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Economic Theology in Iraq: The Parallel Economy of Al-Kafeel

الثيولوجيا الاقتصادية في العراق: الاقتصاد الموازي لشبكة الكفيل

Abstract: This study explores the rise of “economic theology” in Iraq through an examination of the Shi’i Al-Kafeel network and its expanding institutional presence. It addresses the central question of how religious authority, when disengaged from state structures, constructs a parallel economy grounded in theological legitimacy and moral purpose. The analysis, adopting a theoretical framework shaped by Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and contemporary reflections on religious economies, approaches Al-Kafeel not merely as an administrative apparatus but as a symbolic formation that converts ritual authority into organizational capacity and economic power. The study argues that Al-Kafeel exemplifies a distinctive mode of socio-economic action in post-2003 Iraq, one in which religious legitimacy, managerial rationality, and communal trust converge to produce an alternative model of institutional endurance and social influence.

Keywords: Economic Theology; Iraq; Al-Kafeel Network; Religious Authority; Shi’i Institutional Endurance.

ملخص: تبحث الدراسة صعود «الثيولوجيا الاقتصادية» في العراق من خلال دراسة شبكة الكفيل الشيعية وتوسع حضورها المؤسسي. يتناول السؤال المحوري كيفية قيام السلطة الدينية، بمعزل عن هياكل الدولة، بناء اقتصاد مواز قائم على الشرعية اللاهوتية والغاية الأخلاقية. يتبنى التحليل إطاراً نظرياً مستوحى من ماكس فيبر وفيرنر سومبارت ودراسات معاصرة حول الاقتصادات الدينية، حيث لا ينظر إلى الكفيل بوصفه جهازاً إدارياً فحسب، بل كتشكيل رمزي يحول السلطة الشعائرية إلى قدرة تنظيمية وقوة اقتصادية. وتجادل الدراسة بأن الكفيل يجسد نمطاً مميزاً من العمل الاجتماعي والاقتصادي في العراق ما بعد العام 2003، حيث تتلاقى الشرعية الدينية، والعقلانية الإدارية، والثقة المجتمعية لإنتاج نموذج بديل للاستدامة المؤسسية والتأثير الاجتماعي.

كلمات مفتاحية: الثيولوجيا الاقتصادية؛ العراق؛ شبكة الكفيل؛ السلطة الدينية؛ الصمود

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Introduction

The term “Al-Kafeel Economy” describes the expanding economic activities of Iraq’s religious shrines, particularly those associated with the Al-Abbas Holy Shrine since 2003. The designation draws on the shrine’s formal title, Al-Kafeel, a name imbued with profound theological resonance as it refers to one of the epithets of Abbas ibn Ali (d. 680). By extending a sacred title to a network of commercial enterprises, the institution constructs a symbolic veil that obscures the profit-oriented nature of its activities, allowing religious legitimacy and economic practice to merge within a single representational frame. This semiotic manoeuvre signals the emergence of a complex organizational structure whose economic role has grown far beyond its ritual and custodial origins. Today, Al-Kafeel network operates across media production, agriculture, industry, services, and investment, positioning itself as a parallel economy with substantial financial and administrative autonomy. Examining this transformation offers insight into how religious institutions in post-2003 Iraq have translated devotional authority into managerial power, and how economic theology – where belief, legitimacy, and material practice intersect – has become a defining feature of their institutional expansion. Through this lens, Al-Kafeel appears not simply as a religious establishment but as a consequential socio-economic actor.

The intricate relationship between religion and economics in Iraq is profound, particularly when viewed through the lens of Al-Kafeel network. This study explores the transformation of religious institutions in Iraq, with a specific focus on the Shi’i community, tracing their evolution from purely spiritual authorities to prominent economic entities. Historically, religious institutions in Iraq have wielded considerable influence over social and cultural life. However, in recent decades, their role has expanded to encompass significant economic activity, thereby positioning them as key players in the national economy.

The paper draws upon the theoretical insights of Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and Pierre Bourdieu to explore the intersection of religion and economics in Iraq. Through his work on Protestant ethics, Weber provides a foundation for understanding how religious beliefs and practices can influence economic behaviour. Similarly, Sombart’s analysis of the Jewish community’s economic role in Europe and Bourdieu’s concepts of symbolic power and capital help contextualize the economic strategies of religious institutions in Iraq.

In the Iraqi context, Al-Kafeel network exemplifies how religious institutions have capitalized on their spiritual authority to engage in economic ventures. These institutions have not only amassed wealth but have also become integral to the economic landscape, influencing everything from real estate and agriculture to education and healthcare. The study highlights how religious beliefs and practices are intertwined with economic decision-making processes within these institutions, thereby shaping broader economic trends in Iraq.

Moreover, the study examines the collaboration between religious authorities and the emerging political elite, referred to here as the *Parvenus*.¹ This alliance between religious institutions and the new political class has had profound implications for governance and economic development in Iraq. The research argues that this partnership has contributed to the perpetuation of corruption and the entrenchment of the

¹ The term *parvenus* originates in French literature, denoting individuals who have recently acquired wealth or social status but lack the traditional prestige associated with long-established elites. In the context of post-2003 Iraq, this term takes on a broader and more specific meaning. The Parvenus in Iraq are not merely *nouveau riche*; they represent a new ruling class that emerged in the aftermath of the invasion, obtaining wealth, prestige, and political power simultaneously. Under the guise of sectarian religious authority, this class consolidated control, engaging in widespread looting of public funds on an unprecedented scale. Former finance ministers have stated that thirty billionaires have emerged since 2003, all from this new political elite. This figure, confirmed by another former finance minister, indicates the existence of many more who, while not billionaires, have amassed significant fortunes. As such, these individuals transcend the typical definition of *nouveau riche*; their rise to power and wealth, alongside their looting of state resources, necessitates a reconfiguration of the concept. Thus, the term Parvenus is employed here with new connotations to describe this class of Iraqi elites, whose wealth and influence have developed in parallel with their political dominance and religious affiliations.

socio-political status quo, thereby stifling reform and innovation. By shedding light on the economic role of religious institutions in Iraq, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics between religion, economics, and governance in the country. The analysis not only offers insights into the specific context of Iraq but also provides a framework for understanding similar phenomena in other regions where religion and economics are closely intertwined.

Theoretical Framework

Weber provides a foundational lens for understanding the relationship between religion and economics. His seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* explores how religious beliefs significantly shaped the development of capitalism. He theorized that Protestant religious values and beliefs, particularly those stemming from Calvinist traditions, provided a moral framework that encouraged economic behaviour leading to capitalism. This provides insight into the relationship between belief and economic behaviour, which in turn shapes the economic culture of the religious institution in Iraq and its sponsorship of the economies of what I refer to as “the parvenus”, in reference to the group that took power after 2003.

Weber argues that Protestant ethics encouraged an ascetic lifestyle, where hard work and frugality were highly valued.² Protestants, especially Calvinists, believed in the concept of *Beruf*³ and that work was a means of glorifying God. This led to a disciplined, rational, and diligent workforce – ideal traits for capitalist production. Calvinism also embraced predestination,⁴ a doctrine that caused significant anxiety about salvation among Calvinist believers. Weber saw this anxiety as somewhat alleviated by success in one’s worldly calling, which could be interpreted as a sign of divine election. Thus, the accumulation of wealth, though not an end in itself, became a means of demonstrating God’s grace.⁵ Protestant ethics also emphasized rationalization, organization, and efficiency in all areas of life. This rational approach to life and work aligned well with the needs of a flourishing capitalist economy, which required precise resource management and continuous improvement of production processes.

Weber also assumed that the austerity promoted by Calvinism led to capital accumulation. Since ostentatious displays of wealth were frowned upon, and money was not spent on lavish lifestyles, it was reinvested in a believer’s enterprises. Thus, as Weber emphasizes, the decisive feature of the capitalist “spirit” lies in the systematic reinvestment of profits as capital rather than their consumption, a rational conduct that he identifies as fundamental to the development of modern capitalist enterprise.⁶

Weber was not alone in studying the complex relationship between a society’s religion and its economic model. Many preceded and followed him in this field. Sombart, a contemporary of Weber and a German sociologist and economist, found that “members of Jewish communities contributed to the overall development of capitalism, although several elements made their connection to commercial capitalism

² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (trans.) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005 [1930]), pp. 51-52.

³ *Beruf* is a German term used by Max Weber in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. It translates to “vocation” or “calling” in English and refers to the concept of a divinely ordained duty or profession. In Weber’s analysis, *Beruf* is central to Protestant ethics, particularly in Calvinism, where work is seen not merely as a means of earning a livelihood but as a spiritual calling through which individuals can serve God. This notion of *Beruf* encouraged a disciplined and methodical approach to work, aligning with the principles of capitalism by promoting hard work, frugality, and the reinvestment of profits, all seen as signs of God’s favour and evidence of one’s predestined salvation.

⁴ In Calvinist theology, predestination is the doctrine that God has preordained the salvation or damnation of individuals before they are born. This belief generated anxiety among believers about their spiritual fate, which Weber suggested could be alleviated by success in one’s worldly calling, seen as a potential sign of divine favour.

⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge), p. 79.

⁶ See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (trans.) (New York: Scribner, 1958), esp. pp. 17-19, 47-51, where Weber explains that the moral rejection of consumption and the ethical imperative to increase one’s capital through continuous reinvestment constitute the core of the capitalist “spirit”, and that this disciplined economic asceticism played a decisive role in the emergence of modern capitalist institutions.

stronger than to investment capitalism”.⁷ Sombart cites several reasons for this, some of which are rooted in the Jewish religious system, and others in their unique status in Western societies.⁸

Among the studies extending Weber’s line of inquiry is Kuan Li’s doctoral thesis, “Confucianism and Capitalist Development in the East Asian Newly Industrialised Societies”, which contends that contemporary Confucian values, particularly frugality, discipline, hard work, and familial organization, have provided a cultural orientation conducive to capitalist development in East Asia, especially in countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.⁹ The researcher examines the role of Confucian ethics, which emphasize goodness, harmony, and propriety, in creating a conducive environment for business operations and economic growth.¹⁰

Li considers how Confucianism, traditionally seen as an obstacle to capitalism, as Weber suggested, has evolved. In this regard, he disagrees deeply with Weber, arguing that contemporary Confucian values facilitated the development of the capitalist system by encouraging hard work, austerity, and a focus on education, which are crucial for economic productivity, creating a unique form of capitalism in East Asia, distinct from Western models. Li introduces the concept of “popular Confucianism” as a conceptual tool to explain how traditional values are interpreted and disseminated among the general public, influencing daily business practices and economic behaviours.¹¹

Reflecting on Weber’s theories, Li’s thesis discusses the dual role of culture as both a product of social and economic conditions and as an independent variable that can influence economic outcomes. He thus presents Confucianism not as a static cultural heritage but as a dynamic force influencing modern economic strategies and policies in East Asia.¹²

To refine our understanding of how religious beliefs shape economic patterns, Buddhism must also be considered in both its Indian origins and its later development in China. Two key works illuminate this evolution: Jacques Gernet’s *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, which investigates the economic roles of Buddhist monastic institutions in medieval China,¹³ and Gregory K. Ornatowski’s “Continuity and Change in the Economic Ethics of Buddhism”, which analyses shifts in Buddhist ethical attitudes toward economic activity”.¹⁴ Gernet traces the development of Buddhism in China and its direct and indirect involvement in the Chinese economy from the fifth to the tenth centuries AD, a history where the sacred, the ethical, wealth accumulation, and distribution intertwine.¹⁵ He offers a fascinating analysis of the trade of sacred objects and of the Buddhist temple as a bank (which denies itself this label) that accumulates sacred resources, donations, and voluntary and non-religious profits, such as those engaging in usurious practices or mercenary activities (e.g. loans of cereals, collateral loans, taxes on mills, agricultural levies). These resources, not used for maintenance, worship, celebrations, or serving the dead, accumulate in an inexhaustible treasure.¹⁶

⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Talcott Parsons (trans.) (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 115-116, 157-158.

⁸ Werner Sombart, *The Jews, and Modern Capitalism*, M. Epstein (trans.) (Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), pp. 27-42.

⁹ Kuan Li, “*Confucianism and Capitalist Development in the East Asian Newly Industrialised Societies*,” PhD. diss., Loughborough University, 1997, pp. 153-155.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-104.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

¹³ Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, Franciscus Verellen (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Gregory K. Ornatowski, “Continuity and Change in the Economic Ethics of Buddhism: Evidence from the History of Buddhism in India, China, and Japan,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 3 (1996), pp. 187-229. For an analysis of shifts in Buddhist ethical attitudes toward economic activity, see pp.187-228.

¹⁵ Gernet, pp. 3-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

Ornatowski's reading of the economic ethics of Buddhism notes that in Chinese and Japanese Mahayana Buddhism, monasteries and monks widely participated in commercial activities, including usury and brokerage in mortgages. He suggests that Buddhism was not hostile to economic development or the rise of capitalism, although these did not necessarily align with traditional spiritual teachings on the principle of detachment from the material world.¹⁷

It is worth noting that all of the above works highlighting the relationship between religious beliefs and economic patterns discuss sub-sects rather than religion in general. While Weber addressed Protestantism in its Calvinist strand of Christianity, Sombart focused on the Maranos sect within Judaism, and Li confined himself to Confucianism in countries and cultures outside China.

Economic Theology in Iraq: Religious Authority and Patterns of Economic Behaviour

In the Iraqi context, a specific economic theology has developed around the Shi'i belief that state property is "ownerless", providing an economic theological justification for the elite's control over public assets. This has been framed not as theft but as an agency for the absent religious authority, creating a hybrid model of a rentier economy and a parallel sacred economy based on investing state resources by possessing and managing them.

The Principle of *Majhūl al-Mālik*: Origins and Doctrinal Development

The concept of *majhūl al-mālik* (lit. "[belonging to an] unknown owner") is rooted in Twelver Shi'i theology. It refers to properties whose ownership cannot be clearly identified, often considered to be under the ownership of the Imam al-Mahdi, the twelfth Imam in occultation. The religious authorities, acting as the representatives of the Imam, are entrusted with the management of these properties. The principle allows for the use or redistribution of these assets under strict religious guidelines, typically for the benefit of the public or for charitable purposes. This doctrine underscores the religious obligation to manage such properties with integrity, as they are ultimately viewed as part of the Imam's trust, and by extension, the trust of the community.

In early Shi'i jurisprudence, this idea developed as a solution to the question of who owns public and communal assets in the absence of the rightful Imam. Leading Shi'i scholars, such as Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022) and al-Tusi (d. 1067), framed this concept as a form of divine trusteeship, where the jurists (*mujtahids*) act as the Imam's deputies during his occultation, managing these resources for the community's benefit.

This idea is extensively discussed in Shaykh al-Mufid's *Kitāb al-Irshād*, a seminal text in Shi'i jurisprudence. Al-Mufid's interpretations of the role of jurists in the absence of the Imam provide a foundational understanding of how public property is managed under the principle of *majhūl al-mālik*.¹⁸ Similarly, al-Tusi expanded on this by establishing a framework in which jurists assume control over public goods, outlining this role in his jurisprudential volume, *al-Nihāya*.¹⁹

Modern Applications and Legal Debates

The principle of *majhūl al-mālik* plays a pivotal role in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly under the doctrine of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (Guardianship of the Jurist), championed by Ayatollah Khomeini. In his work,

¹⁷ Ornatowski, pp. 199-203, 206-207.

¹⁸ al-Mufid, *al-Irshād fī Ma'rīfat Hujaj Allāh 'alā al-'Ibād*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Ta'aruf, 1981), pp. 85-87.

¹⁹ al-Tusi, *al-Nihāya fī Mujarrad al-Fiqh wa-l-Fatāwā* (Beirut: Dar al-Adwa, 1988), pp. 105-107.

Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist, Khomeini articulates the legal and theological justification for the state's control over public resources, treating them as under divine trusteeship during the Imam's occultation.²⁰ The modern application of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* incorporates *majhūl al-mālik* to justify the state's management of national assets, such as oil, under the supervision of religious leaders.

Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari elaborates on this concept in his treatise *Dastūr-i Islāmī barā-yi Hukūmat*, where he explores the moral and economic duties of religious leaders in managing resources on behalf of the community.²¹ Mutahhari's argument situates the religious leadership as trustees of public wealth, responsible for its equitable distribution and ethical use.

In Iraq, the post-2003 political landscape provided fertile ground for the application of *majhūl al-mālik*, particularly by the religious institutions in Najaf and Karbala. Al-Kafeel network, managed by religious authorities in Karbala, exemplifies the modern utilization of this principle, controlling large sectors of Iraq's economy under the guise of religious trusteeship. Additionally, Islamic organizations and armed factions, either collectively or as individuals, exerted control over state properties, those belonging to officials of the former regime and the assets of displaced Christians and others. This principle has been explored in the writings of Sayyid Mahmoud Hashemi, particularly in *Mawsū'at al-Fiqh al-Islāmī al-Muqārīn* (Encyclopaedia of Comparative Islamic Jurisprudence), where he analyses how religious institutions justify the appropriation of public assets in the absence of state control.²²

In the Jewish context, through the collaboration between a government owning the means of production (originally poor and dependent on oil revenues) and the religious institution that supports and legitimizes that government in some way, a charismatic status is granted to the rabbis. Within this system, rabbinical leaders acquire an elevated spiritual and organizational status that places them at the centre of communal life and moral guidance. This privileged position resembles, in structural terms, the authority exercised by Shi'i *marji*'s (references or authorities), who are regarded as successors to the Hidden Imam and as the exclusive custodians of correct theological interpretation. In both contexts, the religious elite become the final arbiters of doctrinal authenticity, and their legal opinions can evolve into deeply embedded cultural norms among political activists and party followers, shaping behaviour within a recognized legal-religious framework.

Thus, rabbinical authority shares with its Shi'i counterpart the view of the status of the *marji*'s, who are considered successors to the Hidden Imam and monopolists of the correct theological interpretation. The fatwas of some of them have turned from legal opinions into a kind of ingrained culture among the members of Islamic parties and their audience, who cannot operate outside a recognized legal framework.

Based on Li's analysis of Confucian ethics, one can find differences in the importance of overseeing public benefits. From a Confucian perspective, it is expected that the ruler or government official acts as a guardian of the people's resources, enhancing harmony and well-being. In contrast, the culture of corruption in Iraq has a jurisprudential dimension, accompanied by tribalism that habitually tends toward plundering and looting, exploiting the communal nature of public money in twisted ways and with ambiguous justifications to ease one's conscience.

Using Weber's types of authority, Sombart's economic justifications, and Li's ethical supervision, we can gain deeper insights into the mechanisms through which corruption is perpetuated and justified,

²⁰ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Hukūmat-i Islāmī* (Iran: Maktabat al-Sadr, 1970), pp. 125-130.

²¹ Murtaza Mutahhari, *Islamic Principles for Government* (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1976), pp. 45-50.

²² Mahmoud al-Hashemi, *Mawsū'at al-Fiqh al-Islāmī al-Muqārīn*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajja al-Baydaa, 2003), pp. 210-215.

especially in a country like Iraq, where institutionalized religion plays a central role in political and social life.²³

Unclaimed resources lacking ultimate ownership significantly influence individual behaviours. This hidden culture facilitates a specific interpretation of property rights that deeply affects public asset management and the innovation of “legitimate” ways to seize them. This belief in the anonymity of ownership has facilitated a culture of impunity among the parvenus, particularly among ideologically driven politicians from Islamic parties and members of new armed movements who do not hesitate to seize public funds and assets, such as occupying government headquarters, clearing agricultural lands for commercial exploitation for partisan interests, and engaging in dubious deals and fictitious projects. Their justification often rests on the belief that these resources, like minerals or former government properties, are provided divinely and are therefore free to seize, provided that the due fees are paid, or, more often, ignored.²⁴

These interpretations reveal the causal relationship between what a group of people believes and the nature of its economy, far from the class struggle that Marx prioritized over superstructures. Since the economic model of a society influences its lifestyle and ways of living, it in turn reflects the general temperament of that society. The type of economic reality witnessed in Iraq has created a vast chasm between the “Leisure Class”²⁵ and a large percentage of people living below the poverty line, who are pacified by religious discourse and its emotional tools such as victory slogans for the sect, ruling in the name of the Imam, and the opportunity to practice rituals, which intensify as the poverty margin expands in the country.

Economics of Religion: Power and Knowledge

Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society.²⁶

In this section, we focus on the economies adopted by the religious institution and the investment operations it undertakes, then reflect on the relationship between this institution and the parvenus, as well as the ideological-economic collaboration between them. To establish a financial empire that is opaque and not subject to financial oversight standards, it must, as much as possible, intervene in shaping the power that is required to overlook any of its practices. This power, in turn, in order to avoid moral reproach, must resort to protection from religious (sacred) capital.

The religious system sponsors doctrinal discourse, generalizes it, and monitors the adherence of its followers to its framework. Parvenu elites may then glorify this discourse and bureaucratically normalize it through proper legal procedures or reinterpret it in ways that serve their interests. In Weber’s analysis, the consolidation of political order culminates in the modern concept of the state as the ultimate source of the legitimacy of the use of physical force, a development tied to the monopolization of legitimate violence by the political organisation.²⁷ Religious (hierocratic) authority, meanwhile, can operate as a powerful

²³ The term “institutionalized religion” refers to the supreme religious authority in Shia Islam, often led by a *marji*’ who holds the title of *Āyat Allāh al-‘Uzmā* (Grand Ayatollah). The appointment of a *marji*’ is not governed by a formalized process, and there can be multiple *marāji*’ (plural of *marji*’) at the same time. These religious leaders are responsible for overseeing the seminary (*hawza*) and managing the financial assets that are entrusted to them through various religious channels, such as khums, donations, and other sources mentioned earlier.

²⁴ Kareem al-Ghazi, Director General of the Investigations Department at the Integrity Commission, stated that the number of properties encroached upon in Baghdad and the other provinces (excluding the Kurdistan region) reached 31,378, including “buildings, agricultural lands, parking lots, shops, residential houses and apartments, sidewalks and public streets, schools, public squares, and parks”. See: Fadhel al-Nashmi, “al-Nazāha al-‘Irāqīyya Takshif Tajāwuzāt Tālat 31 Alf ‘Aqār wa-Bināya Hükūmiyya,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 1/12/2021, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPUB>

²⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 93.

²⁷ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich (eds.), Ephraim Fischhoff et al. (trans.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 54.

mechanism of legitimacy and social domestication: its structural opposition to political charisma has often recommended it to rulers and conquerors as a means of pacifying and disciplining subject populations.²⁸

Within this alternating ideological-economic collaboration, a role-exchange game occurs. The religious institution protects its growing hidden network of economies, in which government support from public funds overlaps with investment returns enhanced by a legal umbrella or, in some cases, silently tolerated. The parvenus, in turn, reap multiplied wealth without real moral oversight from the believing society. This unspoken relationship maintains the fragile status quo and seeks to sustain it. The religious authority has its reservations about direct involvement in politics, which contradicts its educational, moral, and jurisprudential discourse, and the government maintains its cautious distance from the model of a religious state, which the current situation does not allow. Thus, matters proceed on two invisible crutches.

The complex dynamics of power, surveillance, and control offer a more insightful understanding through the use of Michel Foucault's theories in understanding how religious teachings, rituals, and economic institutions interact to shape and manage public behaviour and societal norms in Iraq. Through such a lens, one can dissect these interactions and highlight the complex strategies used by religious and political leaders to maintain and strengthen their authority, providing insight into the broader implications of these dynamics on social structure and individual agency. Particularly through adopting concepts of power/knowledge, surveillance, punishment, and biopolitics,²⁹ we may clarify the complex interaction between religion, politics, and social control, revealing the profound impact of these mechanisms on both individual lives and the broader socio-political landscape.

Foucault's assertion that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations"³⁰ brings to light the organic connection between civil authority and the epistemological apparatus of spiritual authority.

The *Marji'yya*:³¹ Semiotics of the Religious Field

In the context of understanding the role of religious leaders, we see that jurisprudential teachings are not just spiritual guidelines but tools of power that organize social and political life. They are reinforced by monopolizing ambiguous theological interpretations, which are used to legitimize their actions and policies within society. This is accompanied by a highly precise and strict system of signs, which can be described as the *habitus*³² of the religious field. It pertains to presence and absence, the manner of speaking, the tone of voice, the careful choice of words, gestures, ambiguity that requires or endures interpretation, and the spatial setting in which they are present. The very high-ranking clergy,³³ unlike politicians, avoid rhetorical skills, frequent public confrontations, or excessive media speeches. Their complete immersion

²⁸ Ibid., p. 1161.

²⁹ Biopower/Biopolitics: These terms, introduced by Foucault, refer to the ways in which governments regulate populations through the control of biological and bodily aspects of life. Biopower is the practice of modern states to manage the life of the population, focusing on the body as a site of regulation, discipline, and control. Biopolitics extends this concept to encompass the various strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority over knowledge, power, and the body.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (trans.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 27.

³¹ The term *marji'yya* refers to the religious authority and leadership of a *marji'*, who is a highly respected and qualified Islamic scholar. The *marji'* serves as a source of emulation (*marji' al-taqīd*) for Shi'i Muslims, providing guidance on religious, legal, and ethical matters. The *marji'yya* holds significant influence within Shia communities, not only in spiritual matters but also in social, political, and economic affairs. The authority of the *marji'* is rooted in their extensive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and they are considered the highest authority on religious law for their followers, who are expected to emulate the *marji'*'s interpretations and rulings in their daily lives.

³² *Habitus* is a key concept in Bourdieu's theory, referring to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences and socialization. It represents the way society's structures are internalized by individuals, shaping their perceptions, actions, and reactions, often unconsciously, in a manner consistent with their social and cultural environment.

³³ An example of this is Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has not given a direct public speech in over 70 years of his presence in the seminary and has appeared in the media only rarely and on infrequent occasions.

in their contemplative world surrounds them with an aura of sanctity and mystery. It is not important for them to publish their thoughts, works, speeches, or comments; they exist in their sacred silence that speaks of something not from our world.

The most revered religious leader among the public is the bearer of sacred secrets, shrouded in mysteries that they cannot decode. The traits they exhibit are not necessarily intentional, as Bourdieu tells us they are a practical sense, automatic and prior to rational thought: “The relation of immediate correspondence between habitus and the field to which it is attuned is the source of the experience of the world as natural and self-evident”.³⁴ As for this class of men proficient in the religious field, “The body believes in what it plays at ... by virtue of the dispositions acquired in the course of a prolonged apprenticeship”.³⁵

The Economics of Discourse: Suppressed Knowledge

The sanctity, reverence, and blind obedience to a religious institution carries symbolic violence toward other forms of knowledge that dare not declare themselves, or whose voices cannot be heard under the loud noise that monopolizes the representation of truth and has the power to protect this monopoly. This is what I call here “suppressed knowledge”, referring to dissenting viewpoints that are difficult to express publicly, whether on a contrary jurisprudential level or secular perspectives. Suppressed knowledge is represented by local, intersecting, unqualified, or illegitimate knowledge. It is the information, interpretations, and facts ignored or marginalized by dominant power structures and their discursive tools.

Applying this mechanism to study the formally consistent discourse of the parvenus and its subordination to the discourse of the jurisprudential institution allows us to discover how suppressed knowledge within society is stifled in favour of the dominant power/knowledge narratives promoted by that implicit partnership mentioned earlier. Events and historical narratives, both distant and recent, are interpreted in favour of unilateral implications and ideological distortions. They are incorporated into the official discourse of the state, accompanied by implicit or explicit endorsement from the “infallible” ecclesiastical body.

Since history is the theatre of ideological conflicts, its events are at the forefront of forms of suppressed knowledge, especially when they are selectively and randomly brought into the present to serve as essential material in the discourse of dominance, which a doxic majority revels in, ready to produce all kinds of conflicts. This majority is manufactured and tamed, then controlled according to purely emotional discourses. Foucault’s concept of surveillance extends beyond mere observation to include precise controls and standards imposed by subordinate institutions. In the context of the majority discussed here, surveillance manifests itself through monitoring religious adherence, where rituals, public prayers, and external symbols like rings, forehead marks, the wearing of shrouds, function as mechanisms for enforcing and reinforcing both collective and individual conformity and devotion.

The Panopticon:³⁶ The Economics of Biopolitical Control

Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon, where surveillance becomes a mechanism of self-discipline, the public performance of contemporary rituals – especially million-man marches, pilgrimage gatherings, and even voluntary electronic registration – operates as a vast field of visibility in which the faithful become both watchers and watched.³⁷ Under the constant gaze of religious authorities and communal

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Richard Nice (trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁶ The Panopticon is a conceptual prison design introduced by the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, where a single watchman can observe all inmates without them knowing whether they are being watched. Foucault adopted this concept metaphorically in his discussions of modern surveillance and control, suggesting that the Panopticon represents how power operates in society by inducing a state of conscious and permanent visibility that ensures the automatic functioning of power.

³⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 195-228.

expectations, individuals internalize the disciplinary norms that govern ritual behaviour, interpreting them as acts of spiritual cleansing, moral purification, and collective solidarity. Within this structure of mutual surveillance, submission is produced not through coercion but through what Bourdieu describes as an “illusory relationship” with the sacred: an embodied disposition through which religious meanings appear self-evident and unquestionable.³⁸

This mechanism of internalized submission corresponds to Foucault’s concept of biopower, wherein power acts directly upon the body and regulates the fundamental processes of life.³⁹ Ritual practices such as crying, chest-beating, self-flagellation with chains, head-slashing with blades, crawling in mud, walking long distances, wearing black, and raising flags function as bodily techniques that mould the ritual habitus. Through their repetitive performance within an emotional theatre of mass mourning, these acts constitute a form of corporeal regulation: voluntary, idealistic, and often experienced as spiritually cleansing. The dramatic display of these rituals, filmed and broadcast on a massive scale, reinforces the spectacle. The number of participants is frequently exaggerated for symbolic or political effect, magnifying the appearance of collective devotion and reinforcing the authority of those who orchestrate these performances.

The encouragement and promotion of such ritual behaviour constitute a powerful discourse, extending far beyond personal piety to shape patterns of group control. By aligning religious dictates with government policies, religious institutions govern not only the spiritual life of their followers but also mould the administrative, political, and social directions of society. They create a dense network of boundaries, permissions, and prohibitions regulating the individual’s proximity to power, the acceptable expression of dissent, and the degree to which the Parvenus may approach sacred or political authority. This theological authority is not merely an abstract description of clerical power; it represents a deeply embedded system that permeates the daily lives of the community and penetrates their unconscious expectations and emotional reflexes.

Rituals commemorating historical events, especially those centred on grief, sacrifice, and martyrdom, play a crucial role in maintaining group identity and consolidating collective memory. Such rituals, much like the dramatic penitential practices of the medieval Catholic Church, do not merely express religious devotion; they reproduce hierarchical structures and bind the faithful to their clerical leaders through shared experiences of sacred suffering. These rituals delineate who belongs “inside” the discourse and who is cast “outside” as an outsider, sceptic, or threat.

Across different historical contexts, religious institutions have deployed such rituals to exercise multi-layered forms of control: spiritual, political, social, and economic. This transforms the clerical establishment into an indispensable arbiter of moral order and even an implicit channel of political patronage for the Parvenus. Within this open theatre of ritual practice, dissenting knowledge is suppressed: the critical cleric becomes a traitor to the sect, and the secular critic is condemned as an enemy of the community. In both cases, exclusion operates as a disciplinary mechanism enforcing conformity and deepening the biopolitical reach of religious authority.

Al-Kafeel Economy: The Sacred Commodity

The religious enterprise is an enterprise with an economic dimension which cannot admit to so being, and which functions in a sort of permanent negation of its economic dimension: I undertake an economic act, but I do not want to know it; I do it in such a way that I can tell myself and others that it is not an economic act.⁴⁰

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Richard Nice (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 164.

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley (trans.) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 135-145.

⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” *Comparative Social Research*, no. 13 (1991), p. 12.

In *Practical Reason*, Bourdieu includes a short chapter with the provocative title “The Laughter of Bishops”, where he analyses how the religious habitus imposes emotional restraint on clergy: they may smile, but open laughter is considered inappropriate within the symbolic economy of the religious field. This disciplinary control of the body is comparable to other religious traditions. For example, the Islamic hadith warns, “Do not laugh excessively, for excessive laughter deadens the heart”.⁴¹ The Bible states: “For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool. This also is vanity”.⁴² Judaism, however, does not agree with them, as laughter is praised in Genesis: “And Sarah said, ‘God has made me laugh, so that all who hear will laugh with me’”.⁴³

Thus, the bishops’ laughter entails a paradox and bears a meaning beyond innocent spontaneous laughter, especially when we know why they laughed: “I have been very struck by the fact that each time the bishops used the language of objectification in relation to the economy of the Church, speaking for example, of a ‘phenomenon of supply and demand’ to describe the pastoral, they would laugh. (An example: ‘We are not societies, uh ... quite like the others: we produce nothing, and we sell nothing [laughter], right?’”.⁴⁴

Bourdieu assumes the existence of two truths for the clerical body, such as the Council of Paris Bishops or any other religious institution: a religious truth and an economic truth.⁴⁵ He fills in the gaps in the ambiguous religious language – preaching/marketing, loyalist/customer, imitator/consumer, Friday preacher/spokesperson, shrine servant/executive director, and so on.⁴⁶ This makes the economy of practices inseparable from the economy of symbolic wealth. The unacknowledged overlap between the spiritual and the economic leads Bourdieu to label it “the economy of the offering”,⁴⁷ where the symbolism of commercial and service exchanges is transformed, from self-denial to a kind of heavenly vow. The religious institution, from his point of view, contains an economic dimension that it does not acknowledge. Its function is based on denying this dimension: “I undertake an economic act, but I do not want to know it; I do it in such a way that I can tell myself and others that it is not an economic act”.⁴⁸

Why do religious institutions hide their economic goals behind a veil of sacred metaphors? Is it because their objectives deviate from their spiritual function and role in guiding society? Or do they not want to appear wealthy, which religions denounce, especially those advocating asceticism and simplicity in life? Why do they not disclose their financial accounts to the state and society? Perhaps we will find the answer in Bourdieu himself:

We can thus understand how essential it is, from the methodological point of view, to avoid dissociating economic functions from religious functions, that is, the properly economic dimension of practice and the symbolism that makes the fulfilment of economic functions possible. Discourse is not something additional (as some tend to lead one to believe when they speak of “ideology”); it is part of the economy itself. And, if one wants to be precise, it must be taken into consideration, along with the efforts apparently spent in the work of euphemisation: religious work includes a considerable expenditure of energy aimed at converting activity with an economic dimension into a sacred task; one must accept wasting time, making an effort, even suffering, in order to believe (and make others believe) that one is doing something other than what

⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Randal Johnson (trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), chap. 4, “The Laughter of Bishops,” pp. 75-79.

⁴² Ecclesiastes 7:6 (NIV): “All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied”.

⁴³ Genesis 21:6 (NIV).

⁴⁴ Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, pp. 113-114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

one is doing. There is a loss, but the law of conservation of energy remains true because that which is lost is recovered in another position.⁴⁹

The dynamics of power between the clerical class and its economic arm, Al-Kafeel, on the one hand, and the parvenus, on the other, have profound effects on people's daily lives, influencing everything from religious practices to economic opportunities and political patronage.

One cannot find a religious group with a hierarchical system but without an economy, starting from the economy of vows and offerings, the sale of candles and religious symbols, and the imposition of taxes on its followers (tithes, khums,⁵⁰ zakat, donations, vows), and not stopping at the establishment of large investment projects, banks, and similar financial institutions. For example, the Catholic Church, the largest spiritual institution with a hierarchical administration, has been working since the twelfth century to establish a financial, administrative, and supervisory system to regulate financial inflows, which come from vast land ownership across Europe (the papacy was the largest landowner on that continent), from tithes that amount to ten percent of individual income or production, and from banking and financial services, where the Knights Templar developed the first international banking system. They adopted financial transactions such as loans, wealth management, and secure deposit. Their network facilitated financial transfers across Europe and the Middle East. They participated in grain trade and supply goods across the Mediterranean. They imposed fees and customs as well. The Church participated in minting coins and managing currencies, in addition to the money it earned from internal practices, such as the sale of ecclesiastical positions known as simony,⁵¹ which formed an important income stream. The Church invested in the sale of spiritual goods, such as religious relics and artefacts, like fragments of the cross of Christ or other objects believed to have sacred history.

A quick look at Catholic churches and others shows that the Vatican tops the list of the richest religious institutions in the world, with a value of 101 billion dollars, followed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the US with a value of 100 billion dollars, while the Evangelical Church in England has a value of 8 billion dollars.⁵² In any case, some estimate that the annual income of the Office of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest religious authority in Iraq, ranges between USD 500 to 700 million, with assets worth three billion dollars.⁵³

The Hawza's Shift: From a Votive Economy to a Wealth-Driven Institution

The history of the religious institution in Iraq differs from that of the Church, as it was not, throughout its history, an absolute source of temporal power. Instead, it was an institution managing theological schools for a minority in the Islamic world, maintaining the cohesion and unity of its members, and managing its modest funds from donations, gifts, and the obligatory khums imposed on its followers. Even if these funds were relatively large and sometimes exaggerated in their magnitude, they barely covered the expenses of continuing education and some charitable and scientific projects:

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 96-98.

⁵⁰ Khums is a religious concept in Twelver Shia Islam, referring to a mandatory religious tax that requires one-fifth (20%) of a person's annual earnings, whether from work, trade, or other sources of income, to be paid. The khums is divided into two portions: the first is given to the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad from the Hashemite lineage, known as the sahm al-sādāt (the Sayyids' share), and the second portion is reserved for the Imam, known as the sahm al-imām (the Imam's share), which is handed over to the religious authorities or institutions representing the Hidden Imam during his occultation. The khums serves as a means to support religious institutions, the clergy, and various social and educational projects. It is considered a religious duty and fulfilling or neglecting it carries spiritual and religious implications.

⁵¹ The term "simony" is used to describe the practice of buying or selling ecclesiastical positions or church privileges, a practice that dates back to the Middle Ages. The term is derived from the story of Simon the Sorcerer in the New Testament, who attempted to purchase the ability to bestow the Holy Spirit upon others through the laying on of hands.

⁵² Robert B. Eklund et al., *Sacred Trust: The Medieval Church as an Economic Firm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁵³ See: Laura Henselmann, "The Shite Clergy in Iraq After Sistani: Growing Iranian Influence?," Research Paper, no. 2, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Maison Du Futur, December 2017, p. 17.

The holy shrines had no economic or investment activities since their establishment until the fall of the previous regime in 2003 due to the hostile policies implemented by successive governments in Iraq. However, once freed from these constraints, they turned toward the world of investment and established numerous revenue-generating projects, including large-, medium-, and small-scale ventures.⁵⁴

Among these are the projects of Al-Kafeel Company for Agricultural and Animal Products, the Khairat Abi al-Fadl al-Abbas Farms under the auspices of the Al-Abbas Holy Shrine, and other projects in the tourism, health, and commercial sectors. Additionally, the projects of the Al-Hussein Holy Shrine, such as the Al-Hussein Agricultural City project for agricultural and animal production, and the projects of the Alawi Holy Shrine, such as the Fadak Agricultural Investment Farm and the Faydh al-Qaseem Meat Project. Other proposed projects have been suggested that the holy shrines could establish in the industrial, agricultural, construction, textile, and small to medium-sized enterprises that do not require significant costs or vast resources.⁵⁵

After the fall of the Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime in 2003, the situation changed, and the seminary took on the role of the regulatory machine controlling the entire political process. Over time, it developed its own economy, which I call here "Al-Kafeel Economy". Gradually, as followers of the *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* gained control over the state in Iraq, the Najaf authority's mechanisms and structures developed to confront the challenge of *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*'s control over the resources of production, government power, and weapons. The authority, in turn, developed the experience of the two shrines in Karbala, which indirectly increased the seminary's resources due to the financial independence of the shrines according to the 2012 Shi'i Endowment Law, and transitioned the authority through the shrines from performing a religious function to taking on the burdens of worldly duties.⁵⁶

The Parvenus: Dual Allegiance

The parvenus, although most of them follow *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* and cooperate with the Iranian regime in a way that squanders public funds and contributes to saving the friendly government in Iran from international economic sanctions, also benefit from this cooperation and gain personal wealth, as Iran, after the US occupation of Iraq, immediately filled the vacuum inside the latter country. They used their proxies and helped them reach the pinnacle of power, but in all this, they maintained a dual loyalty to *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* and the Najaf authority. The former is outside the boundaries of their partisan sphere, and it is not in their interest to replace the Najaf authority with another outside their borders, as the equation of cooperation with the state of the same sect is accompanied by the silence of the local authority, the best possible situation for the Parvenus.

Al-Kafeel network is an investment entity with multiple arms, establishing an expanding economic empire that manages large assets and development programmes, including hospitals, real estate, trading companies, tourism companies, factories, agricultural fields, housing projects, and more, reaching 32 major projects by 2021. Most of these operations have been strategically named after a sacred figure, one of the most revered religious symbols in the popular consciousness, where profit activities intertwine with the aura of the sacred figure and the tragic narrative of their fate, ensuring the support and patronage of the Shi'i community without questioning the strange relationship between bottled water imports and the symbolic charge of the name Al-Kafeel.⁵⁷ This economic arm enhances the institution's ability to fund

⁵⁴ Jasim Imran al-Shammari, "al-Nizām al-Qānūnī li-Istithmār Amwāl al-'Atabāt al-Muqaddasa: Dirāsa Muqārīna," Master's Thesis, University of Karbala, 2013, p. 179.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ali Taher Hammoud (ed.), *Al Hawzah of Najaf in Iraq* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

religious activities, scholarships for its followers, and social services for its adherents, further entrenching the institution's power and influence within the internal competition field, to reproduce the summit of the pyramid anew and maintain its circulation within a narrow circle.

The institution benefits from various discourses to maintain its power and influence. These include narratives of piety, martyrdom, resistance, and historical grievances, which resonate deeply within the community and have turned, through repetition, into doxa,⁵⁸ representing all the unconscious and unconsidered beliefs:

The financial resources of the holy shrines consist of gifts, donations, vows, bequests, grants, and aid provided by various entities and individuals both within Iraq and abroad, as well as the revenues from their properties and endowments, the profits generated from the investment of their funds, along with the portion allocated to the shrine by the budget of the Shi'i Endowment Office and the compensation for the acquisition and exchange of properties endowed to the shrines, according to legal conditions. Jurists have substantiated the legitimacy of gifts, vows, and endowments to the holy shrines by likening them to the Kaaba, as both involve the veneration of God's symbols. Vows and gifts are voluntary acts, and these, if tangible, can be converted into monetary funds through sale. The legislator has adopted a specific mechanism for this, issuing special provisions that outline the procedure for opening the shrine's treasury and the handling of vows and gifts.⁵⁹

Through this doxa, which Bourdieu often uses in the field of religious struggles, it reinforces its theological legitimacy and frames its political stance, especially in contexts of conflict and allegiance (us/them).

The Economy of Negating the Economy

Using Pierre Bourdieu's sociological theories, we can explore the complex dynamics within the religious field and its relationship with the economy, as symbolic capital⁶⁰ represented by recognition, honour, status, and prestige, acquired through the marketing of spiritual products over a long history, and can be converted through the mediation of the moral self into economic benefits. Possessing such symbolic capital, with all its magic and awe, skilfully controls people with lower capital. Symbolic repression becomes possible due to the consolidation of status in society: the multi-directional from one side, and the daily practice of suppressing (suppressed knowledge) on the other.

Focusing particularly on the religious institution and its economic projects, Al-Kafeel, we observe that this institution not only enjoys significant religious-social influence but is also deeply engaged in the country's economic cycle and beyond, which intertwines with the interests of the Parvenus, thus shaping societal norms and structures. The religious field, which it almost absolutely dominates, represents an organized space where symbolic capitals intersect: religious, economic, and political. Its interaction with the political elite illustrates its strategic position in this field, where it benefits from its clerical authority to expand economic work under the banner of Al-Kafeel network. These manoeuvres show how religious institutions can influence and be influenced by other fields, such as politics and economics. They navigate the edges of symbolic capital with agility.

⁵⁸ In Bourdieu's sociological theory, doxa refers to the set of beliefs and practices that are taken for granted within a particular society or social group. These are the unquestioned assumptions that are so deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness that they appear natural or self-evident, shaping the way individuals perceive and interact with the world.

⁵⁹ al-Shammari, p. 198.

⁶⁰ Symbolic capital, as defined by Bourdieu, refers to the resources available to an individual or group based on honour, prestige, or recognition. Unlike economic capital, which is material, symbolic capital is intangible and operates within social fields, where it can be converted into other forms of capital (such as economic or social capital) and used to maintain or improve one's position within a hierarchy.

a. Economic Capital

The contemporary Shi'i shrine institutions in Iraq – most prominently al-‘Ataba al-‘Abbāsiyya and al-‘Ataba al-‘Alawiyya have become among the most influential economic actors in the country. Their operations rest on a historically grounded system of financial autonomy, now reinforced through modern legal and administrative arrangements. These institutions enjoy a combination of exemptions, privileges, and discretionary authority that distinguishes them from other public or private entities in Iraq. The legal framework governing the “investment of the funds of the holy shrines” grants them access to state-owned land, exemption from most forms of taxation, and the ability to establish and administer economic enterprises without direct oversight from the Federal Board of Supreme Audit.⁶¹ This structural autonomy continues a historical pattern in which clerical institutions maintain independent economic bases while simultaneously operating within, and benefiting from, the broader authority of the state.⁶²

Despite their substantial economic activity, the shrines rarely publish detailed financial disclosures; rather, they emphasize the religious, developmental, or charitable nature of their projects, and publicly avoid providing specific figures regarding investment volumes or generated revenue.⁶³ Nevertheless, the range and scale of their operations can be reconstructed through official announcements on their institutional websites and through field-specific reports. These reveal a complex and diversified economic profile extending across construction and infrastructure, agriculture, industry, education, health, transportation, food production, and renewable energy.⁶⁴

In the construction and infrastructure sector, al-‘Ataba al-‘Abbāsiyya has undertaken major expansion projects such as the ongoing enlargement of its sanctuary complex, presented as one of its largest long-term infrastructural undertakings.⁶⁵ Similarly, al-‘Ataba al-‘Alawiyya has highlighted the strategic importance of expanding the Great Courtyard of the Imam Ali Shrine, designed to accommodate millions of visitors annually and enhance the shrine’s urban capacity.⁶⁶

Agricultural projects form a second pillar of shrine-led economic activity. Al-Saqi Strategic Agricultural Project, administered by al-‘Ataba al-‘Abbāsiyya, covers thousands of hectares and produces essential crops such as wheat, barley, maize, and vegetables, serving both local consumption needs and broader food security objectives.⁶⁷ Complementing this is al-Joud Company for Modern Agriculture, which specializes in supplying agricultural inputs, seeds, and fertilizers to Iraqi farmers.⁶⁸ These initiatives reflect an attempt to link religious institutions to national development goals, particularly in a country highly vulnerable to food insecurity.

Industrial production represents another major domain of shrine activity. Al-Kafeel Dairy Plant has become a significant national producer of dairy goods, supplying broad consumer markets under a unified brand identity.⁶⁹ Al-Kafeel Water Plant similarly provides large-scale bottled water production, often described by the institution as “meeting national standards and contributing to public welfare”.⁷⁰ Both plants demonstrate how shrine-affiliated enterprises operate with efficiency levels that often surpass those of comparable state-run facilities.

⁶¹ al-Shammari, pp. 14-18.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 27-30.

⁶³ Hammoud (ed.), pp. 22-24.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 25-28.

⁶⁵ “Tawsī‘at al-‘Ataba al-‘Abbāsiyya al-Muqaddasa,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁶⁶ “Mashrū‘ Tawsī‘at al-Ṣaḥn al-‘Azīm li-l-‘Ataba al-‘Alawiyya,” *al-‘Ataba al-‘Alawiyya*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://imamali.net>

⁶⁷ “Mashrū‘ al-Sāqī al-Istirāṭijī al-Zirā‘ī,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁶⁸ “Sharikat al-Jūd li-l-Zirā‘a al-Ḥadītha,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁶⁹ “Maṣna‘ Albān al-Kafil,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁷⁰ “Maṣna‘ Miyāh al-Kafil,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

Healthcare and education are also central sectors in which shrine institutions have expanded their economic and symbolic influence. Al-Kafeel Super Speciality Hospital, founded and operated by al-‘Ataba al-‘Abbāsiyya, positions itself as a high-technology health provider capable of performing advanced surgical procedures and attracting foreign medical expertise.⁷¹ During the Covid-19 pandemic, the shrine also operated an oxygen production plant to supply hospitals in Karbala and neighbouring provinces.⁷² In higher education, al-Ameed University and al-Kafeel University (affiliated respectively with al-‘Ataba al-‘Abbāsiyya and al-‘Ataba al-‘Alawiyya) have become accredited institutions offering programmes across medicine, dentistry, engineering, and the humanities.⁷³

Transportation and energy projects further extend the shrines’ developmental footprint. Al-Kafeel Company for Public Transport operates a fleet of buses serving pilgrims and urban residents, integrating religious service provision with public mobility needs.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, solar energy initiatives such as the 5 MW photovoltaic systems deployed at shrine facilities reflect a move toward sustainable infrastructure and reduced reliance on the national grid.⁷⁵

Taken together, these diverse sectors illustrate how shrine institutions have emerged as alternative providers of essential services, in many cases compensating for the state’s chronic underperformance. Their economic activities operate through a hybrid logic: while legally recognized as religious charities, they function in practice as diversified conglomerates with complex administrative, technical, and financial systems. This ambiguity between the sacred and the commercial is not incidental but structurally embedded in the functioning of the religious field.

As Bourdieu argues, religious institutions often engage in economic activity while simultaneously denying its economic character, reframing material operations through symbolic vocabularies of piety, service, or sacrifice.⁷⁶ In this context, investments – whether a food factory or a specialized hospital – are often presented not as profit-generating enterprises but as “projects in service of the believer”, thus transforming market transactions into moral and spiritual narratives.⁷⁷ The use of revered religious names enhances this symbolic reframing, ensuring that economic capital is continually converted into symbolic capital and vice versa, reinforcing the legitimacy and authority of the clerical institution.⁷⁸ This dynamic constitutes a core mechanism of the religious field, where spiritual authority and economic interests are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.

b. Cultural Capital

As the institution entrusted with “comforting souls”, according to Bourdieu, and the economy of its symbolic wealth is based on the idea of faith, the logic of religious practice requires the necessity of giving up immediate interests as a free submission to the demands of the clerical system.

The clerical elite possesses cumulative cultural capital that legitimizes its economic projects and political influence. Since the sacred is a social amalgamation that creates intermediaries between the transcendental and the people, this intermediary maintains its mediation in non-intentional rhythms: of tension and attraction, appearance and celebration, economy in presence in the public sphere, clerical

⁷¹ “Mustashfā al-Kafīl al-Takhaṣṣuṣī,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁷² “Ma’ mal Intāj al-Uksijīn Khilāl Jā’ihāt COVID-19,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁷³ “Jāmi’at al-‘Amīd,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alem.iq>; “Jāmi’at al-Kafīl,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.edu.iq>

⁷⁴ “Sharikat al-Kafīl li-l-Naql al-‘Āmm,” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁷⁵ “Mashrū’ al-Ṭāqa al-Shamsiyya (5 MW),” *Al-Kafeel*, accessed on 10/12/2025, at: <https://alkafeel.net>

⁷⁶ Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” p. 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

official attire, heavenly-sounding titles, and the group of followers and close loyalists who first believe in themselves, then promote this to the public through a trained network that monopolizes interpretation, explanation, correction, and final judgment. This network is accompanied by sanctity and reverence such that its different, carefully chosen vocabulary does not describe a reality but contributes to creating the reality it describes. According to Bourdieu, “Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods, which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee”.⁷⁹

c. Social Capital

The networks established and maintained by the clerical institution facilitate mobilization and support for religious and political causes, enhancing its position in social and religious fields. It is a rhetorically cautious institution. It says one thing and its opposite in ambiguous language, derived from long-standing traditions that continue through interpretation and conflicting interpretation. Religious authority, like other forms of social authority, depends on the scarcity of the capital it possesses and controls.

d. Symbolic Capital

The revered status of the religious institution grants it symbolic capital, which presupposes a continuous initial accumulation over time and is distributed from the start according to a solid hierarchy in a meticulously organized semiotic space. This symbolic capital is used to monitor political authority and social activities that contradict its visions, thus reinforcing its influence in various fields where doxa, or the world of unquestioned assumptions, forms the real foundation of the relationship; between the clerical class and its followers on one hand, and between them and their opponents on the other.

The social environment, shaped by inherited religious teachings and practices, qualifies individuals to accept the authority of religious leaders voluntarily and emotionally. This acceptance is crucial for maintaining this authority and legitimizing the social order it supports. Thus, it resembles an existential bank that provides salvational credits, under which another bank operates to reap material returns. This is what Bourdieu discusses in his concept of habitus, where individual and collective dispositions are generated within a specific cultural field. Through repetition, they become part of the individual and societal structure and perception because the religious body’s monopoly on the sacred often goes unnoticed precisely because it legitimizes through the notion of faith, ascetic appearance, and religious decorum.

Conclusion

Al-Kafeel network exemplifies the complex interplay between religion and economics in Iraq, where religious institutions have increasingly become significant economic players. By leveraging symbolic capital and religious authority, these institutions exert considerable influence over the country’s socio-economic landscape. The collaboration between the Parvenus and religious authorities underscores the entanglement of religion and politics, with far-reaching implications for governance, social equity, and economic development. Future research could explore how these dynamics evolve in response to changing political and economic conditions in Iraq and how they compare to similar models in other regions.

⁷⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in: J. G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), p. 241.

The rapid capitalist development of Iraq's Al-Kafeel economy appears to be coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism, where the market may come to dominate to the point of commodifying cultural and spiritual products. This economic transformation is increasingly likely to intertwine with the teachings of the Shi'i faith, potentially leading to the Iraqi economy's indirect and involuntary integration into the global market. Such a shift could move away from the traditional dominance of the rentier state over the means of production. As a result, the religious institution might face a serious ideological crisis, as capital rarely recognizes cultural barriers and often seeks to erase or diminish their impact on society.

This situation could mirror historical precedents observed in other faiths, such as Protestantism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, where religion found itself influenced by and exerting influence over economic forces, reshaping their roles within society. Similarly, the Shi'i authority in Iraq may rapidly embrace investment opportunities in all areas within its reach. This expansion might occur without adequate oversight, facilitated by governmental support that no ideological institution has previously enjoyed in modern history. As the religious institution, which inherently promotes asceticism, potentially transforms into a wealthy financial entity preoccupied with an economic cycle deeply enmeshed with diverse cultural elements, it risks compromising its spiritual core. The strategic cooperation between the Parvenus and religious authorities further complicates this landscape. They may navigate a delicate balance, maintaining dual allegiances that serve both personal wealth accumulation and broader socio-economic goals.

Future research should explore how these dynamics evolve in response to changing political and economic conditions in Iraq and how they compare to similar models in other regions. This exploration could provide further insight into the broader implications of the intersection between religion and economics in a globalized world.

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