

# 4

## THE INVENTION OF 'IRFAN

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Thus far my discussion of the debate over Sufism has focused mainly on Isfahan, with good reason. In the post-Shah 'Abbas era of Safavid absolutism, the bureaucracy, administration, and finances of the Safavid dynasty became increasingly centralized. Unparalleled amounts of wealth and power were concentrated in the capital, and Isfahan was not only the political center of Iran but also the intellectual, educational, and religious heart of the realm. Those who aspired to become scholars, especially in the religious disciplines, would spend a few years in their hometowns learning the basics, after which they would migrate to Isfahan to train under the most prominent scholars of their time. Anyone who wished to be taken seriously as a learned member of Safavid society had to forge connections with the Isfahani elite. Given the increasing interest of Safavid monarchs in religious disciplines and debates and the resultant flood of financial resources into the madrasas and the religious hierarchy, Isfahan was the dream city of aspiring clerics.

### The Shiraz Circle

The autobiography of Hazin Lahiji (d. 1766) gives us a wonderful depiction of the vibrant cultural and intellectual environment of the Safavid capital in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Hazin exemplified the urbane, cultivated, and cosmopolitan Shi'a scholar educated in Isfahan. He was open minded and tolerant, seeking out fellow scholars among Christians, Jews, and Sabians. In return, according to Belfour, he was "equally admired and esteemed by the Muselman, Hindoo, and English inhabitants of India."\* Born in 1691, he spent nearly two decades of his early life as an avid student in the city's educational institutions. His autobiography provides a colorful picture of the circles of learning in Isfahan, where he studied medicine, mathematics, astronomy, jurisprudence, hadith, philosophy, and mysticism with prominent teachers of the time.†

\* Hazin, *The Life of Sheikh Mohammed Hazin*, v.

† Hazin, *Tarikh*, 168–72.

Among these was Mir Sayyid Hasan Taliqani (d. ?), Hazin's teacher in philosophy and mysticism who taught Ibn 'Arabi's *Fusus* and Suhrawardi's *Hayakil al-nur*.<sup>\*</sup> According to Hazin, Taliqani was an outstanding scholar who synthesized philosophy and Sufism. Although Hazin complained about the charges of heterodoxy leveled by exoteric religious students against mystically minded scholars like Taliqani, it is clear from his overall account that it was possible for an interested student to pursue both philosophy and mysticism, at least in their speculative forms, with relative freedom in the context of the madrasa. After the fall of Isfahan, when many of the city's elites fled the city they loved, Hazin was among them. The exodus and drop in financial support took its toll on the study of philosophy and high mysticism.<sup>†</sup>

Isfahan, however, was not the only important cultural hub of the Safavid realm. Other major urban centers, such as Qum, Mashhad, Kashan, Ardabil, and Shiraz, were also active sites of learning and education. Shiraz in particular stood out as a vibrant intellectual center, especially for philosophically and mystically inclined students of religious disciplines. The sociocultural outlook of Shiraz was different from that of Isfahan in a number of ways. First, the city was marked by a liberal spirit and tolerant environment that was hospitable to forms of belief and practice that would have been identified, contested, and persecuted as deviant or heretical in other, more conservative urban centers, including Isfahan, Qum, and Mashhad. Second, because Shiraz had been the heart of Persian intellectual and aesthetic life for centuries before the advent of Safavids and because of its strategic geographic location, the intellectual outlook of many of its learned denizens was markedly cosmopolitan. This was a consequence in part of a fascinating cultural exchange between Shiraz and India.<sup>‡</sup> As a result, a current of cosmopolitan thought ran deep and strong in Shiraz. The city had been host to the most prominent philosophers of the Islamic world in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Figures such as Jalal al-Din Davani (d. 1502), Sadr al-Din Dashtaki (d. 1497), Ghiyas al-Din Mansur Dashtaki, and Muhaqqiq Khafri (d. 1550) formed the core of what has come to be known as the School of Shiraz.<sup>§</sup> Shiraz was also home to prominent occultist scholars, especially of the

<sup>\*</sup> Hazin, *Tarikh*, 169–70.

<sup>†</sup> Corbin's appraisal of the situation seems accurate in this regard. See Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 348–49.

<sup>‡</sup> The constant flow of scholars, poets, and dervishes between areas of Iran (especially the Caspian Sea region and Shiraz) and India is a fascinating phenomenon that deserves further attention.

<sup>§</sup> This term has recently been used by some Iranian scholars to refer to the flourishing and vibrant period of Islamic philosophy in Shiraz in the late middle period. See, for example, Kakaie's remarks on maktab-i Shiraz in Kakaie, "Introduction."

Nuqtavi persuasion. The names of important figures such as Mahmud Dihdar (d. 1576), better known by his pen name 'Ayani, and his son Muhammad Dihdar (d. 1016), whose pen name was Fani, come to mind.

Not unrelated to this, the city was also a stronghold of organized Sufism.\* The Nurbakhshi Sufi network in particular had had a major presence in Shiraz since the building of the Nuriyya khanaqah by a prominent student of Nurbakhsh, Muhammad Lahiji (d. 1506). Unfortunately, the history of Sufism in Shiraz in this period remains largely unexamined. We know virtually nothing about the fate of the Nuriyya khanaqah and the developments of organized Sufism there in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

With the rise of prominent figures such as Mir Damad, the locus of philosophical learning shifted to Isfahan beginning in the early seventeenth century, but Shiraz remained an important cultural and intellectual center throughout the Safavid period. Hazin's remarks regarding a trip to the city demonstrate the liveliness of the educational system there. The scholar relates that after moving to Shiraz shortly before 1717, he studied the most celebrated canonical work of Shi'i hadith, *Usul al-kafi*, with Shah Muhammad Darabi Shirazi, by some accounts the most prominent mystically minded religious scholar of Shiraz and a figure who is discussed extensively in the coming pages.† He also studied philosophy with Akhund Masiha Fasavi (d. 1715), a student of Aqa Husayn Khansari, the *shaykh al-islam* of Isfahan.‡ Hazin also provides a brief account of other prominent mystically minded figures whom he met there.§

The invention of the category of 'irfan, I argue, can be attributed to a handful of religious scholars of the Safavid era who hailed from Shiraz. Several important trends and aspects of the intellectual environment of Shiraz contributed to the formation of this category. First, learned circles in the city continued to include syncretistic, open-minded, polymath scholars whose background in philosophy, Sufism, philosophical mysticism, and the occult informed their perspectives as they approached the foundational sources of Twelver Shi'ism, that is, the Qur'an and hadith. Second, Shiraz was host to a reformed tradition of organized Twelver Sufism (represented by the Nurbakhshi and later the Zahabi networks) that had formulated a new Twelver-Sufi discourse that borrowed heavily from Sufi tradition but was purged of the "problematic" and "innovative" aspects of it. Third, there existed a strong

\* Kakaie, "Introduction," 22.

† Hazin, *Tarikh*, 177–78.

‡ Hazin, *Tarikh*, 178.

§ These include Muhammad Baqir Sufi, who taught Hazin Suhrawardi's *al-Talvihat*, and Muhammad 'Ali Sakaki, who was affiliated with organized Sufism and is discussed briefly in the coming pages.

poetic tradition exemplified by the cosmopolitan love poetry of Hafez that was instrumental in the formation of the discourse on 'irfan. Finally, Shiraz was home to a strong and vibrant tradition of philosophical thought that informed the worldview of its intellectuals in significant ways and contributed to the making of the concept of 'irfan.

These broad intellectual and literary trajectories might lead readers to believe that this chapter is concerned primarily with Mulla Sadra, his school of thought, and his students, because it is common among Iranian and Western intellectuals to see Mulla Sadra as a figure in whose work 'irfan is most perfectly manifest. Gerhard Bowering, for example, contends that "*Erfān* reached its climax during Safavid times in the theosophical school of Isfahan with Mīr(-e) Dāmād (d. 1040/1630) and Ṣadr-al-Dīn Šīrāzī, known as Mollā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640)." Mulla Sadra's magnum opus, *al-Asfar al-arba'a*, he contends, is "perhaps the most crucial work on '*erfān*.'"\* In this popular perspective, 'irfan is a broad and amorphous term used to describe attempts by Shi'i scholars to synthesize several intellectual traditions they inherited, including the Illuminationist tradition of Islamic philosophy, the Sufi tradition exemplified by Ibn 'Arabi, and the Shi'i hadith tradition. Contributions of figures such as Sayyid Haydar Amuli and Ibn Abi Jumhur are considered significant turning points in the formation of this "Shi'i gnosis," to use Corbin's terminology, which reached full expression in the writings of Mulla Sadra.† Sayyid Haydar's *Jamī' al-asrar* (*The Sum of [Divine] Secrets*) is cited as a pivotal text,‡ and Ibn Abi Jumhur's *Kitab al-mujli* is said to have created "the perfect cohesion between the theosophy of al-Suhrawardi's *Ishraq*, the theosophy of Ibn al-'Arabi and the Shiite tradition."<§

Not everyone agrees with this account of Twelver intellectual history, though. Nasr, for example, argues that Sadra's thought, in spite of being deeply influenced by Ibn 'Arabi, should be categorized as a form of philosophy (*hikma*) rather than 'irfan. For Nasr, the latter term refers to doctrinal or speculative aspects of the Sufi tradition that culminate with Ibn 'Arabi's school of thought, and he argues that it is highly significant that neither Sadra nor his students wrote "major works devoted purely to theoretical gnosis or '*irfan-i nazari*." The major intellectual thrust of the Safavid period, says Nasr, "lay in creating the School of Transcendent Theosophy, which had incorporated major theses of 'irfan such as the transcendent oneness of being

\* Bowering, "Erfān (1)."

† Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 342.

‡ Although he criticizes Ibn 'Arabi in a number of places on the doctrine of sainthood, the fundamental structure of Sayyid Haydar's understanding of *valaya* as it applies to the infallible imams is shaped by Ibn 'Arabi's school of thought.

§ Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, 335.

[*wahdat al-wujud*] into its philosophical system, but which was distinct in the structure of its doctrines, manner of presentation, and method of demonstration from 'irfan."<sup>\*</sup>

There is nothing wrong with such attempts by scholars to organize the past—any meaningful understanding of the present involves a coherent narrative of the past. Sometimes as scholars, however, we can forget our role in constructing the concepts and categories through which we organize and understand the past. This lack of self-reflection and historical awareness can lead to a teleological mode of interpretation that leaves out or downplays otherwise significant historical developments in favor of the ones that serve our teleology well. In the case of the issue at hand, this plays out in scholars who confuse contemporary etic constructions of 'irfan with historical emic ones. One may have reasons for considering Ibn 'Arabi, Mulla Sadra, or Khomeini, for that matter, the founder or the culmination of the tradition of 'irfan, but such projections tell us more about the intellectual priorities and preferences of contemporary scholars than they do about how 'irfan came into being as a category and how its meaning evolved through history.

The truth is that when we examine the writings of these so-called champions of Shi'i gnosis, we witness no significant departure in the semantics of the term 'irfan or its cognates from the work of their predecessors. The term 'arif, for example, is used in Mulla Sadra's works in accordance with its traditional meaning, that is, to denote the advanced among the saints (*awliya*). What is noteworthy about Sadra's usage, however, is his coupling of 'arifs with those whom he calls divine philosophers (*hukama al-muta'allihin*).<sup>†</sup> This is a clear indication of the Sadraian synthesis in which the ideal 'arif and the ideal hakim are one and the same. In contrast to Sadra's frequent use of the term 'arif, the term *Sufi* rarely appears. The term 'irfan is likewise infrequently used, but when it does appear it follows this paradigm and is used in conjunction with terms and phrases like *philosophic argument* (*burhan*), *certitude* (*yaqin*), and *divine philosophy* (*al-hikma al-ilahiyya*). The paucity of instances in which Sadra uses the term makes it clear that it had not yet become the semantic locus of an established set of beliefs or practices. In other words, its scattered and casual use indicates that it does not refer to a particular concept with clear boundaries classified under an -ism like Sufism. Instead, 'irfan refers to an ideal—the highest and ultimate goal of the seeker of ma'rifa.

The same seems to be true in the writings of Sadra's prominent students, who increasingly emphasized the category of 'arif but not in a way that refers

\* Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 225.

† See, for example, Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), *al-Hikma al-muta'aliya*, 1:6.

to a member of a coherent and distinct group with a defined set of beliefs and practices. *Gawhar-i murad*, an important work by 'Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji, a prominent student of Sadra, provides us with an illuminating statement in this regard. In his classification of the rational sciences, he emphasizes that, unlike kalam and Peripatetic philosophy (*hikmat-i mashsha'i*), Illuminationist philosophy and Sufism cannot be categorized as branches of knowledge. The former two are, according to Lahiji, concerned with exoteric ways of acquiring knowledge, but Sufism and Illuminationist philosophy are concerned with practicalities of the mystical/esoteric path.\* Lahiji notes, however, that philosopher and Sufi come closer to each other in another school of philosophy. "The most urgent kind of knowledge," he says, "is knowing yourself and returning to it, and knowing your God and recognizing your God's command. It is the totality of this kind of knowledge that theologians call the principles of religion [*usul al-din*], philosophers call divine philosophy [*hikmat-i ilahi*], and Sufis call ma'rifat."<sup>†</sup>

A similar trend is observable in the writings of Mulla Sadra's other prominent student, Mulla Muhsin Fayz Kashani. In *Kalimat maknuna* and *Usul al-ma'arif*, the two works in which his indebtedness to his teacher is most obvious, the category of ma'rifa is at the fore. The very title of the former work, *Kalimat maknuna min 'ulum ahl al-hikma va-l-ma'rifa*, is telling in this regard. Again, we see the pairing of hikma and ma'rifa, which indicates their increasing synonymy in Transcendent philosophy. A quick look at the contents of the book reveals that Fayz draws heavily upon the school of Ibn 'Arabi to explain fundamental questions regarding the reality of being and the position of human beings. He begins most of the chapters by laying out what the "folk of ma'rifa" (*ahl al-ma'rifa*) say regarding the topic of the chapter.<sup>‡</sup> In most cases, what they say is saturated with the vocabulary of the school of Ibn 'Arabi. Fayz mentions Rumi, calling him *al-'arif al-rumi*,<sup>§</sup> and he mentions Mulla Sadra in his autobiography, calling him the "chief of the folk of 'irfan" (*sadr-i ahl-i 'irfan*).<sup>\*\*</sup>

In associating hikma with ma'rifa, Fayz is careful to distinguish between the mainstream discursive philosophy known as Peripatetic philosophy and the type of philosophy that to him epitomizes true hikma.<sup>††</sup> The difference can be gleaned from a brief comparison of two of his important

\* Lahiji, *Gawhar-i murad*, 38–41.

† Lahiji, *Gawhar-i murad*, 19.

‡ See Fayz Kashani, *Kalimat maknuna*, 5, 24, 25, 28, 36, 42, 45, 48, 54, 55, and 74, among other pages.

§ Fayz Kashani, *Kalimat maknuna*, 16.

\*\* Fayz Kashani, *Risala-yi sharh-i sadr*, quoted in Ja'fariyan, *Safaviyya*, 2:545.

†† Fayz Kashani, *Kalimat maknuna*, 341.

works *Usul al-ma'arif* and *Kalima*. In the former, Fayz rarely talks about *ahl al-ma'rifa*. In fact, the book is an standard exercise in discursive philosophy, although, like his master, he deviates somewhat from the accepted norms of Peripatetic philosophy and argues for the alternative principles, including the primacy of existence (*asalat al-vujud*) and substantial motion (*al-haraka al-jawhariyya*), that distinguish Sadra's Transcendent philosophy from other schools of philosophy. On the rare occasions that he speaks of *ahl al-ma'rifa*, it is in reference to his master teacher, to other figures in the school of Ibn 'Arabi, or to Ibn 'Arabi himself.\*

We get a better sense of what true hikma or ma'rifa means for Fayz in *Kalimat*, which, in the vein of Mulla Sadra's work, synthesizes the metaphysical principles of Ibn 'Arabi with the traditions of the twelve imams.† Copious quotations from canonical and noncanonical hadith sources are followed by comments and explanations in accordance with the principles of *ahl al-ma'rifa*. The author's primary concern is to reconcile philosophical and mystical principles with the statements of the imams found in hadith literature, thereby demonstrating that the way of true hikma and the way of prophecy do not contradict each other.‡ Fayz shared this concern not only with his teacher Mulla Sadra but with many other members of the ulama, whether philosophically inclined or of Akhbari leanings. As the new Shi'ite orthodoxy expanded its reach across various disciplines, the most urgent need of proponents of those disciplines was to authenticate their hermeneutic by drawing upon authoritative hadith sources. Fayz's *Kalimat* is so steeped in the vocabulary of Sufi metaphysical thought that it is tempting to categorize it as a work of Sufism. As Lawson indicates in his excellent study of the book, however, conceptualizing and categorizing *Kalimat* in this manner would be incorrect.§ Instead, it is better understood as a representative of an emerging, independent Twelver spiritual discourse that was later called by the term *'irfan*.

It is precisely this understanding of ma'rifa and hikma that Qummi opposes in his own *Hikmat al-'arifin*, which was discussed briefly earlier. For him, ma'rifa is not the self-knowledge that Lahiji emphasizes but the knowledge of the imam, without which the person will die a jahili death. Sadra's and Fayz's attempts to bring the Shi'i hadith literature into conversation

\* Fayz Kashani, *Usul al-ma'arif*, 56, 94, 176, and 178.

† Having said this, the role of his other teacher in Shiraz, the prominent Akhbari scholar Sayyid Majid Bahrani (d. 1629) cannot be underestimated. A cursory look at the Fayzian oeuvre makes clear that his concern and engagement with the hadith literature are much more serious and extensive than Sadra's.

‡ Fayz Kashani, *Usul al-ma'arif*, 4.

§ Lawson, "Hidden Words," 428–32.

with some entity called divine philosophy or hikmat-i ilahi is alarming because, for him, "Hikma is the knowledge [ma'rifa] of the imam; and the hakim is the one who knows the true imam and learns religious knowledge from him. There is no question that the purified imams from the Family [of the Prophet] are the leaders of truth and the mines of hikma who learned it from the Prophet himself, Peace be upon him. . . . who said 'I am the house of hikma and 'Ali is its door, whomever desires hikma has to approach the door.' Therefore, hikma is what is understood from the sayings of the pure imams, the companions of infallibility, and the interpreters of God's Book . . . not the problems of philosophy, which are in contradiction with the Book and the tradition [*sunna*]."\*

In spite of this important disagreement over the proper definition of ma'rifa and hikma, Fayz agreed with Qummi in a fundamental level: that it was imperative for him and for like-minded people to demonstrate how the foundations of knowledge traditions such as philosophy and Sufism were based on the teachings of imams. The newly established Twelver sacred nomos not only gave Qummi a vital edge in this debate but also gradually moved the Sufi-minded scholars of time, including Fayz, toward a more reserved position when it came to Sufi vocabulary and worldview.

Fayz's writings, covering the span of almost a half-century, beautifully reflect how, under the influence of the changing religious milieu, he increasingly distanced himself from the traditional Sufi and philosophical vocabulary, opting instead to put more emphasis on hadith reports. In the case of his *Kalimat*, Zargar has demonstrated how his evolving attitudes toward philosophy and Sufism led him to produce a new version of that work, *Qurrat al-'uyun*, in which he relied more heavily on scripture to argue for the same points.<sup>†</sup> Another treatise written by Fayz toward the end of his life and at the height of the anti-Sufi campaign is *al-Insaf*, which was completed in 1672 and which expresses his disenchantment with theology, philosophy, and Sufism. He declares, "I am not a theologian, a philosopher, or a Sufi . . . rather, I am an imitator of the Qur'an, hadith, and the Prophet, and a follower of the household of the Prophet."<sup>‡</sup>

Although the debate between anti-Sufi and pro-Sufi ulama was mostly over the proper definition of already established terms such as hikma and ma'rifa, it prepared the grounds for the emergence of the category of 'irfan. By the middle of the seventeenth century, neither Sadra's school of thought

\* Qummi, *Hikmat al-arifin* MS, 5

† Zargar, "Revealing Revisions," 20

‡ For this quotation and an extensive analysis of Fayz's late-life disenchantment with philosophy and Sufism, see Ja'fariyan, *Safaviyya*, 2:537–55.

nor the Sufi metaphysical thought was referred to by the term *'irfan*. A century later, however, the situation had changed, and religious scholars such as Mulla Mahdi Niraqi (d. 1794) and his son Mulla Ahmad (d. 1829), who were trained in Sadra's mystical philosophy, would refer to this tradition explicitly as *'irfan*.\*

This brief excursion into the semantics of *'irfan* and its cognates in the writings of adherents to the school of Mulla Sadra reveals some of the ways Sadra and especially his students, as well as their opponents, such as Qummi, contributed to the formation of this discourse. They did not, however, coin the term *'irfan*. Rather, in our search for the origins of the category of *'irfan*, I argue the focus should move away from the School of Isfahan and toward the life and works of two influential, yet little known scholars hailing from the ancient province of Fars: Shah Muhammad Darabi and Qutb al-Din Nayrizi.

### Shah Muhammad Darabi, Sufism, and 'Irfan

Information about Darabi's (d. 1718) life and works is scattered across a wide variety of primary sources. Bibliographers of poets and members of the ulama have used these sources to construct a picture of his career and life that can be quite puzzling at times.<sup>†</sup> Because of his extended lifespan (his students insist that he lived more than a hundred years)<sup>‡</sup> and the probability that he, like many poets and writers of his period, spent many years in India in pursuit of royal sponsorship, his life and work are discussed under two, and sometimes three, different names.<sup>§</sup>

Miraculous length of life is often attributed to saintly figures, but in Darabi's case, the number of reports of longevity by his contemporaries lead one to believe that he indeed lived close to, if not slightly more than, one hundred years. The earliest known literary trace left by him is an extant copy of 'Urfi

\* More on the two Niraqis in chapter 5.

† The best attempt to reconstruct the basic chronology of Darabi's life was accomplished recently in Ashkevari, "Introduction." A comprehensive list of Darabi's writings is included in Ashkevari's informative overview.

‡ For example, Hazin claims that he lived to be nearly 130 years old. Hazin, *Tarikh*, 178.

§ For example, Adamiyyat has divided Darabi's works under three different entries. See Ruknzade Adamiyyat, *Danishmandan*, 3:229, 230, and 544). Similarly, Aqa Bozorg contends that there are two Darabis in this period whose identity and work should not be mixed. See Tehrani, *al-Zari'a*, 9:665–66. Other examples of this confusion, most of which are based on Aqa Bozorg's misleading comments, include Karbasi-zade, *Hakim-i muta'allih bidabadi*, 68.

Shirazi's *Divan*, copied by Darabi himself in India in 1636.\* The maturity of the handwriting suggests that Darabi was at least in his early twenties by that time, which puts his birth date somewhere around the middle of the second decade of the seventeenth century. Other concrete dates related to his literary activities belong to a much later period of his life. He mentions the year 1692 in two treatises, *Mi'raj al-kamal* and *Maqamat al-salikin*.† The latest date mentioned in his writings can be found in his commentary on the fourth imam's *al-Sahifa*, which Darabi penned in Isfahan in 1702.‡ Another important piece of information about the chronology of his life comes from his student Hazin, who mentions that Darabi passed away while the former was studying in Shiraz. Although we know Hazin stayed in Iran until 1733, we do not know the exact dates of his study in Shiraz. He was likely in his late twenties and early thirties while there, and his stay must have occurred during the last decade of Safavid rule, some years before the fall of Isfahan in 1722. This gives us a general range, but another piece of evidence helps narrow the time frame further. 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati, in his *Burhan al-murtazin*, the content of which are discussed later, mentions Darabi's name and follows it with the phrase "*rahmatullah 'alayhi*," which means the latter was already dead at the time *Burhan* was being penned.§ We don't have a firm date for the writing of *Burhan*, but the sources are unanimous that Istahbanati died in 1714. This means Darabi's death must have happened prior to that time. This puts his death date sometime in the early 1710s, when he was around a hundred years old.\*\* If we rely on this timeline, his claim to have been a student of Shaykh Baha'i might not be that farfetched.††

Darabi also appears to have lived in India for multiple extended periods of time. The use of the title *shah* before his name indicates a strong connection to India, where it was customary for Sufi saints to be honored with this title.‡‡ All three of Darabi's prominent students who left behind biographical information about him noted that he was their primary teacher in hadith

\* This beautiful manuscript was brought to my attention by Sadeq Ashkevari. I later found out that it was the property of the late Stuart Cary Welch. His descendants put it up for sale, and it was auctioned off by Sotheby's for £73,250 on April 6, 2011.

† See Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 464.

‡ Darabi, *Riyaz al-arifin*, 10.

§ Istahbanati, *Burhan al-murtazin*, 194.

\*\* For a list of different death dates mentioned in primary sources see Darabi, *Tazkira*, xx. I am inclined toward Aqa Bozorg's conclusion in this regard. See Tehrani, *al-Zari'a*, 9:666.

†† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 2:1212. See also Golchin Ma'ani, *Tarikh-i tazkira-ha-yi farsi*, 2:101. Golchin refers to *Lata'if al-khayal* as his source.

‡‡ For a summary of his trips see Darabi, *Tazkira*, xviii-xix.

and mention that he taught classical philosophy textbooks as well as other sciences.\*

Darabi's mastery of hadith is best exemplified in his commentary on *al-Sahifa al-sajjadiyya*, which he titled *Riyaz al-'arifin*. This work was written during the reign of and was dedicated to Shah Sultan Husayn. It is no surprise, then, that Nayrizi cited Darabi as teacher on whose authority he narrated the traditions of the family of the Prophet (his *shaykh al-ijaza*, in other words). In Nayrizi's words, "First among the learned with whom I have associated was . . . my teacher, the one whom I reference in narrating from the infallible imams. . . . [He was] a master of the rational and narrative disciplines [*jami' al-ma'qul va al-manqul*] and a repository of the principles and the branches [of religion]. [He was] the most knowledgeable and intelligent Mawla Shah Muhammad Darabi, peace be upon him. He was the teacher of all the learned of Shiraz in his age, and I am in possession of a treatise by him in his own handwriting titled *Mi'raj al-kamal*, which is an inquiry about the meaning of shaykh and guidance, and disciple and seeking guidance."<sup>†</sup>

This emphasis on hadith by Darabi and his students is another testament to how hadith study was a centerpiece of the madrasa curriculum in this period, whether one was interested in hadith and jurisprudence or in philosophy and mysticism. Other students of Darabi used equally laudatory language and recounted the classes they took from him on a wide variety of topics ranging from *Usul al-kafi* and *Hikmat al-'ayn* to music, mathematics, and kalam. Here is what Hazin had to say:

The teacher of the ulama, our great master Maulana Shah Muhammad Shirazi was in that town [Shiraz]. I began to hear *Usul al-kafi* in his class, and I benefited from him all the time, day and night. . . . That knowledgeable man was one of a kind across all ages . . . he enjoyed the company of many scholars and great 'urafa, he saw many countries of the world, and in order to reach the highest stations and perfect his soul, he experienced mortification. He had a deep respect for the masters and saints . . . and he lived close to a hundred and thirty years, all spent in the service of disseminating knowledge, pursuing truth, and caring for the servants [of God]. He is the author of several treatises on hadith, philosophy and Sufism. He died sometime after I migrated to that town.<sup>‡</sup>

Another interesting fact about Darabi is that, despite his strong penchant for mysticism and the fact that his vocabulary was borrowed heavily from

\* For a comprehensive list of his students, see Ashkevari's notes in Darabi, *Tazkira*, xxii-xxiv.

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 2:1201.

‡ Hazin, *Tarikh*, 177-78.

Sufi literature, none of his contemporaries associated him with organized Sufi orders in either Iran or India. The fact that Nayrizi refers to Istahbanati, and not Darabi, as his *shaykh al-tariqa* (master of the [Sufi] path) also reflects Darabi's hesitation to operate within the framework of traditional Sufi institutions.

Darabi is important to our inquiry because the earliest attempts to replace and contrast terms such as *Sufi* and *Sufism* with '*arif*' and '*irfan*' occur in his writings. Later figures such as Nayrizi operated under his direct influence as they unburdened themselves of words weighted with negative connotations in the aftermath of the anti-Sufi campaign. In fact, an examination of the numerous extant works by Darabi demonstrates that he, along with Mu'azzin and Nayrizi, was at the front line of the Sufi response to this campaign. He wrote works dedicated to three hotly debated issues of the time related to Sufism: *Maqamat al-salikin* on the issue of music (*ghina*) and its legitimate and illegitimate forms,\* *Mi'raj al-kamal* on the master/disciple relationship in Sufism,† *Farah al-salikin* in defense of the Sufi practices of sama' and ecstasy,‡ and *Latifa-yi ghaybi*, which contains his take on the debate over terms like *Sufi* and *Sufism*. It is worthwhile to focus on him not only because of his influence on Nayrizi and the latter's choice to distance himself from the term *Sufi* but also because of his larger influence on the intellectual circles of Shiraz. As a long-lived and universally respected teacher in the city who influenced a great number of students, he made unparalleled contributions to the nascent stages of the formation of the paradigm of '*irfan*'. Two of his most influential contributions to the debate on Sufism during the seventeenth century were *Mi'raj al-kamal* and *Latifa-yi ghaybi*, and thus I proceed to an examination of their contents.

### *Mi'raj al-kamal*

*Mi'raj al-kamal* is focused on what was perhaps the most volatile issue debate over Sufism: the master/disciple relationship. Sufi-minded and anti-Sufi camps disagreed over whether it could be construed as analogous to the relationship between the imams and their followers and the related questions of whether it constituted bid'a or "innovation." In discussing the master/

\* This was recently published. See Darabi, *Maqamat al-salikin*, 283–496.

† Unpublished. There are two known copies of this work available; one is held in Mashhad, at Astan-i Quds, which I consulted for this analysis. This is a clean yet late manuscript, copied in 1351 hijri, and I would like to thank Mr. Ashkevari for providing me with a digital copy. There is another manuscript of *Mi'raj* held in Najaf at the archives of Amir al-Mu'minin Public Library.

‡ Unpublished; one known manuscript. See Darabi, *Farah* MS. To judge from internal evidence, it was written after *Maqamat al-salikin*. See Darabi, *Farah* MS, f. 27b.

disciple relationship, I am not interested in the individual and personal aspects of the relationship and its connection to spiritual matters. Instead, I am concerned with the relationship as a significant social phenomenon that developed across centuries and formed the bedrock of an elaborate ethos and an array of social rituals. Rituals and codes of conduct shaped by this relationship played an important role in regulating not only the social hierarchy of the khanaqah but also the larger network of social groups that were connected in different ways to Sufi institutions. The social implications of this relationship were what the emerging hierocracy found most threatening to its authority and power in religious matters and beyond. This sense of threat led the Sufis to come under verbal attacks and, sometimes, to face actual persecution. The ulama were a highly complex and amorphous group, however, and their activities went far beyond attempts to silence Sufis and dervishes. As mentioned at earlier, a highly innovative and syncretistic attempt was also being made within clerical circles to offer an alternative model of guidance with the imams at its center, a sacred nomos to ground the populace. In other words, the ulama did not simply express what they believed was wrong with Sufism. They also offered an alternative vision of how one could pursue spirituality the “right” way. I believe that this, in addition to the unwavering support of the political establishment for the ulama, contributed significantly to their ultimate success. At a popular level, the development of cults of veneration and worship around the tombs of imams and their descendants and the widespread retellings of miraculous stories about the infallible imams by passionate mullas, wandering dervishes, and maddahs was instrumental in focusing public attention on the imams instead of on Sufi saints. At the same time, similar stories took shape around charismatic and high-ranking members of the hierocracy, whose status as deputies (*nuvvab*) of the Hidden Imam lent itself to the formation of cults of worship. For the learned ulama, dreams and visions of the imams and the enormous literary legacy preserved in hadith literature functioned as primary sources of spiritual guidance. A new spiritual hierarchy developed in which the gates of heaven opened at the behest not of the saintly Sufi shaykh of the khanaqah or local shrine but of the charismatic clergy and the local imam-zada.

In the midst of these negotiations over authentic channels of connection between heaven and earth, Darabi dedicated an entire treatise to explaining the meaning of guidance. That he felt the need to do so indicates a certain level of confusion and uncertainty about the boundaries and definition of the notion. The stakes were high: those who successfully defined such boundaries would be the new guardians of the gates of heaven.

As one of the Sufi-minded ulama, Darabi straddled the worlds of traditional Sufism and the new Twelver orthodoxy, much as Mu'azzin had done

before him in *Tuhfa*. There are differences, however, between the two authors' approaches. As someone solidly grounded in the world of organized Sufism, Mu'azzin was a transitional figure who approached the area where the two worlds intermingled while still privileging traditional Sufi discourse. For his part, Darabi was solidly grounded in the madrasa tradition and lived fully beneath the new Twelver sacred canopy, and his primary commitment was to orthodox Twelver discourse. His arguments in *Mi'raj*, although informed by traditional Sufi discourse and employed in defense of its fundamental ideas, can be seen as an attempt to domesticate the Sufi tradition by revisiting key concepts and adjusting their premises and definitions.

Like Mu'azzin in *Tuhfa*, Darabi opens his remarks in *Mi'raj* with a discussion of the nature of religious knowledge and a basic classification of the scholars of religion, the ulama. This is another affirmation that the crucial point of disagreement between the Sufis and the emerging clerical class was the proper relationship between disciplinary/rational knowledge, which is acquired in the madrasa, and inspirational/intuitive knowledge, which is gained through training in the khanaqah. *Mi'raj* contains the same tripartite division seen in *Tuhfa*; the ulama are divided between those who are experts in the exoteric disciplines (*ulama al-zahir*) and those who are experts in the esoteric disciplines (*ulama al-batin*). Ideal spiritual guides, the ulama who are competent in both the esoteric and exoteric sciences, occupy the third category.\* Representatives of this third group are called divine religious scholars (*al-ulama al-rabbaniyyin*), and, according to Darabi, terms like *pir* and *murshid* are references to these men.† He maintains that these ulama are one and the same with those the Second Martyr called the *ulama al-haqiqqa*, those who embark on the path of asceticism and spiritual advancement after finishing formal training in the religious disciplines. In other words, they combine the knowledge of Sharī'a with accomplishments in tariqa and the realization of *haqiqqa*.‡ Another phrase, *'alim rabbani*, was used in later Shi'i mystical literature as an important alternative to the original Sufi concept of *pir*. Thus a new set of terms appeared, suited to a context where organized Sufism and important elements of its technical language were being purged in favor of a new, Shi'i-inspired lexicon.

This is only one of many instances in this treatise where the author makes a pointed effort to reframe traditional Sufi concepts. The reinterpretation of Sufi concepts in a way that weakens their connection to the technical vocabulary of traditional Sufism is a striking feature of *Mi'raj*. Darabi's

\* Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 97.

† Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 129 and 134–35.

‡ Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 66.

willingness to discard long-standing Sufi terminology in favor of less problematic and more authentic-looking alternative terms can be seen throughout, and he reminds us often that one's choice of technical terms does not matter. "*La mushahhata fi al-istilah*" (there is no dispute in terminology), he says.\* What truly matters, he remarks, is the realities to which such terms point.† This conscious attempt to deemphasize traditional Sufi terminology can be understood as a response to the criticism that Sufi vocabulary is, for the most part, alien to that found in authoritative hadith collections. Darabi pursued a dual strategy of deemphasizing the technical meanings of such terms and citing examples from other disciplines in which extracanonical terminology are used without being subject to charges of innovation.‡ Despite Darabi's claim otherwise, his willingness to compromise on terminology was not simply a superficial exchange of different words referring to the same truth. On the contrary, he took terms deeply rooted in a Sunni-Sufi heritage out of their original register and reintroduced them into a new web of meaning and signification that revolves around Twelver teaching. Here we see the beginning of a cluster of terms that form the basis of a new discourse on spirituality, one that is grounded in a new social reality, that of the Shi'i hierarchy.

Darabi's literary strategy was innovative and synthetic; it reduces and effaces difference. It stands in contrast to Qummi's semantics, where difference is essentialized and emphasized.§ In fact, Darabi's might have chosen his strategy of deemphasizing semantic difference in a direct response to Qummi and his emphasis that essential terms and their traditional fields of meaning can be seen as easy and straightforward indicators of "foreign" elements in Islamic thought. For example, one of his primary methods of defending the orthodoxy of terms like *pir* or *qutb*, which are found in abundance in Sufi literature, was to downplay their technical meanings and treat them as synonyms of less loaded terms like teacher (*ustad*), guide (*rahnama*), student (*shagird*), wayfarer (*rahru*), scholar (*'alim*), and learner (*muta'allim*).

\* For example, see Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 106–7 and 160. Darabi's tendency to deemphasize and decontextualize the technical meanings of Sufi terms is also clearly seen in *Latifa*. As long as one submits to the path laid out by the infallible imams, in matters both exoteric and esoteric, Darabi says, it is of no importance whether one is called Sufi or jurist (faqih). *Sufism* is not just a word; "it is its meaning that is the criteria . . . the letters fa, qaf, and ha [which spell fih] are not [in and of themselves] luminous (*nurani*), neither are the letters ta, sad, vav, and fa [which spell tasavvuf] dark ones (*zulumani*) that belong to hell (*jahannami*)." Darabi, *Latifa*, 110.

† Darabi, *Latifa*, 100.

‡ Darabi, *Miraj* MS, 105–6.

§ See our discussion of Qummi's strategy in chapter 2.

All of these terms, according to him, refer simply to an educational relationship in which knowledge flows from the more to the less informed.\*

Nonetheless, Darabi stood firm in his belief that embarking upon the spiritual path is impossible without the proper training of a master, a murshid or pir.† He qualified this, however, by saying that no one can be the ultimate spiritual guide but the imam. It is only in the period of occultation, when the ultimate qutb of the universe is not accessible, that any degree of authority can be attributed to the 'arifin, the divine religious scholars who are masters of both exoteric and esoteric aspects of religion.

So, if you say [terms like] murshid refer to no one other than the infallible [imams], I say yes, but when they are present. When they are in occultation, however, the 'arifin among the religious scholars who know the esoteric sciences are, with the help of their hadiths, their deputies [*nuvvab*]. Then, if it is said that their hadith is sufficient for us, I would say, if their hadith is sufficient, then why do exoteric religious scholars [go to their teachers in hadith] and take the hadith and hear it from their *mashayikh al-ijaza*? Therefore, [one] learns the way of practice [*tariqat al-'amal*] from the murshid just as one learns his way in the discipline of hadith from the masters of hadith [*mashayikh al-hadith*].‡

The language of deputyship (*niyaba*) here is highly significant. Beginning with 'Ali Karaki in the early sixteenth century, Twelver mujtahids began, with the support of Safavid monarchs, to employ the language of *niyaba* to solidify their authority as true representatives of the Hidden Imam.§ The Safavid monarchs benefited from this state of affairs, since, they claimed, the mujtahids graciously relegated the burden of governance to them. The shah, in other words, was approved by the learned mujtahid to act as a deputy of the Hidden Imam and to rule over the masses. While Darabi did not directly challenge the deputyship claims of the exoteric mujtahid whose expertise was solely in the matter of Shari'a, he stated emphatically that it was the third group, those who combined exotericism and esotericism, who were the true deputies of the Hidden Imam. Darabi quoted a number of hadith to substantiate his claim, concluding they were "explicit that the perfect master who is a 'believer' [*mu'min*] stands as the representative of the infallible imam, and there is no doubt that [this believer] has partial [*naqisa*] *valaya*. This is the status of the murshid. It should be clear that [such] a master of the

\* Darabi, *Latifa*, 95.

† Darabi, *Latifa*, 94.

‡ Darabi, *Latifa*, 105 (marginalia).

§ Ja'fariyan, *Safaviyya*, 1:122, 212, and 215.

esoteric disciplines should also have mastery of the exoteric disciplines. Otherwise, he would not be qualified for the position.”\*

The concept of *valaya*, which appears in this quotation in conjunction with the concept of *pir*, deserves attention here. In his attempt to decontextualize and then redefine central Sufi notions connected to the concept of *pir*, Darabi addressed the notions of sainthood (*valaya*) and the saint (*vali*). Few terms are more important in classical Sufi literature. Accomplished Sufis, by virtue of their advanced spiritual station and closeness to God, become God's favorite servants, the pinnacle of his creation, and the *raison d'être* for its sustenance. This traditional semantic field, however, is not what Darabi wished to discuss. Instead, he pointed out that *valaya* has multiple meanings, including *helper* (*nasir*) and *lover* (*muhibb*, in an affectionate rather than a sexual relationship).† The meaning on which he spent the most time, however, was *valaya* as it occurs in Islamic legal texts, where it is connected to the notion of the “*awla bi al-tasarruf*,” someone who has precedence in managing the affairs of someone else. Darabi extended this notion beyond matters of the Shari‘a to the sphere of spiritual guidance. A true *vali*, for him, was a person to whom God has given material and spiritual authority over someone else.

Darabi made it clear that absolute authority of this kind can be conferred by God only on his most perfect servants, the imams. Therefore, he argued, the only case in which an adept is truly “a corpse in the hands of a washer” is one in which it comes to acquiescing to the infallibles and their commands.‡ In light of the occultation, however, he advanced the notion that a weaker (*naqis*) or partial sense of *tasarruf* or *valaya* applies to the perfect spiritual master (*al-‘alim al-rabbani*), who is present and accessible while the last imam remains in hiding.

The political implications of this model of authority were not explored by Darabi, but they loomed large in the background. The fact that such a politically potent notion of *valaya* emerged in the Safavid milieu reveals an immense power struggle within the hierocracy. This was not merely a debate between Sufi shaykh and jurist. It was a contest over who had the right to claim the deputyship of the Hidden Imam, a battle that has had profound ramifications for the social and political landscape of contemporary Iran. The debates in which Darabi was engaged foreshadowed the later concept of *valayat al-faqih*, a political system at whose head stood *al-vali al-faqih*, someone like Khomeini, who was not only a mujtahid but also an accomplished and

\* Darabi, *Mi‘raj* MS, 172.

† Darabi, *Latifa*, 97–98.

‡ Darabi, *Latifa*, 149.

highly knowledgeable 'arif. Noticeable in this regard is the fact that Mulla Ahmad Niraqi, himself a polymath, a reputable 'alim, and a renowned 'arif and who is usually credited as one of the earliest figures who argued for the idea of *valayat al-faqih* in its earliest form, was influenced by the Nurbakhshi Sufi network in general and by the work of Shah Muhammad in particular. In other words, the attempts to depoliticize Sufism by stripping it of its extensive social network and institutions and to assimilate what remained into the madrasa system under the heading of 'irfan created space for a new kind of politics. In Qajar times and beyond, it was no longer the Sufi shaykh but rather the mujtahid-'arif who had the social capital to influence the trajectory of political life.

Another striking similarity between *Mi'raj* and *Tuhfa* becomes clear in the final pages of the former, where Darabi begins a discussion of qualities necessary for master and disciple. The list is almost identical to that in *Tuhfa*.<sup>\*</sup> A few points of divergence, however, indicate that Darabi's vision of the master/disciple relationship was different from that of a member of organized Sufism such as Mu'azzin. First, though Darabi mentions the necessity of the disciple submitting to the master, he qualifies this assertion by saying that an adept does not need to obey the shaykh if the latter's demands are contrary to the Shari'a.<sup>†</sup> Darabi has set up an image of the pir that makes it inconceivable that he would require the adept to do something contrary to the law, but the fact that he entertains this as a hypothetical is a significant departure from the traditional Sufi understanding in which, on the basis of the famous story of Moses and a companion traditionally understood to be Khizr, the disciple is required to submit to the will of the master even when doing so violates common sense and the basic tenets of the Shari'a.<sup>‡</sup> This is exactly the point where Darabi departs from long-standing Sufi tradition. In his elaboration of the twentieth qualification for the disciple, which is taken almost word for word from *Tuhfa*, he drops all reference to the traditional corpse/washer analogy, even though he retains the Qur'anic story to emphasize the importance of disciple's submission.

To return to Darabi's willingness to compromise on terminology, it is revealing to see his treatment of the term *hikma*. As a prominent teacher of Peripatetic philosophy and in response to criticism from the anti-Sufi and anti-philosopher camp that Qur'anic hikma had nothing in common with

<sup>\*</sup> Darabi, *Latifa*, 174.

<sup>†</sup> Darabi, *Latifa*, 178.

<sup>‡</sup> In fact, Najm al-Din Razi, in his classic *Mirsad al-'ibad*, says explicitly that, on the basis of the logic of the Qur'anic story mentioned, the disciple is to submit to the will of the master like a corpse in the hands of the washer, even when he thinks doing so contradicts the law. See Razi, *Mirsad al-'ibad*, 147.

the field of knowledge known as philosophy, he redefined the term in the following manner:

So, if you say that the hikma praised in the discipline of Shari'a is different from the hikma that is customary among the students, I would say that hikma is knowing the reality of things as they are according to the capacity of human understanding . . . the result is that the philosopher [hakim] is one who knows things as they are and acts accordingly. That is why in *Hikmat-i 'ala'i* it is said—in Persian—that the hakim is truthful [*rast-guftar*] and righteous [*durust-kirdar*]. Therefore, hikma is something that includes the discipline of Shari'a, . . . and the discipline of tafsir, hadith, and fiqh are all included in hikma. . . . Our master, Shaykh Baha'i, has pointed out in some of his writings that hikma is derived from the fountain of prophethood [*nubuvva*], and because the names of some prophets were recorded in Greek, people were confused [and thought] that those names referred to philosophers rather than prophets, and then he explained that Hermes Trismagestus is the [Greek] name of prophet Idris, and Pythagoras the name of prophet Shis [Seth, son of Adam].\*

Another term with which Darabi grappled is the word *tasavvuf* itself. Darabi experimented with several alternative terms for this concept, '*irfan* among them. For Darabi, '*irfan* served as an authentic Shi'i word for spirituality, in contrast to the problematic, Sunni-related aspects of *tasavvuf*. He wrote, "If the fact that Sunni scholars are numbered among jurists is not considered a stain on the face of the glorious science of fiqh, then similarly, the fact that there are rare Sunni Sufis among the '*urafa* is not a blemish for '*irfan*."<sup>†</sup>

An '*arif*, ideally, cannot be a Sunni. Darabi made this clear in a number of places in *Mi'raj* by emphasizing that the spiritual lineages originating from problematic Sunni figures like Hasan Basri and Sufiyan Sawri are illegitimate.

If you were to say that some orders trace their lineage back to Hasan Basri or Sufiyan Sawri and that those two are condemned [by the imams], I would say that only a few among the orders end in those two, and that does not cast a negative light upon the discipline of Sufism and '*irfan*.<sup>‡</sup> . . . [T]he disparagement of Sufism that is found in some hadiths refers to the group who were opposed to Their Excellencies, who disputed them, and who actively pursued a way contrary to the true way of

\* Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 155–56.

† Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 113.

‡ Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 125 and 113.

Twelverism. It does not refer to the group whose spoken words, deeds, and religious observances most closely followed Their Highnesses, the pure imams. How it is fair to call this latter group Sufis [that is, to denigrate them by calling them Sufis] simply because they persisted in zikr, purified their food and their soul, and refined their ethical qualities, and then to fight them, express hostility toward them, and reject them? As soon as we have learned a few [jurisprudential] issues [*mas'ala*] from the books of transactions and trade [*mu'amalat va tijarat*], we consider ourselves better than the group we have called Sufis, even if we observe them doing their best to follow Their Highnesses, the imams, and even if we have done thousands of blameworthy deeds opposed to the exalted tradition of Their Excellencies. [And we do this] only on the grounds that we are jurists and they are Sufis. What kind of logic is this, and according to what notion of fairness, judgment, and law?\*

Though Darabi set up a clear Shi'i–Sunni dichotomy, he used the words *'irfan* and *Sufism* in conjunction with each other in this passage and in many other. Presenting these two words as synonyms helped give his readers a sense of what the newly introduced category of *'irfan* meant. As far as I have been able to determine, Darabi was the first author to use *'irfan* as an equivalent term for Sufism, transcribing many of the semantic denotations and connotations of latter onto the former. In his writing, *'irfan* became a substantive term signifying a particular discipline (*fann*) instead of a word for the advanced spiritual station marked by *'arif* realization of the unity beneath apparent multiplicity. Darabi also called it a *mazhab*, which implies a defined set of beliefs and practices or a particular school of thought.†

As mentioned, the most literal meaning of the term *tasavvuf* is the process by which one becomes a Sufi. This procedural denotation was also transcribed onto *'irfan* by Darabi. In a brief but important passage, he provided a rough definition of these terms, saying, “tasavvuf and *'irfan* mean being free of all vices [*raza'il*], adorned with all virtues [*faza'il*], and observing the exoteric and the esoteric [aspects] of the Shari'a.‡ This definition clearly draws on that of Ibn Sina in his *al-Isharat* and Dasktaki's treatise *Maqamat al-'arifin*, discussed earlier. Darabi, a teacher of philosophy in Shiraz, was fully aware of the Avicennan tradition of *'irfan*. As a member of the Shirazi intellectual elite, he likely knew Sadra personally during the later stages of the Sadra's teaching career, and Darabi actually mentions the latter's name with approval in *Maqamat al-salikin* and in a small treatise called *Maslak-i ahl-i*

\* Darabi, *Latifa*, 108–9.

† Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 150.

‡ Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 148.

'*irfan*.\* Sadra's mystical philosophy, however, does not seem to have informed Darabi's notion of 'irfan. The latter's philosophical approach, especially to fundamental questions of the metaphysics of being, was similar to that of many of his contemporaries in that it remained largely Avicennan.† The primary medium through which he interpreted the Avicennan tradition is the work of Nasir al-Din Tusi, whose name appears more frequently in Darabi's writings than that of any other scholar. Darabi cited passages from Tusi's works frequently, with many of the quotations taken from *Sharh al-tajrid* and *Awsaf al-ashraf*.‡

Yet, Darabi's notion of 'irfan, as explained in *Mi'raj*, was far from just being derived from this Avicennan tradition. Rather, he built his notion of 'irfan on his innovative synthesis of multiple traditions of learning, from philosophy and Sufism to the rich tradition of Persian poetry in Shiraz. Thus far my discussion of Darabi has focused on his status as a religious scholar and the way his scholarly background and commitments informed his conception of 'irfan. Yet Darabi was also a poet from the city that was home to two of the most celebrated and popular Persian poets, Hafez and Sa'di. Centuries after these poets' deaths, the cultural environment of Shiraz was still indelibly marked by the legacy of these two towering figures in the history of Persian literature. Interestingly for this study, Darabi composed poetry under the pen name 'Arif, an indication of the significance of this notion in Darabi's overall mystical-poetic thought. Furthermore, Darabi is the author of what can be considered the first commentary on the ghazals of Hafez.§ His *Latifa-yi ghaybi*, a brief commentary on a limited number of Hafez's odes, is

\* Darabi, *Maqamat al-salikin*, 323–24, as well as *Maslak* MS, 190.

† See, for example, in his comments on the issue of *vahdat al-vujud va al-mawjud*, which appear on the margins. Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 151. The lack of attention to Sadra's philosophy is not surprising, even for a denizen of Shiraz. We know that despite Muhammad-Tahir Qummi's early attacks on Sadra for his synthesis of Sufism with philosophy, Sadra's philosophy remained marginal in philosophical circles until the end of the eighteenth century and the emergence of Mulla 'Ali Nuri (d. 1830). See Ashtiyani's remarks in this regard in "Introduction III," cvi–cviii. It is also worth mentioning that Darabi wrote a work called *A Treatise on the Existence of the Imaginal World* (*Risala fi tahqiq 'alam al-misal*), which indicates the extent to which Sufi-Illuminationist trends influenced his thought. In this treatise Darabi contends that, although the existence of such a realm cannot be proved by reasoning, it has been confirmed by mystical visions and also by implication in hadith literature. See Darabi, *Risala* MS. See also Ashkevari's brief report of this treatise in Ashkevari, "'Alam al-misal," 34–35.

‡ Darabi also frequently quotes from Tusi's foundational theological work, *Tajrid al-i'tiqad*. See, for example, Darabi, *Mi'raj* MS, 137–38.

§ The only work preceding *Latifa* in this genre is Davani's commentary on a single ghazal and two lines of poetry from Hafez. See Davani, *Naqd-i niyazi*.

arguably the most widely read of his works, certainly among Persian belles-lettrists. It is also the work in which he used the category of 'irfan most frequently and consistently. Given the popularity of *Latifa* among a wide range of learned Iranians who were interested in reading about Hafez's poetry, this work may have played a more important role than *Mi'raj* in the establishment and spread of the notion of 'irfan.\*

As Darabi mentions in his introduction of the work, the major impetus for the writing of *Latifa* was to defend Hafez against increasing attacks by critics who accused the poet of being a Sunni and a heretic based upon their reading of his odes.† I have not been able to find any literary evidence of Hafez being attacked in anti-Sufi literature, but it is quite obvious from the text of *Latifa* as well as from the reason stated by its author for its writing that Hafez was targeted by the puritan defenders of orthodoxy who attacked Sufism. In fact, it would be surprising if this were not the case, given Hafez's subversive and erotic imagery, his syncretistic and pluralist tendencies, and his anti-establishment tone and indulgent manners.

Darabi's commentary, the earliest substantial one in which Hafez's poems are interpreted in a symbolic and otherworldly manner that goes against the grain of their literal meaning, should be understood in the context of such attacks. The long tradition of treating Hafez's language symbolically, as representative of a purely metaphysical eros, might best be attributed to the desire among religious readers to make this beloved Persian poet acceptable to the guardians of orthodoxy. Doing this required the domestication of the explicitly sexual, pluralistic, and sometimes antinomian nature of Hafez's language. The subversive potential of his poetry had to be neutralized by transferring its referents to the afterworld and a heavenly beloved.

In his attempt to avoid the stigma of Sufism and associate himself with the new paradigm of 'irfan as an alternative, Darabi found in Hafez, with his anti-establishment tone and aversion to religious formality and hypocrisy, an important ally. His imagined community of *ahl-i 'irfan* was not entangled in a convoluted and corrupt web of social hierarchies, and it found a natural home in the world of Hafez. I say "imagined community," because the notion of 'irfan was still in its infancy, and no set of beliefs yet bound together a like-minded group of elite 'arifin. Religious communities need founding myths, and Darabi was engaged in myth-making. By referring frequently to

\* The popularity of *Latifa* is evident from the number of extant manuscripts; more than one hundred survive around the world. Since the emergence of print in Persia, it has been published several times. Most notably, it was among the first publications printed at Dar al-Funun, the first modern-style university established in Iran, where it was published in 1886.

† Darabi, *Latifa*, 7.

prominent Sufis and Sufi-minded poets such as Ibn 'Arabi, Najm al-Din Kubra, 'Ala al-Dawla Hamadani, Shams al-Din Maghribi, Baba Afzal Kashani, Fakhr al-Din 'Iraqi, and others and by positioning them as part and parcel of a tradition of 'irfan that could be traced back to the first imam, who was the "the head of the chain of the lords of 'irfan" (*sar halqa-yi arbab-i 'irfan*),\* he created an imagined community of 'irfan-minded people that had existed throughout the ages. In doing so, he took a first step toward building an actual present community.

Darabi's attempt to build an imagined community of 'irfan-minded people manifested itself in another way in a short treatise that has no title but is catalogued under the heading *Risala dar maslak-i ahl al-'irfan* and appears at the end of *Mi'raj*. In it he lists a number of prominent Shi'i jurists who were also theologians, philosophers, scholars of hadith, and so on and who, according to Darabi, supported the path of the folk of 'irfan (*mashrab-i ahl-i 'irfan*). In addition to these names, he lists some of the works authored by these figures that he said demonstrate their inclination toward 'irfan. Many of these are the figures and writings studied earlier. It is helpful, however, to list them here in the order in which Darabi presents them:†

Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Awsaf al-ashraf*, *Aghaz va anjam*

Muhammad b. 'Ali b. Abi Jumhur Ahsha'i, *'Avali al-la'ali*, *Mujli mir'at al-yaqin*

Shaykh Jamal al-Din Hilli ('Allama), *Minhaj al-karama*

Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili, his son Sadr al-Din, and his brother Salah al-Din Baba Afzal Kashani (d. 1213), *Zajr al-nafs*, *Madarij al-kamal*, and others

Sayyid Haydar Amuli, *Jami' al-asrar*

Sayyid Murtaza 'Alam al-Huda (d. 1044), *Durar al-fava'id*

Sayyid Razi (d. 1015), *Nahj al-balaqa*, *Misbah al-shari'a*‡

Shaykh Zayn al-Din Ahmad Jubba'i 'Amili (Shahid Sani), *Munyat al-murid*

Shaykh Shams al-Din Jizzini 'Amili (Shahid Avval [d. 1386])

Shaykh Rajab Bursi (d. 1410)

Shaykh 'Ali b. Hilal Jaza'iri (d. 1530)

Sayyid b. Tavus, *Iqbal al-a'mal*, and others

Shaykh Ibn Fahd Hilli (d. 1437), *al-Tahsin*, *Udda al-da'i*

Shaykh Baha'i

Mir Damad, *al-Khal'atiyya*, *al-Khalsa al-malakutiyya*, and others

\* For example, Darabi, *Latifa*, 8.

† Darabi, *Maslak* MS, 188–91.

‡ Esoteric sermons and sayings attributed to Imam 'Ali, some included in *Nahj al-balagha*, were the subjects of extensive commentaries by mystically minded ulama, especially beginning in the seventeenth century. Darabi was aware of the shakiness of *Misbah's* attribution to 'Ali.

Muhammad Baqir Khurasani (Muhaqqiq Sabzavari, d. 1679), *al-Kifaya*\*  
 Majlisi Sr., because of his responses to Mulla Tahir Qummi  
 'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani (Fayyaz)  
 Mirza Hasan Gilani Qummi (d. 1709)<sup>†</sup>  
 Mulla Muhsin Kashani (Fayz)  
 Mulla Sadra, *al-Asfar*, *al-Shavahid*, *al-'Arshiyya*, and others  
 Shaykh Husayn Tunikabuni<sup>‡</sup>

Such lists are a regular feature of early 'irfani writings of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. They are an indication of the urgent need to legitimize the nascent 'irfanian discourse by portraying uncontroversial and prominent figures among the ulama as sympathetic to the folk of 'irfan.

Another important aspect of Darabi's effort is his portrayal of ahl-i 'irfan as a group with a distinct vocabulary. At the end of *Latifa*, under the heading "The Terminology of the Folk of 'Irfan" (*istilahat-i ahl-i 'irfan*), he includes a concise lexicon of technical terms used mainly by Hafez and other Sufi poets. The lexicon is somewhat similar to that offered by Dashtaki in *Maqamat*, but a key difference is that Darabi's list uses Hafez as the source of the terminology rather than an elitist philosopher-Sufi like Suhrawardi.<sup>§</sup>

Darabi's efforts to establish a distinct 'irfanian discourse by imagining a community, developing a vocabulary, and defending it as an authentically Shi'i tradition were continued by his disciples and Sufi contemporaries. This was most notably the case in the Zahabi lineage, where Shaykh 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati and Sayyid Qutb al-Din Nayrizi followed in Darabi's footsteps.

\* He was included here solely on the basis of his perceived views on the permissibility of ghina in *al-Kifaya* (which would allow zikr and sama' sessions to be permissible as well).

† The son of 'Abd al-Razzaq. He lived most of his life in Qum, where he died in 1709. Zanzuzi says that he was persecuted by the people of Qum, at the instigation of Muhammad-Tahir Qummi, for his Sufi proclivities. See Zanzuzi, *Riyaz al-janna*, 4:438–40.

‡ He was, along with Fayz and Fayyaz, a prominent student of Mulla Sadra. Afandi describes him as "a Sufi, and a philosopher of the Illuminationist School." See Afandi, *Riyaz*, 2:34.

§ *Istilahat* does not seem to be included as part of some of the earlier manuscripts of *Latifa* that I was able to check and therefore it is possible that it is a later addition to the text of *Latifa*. As such, it needs to be taken with a grain of salt, so to speak. Another difference is that Darabi drew on classical works like Shabistari's *Gulshan-i raz* instead of a treatise like *Kalimat al-tasavvuf* (see Darabi, *Latifa*, 19–20 and 38).

### 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati and *Burhan al-murtazin*

Because of the extremely hostile environment in Isfahan, 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati, a disciple of Najib who was later recognized as the next pole of the Zahabi network, moved to the vicinity of Shiraz, a place more welcoming and tolerant of unorthodox figures. According to his disciple, Istahbanati died in anonymity in 1714.\* The only piece of his work that survives today is a treatise titled *Burhan al-murtazin*, which was published recently in Iran.†

This monograph is not very original, but it contains themes that substantiate my claim about the influence of Darabi and Mu'azzin on later developments in 'irfanian discourse. *Burhan* contains an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue. The lengthy introduction addresses the definition of Sufism and attempts to prove that the Sufi path is "the same as the path of the Prophet and his legatees, peace be upon them, and the purified among their partisans."‡ It is clearly inspired by and sometimes copied verbatim from Mu'azzin's *Tuhfa*.

The first chapter is dedicated to the question of the "pleasant voice" (*sawt-i hasan*), its permissibility, and how it differs from illicit music (*ghina*). The Sufi practice of sama' is clearly at stake. Istahbanati's contribution is hardly original; most of the content of this chapter is either a paraphrase or a verbatim copy of Darabi's *Maqamat al-salikin*, a monograph on the permissibility of music. The next chapter of *Burhan* focuses on the question of ecstasy during zikr gatherings, another controversial topic previously covered in both Mu'azzin's *Tuhfa* and Darabi's *Farah al-salikin*. Chapter 3 is about yet another controversial issue, that of some involuntary, and sometimes violent, physical manifestations of Sufi meditative practices. The final two chapters of *Burhan* deal with two other salient debates for Sufis of the time, and both are aimed at establishing a strong connection between Sufi lineages and the infallible imams. Istahbanati begins his third chapter by mentioning Mu'azzin and his seminal work, *Tuhfa*, continuing with an extensive quotation from the work about how all Sufi lineages go back to one of the imams and how the Sufi networks of his time, especially the Zahabis, trace their

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1199. On his date of death, see Khavari, *Zahabiyya*, 296.

† We do not know when this treatise was finished. Internal evidence tells us, however, that Darabi was not alive at the time of *Burhan*'s writing. However, as our discussion of Darabi's longevity indicates, we know that he was definitely alive until the year 1702 or 1703, which means *Burhan* must have been written between 1702 and 1714, when Istahbanati died.

‡ Istahbanati, *Burhan al-murtazin*, 6.

spiritual lineage to the eighth imam.\* Finally, in the epilogue of *Burhan*, Istahbanati follows the example of Darabi as he outlines the myth of an uninterrupted tradition of 'irfan by identifying prominent Twelver figures who, according to him, "followed the path of Sufism and 'irfan."<sup>†</sup> The use of the term 'irfan in conjunction with Sufism is significant, because it is one of the first cases of such use after Darabi. Istahbanati was aware of Darabi's writings and seems to have adopted this new use of 'irfan from him. Moreover, Istahbanati's list of 'irfan-minded ulama is an almost verbatim translation into Persian of Darabi's list in *Maslak*.<sup>‡</sup>

A noteworthy feature of Darabi's and Istahbanati's list is the inclusion of a considerable number of philosophers. Mir Damad is included in the list despite the disdain he sometimes expressed for popular and organized Sufism, and his mystically oriented works are emphasized, including *al-Khalsa al-malakutiyya*, which contains an extraordinary autobiographical narrative of two of his ecstatic visions. Mulla Sadra and his students Fayz, Fayyaz, and Tunikabuni are particularly prominent on the list, and the inclusion of such philosophers among the 'irfan-minded religious scholars is significant. As we saw in the discussion of *Hikmat al-'arifin*, the earliest attack from outside philosophical circles claiming that Sadra's philosophy was an innovation came from Muhammad-Tahir Qummi toward the end of the seventeenth century, when he attacked Sadra for what he considered the double heresy of positioning Sufi ideas within a philosophical framework. In fact, such attacks from the most prominent anti-Sufi figure of the era may have been part of what brought Sadra and his philosophy to the attention of Sufi-minded people such as Darabi. The fact that Sadra and his students had mystical inclinations helped Istahbanati and others overlook their occasional criticism of Sufism and emphasize their pro-Sufi ideas and ideals. Moreover, given how the Zahabis themselves emerged as a reformed Twelver Sufi network precisely at this time, it is likely that Istahbanati, similar to Mu'azzin

\* Istahbanati, *Burhan al-murtazin*, 173–82.

† Istahbanati, *Burhan al-murtazin*, 189.

‡ There are only two differences in Istahbanati's list. First, he begins the list of later Shi'i figures with Mulla Ahmad Ardabili, otherwise known as Muqaddas Ardabili, to whom the notoriously anti-Sufi work *Hadiqat al-shi'a* is attributed. Istahbanati not only quotes seemingly pro-Sufi lines from Ardabili's works to prove his Sufi proclivities but also rejects the attribution of *Hadiqa* to him, referring the reader to Darabi's writing on the issue. Darabi addresses this controversy in several places in his writings (see Darabi, *Maslak* MS, 190, and, more extensively, Darabi, *Maqamat al-salikin*, 463–65). Second, Istahbanati adds to his list the name of Sayyid Ahmad 'Alavi, Mir Damad's student, on the basis of treatises like *Ma'arif ilahiyya*, his commentary on *al-Shifa*, and other works. This despite Sayyid Ahammad's attacks on storytellers and Abu Muslim, mentioned in chapter 2.

in *Tuhfa*, sympathized with Sadra's critique of organized Sufism, associating it with the previous "inauthentic" and "vulgar" form of Sufism that did not comply with the way of the twelve imams. Here we see the initial stages of a process in which Sadra's philosophical system was gradually incorporated into the newly emerging framework of 'irfan. Later, in the Qajar period, Sadra's thought became a hallmark of 'irfanian discourse, but during this initial stage, Sadra and his students were not the central players in the formation of this discourse. Instead, they were appropriated because their overall intellectual outlook lent itself to the purposes of Sufis such as Darabi, Istahbanati, and, later, Nayrizi, who did the work of building an authentically Twelver 'irfanian discourse.

### Sayyid Qutb al-Din Nayrizi, *Fasl al-khitab*, and the Zahabi Network

Sayyid Muhammad Qutb al-Din Nayrizi (d. 1760) was born around 1688 in Nayriz, a small town in the ancient province of Fars.\* He is considered by Zahabi Sufis to be the successor to 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati and the thirty-second qutb of the network.† The network underwent a revival under the leadership of Nayrizi, who was a prolific writer and respected teacher for nearly a half-century.‡ In Zahabi sources, he is frequently called the Reviver (mujaddid).§

Nayrizi has been at the center of Zahabi hagiographical accounts since the nineteenth century, when the first detailed account of his life was written by the influential Zahabi master Abu al-Qasim Sharifi Shirazi (d. 1869), otherwise known as Mirza Baba. Shirazi was Nayrizi's grandson, a poet with the pen-name Raz, and the thirty-fifth pole of the network, and his account does not lend itself well to the purposes of historians. It is peppered with miraculous events (*karamat*), fantastical narratives, and anachronistic accounts of meetings between Nayrizi and prominent religious scholars. For example, we are told that Mirza Muhammad Nishaburi (b. 1764, d. 1817) met Nayrizi on Khark Island near the Persian Gulf, where the latter had taken refuge to dedicate his time to prayers and ascetic practices in seclusion.\*\* However, Mirza Muhammad, who is also known as the Akhbari, was not even born when Nayrizi died, in 1760. Similarly, Nayrizi is said to have traveled to Ahsa and to have met and impressed Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i (b. 1752, d. 1826) with his recipe for spiritual exercise, which the Hidden Imam affirmed in a dream the

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1:v. See Sharifi Shirazi, "Tarikh-i hayat," 4. For his date of birth, see Khavari, *Zahabiyya*, 299–300.

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1199.

‡ For an account of later developments in Zahabi leadership, see Lewisohn, "Modern Persian Sufism, Part II."

§ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1:xviii.

\*\* Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 24–25.

latter had while in seclusion.\* Again, this is a historical impossibility, since Ahsa'i would have been a small child when Nayrizi died.

The story of Nayrizi's initiation into Sufism as told by Raz Shirazi follows a trajectory familiar in Sufi hagiography. He is said to have spent years mastering and then teaching the official fields of discursive knowledge, especially the rational sciences of philosophy and theology, with the purpose of finding satisfaction and salvation.† Disillusioned, he gave up the madrasa and left Shiraz in search of someone who could teach him true knowledge. Finally, he found an accomplished Sufi master, 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati, and became his disciple.‡ After he spent many years in seclusion, meditation, and self-mortification, his master was impressed with his spiritual progress and promised to give his daughter to him in marriage in the future, a move that became standard for Zahabi masters and served as confirmation of their choice of successor.§

Given the layers of hagiographical embellishment, it is difficult to construct a historically reliable narrative of Nayrizi's life. It is clear that he spent most of the first couple of decades of his life in or near Shiraz. He then moved to Isfahan, probably during the last decade of Safavid rule, and he witnessed the fall of the Safavid capital.\*\* In the aftermath of this catastrophic event, he stayed in Iran for a time, trying to convince the ulama and other influential figures to take the steps he believed were necessary to restore order to the land of Iran. Later hagiographers even claimed that he gave the last Safavid king prior warning of the catastrophe,†† and Nayrizi himself claimed that his master had foretold the fall of the Safavids.‡‡ Whether or not we accept such accounts, there is no question that Nayrizi wrote extensively about his view and his diagnosis of the fall of the Safavid dynasty in several of his

\* Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 33–34.

† Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 4–6.

‡ Ja'fariyan asserts that Nayrizi met his master in Isfahan, but this is based on a misreading of the relevant verses in *Fasl al-khitab* (see Ja'fariyan, *Safaviyya*, 3:1310). Early Zahabi hagiographies claim this meeting happened in Istahban, the hometown of Nayrizi's master (see Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 7). This seems a more reasonable claim, because, as mentioned earlier, the seat of the Zahabi masters was moved to the province of Fars during the last decade of Najib's life.

§ Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 7, and Khuyi, *Mizan al-Savab*, 3:1317.

\*\* In *Fasl al-khitab*, he mentions that he spent seven years in the companionship of Mulla Sadiq Ardistani (d. 1721) in Isfahan.

†† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1249–54 (see the long footnote by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Husayni, better known as Majd al-Ashraf, the great-grandson of Nayrizi). The same story, with minor differences, is also told by Raz Shirazi in Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 29–31.

‡‡ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1:104.

works, including an independent treatise titled *Tibb al-mamalik*.<sup>\*</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the fall, Nayrizi stayed in Iran, hoping that the situation would change.<sup>†</sup> Eventually, though, he gave up hope and followed many of the learned of Isfahan in their exodus to the 'Atabat.<sup>‡</sup> There, according to Raz Shirazi, Nayrizi became a prominent teacher to both Shi'i and Sunni students in Najaf.<sup>§</sup> He may have returned to Shiraz for a brief period, only to return to Najaf in 1750, where he spent the final decade of his life. He died there on April 5, 1760.<sup>\*\*</sup> Raz Shirazi portrays Nayrizi during his years in Najaf as a well-connected religious scholar who was given land grants by the Ottoman Pasha in recognition of his prominence. A unique manuscript dating to six or seven years into Nayrizi's stay in Najaf (1756–1757), however, contains a letter in which he writes that he had been unable to find patrons or sponsors to support his family and had thus incurred substantial debt.<sup>††</sup>

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1266. For a detailed analysis of this important political treatise and its full transcript in Arabic, see Ja'fariyan, *Safaviyya*, 3:1309–83. While no manuscript under this title has survived, Ja'fariyan has reported extensively on a unique manuscript preserved without a title in the library of the Shrine of Ma'suma in Qum, which he argues is *Tibb al-mamalik*.

† See Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1266, where he mentions the return of Shah Tahmasp II to Isfahan. He initially takes this as a sign of things moving in the right direction, but later he is disappointed by the apathy of the religious and political elite and leaves Iran for Najaf.

‡ He chooses the word “escape” to refer to his departure from Iran, an indication of his mounting frustration with his failure to convince the elite of his time of his remedies for restoring Iran as a Shi'ite nation. It was in Najaf, he says, that he was able to put together the verses that constitute *Fasl al-khitab* as it exists today. Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1266, 1267.

§ Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 34. He is even said to have taught Ibn 'Arabi's *al-Futuhat* there, educating prominent mystically minded students such as Sayyid Mahdi Tabataba'i Bahr al-Ulum (d. 1797) and Mawla Mihrab Gilani (d. 1802), among others. See Ma'sum-'Ali Shah, *Tara'iq al-haqa'iq*, 3:217, where he paraphrases Raz Shirazi's *Sharayit al-tariqa*.

\*\* Umm-Salama Nayrizi, *Jami' al-kulliyat*, 19.

†† See Nayrizi, *Risala-yi juz' va kull* MS, f. 16–17, where he complains to his disciple Hashim Darvish (who succeeded Nayrizi as pole of the Zahabi network) about his financial situation. He blames his difficult situation on the negligence of people to pay their dues to the descendants of the Prophet (he was a sayyid). Despairing of finding any sources of help in Iraq, he asks Hashim to remind his countrymen while he is traveling in Fars of their duty to take care of the family of the Prophet. This stands in contrast to Raz Shirazi's embellished account of how the Ottoman authorities, impressed with Nayrizi's knowledge and erudition, gave him a generous stipend from Baghdad as well as a land grant (*tuyul*) in Basra. See Parvizi, *Tazkira*, 35.

Nayrizi was a prolific author.\* He wrote works of Arabic grammar and treatises eulogizing the infallible imams. Most of his writings, however, are dedicated to the explication of his mystical thought. His most celebrated and extensive work is *Fasl al-khitab*, also known as *al-Hikmat al-'alaviyya*.† This lengthy work of poetry is written in Arabic, and in it Nayrizi laid out his mystical worldview in detail. Although most of *Fasl al-khitab* was written at the height of Nayrizi's career as a Sufi master in Isfahan as Safavid rule crumbled, he assembled the scattered pieces and edited them as a single work only after the fall of the city. It was in the relatively safe and tranquil environment of Najaf that he was able to gather the disparate parts between the two covers of *Fasl al-khitab*.‡

The picture of Nayrizi reflected in *Fasl al-khitab* is that of a maverick, a mystically minded, erudite, Akhbari-leaning scholar who has been marginalized. He is angry both at the pseudo-ulama (his name for members of the religious establishment) and at pseudo-faqirs (his name for Sufis) for neglecting the teachings of the imams and corrupting God's religion. He considers himself a servant of the lineage of learned and great Shi'i 'arifin, "the kings of spiritual poverty" (*muluk al-faqr*). "I have served the 'arifin," he says, "the leaders of the 'Alid Shi'a party . . . who were the kings of poverty in their age, and the tariqa with which they associated is the holy razavi order known as the Zahabiyya."§ He highlights the name of his pir, 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati, saying the latter was the "pride of the greatest divine men [*ilahiyyin*] in asceticism and the king of kings of poverty, my shaykh and master, and my reference for divinely-endowed philosophy [*al-hikma al-mawhibiyya*]. . . . [He] was unique among the dervishes of his age, and I met no one who could match his glory."\*\* Unfortunately, he laments, the people of his master's time did not recognize the man's great spiritual gifts.†† He mentions only one other figure as his teacher, Shah Muhammad Darabi, under whom he studied hadith and who was, according to Nayrizi, "the teacher of all of the learned

\* To my knowledge, the most accurate enumeration of Nayrizi's works is that of Khajavi. See Khajavi, "Introduction," 15–33. Most of Nayrizi's writings have been published in recent decades thanks to the active Zahabi publication house in Shiraz (Intisharat-i Khanaqah-i Ahmadi). For another detailed bibliography of Nayrizi's works, see Khavari, *Zahabiyya*, 526–65. The earliest report we have regarding Nayrizi's writings is by his daughter, Umm-Salama, in her *Jami' al-kulliyat*. She mentions that her father penned fourteen works, though she names only a few. See Umm-Salama Nayrizi, *Jami' al-kulliyat*, 18.

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1:28.

‡ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1309 and 1267.

§ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1198 and 1318.

\*\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1199.

†† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1199.

in Shiraz in his time.”\* Both this statement and a close examination of Nayrizi's writings make it clear that Darabi was a major influence in the formation of Nayrizi's intellectual outlook. This influence played itself out in more than one way.

Nayrizi's *Fasl*, like Istahbanati's *Burhan* and the writings of Darabi, evokes a sense of deeply rooted tradition, of a community of like-minded people made up of “the knowledgeable people of the past and the pioneering ulama whose writings demonstrate that they were sincere friends of the impoverished ‘arifin [*al-fuqara al-‘arifin*]. Some were even their disciples in their mystical quest [*sayri-him va suluki-him*].”† Nayrizi's avoidance of the term *Sufi* is noticeable here. His list of such people contains familiar names, including many we have already encountered in Mu‘azzin's *Tuhfa* and in the epilogue of *Burhan*. But his canon of ahl-i ‘irfan departs from that of his predecessors in that he creates a more elaborate hagiography that assimilates the most important Sufi-minded figures of the recent past into the Zahabi narrative of sacred history.

The first major difference is that the names of two foundational figures in the official Safavid spiritual lineage, Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili and his son, who are mentioned without fail in almost all seventeenth century Sufi writings, are dropped in Nayrizi's list. The fact that Nayrizi felt no need to include the legendary founder of the Safavid order in his list is a clear reflection of the dramatic fall of the dynasty.

The second major difference, which reflects Nayrizi's agenda as the master of the Zahabi network, is the way biographies of figures such as Shaykh Baha'i and Fayz Kashani are embellished and expanded in an effort to prove that these men belong to the Zahabi spiritual lineage. His statement about Shaykh Baha'i deserves to be quoted in full, as it introduces a new hagiographical layer to the mythical past that is constructed for 'irfan:

And among them [the friends of the folk of poverty] is the teacher of my abovementioned teacher Maula Shah Muhammad Darabi, namely . . . Shaykh Baha al-Din Muhammad 'Amili . . . he entered the divine order of the folk of poverty, and his allegiance [*iradat*] is attributed to . . . Shaykh Mu'min Mashhadi, and the latter is one of the most important disciples of Shaykh Muhammad 'Arif, to whom is linked the allegiance of my *shaykh al-irshad*, the one to whom I refer in walking the path of poverty, Shaykh 'Ali-Naqi Istahbanati. God willing, I will mention his spiritual lineage [*mashikha*] in this book . . . as it is reflected in the scroll

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1201.

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1204.

of the Zahabi, Kubravi, Razavi order. This scroll was bequeathed to the noble shaykh, Shaykh Hatam, by Shaykh Muhammad 'Arif, whose cloister [*sawmi'a*] is in the holy city of Mashhad and he [Shaykh Hatam] to Shaykh Muhammad-'Ali Mu'azzin, and he to Shaykh Najib al-Din Riza Tabrizi, and he to my above-mentioned master, 'Ali-Naqi, and the scroll is in my possession today.\*

This passage contains a number of significant pieces of information. First, this is the first time we see Shaykh Baha'i explicitly portrayed as an initiate to a specific Sufi network, the Zahabiyya. A couple of pages later, in a similar description, Fayz Kashani is also said to have been initiated to the order via Shaykh Muhammad Mashhadi.<sup>†</sup> The anachronistic connection of these figures to the Zahabi network is an attempt to construct a hagiographical narrative that emphasizes the network's ties to celebrated figures in the ulama. Conversely, such attempts can be understood as the earliest stages of the development of 'irfanian genealogies for Shi'i ulama modeled after Sufi spiritual genealogies. Nayrizi mentions these connections in the passive voice, an indication that he had no concrete evidence for them; whether he concocted such links himself or was repeating recently developed rumors is impossible to ascertain.<sup>‡</sup> Nayrizi's task of connecting the Zahabi network to prominent figures among the ulama was furthered by his practice of assimilating figures such as Shaykh Mu'min Mashhadi and Shaykh Muhammad 'Arif (Pir Palanduz), who were probably prominent Nurbakhshi masters in the early to mid-seventeenth century, into the lineage.<sup>§</sup> These revisionist attempts have personal ramifications as well: the lineage Nayrizi constructs positioned him as the exclusive representative not only of the Nurbakshi line but also of the legacy of Sufi-minded luminaries such as Shaykh Baha'i, Mulla Sadra, and Fayz Kashani. His status as the spiritual successor of such towering figures was given concrete form in the scroll that he claimed to have inherited from his masters.\*\*

The third noticeable change has to do with the way some philosophers in Nayrizi's narrative are presented. Because of his strong opposition to traditional philosophical discourse (which will be discussed shortly), Nayrizi

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1212.

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1222.

‡ This attribution is not mentioned in Istahbanati's work.

§ For more on these figures, see Anzali, "Emergence."

\*\* As demonstrated elsewhere, the scroll that contained the purported spiritual lineage of the Zahabi network was produced by a close collaboration between Najib and Mu'azzin. See Anzali, "Emergence."

was careful to explain that philosophers he endorsed in *Fasl*, including Tusi, Davani, and Mir Damad, had conversion-like experiences at relatively late stages of their careers and were rescued from “the abyss of philosophical illusions.”\* Mulla Sadra, however, is an exception. Nayrizi maintained that he was a friend of “the folk of poverty” from the very beginning of his career and that his philosophical writings were merely an acquiescence to the spirit of his age. He wrote, “[B]ecause in his age the philosophers were dominant, he had no choice but to speak in their language, and [that is why] he explained the divine knowledge in possession of the folk of poverty [*al-fuqara al-ilahiyyin*] according to the logic of the philosopher and the language of theologians [*mutakallimun*], and there is no dispute in terminology.”†

Nayrizi added that he had in his possession many of Sadra’s writings, some of which were original copies written by Sadra himself. This is significant, I believe, because it indicates the kind of people for whom Sadra was a defining influence. Nayrizi treats *vahdat al-vujud* (oneness of being) extensively in *Fasl*. His thoughts on the subject reflect a noticeable engagement with Sadra’s writings, and it is probably fair to say that it played an important role in introducing and assimilating Sadra’s philosophical framework into ‘irfanian discourse at its earliest stages of development.

A curious and puzzling addition to Nayrizi’s list of ‘irfan-friendly Shi‘i scholars is Shaykh Hurr ‘Amili! Nayrizi justifies his choice on the basis of a monograph written by ‘Amili and titled *Jawahir al-saniyya fi al-ahadis al-qudsiyya*, a fairly comprehensive collection of Qudsi hadith reports (hadiths in which God himself is the speaker). Given ‘Amili’s strong opposition to Sufism and his important role in the anti-Sufi campaign of the late seventeenth century, one wonders how to make sense of his inclusion. I argue that Nayrizi’s strong aversion to being called a Sufi, his strong rejection of philosophy, and his Akhbari leanings, which are discussed later, can help us understand this inclusion as a sign of the ultimate success of the process of domestication of Sufism in his case. In other words, by the early eighteenth century the landscape had changed so much that, for a religious scholar like Nayrizi, many elements of Qummi and ‘Amili’s attacks on Sufism and philosophy were understood as legitimate critiques leveled against the Sunni pretend-Sufis, or philosophers, of the past. In other words, hermeneutically a possibility had been opened up for Nayrizi not to understand them as his enemies or the enemies of ‘irfanian discourse as he understood it. A focus on

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1204 and 1211.

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1220. Note the similarity of this expression to that used by Darabi.

their advocacy for a spiritual life thoroughly informed by the teachings of the imams, as we saw in the case of Qummi, might have opened the way to consider them as 'irfan-friendly scholars in Nayrizi's mind.\*

A final distinctive feature of Nayrizi's list is his unusual decision to introduce his readers to prominent 'irfan-friendly scholars and mystics he had met *in his own lifetime*.† This list is important, because it gives us information about the members of the learned elite with whom Nayrizi associated. Nayrizi claims a close relationship with six figures: (1) Shah Muhammad Darabi, whom he praises as the teacher of all the knowledgeable people in Shiraz;‡ (2) Muhammad-'Ali Sakaki Shirazi (d. 1722);§ (3) Muhammad-Sadiq Ardistani (d. 1721), with whom, he says, he had a close relationship for seven years;\*\* (4) Aqa Khalil Isfahani [Qazvini] (d. 1136), whom he says he met in

\* Therefore, Nayrizi seems to be deeply influenced by the intellectual movement that was spearheaded by Qummi in many ways. His opposition to philosophy, his understanding of Shi'i spirituality encapsulated in 'irfan, and his attempt to offer an alternative framework of understanding for the notion of the Oneness of Being can all be seen as deeply influenced by Qummi's arguments. In fact, his *Fasl al-khitab*, discussed later, can be read as a response to Qummi's *Hikmat al-'arifin*.

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1203.

‡ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1201.

§ His name appears as Muhammad-'Ali Kali rather than Sakaki in the print version of *Fasl al-khitab* (see Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1201–2). This is most probably an editorial mistake, especially given orthographic similarities that can mislead the reader if the strokes of the letter kaf are not written carefully (a frequent occurrence in Persian manuscripts). Furthermore, the biographical dictionaries do not contain any information on a Muhammad-'Ali Kali. Muhammad-'Ali Sakaki, however, is known from several sources. I have not yet had access to manuscripts of *Fasl* to confirm my sense that this is an error, however. For more on Sakaki see Hazin, *Tarikh*, 179. Unfortunately, contemporaneous sources are silent about the exact network to which Sakaki paid allegiance. A later source, *Farsnama-yi nasiri*, associates Sakaki with the Zahabi network. See Fasa'i, *Farsnama-yi nasiri*, 2:1171. This seems to be conjecture based on the prominence of the Zahabi network in Shiraz in Sakaki's lifetime rather than a reflection of an earlier source. Sakaki's affiliation with organized Sufism is clearly mentioned in Hazin's remarks as well, but it is highly unlikely that the former was a Zahabi. If that were the case, why would Nayrizi have failed to mention it? In fact, given Nayrizi's effacement of the Nurbakhshi identity of contemporaneous Sufi masters he mentions earlier and given Nayrizi's own statement about the reservations some of the figures had about one another (see Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1203), it is plausible to believe that Sakaki was a Nurbakhshi.

\*\* We are told that Ardistani was expelled from Isfahan because of his Sufi proclivities. Although we cannot be sure of the historicity of this incident (see Ja'fariyan, *Savafiyya*, 2:587), there is no doubt about his Sufi inclinations. Zanuzi describes him as someone with "a strong passion for Sufism." See Zanuzi, *Riyaz al-janna*, 3:316. It is not difficult to see how this could have been a link that connected him

Isfahan;\* (5) Amir Ibrahim Qazvini (d. 1736);† and (6) Mir Muhammad-Taqi Khurasani (d. circa. 1737), whom he praises as “the knowledgeable sayyid renowned in every quarter of the earth, [who is numbered] among the guides of those who seek guidance on the spiritual path . . . and I accompanied him frequently when I entered the holy city of Mashhad.”‡ Research on the background of these figures reveals that of the six, three (numbers 2, 5, and 6) were most likely affiliated with the Nurbakhshi Sufi network, and two others (numbers 1 and 3) had strong mystical proclivities.

Reading Nayrizi's list of 'irfan-minded people also gives us information about his library. He points out with satisfaction that he possesses some of the works of Sayyid Haydar, Mulla Sadra, Darabi, and Fayz, among others. He makes specific reference to Sayyid Haydar's *Jami' al-asrar* and *al-Muhit al-a'zam*, saying that he “adored” these two books.§ He also mentions many of Mulla Sadra's monographs, such as the latter's commentaries on the Qur'an and *Usul al-kafi*, as well as his *al-Asfar al-arba'a* and *al-Shavahid al-rububiyya*. As for Darabi, Nayrizi mentions with pride that he is in possession of the original copy of *Mi'raj al-kamal*, the treatise discussed at length earlier in this chapter. Finally, he mentions two works of commentary by Fayz, *al-Vafi* and *al-Safi*, saying that he also has the latter's *Divan* in his library. These works give us a clear indication of the intellectual and spiritual traditions to

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with students including Nayrizi, 'Abd al-Rahim Damavandi (discussed in the next chapter), and Hazin Lahiji.

\* Tehrani, *Tabaqat*, 6:15–16, and also in Qazvini, *Tatmim*, 142–46.

† See 'Amili, *A'yan al-shi'a*, 2:227–8. On his Sufi proclivities and his close relationship to Mir Muhammad-Taqi, see Qazvini, *Tatmim*, 85.

‡ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1202. Khurasani is known in many sources as Shahi. For more on him, see Qazvini, *Tatmim*, 84–87. A note of caution about the author of *Tatmim* is necessary here. He inherited strong anti-Sufi sentiments from his teacher Mulla Khalil Qazvini, and, after giving a quite detailed account of Khurasani's miracles and his exemplary piety and asceticism, he feels it necessary to establish that “all the people of knowledge and nobility who met him and with whom I met mentioned that he never spoke as Sufis speak about their superstition, their technical vocabulary, their pretensions, and beliefs” (Qazvini, *Tatmim*, 86). Curiously, the name of the Sufi network with which Khurasani associated is not mentioned either by Nayrizi or in other biographical sources that mention him. A unique manuscript, however, mentions him as a master of the Nurbakhshi Sufi network. His name appears in the lineage, where he is said to have been a student of Muhammad Mu'min Sidiri of the khanaqah in Sidir. See Shirvani, *Riyaz al-siyaha*, 336. Most probably his source is Anonymous, *Silsila-yi sidiriyya-yi nurbakhshiyya-yi hamadaniyya* MS, f. 2. For more on this specific khanaqah, see my recent article in Persian: Anzali, “Khanaqah-i nurbakhshiyya dar sidir.”

§ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1207.

which Nayrizi saw himself as heir. The same cluster would become the lineage and heritage claimed by later 'irfan-minded people.

In addition to the information we glean from Nayrizi's accounts of the 'irfan-minded people of his time, the topics he deals with in *Fasl* give us a wealth of information about the intellectual and social forces of the period. Nayrizi's heroes are a group he calls the folk of poverty (*ahl al-faqr*), a chosen group of the learned (*ahl al-'ilm*) also known as the 'urafa.\* They stand as the pinnacle of creation in opposition to three groups that form what I call a "triangle of evil" in his thought.

One corner of this triangle is composed of many of the mainstream philosophers and the scholars of kalam who borrow heavily from them. These are Nayrizi's primary targets, and he bashes them for having hijacked the path of God by introducing their innovations, the "foreign disciplines" they have borrowed from the Greeks. Nayrizi's intense rhetoric against philosophy should be understood in the context of the final three decades of Safavid rule, when philosophy came under increased attack.†

The second corner of the triangle of evil is occupied by those whom Nayrizi calls *pseudo-ulama* (*ashbah ahl al-'ilm*). These are closely associated with the philosophers, and Nayrizi argues that the catastrophe visited by God on the people of Iran was primarily in retribution for their failings.‡ The obsession of the political elite with wealth and the resulting corruption of the system in favor of the privileged were matched by an obsession among the pseudo-ulama with social status and closeness to the political elite. These so-called ulama were meant to be the guardians of the teachings of the imams, the ones who commanded good, forbade evil, and advised kings and amirs to rule with justice. Instead, Nayrizi laments, they cared only for status,

\* See, for example, Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 546.

† For example, he attacks basic principles of traditional philosophy such as the exclusive division of concepts into either universal (*kulli*) or specific (*juz'i*) as inapplicable when it comes to the Divine Being. From his perspective, lack of attention to this simple but important shortcoming of traditional logic/philosophy is the major reason that philosophers, theologians, and jurists alike went astray in building their understanding of God's unity on the assumption of either the univocality of being (*ishtirak ma'navi vujud*) or its multivocality (*ishtirak lafzi vujud*). Both positions, Nayrizi holds, fall extremely short of offering a proper understanding of God's unity and caused a feud between different factions of the learned over the real meaning of tawhid. According to Nayrizi, all of them fundamentally misunderstand the unity of God in terms of numerical unity rather than what he considers "the true and essential unity of God" beyond concepts, allusions, and personifications. See Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 1:127–28, 269–301, and 557–62. See also Nayrizi, "Risala-yi vahdat-i 'adadi," 98–101.

‡ See, for example, Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1302.

position, and proximity to the political establishment that allowed them to enjoy worldly pleasures. They failed to distinguish between the true folk of poverty and pseudo-dervishes (*ashbah ahl al-faqr*), and their reaction against the latter created an environment of persecution and hostility toward the former. The actions of this group of pseudo-ulama, says Nayrizi, weakened the legitimacy of the Safavid rule and towering figures among the folk of poverty such as Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili. In his own words,

They blocked the way of poverty because of their love of status, their worldly standing, and their love of leadership . . . they were hostile toward the saints in all gatherings . . . and the knowledgeable people in their era cursed the exalted saints from their pulpits . . . alas, alas, for the illustrious ulama who live in luxury in our times . . . they are amazed by their non-existent erudition, and they have destroyed their towns with this erudition. Their erudition is the hairsplitting of nonsensical statements with philosophical method; their erudition is in imitating people whom they favor based on illusion [*khayal*] without apprehending the meaning of reality. Their erudition is their thoughts on the nuances they have concocted in old marginalia, their erudition is the rejection of His unity, *vahdat al-vujud*, as [explained] in 'Alid philosophy, their erudition is [sticking to] the letter of hadiths outwardly without understanding their meaning with the light of discernment. Their erudition is their illusionary metaphorical interpretations [*ta'vil*] of hadiths without their feeble minds understanding them. Their erudition is their legitimacy and position among the ignorant and haughty amirs. Their erudition is flattering kings for the sake of worldly decorum. Their erudition is abandoning [the practice of] forbidding evil because of their obeisance to kings [and failure to] honor the commands of the Shari'a. Their erudition is blocking the path of all who live in poverty [according to] His Eminence, Prophet Muhammad. Their erudition is hurting the folk whose path is the path of the People of the Bench [*ahl al-suffa*] [of the times of] the Messenger. . . Their erudition is their hate when they curse the saints, exalted they are, in their enmity. Their erudition is blocking the sacred Safavid state from the source of grace.\*

The last corner of the triangle—the final group to attract Nayrizi's ire—is a group of people he calls pseudo-faqirs (*ashbah ahl al-faqr*) to distinguish them from the real saints, the true faqirs, the folk of poverty. There is, of course, a long and strong tradition of prominent Sufis levying harsh criticism against pseudo-Sufis. This self-critical tradition, however, usually reserves space for

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1254–55.

the few who embody the ideals of true Sufism. We do not find this, however, in Nayrizi's approach. He rejects the notion of Sufism altogether, placing it in diametric opposition to *faqr*. It seems that for Nayrizi, terms like Sufi and Sufism are stigmatized beyond hope of redemption. They are so tainted in the public eye that Nayrizi finds the old strategy of differentiating between good and bad Sufis useless. In a strategic semantic retreat, he gives up on the term *sufi* and uses it exactly as opponents of Sufism would. The term *sufi* in Nayrizi's lexicon is a synonym for *mutasavvif*, the pseudo-Sufi of his predecessor.\* Those who previously would have been called true Sufis are now called faqirs, dervishes, or, more frequently, 'arifs.

In what seems an ironic turn for a Sufi master, Nayrizi vehemently admonishes those who accuse him of being a Sufi. "Those liars have called us infidels," he says. "We will truthfully call them stupid."<sup>†</sup> He also says, "In their foolish understanding, and because of their excessive ignorance, they called all the 'arifin Sufis."<sup>‡</sup> In a statement that reveals the continuation of such accusations even after the fall of Isfahan, he says, "I heard the lowly liars accuse me of Sufism, without any knowledge and solely on the basis of their stupidity . . . people like them destroyed the Iranian territories with similar stupid accusations. Those among them who have survived in different corners of your land are [once again] expressing their animosity toward the folk of God [*ahl Allah*] with the same accusation by which they destroyed cities and opposed the great noble Shi'a of 'Ali.<sup>§</sup>

Nayrizi also laments that, in spite of his master's outstanding accomplishments in asceticism and unique mastery of divine secrets, the people around him not only failed learn from him but also looked down on him. "The arrogant people of Isfahan," he says, "belittled the saints in every land. Because of their deficient insight, they called they who were greatest among the pious 'Sufis,' simply because of their asceticism."<sup>\*\*</sup>

At the same time, he takes pride in the history of organized Sufism, though he eschews that term and makes use of alternative titles such as *faqr*

\* For some examples, see Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 2:551, 612 and 3:1182, 1199, 1241, 1243, 1249, and 1302. Interestingly, in most of these cases, Khuyi tries to explain Nayrizi's blanket rejection of the term *Sufi* by resorting to the strategy of differentiating between bad and good Sufis, using the term *sufiyya-yi radi'a* (literally, "bad Sufis") in each instance where Nayrizi uses only the term *Sufi*. Additionally, Khuyi explains Nayrizi's explicit effort to disassociate himself from Sufism in terms of its popular semantic association with heretical and antinomian beliefs (Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 2:552).

† Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1241.

‡ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3: 1182.

§ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1302.

\*\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1199.

(poverty). For example, he tells us that there are four important “orders of the folk of poverty” (*salasil ahl al-faqr*) in the Muslim community.\* Here, Nayrizi is referencing the fourfold classification of Sufi orders listed by the Zahabi master Najib in *Nur al-hidaya* and by Istahbanati in *Burhan al-murtazin*.† These four orders are the Naqshbandiyya, the Shattariyya, the Rifa'iyya, and the Zahabiyya. Only the last one, Nayrizi notes, is active in Iran and holds the honored status of being associated with the eighth imam.‡ This is the order whose guardian Nayrizi considers himself to be.

While space does not allow to have a more extensive discussion, it is important to note that *Fasl* extends well beyond Nayrizi's self-identification and condemnation of his enemies in the late Safavid and early interregnum period. It is a massive work that, like Mu'azzin's *Tuhfa*, is concerned primarily with establishing an authentic discourse of what Nayrizi calls poverty by rooting Sufi doctrines in the teachings of the imams. Quotations of hadith and references to the imams and their teachings are myriad, and it is clear that Nayrizi was tremendously influenced by the hadith movement.§

The works covered above represent the earliest attempts to carve out a semantic and discursive space marked by the term *'irfan* as the authentic and original Twelver mystical tradition. Darabi and Nayrizi deserve credit for

\* Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1185.

† *Istahbanati, Burhan*, 183–84. See also Tabrizi Isfahani, *Nur al-hidaya* MS, f. 186a–186b.

‡ Khuyi, *Mizan al-savab*, 3:1187.

§ One issue treated most conspicuously in *Fasl* (and in many other treatises by Nayrizi) is that of the unity of God (*vahdat al-haqq*). Acutely aware of the heavy criticisms levied against the Sufi tradition for its adherence to the doctrine of oneness of being, Nayrizi takes great pains to prove how all philosophers and scholars of kalam as well as the jurists who follow them have a fundamentally flawed understanding of tawhid. He argues then that the real folk of poverty, the true 'arifin, invented the phrase *vahdat al-vujud* in order to steer clear of a widespread and flawed understanding of tawhid that is nothing less than polytheism. Unfortunately, says Nayrizi, the pseudo-faqirs (that is, the Sufis) interpreted the idea of oneness of being according to their own whims and fantasies, preparing the grounds for the pseudo-ulama to attack and slander the true 'arifin, the only ones who knew the true meaning of the unity of God. Ibn 'Arabi's influence on Nayrizi's thought, at least at the level of vocabulary, is unmistakable; the latter uses terms like *tajalli* as well as more technical phrases like *al-fayz al-aqdas* (the most holy emanation) and *al-fayz al-muqaddas* (the holy emanation) to explain some of his views. See, for example, Khuyi, *Mizan al-Savab*, 1:213–14, 252, and 2:509. At the same time, Nayrizi meticulously avoids any mention of Ibn 'Arabi's name, probably because of the highly charged environment in which he operated. As for Mulla Sadra, some passages from his writings find their way verbatim into Nayrizi's *Fasl*. See, for example, Khuyi, *Mizan al-Savab*, 1:287.

transforming this term into a concept that stood in contrast to (or in place of) the traditional concept of Sufism, but that is only the beginning of the long story of ‘irfan. The next section of the story is about the development of what I call an “irfanian discourse” in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, when the abstract idea of ‘irfan found an institutional home within the intellectual and spiritual circles of a group of mystically minded Twelver religious scholars at the margins of the madrasas of Iran and Iraq.

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## 6

## THE MODERNIZATION OF 'IRFAN

At the end of the nineteenth century, 'irfan occupied a semantic domain independent of the Sufism from which it had developed and against which it had been defined. It was not until the twentieth century, however, that the concept gained traction beyond a small circle of mystically minded ulama whose engagement with 'irfan was confined to their writings and the corners of the madrasa where they taught. Prior to that time, none of the major Persian, Arabic, or Turkish dictionaries dedicated a separate entry to 'irfan. It was occasionally mentioned under *ma'rifa* or the root 'r-f as a cognate meaning *knowledge, insight, or culture*.<sup>\*</sup> Persian dictionaries authored later in the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth began to have separate entries for 'irfan, but with similar general definitions that did not yet reflect its semantic independence vis-à-vis Sufism,<sup>†</sup> which still had close to a semantic monopoly as a reference to the mystical aspects of Islam. *Farhang-i nafisi*, a Persian dictionary compiled in the second decade of the twentieth century, provides two different meanings for 'irfan. The first definition is "knowledge of the exalted God," and the second is the more general definition of "knowing something after ignorance."<sup>‡</sup> In the same dictionary, the term *tasavvuf* is defined as "the

\* The Persian dictionary *Ghiyas al-lughat*, for example, which was first printed in 1826, gives us two major meanings for 'irfan: "knowledge," and "knowledge of God." See *Ghiyas al-lughat*, s.v. "Ma'rifa."

† The *Persian-English Dictionary* of Francis Steingass (d. 1903), published for the first time in 1892, defines 'irfan as "Knowing, discerning; confessing, owning, admitting; knowledge, learning, science; name of a celebrated female singer; -ahli 'irfan, Learned men, scholars" (see Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, s.v. "Irfan"). The same dictionary defines *tasavvuf* as "Mysticism, Sufism; devoting oneself to contemplation; contemplation" (s.v. "Tasavvuf").

‡ *Farhang-i nafisi*, s.v. "Irfan." The author of this dictionary, 'Ali-Akbar Nafisi (d. 1924), who was also known as Nazim al-Atibba, was a famous physician and intellectual of the late Qajar period. For more information of the compilation of this dictionary and its publication, as well as a brief biography of the compiler, see Foruqi, "Preface."

name for the school of a group of people of truth who are purified from the desires of their carnal soul and consider worldly entities to be manifestations of God.”\*

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as modernist ideas spread rapidly and were being debated heatedly by Iranian intellectuals, 'irfan expanded beyond its home in the madrasa, where it was the descriptive category for spirituality preferred by a group of ulama unwilling to completely discard Sufi ideas and ideals. It came onto the radar of a group of modern intellectuals who shared the ulama's disdain for popular manifestations of Sufism, seeing them as remnants of a backwardness that kept the nation from progressing toward the promised land of modernity. 'Irfan provided a discursive space amenable to both groups, allowing intellectuals to express their religious aspirations and esoteric tendencies without contradicting modern modes of thinking, just as it allowed clerics to follow their mystical proclivities without transgressing the norms of Shi'i orthodoxy. The story of 'irfan in the twentieth century, then, split into two quite different narratives, one related to small circles of mystically minded ulama of the madrasa and the other to equally small circles of modernist intellectuals and literary figures. The two narratives were not completely independent, however. They crossed paths at multiple junctures and influenced each other in unexpected ways. As a result of these interactions and developments, 'irfan became a much more visible concept and a familiar term in broader Iranian society. This was a significant step. Whereas earlier discussions of 'irfan had been carried out under the literary hegemony of Sufism and were usually reactionary in nature, in the twentieth century 'irfan achieved such discursive prominence and semantic autonomy that it came to overshadow Sufism. It no longer needed to be defined in contrast to Sufism. On the contrary, Sufism, primarily represented by the marginalized Ni'matullahis, was forced to situate itself in relationship to the central concept of 'irfan as advocated not only by mystically minded ulama but also by modernist intellectuals and belles-lettrists.

By way of a concrete example, I would like to point to an important and famous history of Sufism published at the turn of the twentieth century in Iran: *Tara'iq al-haqa'iq*. The book, now a classic, was authored by the erudite Ni'matullahi Sufi Mohammad Ma'sum Shirazi (d. 1926), otherwise known as Ma'sum-'Ali Shah, and printed in lithograph edition in 1900. The book opens with a brief preface by Mohammad-Hoseyn Foruqi (d. 1907), a modern-minded, progressive man of letters known as Zoka al-Molk. Foruqi was the editor of Iran's first nongovernmental newspaper, *Tarbiyat*, which began publication in 1894. He was also a teacher of literature and later the chair of

\* *Farhang-i nafisi*, s.v. "Tasavvuf."

the College of Political Science (Madrassa-yi 'ulum-i siyasi), the first such institution ever established in Iran.\* What is remarkable about this preface is that in it, Foruqi deliberately avoids any reference to Sufism. Instead, he repeatedly uses terms like *'arif* and *'irfan*, opening his remarks with a definition of the latter.† More important, he warns that this new concept of *'irfan*, if not accompanied by “reasoning and trustworthy evidence, has no place among the learned and critical generation of the age of discovery.”‡ These remarks stand in stark contrast to the content of the book itself. As an author, Ma'sum-'Ali Shah was fully immersed in traditional Sufi discourse. His long introduction begins with a section on the nature of knowledge, followed, in a familiar pattern, by a section defining the terms *Sufi* and *Sufism*.§ He explicitly equates Shi'ism with Sufism,\*\* and he rarely uses the term *'irfan*. When he does, it is in a manner that accords with the traditional role such concepts played in Sufi literature (that is, he uses it in reference to unmediated knowledge of God).††

Such visible contrasts in vocabulary are not exceptional in literature from this tumultuous time in Iranian history. Modernism had begun to impact the social, religious, and political realms, and it created gaping chasms in intellectual discourse. The emergence of a new class of educated, modernist Iran intellectuals was at the core of such tensions. Many educated Iranians of means traveled to Europe for extended periods of time. Some stayed there for decades or even permanently, but the vast majority retained connections with their land of origin and contributed to its intellectual, cultural, and political developments insofar as they were able. Some among them were active in introducing alternative modes of spirituality such as theosophy, spiritism, magnetic sleep, and the religious symbolism of freemasonry to an Iranian audience hungry for new ideas that had the potential to transform modern human life.‡‡ These expatriates saw more potential in *'irfan* than in Sufism,

\* For a brief biography see Afshar and Azimi, “Forūgī.”

† The same pattern can be seen in his introduction to 'Attar's *Mantiq al-tayr*, published in 1902. See Foruqi, Introduction, 2–15.

‡ Ma'sum-'Ali Shah, *Tara'iq al-haqa'iq*, 1:8.

§ Ma'sum-'Ali Shah, *Tara'iq al-haqa'iq*, 1:99ff.

\*\* Ma'sum-'Ali Shah, *Tara'iq al-haqa'iq*, 1:156.

†† Nonetheless, the fact that Zoka al-Molk wrote this preface to *Tara'iq* shows that the traditional Sufi discourse offered in the hundreds of pages following the preface was not necessarily seen as incompatible with the “evidence” that the “critical generation of the age of discovery” required. That is, a substantial continuity was assumed between the past and the future. At issue was discerning the “correct” version of the past, which could be carried, with a newly minted vocabulary, into the future.

‡‡ This is a highly underresearched area. For a brief discussion of spiritism see Doostdar, “Empirical Spirits.” On freemasonry, see Bayat, “Freemasonry.”

latching onto the former as a concept that could be broadened and used to refer to a more universalist,\* individualistic, egalitarian, and accessible mode of spirituality that, from their perspective, was well suited to serve the generation of science and democracy.

Increasing rates of literacy; the widespread availability of books, journals, and newspapers that accompanied the emergence of modern print, a new Western-inspired public education system; and the emergence of an educated Iranian middle class all helped facilitate a new phase in the development of 'irfan that I call the "modernization of 'irfan." In this period, 'irfan gained a new semantic dimension, one that was universal and democratic in scope and pluralistic and individualistic in nature. This new notion of 'irfan developed mostly independent of the nineteenth century, madrasa-based notion of 'irfan centered on the mystical philosophy of Ibn 'Arabi. Some thinkers, however, tried to synthesize what they considered to be the best aspects of both notions into a tradition suited to the needs of modernity. A comprehensive overview of the religious landscape of Iran as it relates to the story of 'irfan is beyond the scope of this study, but I would like to offer a window into these developments by focusing on 'Abbas Keyvan Qazvini and how his conception of 'irfan as a modern concept in contrast to Sufism has influenced 'irfania discourse to this day.

### Keyvan Qazvini

Keyvan Qazvini (d. 1938) was born in Qazvin in 1861. His early learning took place in his hometown, and in 1883 he moved to Tehran as a young adult to continue his education.† Sometime after he began his studies in the capital, he became interested in the less commonly taught disciplines of philosophy and speculative mysticism, and he learned about organized Sufism as well. Economic necessity impelled him to begin preaching during Ramadan, and his talents as a public speaker gradually made a name for him.‡ He searched ardently for a perfect spiritual master, meeting several Ni'matullahi masters, including Safi-'Ali Shah (d. 1899). Eventually, however, he cast his lot with another branch of the Sufi network headed by Soltan-'Ali Shah (d. 1909).§ In 1889 he elected to continue his studies further by moving to Najaf, the

\* I am indebted to Alireza Doostdar, who gave me a better understanding of the importance of this universalist feature of modern 'irfania discourse as part of a broader cultural development related to modernism and science in twentieth-century Iran.

† Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 2:51–52, and Sami'i, "Keyvan Qazvini," 1429.

‡ Sami'i, "Keyvan Qazvini," 1466–67. Keyvan's talents as a preacher are described vividly by Sami'i, and independent sources confirm his fame in this regard. See E'tesam, *Bi rivayat-i sa'id nafisi*, 588.

§ Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 2:118ff.

most important center of Shi'i learning. According to his autobiography, he was recognized in Najaf by Mirza Habibullah Rashti (d. 1894) for his extraordinary preaching and deep knowledge, which earned him the honorary title of *ayatullah*.<sup>\*</sup> Keyvan relates that he maintained his Ni'matullahi affiliation throughout this time and spent a total of more than three decades of his life as an active Sufi, initially in the capacity of a novice and then, for seventeen years or so, as a missionary. He deployed his public-speaking skills in the service of three of the Gunabadi-Ni'matullahi poles, namely Soltan-'Ali Shah, Nur-'Ali Shah II (d. 1918), and, eventually, Saleh-'Ali Shah (d. 1966). According to sympathetic sources, he was promoted and given the honorary Sufi title of Mansur-'Ali Shah and was an "itinerant shaykh" (*shaykh-i sayyar*).<sup>†</sup> Keyvan himself claimed that many people recruited by him during his extensive travels regarded him as their pole.<sup>‡</sup>

Despite his service to the Sufi network, Keyvan gradually grew disillusioned with the Ni'matullahi leadership, eventually raising explicit objections to Saleh-'Ali Shah, which led to his excommunication in 1926.<sup>§</sup> Keyvan attributed his break with the order to dishonesty, fraudulent claims, and corruption,<sup>\*\*</sup> but it is not unlikely that a combination of financial disputes, unmet personal ambitions, and bitter infighting between different branches had a role in straining his relationship with the Ni'matullahi leadership. Whatever the reasons, Keyvan turned his talent for public speaking and his gifts as a writer into effective weapons against the Ni'matullahi pole and organized Sufism in general.<sup>††</sup> His works betray a personal grudge against Saleh-'Ali Shah and the higher echelons of the Ni'matullahi network, but they also reveal a deep engagement with fundamental questions regarding the role of religion and tradition in a world that was careening toward modernism at a dizzying speed.<sup>‡‡</sup>

\* We are told by his student that he attained the highest level of religious education (*ijtihād*) there, but this remains unconfirmed by independent sources. See Sami'i, "Keyvan Qazvini," 1461. For Keyvan's own description of his travel to Iraq and his fame as a preacher see Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 2:91ff.

† Sami'i, "Keyvan Qazvini," 1465–66. See also Van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 81. Ni'matullahis dispute the validity or even meaningfulness of this title. See Parishan-zade, *Gushayish-i raz*, 19.

‡ See, for example, Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 3:64.

§ Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 85.

\*\* Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 2:106.

†† For a list of his works see Modarresi Chahardehi, *Sayri dar tasavvuf*, 222–24.

‡‡ Accounts of Keyvan's life, especially related to the years he spent as a Ni'matullahi adept, differ according to whether they were written by a friendly source or a hostile Ni'matullahi one. For a fairly balanced biography, see Sami'i and Saduqi Soha,

Before proceeding with my analysis I should clarify that Keyvan did not write in a systematic, scholarly manner, nor was he an unbiased observer. Some of his written legacy consists of transcripts of sermons and other public remarks, and factual inaccuracies and a stream-of-consciousness quality can be found across his writings. His work is also replete with vitriolic polemics against his personal enemies and characterized by self-centeredness and ideological hyperbole. Despite the personal enmities that prejudice certain sections of his accounts, I believe his extraordinary background made him a unique and astute observer of the religious landscape of Iran in the early twentieth century. He had an intimate inside view of organized Sufi networks, and he spent many years as a student of religious disciplines in the madrasa. He rubbed shoulders with high-ranking ulama and had close contact with ordinary people in his capacity as a preacher. His observations and comments are unusually detailed, making them a treasure trove of raw information and a valuable window into broader religious dynamics in his time in Iran, especially as they relate to the developments of 'irfanian discourse.

I begin with an example drawn from *Keyvan-nama*, his autobiography. The section that interests me starts with a tangential remark that sparks a long discussion of the classification of disciplines of knowledge in Iran. Only the third division, the one composed of “mathematics, natural sciences, philosophy, and ‘irfan,” is relevant to our purposes. Keyvan is quick to note that the mujtahids of his hometown disapproved of the fields of knowledge in this third classification, especially philosophy and ‘irfan, and that they sometimes declared the teachers of such disciplines to be unbelievers. The latter, Keyvan says, in their overzealous enthusiasm, took such declarations to heart and considered proponents of these disciplines to be ritually impure. He then adds a fascinating and somewhat amusing story from his childhood. “It was not,” he says, “as if everyone in Qazvin considered every philosopher to be a bad person or an unbeliever. But the bottom line is that they did not pay nearly as much money to philosophers as they paid to jurists. Additionally, they would do everything in their power to prohibit their sons from studying philosophy. Once, a religious student was leaving Qazvin for Isfahan to continue his studies. When it came time to say goodbye, his mother wept and said, ‘You know I would die for you!’\* Study whatever you want, but don’t embarrass me in front of the neighbors by studying the book of *Asfar*!”†

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*Du risala*, 125–52. Van den Bos offers a brief overview of Qazvini’s life and a useful analysis of his work in Van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 81–86.

\* A loose translation of *qadan alim*, a Turkish expression of affection (Qazvin had and still has a significant Turkish-speaking population).

† Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 1:54.

Keyvan himself does not seem to have heeded such advice, stating explicitly that he traveled to Tehran in 1882 to study philosophy and 'irfan, which, along with astronomy, astrology, geometry, alchemy, and a handful of other disciplines, were deemed occult sciences (*'ulum-i ghariba*) by their opponents at the time.\* It is dangerous to read too much into a single anecdote, but other similar reports confirm Keyvan's take on the situation. One of these is given by Seyyed Hasan Meskhan Tabasi (d. 1949), a student of a well-known philosopher of the Qajar era, Jahangir Khan Qashqa'i (d. 1910):

When I came to Isfahan [around 1896], the natural sciences and mathematics were totally abandoned, and literature was in a dismal situation. In spite of the crowdedness of the madrasas, no attention was paid to such disciplines. All the efforts were focused on fiqh and usul. . . . The custom of takfir was not entirely abandoned, but it did not happen frequently. Thanks to the efforts of people like Mulla 'Ali Nuri [d. 1830] and Jahangir Khan Qashqa'i, the horror that people had for the rational disciplines in the time of Haji Kalbasi† was to some extent turned into familiarity. That is to say, if a person was observant in attending communal prayers, attended the sessions eulogizing the imams [*majalis rawza*], and studied fiqh and usul, he was able in his spare time to study disciplines that religious students of the time referred to as "occult disciplines." . . . [Gradually] the proponents of such disciplines increased and [people's] ears became somewhat accustomed to the type of arguments offered by mathematicians and philosophers, so much so that after three years Jahangir Khan came out of his cell in the Sadr Madrasa and taught *Sharh-i manzuma* [of Mulla Hadi Sabzavari] to almost a hundred and thirty people in the courtyard of the Jarchi Madrasa, and no one complained. Modernism [*tajaddud*] had already entered, or was very close to entering, the madrasas of Isfahan. One of the problems of that time was knowing how to use the astrolabe, and even more difficult, to know the principles upon which it was built. . . . This technology was so abandoned at the time that I could find only one person called Mirza Gholam-Hoseyn [who understood it]. This knowledgeable man was unique in his knowledge of the astrolabe . . . and he could make the best ones, but at the time his passion for alchemy and the other expensive and difficult experiments he was involved in did not let him finish this work. Some among us were not willing to study with Mirza in public, and he did not teach in secret. Instead, he would intentionally sit in

\* Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 81.

† Mirza Muhammad-Ibrahim Kalbasi (d. 1845), a student of Bidabadi. See Saduqi Soha, *Tarikh-i hukama*, 153.

the veranda [*ivan*] of the madrasa and teach. Therefore, he did not have many students. . . . In any case, I learned such disciplines from him and promoted them and moved from Isfahan to Khurasan. . . . In the madrasas of Mashhad in that era people had no inclination toward the rational disciplines . . . if someone was accused of knowing philosophy, he would be considered successful if he escaped with his life. . . . This brief account is related to the period between 1896 and 1906, when a new era had been ushered in and new ideas had emerged in all classes of people in Iran. I had my own share, and I began to study French, the natural sciences, and European literature. I travelled abroad twice, once staying almost a year in Cairo. On the second trip, I stayed three years in Paris. During these trips I saw many places and met learned men from a variety of nations.\*

This account adds some fascinating perspective to my earlier considerations. 'Irfan-minded scholars such as Bidabadi, the Niraqis, and, later, Mulla Hadi Sabzavari may have commanded respect for their charisma and exemplary piety, but they had to exercise great caution about coming out publicly as advocates of controversial philosophers and Sufis such as Mulla Sadra and Ibn 'Arabi. This sheds light on Bidabadi's thoroughgoing reluctance to explicitly assume the role of spiritual guide to the seekers who approached him. More important, Meshkan's account reveals that the increased freedom to teach disciplines such as mathematics, the natural sciences, Islamic philosophy, and (as Keyvan implies) 'irfan was closely tied to the penetration of modernism into the madrasa and beyond. It seems that as the ulama in control of the madrasa curriculum faced the increasing popularity of modern Western philosophical ideas among the younger generation, they became more open to the rational disciplines, at least as the lesser of two evils.

The urgent desire to be modern, to catch up with the West, and to be part of the new world order that is obvious toward the end of Meshkan's account is something that pervades many Iranian writings of this era. Meshkan was not alone in his desire to learn European languages and to travel. Iranians who traveled, studied, and/or lived in Europe came home with a plethora of new ideas, mainly in the realm of politics but also in religion. They spread these ideas through a growing number of newly established newspapers and magazines. One of the most attractive features of modernism was the scope of its discourse. Science, technology, democracy, human rights, individual agency, autonomy, and freedom were all concepts without borders, or so they

\* Meshkan Tabasi, "Naql az kitab-i gulzar," 67–69; reproduced in Saduqi Soha, *Tarikh-i hukama*, 327–28.

seemed to enthralled Iranian intellectuals who saw tribalism, sectarianism, authoritarianism, ritualism, superstition, and many other kinds of particularistic thinking as major impediments to progress.

Of course, modernist intellectuals' views differed widely when it came to the proper role of religion in their utopian conceptions of an ideal modern Iran. At one end of the spectrum were figures such as Fath-ʿAli Akhundzade (d. 1878), a dyed-in-the-wool atheist who harbored great hostility toward any form of religion. Mirza Malkom Khan (d. 1908) and others were less strident in their opposition to religion, which expressed itself in the derision of religious institutions.\* Others were reformists of various sorts who were inspired by Afghani (d. 1897) and who believed that religion, in its proper form, could play a positive role in moving a nation toward enlightenment. Despite these differences, nearly all were united in their criticism of Sufism. Its alleged teachings of withdrawal from the world were considered a source of stagnancy and laziness among Muslims.

Intellectuals may have differed sharply on matters of religion, but their writings contain common themes that impacted religious developments in Iran. Two of those are unity (of Iran as a nation) and universalism (Iranians as citizens of the modern global community).† Perhaps the most clear and radical example of how universalism as an ideal inspired religious developments in Iran is the Baha'i religion. At its inception, the messianic movement initiated by Sayyid 'Ali-Muhammad Shirazi (d. 1850), otherwise known as the Bab, was not influenced in any explicit way by the cultural forces of modernism, though the economic realities of the New World Order, as Hodgson put it,‡ had begun to have significant impact. After this initial period, however, Babi leaders were forced into exile abroad, a formative event that put the movement into conversation with Western ideas and ideals and helped transform it into the world religion now known as the Baha'i faith. It is not coincidence that the fundamental principles of the Baha'i message as propagated by 'Abd al-Baha (d. 1921) in his journeys to Europe and North America in the early twentieth century strongly resonated with and were sometimes identical to the aspirations of modernist Iranian intellectuals (including Keyvan Qazvini). Similar viewpoints on the necessity of independent investigation of reality (the opposite of *taqlid* or blind imitation), on the unity of mankind, on true religion as a source of unity and harmony, and on the complementary nature of religion and science do not point to Baha'i influence on

\* For an analysis of Malkom's take of religion and its role in the Iranian society, see Algar, MĪRZĀ MALKUM KHĀN.

† Ridgeon, *Religion and Politics*, 15.

‡ See the third volume of Hodgson's *Venture of Islam*.

intellectuals (though that existed in some cases) as much as they do to the tremendous influence that Western ideas, especially those with universalist appeal, had in shaping the religious, social, and political worldviews of the Iranian elite at the time.\*

The universalism, individualism, and egalitarianism in Keyvan's writings must be understood against this backdrop. He reminds his reader many times that his ideas "are based on human thought with no regard to race, nationality, science, or religion. People of all places are my audience without any exception."<sup>†</sup> In a comment characteristically long on self-confidence and short on humility, he invites "thinkers around the world" to read and criticize his writings.<sup>‡</sup> In order to facilitate this goal, which was hampered by the fact that he knew no European languages, he sent many of his books to his friend Mohammad Qazvini (d. 1949), a prominent Iranian scholar based in Paris, and asked the latter to discuss them with the European thinkers and seek their feedback.<sup>§</sup>

In Keyvan's writings, the concept of religion (*din*) plays a much more important role than Islam or Shi'ism. As he speaks of religion in a universal way, however, he struggles with the fact that different religions and sects have competing truth claims. Ultimately he attributes the fighting, persecution, and wars stemming from religious differences to the fact that human beings have forgotten the true essence of religion. Drawing on his Islamic religious education, he argues that religion manifests itself on multiple levels of reality. True religion, like a universal archetype, operates at the highest level of reality. Differentiation happens only as we descend to the world of manifestations, just as existence (*vujud*) is differentiated into various forms and manifestations called *mahiyya* or "quiddity." Therefore, religions are not different from one another in their essence, their true being, which is composed of the higher principle of unity.\*\* Pointing to this metaphysical scheme, he invites his readers to put aside what divides them (*ma bi-hi al-imtiaz*) and to focus on what unites them (*ma bi-hi al-ishtirak*). Keyvan

\* Another later manifestation of such universalism can be seen in the "New Global Unity" (*vahdat-i navin-i jahani*) school established by Heshmatollah Dolatshahi (d. 1980), an aristocrat from Kermanshah who was exposed to modernist ideas through literature brought back to Iran by his father from his frequent travels to Europe. For a brief account of Dolatshahi's worldview and activities see Modarresi Chahardehi, *Sayr-i dar tasavvuf*, 263–73; also see Doostdar, "Fancies of Reason," 204.

<sup>†</sup> Keyvan, *'Irfan-nama*, 17.

<sup>‡</sup> Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 3:1.

<sup>§</sup> Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 2:97.

\*\* Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 3:6–16.

sees it as quite natural that each religion's adherents believe themselves to be closest to the true essence of religion, and he remarks that only at the end of time, when the universal messiah appears, will the stupidity of all these fights be revealed.\* His contention is not that all different religions will be wiped out to make way for a universal religion. Rather, people will have a proper understanding of the place and function of what divides them and will never prioritize it over what unites them.

### Keyvan, Sufism, and 'Irfan

Keyvan's harsh criticisms of organized Sufism go hand in hand with his desire to find a universal, accessible, and egalitarian religious vocabulary suitable for a modern-minded audience. As a deeply religious person, however, he takes great pains to devise a plan that does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. First, he carefully differentiates between the mystically minded groups of his time, using an original and insightful tripartite classification to evaluate their relationship with what he considers to be the center of Sufism. This classification system is informed by his long years of familiarity with different religious groups. Aspects of it may seem arbitrary, but it gives us some understanding of the spiritual landscape of Iran at the time.†

Like any good phenomenologist, Keyvan begins with a list of commonalities that he claims all the groups share. These are (1) a general aversion for exotericism and an inclination toward the esoteric aspects of religion; (2) an endorsement Rumi's *Masnavi* with their hearts even if they deny it in public to avoid being labeled; (3) a focus on improving ethical character (*akhlaq*) and pursuing the goal of universal peace (*sulh-i kull*); (4) an avoidance of worldly pleasures (*khush-guzarani*); and (5) a tendency toward exaggeration (*ghuluvv*) when it comes to the nature and powers of the imams, the saints, and spiritual masters.‡ These commonalities are interesting in and of themselves, but the qualities that differentiate the groups are more pertinent here. Keyvan recognizes three distinct approaches to Sufism among the mystically

\* While some of this might seem similar to the traditional inclusivist view found in the Qur'an (e.g. 3:19), Keyvan uses a markedly nonconfessional vocabulary that makes his position closer to that of a pluralist than an inclusivist. He points out in many instances that Shi'ism does not have a particular hold on truth compared to Sunnism, going so far as to say that those who make the most fuss about how right they are will probably be in more trouble when the messiah comes.

† This classification has surprisingly received no major scholarly attention. It has been quoted in only two works by Persian scholars of Sufism, and with no analysis. See Karbasi-zade, *Hakim-i muta'allih*, 206, and Saduqi Soha, *Tarikh-i hukama*, 214–15.

‡ Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 134–35.

minded people of his time, whom he divides accordingly into three separate groups:

(I) Those in between. This group is farthest away from what Keyvan considers the center of Sufism, and it is composed of people who stand “in between” (*barzakh*) exoteric and esoteric interpretations of religion.\* A major marker of this group is that they are terrified of (*vahshat darand*) being called Sufis.

(II) Those at the outset. Moving from the fringes toward the center of Sufism, we come to the second group, which is located at the starting point or beginning of Sufism (*bidayat-i tasavvuf*). This group, while not particularly interested or invested in taking on the title of Sufism, is not terrified of the designation.†

(III) Those at the center. Finally we reach the third group, which is located at the center of Sufism (*markaz-i tasavvuf*). This group is composed of members of traditional Sufi networks best exemplified (Keyvan believes) by the Ni'matullahi order. This group considers the term *Sufi* “sacred,” saying that it is difficult to find even one person among the masters of each age who is worthy of the designation.‡

The first and second groups, according to Keyvan, are separated by only one major difference: the first does not have special instructions for hidden zikr, while the second does. This is significant, Keyvan tells us, because receiving specific instructions for hidden zikr is a prerequisite for becoming an official member of a Sufi network.§ We have seen how hidden zikr and the question of whether it constituted bid'a were major issues of debate among 'irfan-minded people. Despite arguments to the contrary from a minority of religious scholars such as Niraqi Sr., many among the 'irfan-minded ulama, even later generations in the nineteenth century, considered such instructions illegitimate. This is especially true of Mulla Husayn-Quli Hamadani (d. 1893) and the Najafi lineage of 'irfan teachers who came to be known as the “moralists” or *akhlaqiyyun* and whom Keyvan classifies as being on the fringes of Sufism.\*\*

\* *Barzakh bayn-i qishr va lubb*.

† He recounts how one of his spiritual masters, Adine-yi Esfahani, told him how he had been scared of becoming a Sufi, but after a dream he was convinced that there was no need to be afraid of the term *Sufi* anymore. See Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 140.

‡ Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 140.

§ Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 239.

\*\* In fact, Keyvan claims to have been a student of Mulla Husayn-Quli. Another prominent scholar Keyvan classifies under the first group is Mulla Fath-'Ali Sul-tanabadi (d. 1900). See Saduqi Soha, *Tarikh-i hukama*, 211–15 and 237–57.

The group at the outset of Sufism, according to Keyvan, is composed of members of the ulama who, because of their familiarity and friendly relationships with some Sufi masters, are more accustomed to the traditional world of Sufism. Nonetheless, they see themselves as following an independent Shi'i spiritual tradition, which is marked by a distinctive discourse that allows them to distance themselves from traditional Sufi discourse. Keyvan includes among them his contemporary, Molla Mohammad-Javad Adine-yi Esfahani (d. 1921),\* as well as Aqa Muhammad Bidabadi. It appears that Bidabadi is classified in the second rather than the first group because he was (wrongly) credited with writing the *Sayr va suluk* treatise.† The treatise includes special instructions on performing hidden zikr, which, for Keyvan, is the criterion of differentiation between the two groups.‡

Though they differ in regards to hidden zikr, both the first and second groups share an unwavering adherence to the tenants of Twelver Shi'ism. Unlike the organized Sufi networks at the center of Sufism, there is nothing in particular about the beliefs of the first two groups that deviates from the established norms of orthodoxy of the time. Keyvan's categorization gives us a better sense of the type of people who contributed to the formation of 'irfan as a category; it was among the people in the first two groups that 'irfanian discourse flourished.

Differences between the third group and the previous two groups run much deeper. Keyvan enumerates six principal distinctions that mark those at the center of Sufism. These have to do with strict rules, a well-organized hierarchy, various formalities, and a set technical vocabulary. Those at the center use terms like *shah* and *qutb*, and they perform elaborate initiation rites to secure membership. Disciples are required to adhere to a single spiritual master, and initiates are not free to act as missionaries unless given permission by the shaykh. None of these things are true for the first two groups, who are defined by their lack of such practices.§ The absence of Zahabiyya from Keyvan's discussion of the group at the center of Sufism is noteworthy. He knew the network well,\*\* but he may not have included them in the third

\* Keyvan claims to have been his student for some, saying that he had received special instructions from him on how to perform a difficult form of the hidden zikr. Esfahani was among the most prominent teachers of the mystical philosophy of Mulla Sadra in his time after his teacher Jahangir Khan in Isfahan. See Saduqi Soha, *Tarikh-i hukama*, 334–35.

† I briefly discussed this attribution in the previous chapter. See pages 167–173, especially note \*\* on page 173.

‡ Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 138.

§ Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 140–42.

\*\* In his autobiography, Keyvan provides an extensive account of his trip to Shiraz, saying he stayed there for two months and had the opportunity to become

group because of their lack of enthusiasm for being called Sufis.\* Additionally, Zahabi vocal zikr sessions resemble Shi'i sessions eulogizing the imams more than they resemble traditional Sufi zikrs.†

Keyvan puts his tripartite categorization into use in many places, including when he narrates the story of his flirtation with and his eventual conversion to Sufism. After moving to Tehran, he says, he decided to take lessons in philosophy despite its unpopularity among the religious students:

[I]n the midst of taking lessons in philosophy, I considered making inquiries into 'irfan and Sufism. . . . I had fear in my heart for the term Sufism, and found 'irfan more approachable. I told myself, 'Irfan will be enough to get you out of your exoteric and biased [mindset],' and I did not dare to think about Sufism. What I meant by 'irfan was a nuanced discipline of knowledge expressed in a particular vocabulary, something that in my book *'Irfan-nama* I have called speculative 'irfan [*'irfan-i 'ilmi*] in contrast to Sufism, which is called practical 'irfan. . . . At the time, Aqa [Muhammad-]Riza Qumsha'i [d. 1888] was famous for his *Fusus* lessons in Tehran, but I still did not have the courage to go to his lessons out of the fear that I would inevitably become a Sufi. I did not mind taking *al-Isharat* lessons, because the Shaykh [Ibn Sina] used the term 'arif rather than Sufi . . . then I sought out someone representative of the in-between path, and after a year . . . I found Haj Mir Mohammad- 'Ali. He was a perfect jurist, but he had chosen seclusion, and even though the mosque was near his home, he did not go there. He led the communal prayers in his home and sometimes gave sermons to people there. I joined him and left everyone else. He ordered me to perform very difficult rituals of worship, mortification, and vocal zikr, and he told me that his path was received from Aqa Hasan Najmabadi. . . . I performed those rituals for a couple of years until the fear in my heart for Sufism was not as strong. Then I found an order made up of those at the outset

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familiar with multiple Sufi organizations, all of which, according to him, were one another's enemies. He observes that the general attitude of the jurists in Shiraz was much more positive toward Sufism than was that of jurists in some other cities in Iran. See Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 3:62–63.

\* In this they followed the lead of Qutb al-Din Nayrizi, who preferred the term *fuqara*. In more recent times Zahabis have referred to their fellow members as *akhavan* or, simply, *brothers*.

† The Zahabi zikr sessions, which are open to the public, consist of someone reciting the poetry of Zahabi masters, the content of which is overwhelmingly in praise of the imams. Meanwhile, all other members, dressed in black robes and holding rosaries in their hands, sit in silence and listen. I was able to observe one such zikr session in the summer of 2014 during my visit to Khanaqah-i Ahmadi in Shiraz.

of Sufism, and they accepted me and trained me. . . . [Despite objections from Haj Mir Mohammad], I did not leave this order. Instead, thanks to a couple of connections, and still totally convinced of the path of the jurists and philosophers, I gradually became familiar with the Sufi orders at the center [of Sufism].\*

Only after making these distinctions does Keyvan unleash his harsh criticisms, which are aimed mainly against the third group: those at the center of organized Sufism who adhere to its institutions and rituals. He directs his ire at the vices of corrupt Sufi social institutions and hierarchies,<sup>†</sup> criticizing the endless feuds between different Sufi networks and the absolutist nature of the master/disciple relationship, which often led to scandalous exploitation of the disciples by opportunistic masters. In place of these institutions and hierarchies, he advocates for a more pluralist, individualist, and universal understanding of Sufism. One of Keyvan's students, in fact, claims that his teacher was the first person to come up with the idea of "individualist Sufism."<sup>‡</sup>

At this crucial juncture, the term *'irfan* takes center stage in Keyvan's discourse. While promoting his own distinct vision of the true essence of religion, Keyvan engages in a fascinating effort to define *'irfan* as a universal concept, unbound by particular religious creeds or institutions. In order to do that, he makes a crucial distinction between two kinds of Sufism: *haqiqi* (true) and *marsum* (customary). From Keyvan's perspective, most of what is associated with organized and institutionalized forms of Sufism fits under the second, nongenuine Sufism. He speaks sympathetically, however, about what he considers to be genuine Sufism, which, according to him, is devoid of all the corruption and superstition of customary Sufism. *'Irfan*, he says, is a broader concept that encompasses genuine Sufism. From one perspective, it can be divided into two branches—speculative (*'ilmi*) and practical (*'amali*).<sup>§</sup> Genuine Sufism, he says, can be categorized under the practical branch of *'irfan*, while speculative *'irfan* can be understood to refer to Ibn 'Arabi and

\* Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 2:115–16.

† His critique of the Ni'matullahi network is detailed in his *Razgusha* and *Bihin-sukhan*. His criticism of organized forms of Sufism in general is best found in his *'Irfan-nama* and *Ustuvar*.

‡ Keyvan, *Sharh ruba'iyat*, 10.

§ Here Keyvan takes a dichotomy introduced by students of Ibn 'Arabi, specifically Mulla Muhammad b. Hamza Fanari (d. 1431), who divided Sufism into issues of spiritual quest (*'ilm al-suluk* or *'ilm manazil al-akhira*) and issues of reality and visions (*'ilm al-haqa'iq* or *'ilm bi-Allah*). Keyvan, however, replaces the mother category with *'irfan*. See Yazdanpanah, *Mabani va usul*, 64.

his school of thought. On the basis of this terminology, he considers Mulla Sadra the founder of the synthesis between philosophy and 'irfan.\*

Keyvan's concept of 'irfan is much broader than the school of Ibn 'Arabi and cannot be reduced to the sum of the practical and the speculative branches. That is to say, this is a universal conception that could encompass many paths. This in turn means that both the madrasa-based (speculative) and khanaqah-based (practical) versions of 'irfan/Sufism are particular and local and thus less important than this new hegemonic notion. In an effort to be more precise, Keyvan enumerates three distinct meanings of 'irfan. First, there is the popular sense of the term, which refers to someone who is talented and resourceful in what he does. Second is a more technical meaning, prevalent among some of the ulama, in which *'irfan* is used in contradistinction to *philosophy*. In this context, the latter term usually refers to the Peripatetic school of philosophy, whereas the former is associated with mystical intuition as a complementary epistemological basis of philosophy, which is characteristic of the Illuminationist school of philosophy and some Sufi philosophers as well. Last but not least, in the realm of religion, 'irfan is used in contradistinction to literalism and exotericism. According to Keyvan, an 'arif is one who prioritizes intention, ethics, and internal moods and inclinations in religion, whereas a *qishri* person (literally, a person concerned with the crust) sees exoteric actions as more important signs of religiosity.† Keyvan devotes the bulk of his attention to expand the third meaning. This is a critical juncture: 'irfan as conceptualized in the madrasas of the time was heavily focused on the second meaning. The way Keyvan expanded and enriched the semantic field of 'irfan on the basis of the third meaning is an original contribution that had a lasting impact on later generations and their understanding of the term.

The differences between customary Sufism and genuine Sufism/'irfan are many. Among the most important are that (1) 'irfan (or genuine Sufism) lacks hierarchical structures, having neither orders nor master/disciple relationships; (2) 'irfan has no place for secretive or inaccessible language and teachings; and, most important, (3) the genuine impulse of 'irfan is not confined to a specific set of beliefs, practices, customs, or organizations.‡ This final distinctive feature of 'irfan makes it a perfect vehicle for Keyvan's universalism. "[A]lthough nowadays we know of no Sufis with traditional titles

\* Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 125.

† Keyvan, *'Irfan-nama*, 33–35.

‡ Keyvan, *'Irfan-nama*, 35, and *Razgusha*, 326–27.

and organizations outside the world of Islam," he says, "genuine Sufis can be found not only within the Islamic world, but within every religion."<sup>\*</sup>

Who might these Sufis of other religions be? Does Keyvan have specific figures or groups in mind? Are they medieval Christian mystics or Jewish adherents to the Kabala tradition, and, if so, would Keyvan be disillusioned by the institutions and hierarchies in which they participate? Keyvan does not elaborate much on this point, but a footnote to the text opens up a window into his worldview and hints at his conception of who might be considered a true Sufi. The note is peculiar and brief, and in it Keyvan points to the Theosophical Society as an example of "universal 'irfan, which is not bound to any specific religion."<sup>†</sup> Theosophy is, in fact, mentioned numerous times throughout his writings, and it is clear that he was impressed with the group's philosophy and international popularity.<sup>‡</sup>

Keyvan's references to the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Blavatsky (d. 1891), will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the early twentieth-century religious landscape of Iran. The society was well known among the Iranian elite thanks to the efforts of Hoseyn Kazemzade Iranshahr (d. 1962), a Tabriz-born nationalist who lived as an expatriate in Europe.<sup>§</sup> Iranshahr had a deep and personal interest in alternative spiritualities, and at some point in the mid-1920s he joined the Theosophical Society.<sup>\*\*</sup> As the chief editor of *Iranshahr*, the magazine he published from 1922 to 1927, he introduced his readership in Iran to this school of thought, predicting passionately that theosophy would be the future of all forms of religion.<sup>††</sup> Interestingly, he chose to translate the word *theosophy* as "theoretical Sufism" (*tasavvuf-i 'ilmi*) rather than as *'irfan*. Moreover, he translated "Christian mysticism" as "Jesus' Sufism" (*tasavvuf-i 'isawi*) rather than as "*'irfan-i 'isawi*"

\* Keyvan, *'Irfan-nama*, 35.

† Ibid.

‡ For another example, see Keyvan, *Keyvan-nama*, 2:88.

§ For his autobiography, which is rich in fascinating historical detail, see Kazemzade Iranshahr, *Asar va ahval*. For a more succinct account based on primary sources see Behnam, "Irānshahr." His fascinating life and career beg for further scholarly attention. For his views on the West, see Borujerdi, "The West."

\*\* His early inclination toward mysticism is evident in his conversion to a vegetarian diet at the age of twenty-five. See Kazemzade Iranshahr, *Asar va ahval*, 205.

†† Kazemzade Iranshahr, "Ti'usufi," 641–59 and 705–16. Other "experimental" philosophies and alternative modes of spirituality, such as hypnosis and spiritualism, were also in the air. For a fascinating account of one such figure, Khalil Saqafi (d. 1944), who was well versed in the "science of spirit" and established the Iranian Society for the Empirical Study of the Spirit (*anjuman-i ma'rifat al-ruh tajrubi bati iran*), see Doostdar, "Fantasies of Reason," 195–204.

or “*‘irfan-i masihi*.”\* These semantic choices clearly demonstrate that, at the time, ‘irfan was not the default choice for Persian speakers when it came to talking about modern, universalist modes of spirituality. However, when he spoke of the Ecole Mystique Esotérique, which he established in 1942 for his European disciples, he translated the name of the group as *maktab-i ‘irfan-i batini*, which as far as I know is one of the earliest instances where the term *mystique* is translated into Persian as ‘*irfan*.†

To return to the role of ‘irfan in Keyvan’s worldview, his writings leave no doubt that for him, ‘irfan was the essence of true religion. This led him to define the concept in the broadest way possible:

[‘Irfan] is neither an official field of knowledge . . . nor is it a religion or a branch of a specific religion that is biased or defensive against other religions and denominations or that sets its goal on the same level as other religions’ goal, making every attempt to promote [that goal] and to falsify the other [religions]. On the contrary, it is an all-encompassing way of knowledge that can turn to any science, religion, or philosophy, benefiting from them as they benefit from it, so that eventually it becomes intimately entwined with them. . . . Therefore, ‘irfan is not only the basis of science and religion, but also their ornament and perfection, and it is the means by which they resolve their differences and reconcile their hostilities.‡ . . . The purported necessary connection between ‘irfan and Sufism is baseless. [Rather,] the relationship between the two is partial overlap. Neither all ‘arifs are Sufis, nor all Sufis, ‘arifs.§

The main characteristics of ‘irfan, based on this definition and other remarks by Keyvan in his writings, are that (1) it is a highly individualistic form of spirituality; (2) it is universal and pluralistic in nature; and (3) it is amenable to reason and knowledge and compatible with science. All of these characteristics, of course, are emblematic of the modern-minded approach to spirituality that resonated with so many of the enlightened scholars of the time. Keyvan’s emphasis on the compatibility of ‘irfan with all types of philosophy, knowledge, and religion should be understood against the backdrop of a deep soul-searching among learned Iranians of the time, intellectuals who sought to identify cultural elements responsible for the “backwardness” of their country and who were hungry for a science-friendly worldview that

\* Kazemzade Iranshahr, “Ti’usufi,” 708–9.

† Kazemzade Iranshahr, *Asar va ahval*, 203–4.

‡ Keyvan, *‘Irfan-nama*, 28, and *Razgusha*, 72.

§ Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 124.

would help the nation progress. Thinkers like Keyvan who valued religion sought to free it of the corrupt institutions, hierarchies, and dogmas they believed were harmful, stripping it to its core to reveal what its true essence could offer a society entering the modern world. Keyvan's words reflect this impulse and the influence of Western currents of thought. He wrote, "I *protest* against the form of Sufi orders and against the title of qutb and the institution of master/disciple. I want to distinguish between two kinds of Sufism as Protestants made a distinction between two aspects of Christianity, saying 'we do accept the essence of Christian religion as sacred and necessary to abide by, but refuse the Pope's arbitrary interference in matters of dogma.'"\* It is significant that the word "protest" in the quotation is not a translation. Keyvan himself deliberately used this exact word, transliterated from English into Persian script. This can be seen as an attempt to emphasize the familiarity of the author with a modern, Western culture and its lexicon as well as the deep similarity he saw between his reformist ideas and objection to traditional Sufism and the Protestant Reformation. Keyvan's enchantment with the modern world is perhaps nowhere more explicit than in the 1930 version of his *'Irfan-nama*, in which he used the Gregorian calendar, the measure of the modern age.<sup>†</sup>

The influence of Keyvan's attempts at categorization on later Iranian intellectuals has thus far gone unnoticed and unexplored by scholars. Like Dārabi, Damavandi, and other marginalized figures whose role in the intellectual history of 'irfan I have emphasized, Keyvan has perhaps been neglected because of his status as a preacher and the unspoken assumption that men of the pulpit do not make original contributions. Evidence suggests, however, that he influenced elite and popular discourse on 'irfan in subsequent generations. I first came across such evidence in the transcription of a radio program dating from 1960, when the national channel Radio Iran aired a series titled *Jalva-ha-yi 'irfan-i iran* (*Manifestations of Iranian 'Irfan*). In one of the broadcasts, Jalaloddin Homa'i (d. 1980), a well-known professor of Persian literature and Sufism, offered the following definition of 'irfan:

'Irfan, in its widest meaning, is not a science or a discipline [fann]. . . . On the contrary, it can be said that it is compatible with all kinds of sciences and disciplines and does not belong to a specific religion or sect . . . it is compatible with all religions and sects. It is a misconception to think that the terms 'arif or Sufi or 'irfan are the same as Sufism . . . in

\* Keyvan, *Razgusha*, 342–43.

† Most appropriately, his prominent student Nuroddin Modarresi Chahardehi (d. 1997) referred to his master not as his shaykh but as "the great philosopher." Van den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 84.

principle, it is Sufism that should be considered one of the branches of 'irfan. Sufism is a type of spiritual quest [suluk] that originates from the fountain or 'irfan. [By contrast,] 'irfan is a more general concept that includes Sufism and other sects [*nihla-ha*]. . . . It is possible for a person to be an 'arif but not a Sufi.\*

Although Homa'i did not provide us with his sources, his definition of 'irfan is nearly identical to that of Keyvan, and there is little doubt that he was indebted to the latter. Homa'i was not the only one to adopt this modern conception of 'irfan. The definition was well received among the literati, quickly making its way into the most comprehensive Persian lexicon of the time, *Lughat-nama-yi dihhkuda*. This authoritative Persian dictionary, which cemented the status of the scholar and lexicographer 'Ali-Akbar Dehkhoda (d. 1956) as one of the most influential literary figures of the twentieth century, remains the gold standard today. Its lengthy entry on 'irfan lists three major meanings. First, we read that 'irfan can be used as a synonym for Sufism. Second, we are told that it can mean ma'rifa, or knowledge of the Divine. According to the entry, this ma'rifa "can be attained either through rational reasoning or mystical visions." Finally, the dictionary declares that 'irfan, in its broadest sense, is "finding out the true reality of things through visions." In clarifying this latter meaning, the entry adds that "Sufism is just one manifestation of 'irfan . . . it is only a specific sect, a particular spiritual path that stems from the fountain of 'irfan. The latter is a universal and comprehensive term that includes Sufism . . . it is possible, then, for an 'arif not to be a Sufi and vice versa."<sup>†</sup>

Keyvan may have been among the earliest thinkers to articulate a notion of 'irfan suited to the modern era and amenable to subsequent generations of intellectuals, but he was inspired by some of the figures discussed earlier. A crucial link between the late Safavid period and the early modern period, I believe, is Shah Muhammad Darabi. As mentioned before and evidenced by the textual tradition, Darabi's *Latifa-yi ghaybi*, a commentary on the ghazals of Hafez, was the most frequently read of his works in subsequent centuries. Its popularity did not diminish as Iran entered the age of modern print. If anything, it increased. *Latifa* was among the publications of Dar al-Funun, the first institution of higher education in Iran established on the Western model.<sup>‡</sup> Several decades later a pioneering literary journal of the time, *Armaghan*, published the entire text in serial form, spreading it across select

\* Homa'i, "Jilva-ha-yi 'irfan," 16–17.

† Amanat, Introduction to *The Persian Revolution*. "Irfan."

‡ *Latifa* was published in 1886 by Dar al-Funun.

issues throughout 1925 and 1926.\* I have found no specific mention of Darabi in Keyvan's writing, but his impulse to put 'irfan at the center of his effort to redefine the mystical tradition of Islam is reminiscent of Darabi's presentation of Hafez's cosmopolitan, anti-institutional, antihypocritical mode of piety as 'irfan. Hafez, Darabi tells us in numerous places in his commentary, was the "head of the chain of the lords of 'irfan." The success and the rapid pace at which Keyvan's definition moved from the margins to the center, where it was accepted and used by literary giants of the mid-twentieth century, may have occurred in part because *Latifa* paved the way for Keyvan's innovation.

Renewed interest in Darabi's commentary on Hafez in the early modern period was part of a broader cultural and literary phenomenon of the early twentieth century in which figures like Hafez, Rumi, Khayyam, and 'Attar were reimagined and rebranded as icons worthy of national pride. This was just one piece of the process of modern nation-building that consumed political and cultural activists in the first half of the twentieth century. To understand this process, it is helpful to consider the history of orientalism and how it influenced the self-image of Iranian intellectuals.

### Orientalism, Mysticism, and 'irfan

Europeans "discovered" Sufism only at the turn of the nineteenth century, when colonial officers of the East India Company encountered wild-looking "fakirs" and "dervishes," as they called them, in India.† This "discovery" fed into elite Europeans' growing interest in the ancient "wisdom traditions" of the East, an interest that led to the translation of huge numbers of important ancient texts previously unavailable in European languages. Following Edward Said's groundbreaking work, many scholars have written about how this engagement with the "mystic East" was a colonial project the results of which reaffirmed the underlying power dynamics between the colonizers and the colonized.‡ While this is certainly an important part of the picture, a complementary trajectory of scholarship that I find more relevant to my analysis shifts the center of attention to the internal political and intellectual

\* Curiously, the editor of *Armaghan*, the famous poet and man of letters Mohammad-Hasan Vahid Dastgerdi (d. 1942), stated that the text was sent to him for publication by the renowned Ni'matullahi Sufi of the time, Mirza 'Abdol-Hoseyn Zu al-Riyasatayn (d. 1943). He mistakenly attributed *Latifa* to the latter in spite of the fact that Darabi's name is mentioned a couple of pages later in the text as the author. See Darabi, "Latifa-yi ghaybi," 207. (Darabi's name is on page 213.)

† Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 3–4.

‡ See, for example, King, *Orientalism and Religion*.

struggles of Europe. It focuses on the role such a romantic image of the East played in helping European intellectuals navigate questions about their own national identities during the nineteenth century.\* Additionally, such romantic flirtation with the East, dubbed by Raymond Schwab the “Oriental Renaissance,” was an important element of a critical response some Western intellectuals were formulating in reaction to the hegemony of rationalism and scientism during the nineteenth century. This critical response culminated in the intellectual movement known as Romanticism, which was exemplified by English Romantic poets such as William Blake (d. 1827), Samuel T. Coleridge (d. 1834), and William Wordsworth (d. 1850), as well as by German theologians and idealists including Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834), Georg W. F. Hegel (1831), and Friedrich W. J. Schelling (d. 1874).

Influenced in part by the Romantic movement, orientalist such as Sir William Jones (d. 1794) and Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833), who can be credited with the Western discovery of Sufism, conceptualized Sufism as yet another ancient mystical tradition originating from the East. These orientalist were initially reluctant to see Sufism as part of the Islamic tradition, partly because of the sources on which they relied and partly because of the intense biases they harbored against Islam. Additionally, they labored under the misguided Romantic notion that all mysticism came from India. Pantheism underlay all Eastern mystical traditions, they believed, and this commonality was emphasized and the contexts out of which mystical traditions emerged were deemphasized or denied altogether. Ernst notes that this perspective “made [Sufism’s] Islamic connections interesting but incidental.”† This can be seen in Jones’s description: “Such in part . . . is the wild and enthusiastick religion of the modern *Persian* poets, especially of the sweet HAFIZ and the great Maulavi [Rumi]: such is the system of the *Vedanti* philosophers and best lyrick poets of India, and, as it was a system of highest antiquity in both nations, it may be added to the many other proofs of an immemorial affinity between them.”‡ A similar disregard for Sufism’s place within the Islamic tradition can be seen in the perspective of James W. Graham, an officer on Malcolm’s staff who wrote in 1819, “With regard to the religion (if it can be so termed in general acceptation of that word) or rather the doctrine and tenets of the sect of Sufis, it is requisite to observe, first, that any person, or a person of any religion or sect, may be a *Sufi*: the mystery lies in this;—a total disengagement of the mind from all temporal concerns and worldly pursuits; an

\* See, for example, Leask, *British Romantic Writers*, and Germana, *Orient of Europe*.

† Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 10–11.

‡ Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 10.

entire throwing off not only of every superstition, doubt, or the like, but of the practical mode of worship, ceremonies, &c. laid down in every religion.”\* This statement foreshadows Keyvan’s words almost a century later about the universal impulse of genuine Sufism/’irfan.

Orientalists saw Persian poets such as Rumi and Hafez as some of the best representatives of a pantheistic, universal religion. Franklin Lewis noted that as portions of the poets’ work were translated into various European languages in the early nineteenth century, a pantheon of Persian poets was constructed in the Western imagination, consisting of Hafez, Sa’di, Ferdowsi, and Jami. “By the last quarter of the nineteenth century,” Lewis observed, “with Edward FitzGerald’s astonishingly successful translating of Khayyam following upon Jones, Goethe and Emerson’s earlier fascination for Hafez, Persian poetry enjoyed a highly favorable reputation in the West.”† As part and parcel of the Romantic conception of the East as the source of universal and salvific wisdom, these translations, at least initially, said less about the original texts and their cultural contexts than they did about the cultural needs and sociopolitical dynamics of their target audiences. Gradually, however, as scores of orientalists made their way through enormous troves of primary sources over the course of the nineteenth century, the simplistic and biased understandings of the early part of the century gave way to nuanced scholarly narratives that did better justice to the sources and their contexts.

Romantic perceptions of Sufism and Persian poetry persisted, however. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they appeared on the radar of a small group of secularist Iranian intellectuals enchanted with modernism. It is difficult to overemphasize the role such circles had in shaping the way Iranians imagined their own cultural identity. As nationalism swept through the region in the early twentieth century, this international network of Iranians, with their familiarity with European languages and access to modern means of communication such as newspapers and literary journals, was at the heart of efforts to forge a national identity for the newly emerging nation-state. When it came to the cultural and religious aspects of this national identity, these intellectuals were highly conscious of how the important “others,” the Europeans, viewed Iran and Persian culture.‡

\* Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 13.

† Lewis, *Rumi*, 574.

‡ Just as an example, *Danishkada* included a series of translations of European orientalist works under the title of “We as Viewed by Others” by S. M. Khorasani. See *Danishkada* nos. 2, 4, 6, and 9. Another fascinating example comes from the account Kasravi gives of a purported conversation he had with Muhammad-‘Ali Foruqi, the prime minister at the time in 1935, which best illuminates this

European perspectives were spread via the work of Iranian expats in Europe and via translations of European writings done by individual Iranians or through institutions such as Dar al-Funun or the official Office of Translation. Educated Iranians began to see their own history and culture through the lens of European orientalists. When it came to 'irfan and mysticism, the popularity in orientalist circles of Sufi literature in general and Persian poets such as Hafez and Rumi in particular was reflected in the writings of Iranians, who celebrated the legacy of Sufism as part of the national identity of Iran. There was, however, a major exception. Orientalist fascination with all that was Eastern may have been boundless, but Iranian intellectuals' rationalist-modernist framework left them with little patience with what they saw as the backward, superstitious, and irrational elements of organized Sufism. They criticized the involvement of the religious hierocracy in political and social affairs. Citizens of a modern Muslim nation, they believed, should not take inspiration from nondemocratic, hierarchical institutions of the khanaqah and the madrasa. An individualistic mode of piety was more appropriate for a modern, secular Iran.

The new 'irfan, with its free-spiritedness and open-mindedness, offered inspiration for such a mode of piety. It thus became part of the conceptual arsenal of intellectuals and literary figures who were trying to establish, for future generations, what the Iranian nation was all about. 'Irfan was rooted in the past and held promise for the future. It could be traced back to inspirational figures such as Hafez, and Sufi figures in the literary canon, such as Rumi, Jami, Shabistari, and 'Attar, who came to be promoted as embodiments of Iran's national identity.

One example of this is the relationship many intellectuals of Iran in the turn of the century had with the prominent British orientalist Edward G. Browne (d. 1926) and his works. Browne was deeply influenced by the romanticism of the Victorian era, and he was fascinated by what he considered the "pantheistic" doctrines of the Sufis.\* His love for Iran and all things Persian knew no bounds, but his highest regard was reserved for Persian poets,

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frustration with the elevation of figures like Hafez and Rumi to the status of "national poets." "One day," he relates, "I went to the palace . . . [and] we spoke at length. [Foruqi] said, 'In Europe [people] associate Iran with Sa'di, Hafez, Mawlawi, and Khayyam.' I replied . . . 'Why don't they associate Iran with its ancient history? Why don't they associate Iran with Shah 'Abbas or Nadir Shah?' Is [European praise] reason enough for us to teach all the misguided evil and thoroughly harmful teachings of Sa'di and others to our children?'" (translation taken, with minor alterations, from Ridgeon, "Ahmad Kasravi's Criticisms," 227).

\* Amanat, Introduction to *The Persian Revolution*, XI, and Ridgeon, "Ahmad Kasravi's Criticisms," 224.

whose effect on his life he expressed in a profoundly personal way. "As a young doctor at St. Bartholomew's hospital in London," he related, "I witnessed much that made me wonder at man's clinging to life. . . . Never before or since have I realized so clearly the immortality, greatness, and virtue of the spirit of man, or the misery of its earthly environment: it seemed to me like a prince in rags, ignorant alike of his birth and his rights, but to whom is reserved a glorious heritage. No wonder, then, that the Pantheistic idealism of the Masnavi took hold of me, or that such words . . . of Hafiz thrilled me to the very soul."\* Browne's words are just one example of a broader pattern of Eastern figures acting as cures for the sick souls of European orientalisks.†

Browne's romantic involvement with all things Persian was accompanied by exceptional erudition and an impressive command of Islamicate history and culture. The biggest symbol of his scholarly legacy is his four-volume magnum opus, *A Literary History of Persia*. Published between 1902 and 1924, it represents the first successful attempt in English to write a comprehensive narrative of the literary, intellectual, and social history of Iran. It remains authoritative to this day.‡ Throughout his career, and as a passionate and active supporter of Iran's constitutionalist movement of the early twentieth century, Browne had extensive contact with and a noticeable influence on the new class of Iranian intellectuals, scholars, political activists, and men of letters. As he worked to finish his *Literary History*, he sent completed volumes to Iran for his colleagues to read.§ As soon as the ink was dry on the final volume, a Persian translation was commissioned.\*\* As such, Browne's *Literary History* became yet another mirror in which the Iranian literati looked to find out about their own history and literature.

Browne's influence on the Iranian political and literary elite was not limited to literary encounters. Prominent figures including Mohammad Qazvini, Kazemzade Iranshahr, Seyyed Hasan Taqizade (d. 1970), and Mohammad-'Ali Tarbiyat (d. 1940) had extensive contact with Browne during their stay or exile in Europe.†† This small circle of modern-minded literati also kept in

\* Amanat, Introduction to *The Persian Revolution*.

† It could be argued that the same romantic influence sparked his interest in the study of the early Babi movement and the Baha'i religion as well. See Bosworth, "E. G. Browne," 119.

‡ Lewis, *Rumi*, 530.

§ Kasravi, *Dar piramun-i adabiyyat*.

\*\* To give just one relevant example, by the summer of 1925, just a year after Browne finished his magnum opus, 'Ali-Asghar Hikmat, a senior staff member in the ministry of Ma'arif in the postwar Pahlavi government, commissioned a number of prominent Iranian academics to translate the work. See Yasemi, "Dibacha," 4-15.

†† Qazvini, *Bist maqala*, 14; Kazemzade Iranshahr, *Asar va ahval*, 109-19.

close contact, reading and commenting on one another's works. As a senior scholar, Qazvini had a close working relationship with the younger generation of modern-minded Iranian belles-lettrists such as Sa'īd Nafisi (d. 1966), Rashid Yasemi (d. 1951), 'Abbas Eqbal Ashtiyani (d. 1956), and Mohammad-Taqi Bahar (d. 1951), who established Iran's first literary association and published the pioneering journal *Danishkada*. This close-knit circle of friends and colleagues extended beyond the borders of Iran. During Qazvini's stay in Berlin during the tumultuous years of World War I, for example, a small literary circle was formed that lasted for five years, thanks to the efforts of a prominent modernist politician and proponent of the constitutionalist movement, Taqizadeh. Included in this circle were luminaries such as Tarbiyat, Irani-shahr, and the young Mohammad-'Ali Jamalzade (d. 1997).\*

Keyvan, who was himself enchanted with modernism, sought to have his ideas heard by the intellectual powerhouses in these circles. He regularly corresponded with Qazvini while the latter was in Paris, sending monographs to him and asking for comments not only from Qazvini but also from the European intellectuals he hoped Qazvini would convince to read his works. 'Abbas Eqbal, a prominent historian of the time, seems to have had some contact with Keyvan based on the preface that he wrote to accompany the latter's commentary on Khayyam's quatrains. However, Yasemi was by far the closest friend Keyvan had among the early twentieth-century literary elite. He wrote about how he "discovered" Keyvan and was immediately and deeply impressed with his open-mindedness and erudition.† Yasemi visited Keyvan frequently in the last decade of the latter's life, engaging in regular scholarly conversations with him. Yasemi claims that *'Irfan-nama*, the text in which Keyvan laid out his views on 'irfan and its distinction from Sufism, was written at his request.‡ This provides even more evidence that Keyvan's definition of 'irfan found its way into literary circles through his communication with scholars such as Qazvini, Eqbal, and Yasemi.

Not all modernist intellectuals of Iran agreed, however, that even a domesticated version of Sufism, best represented by Rumi and Hafez and called 'irfan or whatever else, could be a healthy contributing factor to their imagined prosperous, modern, and progressive nation of Iran. The most outspoken of these dissenters was Ahmad Kasravi (d. 1946), whose opposition to Sufism and the orientalist agenda of promoting poets such as Hafez and Rumi has already been covered by several scholars.§ Although Kasravi's suspicion of the

\* Qazvini, *Bist maqala*, 18–20.

† Yasemi's introduction to Keyvan, *'Irfan-nama*, 21–26.

‡ Yasemi's introduction to Keyvan, *'Irfan-nama*, 26.

§ See, for example, Ridgeon, *The Sufi Castigator* and "Ahmad Kasravi's Criticisms."

colonial agenda hidden beneath the disguise of orientalism was later picked up by Iranian intellectuals influenced by the rise of leftist movements across the globe, including Jalal Al-e Ahmad (d. 1969) and 'Ali Shari'ati (d. 1977), his wholesale rejection of Persian poetry and the legacy of Sufism did not gain much traction.

### Morteza Motahhari (d. 1980) and 'Irfan

The influence of Keyvan's definition of 'irfan was not confined to secularist literati who considered individualistic spirituality more appropriate for a modern nation than a socially and politically active religion. In fact, it was a group of neotraditionalist ulama that played the major role in promoting 'irfan in the 1970s. These clerics were mostly favorably inclined toward the revolutionary ideas of Khomeini, and their support helped lead to the appointment of a "perfect 'arif" as the Supreme Leader.\* Prominent among them was Morteza Motahhari Farimani, a student of Khomeini who later came to be recognized as the foremost ideologue of the Islamic Revolution. Motahhari was a hybrid figure. He had extensive madrasa training and was deeply invested in the Islamic rational disciplines, but at the same time he had an abiding interest in modern Western thought and scientific knowledge and methodology. He took the challenge of modernism very seriously. Like Keyvan, however, he did not know any European languages, and he educated himself on various aspects of Western philosophy and social thought via translations and conversations with modern-minded intellectuals of his time. He was eager to present Islam in a way that was accessible and attractive to an educated generation of young Iranians trained in engineering and the sciences at Iran's modern institutions of higher education.

Motahhari's systematic thinking and clarity of writing is best exemplified in his *Islam and Iran: A Historical Survey of Mutual Services*, a well-received and popular book that he wrote at the request of his friend Seyyed Hossein Nasr prior to the revolution. He discusses an array of Islamic disciplines, including Qur'anic commentary, hadith studies, grammar, philosophy, ethics, and jurisprudence, but he also dedicates an entire chapter to 'irfan and Sufism.† His opening remarks in this detailed chapter are highly relevant to our purposes and deserve to be quoted at length:

\* The term *neotraditionalist* refers to a certain group of the ulama who strongly desired continuity with the past but also appreciated the depth of the Western challenge, were deeply influenced by the scientific discourse, and selectively adopted Western ideas and practices. For an interesting example, see Doostdar's discussion of Makarem Shirazi's position in favor of scientific skepticism and empirical evidence in "Empirical Spirits."

† This chapter was added to later editions of *Khadamat*.

'Irfan is one of the disciplines that originated and developed within the realm of Islamic culture, attaining a high level of sophistication. But before we can begin to discuss 'irfan, we must realize that it can be approached from two viewpoints: the social and the cultural. Unlike the scholars of other Islamic disciplines—such as the Qur'anic commentators, the scholars of hadith, the jurists, the theologians, the philosophers, the men of literature, and the poets—the 'urafa are a group of scholars who have not only developed their own discipline of knowledge, that of 'irfan, and produced great scholars and important books, but have also given rise within the Islamic world to a distinct social grouping. In this the 'urafa are unique; for the scholars of the other Islamic disciplines—such as the jurists, for instance—form solely academic groupings and are not viewed as a social group distinct from the rest of society.

In view of this distinction the folk of 'irfan, when referred to as belonging to a certain discipline of knowledge, are called 'urafa and when referred to as a social group are generally called Sufis [*mutasavvifa*]. The 'urafa and Sufis are not regarded as forming a separate sect in Islam, nor do they claim themselves to be such. They are found within every Islamic school and sect, yet at the same time, they coalesce to form a distinct social group. The factors that set them apart from the rest of Islamic society are a distinctive chain of ideas and opinions, a special code governing their social intercourse, dress and even, sometimes, the way they wear their hair and beards, and their living communally in khanaqahs.

Of course, there are and have always been 'urafa—particularly amongst the Shi'a—who bear none of these external signs to distinguish them socially from others; yet, at the same time, they have been profoundly involved in the 'irfanian spiritual quest [*sayr va suluk*]. *It is these who are the real 'urafa; not those who have invented for themselves hundreds of special mannerisms and customs and have brought innovations into being.*\*

It is clear that the distinction that Motahhari makes here is based on the dichotomy Keyvan created between "genuine Sufism/'irfan" and socially organized forms of Sufism. Additionally, Motahhari's insistence that there has always been 'irfan among the Shi'a and that the concept applies only to them is consistent with the previous trend in regard to Darabi, Nayrizi, and others. Motahhari goes on to say that he is not interested in the social and sectarian

\* Motahhari, *Khadamat*, 542–43 (emphasis added).

aspects of 'irfan, that is, what is categorized as Sufism. Rather, he wants to discuss 'irfan as a distinct discipline of knowledge in Islamic culture. Then he adds a classification that should be familiar to us from Keyvan:

'Irfan itself, as a discipline of knowledge, has two branches: the practical and the theoretical [*nazari*]. The practical aspect of 'irfan describes and explains the relationship and responsibilities human beings bear toward themselves, toward the world, and toward God. Here, 'irfan is similar to ethics [*akhlaq*], both of them being practical sciences. . . . The practical teaching of 'irfan is also called the itinerary of the spiritual quest. Here, the wayfarer who desires to reach the goal of the sublime peak of humanity—that is to say, *tawhid*—is told where to set off, the ordered stages and stations that he must traverse, the states and conditions he will undergo at these stations, and the events that will befall him. Needless to say, *all these stages and stations must be passed under the guidance and supervision of a mature and perfect example of humanity who, having traveled this path, is aware of the manners and ways of each station*. If not, and there is no perfect human being to guide him on his path, he is in danger of going astray. The 'arifin have spoken of the perfect man who must necessarily accompany the novice as the “Bird of Heaven” or *ta'ir-i quds* and Khizr.\*

At this point, Motahhari quotes two verses taken from Hafez that reference Khizr and *ta'ir-i quds*.† I would like to make two significant points with regard to the preceding quotation. First of all, this classification, although inspired by Keyvan, takes an additional step—one we might call the final step—toward exorcising the “demon” of Sufism from Shi'i discourse. For Motahhari, unlike Keyvan, there is no longer something called “genuine Sufism” that constitutes the “practical branch” of 'irfan. Instead, Sufism has been reduced to the social institutions of traditional Sufism and the paraphernalia

\* Motahhari, *Khadamat*, 542–44. Translations taken, with some modifications, from this online source: <http://english.aviny.com/books/motahhari/al-tawhid/irfan.aspx>. In another treatise, Motahhari says that theoretical 'irfan is “concerned with ontology, and discusses God, the world, and the human being. This aspect of 'irfan resembles divine philosophy [*falsafa-yi ilahi*], which also seeks to explain and interpret being. Like divine philosophy, 'irfan [as a discipline] has its own subject, essential principles, and problems, but whereas philosophy relies solely upon rational principles for its arguments, 'irfan bases its deductions on principles discovered through mystical unveiling [*kashf*] and then reverts to the language of reason to explain them.” Motahhari, *Majmu'a asar*, 23:29.

† *Himmatam badraq-yi rah kun iy ta'ir-i quds, ki daraz ast rah-i maqsad va man nau sa-faram; Tark-i in marhala bi hamrahi-yi khizr makun, zulumat ast bitars az khatar-i gumrahi.*

that made Sufis distinct as a social group. Anything related to matters of spirituality and the journey toward God through purification of the soul, detachment from the world, and meditation on the final goal of tawhid is detached from Sufism and properly understood under the discipline of sayr va suluk and akhlaq, and 'irfan-minded ulama are its guardians and exponents.

Second, it is remarkable how Motahhari meticulously avoids terms like *murshid* or *pir* despite his insistence that the spiritual path cannot be trodden without a guide. In place of these words he uses the obscure phrase *ta'ir-quds* and the name Khizr, who is usually considered the hidden spiritual master of people with no formal ties to a Sufi shaykh. It is no accident that both of these terms are taken from Hafez's *Divan*. As an 'irfan-minded religious scholar deeply engaged with modernism, Motahhari was not only in conversation with secular and religious literati of his time who valorized Hafez for their own reasons but also deeply aware of a tradition of 'irfan-minded ulama writing poetry in the style of Hafez. These cleric-poets ranged from Shaykh Baha'i, to Mulla Hadi Sabzavari, to Motahhari's own philosophy teacher, Al-lame Tabataba'i. Motahhari himself had a deep engagement with the poet's ghazals, as his extensive commentary on the latter's *Divan* demonstrates.\*

The extent of Motahhari's engagement with Hafez is evidenced by a series of lectures he delivered in the newly established department of theology at the University of Tehran, where he spoke in detail about the poet and 'irfan. The lectures were later transcribed, edited, and published in the form of a book titled *'Irfan-i Hafez*. The central question to which Motahhari dedicates the entire introduction is "whether Hafez was really a 'arif or not." This question references two competing contemporary representations of Hafez. From Motahhari's perspective, the wrong representation had prevailed in the media of his time. "If you read the overwhelming majority of the articles that are written nowadays about Hafez in journals, magazines, newspapers, and even some of the books recently published on Hafez, he is presented as anything but an 'arif," he says. The trend, Motahhari claims, was to represent Hafez as an Epicurean, an antinomian hedonist poet who could not have cared less about any religion but the universal religion of love.† Although Motahhari does not name names here, in another treatise he explicitly singles out the renowned poet Ahmad Shamlu (d. 2000) as one of the most outspoken advocates of this wrong representation of Hafez.

\* His marginalia on the *Divan* were published after his death in a book titled *Ayina-yi jam*. A remarkable feature of his commentary is that he ranks ghazals, based on the themes and vocabulary used, with phrases like "highly 'irfani," "moderately 'irfani," "containing 'irfani allusions," and "mediocre and 'irfani."

† Motahhari, *'Irfan-i Hafez*, 19. See Motahhari, *Ayina-yi jam*, x.

For Motahhari, Hafez was first and foremost a gnostic, “a flower among the many flowers of the garden of Islamic knowledge,” someone who had “the lifestyle of the ulama and, at the same time that he was an ‘arif . . . was more known [in his own time] as a religious scholar.”\* The intellectual figure on whose shoulders Hafez stood, according to Motahhari, was none other than Ibn ‘Arabi. Motahhari claimed that many of the major Persian Sufi poets such as Rumi, Mahmud Shabistari (d. 1340), and Shams Maghribi (d. 1277) were students of the school of Ibn ‘Arabi.† The centrality of Ibn ‘Arabi to his understanding of ‘irfan reflects the deep influence of the madrasa-based notion of ‘irfan on his views. The exclusive emphasis on Ibn ‘Arabi in this version of ‘irfan marginalizes or overlooks an equally strong lineage of Sufism in which the concept of love (‘ishq), rather than knowledge of God (ma‘rifa), plays the most fundamental role. Ecstatic and passionate Sufis such as Ahmad Ghazali (d. 1126), Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209), and Rumi, among others, are considered the standard bearers of the parallel tradition of ‘ishq-based Sufism. This tradition was never as successfully absorbed into orthodox Shi‘i discourse as Ibn ‘Arabi’s school. Instead, it remained central to khanaqah-based forms of Sufism, from whence it captured the attention of some of the modern-minded literati of the twentieth century, who saw in it an expression of their secularist, anticlerical, spiritual, and/or humanistic aspirations. Motahhari’s attempts to portray Hafez as a “flower of the garden of Islamic knowledge” and a student of Ibn ‘Arabi and to read Hafez in a completely symbolic fashion was another step in the process of domesticating traditional Sufi discourse, this time by a modern, madrasa-trained, ‘irfan-minded religious scholar. Motahhari’s symbolic treatment of Hafez followed a long tradition among ‘irfan-minded ulama, some already mentioned, whose reading of Sufi love poetry was completely detached from bodily desires.‡ Khomeini’s *Divan*, published after his death, bears a striking resemblance to that of Hafez in both vocabulary and theme, and it could well be considered the final “official” step in recognizing this tradition, though the process of domestication remains far from finished.

Motahhari’s take on whether Hafez can be considered an ‘arif can be fruitfully compared to that of the eminent scholar Ehsan Yarshater, a secularist contemporary of Motahhari. In his erudite introduction to *Encyclopedia Iranica*’s long entry on Hafez, Yarshater dedicates a long passage to answering this question:

Hafez very often is called an ‘arif. The application of this term depends on what is meant by it. If by ‘arif is meant a person of wisdom

\* Motahhari, *Irfan-i Hafez*, 26 and 52.

† Ibid., 42–58.

‡ Motahhari, *Irfan-i Hafez*, 50–52.

and insight, broad-mindedness and understanding, given to reflection on human destiny, the transience of life, and the vanity of our worldly concerns, a man who would not go for the dogmatic rigidity of formal religion and the intervention of self-appointed guardians of faith in the daily lives of believers, but would prefer the devotion of truly pious men and sets high value on purity of heart and kindness towards others rather than pretentious observation of religious ordinances—in other words, a benevolent sage—there is no reason to deny that epithet to Hafez. . . . On the other hand, if by 'arif is meant a “mystic,” that is, a person who believes in the theory and practice of Sufism, is attached to a certain Order or the circle of a Sufi mentor [pir] or a khānaqāh, or allows the clarity of his mind to be clouded by the irrational and obfuscated by the woolly thinking of some Sufis and their belief in miraculous deeds ascribed to their saints, then the epithet is a misnomer. While it is clear that Hafez distinguishes sincere, self-effacing, and godly mystics from the false ones, he does not belong to any Sufi school of thought, but chooses to be entirely free and independent of any such attachment. . . . Confusing Hafez's lack of fanaticism, his broad world view, and his contemplative and moral musings with “mysticism” implies a subjective interpretation of his poetry.\*

The contrast is quite remarkable: to Motahhari, Hafez was a religious scholar, someone who had “the lifestyle the ulama” and was “a flower of the garden of Islamic knowledge.” To Yarshater, Hafez was “a man who would not go for the dogmatic rigidity of formal religion and the intervention of self-appointed guardians of faith in the daily lives of believers.” Obviously, the concern with whether Hafez was a true 'arif and, more important, what constitutes a true 'arif more generally is less about the poet himself and more about competing views on the nature and function of religion in modern Iran. Despite the remarkable contrast in their views, however, Yarshater and Motahhari are united in their observation that Hafez was as far as one can get from organized Sufism. In both idealizations the poet stands in ultimate contrast to Sufism, as a person who would never allow “the clarity of his mind to be clouded by the irrational and obfuscated by the woolly thinking of some Sufis and their belief in miraculous deeds ascribed to their saints.”

To conclude, a common thread links the different ways the concept of 'irfan has been deployed by modern Iranians. Whether they were traditional and madrasa-based, neotraditional and revolutionary, or modernist and secular, all have used 'irfan in apposition to Sufism. Each group has had

\* Yarshater, “Hafez I. An Overview.”

different reasons for resenting the traditional mode of Sufi piety, but all have domesticated and appropriated its rich and multifaceted discourse for their own purposes. The result has been an equally rich and multifaceted concept called 'irfan, the origins and development of which have been the subject of this book.

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## EPILOGUE

### *ʿIrfan as Mysticism?*

wish to close this book with a few words about ʿirfan as mysticism. Throughout this work, I have avoided translating ʿirfan as *mysticism*. This is not because I object to such a translation in principle. Rather, in a book dedicated to the complex intellectual and social phenomena that led to the emergence and development of ʿirfan as a category and given my extensive engagement with primary sources, I thought using the original term would make it easier for the reader to follow the story with less distraction. In modern Persian discourse, however, *mysticism* has been translated as ʿirfan for quite a while now. As mentioned, Kazemzade Iranshahr’s translation of the French term *mystique* into ʿirfan in the early 1940s might be one of the earliest examples of what is now a standard practice in translation.\* The universal, nonsectarian, and individualistic notion of ʿirfan promoted by the literary figures of the mid-twentieth century gained increasing popularity as Iran witnessed exponential growth in literacy rates among its nascent modern middle-class population.† As increasing numbers of books written in European languages, especially those on psychological and self-help topics, were translated into Persian, translators used the term ʿirfan naturally as an equivalent to *mysticism*. The work of the prominent American philosopher and psychologist William James played a role in this regard. He was already known in Iran‡ when his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* became available to the public in partial Persian translation in 1964.§

\* Kazemzade Iranshahr, *Asar va ahval*, 203–4.

† For the emergence of a middle class in Iran in the first half of the twentieth century, see Schayegh, *Who Is Knowledgeable, Is Strong*, 53–72.

‡ For example, translations from his works in psychology appeared in the Iranian journal *Mehr* as early as 1938. See Sanaʿi, “Mabahis maʿrifat al-naḥsi.”

§ It is noteworthy that Motahhari was aware of this translation and thus aware of the vocabulary of “religious experience” and “mysticism.” For example, he notes that “among the modern psychologists, there is one person who has some knowledge in this area (maybe there are more; he is the only one I know). He is the famous American philosopher and psychologist William James . . . he wrote a book

*Din va ravan (Religion and the Psyche)* contained six lectures translated from *Varieties*, including James's discussion of mysticism. In the Persian translation, 'irfan is chosen as the term equivalent to *mysticism*, though at times the term *Sufism* appears in conjunction with it.\* By the time Baha'oddin Khorramshahi offered his masterful translation of Walter T. Stace's (d. 1967) *Mysticism and Philosophy*, which appeared on bookstore shelves in postrevolutionary Iran, the vocabulary of "religious experience" had been fully absorbed into Persian discourse.†

The choice of intellectuals and scholars to translate *mysticism* as 'irfan might be criticized or dismissed on the grounds that these translators were ignorant of the complex history of the English term and the story of its emergence in the West in the late nineteenth century, when scholars such as James and Emerson used it as a universal concept referring to what they saw as the "common spiritual core" of different religions.‡ This notion, it has been argued, is characterized by a privatization often considered a prominent feature of a distinctively modern and Western religious consciousness shaped by particular social and political contexts that cannot be generalized to other cultures.§ Richard King deals with this aspect of mysticism to some extent in his *Orientalism and Religion*. Speaking of what he sees as distinctive features of modern Western notions of mysticism, King says, "[T]he privatization of mysticism—that is, the increasing tendency to locate the mystical in the psychological realm of personal experiences— serves to exclude it from political

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with an original title of something like *Religious Experiences* [sic]. Part of this book is translated into Persian under the title of *Religion and Psyche*. This man himself was an 'irfan-minded religious person, he was both 'irfan-minded and a psychologist . . . he deeply believed in mystical psychic states." See Motahhari, *'Irfan-i Hafez*, 12–13.

\* While Qa'emi uses 'irfan as an independent equivalent term for *mysticism*, he sometimes pays lip service to established conventions of the past and, to make the meaning clear, pairs 'irfan with the term *Sufism* (saying "*irfan va tasavvuf*"). This did not happen in later translations. For example, a couple of years later, in 1970, the prominent translator Najaf Daryabadari (d. 2014) translated a collection of articles by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, including "Logic and Mysticism," which was translated as *'Irfan va mantiq* with no reference to *Sufism* at all.

† It is hard to overemphasize the influence that James and Stace, through these translations, have had in introducing and establishing of the vocabulary of religious experience in Persian with strong perennialist undertones. Many of the monographs and articles that have appeared in subsequent decades take the basically perennialist view that mysticism has an unchanging essence that runs through all religious traditions.

‡ For a rich and fascinating analysis of the sociocultural background that gave rise to the concept of mysticism, see Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism.'"

§ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 13.

issues such as social justice. Mysticism thus has become seen as a personal matter of cultivating inner states of tranquility and equanimity, which, rather than seeking to transform the world, serve to accommodate the individual to the status quo through the alleviation of anxiety and stress. . . . In this way, mysticism has been thoroughly domesticated . . . [it] has become at once decontextualized, . . . elitist, . . . antisocial, . . . [and] otherworldly.”\*

King, like many other scholars of religion who concentrate on postcolonial studies, is primarily focused on Eastern religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. But the case studies in his work and that of many others are used to draw broad conclusions about how concepts such as religion and mysticism, as categories deeply embedded in the history of Western colonialism, should either be abandoned completely in scholarly discourse or not applied in comparative analysis and cross-cultural classifications. There is no question that such studies, which reexamine the historical contingencies that shape our seemingly solid categories, need to be taken seriously. In fact, they *have been* taken seriously by scholars, and for good reason.

What makes me uncomfortable with this scholarly trend, however, is its exclusive attention to the modern West and its emphasis on the utter distinction between the West and the rest and between the modern and the pre-modern. These dichotomies are supposed to be destabilized in postcolonial and postmodern frames of thought, but somehow they always manage to sneak their way back in, as can be evidenced in, for example, Fitzgerald’s *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.† This, I believe, has partly to do with the current state of the study of religion and the default position of prioritizing Western phenomena in religious theorizing.‡

In their attempt to break away from the status quo by focusing on Eastern rather than Western religious phenomena, deconstructionists easily fall into a reactionary discourse that reproduces the same binary thinking and modes of power and dominion that they supposedly reject. In their determination to fight the perceived imperialistic agenda of religious studies as a Western discipline of knowledge and to indict the scholars of religion for their sins in this regard, the agency of the “other” is too easily dismissed as a form of “resistance” or “adaptation.” It is as if other cultures and civilizations have never been smart enough or imperialist enough, for that matter, to think of comparisons and classifications or to impose their constructed categories on others. But we know that other cultures have also used comparative analyses, that they have objectified their own others. We know that

\* King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 21ff.

† Fitzgerald, *Ideology of Religious Studies*.

‡ Orsi, *Cambridge Companion*, 3–12.

Western colonialism was not the first colonialism and that comparison has long been an imperial enterprise.\* Only by taking these things into account can we overcome recent moves in the humanities toward the ghettoization of the Western world of ideas.

Additionally, although the enormous transformation of human life in the modern period originated in the West, it has long since ceased to be a particularly Western phenomenon. The modern condition is and has been for quite a while a global phenomenon. It occurs in a variety of local, national, and international forms, but these share common features that distinguish themselves from premodern ways of organizing individual and social life. They share in common a prioritization of an “imminent,” this-worldly framework for understanding and pursuing the ultimate goal of “human flourishing,” to use Charles Taylor’s terminology.† The efforts of modern-minded Iranian intellectuals and scholars to introduce the concept of ‘irfan as a signifier for an individualistic, universal, rational, science-friendly, and egalitarian mode of piety detailed here are only one example of the many ways the modern condition manifests itself. What is significant about these efforts, however, is that they were not simply a wholesale importation of a Western idea or ideal. Rather, they were creative efforts to tap into poignant symbols already present and well developed across the long history of a rich Persianate and, more broadly, Islamicate civilization and to reimagine those symbols as elements of Iran’s new identity as a modern nation.

The concept of ‘irfan was chosen, I argue, not by chance but because it already carried with it some of the most important features of the modern concept of mysticism. It emerged, as we saw, as a depoliticized and decontextualized alternative to Sufism, stripped of the extensive social network that supported traditional Sufi organizations centered around the *khanqah*. This is not, of course, to say that the post-Safavid concept of ‘irfan was devoid of authoritative and hegemonic systems that controlled its function. The ‘irfanian quest was possible for the adept only if he or she operated within the established norms of Twelver orthodoxy. But the fact remains that the intimate and highly hierarchical personal relationship between master and disciple was transformed into a symbolic and highly abstract form of relationship in which a significant amount of agency was transferred to the adept, broadening the range of interpretive choices when it came to texts, dreams, and traditions relevant to his or her spiritual quest.

To return to the controversial example of Hafez, there is no denying

\* Doniger, “Comparisons,” 63–74.

† Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

that strong resentment toward formalized and institutionalized forms of religiosity pervades his poems. There is nothing exclusively modern about the refusal to be limited to the confines of dominant modes of piety or about reaching for a more universal, free-spirited, and perhaps individualist spirituality. As Sufi institutions developed and worship became more formalized, or, to put it in Hodgson's terms, as the early Sufi tradition of intensive interiorization re-exteriorized its results,\* focus often shifted to institutional formalities, outward signs of piety, and the nuances of outward performance. As a result of their popularity, Sufi shaykhs were able to secure huge financial resources—mostly in the form of pious endowments and donations—and to forge political connections with local and regional powers. As these worldly matters influenced the rank and file of those affiliated with the khanaqah, the problems of hypocrisy (*riya*) and dissimulation (*tazvir*) became the objects of important cultural critique. Hafez's vehement criticism of such traits should be understood in this context. Like Rumi, he preferred the antinomian Qalandar, the bandit (*rind*)† whose hallmark is an absolute indifference to social status and outward appearance and a disregard for the sham piety of ascetics and Sufis and the superficial and dishonest spirituality trumpeted by their ceremonious attire. Hafez decried such hypocrisy, saying:

Not all Sufi coin is pure and unadulterated,  
 How many cloaks deserve to be thrown in the fire!  
 If only the touchstone of experience were in our midst,  
 So that those who are adulterated might be embarrassed.  
 Those brought up in the lap of luxury will not find their way to the  
 friend,  
 The lover's path is for the *rind* who throws caution to the wind.  
 Hafez' old cloak and prayer mat will go to the wine-seller,  
 If his wine comes from the hand of the moon-faced cup-bearer.‡

Hafiz portrays the 'arif as part and parcel of the Sufi world, a world from which he can (and must) redeem himself.§ In order to find such redemption, he needs only to burn the Sufi cloak:

\* Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 2:218.

† The *rind*, a word variously translated in English as "rake, ruffian, pious rogue, brigand, libertine, lout, debauché," is the very antithesis of establishment propriety. For more on Hafez's depiction of *rind* and Qalandar see Lewis, "Hafez viii. Hafez and Rendi."

‡ Ghazal 155. My references to ghazals follow the numbering in Khanlari's critical edition of Hafez's *Divan*.

§ Lewis, "Hafez viii. Hafez and Rendi."

O 'arif wayfarer, set fire to the cloak,  
Apply yourself, and become the leader of the *rinds* of the world.\*

Similarly, deemphasizing the need for a spiritual master and the more individualistic model of spiritual quest to which that leads is not uniquely modern. Hafez consistently spoke of an adept's need for a guide in the spiritual journey but noted that the adept's discourse could not be reduced to an essentially Sufi, institutional one. The spiritual guide of Hafez's poetry is the *pir-i mughan*, the Zoroastrian master based in the tavern (*kharabat*). Much ink has been spilled in the effort to identify this figure as a real human being, a Sufi shaykh of a specific khanaqah, but Hafez's elusive, highly symbolic language refuses all attempts to reduce this abstract idea to a particular social reality or concrete hierarchical relationship.†

My point is simple. In response to the quotation from King's work, I say that there is nothing uniquely modern or Western about something being decontextualized, elitist, individualistic, depoliticized, anti-institution, otherworldly, or domesticated. 'Irfan carried similar connotations even at its earliest stages of development, many years before the advent of modernity in Persia. And its development in the modern period was not simply the result of a scholarly and/or imperial will to make it, in the words of King, "amenable to simplistic comparative analysis." Nor was 'irfan the conceptual product of foreign agents seeking to declaw Sufism and make it "irreconcilable with the goals of political and social transformation," turning it into an anti-revolutionary opiate, so to speak. It is true that Sufism was domesticated and even violently suppressed. But concurrent with—though quite independent from—that suppression and domestication, 'irfan flourished as a distinct notion of the mystical quest with its own rational, elitist, and otherworldly flavor.

In other words, while there is no doubt that certain aspects of the contemporary notion of 'irfan, such as the idea that it could be detached from a particular religious context and the emphasis on its compatibility with empirical science and technology, developed in response to and were influenced by the process of modernization in Iran, other elements have been in the

\* Ghazal 267.

† Motahhari considers Hafez's lack of reference to a specific spiritual guide as a sign that his mode of piety was close to that of orthodox Shi'i 'arifin, rather than traditional Sufis (see Motahhari, *Irfan-i Hafez*, 22–23). Pourjavady, on the other hand, argues that Hafez's reference to a "rose-colored master" (see ghazal 199) is better understood not as referring to a human guide but as a symbolic reference to the abstract divine reality, the active intellect that manifests itself to the wayfarer to guide him along the path, much as we saw in Ibn Sina's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (see Pourjavady, *Ishraq va 'irfan*, 166–77).

making since the seventeenth century as part of the internal dynamics of Persian-Shi'i culture. If 'irfan as a category referring to a privatized, reason-friendly, egalitarian, and universal concept resembles the concept of mysticism, it is not because it was transplanted into the soil of Iranian culture by so-called Westoxified puppets of imperialism or by reactionary fundamentalists who, despite their rhetoric, were deeply embedded in modernity. Nations experienced huge transformations in the process of modernization, but creating a wall between the modern and the premodern does a remarkable disservice to our ability to understand these important transitions. There was transformation and rupture, but there was also continuity. No nation has become modern in a vacuum, and Iran is no exception. In proposing 'irfan as an alternative to Sufism, modern Iranian intellectuals appropriated an already well-developed notion that they found to be an apt expression of their aspirations.

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# "MYSTICISM" IN IRAN



*The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept*

ATA ANZALI



THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS

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Published by the University of South Carolina Press  
Columbia, South Carolina 29208

[www.sc.edu/uscpress](http://www.sc.edu/uscpress)

Manufactured in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data can be found at  
<http://catalog.loc.gov/>.

ISBN: 978-1-61117-807-4 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-61117-808-1 (ebook)

*review copy*  
*not for distribution*