

The Theory of the Imams Being ‘Righteous Scholars’ (*‘Ulamā’ Abrār*) Has No Historical Basis: A Response to Mohsen Kadivar

Hassan Ansari¹

Introduction

Mohsen Kadivar’s views on the Scholars of Qom during the first three to four centuries of Shī’a history are inaccurate and unsubstantiated. In this installment of our series of critiques of Kadivar’s ideas, we delve into his perspective on the notion that the Imams were nothing more than ‘upright scholars’ (*‘ulamā’ abrār*) and explore the conclusions he has drawn. In light of previous responses to him and the arguments presented in this short essay, the evidence presented in the article, “Qirā’at-i farāmūsh shudi”² (“The Forgotten Reading”) must be called critically re-evaluated. Ultimately, the position outlined in the article appears to lack a solid historical foundation. Kadivar’s argument can be examined by reviewing the inferences he has drawn from a few cherry-picked quotations from Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) and Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (d. 381/991). He writes:

‘... The thinking of the Scholars of Qom was directly opposed to the doctrines of the Mufawwiḍa³. Anyone

¹Hassan Farhang Ansari is an Iranian Islamic scholar and Visiting Professor of Islamic Law and Theology at the Institute for Advanced Study. He is known for his works on Islamic theology, philosophy, law, and legal theory. He is a co-editor of *Shii Studies Review*. This note was originally published in Persian on Ansari’s personal website, <https://ansari.kateban.com/post/3254>.

²Mohsen Kadivar, “Qirā’at-i farāmūsh shudi,” Mohsen Kadivar official website, <https://kadivar.com/238/>.

³The Mufawwwiḍa were allegedly a group of Shī’i extremists that emerged in the early second/eighth century, during the time of Imām al-Ṣadiq. They

who accuses the Scholars of Qom of failing to acknowledge the rightful status/position of the Imams, and does not accept their moderate religious stance, and attributes more to the Imams than they themselves have stated, belongs to the Mufawwiḍa ... The difference between the Mufawwiḍa and the Scholars of Qom, which the former have characterised as the difference between the true Shī'a and the Muqaṣṣirūn, reflects two radically different perspectives on the nature/qualities of the Imams. The Mufawwiḍa believed the Imams were superhuman beings while the Scholars of Qom did not.

Based on Shaykh al-Mufid's account, the Scholars of Qom – at least a few of whom, in his view, were indeed Muqaṣṣirūn – held a number of beliefs.

First, they denied that the Imams possess "knowledge acquired through 'unveiling'" (*'ilm ladunnī*) . According to them, the Imams, like other religious scholars and indeed all people, only acquire knowledge through conventional means (i.e., *'ilm iktisābī*). Their approach to religious questions is no different from the approach of other scholars, meaning they too employ *ijtihād* ('judicial reasoning') to derive law from the foundational sources. Therefore, if other religious scholars seek religious rulings through valid opinions and conjectures, the Imams proceed similarly. In

are said to have adopted many of the beliefs of earlier extremist groups, particularly regarding the divine nature of the Shī'ī Imams. It is also claimed that the Mufawwiḍa believed that God had delegated power to the Prophet Muḥammad and the Imams to "create and provide for all beings and had vested in them the authority to legislate and abrogate the *shar'ā* as they decided." However, they did not claim the Prophet and the Imams to be God. See Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam: Abū Ja'far ibn Qiba al-Rāzī and His Contribution to Imāmite Shi'ite Thought* (Darwin Press: 1993), 21-22.

other words, the Imams are merely 'righteous scholars' (*'ulamā' abrār*), meaning they are pious and learned individuals whom the Prophet Muḥammad explicitly designated as leaders of humanity. They do not differ in essence and nature from other human beings.

Second, there was another group among the Scholars of Qom who also denied that the Imams possess *'ilm ladunnī*, but this group put forward an alternative account of how the Imams acquire knowledge. According to this group, before knowledge is bestowed in their hearts, the Imams are unaware of many religious sciences. This bestowal could occur through divine inspiration mediated by angels, directly without intermediaries, or acquired through human means. However, prior to this bestowal, their conscience, like other humans, was devoid of the aforementioned knowledge.

Third, attributing exaggeration (*ghuluww*) to those who deny that the Prophet and the Imams could experience inadvertent lapses (*sahw*) indicates a human-centric perspective. The Scholars of Qom rejected the superhuman attributes of the Imams, but were also religiously committed to them and to adhering to their teachings. They viewed obedience to the Imams as mandated and followed the Imams based on the Prophet's instruction. However, they did not consider this instruction to originate as a result of a unique divine nature or specialised knowledge. Shaykh al-Mufīd believed in the infallibility (*'isma*) of the Imams, equating it with the Prophet's own infallibility. He considered the views of other Imāmī scholars on this matter similar to his own, except for a few who clung to the literal meaning of the narratives and presented

interpretations that were based on their presumably erroneous opinions (*Awā'il al-maqālāt*, Chapter 37, p. 64).

Unlike other topics in *Awā'il al-maqālāt*, al-Mufīd did not claim the existence of a consensus among the Imāmī school on this issue. Additionally, he likely had in mind the views of his teacher, Ibn Junayd. If we consider al-Shahīd al-Thānī's report that the majority view of the Shī'a in the second[/eighth] century and the first half of the third[/ninth] century did not believe in the Imams' infallibility, it is evident that those denying this position were by no means a small minority. Nevertheless, according to al-Mufīd, these rare exceptions must belong to the Scholars of Qom. On the issue of the knowledge of the judge and whether the Imams based their ruling on apparent or esoteric knowledge, al-Mufīd presents three distinct opinions, without attributing them to any particular individual. (*Awā'il al-maqālāt*, Chapter 39). Following the general principle, the Scholars of Qom would consider the rulings of the Imams to be based on apparent knowledge. Even though al-Mufīd deemed it possible for the Imams to know the esoteric aspects of individuals, he believed absolute unseen knowledge was exclusive to God and attributed such a belief regarding the Imams to the Mufawwiḍa (*Awā'il al-maqālāt*, Chapter 41, p.67). The Scholars of Qom did not believe in the Imams' knowledge of the Unseen.

In conclusion, with the figure of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Īsā al-Ash'arī in the third and fourth [Islamic] centuries, we can recognise the emergence of a dominant form of Shī'ī thought that rejected the superhuman attributes of the Imams. They perceived the Imams as upright scholars and considered their

knowledge to be acquired rather than divine. They did not subscribe to doctrines such as the Imams' possessing knowledge of the unseen, having the ability to perform miracles, and belief in the Imams' infallibility.'

To assess Kadivar's theory, it is helpful to begin by examining some of the references provided in his article. The first being what Shaykh al-Mufid says about the infallibility in his theological treatise *Awā'il al-maqālāt*:

On the Infallibility of the Imams

On the Infallibility of the Imams, Shaykh al-Mufid states:

'The Imams, who stand in the position of Prophets (Peace be upon them) in implementing rules, establishing boundaries, preserving the laws, and educating the masses, are infallible just like the infallibility of the Prophets. It is impermissible for them to commit minor sins save for those that have been previously mentioned to be permissible for the Prophets. They cannot err in religious matters, nor do they forget any rulings. This is the creed of the majority of the Imamites, except for a deviant minority who rely on the apparent meanings of certain traditions and narrations and propose corrupted interpretations. And the Mu'tazila unanimously oppose this position, and allow for the Imams to commit major sins or even renounce Islam.'⁴

Contrary to the explanation given by Kadivar, Shaykh al-Mufid unequivocally states that the entirety of the Imāmī school upholds the infallibility (*iṣma*) of the Imams, which he considers an extension of Prophetic infallibility. At the same time, he emphasises that the Imāmī position is that the Imams do not experience lapses in relation

⁴ Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Mufid, *Awā'il al-maqālāt* (Dār al-Mufid: 1413 AH), 65.

to religious matters, nor do they forget religious rulings. However, he makes an exception for a rare (*shādh*) group, saying that they rely on the apparent meanings of certain *ḥadīths* and propose corrupted interpretations.

Based on the context, and in the section where he addresses this deviant belief, it seems that Shaykh al-Mufid is specifically referring to the idea of the Prophet and Imams experiencing lapses (*sahw*), a view held by figures such as Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Walīd (d. 343/954) and Shaykh al-Ṣadūq. Nonetheless, it is clear that only a small group of Imamites held this minority view on infallibility and as Shaykh al-Mufid points out, this view is based on interpretations of certain specific reports, not on foundational principles. This fringe belief emerged solely from specific interpretations of particular traditions, rather than constituting a core element of Imāmī doctrine, as the theory of 'upright scholars' appears to suggest. An example of this issue is Shaykh al-Ṣadūq's belief about the Prophet's occasional forgetfulness. This is considered a unique case based on limited traditions and does not appear to have influenced Shaykh al-Ṣadūq's general perspective on the necessity of infallibility for both the Prophet and the Imam.

On the legal rulings of the Imams

On the legal rulings of the Imams, Shaykh al-Mufid writes:

'The Imam has the authority to judge based on his knowledge, just as he judges based on the apparent testimonies. When the witnessed event contradicts the provided testimony, the testimony of the witness becomes void, and the Imam rules based on what Allah Almighty has informed him. In my opinion, it is permissible that the hidden aspects of matters might be unknown to him, so he rules based on their apparent features, even if they are contrary to the reality in the sight of God Almighty. Alternatively, God might guide

him to distinguish between a truthful and false witness, so that the truth of the situation is not hidden from him. Matters in this regard are related to divine acts of kindness (*alṭāf*), and the best interests of God's servants (*maṣāliḥ*), which, in any case, only God the Exalted knows. The followers of Imamate have three opinions on this topic:

Some contend that the judgments of the Imams (peace be upon them) are based on the apparent matters, regardless of what they might know, in all situations. Others assert that their judgments are solely on the esoteric aspects and not the exoteric, wherein disagreements can arise. There are also those who adhere to the stance I have adopted in this article, and I have not found sufficient evidence to confidently attribute this view to the Banū Nawbakht [a family of renowned Imāmī scholars in Baghdad], may God have mercy on them.⁵

These remarks by Shaykh al-Mufid in *Awā'il al-maqālāt* are another one of Kadivar's major references. As previously mentioned, this topic is not directly connected to debates concerning the sources of an Imam's knowledge, such as whether it is acquired or divinely bestowed, nor to their knowledge of the unseen. Instead, it is a jurisprudential matter focused on judicial procedures, specifically whether an Imam can act based on his privileged knowledge or is required to issue rulings according to the apparent circumstances. The essence of Shaykh al-Mufid's argument is that with the consideration of both possibilities and relating them to divine wisdom and expediency, he suggests that there are times when God may choose not to reveal the inner dimensions of testimonies and judicial rulings to the Imam, requiring the Imam to issue judgments based on apparent evidence. Conversely,

⁵ Ibid, 66.

he proposes that in certain situations, God may disclose these inner truths to the Imam, depending on divine wisdom and what best serves the interests of God's servants. As such, Shaykh al-Mufid's discussion is not about an Imam's knowledge or its sources in religious law, nor is it about an Imam's knowledge of cosmological matters (*umūr takwīnī*). The discussion focuses solely on the judicial approach an Imam should adopt when implementing legal limits and rulings, which is considered on a case-by-case basis. Even Shaykh al-Mufid's cited opponents have not targeted the all-encompassing knowledge of the Imam. The discussion has largely been whether an Imam should act based on his knowledge or the apparent, specifically in the context of judicial procedures.

On the Knowledge of the Imams

The discussion centers the Imam's knowledge, particularly concerning their awareness of people's thoughts, the ability to see future events, knowledge of the unseen, and whether these are considered their defining attributes. Al-Mufid writes:

'The Imams from the Progeny of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) knew the hidden intentions of some servants and knew events before they occurred. However, this is not a necessary component of their attributes or a condition for their leadership. Instead, God Almighty honored them with this and as a form of divine kindness to their followers to encourage them to obey them and adhere to their leadership. This is not a rational necessity, but was necessary for them from the perspective of revelation. As for the assertion that they know the unseen, it's a manifestly objectionable claim, for such a description can only be fitting for one who knows things through Divine knowledge, not through acquired knowledge. And this can only be God, the Mighty and Majestic. On this opinion, a majority of

the followers of Imamate agree, except for those who deviated from the mainstream, such as the Mufawwiḍa and those *ghulāt* ('extremists') who identify with them.⁶

In this context, Shaykh al-Mufīd distinguishes between two types of knowledge: the belief held by the *ghulāt* ('extremists') and the Mufawwiḍa, which asserts that the Imam possesses absolute knowledge of the unseen. He argues that this belief is flawed because attributing absolute knowledge of the unseen is reserved for an entity whose knowledge is intrinsic, not acquired. Intrinsic knowledge belongs exclusively to God, and thus claiming knowledge of the unseen is appropriate only for God, whose understanding is innate. In contrast, the knowledge of creatures, whether acquired (*muktasab*) or self-evident (*ḍurūrī*), is extraneous (*mustafād*), meaning it is derived from an external source rather than being inherent. .

Kadivar has conflated knowledge of the unseen (*ilm al-ghayb*) with God-given types of extraneous knowledge (*ilm mustafād ghayr muktasab*), and as such, interprets these statements as evidence – claiming non-acquired knowledge for the Imams is considered an extremist view. Extraneous knowledge involves processes such as learning, deduction, and contemplation – a concept well-known to scholars of speculative theology, particularly in relation to the views of the Mu'tazila. However, extraneous knowledge can also encompass another kind of knowledge that is rooted in divine revelation or 'creation' (*khalq*) by God. This includes 'self-evident' knowledge instilled in humans, such as the special grace received from the Prophet, as suggested by the Tradition of The City of Knowledge.

The term 'divine knowledge' (*ilm ladunnī*) does not necessarily refer to absolute knowledge of the unseen, but rather to a type of extraneous knowledge obtained through unconventional or non-acquired means. Shaykh al-Mufīd's discussion pertains to knowledge about people's innermost thoughts and knowledge of future events, both of which

⁶ Ibid, 67.

have no bearing on the Imam's religious knowledge, its sources, or the various kinds of cosmological knowledge the Imam possesses.

In one instance, Kadivar referenced expressions from Shaykh al-Mufid's *Taṣḥīḥ* ('correction') on Shaykh al-Ṣadūq's *I'tiqādāt al-Imāmiyya* ('Creed of the Imāmī school'), which elicited objections regarding his interpretations. Shaykh al-Mufid's statements are as follows:

'...As for the explicit statement of Abū Ja'far - may Allah have mercy on him - accusing those who attribute shortcoming (*taqṣīr*) to the scholars and elders of Qom of being extremists (*ghūluww*), it is not the case that attributing shortcoming to this group is an indication of people's extremism. Among those referred to as elders and knowledgeable, some may indeed be guilty of shortcoming. However, the accusation of extremism should be directed at those who claim that the truthful ones are negligent, whether they are from Qom or any other region.

We have heard a clear account about Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Walīd - may Allah have mercy on him - from which there is no defense against the charges of shortcomings. He is quoted saying "The first degree of extremism is to deny that the Prophet, peace be upon him, and the Imam, peace be upon him, could experience lapses." If this report about him is accurate, then he has made an error, despite being amongst the scholars and elders of Qom.

We have met a group who came to us from Qom, clearly guilty of shortcomings in religion. They demote the status of the Imams - peace be upon them - claiming they did not know many of the religious rulings until they were inspired. We have seen those who say they relied on their personal judgments and deductions in

religious matters, while asserting their own status. This is the negligence that is undeniable.

And as for the sign of extremism, it is to deny the created nature of the Imams, attributing divinity and eternity to them, as they [the extremists] suggest they possess the power of creating entities and originating essences, which are beyond the capability of mere mortals. However, there is no need to pass judgment on them and determine their status solely based on what Abū Ja‘far identified as a sign of extremism in this particular instance.⁷

These statements by Shaykh al-Mufīd, refute everything Kadivar has stated regarding the Scholars of Qom. This in itself is surprising that the intended meaning behind the expressions of Shaykh al-Ṣadūq and Shaykh al-Mufīd has not been fully grasped.

It should be noted that part of this quote from Shaykh al-Mufīd is a response to statements made by Shaykh al-Ṣadūq in his book on beliefs, where he asserts the following: ‘And the sign of the Mufawwiḍa and the *ghulāt* and their types is their attribution of shortcoming (*taqṣīr*) to the scholars and elders of Qom.’⁸ Many have misunderstood Shaykh al-Ṣadūq’s statement in his creed, *al-I‘tiqādāt*. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq is highlighting one of the key ‘signs’ or indicators used to identify extremists and delegationists, a reflection of the strong opposition held by the Qummīs against these groups. In fact, this refers to the distinct hostility they harbored toward them, sharply criticising them in their writings and accusing the Qummīs of ‘shortcoming’ – a pattern similar to the accusations found in recently discovered Nuṣayrī texts against their opponents today. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq is not suggesting that opposing the Qummīs leads to accusations of extremism, but rather, that the mark of the extremists and delegationists is that they constantly accuse

⁷ Al-Mufīd, *Taṣḥīḥ i‘tiqādāt al-Imāmiyya* (Dār al-Mufīd: 1993), 136-7.

⁸ See Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Ṣadūq, *I‘tiqādāt al-Imāmiyya* (Kungiri-yi Shaykh Mufīd: 1993), 3.

the Qummīs of these shortcomings.

Contrary to Kadivar’s interpretation, this does not mean that the beliefs of the Qummīs were entirely in opposition to the extremists and delegationists on every issue, nor that the “Scholars of Qom” opposed attributing certain superhuman qualities to the Imams. The Scholars of Qom are the primary narrators of traditions that deal with these topics and precisely assign such attributes to the Imams. This becomes evident even in the most cursory examination of books like *al-Kāfi* and *Baṣā’ir al-darajāt*.

In contrast, Shaykh al-Mufīd, interpreting Shaykh al-Ṣadūq’s statements, sought to clarify a key principle: to identify a genuine criterion for distinguishing between the various sects of *ghulāt* (extremists) and the Mufawwiḍa. The focus should be on doctrinal discussions and evidence, rather than simply on whether these groups oppose or align with the Scholars of Qom. In doing so, he enumerates these criteria. To illustrate the potential imprecision of Shaykh al-Ṣadūq’s categorisation, he references the debate concerning the permissibility of the Prophet and the Imams experiencing lapses (*sahw*). He argues that Ibn al-Walīd’s position would suggest a deficient level of belief in the Imams. Even though Ibn al-Walīd states that the first step of extremism is denying the lapses to the Prophet and the Imams, it remains unclear to what is considered as subsequent levels. Numerous traditions cited regarding the subject of Imamate indicate that his approach is not consistent with attributing the theory of ‘upright scholars’ to him.

In this context, Shaykh al-Mufīd is not categorically attributing the perspective of ‘shortcoming’ to the Scholars of Qom, suggesting that Kadivar’s interpretation may represent a misreading of the text. He is solely referencing Ibn al-Walīd’s shortcoming as a counterexample to Shaykh al-Ṣadūq’s statement. If there were more prominent beliefs among the chief Qummī scholars that clearly indicated their shortcomings in religion, Shaykh al-Mufīd would have explicitly mentioned them. In fact, these references suggest that in Shaykh al-Mufīd’s view, the most significant ‘shortcoming’ attributed to the core

Qummī scholars was their belief – shared with Ibn al-Walīd and Shaykh al-Ṣadūq – in the inadvertence of the Prophet. This belief is invoked to refute Kadivar’s position rather than to support it.

Moreover, Shaykh al-Mufīd mentions that there are people from Qom (referring to ‘a group who came to us from Qom’) who hold even more problematic and evidently deficient beliefs regarding the Imams. This does not imply that the mainstream Qummī scholars held these beliefs. He provides examples that seem to reflect beliefs held by only a small faction from Qom, particularly among those from Shaykh al-Mufīd’s time. It is well-documented that during Shaykh al-Mufīd’s era, the Qummī school was experiencing a decline, having long since passed its golden age in the latter half of the third/ninth century and the early fourth/tenth century. This may be in reference to individuals such as the two Aḥmads, the sons of Ibn al-Walīd, and Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-‘Aṭṭār (d. c. 3rd/9th century), who had close ties with the Scholars of Baghdad. If, for instance, Ibn al-Walīd had truly held the beliefs that Shaykh al-Mufīd attributes to some Scholars of Qom, it raises the question of why Shaykh al-Mufīd would only address the issue of the possibility of lapses for the Prophet – a relatively minor point.

What Shaykh al-Mufīd attributes to this limited group of Qummīs (rather than to ‘the Scholars of Qom,’ as Kadivar repeatedly asserts) merits further examination. Once again, it is evident that Kadivar has made an interpretational error. Shaykh al-Mufīd notes that some of these Qummīs regard the Imams as lacking specific knowledge concerning various religious and jurisprudential issues. They believe that the Imam is unaware of these sciences until God occasionally informs him about a specific matter thereby inspiring knowledge into his heart. Shaykh al-Mufīd regards this view as a disservice to the Imams. It is evident that this perspective denies the Imams’ knowledge on certain jurisprudential matters, portraying them as individuals who sporadically convey knowledge that comes to them in fleeting moments. This belief stands in stark contrast to the mainstream Shī‘ī viewpoint, which asserts that the Imams possess continuous and profound knowledge of religious

jurisprudence. This knowledge is derived from the grace of the Prophet, insights gained from previous Imams, careful study of their writings, and the enduring knowledge entrusted to them. This group of Qummīs did not adhere to mainstream Shī'ism and interpreted the Imam's knowledge in an unconventional way which subsequently aligned with extremist Shī'a views. Shaykh al-Mufīd states that this belief is a disservice to the Imams, as it deprives the Imam of genuine knowledge and turns to extreme views to compensate.

Regarding the second point, Shaykh al-Mufīd writes that some Qummīs he encountered believed that the Imam's knowledge of religion and jurisprudence was grounded in conjecture and personal opinions. Despite this stance, they still regarded the Imams as "*ulamā*" (scholars) employing the traditional Shī'ī term for the Imams, as reflected in texts such as *al-Kāfī*. It has previously been explained that this belief was proposed by some Imāmiyya to justify the existence of contradictions in narrated rulings and legal decisions from the Imams. They believed that the Imam's opinion, with divine intervention, would always be correct, a view rejected by fundamental theologians. Following the Mu'tazila and Ibn Qiba al-Rāzī (d. before 317/929), as well as the foundational perspectives of the Imāmiyya, any reliance on conjecture in jurisprudence was deemed invalid. They believed the reason for having an infallible Imam and his indispensability was that the Imam was a source of certain knowledge (not speculative) for jurisprudence and that his knowledge was not based on conjecture and opinions like other jurists. Given this intellectual framework, it is natural for Shaykh al-Mufīd to criticise the view attributed to some Qummīs and consider it a shortcoming. However, as previously explained, this view does not conflict with the belief in the Imam's infallibility, understood as divinely protected from making mistakes or forgetfulness in matters of jurisprudence. It represents a different perspective on the nature of the Imam's knowledge, particularly concerning jurisprudential rulings. It is not evident that this view requires a broadly opposing stance regarding the Imam's knowledge, particularly concerning the Imam's

understanding of cosmological matters or various forms of esoteric knowledge.

Conclusion

As such, Shaykh al-Ṣadūq has not asserted that the Qummīs and their scholars were “shortcomers” in relation to their views on the Imams, nor has the moderate Shī‘ī perspective, as represented by Shaykh al-Mufīd, accused the so-called ‘Scholars of Qom’ (as Kadivar refers to them) of holding such beliefs. Shaykh al-Ṣadūq does not attribute to the Qummīs an opinion consistent with the theory of the Imams being merely ‘upright scholars.’ Instead, he addresses the animosity of the extremists (*ghulāt*) and the Mufawwiḍa toward the Qummīs, with these groups accusing the Qummīs of ‘falling short’ in their views. He highlights this accusation as a means of identifying those who hold extremist views about the Imams. Similarly, Shaykh al-Mufīd attributes contrary beliefs to only a few Qummīs of his time, accusing them of falling short of the moderate perspective. How is this genuinely connected to attributing to the ‘Scholars of Qom’ the belief that the Imams possess no more knowledge than upright scholars? As previously mentioned, there is no evidence to suggest that the Scholars of Qom, as a unified group, held views on this matter that were distinct from those in Baghdad.

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