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Source: *Religious Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Sep., 1970), pp. 229-242

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20004827>

Accessed: 05-03-2015 01:37 UTC

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### SHI'ISM AND SUFISM: THEIR RELATIONSHIP IN ESSENCE AND IN HISTORY

In discussing the intricate and somewhat complex relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism, both in principle and essence or in their metahistorical reality as well as in time and history, we need hardly concern ourselves with the too often repeated criticism made by certain orientalists who would doubt the Islamic and Quranic character of both Shi'ism and Sufism. Basing themselves on an *a priori* assumption that Islam is not a revelation and, even if a religion, is only a simple 'religion of the sword' for a simple desert people, such would-be critics brush aside as un-Islamic all that speaks of gnosis (*'irfân*) and esotericism, pointing to the lack of historical texts in the early period as proof of their thesis, as if the non-existent in itself could disprove the existence of something which may have existed without leaving a written trace for us to dissect and analyse today. The reality of Shi'ism and Sufism as integral aspects of the Islamic revelation is too blinding to be neglected or brushed aside by any would-be historical argument. The fruit is there to prove that the tree has its roots in a soil that nourishes it. And the spiritual fruit can only be borne by a tree whose roots are sunk in a revealed truth. To deny this most evident of truths would be as if we were to doubt the Christian sanctity of a St Francis of Assisi because the historical records of the first years of the Apostolic succession are not clear. What the presence of St Francis proves is in reality the opposite fact, namely, that the Apostolic succession must be real even if no historical records are at hand. The same holds true *mutatis mutandis* for Shi'ism and Sufism. In this paper in any case we will begin by taking for granted the Islamic character of Shi'ism and Sufism and upon this basis delve into their relationship.<sup>1</sup> In fact Shi'ism and Sufism are both, in different ways and on different levels, intrinsic aspects of Islamic orthodoxy, this

<sup>1</sup> We have dealt elsewhere with the Islamic origin of Shi'ism and Sufism. See S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, pp. 83-99; S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London, 1966, chapter V; H. Corbin (with the collaboration of S. H. Nasr and O. Yahya), *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, vol. I, Paris, 1964, part one. Concerning the Islamic origin of Sufism see Abû Bakr Sirâj ed-Dîn, 'The Origins of Sufism', *Islamic Quarterly*, April, 1956, vol. III, pp. 53-64; F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. by D. M. Matheson, London, 1963, chapter IV; and R. Guénon, 'L'Esotérisme islamique', in *L'Islam et l'Occident*, Paris, 1947, pp. 153-9.

Besides Corbin, some of the earlier Western scholars have also emphasised the close connection between Shi'ism and Sufism. See T. Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads im Leben und Glauben seiner Gemeinde*, Stockholm, 1918, where however in contrast to Corbin everything of an esoteric character in Islam is relegated to Hellenistic and Christian sources.

term being taken not only in its theological sense but in its universal sense as tradition and universal truth contained within a revealed form.

The relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism is complicated by the fact that in discussing these two spiritual and religious realities we are not dealing with the same level or dimension of Islam in both cases. Islam has both an exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and an esoteric (*bāṭin*) dimension which along with all their inner divisions represent the 'vertical' structure of the revelation. But it is also divided into Sunnism and Shi'ism which one might say represent its 'horizontal' structure.<sup>1</sup> If this were to be the only aspect of this relationship it would be relatively simple. But in matter of fact the esoteric dimension of Islam, which in the Sunni climate is almost totally connected in one way or another with Sufism, colours the whole structure of Shi'ism in both its esoteric and even exoteric aspect. One can say that Islamic esotericism or gnosis crystallised into the form of Sufism in the Sunni world while it poured into the whole structure of Shi'ism especially during its early period.<sup>2</sup> From the Sunni point of view Sufism presents similarities to Shi'ism and has even assimilated a few aspects of Shi'ism. No less an authority than Ibn Khaldūn writes: 'The Sufis thus became saturated with Shī'ah theories. (Shī'ah) theories entered so deeply into their religious ideas that they based their practice of using a cloak (*khirqah*) on the fact that 'Alī clothed al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in such a cloak and caused him to agree solemnly that he would adhere to the mystic path. (The tradition thus inaugurated by 'Alī) was continued according to the Sufis, through al-Junayd, one of the Sufi *shaykhs*'.<sup>3</sup> From the Shi'ite point of view Shi'ism is the origin of what later came to be known as Sufism. But here by Shi'ism is meant the esoteric instructions of the Prophet, the *asrār* which many Shi'ite authors have identified with the Shi'ite 'concealment', *taqīyah*.

Each of these two points of view presents an aspect of the same reality but seen within two worlds that are contained in the bosom of the total orthodoxy of Islam. That reality is Islamic esotericism or gnosis. If we take Sufism and Shi'ism in their historical manifestation in later periods, then neither Shi'ism nor Sunnism nor Sufism within the Sunni world derive from

<sup>1</sup> Concerning these relationships see Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, chapter VI.

<sup>2</sup> 'On ne peut plus, en tout rigueur, faire de "soufisme" et de mystique musulmane, deux termes interchangeables depuis que l'on sait, en particulier grâce aux travaux de H. Corbin, qu'il existe une mystique musulmane-la gnose ismaélienne et imāmīte notamment-que ne se reconnaît pas "soufique". Toutefois, ce qui est dit ici du *taṣawwuf* à ses débuts vaut également pour cette mystique, ou gnose non soufique, laquelle a aussi sa source dans les enseignements du Prophète et de certains compagnons, dont surtout 'Alī.' J. L. Michon, *Le soufi marocain Aḥmad ibn Ajība et son mi'rāj* (Thèse de doctorat, Faculté des Lettres, Université de Paris, 1960, p. 2, n. 1.)

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, trans. by F. Rosenthal, vol. II, New York, 1958, p. 187. Ibn Khaldūn continues, 'The fact that (the Sufis) restrict (precedence in mysticism) to 'Alī smells strongly of pro-Shī'ah sentiment. This and other aforementioned Sufi ideas show that the Sufis have adopted pro-Shī'ah sentiments and have become enmeshed in them.' *Ibid.*, p. 187.

On this question see also the extensive and well-documented work of Kāmil al-Shībī, *al-Ṣilāh bayn al-taṣawwuf wa'l-tashayyūf*, 2 vols., Baghdad, 1963-64.

each other. They all derive their authority from the Prophet and the source of the Islamic revelation. But if we mean by Shi'ism Islamic esotericism, then it is of course inseparable from Sufism. For example, the Shi'ite Imams play a fundamental role in Sufism, but as representatives of Islamic esotericism, not as specifically Shi'ite Imams as the Shi'ite faith came to be organised later. In fact there is a tendency among both later Muslim historians and modern scholars to read back into the first two centuries the clear distinctions that were established only later.<sup>1</sup> It is true that one can discern 'shi'ite' elements even during the life-time of the Prophet and Shi'ism and Sunnism have their roots in the very origin of the Islamic revelation, placed there providentially to accommodate different psychological and ethnic types. But the hard-and-fast divisions of later centuries are not discernible in the earlier period. There were Sunni elements with definite Shi'ite tendencies,<sup>2</sup> and there were Shi'ite contacts with Sunni elements both intellectually and socially. In certain cases in fact it is difficult to judge as to whether a particular author was Shi'ite or Sunni especially before the fourth/tenth century although even in this period the Shi'ite and Sunni religious and spiritual life did possess their own particular perfume and colour.

In this less crystallised and more fluid environment, the elements of Islamic esotericism which are particularly Shi'ite, from the Shi'ite point of view, appear as representing Islamic esotericism as such in the Sunni world. No better instance of this can be found than the person of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. Shi'ism is essentially the 'Islam of 'Alī' who in Shi'ism is both the 'spiritual' and 'temporal' authority after the Prophet. In Sunnism also nearly all Sufi orders reach back to him and he is the spiritual authority *par excellence* after the Prophet.<sup>3</sup> The famous *ḥadīth* 'I am the city of knowledge and 'Alī is its gate', which is a direct reference to the role of 'Alī in Islamic esotericism, is accepted by Shi'ah and Sunni alike, but the 'spiritual vicegerency' (*khilāfah rūḥānīyah*) of 'Alī appears to Sufism within the Sunni world not as something specifically Shi'ite but as being directly connected with Islamic esotericism in itself.

Yet, the case of 'Alī, the reverence in which he is held by Shi'ites and Sufis alike, shows how intimately Shi'ism and Sufism are connected together.

<sup>1</sup> This anachronistic practice is criticised by John B. Taylor, 'Ja'far al-Šādiq, Spiritual Forebear of the Sufis', *Islamic Culture*, vol. XL, no. 2, April 1966, pp. 97 ff.

<sup>2</sup> 'So many-sided is this Sunni sentiment—in *ḥadīths*, in the Sufi orders, in guilds, in popular tales—that not only in its support of the original 'Alī claims but in its whole piety Sunni Islam can be called half Shi'ite'. M. G. S. Hodgson, 'How did the early Shi'a become Sectarian?', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 15, 1955, p. 4. See also J. R. Taylor, 'An Approach to the Emergence of Heterodoxy in Medieval Islam', *Religious Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, April 1967, p. 202, where the words of Hodgson are also quoted.

In certain areas of the Islamic world, particularly in the Indo-Pakistani sub-continent, one meets among Sufis certain groups as devoted to the Shi'ite Imams, especially 'Alī and Ḥusayn, as any Shi'ite could be, yet completely Sunni in their practice of the law (*madhhab*).

<sup>3</sup> See F. Schuon, 'De la tradition monothéiste', *Etudes Traditionnelles*, 1933, p. 257.

Sufism does not possess a *Sharī'ah*; it is only a spiritual way (*Ṭarīqah*) attached to a particular Shari'ite rite such as the *Mālikī* or *Shāfi'ī*. Shi'ism possesses both a *Sharī'ah* and a *Ṭarīqah*. In its purely *Ṭarīqah* aspect it is in many instances identical with Sufism as it exists in the Sunni world, and certain Sufi orders such as the *Ni'matullāhī* have existed in both the Shi'ite and Sunni worlds. But in addition Shi'ism possesses even in its Shari'ite and theological aspects certain esoteric elements which make it akin to Sufism. In fact one could say that Shi'ism, even in its outward aspect, is oriented toward the spiritual stations (*maqāmāt-i 'irfānī*) of the Prophet and the Imams which are also the goal of the spiritual life in Sufism.

A few examples in the vast and intricate relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism may make more clear some of the points discussed so far. In Islam in general, and Sufism in particular, a saint is called a *walī* (abbreviation of *walīallāh* or friend of God) and sanctity is called *wilāyah*. In Shi'ism the whole function of the Imam is associated with the power and function of what in Persian is called *walāyat* and which comes from the same root as *wilāyah* and is closely connected with it.<sup>1</sup> Some have even identified the two. In any case according to Shi'ism, in addition to the power of prophecy in the sense of bringing a divine law (*nubuwwah* and *risālah*), the Prophet of Islam, like other great prophets before him, had the power of spiritual guidance and initiation (*wilāyah*) which he transmitted through Fāṭimah to 'Alī and through him to all the Imams. Since the Imam is always alive, this function and power is also always present and able to guide men to the spiritual life. The 'cycle of initiation' (*dā'irat al-wilāyah*) which follows the 'cycle of prophecy' (*dā'irat al-nubuwwah*) is therefore one that continues to this day and guarantees the ever-living presence of an esoteric way in Islam.<sup>2</sup>

The same meaning pertains to *wilāyah* in the sense that it too concerns the ever-living spiritual presence in Islam which enables men to practise the spiritual life and to reach a state of sanctity. That is why many Sufis since Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī have devoted so much attention to this cardinal aspect of Sufism.<sup>3</sup> There is to be sure a difference between Shi'ism and Sufism on how and through whom this power and function operates as well as who is considered as its 'seal'.<sup>4</sup> But the similarity between the Shi'ah and the Sufis concerning this doctrine is most startling and results directly from the fact

<sup>1</sup> See H. Corbin, 'L'Imām caché et la rénovation de l'homme en théologie shi'ite', *Eranas-Jahrbuch*, 1960, pp. 87 ff.

<sup>2</sup> On the 'cycles of initiation and prophecy', see S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, pp. 87 and 161; and H. Corbin, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī devoted a major work to this question entitled *Khatm al-awliyā'* which has been recently edited by O. Yahya, a work which had much influence upon Ibn 'Arabī and later Sufis.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn 'Arabī and following him Dā'ūd al-Qaysarī consider Christ as the universal 'seal of sanctity', and Ibn 'Arabī refers indirectly to himself as the 'particular seal of sanctity' whereas most

that both are connected in the manner mentioned above with Islamic esotericism as such, which is none other than *wilāyah* or *walāyat* as used in the technical sense in both Shi'ite and Sufi sources.

Among the practices of the Sufis there is one that is closely associated in its symbolic meaning with *wilāyah* and in its origin with the Shi'ite *walāyat*. It is the practice of wearing a cloak and handing it from the master to the disciple as a symbol of the transmission of a spiritual teaching and the particular grace associated with the act of initiation. Each state of being is like a cloak or veil that 'covers' the state above, for symbolically the 'above' is associated with the 'inward'. The Sufi cloak symbolises the transmission of spiritual power which enables the disciple or *murīd* to penetrate beyond his everyday state of consciousness. By virtue of being presented with this cloak or veil in its symbolic sense he is able to cast aside the inner veil which separates him from the Divine.

The practice of wearing and transmitting the cloak, and its meaning, is closely associated with Shi'ism as affirmed by Ibn Khaldūn in the quotation cited above. According to the famous *Ḥadīth-i kisā'* (the tradition of the garment) the Prophet called his daughter Fāṭimah along with 'Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn and placed a cloak upon them in such a manner that it covered them.<sup>1</sup> The cloak symbolises the transmission of the universal *walāyat* of the Prophet in the form of the partial *walāyat* (*walāyat-i fāṭimiyah*) to Fāṭimah and through her to the Imams. There is a direct reference to the esoteric symbolism of the cloak in a well-known Shi'ite *ḥadīth* which because of its significance and beauty I quote in full:

'It has been accounted of the Prophet—upon him and his family be peace—that he said: "When I was taken on the nocturnal ascension to heaven and I entered paradise, I saw in the middle of it a palace made of red rubies. Gabriell opened the door for me and I entered it. I saw in it a house made of white pearls. I entered the house and saw in the middle of it a box made of light and locked with a lock made of light. I said, 'Oh, Gabriell, what is this box and what is in it?' Gabriell said, 'Oh Friend of God (*Ḥabiballāh*), in it is the secret of God (*sirrallāh*) which God does not reveal to anyone except to him whom He loves.' I said, 'Open its door for me'. He said, 'I am a slave who follows the divine command. Ask thy Lord until He grants permission to open it.' I therefore asked for the permission of God. A voice came from the Divine Throne saying, 'Oh Gabriell open its door', and he opened it. In it I saw spiritual poverty (*faqr*) and a cloak (*muraqqa'*). I said, 'What is this *faqr* and *muraqqa'*?' The voice from heaven said, 'Oh

Shi'ite authors believe these titles belong to 'Alī and the Mahdi respectively. In this delicate question the distinction between the 'universal seal of sanctity' and the 'particular or Muḥammadan seal of sanctity' must be kept especially in mind. In any case this is a point of contention between Ibn 'Arabī and even his most ardent Shi'ite followers such as Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī.

<sup>1</sup> This *ḥadīth* appears in many different forms in Shi'ite sources such as the *Ghāyat al-marām*, Tehran, 1272, pp. 287 ff.

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Muḥammad, there are two things which I have chosen for thee and thy people (*ummah*) from the moment I created the two of you. These two things I do not give to anyone save those whom I love, and I have created nothing dearer than these.'” Then the Holy Prophet said, “God—Exalted be His Name—selected *faqr* and the *muraqqa'* for me and these two are the dearest things to Him”. The Prophet directed his attention toward God and when he returned from the nocturnal ascent (*mi'rāj*) he made 'Alī wear the cloak with the permission of God and His command. 'Alī wore it and sewed patches on it until he said, 'I have sewn so many patches on this cloak that I am embarrassed before the sewer'. 'Alī made his son Ḥasan to wear it after him and then Ḥusayn and then the descendants of Ḥusayn one after another until the Mahdī. The cloak rests with him now.<sup>1</sup>

Ibn Abī Jumhūr as well as the later Shi'ite commentators upon this *ḥadīth* add that the cloak worn and transmitted by the Sufis is not the same cloak cited in the *ḥadīth*. Rather, what the Sufis seek to do is to emulate the conditions for wearing the cloak as the Prophet wore it and through this act to become aware to the extent of their capability of the divine mysteries (*asrār*) which the cloak symbolises.

The whole question of *wilāyah* and the cloak that symbolises it makes clear the most important common element between Sufism and Shi'ism, which is the presence of a hidden form of knowledge and instruction. The use of the method of *ta'wīl* or spiritual hermeneutics in the understanding of the Holy Quran as well as of the 'cosmic text', and belief in grades of meaning within the revelation—both of which are common to Sufism and Shi'ism, result from the presence of this esoteric form of knowledge. The presence of *wilāyah* or *walāyat* guarantees for Shi'ism and Sufism alike a gnostic and esoteric character of which the doctrine and the characteristic manner of instruction present in both are natural expressions.

Closely associated with *walāyat* is the concept of the Imam in Shi'ism, for the Imam is he who possesses the power and function of *walāyat*. The role of the Imam is central to Shi'ism, and we cannot deal here with all its ramifications.<sup>2</sup> But from the spiritual point of view it is important to point to his function as the spiritual guide, a function that very much resembles that of the Sufi master. The Shi'ite seeks to encounter his Imam, who is none other than the inner spiritual guide—so that some Shi'ite Sufis speak of the Imam of each person's being (*imām wujūdika*). If one leaves aside the

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Kutāb al-mujlī*, Tehran, 1329, p. 379. This *ḥadīth* has been mentioned with slight variations by many Shi'ite gnostics and Sufis. See for example, Muḥammad 'Alī Sabziwari, *Tuḥfat al-'abbasiyah*, Shiraz, 1326, pp. 93-4. Many other Shi'ite authors like Ibn Abī'l-Ḥadīd, Maytham al-Bahrānī and Sayyid Haydar Amulī have referred to this *ḥadīth*. See al-Shībī, *al-Silah bayn al-taṣawwuf wa'l-tashayyū'*, vol. II, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> On the role of the Imam in Shi'ite spirituality see the many works of H. Corbin in the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* especially 'L'Imām caché et la rénovation de l'homme en théologie Shi'ite', and 'Pour une morphologie de la spiritualité Shi'ite', *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, vol. XX, IX, 1961.

Shari'ite and also cosmic functions of the Imam, his initiatory function and role as spiritual guide is similar to that of the Sufi master.

In fact just as in Sufism each master is in contact with the pole (*qutb*) of his age, in Shi'ism all spiritual functions in every age are inwardly connected with the Imam. The idea of the Imam as the pole of the Universe and that of the *qutb* in Sufism are nearly identical, as asserted so clearly by Sayyid Haydar Âmulî when he said, 'The *qutb* and the Imam are two expressions possessing the same meaning and referring to the same person.'<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of the universal man (*al-insân al-kâmil*)<sup>2</sup> expounded by Ibn 'Arabî is very similar to the Shi'ite doctrine of the *qutb* and the Imam, as is the doctrine of the *mahdî* developed by later Sufi masters. All these doctrines refer essentially to the same esoteric reality, the *ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyah*, as present in both Shi'ism and Sufism. And in this case as far as the formulation of this doctrine is concerned there may have been direct Shi'ite influences upon later Sufi formulations.<sup>3</sup>

Another doctrine that is shared in somewhat different forms by Shi'ites and Sufis is that of the 'Muḥammadan light' (*al-nûr al-muḥammadî*) and the initiatic chain (*silsilah*). Shi'ism believes that there is a 'Primordial Light' passed from one prophet to another and after the Prophet of Islam to the Imams. This light protects the prophets and Imams from sin, making them inerrant (*ma'sûm*), and bestows upon them the knowledge of divine mysteries. In order to gain this knowledge man must become attached to this light through the Imam who, following the Prophet, acts as man's intermediary with God in the quest for divine knowledge. In the same way in Sufism, in order to gain access to the methods which alone make spiritual realisation possible, man must become attached to an initiatory chain or *silsilah* which goes back to the Prophet and through which a *barakah* flows from the source of revelation to the being of the initiate. The chain is thus based on the continuity of spiritual presence that much resembles the 'Muḥammadan light' of Shi'ism. In fact later Sufis themselves speak of the 'Muḥammadan light'. In the early period, especially in teachings of Imam Ja'far al-Šâdiq, the Shi'ite doctrine of the 'Muḥammadan light' and the Sufi doctrine of the spiritual chain meet, and as in other cases have their source in the same esoteric teachings of Islam.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in this comparison between Shi'ite and Sufi doctrines I wish to mention the spiritual and gnostic stations (*maqâmat-i 'irfânî*). If we turn to

<sup>1</sup> From the *Jâmi 'al-asrâr* quoted by Kâmil Muṣṭafâ al-Shîbî, *Al-Fikr al-shî'i wa'l-naza'ât al-šifîyah*, Baghdad, 1966, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the Sufi doctrine of the universal man see the translation of al-Jili's *al-Insân al-kâmil* by T. Burckhardt as *De l'homme universel*, Lyon, 1953; also R. Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, trans. by R. Macnab, London, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Shîbî in his *al-Šilah* . . .; vol. II, pp. 52-3 writes that Ibn 'Arabî has made use of Shi'ite sources in formulating his doctrine of the *ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadiyah*, *wahdat al-wujûd* and the *Mahdî*.

<sup>4</sup> On Imam Ja'far's teaching on this subject as it pertains to both Shi'ism and Sufism see Taylor, 'Ja'far al-Šâdiq, Spiritual Forebear of the Sufis', pp. 107-2.



a study of the life of the Prophet and the Imams as for example found in the compilation of Majlisī in the *Bihār al-anwār*,<sup>1</sup> we will discover that these accounts are based more than anything else upon the inner spiritual states of the personages concerned. The goal of the religious life in Shi'ism is in fact to emulate the life of the Prophet and the Imams and to reach these states. Although for the majority of Shi'ites this remains only a latent possibility, the elite (*khawāṣṣ*) have always been fully aware of it. The spiritual stations of the Prophet and the Imams leading to union with God can be considered as the final goal toward which Shi'ite piety strives and upon which the whole spiritual structure of Shi'ism is based.

Now in Sufism also, the goal, which is to reach God, cannot be achieved except through the states and stations (*ḥāl* and *maqām*) which occupy such a prominent position in classical treatises of Sufism. The Sufi life is also one that is based on the achievement of these states although the Sufi does not seek these states in themselves but seeks God in His Exalted Essence. Of course in Sufism everyone is conscious of the states and stations whereas in Shi'ism only the elite are aware of them, but this is quite natural in as much as Sufism is itself the path for the spiritual elite whereas Shi'ism concerns a whole community, possessing its own exoteric and esoteric division and having its own elite as well as common believer (*awāmm*). But in the special significance given to the spiritual stations in the Shi'ite account of the lives of the Prophet and the Imams, there is a striking similarity with what one finds in Sufism. Here again both refer to the same reality, Islamic esotericism, with whose practical and realised aspect the spiritual stations are concerned.

Having considered these few instances of the relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism in principle we must now discuss briefly how the relationship between the two has manifested itself in Islamic history.<sup>2</sup> During the life-

<sup>1</sup> This is a very complex question which of necessity we can only treat in very summary fashion. A fairly extensive survey of this question is found in the two works of al-Shībī, *al-Ṣilāh bayn al-taṣawwuf wa'l-tashayyū'* and *al-Fikr al-shī'ī wa'l-naza'at al-sūfiyah* but even these two scholarly works deal mostly with the central lands of Islam leaving out of discussion the Maghrib, much of Central Asia and especially India where the relation between Shi'ism and Sufism has produced results not found elsewhere, results which should be closely studied.

<sup>2</sup> On the pretext that the *Nahj al-balāghah* is not by 'Alī but comes from the pen of its compiler Sayyid Sharīf Raḍī, many Western orientalists have simply brushed it aside as unauthentic. First of all many of the sayings compiled in the *Nahj al-balāghah* exist in texts antedating Raḍī, secondly their style is totally different from the many books that have survived from Raḍī's pen and finally their innate quality is sufficient guarantee of their celestial inspiration. Today there are too many works of purely spiritual character which are brushed aside by simply attaching the name 'pseudo' to them or by doubting their authority with total disregard for the innate value of their content.

A few years ago in a session in which the famous Shi'ite theologian and gnostic, 'Allāmah Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'i, and Professor Henry Corbin were present, Professor Corbin asked the Shi'ite authority as to whether the *Nahj al-balāghah* was the work of 'Alī, the first Imam. 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'i answered, 'He who has written the *Nahj al-balāghah* is for us the Imam even if he lived a century ago.'

In any case it is curious that through completely inadequate historical arguments which do not

time of the Imams, from the first to the eighth, the contact between the two was most intimate. The writings of the Imams contain a treasury of Islamic gnosis. The *Nahj al-balāghah* of 'Alī,<sup>1</sup> one of the most neglected works of Islam in modern studies of Islamicists, the beautiful *Ṣaḥīfah sajjādiyyah* of the fourth Imam, Zayn al-'ābidīn, called the 'psalms of the Family of the Prophet',<sup>2</sup> and the *Uṣūl al-kāfī* of Kulaynī, containing the sayings of the Imams, outline a complete exposition of Islamic gnosis and have served in fact as a basis for many later gnostic and Sufi commentaries. Although their technical vocabulary is not the same in every way as the works of the early Sufis, as shown by Massignon,<sup>3</sup> the doctrines and spiritual expositions contained therein are essentially the same as one finds in the classical Sufi treatises.

During this period of the lifetime of the Imams there was intimate contact between the Imams and some of the greatest of the early Sufis. Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Uways al-Qaranī were disciples of 'Alī; Ibrāhīm al-Adham, Bishr al-Ḥāfi and Bāyazīd al-Baṣṭāmī were associated with the circle of Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq; and Ma'rūf al-Karkhī was a close companion of Imam Riḍā. Moreover, the earliest Sufis, before being called by this name, were known as ascetics (*zuḥḥād*) and many of them were associated with the Imams and followed their example in the ascetic life. In Kufa such men as Kumayl, Maytham al-Tammār, Rashīd al-Ḥajārī, all of whom were among the early Sufis and ascetics, belong to the entourage of the Imams. The 'companions of the ledge' (*aṣḥāb al-ṣuffah*) before them, like Salmān, Abū Dharr and 'Ammār al-Yāsir, are also both poles of early Sufism and the first members of the Shi'ite community.<sup>4</sup>

It was only after the eighth Imam, 'Alī al-Riḍā, that the Shi'ite Imams did not associate themselves openly with Sufis. It is not that they spoke against Sufism as some exoteric Shi'ite critics of Sufism have claimed. Rather, because of special conditions prevailing at that time they remained silent in these matters. Imam Riḍā thus appears as the last explicit and open link between Sufism and the Shi'ite Imams. In fact to this day he is considered as the 'Imam of initiation' and many Persians who seek a spiritual master and initiation into Sufism go to his tomb in Mashhad to pray for his help in finding a master. For this reason also his role in Shi'ite Sufi orders has been great to this day.

at all disprove its authenticity, the *Nahj al-balāghah*, a book which is the most revered in Shi'ism after the Quran and prophetic sayings and which has taught so many famous Arab writers such as Kurd 'Alī and Ṭaha Ḥusayn how to write eloquent Arabic, has been neglected to this extent.

<sup>1</sup> *Zabūr-i āl-i Muḥammad*.

<sup>2</sup> See especially his *Essai sur les origines du lexique technique de la mystique musulmane*, Paris, 1954, and *Recueil de textes inédites concernant l'histoire de la mystique en pays d'Islam*, Paris, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> The relationship between the Imams and the first generations of *zuḥḥād* that later became known as Sufis is discussed by 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'i in *Shi'ite Islam*, translated and edited by S. H. Nasr, part II, section 3 (in press).

<sup>4</sup> See S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Cambridge (U.S.A.), 1964, chapter I.

After the Imams, Shi'ism and Sufism became both distinct in themselves and to a certain extent separated from each other. During this period, in contrast to the life-time of the Imams, Shi'ism began to have a more active political role while most of the Sufis, at least in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries, shied away from participation in political life and all that possessed a worldly aspect. Yet, some of the Sufis like al-Hallâj were definitely Shi'ite or of Shi'ite tendency and there are certain relations between Sufism and Shi'ism particularly Isma'ilism, as we see in clear references to Sufism in the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity, which if not definitely Isma'ili in origin certainly come from a Shi'ite background and are later closely associated with Isma'ilism. Twelve-Imam Shi'ism also showed some links with Sufism. Ibn Bâbûyah, the famous Shi'ite theologian, describes the Sufi circle (*halqah*) in which invocation (*dhikr*) is performed, and Sayyid Sharif Murtaḍâ calls the Sufis 'real Shi'ites'.<sup>1</sup> The guilds and different orders of chivalry (*futuwwât*) also reveal a link between Shi'ism and Sufism because on the one hand they grew in a Shi'ite climate with particular devotion to 'Alî and on the other hand many of them became attached to Sufi orders and became their extension in the form of 'craft initiations'.

After the Mongol invasion Shi'ism and Sufism once again formed a close association in many ways. Some of the Isma'ilis whose power had been destroyed by the Mongols went underground and appeared later within Sufi orders or as new branches of already existing orders. In Twelve-Imam Shi'ism also from the seventh/thirteenth to the tenth/sixteenth century Sufism began to grow within official Shi'ite circles. It was during this period that for the first time some of the Shi'ite '*ulamâ*' and jurists were given such titles as *sûfî*, '*ârîf* or *muta'allih* and some of them devoted many pages of their writings to Sufi doctrines. Kamâl al-Dîn Maytham al-Bahrânî in the seventh/thirteenth century wrote a commentary upon the *Nahj al-balâghah* revealing its gnostic and mystical meaning. Raḡî al-Dîn 'Alî ibn al-Tâ'ûs, a member of the well-known family of Shi'ite scholars, and himself an outstanding Shi'ite '*âlim*', wrote prayers with Sufi connotations. 'Allâmah al-Hillî, the student of Nasir al-Dîn al-Ṭûsî, and a person who played a great role in the spread of Shi'ism in Persia, has many works of gnostic character. Shortly after al-Hillî one of the most significant Shi'ite theologians of this period, Sayyid Haydar Âmulî, was also a Sufi and follower of the school of Ibn 'Arabî. His *Jâmi' al-asrâr* is a summit of gnostic Shi'ism, where perhaps in more than any other work the metaphysical relationship between Shi'ism and Sufism is treated.<sup>2</sup> It is Âmulî who believed that every true Shi'ite is a Sufi and every true Sufi a Shi'ite.

<sup>1</sup> See al-Shibî, *al-Fikr al-shi'î* . . . , pp. 73 ff.

<sup>2</sup> This monumental work has been edited for the first time by H. Corbin and O. Yahya and has appeared in the collection of the Institut Franco-Iranien of Tehran, 1969.

Concerning Âmulî see Corbin, 'Sayyid Haydar Âmulî (VIIIe-XIVe siècle) théologien shi'ite du soufisme', *Mélanges Henri Massé*, Tehran, 1963, pp. 72-101.

The tendency toward the rapprochement between Sufism and official circles of Shi'ite learning is to be seen in the ninth/fifteenth century in such figures as Hâfiz Rajab al-Bursî, author of the gnostic *Mashdriq al-anwâr*, Ibn Abî Jumhûr, whose *Kitâb al-mujlî* is also a cornerstone of this new structure of Shi'ite gnostic literature and Kamâl al-Dîn Husayn ibn 'Alî, entitled 'Wâ'iz-i Kâshifî', who although a Sunni, was a Naqshbandî Sufi and the author of works on Shi'ite piety which became extremely popular, especially the *Raudat al-shuhadâ'* which has given its name to the typically Shi'ite practice of *raudah*. All these figures were instrumental in preparing the intellectual background for the Safavid renaissance which was based on both Shi'ism and Sufism.

Of special interest during this same period is the spread of the writings of Ibn 'Arabî in Persia and especially in Shi'ite circles.<sup>1</sup> It is well known that Ibn 'Arabî from the point of view of his *madhhab* was a Sunni of the Zâhiri school. But it is also known that he wrote a treatise on the twelve Shi'ite Imams which has always been popular among Shi'ites.<sup>2</sup> There existed an inward complementarism and attraction between the writings of Ibn 'Arabî and Shi'ism which made the integration of his teachings into Shi'ite gnosis immediate and complete. Such Shi'ite Sufis as Sa'd al-Dîn al-Ĥamûyah, 'Abd al-Razzâq al-Kâshânî, Ibn Turkah, Sayyid Ḥaydar Âmulî, Ibn Abî Jumhûr and many other Shi'ite gnostics of this period are thoroughly impregnated with the teachings of Ibn 'Arabî, not to speak of the Shi'ite philosophers and theosophers the culmination of whose thought is found in the school of Mulla Şadrâ.

From the seventh/thirteenth to the tenth/sixteenth century, there were also religious and Sufi movements which were linked with both Sufism and Shi'ism. The extremist sects of the *Hurûfîs* and the *Sha'sha'ah* grew directly out of background that is both Shi'ite and Sufi.<sup>3</sup> More important than these movements in the long run were the Sufi orders that spread in Persia at this time and aided in preparing the ground for the Shi'ite movement of the Safavids. Two of these orders are of particular significance in this question of the relation between Shi'ism and Sufism: The Ni'matullâhî order and the Nûrbakhshî order. Shâh Ni'matullâh came originally from Aleppo and although a descendant of the Prophet was probably a Sunni in his *madhhab*.<sup>4</sup> But the order, which is closely akin to the Shâdhiliyah order in its *silsilah* before Shâh Ni'matullâh, became a specifically Shi'ite Sufi order and remains to this day the most widespread Sufi order in the Shi'ite

<sup>1</sup> See S. H. Nasr, 'Seventh Century Sufism and the School of Ibn 'Arabî', *Journal of the Regional Cultural Institute* (Tehran), 1967, vol. I, no. 1, pp. 43-50.

<sup>2</sup> This work called the *Manâqib* has been also commented upon in Persian. See Mûsâ Khalkhâlî, *Sharḥ manâqib Muḥyî al-Dîn ibn 'Arabî*, Tehran, 1322.

<sup>3</sup> See al-Shibî, *al-Fikr al-shî'î* . . . , pp. 179-244, 302-27.

<sup>4</sup> Concerning his life and works see I. Aubin, *Matériaux pour la biographie de Shah Ni'matullâh Walî Kermanî*, Tehran-Paris, 1956, and several studies devoted to him by J. Nourbakhsh, the present *qutb* of the order, published by the Ni'matullâhî *Khâniqâh* in Tehran during the last decade.

world. The study of the doctrines and methods of this order which possesses a regularity of chain or *silsilah* and method very much similar to the Sufi orders in the Sunni world is most revealing as an example of a still living order of Sufism that is thoroughly Shi'ite and functions in a Shi'ite climate.

The Nûrbakhshî order founded by Muḥammad ibn 'Abdallâh, entitled Nûrbakhsh, a Persian from Quhistan, is particularly interesting in that the founder sought to create a kind of bridge between Sunnism and Shi'ism in his own person and gave a Mahdîist colour to his movement.<sup>1</sup> The spread of his order and the power of his own personality were instrumental in drawing many people to hold particular reverence for 'Alî and the 'Alids. His own open declaration was that his movement combined Sufism and Shi'ism.<sup>2</sup> And the spread of his ideas was one of the factors that brought forth this combination of Shi'ism and Sufi movements which resulted in the Safavid domination of Iran.<sup>3</sup>

The rise of the Safavids from the nucleus of a Sufi order of Shaykh Şafî al-Dîn Ardîbîlî, is too well known to need repetition here.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say that this political movement which founded the new Persian state was Sufi in origin and Shi'ite in belief. As a result it made Shi'ism the official religion of Persia while aiding in every way the growth and propagation of Sufi ideas. It is not therefore surprising to see during this period a renaissance of Shi'ite learning in which Shi'ite gnosis plays such an important role. The names of Mîr Dâmâd, Mîr Findiriskî, Şadr al-Dîn Shîrâzî, Mullâ Muḥsin Fayd, 'Abd al-Razzâq Lâhijî, Qâdî Sa'id Qumî and so many other gnostics of this period perhaps belong more to the chapter on Safavid theosophy and philosophy than to Sufism,<sup>5</sup> but since all these men were Shi'ite and at the same time completely impregnated with Sufi and gnostic ideas, they represent yet another facet of the nexus between Shi'ism and Sufism. There were also outstanding Shi'ite 'ulamâ' of this period who were practising Sufis like Bahâ' al-Dîn 'Âmilî and Muḥammad Taqî Majlisî as well as masters of regular Sufi orders like the Dhahabîs, Ni'matullâhîs and Safavîs.<sup>6</sup>

But strangely enough, during the reign of the same dynasty whose origin

<sup>1</sup> Concerning Shaykh Nûrbakhsh and also the Kubrawîyah and their importance in connection with Persia becoming Shi'ite see the articles of M. Molé in the *Revue des études islamiques* from 1959 to 1963.

<sup>2</sup> The text of his declaration is quoted by al-Shîbî *al-Fikr al-shî'î* . . . , p. 335.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning the different Sufi orders in the Shi'ite climate of Persia, see M. Molé, *Les mystiques musulmans*, Paris, 1965, chapter IV.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the original historic sources such as *Âlam arday-i 'abbâsî* and *Rawdat al-safâ*, many historical works have been devoted to the origin of the Safavids by such scholars as Minorsky, Togan, Hinz, Aubin, Savory and others. See for example, Z. V. Togan, 'Sur l'origine des safavides', *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, Paris, 1957, vol. 3, pp. 345-57. The work of W. Hinz, *Irans Aufstieg zum Nationalstaat im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1936, is of particular value for its historical analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning these figures see S. H. Nasr, 'The School of Ispahan' and 'Şadr al-Dîn Shîrâzî' in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. II, Wiesbaden, 1966; and H. Corbin, 'Confessions extatiques de Mîr Dâmâd', *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, pp. 331-78.

<sup>6</sup> See Sayyid 'Abd al-Hujjat Balâghî, *Maqalat al-hunafâ fî maqamât Shams al-'urafâ*, Tehran, 1369.



was Sufi, a severe reaction set in against the Sufi orders partly because many extraneous elements had joined Sufism for worldly ends and also because some of the orders became lax in their practice of the *Shari'ah*. Some of the religious scholars wrote treatises against the Sufis such as *al-Fawā'id al-dīniyah fi'l-radd 'al'l-hukamā' wa'l-sūfiyah* of Mullā Muḥammad Ṭāhir Qumī. Even the outstanding theologian and scholar, Mullā Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, who was not completely against Sufism as attested by his *Zād al-ma'ād*, was forced in these circumstances to deny his own father's Sufism and openly oppose the Sufis. In such a climate Sufism encountered a great deal of difficulty during the latter part of the Safavid era and in this period even the theosophers (*hukamā'*) of the school of Mullā Ṣadrā faced severe opposition from some of the '*ulamā'*'. It was as a result of this situation that in religious circles Sufism henceforth changed its name to '*irfān*' and to this day in the official Shi'ite religious circles and *madrasahs* one can openly study, teach and discuss '*irfān*' but never *taṣawwuf* which is too often associated with the lax dervishes oblivious to the injunctions of the *Shari'ah*, who are usually called *qalandar ma'ād* in Persian.

During the ensuing Afghan invasion and the re-establishment of a strong government by Nādir Shāh there was not much talk of Sufism in Shi'ite circles in Persia while Sufism prospered in Shi'ite milieus in India. And it is from Deccan that in the twelfth/eighteenth century Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh and Shāh Ṭāhir of Deccan of the Ni'matullāhī order were sent to Persia to revive Sufism. Although some of their disciples like Nūr 'Alī Shāh and Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh were martyred,<sup>1</sup> Sufism began to flourish again, especially during the rule of the Qajar king Fath 'Alī Shāh while Muḥammad Shāh and his prime minister, Ḥajj Mīrzā Āqāsi, were themselves attracted to Sufism. Henceforth the different Sufi orders, especially the various branches of the Ni'matullāhī, as well as the Dhahabī and Khāksār, flourished in Shi'ite Persia and continue to this day. Also during the Qajar period, the gnostic doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī and Ṣadr al Dīn Shīrāzī were revived by such men as Ḥājji Mullā Hādī Sabziwārī and Āqā Muḥammad Riḍā Qumshah'i.<sup>2</sup> They revived a school which also continues and thrives to the present day.

In Shi'ite Persia today one can distinguish between three groups of gnostics and mystics: those who belong to regular Sufi orders such as the Ni'matullāhī or the Dhahabī and who follow a way very similar to those of Sufis in the Sunni world; those who also have had a definite spiritual master and have received regular initiation but whose master and those before him do not constitute an organised and 'institutionalised' Sufi order with its openly declared *silsilah* and established centre or *khāniqāh*; and finally

<sup>1</sup> Concerning these figures see R. Gramlich, *Die schiitischen Derwischorden Persiens, Erster Teil: Die Affiliationen*, Wiesbaden, 1965, pp. 33 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See S. H. Nasr, 'Sabziwārī', in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. II.



those who have definitely received a gnostic and mystical inspiration, who have authentic visions (*mushâhadah*) and possess spiritual states (*aḥwâl*) but who do not possess a human master. Of this latter group some are Uwaysîs, others belong to the line of *Khaḍîr* or *Khidr* in Persian,<sup>1</sup> and most reach spiritual contact with the Imam who is also the inner spiritual guide. The very overflow of esotericism in Shi'ism into even the more outward aspects of the religion has made this third type of possibility more common than one would find in Sunni Islam. Some of the great theosophers and gnostics in fact, who have definitely reached the state of spiritual vision as attested by their works, belong to this latter category and also perhaps to the second category because in that case likewise it is difficult to discern the spiritual lineage outwardly.

Shi'ism and Sufism, then, possess a common parentage in that they are both linked with the esoteric dimension of the Islamic revelation and in their earliest history were inspired by the same sources. In later periods they have had many mutual interactions and influenced each other in innumerable ways. But these historical manifestations have been no more than applications to different moments of time of an essential and principal relationship which belongs to the eternal and integral reality of Islam itself and which in the form of the gnosis that characterises Islamic esotericism has manifested itself in both segments of the Islamic community, the Sunni and Shi'ite alike.

<sup>1</sup> On the spiritual significance of Khidr see L. Massignon, 'Elie et son rôle transhistorique, Khaḍîriya en Islam', *Etudes carmélitaines: Elie le prophète*, vol. II, Paris, 1956, pp. 269-90. Massignon has also devoted numerous other articles to this subject most of which have appeared in the *Revue des études islamiques*. There are also many valuable references to initiation in Sufism though Khidr and the *awṣiyyâ* who have received such initiation in the writings of R. Guénon on initiation.