How Shiism evolved

Powers of

persuasion

The Emergence of Modern Shiism: Islamic

Reform in Iraq and Iran. By Zackery Heern.

Oneworld; 220 pages; $30 and £20

W

HENEVER the non-Islamic world

has confronted the Muslim one, mil-

itant movements have arisen from within

that impeded crusty regimes from seeing

off the external threat. Under attack from

Crusaders in the west and Mongols in the

east in the early medieval period, jihadist

groups and firebrand preachers turned on

heterodoxy in the ranks. Saladin over-

threw the Shia imamate in Cairo and set

troops on the Crusaders. He also estab-

lished law schools that reduced multiple

legal interpretationsinto rigid codes. In the

13th century Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya, a

Sunni scholar in Damascus, adopted the

notion of takfir, denouncing as apostates

Muslims whom he deemed wayward, a

crime punishable bydeath.

Five centuries later, buffeted by West-

ern colonial militaryand economicmight,

a crop of Muslim movements turned on

their distant all-encompassing Ottoman,

Safavid and Mughal overlordsin much the

same way. Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wah-

hab (1703-92) sought to purify Islam of its

1,000-year-old accretions, and eradicate

manifestationsofwhathe deemed to com-

promise the Prophet Muhammad’s unal-

loyed monotheism. His fighters turned on

Shia shrines in Iraq, and briefly wrested

Mecca from the Ottomans.

Ahmad Ibn Idris (1760-1837) sought to

suppressthe more eccentricexpressions of

Sufism, orIslamicmysticism, and re-estab-

lish an orthodox line, spawning brother-

hoods that revolted against the Italians in

Libya and the British in Egypt and Sudan.

And Wahid Bihbihani (1704-91) revived

and refashioned the waning Usuli school

of Shiism, as the Ottoman and Safavid

empires lost control of Iran and Iraq. His

followers, as expositors of God’s word,

arrogated immense powersto themselves;

in 1979 one of them, Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini, turned Iran into a theocracy.

ZackeryHeern, an American academic,

is primarily concerned with the Shias,

Islam’s second-largest denomination after

the Sunnis. But he refreshingly teases out

the parallels between the three move-

ments, ratherthan theirdifferencesas most

other commentators have done. He notes,

in particular, theirshared intolerance ofal-

ternatives in their pursuit of a single path

to truth. “Sectarianism notwithstanding,”

he writes, “Wahhabis, Idrisis and Usulis

did have a common enemy in popular

Sufism and each movementsoughtto sup-

press popular rituals that were thought to

be un-Islamic.”

Historians term the new movements,

somewhat kindly, “revivalist”. Certainly

all three upheld the right to challenge and

reinterpret tradition afresh. Both the Wah-

habis and the Usulis (unlike their Shia

rivals, the Akhbaris) clung to their right to

exercise ijtihad, or independent legal rea-

soning, rather than reliance on precedent.

But whereas the Wahhabis limited ijtihad

to interpretation ofthe sacred texts, Usulis

insisted theycould deduce rulingsfrom ra-

tional argumentsaswell. Ibn Idris, the Sufi,

relied on hisintuition to revisitold texts.

But having arrogated the right to inter-

pret God’s word anew, they and, even

more so, their successors were viciously

hungry to exercise the power that gave

them, making them no less terrifying to

their detractors than Abu Bakr al-Bagh-

dadi’s Islamic State is today. Then, as now,

theirfollowersfilled the spacesleft bydes-

pots reelingin the face ofEurope’s techno-

logical, military and economic advances.

As European merchant shipping sucked

trade and revenues from ancient overland

routes, uppity tribesmen looked to rebel-

lious clerics to help slough off their tax-

farmingoppressorsappointed bya distant

central state.

The Ayatollahsraised theirown private

armies and taxation systems and inspired

the massconversion ofIran and Iraq to Shi-

ism. Throughout the 19th century they

built up their own power base, accepting

the state when it did their bidding and

slaughtering rivals and apostates. When

the state resisted them under the Shah,

they overthrew it. Two centuries after the

death ofthe three revivalists, their legacies

continue to shake the Middle East.