituation on the other.

Finally, this article has sought to examine how Shi‘i children’s books aid the formation of the pious subject, who emerges through her appropriation of pious norms, the terms of recognition and how they contribute to and partake in the subject’s displacement, impingement and inauguration. The books thus re-enforce Imam ‘Ali’s words, that the Shi‘i subject’s agency, her capacity for ethical practice and her ability to inhabit norms, lies in her willingness to respond, follow and perform taqlid: “Look at the people of the Prophet’s family. Adhere to their direction. Follow their footsteps.”

Glossary of Arabo-Islamic Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abaya</td>
<td>black over-coat worn by Muslim women in Iraq and the Arab Gulf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ahl al-bayt</td>
<td>literally &quot;people of the house&quot;; it refers to the descendants of the Prophet: his daughter, Fatima, her husband ‘Ali who was also the first Imam, their children Hassan, Hussayn and a line of male descendants through Hussayn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ali</td>
<td>the first Imam, Muhammad’s son in-law and father of Hassan, Hussayn and Zaynab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Ashūra</td>
<td>the tenth day of Muharram, the day Hussayn was killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayatollah</td>
<td>honorific title for a high-ranking Shi‘i scholar of Islamic Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>du‘a</td>
<td>non-obligatory prayer, supplication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiqh</td>
<td>Islamic jurisprudence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghadīr Khumm</td>
<td>the day the Prophet elected ‘Ali as his successor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hijāb</td>
<td>modest dress in general, but the head-scarf in particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hussayn</td>
<td>the third Imam, brother of Zaynab; he died on ‘Ashūra at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imam</td>
<td>in Twelver Shi‘ism, there are twelve Imams beginning with ‘Ali; all are male descendants of ‘Ali and Fatima; they are considered infallible and the rightful heirs of Muhammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infallibles</td>
<td>Twelver Shi‘is believe God has protected the following fourteen from sin: the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and her husband ‘Ali, their sons Hassan and Hussayn, and nine other male descendants, the last being the Mahdi (the Hidden Imam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbala</td>
<td>in the 7th century Karbala was a desert plain in Iraq, where Hussayn and his followers fought the army of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid; since then, a shrine-city has been built around Hussayn’s grave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kufa  city in Southern Iraq
mullahiya a woman who chants mourning poetry in remembrance of the ahl al-bayt

Muharram the name of the Islamic month during which Hussayn died
mustahabb non-obligatory acts that are liked and rewarded by God
Sayyida female honorific (i.e. Lady)
taqīd emulation, especially in legal and ritual matters
walaya 'spiritual governance'; in Twelver Shi’ism this is the prerogative of the Imams, who inherited this function from the Prophet
wali patron, protector and friend
Yazid the second Umayyad Caliph, he ruled from 680-683 CE and was based in Damascus
Zaynab the sister of Hussayn, daughter of ‘Ali and Fatima

Works Consulted

Shi‘i Children’s Books

Secondary Sources


