

Interview with Etan Kohlberg, conducted by Edmund Hayes.

Hayes:

Here we are at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton on the 28th of March 2019. I am Ed Hayes, and I have here Prof Etan Kohlberg with me. I am very glad to have this opportunity. Before we talk specifically about Shi'i Studies, I thought it would be nice to hear about your intellectual formation—how you first studied Arabic and how you first came to the subjects that you made your career with. There is an overview of your career and life in the beginning of the edited volume *Le Shi'isme imamite quarante ans après. Hommage à Etan Kohlberg*¹ so we will take those things as read and I encourage people who are curious to refer to that. I should also mention that soon to appear with Brill is a book that collects many of your earlier studies, both published and unpublished, *In Praise of the Few: Studies in Shi'i Thought and History*.² I haven't seen it yet but I look forward to it.

So, could you tell me a little bit about how you first started to study Arabic at school? What was that like? What kind of training did you get, and what were the teachers like?

Kohlberg:

Good morning Ed. I'm very happy to be here at the Institute, which I have visited several times before. It's one of my very favourite institutions and I would like to thank Professor Sabine Schmidtke for inviting me. I was happy to make your acquaintance earlier this month in Chicago at the annual conference of the American Oriental Society and it pleases me very much that we are having this conversation.

In response to your question, I grew up in Tel Aviv in the 40s and 50s. I can't believe how long ago that was! At the time high school students could choose between Arabic and French as a second language. I remember being very curious about the Arabic script. When I looked at it, I would think, "My goodness, how can one decipher this?!" It looked so difficult and at the same time so beautiful. So, I think that the aesthetic aspect of the letters was one thing that initially aroused my interest. I was fortunate in having two wonderful mentors in high school with two very different personalities and backgrounds. One was Miriam Solel, who had come from the German orientalist tradition. She gave us a solid grounding in Arabic grammar and taught us a few of the short Quranic suras. She also introduced us to Islamic history—mainly the early medieval period. The other teacher, Avraham Lavi, was born in Tiberias. It was then a mixed Arab-Jewish city, and he was a native speaker of both Hebrew and Arabic. His perspective on Arabic was completely different. For him Arabic was not an academic subject but a living language. With him we read Arabic newspapers as well as excerpts from Taha Hussein's *Du 'ā' al-karawān (The Curlew's Prayer)*. He made us speak Arabic in class and would shout at the top of his voice when anyone dared to fall back into Hebrew. He also taught us the basics of Palestinian Arabic, which was wonderful. The combination of these two teachers, Miriam Solel and Avraham Lavi, was just right because it gave me, from the start, a very good sense of the richness and variety of the language and the culture. I think it was then that I started considering making Arabic my main field of study. When I came to the Hebrew University as an undergraduate, I had to choose two major fields of study. My second one was English literature, which I was very fond of. I read a good deal, there were some excellent teachers and I even toyed with the idea of making English the

¹ Introduction/Foreword by Frank Stewart, in M.A. Amir-Moezzi, M.M. Bar-Asher, S. Hopkins (eds.), *Le shi'isme imamite quarante ans après. Hommage à Etan Kohlberg* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

² Etan Kohlberg, *In Praise of the Few: Studies in Shi'i Thought and History*, edited by Amin Ehteshami (Leiden: Brill 2020).

focus of my future studies. But as time progressed, I realized that while English literature would remain a favourite topic of mine, I would not make it a subject of research. In the 1960s the Hebrew University was, I believe, one of the leading institutions for Arabic studies. It was blessed with a number of first-rate scholars and teachers who'd come from various backgrounds and whose interests were very diverse—from pre-Islamic poetry, Quran, hadith, Arabic grammar and literature, medieval Islamic history and science, to modern Arabic literature and the Palestinian and Egyptian dialects.

Hayes:

Before we go on to your study at the Hebrew University can I just take you back to the high school experience for a bit? You say there was a choice between French and Arabic. Among your classmates, were there more people studying Arabic or French? Were there different camps? Were there discussions about why one would choose one or the other?

Kohlberg:

In my year, we called it 5th grade, which you entered at age 14, there were seven classes, five Arabic and two French. Since the students in each class all studied the same language there were no disagreements, and I cannot recall discussions with students of the French classes; nor can I tell whether individual decisions were culturally or politically motivated. The fact that there were more Arabic than French classes may indicate where school priorities lay, but to the best of my recollection no pressure was applied on students to study Arabic rather than French.

Hayes:

Did you have an inkling at that point that you would take the path less travelled to study the medieval perspective. Certainly, as an undergraduate I thought that I was going to read modern Arabic novels and it was an accident, really, and a case of good teachers in the medieval section that led me the way that I eventually followed.

Kohlberg:

I think my experience was somewhat similar to yours. Because Avraham Lavi was such a charismatic character I thought for a while I would continue in his path. But when I came to University, I realized there was so much to be learned and researched in the medieval period—especially with one particular teacher who led the way...

Hayes:

Who was that?

Kohlberg:

Meir Kister, who was an extraordinary teacher and scholar. His influence was decisive, not only for me, but for a whole generation.

Hayes:

So, what was it like, sitting in his classroom?

Kohlberg:

You were expected to come to class fully prepared! He would throw stuff at you and expect you to answer, expecting you to have checked everything from *Lisān al-‘arab* to Lane. He did not go in for grand theories; instead, he would show you what could be learned from the smallest text unit. And he had this game: if we were sitting in a small group and you didn't know a word, you had to pay one lira – a pretty small sum of money – and put it in a box.

When a sufficiently large amount had accumulated, we all went to the cafeteria and had coffee with the proceeds. His enthusiasm was absolutely infectious and of course his scholarship was amazing. He was the one who really showed me what hadith and classical poetry were all about.

Hayes:

My first experience with Kister was reading articles assigned to me as a graduate student by Fred Donner—articles on these very apparently abstruse topics— small things that would illuminate a whole world—especially that very early period on the boundary between the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, which is a very obscure world.

Kohlberg:

Exactly. Incidentally, I don't know if this was Kister's sense of humour at work, but he had a first-year undergraduate class called "Easy Classical Prose Texts", where the texts studied were the most difficult you could imagine!

Hayes:

And who were your classmates? Were there other people who stayed in the field from that time?

Kohlberg:

I was one of a number of Kister's students who were either my teachers or my classmates. All of them remained in the field and all of them are my friends to this day. They include Haggai Ben Shammai, Yohanan Friedmann, Isaac Hasson, Aryeh Levin, Menahem Milson, Shaul Shaked and others.

Hayes:

You are famous for really opening up the field of Shi'i Studies. Was there any sense at that point that Shi'ism was something you would be interested in? It must have been at this period that you were exposed to Shi'i topics? How did that happen?

Kohlberg:

There was no class devoted to Shi'i Studies, although Moshe Sharon, who is renowned for his work on medieval Islamic history, Islamic epigraphy and the Baha'i religion, taught a class on the 'Abbasid revolution which I attended. But whether by accident or design, for my undergraduate seminar paper Kister suggested that I compare the Shi'i and Sunni views on the accession of Abū Bakr. So that was my first real attempt to read Shi'i texts. It was a very important moment, and in fact my doctoral dissertation is, in a way, an offshoot of that initial work.

Hayes:

So, your doctoral dissertation was on the companions of the prophet?

Kohlberg:

Yes.

Hayes:

When you were writing your undergraduate thesis what was it that sparked your interest? What did you feel was important about this, or different from what you had usually seen?

Kohlberg:

What we normally read were Sunni texts. Being exposed to Shi‘i sources made me realize that there was another way of looking at early history, and that fascinated me. There was a whole new world to explore, and I felt a little bit like an adventurer entering uncharted territory. This I found exciting, and I must say I still feel so to this day—a sense of discovery, of new things around the corner, a feeling that there is so much you don’t know and so much that there is still to learn.

Hayes:

So, let’s move on to the dissertation. You did your dissertation in Oxford. As you say, there were amazing scholars in Jerusalem at this time. Why did you decide to go to Oxford? Were there other options of places to go, or the option to stay in Jerusalem?

Kohlberg:

I’ll answer that in a moment, but I just want to mention that the system followed in Israel is a BA followed by an MA. The supervisor of my MA dissertation was again Kister, and he suggested that I edit an Arabic Sufi text using a number of manuscripts. This was my first real introduction both to Sufism and to the edition of manuscripts.

Hayes:

What was the text you edited?

Kohlberg:

It was by Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, a 4th-5th/10th-11th century Sunni author and the two texts were *‘Uyūb al-naḥs wa mudāwātuhā* and *Jawāmi‘ ādāb al-ṣūfiyya*. I enjoyed working on this and learned a lot about the fascinating world of early Sufism. I try to keep up with the literature, but I have not pursued this subject further in my research.

When I finished my MA, it was suggested that for my PhD I should stay in Israel and specialize in modern Arabic literature. By that time however it was clear to me that, interesting though this subject was, it was Shi‘ism that attracted me as an object of research. Here again Kister offered valuable advice, suggesting that I try a different country and a different academic system. The name he mentioned was Samuel Stern, who was at the time a Research Fellow at All Souls College and a University Lecturer in the history of Islamic Civilisation at the Oriental Institute in Oxford. Stern was a leading expert on Shi‘ism, especially Ismaili Shi‘ism. He agreed to meet me, and so I found myself one bright afternoon in August 1968 knocking at the door of 5 Bladon Close, where Stern lived at the home of Richard and Sophie Walzer. I was immediately made to feel at ease. Stern invited me to his study on the upper floor and asked me about my studies and future plans. At the conclusion of the meeting I was happy to learn that he would be willing to take me on as his student. I am not sure whether we spoke English or Hebrew at that meeting, but in due course I had ample opportunity to admire his fine Hebrew. I returned to Jerusalem to complete my MA examinations, coming back to Oxford in early January 1969, in time for the beginning of Hilary term. I stayed there for three years.

Hayes:

And so Stern and Kister, how did they know each other?

Kohlberg:

Kister had known Stern from the early 1940s, when they were both students of the eminent arabist David H. Baneth (1893-1973) at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Kister and Stern kept in touch after Stern moved to England. Kister was a great admirer of Stern, as were many others.

Hayes:

Tell me about Stern. He died soon after you arrived?

Kohlberg:

Yes. He died suddenly on October the 29th, 1969, less than ten months after my arrival. That was a deeply shocking event, a tragedy for everyone who knew him, and a great loss to the field. He had not yet reached the age of 49.

Hayes:

Just from his publications you wouldn't get the sense that he had a short life. He covers so much, he was so curious in so many areas: numismatics, doctrinal history...

Kohlberg:

Right, and also Hebrew and Arabic Andalusian poetry, Fatimid administrative documents, Islamic and Jewish philosophy. Stern used to tell me of his projects, especially in the field of Ismaili studies, and he had so many ideas.

As I mentioned earlier, Stern lived at the home of Richard and Sophie Walzer. Richard was Professor of Islamic Philosophy and his wife, herself a good scholar, was the daughter of the German Jewish publisher and gallery owner Bruno Cassirer.

The Walzers had a wonderful art collection, presumably inherited from Sophie's father. It included Claude Monet's *Bathers at la Grenouillère*³ which visitors to the Walzer home could admire. Nothing was insured, because of the high cost of insurance. Today this painting, showing bathers and boats in the Seine, forms part of the Impressionist collection of the National Gallery, and the text next to it reads: "Bequeathed by Mrs. M.S. Walzer as part of the Richard and Sophie Walzer Bequest, 1979". I try to see it whenever I come to London.

Hayes:

That's interesting. You don't usually connect Arabic Philosophy with Impressionism. It's nice how these connections are made.

Kohlberg:

The Walzers had a two-story house and Stern lived on the upper floor. We usually had our sessions either there or at the King's Arms near the New Bodleian. In the period after Stern's death, in addition to the personal loss I felt, there was also the question of who my supervisor would be. Fortunately, Richard Walzer generously agreed to take over, even though his main field of research was Greek and Islamic philosophy. Also there was Albert Hourani who was extremely kind and helpful, Bernard Lewis, whom I met in London and who showed an interest in my work, and Wilferd Madelung, who had an appointment in Chicago but whom I met in Oxford, and who read drafts of some of my dissertation chapters and made excellent suggestions.

Hayes:

³ See <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/claude-monet-bathers-at-la-grenouillere#>

While you were working with Stern, what kind of comments did you get? Would you say that he had an influence on the direction you took in that short time?

Kohlberg:

Although I came to Oxford with a general sense of what I wanted to write about, he helped me to see things more clearly and develop the outlines of the dissertation. He also broadened my horizons, for example by pointing to the significance of the Mu‘tazili element. He did this by sending me to read al-Khayyāt, ‘Abd al-Jabbār and the works of other Mu‘tazili authors available at the time. In the dissertation there is in fact a chapter on the Mu‘tazili views on the Companions as a basis for comparison between Mu‘tazili and Shi‘i beliefs on this question. Stern also stressed the importance of the Sunni perspective, and the need to be aware of how the two hang together. This approach is reflected in the dissertation.

Hayes:

And for the early period this comparative perspective is so important because there is a tendency, especially now we are living in time when sectarian tensions are maybe at the high point in several hundred years...

Kohlberg:

Which is deplorable.

Hayes:

... which means that we tend to see early Islam as a binary world, whereas in fact it was a multipolar world.

Kohlberg:

Very true.

Hayes:

I see that there are some chapters of the dissertation going into the new collected volume. Did you oversee that? Are you anxious about that? Because I know it is a long time ago and there are many texts and studies that have been published since then.

Kohlberg:

When I finished the dissertation, I decided it needed more work. I didn't want to publish it as it was. I then started looking at other things, and as happens very often to dissertations, it just got left behind, though I did make use of some of the material in subsequent articles. But quite a bit of the dissertation remained right there and I didn't touch it for many years. Now the editor of the collected articles volume, Amin Ehteshami, who did a truly fine job, thought it might be a good idea to include some of the unpublished chapters of the dissertation. He had a hard time convincing me, because I was in two minds—and still am. I did not have the energy, after fifty years, to update the material, and in addition I have been plagued by increasingly poor eyesight. So, the only way I could approach this was to leave the chapters more or less unchanged. I just made some stylistic changes, added some references to my own work, and occasionally referred to *Encyclopaedia of Islam* entries. Also, Amin and I composed an appendix in which we listed some of the relevant literature that has been published in the last fifty years.

Hayes:

I think it makes perfect sense to publish it and give it a wider audience, though I can understand an unwillingness to return to work done half a century earlier.

I have a related anecdote from Chicago. You know Paul Walker was on my dissertation committee and when he taught Ismailism he would get students to read an article by Madelung on the Imamate in German, which he said was the best guide to the early development of the Ismaili idea of Imamate, and there was an unofficial translation by Patricia Crone, that he would distribute as a kind of *samizdat*. Madelung did not want to publish an English version because he would have to change a lot—for similar reasons as those which you gave. But for students and for scholars it is nice to have the material.

Kohlberg:

I think the English translation has appeared in the *Shii Studies Review*, so it's no longer a *samizdat*.⁴

Hayes:

And Richard Walzer, was he largely a formal supervisor? Or did he have a more influential role? He's known for his work on *Fārābī*... There is a certain connection there with Shi'ism: divine government and the ordering of the world. Did any of that perspective come in?

Kohlberg:

It was instructive to learn from him about some of the ideas common to Shi'ism and *Fārābī*. This is not reflected in the dissertation, which deals with other issues. He did have some good comments when I showed him drafts of my work.

Hayes:

So, that's Oxford then.

Kohlberg:

I'd just like to add that the years in Oxford were wonderful, both intellectually and personally. Some of the people I met at the time became lifelong friends.

Hayes:

Did you finish at Oxford and then go back to Jerusalem, or were you still writing when you went back to Jerusalem?

Kohlberg:

I made a big effort to finish and submit the dissertation and have the viva before returning home, because I knew that once I got into teaching, I would be quite busy. I am glad I did!

Hayes:

So, you had a job waiting for you?

Kohlberg:

Yes. While I was in Oxford, I received an offer from the Hebrew University to join the Faculty of Humanities as a lecturer in Arabic.

Hayes:

What did you teach?

Kohlberg:

⁴ Wilferd Madelung, "The Imamate in Early Ismaili Doctrine," *Shii Studies Review* 2: Issue 1-2 (2018): 62–155, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/24682470-12340019>.

One of the courses I taught for many years was the Quran—especially Quranic commentary. I tried to teach different Suras every year. The commentary that I particularly liked to teach was the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* by the 15th-century Egyptian scholars Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī. I had first been introduced to this text by Kister, who taught it regularly. There are several reasons why I found teaching this text so rewarding: first, it is concise and so more ground could be covered; second, despite its brevity it comprises all the important elements that make up a *tafsīr*: doctrine, grammar, *qirā'āt*, history, *asbāb al-nuzūl* etc.; third, it provided an excellent opportunity for comparisons with earlier, larger commentaries such as al-Ṭabarī or al-Zamakhsharī. Such comparisons could be extremely helpful in elucidating the text of al-Jalālayn since its conciseness sometimes makes it difficult to understand, and you really have to rack your brain. From student feedback over the years I gathered that they found this method quite useful.

Hayes:

So, the idea is that you take something that is synthesized, and unpick the elements?

Kohlberg:

Exactly.

Hayes:

How did your teaching relate to your scholarship? It sounds like there was fertile ground for crossover in your teaching and what you were doing in your publications.

Kohlberg:

I had been teaching Shi'ī texts since the mid-70s, and at some point had put together a little booklet in which I included xeroxed texts by major Shi'ī authors such as al-Kulaynī, al-Mufīd and al-Murtaḍā. Initially, however, I did not focus on those specific texts or issues which I'd been working on; at the time, strangely enough, I thought that teaching and research should be separate, because what was good for me was not necessarily good for my students. It was only later that it dawned on me that the best teaching is often precisely that which relates to what you are currently interested in.

Hayes:

So, how do you do this? Teaching something close to your field of your research—it can be difficult—understanding where you are coming from and where the student is coming from and make the two ends meet. What is the trick?

Kohlberg:

I think the first thing is to be as clear as you can, not to take anything for granted. If you have to explain the basics, then explain the basics. But on the other hand, you have to make demands of your students. If they realise that a high level of preparation or achievement is expected of them, they often rise to the challenge, certainly those who are more interested, the serious ones. Always be respectful of your students. You should never think that you are better – many of them taught me things. For example, I have had students who had a better background in Jewish studies or the social sciences, and I often learned from their comments or was given a different perspective. Learning from my students has been a major benefit of teaching.

Hayes:

So now I will move on to some more detailed questions about Shi'ī Studies. I wrote my dissertation on the Occultation period and now I am trying to go back to the period of the

Imams, just to trying to figure out who the Imams are, and what were their relations with their followers. Now that we are not working in the genre of the academic article, but just having a conversation, could you give me an impressionistic sense of who you think the Imams were and what the early Shi‘i community was? Maybe not going right back to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, because I think the historical problems in dealing with the first four Imams become more difficult. Each of them is very different in their political situation and relations. But maybe from Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq up until the Occultation, how would you describe the Shi‘i community?

Kohlberg:

Needless to say, the Imams were central figures, arguably the most knowledgeable scholars of their day. If you read the biography of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq in Sunni sources, you realize he was considered a very learned scholar even by those who did not subscribe to the Shi‘i vision of the world. So, it is not surprising that these men had a group of disciples that followed them. Of course, according to Shi‘i doctrine, whatever the Imam says is the law, since only he possesses the complete truth. But as we know from reading the early material there were discussions, and sometimes even disagreements between some of the leading disciples and the Imam. So, you do get a certain discrepancy between the theory of where the Imam stands and what we learn from the sources: that there were leading scholars in their own right who did not always endorse the views advanced by the Imam. So, there was an interesting tension.

Hayes:

So, was the Shi‘i Imam a *faqīh*? an “imam” in the sense that the Sunnis use the term, for example “Imam Mālik”, to indicate a great scholar? Is that the kind of imam the Shi‘i Imams were?

Kohlberg:

He was a *faqīh* but also a leader of the community. The question is, at what point was he also believed to be divinely designated or deemed to have supernatural knowledge or connections to the divine that went beyond being just a leader? And when exactly was it that his disciples started viewing him in this way? I imagine it was quite early, though it's hard to put a precise date on it.

Hayes:

If you had to have a stab at it, how early would you guess?

Kohlberg:

At the latest during the lifetime of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq. His imamate lasted for 34 years and coincided with the transition from the Umayyads to the ‘Abbasids. He was clearly an extraordinary personality. A great many legal hadiths go back to him.

Hayes:

We have such a huge corpus of statements that purport to be statements of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, that even if people only ascribe statements to him because he was an important guy, that shows us something. One of the great differences between Shi‘i hadith and Sunni hadith is that at the time when the Sunnis started feeling that all the hadith should go back to the Prophet Muḥammad, the Shi‘a had accepted that hadith that go back to the Imams were sufficient as a base of law.

Kohlberg:

Or just as authoritative. They had a shorter *isnād*, because they only had to go back to the second century AH, instead of going all the way back.

Hayes:

Do you think that the Sunni and the Shi‘i sense of hadith was the same? When al-Shāfi‘ī says that you have to have a prophetic hadith as the basis of law, is the Shi‘i sense of the foundation of the law comparable to that, do you think? Or is it a different kind of law, a different kind of application of textual knowledge to practice?

Kohlberg:

In principle hadith fulfils the same function and serves as the basis of the law. A key difference is that for Shi‘is the Imams have the same authority as the Prophet. This means that a Shi‘i hadith which ostensibly came into being at a later date than any prophetic hadith could nevertheless have the same validity, for the Shi‘is, as a prophetic hadith.

Hayes:

So, in a way the early Shi‘a are *ahl al-ḥadīth*, or we might even justifiably say, *ahl al-sunna* even?

Kohlberg:

Yes, which goes back to your point of the artificiality of separating the study of Shi‘i and Sunni hadith. There is so much that we can gain by looking at both.

Hayes:

This is what is so nice about what Robert Gleave is doing at Exeter, having a team specifically working on the connections.

So, the Imam as *faqīh* is one element, and then there is the Imam as a supernaturally endowed figure. How does being from the *ahl al-bayt* fit in with that? Is it just a prerequisite for omniscience or *‘isma*?

Kohlberg:

Yes, the Imams’ membership of the *ahl al-bayt* was indeed a prerequisite for their *‘isma* and their possession of both legal authority and esoteric knowledge. Shi‘i hadiths provide ample examples of all these elements.

Hayes:

Sometimes there is a tendency in the field to say, “Only the esoteric material is the true legacy of the Imams,” or, “Only the *fiqh* or more rational or mundane processes of reasoning are authentic.” But would you then say that these are different hermeneutic milieux within one Shi‘i community, or that these are the same people who are working on both levels?

Kohlberg:

The idea of different hermeneutic milieux is attractive and seems to be supported by some of the biographical material. This does not however rule out the possibility that the same people regarded the Imam as both a legal authority and as possessing supernatural powers, or tended to emphasize one aspect rather than another depending on the audience they were addressing.

Hayes:

Certainly when you look at some of the so-called *ghulāt* groups, you have moments when the problem is seen to be the revelation of the doctrine rather than the doctrine itself, so this gives

us a hint that there are appropriate spheres for different kinds of knowledge, and that there is a separation of these.

Kohlberg:

Is that something you have come across in your research?

Hayes:

Well, for example, I have just been looking at the case of al-Shalmaghānī recently. My question for the relationship between Shalmaghānī and Ibn Rawḥ is: did Ibn Rawḥ disapprove of Shalmaghānī because they had different doctrines or because he was a political threat? Maybe it is too difficult to separate those questions. Political authority within the Imami community and religious authority are so closely intertwined. But one of the things you see in the narratives about Shalmaghānī is that the public nature of the controversy was deeply problematic. It was not only an issue that Shalmaghānī's heretical preaching was too public, but also you get a clear sense that Ibn Rawḥ needs to justify the fact that he went public to get Shalmaghānī executed. But... *Allāhu a'lam*.

Kohlberg:

Well, I look forward to reading the results of your research.

Hayes:

And there is the article by Bella Tendler where she looks at the question of do you reveal or not reveal in the Nuṣayrī tradition?⁵ And I think there is something of that in the broader Imami community.

Coming back to this question of dissent from the Imams, you have done some work on this, for example in the case of Zurāra. How do you feel disagreement with the Imam might have operated? Did dissent become less possible later on, or are disagreements always a possibility if you have a living Imam there, and you have to deal with the realities of his authority?

Kohlberg:

One hears less about disagreements with the later Imams, possibly because by that time the doctrine of *'isma* had been firmly established, though there were dissenting voices at that time as well. Dissent may have been more acceptable in the earlier period, and there are some indications that the Imams encouraged their disciples to express their own views. On the whole, the impression is of a vibrant community of scholars. We can see that from the biographical literature and from studies such as *Tradition and Survival* by Hossein Modarressi⁶ or *L'imamat et l'Occultation selon l'imamisme* by Hassan Ansari.⁷

Hayes:

I guess the question regarding dissent is this: do elements in the community who disagree with one another articulate their disagreements through statements that they attribute to the Imams, or do the Imams themselves generate material that is ambivalent, and that scholars then have to figure out afterwards? Do you have a sense of that?

⁵ Bella Tendler, "'Abd Allāh b. Saba' and the Role of the Nuṣayrī Bāb. Rehabilitating the Heresiarchs of the Islamic Tradition," in *L'Ésotérisme shi'ite: ses racines et ses prolongements*, edited by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Maria De Cillis, Daniel De Smet, Orkhan Mir-Kasimov (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016).

⁶ Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: a Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi'ite Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).

⁷ Hassan Ansari, *L'imamat et l'Occultation selon l'imamisme: Étude bibliographique et histoire des textes* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Kohlberg:

I would tend to opt for the former.

Hayes:

And then you think that the partisans of one or other side would have to cite proof to back up their position?

Kohlberg:

Right.

Hayes:

So, this is a kind of Schachtian view of the development of contradictory hadith?

Kohlberg:

It may well be that supporters of a particular doctrine would attribute this doctrine to the Imam, at times resulting in contradictory hadith. There are of course other reasons for *ikhtilāf*, such as the need to practise *taqiyya*.

Hayes:

Well, I hope we have more work done on this. When you look at all the work done on Sunni hadith, the Juynboll-style spider-diagrams and the Motzkian *matn-cum-isnad* analysis. Is this kind of thing even possible with Shi‘i hadith?

Kohlberg:

I don't see why it couldn't be done. In the case of Shi‘i hadith this might be less complicated because of the shorter *isnāds*. If your starting point is the mid-2nd/8th century you are on safer ground than if you have to go back to the very beginning.

Hayes:

Then again, if you have a numerically smaller community you just have fewer variants to compute.

Kohlberg:

Sure.

Hayes:

Moving on, one of your major works is your book on Ibn Ṭāwūs. I love this because it is a place where intellectual history and social history overlap, because you are looking at practices of scholarship.

Kohlberg:

My interest in Ibn Ṭāwūs was sparked when, reading some of his works, I noticed that when he cited from a particular work he not only gave its title, but occasionally also provided the folio number or the format of the manuscript, or mentioned that it belonged to his library, or that he'd bought it for a large sum of money, and so on. And so I thought, "My goodness! This is quite unusual! Let's follow this up." I had no idea where it would lead. It turned out, for me, to be a very rewarding project.

Hayes:

Yes—and it must have been a huge project.

Kohlberg:

It was quite time-consuming, without the benefit of computers and databases.

Hayes:

I shudder to think.

Kohlberg:

But it was exciting, and I learned a great deal.

Hayes:

Yes, well the problem with things being too easy is that if you can just search for something and get it, it prevents you from getting the experience of a text where you are really working through it and trying to figure out how you can orient yourself towards it.

Kohlberg:

Yes.

Hayes:

So then, as a scholar in the 20th and 21st century do you think we are doing similar things from someone like Ibn Ṭāwūs, or do you think we are very different people, engaged in a very different project?

Kohlberg:

There are several aspects where most of us can feel an affinity with Ibn Ṭāwūs: his love of books, his curiosity, his wish to increase knowledge, his attention to detail. In these respects he is quite similar to us—to contemporary scholars. Of course, he was writing from within his own tradition, so I imagine that, for example, comparisons with other libraries or other literatures would have held less attraction for him. I still think, by the way, there is scope for more work on Ibn Ṭāwūs.

Hayes:

Yes? What tips would you give for directions for future scholarship?

Kohlberg:

For example, it might be interesting to explore to what extent his work and thought are representative of the Shi'ism of his time, that is the 7th/13th century. Also, how does he fit within the scholarly tradition of his native al-Ḥilla which was an important centre of Shi'ī learning at the time? On a point of detail, the number of works of supplication (*du'ā'*) which he wrote or which he cites is impressive, and an investigation of this genre could prove worthwhile.

Hayes:

I would like to continue with this discussion of Shi'ī hadith a bit. Maybe I can just ask broadly in Shi'ī Studies, and Shi'ī hadith, where you feel the gaps are and where you feel people should really be working now. Thinking about Ibn Ṭāwūs is useful, because we have a relatively large amount done on the earliest periods—the 10th and 11th centuries. Then there is relatively more done on the Safavids, though perhaps not so much specifically on hadith, but at least on the milieu.

Would you say there is a gap there between Ṭūsī and the Safavids, and where else do you think we should be concentrating?

Kohlberg:

The period between the Buwayhids and the Safavids could indeed benefit from further research. In the field of *kalām* Hassan Ansari and Sabine Schmidtke have been leading the way with their work on developments between the 5th/11th and 7th/13th centuries. It might also be rewarding to look at the connections between Zaydī and Twelver hadith, especially now that so many Zaydī texts have become available. Another interesting case is authors on the borderline between Sunnism and Shi'ism, particularly in the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries.

We also need good critical editions. More of them have been coming out in recent years, but there are still quite a few editions that lack any critical apparatus and are based on a single manuscript even when more are available.

Hayes:

In the texts that you have worked on, are there very great divergences in the manuscript tradition, or do Shi'ī texts tend to look the same in different variants?

Kohlberg:

The divergences are sufficiently significant to justify the effort of producing good editions based on the best manuscripts available.

Hayes:

So, to follow up that... what are you working on at the moment?

Kohlberg:

It has long been known that the second half of the *Tafsīr* of Muḥammad b. Mas'ūd al-ʿAyyāshī (d. early 4th/10th century) has not survived, although fragments are found in some later sources. For quite a few years now I have been collecting these fragments with a view to publishing an edition. I recently discovered that the Qumm 1420-21 AH edition of al-ʿAyyāshī includes a supplement in which many of these fragments are reproduced, but I believe it would still be worthwhile for me to go ahead with my own edition, which I hope will include a critical apparatus.

Hayes:

Well it would be a very great contribution.

Finally, in the introduction to the volume *Le Shi'isme Imamite*, Frank Stewart...

Kohlberg:

An old friend and a wonderful scholar.

Hayes:

...he said that he would place you as a representative of the old tradition of central European scholarship, and I wanted to get a sense of whether you would agree with that statement, and is that still a tradition that is represented in the Hebrew University and Israeli scholarship and how you see scholarship in Israel in Islamic studies and Middle Eastern studies as having moved on, or stayed in that tradition?

Kohlberg:

I think a text-based approach is very much alive. At the same time there is increasing emphasis on the social sciences and comparative and interdisciplinary studies.

Hayes:

Even in the mid-20th century, Goitein brought a social-historical perspective-also here in Princeton.

Kohlberg:

Yes. That is very important of course. The comparative angle includes looking at the Christian and Jewish elements and seeing how they fit into the picture.

I would still insist, being old-fashioned in my way, that you cannot achieve significant results without having a solid basis in the text. The text is where we start, and then we can take it where we want. So, I remain committed to this, if you like “central European” tradition.

Hayes:

Well, I don't know if it is only central European—this is one way of looking at it—you could just call it “humanistic”, though we can certainly identify certain characteristics of a tradition embodied by German, and Hungarian scholars and others... people like Ignaz Goldziher, and Nöldeke.

Kohlberg:

Yes. I think we have much to learn from them!