

SIX

Sufism Returns, and with a Vengeance

IN JUNE 1989 a hitherto unpublished poem by Ayatollah Khomeini was released to the press just a few days after he had died, and it started like this:

I fell for the beauty mark on your lip, O Beloved,
Your ravishing stare stirred my melancholy. (Seyed-Gohrab 2011)

The poem was readily received as an esoteric allegory on mystical yearning for God, one composed in the spirit of Muslim mystics, the Sufis. In the next line, the poet explicitly self-identifies with one of the most iconic Sufi figures in Muslim history—namely, the tenth-century Ḥusayn, son of Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj, who was put on trial and eventually executed on behest of the *‘olamā* of his time:

Relinquishing awareness of who I am, I declared: “I am the Truth”
Bargaining to be crucified like [Ḥusayn, son of] Maṣṣūr.

On multiple levels, this short, soft, and unabashedly sensuous poem, called a *ghazal*, contrasted with larger-than-life portrayals of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, the stern *imām*, and the implacable warrior against the infidels—the Great Satan and the rest. Khomeini was not a Sufi but a jurist, a grand ayatollah—an authoritative source of imitation for the faithful. He had reached the acme of the ranks of the *‘olamā*.

How could the revered source of emulation, the incorrigible commander in chief write soft poems instead of fulminating against ungodly tyrants? Where did all that sacred revolutionary wrath go? As shocking as the tone, wording, and imagery of the poem may sound to uninitiated detractors, most of Ayatollah Khomeini's admirers had already heard about his intimacy with mysticism and Gnosticism or *'erfān*. They also knew that the key for deciphering this *ghazal* lay in madrasah philosophy, particularly in its more esoteric and Gnostic dimension, *'erfān*. In publishing this poem, the *imām*'s heirs and legatees—his personal descendants and the state—capitalized on his reputation of being an Islamic philosopher, especially a master of *'erfān*, to highlight a more humane and compassionate aspect of the revolutionary leader's personality. Also, this was an understated acknowledgment of the ideas and ideals of Sufism in the Islamic Republic as well as a nod to their enduring presence in the nation's collective psyche.

Sufism has deep roots in Iranian history (Čahārdehī 1981; Lewisohn 1992; Masum-Ali-Shah ca. 1900; Van den Bos 2002; Zarrīnkūb 1978, 1983). Although Sufism was disfavored during the first few decades of Qajar rule, it gained a footing in the capital as early as the 1840s and later became an integral element in spiritual and intellectual life of the public, especially on the eve of the Constitutional Revolution (Bayat 1982). Half a century after that, Sufism enjoyed another bout of revival during the 1960s and 1970s. Although the majority of the mainstream *'ulamā* never took a shine to it, the Islamic Republic keenly drew on Sufism for public mobilization and in manufacturing consent, not least in valorizing warfare as a battle of good against evil, and glorifying military loss in terms of sacrificial oblation to the divine. In one guise or another, Sufism continues to inform perceived relations between God and man in Tehran to this day.

Speaking of God as the beloved, and the human individual as a lovesick wayfarer who frequents taverns and blunders through idol houses on the quest for God, constitutes a salient theme in Persian Sufi literature. A related major idea is that of breaking down the illusions of selfhood and severing all worldly attachment to the point of ultimate self-dissolution or self-annihilation. This was annihilation in God—*fanā*³ *fi-Allāh* or simply *fanā*³. One of the most familiar tropes used to express it was that of a moth being consumed by fire in its unrelenting desire for union with candlelight. Another one was that of a raindrop joining the ocean, losing its insignificant individual identity as a mere raindrop but becoming one with the

infinitude of the ocean. The ideal of dissolution of the lower human self in the sublime being of God constituted the ultimate destiny of Sufi mystics.

Madrasah philosophy incorporated many theoretical elements of Sufi teachings under the rubric of *‘erfān*. In his *Four Journeys*, Mollā-Ṣadrā provided a philosophical interpretation of the notion of transcending the finitude of self in terms of a journey that begins with self-abnegation and culminates in the realization of the absolute oneness of Being. He and others adept in *‘erfān* did not shy away from describing the relationship between man and God as one between a lover and the beloved. In *‘erfān*, one imagines God as being sublimely beautiful and loving beauty. These sensibilities and their underlying aesthetic theology seldom appealed to mainstream *‘olamā* well before Tehran became the capital of the Qajars.

Especially since the late 1600s, under the influence of the *‘olamā*, the Safavid court had turned against the Sufis (Anzali 2017). In matters of religious authority, all competition was to be contained. Sustained persecution effectively marginalized the Sufis and confined them to backwater regions. Many leading Sufi masters, called *mašāyekh* or *morāds*, and their disciples, known as *morīds*, left for India, Central Asia, and even Africa, where local courts as well as the public afforded them more tolerance. After a prolonged dormancy, wandering Sufis, also called dervishes, trekked back to major towns in Iranian territory (or the Protected Domains of Persia [*mamālek-e maḥrūseh-e Īrān*], in Qajar court nomenclature) at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the consolidation of Qajar rule was under way.

Despite prolonged persecution of the Sufis, tens of thousands of people across Iran deferred to the religious authority of the Sufi masters even up to the early 1800s. Most of the population of the land may have frequented Sufi hospices or *Kāneqāhs* more often than mosques (Lewisohn 1998, 441; Malcolm 1829, 2:292ff; Masum-Ali-Shah ca. 1900). Like their forebears in the late Safavid period, mainstream *‘olamā* of the Qajar era did not tolerate rivals, especially when it came to claiming the authority to speak for God. In particular, the nascent Oṣūlīs were intent on nipping Sufi comeback in the bud, much like they snuffed the Aḵbārīs and later rooted out the Shaykhīs and the Bābīs. This iron fist became manifest in Moḥammad-‘Alī Kermānšāhī (1731–1801), the elder son of the champion of the Oṣūlīs, Seyed Moḥammad-Bāqer Behbahānī (ca. 1705–1791). Based in Karmanshah, a town less than three hundred miles west of Tehran, he busied himself with waging war on the Sufis, proudly carrying the sobriquet “Sufi-killer” (Čahārdehī 1981, 8;

Davānī 1983; Kermānšāhī ca. 1800). Kermānšāhī lived up to his reputation by poisoning and torturing several Sufis to death. The Qajar monarch Fat’ḥ-‘Alī Shah did not object, if only because the powerful *majtahed* claimed to be doing God’s work by ridding the earth of infidel Sufis (Van den Bos 2002, 60; Zarrīnkūb 1983, 324). Caught up in more pressing concerns, the king turned a blind eye to reports of cruelties perpetrated against Sufis in the outer flanks of his kingdom.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Sufis received no welcome, neither from the court nor the public in Tehran. Should a dervish be charged with heresy and dragged around in shackles, the best Fat’ḥ-‘Alī Shah could muster was to offer him a few words of advice to follow the proper doctrines of religion as advocated by the *‘olamā* (Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978). First-generation Oṣūlīs in the capital—including Mīrzā Masīḥ, who headed the Khan-e Marvī Madraseh, and Āqā-‘Abd-Allāh Zonūzī, who taught *falsafeh* there—worried little about the Sufis and focused more on battling the Aḵbārīs, Shaykhīs, and Christian missionaries.

Matters improved for the Sufis by the late 1830s under Moḥammad Shah. Even one of the sons of the Sufi-killer Kermānšāhī felt comfortable enough to stand against his father’s anti-Sufi legacy. The new Qajar monarch had grown sympathetic to Sufism during his years as heir-apparent in Tabriz, where he had a Sufi for a personal tutor. Some even say that the Crown Prince was initiated into a Sufi order himself (Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978, 139, 142; Van den Bos 2002, 62). Be that as it may, upon acceding to the throne in 1834, the twenty-six-year-old monarch picked his former Sufi tutor as his new grand vizier. This was ‘Abbās Īravānī, better known as Ḥājī Mīrzā Āqāsī (ca. 1783–ca. 1848).

Having arrived on Iranian soil as an itinerant dervish from the *‘atabāt*, Iraqi shrine towns, Āqāsī had found patronage in Tabriz, where he proved his mettle as a clerk and then as tutor to the local court’s most notable pupil, the Crown Prince (Amanat, “Āqāsī,” *Elr*). In the eyes of disciples, the charismatic Āqāsī was a consummate master of the Sufi path and a veritable manifestation of divine grace. Drawing on professed spiritual powers of divination and prognostication, like a beneficent father figure, he reassured the heir-apparent of his being destined to rule as the third king of the Qajar dynasty.

Moḥammad Shah’s reign enlivened the Sufis. Under him, Sufi ideas functioned to advance court interests, sometimes at the expense of the

landowners, merchants, and not infrequently the *‘olamā*. From his high position, Āqāsi facilitated the spread of Sufism in theory and practice, for better and for worse. As a Sufi master, he aggrandized the sovereign as a friend of God or a carrier of divine authority, *vali-Allāh*. Drawing on Sufi heritage and rehabilitating a strong form of mediatory theology in political discourse, he referred to the monarch as a divine viceregent, *kalīfa-Allāh*. A man of politics as he was, Āqāsi himself preferred to be called the “first man of the land” (*šaḡṣ-e avval-e mamlakat*), translatable as “premier of the realm.” The tacit implication of this uncommon title was that primarily he channeled the king’s will, and thereby divine authority, throughout the kingdom. Āqāsi clearly saw himself as above and beyond a mere worldly grand vizier (*ṣadr-e a‘zam*). On more practical grounds, he empowered Sufi-leaning tribal chieftains by granting them land entitlements and government appointments. He resettled hundreds of families particularly in villages near Tehran—from Tajrīš, Qolhak, and Vanak in the north; Karaj in the west; to Varamin in the east (Bayānī and Etteḥādiyeh 2008). Most of those families belonged to Turkic, Kurdish, or Arab extended kin groups and revered Āqāsi personally as their patron and Sufi master. In many cases land had to be confiscated or forcibly purchased below fair price before it could be redistributed, and this brought Āqāsi into direct conflict with established landowners as well as the *‘olamā*. Emphasizing the prerogative of the monarch as a carrier of divine authority and the premier’s role as a Sufi master, hundreds of acres of private estates were repossessed in the name of God. These religiously illegal practices of land confiscation, as effective as they were in mobilizing labor, improving irrigation, and raising agricultural yield in reassigned lands, alienated landowners and infuriated the *‘olamā*. Both groups objected to arbitrary violations of private property, which Twelver Shia jurisprudence considers as sacrosanct as blood.

When Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah inherited the legacy of his father, he faced the challenge of placating disgruntled Oṣūlis without antagonizing the Sufis in his capital. He managed to draw on a more diverse base than his predecessors. Even as more power was accorded to the Oṣūlis, best represented by Tehran’s chief *mojtahed* Ḥājj Mollā-‘Alī Kanī (1805–1888), the Sufis still found Tehran more welcoming than ever. The talented Sufi poet ‘Abbās Forūḡī-Bastāmī (ca. 1798–1857), who enjoyed favors from Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah, praised the young monarch profusely, exalting him as the shadow of God (*ẓill-Allāh*) (Browne 1924, 336; Forūḡī-Bestāmī 1857). Drawing heavily on Sufi themes in

his poetry, Forūḡī was an important link in continuing the Sufi ethos inside the Qajar court. For example, in one of his best-known poems, he spoke of the ubiquitous presence of God in all of creation:

You never departed from the heart that I should crave you.
 You never hid away that I should find you.
 You never disappeared that I should wish you were present.
 You never absconded that I should make you reappear.
 And now that you shine like a hundred thousand rays of light
 I may behold you with a hundred thousand eyes. (Browne 1924, 337; emended translation)

The most renowned Persian Sufi to appear during the latter half of the nineteenth century in Tehran was Moḥammad-Ḥasan Eṣfahānī (1835–1899), better known by his assumed title Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah (Barq 1973; Green 2004). Like Forūḡī-Bastāmī, he too praised Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah, especially for welcoming Sufis such as himself to the capital (Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shah ca. 1870, 5). Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah's decision to settle and operate there came as a response to an emerging dynamic between layers of society—the *ʿolamā*, palace intellectuals, landowners, bazaar merchants, and others. Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah had arrived in Tehran sometime between 1868 and 1871. Disciples flocked around him, acknowledging him as a Sufi master and a carrier or conduit of divine authority, a *valī-Allāh*. Like Āqāsī, he traced his spiritual lineage to the revered fourteenth- to fifteenth-century Shah-Neʿmat-Allāh Valī. Before Ṣafī-ʿAlī Shah, most Sufis in the nineteenth century similarly attached themselves to the Neʿmat-Allāhī Order and were identified as Neʿmat-Allāhī Sufis (Homāyūnī 1992; Lewisohn 1998; Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978; Sheil 1856, 194). Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah's followers in turn became known as members of the Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shāhī Order, or simply Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shāhīs.

On a plot of land located on the northeastern limit of Tehran at the time, Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah founded for his disciples a “*Ḳāneqāh*,” which is the name for a Sufi gathering place. The land came as a gift from a Qajar prince. The Sufi master steadied a new conciliatory vision and attracted a wide range of people. Disciples or *morīds* came from every walk of life to sit at his feet—merchants, craftsmen, officials, and princes were among those initiated into his order. Many others maintained looser ties, visiting the *Ḳāneqāh* only occasionally if at all. It is reported that the Sufi master even became

friendly with the monarch, but in reality, Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah was never as close to him as Forūgī-Baṣṭāmī (Van den Bos 2002, 65n101). He did have close relations with the Nizārī-Ismaʿīlī Shias, a small circle in the capital. They too had historic ties to the Neʿmat-Allāhī Order. As recently as a generation earlier the leader, or Living Imām of Nizārī-Ismaʿīlīs, Ḥasan-ʿAlī-Shah (ca. 1804–1881), better known as Agha Khan Mahallātī, had married into the Qajar ruling house. For political reasons, the Agha Khan had eventually based himself in Bombay but still maintained cordial relations with Tehran. Shortly before moving to the Qajar capital for good, Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah had visited Agha Khan in India and may have accepted the spiritual charge of looking after the welfare of the Nizārī-Ismaʿīlīs in his new hometown (Green 2004; Van den Bos 2002, 91–92).

Mindful of the mistreatments suffered by Sufi precursors at the hands of Moḥammad-ʿAlī Kermānshāhī—the Sufi-killer—and his ilk, Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah tread lightly. He avoided confrontation, especially with the ʿolamā. Emphasizing the mystical Sufi ethos, he called for a close, direct, and personal experience of divine presence, advocating a commitment to God in total trust and absolute obedience. But he repudiated smoking narcotics, sexual misconduct, and all other antinomian tendencies that were commonly, if not always fairly, attached to Sufism. Without prevarication, Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah insisted on the necessity of the proper observance of the requirements of *ṣarīʿat*, which was a nonnegotiable demand of the Oṣūlīs. This may be seen as an effort on his part to define urban Sufism, distancing it from the unruly practices of wandering Sufis or vagrant dervishes.

Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah’s avoidance of what the *mojtaheds* might find extreme went hand in hand with a sober political conservatism. He reconciled his own lofty place in Sufi mediatory theology with political loyalty by upholding a structure of dual authority oriented toward himself and the ruling monarch (Van den Bos 2002, 108). Demanding obedience and service to himself, he also forbade his flock from speaking ill of the king in public or in private. Always wielding the proverbial olive branch, the Sufi master was prepared to make peace with whoever came.

By the 1870s, as Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah’s *Kāneqāh* attracted public attention in Tehran, a trilateral rapprochement was under way among palace intellectuals and Sufis, Sufis and madrasah philosophers, and madrasah philosophers and certain palace intellectuals. To them all, Sufism offered a viable framework for reconciling religion and civilization—delineating a space for

the sacred as well as the secular. The philosophical worldview that pervades Sufism presented itself as an aptly sophisticated intellectual system for bridging the past and the future, providing a bedrock for spiritual enlightenment, moral buildup, communal integrity, rational development, and worldly progress, all in one.

One of the most prominent thinkers of the age, Āqā-Moḥammad-Rezā Qomšeh'ī, brought madraseh philosophy and Sufism closer than ever in Tehran (Ṣadūqī-Sohā 1981, 45–59; Ṣahbā ca. 1885; Masum-Ali-Shah ca. 1900, 3:508). He delivered a potent shot of *ʿerfān* into the veins of madrasah philosophy and enriched Sufi discourse with more philosophical rigor. More than anyone else among his contemporaries, he became greatly admired for placing the Sufi ethos of “*ʿerfān-for-all*” on firm philosophical footing. This migrant from Isfahan arrived in the capital in 1872 on the eve of a devastating famine that resounded as “the most tragic event in the modern economic and social history of Persia” in the nineteenth century (Goldsmid 1876, 49, 96; Homā'ī 1964, 21; Masum-Ali-Shah ca. 1900, 3:237; Okazaki 1986). Having spent many of his personal resources to feed indigent students and others, Qomšeh'ī left his homeland in protest over what he considered corruption and profiteering by heavyweight local *mojtaheds* in collusion with high-ranking Qajar administrators.

While it is doubtful Qomšeh'ī had formal ties to any particular Sufi order, it is clear that Sufis high and low gravitated to him in Tehran, not least the Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shāhīs among them (Jamālī 1977, 68). His superb mastery of madraseh philosophy, his unpretentious character, and his unmatched commitment to the ascetic lifestyle were hard to resist. As first-rate a philosopher as he was, Qomšeh'ī accentuated a more mystical approach to *ḥekmat*. He augmented the curriculum of *madrasehs* in Tehran by introducing new texts for study. Mollā-Ṣadrā's *Four Journeys* had been its principal text since Āqā-ʿAbd-Allāh Zonūzī had started teaching philosophy at the Khan-e Marvī Madrasah back in the 1810s, but Qomšeh'ī centered his teachings on two other important works: *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*) and *Meccan Revelations* (*Futūḥāt al-Makkiyah*), both by the thirteenth-century mystical philosopher Ibn ʿArabī (Ibn al-ʿArabī ca. 1220, ca. 1240). These works and their chains of associated commentary had a deep influence on Mollā-Ṣadrā himself (Chittick 1982). And in building the edifice he called Transcendental *Ḥekmat*, Mollā-Ṣadrā had drawn heavily on commentaries on Ibn ʿArabī, especially those by Ṣadr-al-Dīn Qūnavī (1210–1274),

‘Abd-al-Razzāq Kāšānī (ca. 1260–ca. 1330), Dāvūd Qayṣarī (ca. 1260–1350), and Mehmet Fenārī (1350–1431). These and similar works, completed between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries, gave shape to a textual tradition of analytic expository interpretation arising from Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought. Mollā-Šadrā also had availed himself of a parallel interpretive tradition, notably expressed in the writings of Šā’en al-Dīn Ebn-e Torkeh (1368–1432) in fifteenth-century Isfahan, which dealt with Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas from a more esoteric perspective (Melvin-Koushki 2012). This alternative or complementary interpretive tradition may be labeled “hypermystical.” The two interpretive traditions, the analytic and the esoteric, or the mystical and the hypermystical, combined in the discipline of theoretical *‘erfān*, or *‘erfān-e naẓarī*.

Before Qomšeh’ī, Tehran’s madraseh philosophers often downplayed theoretical *‘erfān*, even to the point of exclusion. As it pertains to the three major madraseh philosophers discussed before, Zonūzī included some esoteric elements in philosophical teaching, especially seen in his *Glaring Lights* (*Anvār-e jalīyyeh*; Zonūzī 1830), but his successors, Āqā-‘Alī Modarres and especially the rationalist philosopher Jelveh, displayed far less interest in the esoterica. Qomšeh’ī changed all that. Sometimes referred to as the Ibn ‘Arabī of his time, he taught Ibn ‘Arabī’s works alongside commentaries on these works as fundamental texts together with the mystical poem of ‘Umar ibn ‘Alī ibn al-Fāriḍ (1181–1235), known as the *Order of Spiritual Ascendancy* (*naẓm al-sulūk*). In his presentation, the migrant philosopher elaborated on the esoteric approach expounded in Ebn-e Torkeh’s book of *Ground Rules* (*Tamhīd al-qawā’id*).

Qomšeh’ī also composed works of his own, including copious commentaries on Mollā-Šadrā’s *Four Journeys* and Ebn-e Torkeh’s *Ground Rules* (Ibn Turkah ca. 1430). He penned a short book called *On the Unity of Being and All Beings* and another one titled the *Subject of Knowledge*. Qomšeh’ī’s *Note on Divine Viceregency* and, most famously, his *Treatise on Walāya* offered philosophical formulations of mediatory theory (see Moḥaqeq-e Dāmād 1997a; Šahbā ca. 1885). The latter treatise, which commented on the “Bezel of Seth” in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Bezels of Wisdom*, contains a mystical discourse on the notion of *walāya* and a theoretical defense of mediatory theology in its “strong,” “dense” sense, as manifested in the primordial man, Adam, and his successor in embodying divine authority among men. If he did not already have enough within him to offer up, Qomšeh’ī also composed mystical poetry,

often drawing on esoteric allegories to express ideas in *ʿerfān* (Ṣahbā ca. 1885). Here Mollā-Ṣadrā's philosophy and Sufi doctrine fuse in an illustrative quatrain:

The universe of love is different
 It has another earth and another heaven
 Not all caravans are allowed to enter it
 This land has a different group of wayfarers (Ṣahbā ca. 1885)

For his poems, Qomšeh'i used the pen name Ṣahbā—literally meaning “wine.” As hinted at by his chosen poetic signature, he placed himself within the tradition of allegorical Sufi poetry. Writing within the same literary tradition, when Forūgī-Bastāmī said, “The men of God behold nothing but God anywhere they look,” his words echoed the most fundamental teaching of *ḥekmat* and *ʿerfān* in easily understood words (Forūgī-Bestāmī 1857). Bringing the subtle teachings of *ʿerfān* to the public, this poetry expounded the fundamental idea that God is the fount of Being and present in all creation. Decades later, Ayatollah Khomeini drew on the same coded way of expression, musing on the beloved's lip, fancying the alehouse, and reminiscing about the idol temple. For centuries *ʿerfān* poetry spoke of the spiritual meditative journey toward God in metaphorical terms. Focusing on the notion of Being and accenting the link between Being and Knowing, Ṣahbā raised *ʿerfān* poetry to unprecedented heights in Tehran, impregnating his poetry with far more profound technical philosophical observations: saying, for example, the more you *know*, the more you *are*; the more you *are*, the closer to God. The Sufi master Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah similarly produced volumes of *ʿerfān* poetry (Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah ca. 1870).

As much as the mystical perception of God as the ultimate beloved appealed to the Sufis, some madraseh philosophers, and some palace intellectuals, it repelled most *mujtaheds*, who objected to such intimate characterizations of the relationship between God and man. They dismissed both this kind of phraseology and manner of conceptualization for having no basis in proper religion and for being misleading.

Qomšeh'i had solid training in the Oṣūlī tradition but chose not to resemble the *mujtaheds* in mannerism, comportment, or even dress. In his disregard for the formalism of the *ʿolamā*, he cut more the appearance of a village cloth vendor, plain and guileless (Ṣadūqī-Sohā 1981, 58). Tehran's

religious elite at the time, led by Mollā-‘Alī Kanī, did not approve of him or of his teachings. The social privileges afforded to other men of *madrasesh* learning, even those with a fraction of his knowledge, were denied to Qomšeh’ī. For years he slept in a bare room at the neglected Ṣadr Madrasah, which squats before the Shah Mosque near the Tehran bazaar. He did not deliver lessons at the *madrasesh* but taught in abandoned buildings such as a decrepit coffeehouse near a ditch outside the city wall. In expressing his disregard for feigned hierarchies, he used the term for forbidden places of merriment in the Sufi literary tradition, referring to his “classroom” as the *karābāt*—ruins frequented by outcasts (Ṣadūqī-Sohā 1981, 58).

Angered by Qomšeh’ī’s refusal to bow to their conventions, some of the lesser ‘*olamā* petitioned the court to have him banished from Tehran. Perhaps it was to charm these petitioners that Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah rebuffed Qomšeh’ī. During a brief audience with the sage, the supercilious monarch made an offhanded comment likening the philosopher’s teaching of Mollā-Ṣadrā’s *Four Journeys*, the *Asfār*, to a donkey carrying heavy loads of books—and the Arabic word for books is *asfār* (Etemad al-Saltaneh 1895). When Qomšeh’ī died, just after Mollā-‘Alī Kanī, only a scattered few attended his funeral, a sparse attendance in sharp contrast to the throngs who rushed to the affluent *mojtahed*’s. The episode drove the *mojtahed* Mīrzā Ḥasan Āštiānī to contrast what he saw as the lowly stature of Hellenic nonsense against the exalted value of *feqh*.

Āštiānī’s ferocity reflects a deep-seated insecurity stirred in the *mojtaheds* by the implications of Qomšeh’ī’s broad conception of God-given authority, *velāyat*. The philosopher’s emphasis on ‘*erfān* and his philosophical defense of strong or dense mediatory theology went a long way toward buttressing the legitimacy claims of the Sufis. Recognizing the *walāya* of the Sufi masters was tantamount to acknowledging a source or manifestation of divine authority alongside—in truth, beyond—the worldly power of the king and the formal religious authority of the *mojtaheds*. The claim that, inwardly and spiritually, a Sufi may surpass a king or a man of formal religious learning had an unmistakably subversive ring. Being the divinely ordained guides of man’s journey to God, the Sufi masters boldly proclaimed: “We do not need the crown of kings anywhere close to the degree that the crown needs us” (Van den Bos 2002, 80). Some went so far as to warn that neglecting their spiritual authority was bound to result in the monarchy’s downfall (Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978, 117).

The political implications of the Sufi claim to God-given authority aside, this had more explicit corollaries for acknowledging Sufi masters as the true manifestations of divine will among the people. It particularly undermined the Oṣūlīs' exclusive claim that the *mojtaheds* were the spokesmen of God. The Sufis urged that salvation depended not simply on showing obedience to formal *feqh* but on cultivating a loving devotion to God and displaying it through absolute obedience to a Sufi master. The idea was that the world revolves around and pivots on the dominant Sufi master of the age, who was recognized as the pole, the axis, or the *qoṭb*. Traditionally, the position of the *qoṭb* occupied the highest rank in Sufi hierarchy (Van den Bos 2002, 82). Clearly, endorsing this view amounted to a strong form of mediatory theology. Its growing popularity and its potential consequences alarmed the 'olamā more than the court.

The 'olamā's objection to the Sufis had ethical and theological reasons as well as political justifications. For them, relying on 'erfān and seeking a mystical loving connection with absolute being was neither sufficient nor even strictly necessary. To extend the sphere of *velāyat* beyond the Fourteen Infallibles and to override the authority of *mojtaheds* in working out divine mandates was viewed as anathema. Believing the form and content of 'erfān alien to their teachings, many of the 'olamā forbade reading or reciting Sufi poems, further warning that even keeping Sufi writings at home was sure to attract only misery and misfortune.

The 'olamā were not alone in their battle with the Sufis. As expressly opposed as they were to the power of the *mojtaheds*, most palace intellectuals and their followers also bore no interest in seeing the Sufis empowered. They equated mysticism with superstition and found most Sufi teachings to contravene progress toward civilization. However, neither the majority of the public nor many of the senior members of the nobility were convinced, either by the *mojtaheds'* admonitions against the Sufis or by the palace intellectuals' condescension.

The appeal of the Sufi idea of a meditative journey of the soul had found patrons among high-ranking Qajar administrators. Together with palace intellectuals, this group of administrators formed what may be labeled as the Qajar service nobility (Kamaly 2006). An established faction within the ranks of the service nobility kept distant from the palace intellectuals and their out-and-out emulation of all things European. Since Moḥammad Shah's time, this segment of the emerging class of trained administrators

had shown sympathy for Sufism as an intellectual and religious platform. Unlike the palace intellectuals, several powerful members of this group refused to dismiss *‘erfān* as passé. The embracement of Sufism is most notably illustrated in the case of Mīrzā Yūsof Khan Āštiyānī (1812–1886) and Mīrzā Hedāyat-Allāh Khan Vazīr-Daftar (ca. 1819–1892), two of the most prominent exponents of the more conservative segment of the service nobility. They were patrons of Sufis and Sufi learning, both opening their homes and hearts to masters of the esoteric hidden realm (*‘ālam-e bāṭen*).

Mīrzā Yūsof Khan Āštiyānī, better known as Mostōfi-al-Mamālek, was in charge of all fiscal matters in the Qajar kingdom. He was a major landowner, and a number of Tehran neighborhoods still carry his original holdings’ names—Yūsof-ābād, which he named after himself; Ḥasan-ābād and Behjat-ābād, named after his son and daughter, respectively; and still others (Shahri 1997). Even the monarch kept him in high esteem. Mostōfi-al-Mamālek welcomed and supported Sufis coming from as far away as India (Etemad al-Saltaneh 1889, 202f, 302). On his private estate in Vanak, a village tucked in the northern suburbs of Qajar Tehran—one of those places that Āqāsī had populated with loyal Sufi families a generation earlier—Mostōfi-al-Mamālek built a shrine for the guru he revered, next to whom he was later put to rest. Today their adjoining tombs stand on the bustling campus of Tehran’s premier women’s university, Al-Zahrā.

Vazīr-Daftar courted the Sufis in the same way that his slightly older cousin and brother-in-law, Mostōfi-al-Mamālek, did. Furthermore, he dabbled in alchemy, dream interpretation, other arts of the occult, and penned treatises on *‘erfān* (Derāyatī 2010; Kamali 1995; Moṣaddeq 2004–2005). Men of substance as they were, Vazīr-Daftar, Mostōfi-al-Mamālek, and a few other like-minded exponents of the Qajar service nobility made Sufism respectable, calling to elevate faith in the divine from barren juridical routine to the enlivening heights of love.

By the time Qomšeh’ī arrived in Tehran, the Kāneqāh that Ṣafī-‘Alī-Shah had recently founded was materializing as a locus of Sufi activity. Weekly gatherings were held on Thursday evenings. Scores of men and sometimes several women attended. Disciples, or *morīds*, filtered from the ranks of Qajar royalty, service nobility, and military commanders (Barq 1973, 11f; Etemad al-Saltaneh 1895, 1059). The weekly rituals included the collective chanting of divine names, or *zehr*: Compassionate, Merciful, All-Knowing, Bestower of Bounty, and the other ninety-nine or more good names of God.

After the chant (*zeker*), Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah would deliver a sermon, often commenting on passages from the Qurʾān. During meetings, new *morīds* were initiated into the order. Then a reverent, open palmful of close disciples received the privilege of a private audience with the Sufi master, the *morād* himself. A two-volume commentary, or *tafsīr*, on the Qurʾān contains a partial record of Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah's Thursday sermons. This unique work is composed in verses similar in meter to classical Sufi masterpieces such as Farīd-al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār's *Conference of the Birds* and Jalāl-al Dīn Rūmī's *Maṣnavī* from the thirteenth century.

Compared with Qomṣeh's philosophical writings, the expository works of Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah fall short in their analytical rigor. By contrast, the latter's poetry is livelier and more passionate than the former's. Taken side by side, though, they exude the potency of mystical ideas during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and testify to the strong appeal of *ʿerfān* for the inhabitants of Tehran.

Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah died in 1899, but his spiritual legacy lived on. The Sufi order he had founded, the Kāneqāh he had built, and the disciples he had trained thrived long after him. Thursday evening sessions continued, and the scope of the Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shahī activities expanded. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah's legacy led to a modern revival of Sufism and a new articulation of relations between man and God. To a large extent, this revival was made possible by the spiritually ambitious and politically connected visionary leader ʿAlī-Khan Żahīr-al-Dōleh (1865–1925), who succeeded Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shah as the new head of the Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shahīs. Assuming the title Ṣafā-ʿAlī-Shah, he placed the Sufi order center stage in the social life of Tehran. Żahīr-al-Dōleh rebranded the Sufi order a modern “Fraternal Society,” or *anjoman-e okovvat*, trailblazing a modern assembly of political activism with the ideals of serving God and loving His Creation.

Ṣafā-ʿAlī-Shah obtained a royal decree from his brother-in-law Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah (r. 1896–1907), and with such strong backing launched the activities of the Fraternal Society on Thursday, December 21, 1899. The day of inauguration was chosen in observance of the birth of the Hidden Emām, the embodiment of divine authority of the age (*valī-e aṣr*). Żahīr-al-Dōleh had handpicked each and every one of the 110 invited guests to stress the esoteric significance of this number. According to the art of numerology near and dear to the Ṣafī-ʿAlī-Shahīs and other Sufis, the number 110 equals

the computed value of the words “right” (*yamīn*), “true” (*b.ḥ.q*), and, most importantly, the name “‘Alī” in Persian letters.

Like all other Sufi orders in nineteenth-century Iran, the Ṣafī-‘Alī-Shāhīs traced their spiritual lineage back to Emām ‘Alī, the first of the twelve Emāms (Van den Bos 2002). As of the second half of the nineteenth century, the birth of the first Emām was observed publicly, partly due to Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah’s expressed devotional dedication and his declaration of the thirteenth of the seventh lunar month (Rajab) of the calendar as the day to celebrate the birth of Emām ‘Alī. Beginning in 1900 the Fraternal Society celebrated this occasion with great festivity year after year. A decisive spin was added and a new emphasis was placed on paying homage to Emām ‘Alī as the paragon of justice, not only in the cosmic sense but also in social terms. This resonated with the society’s ethos of combining faith in God, devotion to the Emām, and interest in social justice.

Weather permitting, Fraternal Society festivities were held in a park-like setting, often in Bāg-Shāh, where the public attended without distinction of birth, wealth, or social rank. The festivities lasted for several hours. Modifying the Sufi performances of ritual dance and sacred music, *samā’*, poets and master musicians of the time attended to recite lyrics and play songs. The intersection of spiritual self-improvement, religious celebration, social action, and political progressivism begat a new form of public participation.

Organizing public observances in open urban areas was a major shift from the habit of holding cloistered private events, signaling a departure from Malkom’s closed Chamber of Secrets sessions of the late 1850s or similar venues. The setting of the Fraternal Society’s public feasts was far from that of the private theaters where courtiers and their imitators hosted musical performances and other forms of licit and illicit entertainment. Public gatherings that the Fraternal Society organized also differed from religious observances regularly held under the supervision of the ‘*olamā*, especially the mass mourning processions on ‘Āšūrā.

The Fraternal Society opened an arena of social life that in an unprecedented manner integrated public participation in urban life together with political activity. The institution originating from centuries of Sufi organization flung open the gates for the creation of Tehran’s public sphere, in its modern sense (Habermas 1989), while forging a space for individuals to come together, engage in conversation, and arrive at common judgment.

The public sphere went beyond its initial scope of group meetings to circumscribe discussions about such matters as commodity exchange, social reforms, legal change, and even women's rights. The Fraternal Society was becoming a venue for the construction of public opinion and discussions of public interest. The resulting emergence of a collective identity prepped the terrain for taking progressive public political action (Habermas 1989, 30). This was not a blind imitation of European enlightenment ideology but drew on deeply rooted traditions in Twelver Shia doctrine and in Sufism, reviving, reemphasizing, and reformulating the ideal of justice in Twelver Shia theology and the emancipatory ethos of Sufism.

Similar debates were already simmering in the town's coffee houses. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, social clubs had mushroomed in Tehran's fertile soil. Many shrouded themselves in layers of secrecy that sometimes seemed to mimic a Masonic lodge. The Fraternal Society loosely operated in a similar manner (Algar 1970, esp. 291; Lambton 1987), and some of its members were indeed card-carrying Freemasons. In particular, the membership of the retrospectively infamous Persian Awakening Lodge, the *loj-e bīdārī*, shared a lot with that of the Fraternal Society (Algar 1970). On some level, the Masonic idealization of the divine as a cosmic force or a unifying principle of light and truth, above and beyond the minutiae of quotidian life, resonated with Sufi teachings. But to characterize the Fraternal Society as *merely* a Masonic entity behind a different shroud is inaccurate. No matter what flaws the Fraternal Society may have endured, and whatever moral, intellectual, or political shortcomings its members may have suffered, the institution embodied a novel set of ideals that distinguished it from other currents of the time. Although in the same waters, its ideas differed from those of the *'olamā*, those of the palace intellectuals, and other contemporary factions. Its integration of a mystical faith in God with a dedication to public service and commitment to civic duty spoke to a wider swath of the public.

Men, but also many women, who combined progressive political views with mystical sensibilities were drawn to the Fraternal Society. The Sufi ethos of self-dissolution had acquired new meaning, one with more emphasis placed on annihilating and uprooting not individual selfhood but the evil deeds contaminating the self. A significant nuance was at work that called for personal betterment, moral empowerment, and self-improvement in a modern sense. Even more than the annihilation of evil,

the cultivation of virtue took priority. Thus, a new form of humanism was born, inspired by the age-old wisdom summed up in a saying attributed to the Prophet and formulated into a poem by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Saadi:

Humanity is like a body with many parts,
 All created from the same essence.
 Once any member feels pain, others become restless.
 So any person unaffected by the anguish of others,
 Surely does not deserve membership in the body of humanity. (Saadi ca. 1296,
Golestān, Section I, Anecdote 10)

The humanistic ethos expressed in Saadi's poem became the mantra of reinvigorated Sufi sensibilities at the turn of the twentieth century. Sufism was understood to be humanistic, rational, and mystical at the same time. The Fraternal Society operated as a conduit for self-improvement through fostering good deeds, assisting fellow human beings, and serving the public. Helping the poor became a central concern. In 1901 the Fraternal Society raised and donated considerable funds to rebuild the town of Āmol, in northern Iran, after it was destroyed by fire. The society's dedication to furthering personal refinement and active social reform appealed to many of the students and graduates of the Dār-al-Fonūn and of newly founded institutions such as the School of Political Science and the American College (Boyce 1954). Several madraseh students (*ṭollāb*) who nurtured an interest in *ḥekmat* and other rational sciences were attracted as well. Membership swelled, with many arrivals from these modern educational institutions. The theological realization that God is good was seen to imply that devotion to God must translate into doing good in the world.

The *Ethical Miscellany*, a periodical published in Tehran as of 1905, gave new voice to the aspirations of those who cherished humanistic ideals, valued moral integrity, and promoted reformist ideas inside and outside Żahīr-al-Dōleh's Fraternal Society (Şadr-e Hāšemī 1948–1953, 1:79–80; 4:190–91). The magazine was put together by the society member Mīrzā 'Alī-Akbar Khan Moşavver-Ḥajjār (d. ca. 1935?), a modernist painter and sculptor who had accompanied to Europe the famed Kamāl-al-Molk, the pioneer of the natural-mimetic turn in Iranian visual arts. Moşavver-Ḥajjār's *Ethical Miscellany* lasted a run of only nine months and eighteen issues, drawing heavily from

Sufi themes and wisdom literature. Women's liberation and related topics were also discussed in its fleeting but progressive pages.

In effect, the Fraternal Society reoriented Sufism into the here and now. Alongside sincere devotion to God, personal empowerment and social reform were deemed matters of urgent concern. The political implications were clear. Most members, including Ẓahīr-al-Dōleh himself, actively supported the constitutional movement (Algar 1970, 291; Lambton 1987). For their effort, the anticonstitutionalist Moḥammad-ʿAlī Shah and the pro-court ʿolamā did everything in their power to deflate, defame, even destroy, the Fraternal Society and its associates. During the clampdown of June 1908, at least three constitutionalist affiliates were murdered. Ẓahīr-al-Dōleh's residence was looted; his son put in chains (Ṣadūqī-Sohā 1981, 105; Van den Bos 2002, 98). In a reversal, the next year found the society celebrating the tyrant's defeat and exuberantly calling it a "National Victory" (Anwār, "Anjoman-e Oḳowwat," in *Elr*). The proceeds from ticket sales and other contributions wrung from the celebratory occasion went toward assisting the families of constitutionalist martyrs.

The Fraternal Society's structure was the picture of orderliness and a reflection of rational organization. Acceptance for membership required recommendations from two persons, usually other members. Dues were collected and preprinted membership identity cards issued. All contributions were carefully monitored. During official meetings, members sat on 102 custom-made, identically carpentered chairs (Ẓahīr-al-Dōleh ca. 1925). All of this was new.

In this process, Sufism changed, redirecting its focus from ascetic otherworldliness to spiritual self-improvement, moral progress, and political activity. By the 1920s moral reform had become a national preoccupation. Institutions such as the Fraternal Society as well as individuals from various walks of life competed to be recognized as the most qualified authorities on ethics and virtue. Outward cleanliness, personal hygiene, hard work, and economic self-sufficiency defined a new standard of personal conduct. More than ever before, urban, middle-class Sufism distanced itself from vagrants, mendicants, addicts, and the rest of the stereotyped images of Sufi dervishes (Van den Bos 2002, 7).

The transformation of Sufism was not utterly peaceful. Before and after the Constitutional Revolution, hostilities against the Sufis continued, and divisions formed within Sufi orders themselves. This was the case especially

outside Tehran, where authority claims by local Sufi masters clashed with the interests of major landowners, tribal chieftains, and locally independent *‘olamā* families. For instance, bloody rivalries tainted the Gonābādī Sufi Order, which was an offshoot of the Ne‘mat-Allāhī Order with a strong presence in Khorasan as well as in the capital. In 1909 and 1918 two successive leaders of the order, Solṭān-‘Alī-Shah (d. 1909) and his son Nūr-‘Alī-Shah (d. 1918), were murdered (Van den Bos 2002, 79–80). Division and discord rankled the Sufi masters and their followers. Violence was a constant hazard in a patrimonial society where centralized state power was absent even in name during the dark days of 1910s. Sufi circles in Tehran were affected as well, if only indirectly.

The establishment of effective police and gendarme forces under Reżā Shah in 1921 worked to save the Sufis too. First and foremost, it protected them from mortal abuse at the hand of enemies such as rivals and local potentates. When the Cossack brigade captured Tehran in March 1921, Żahīr-al-Dōleh, the Sufi master and head of the Fraternal Society, served as acting governor of the city. This cooperation signaled a tactical alliance between the two sides (Van den Bos 2002, 98–99). However, the rising columns of the nation-state posed structural challenges to Sufism, weighing down on Sufi forms of mediatory theology among others. The pressures from above changed Sufism, and in drastic fashion: no longer could Sufi masters claim God-given authority above and beyond the state.

Members of the Gonābādī Order were assured by their spiritual leader that the new king, Reżā Shah, harbored sympathies for them and other Sufis (Pourjavadi and Wilson 1978, 162). There was an inside rumor that Reżā Khan had met a Gonābādī Sufi who had delivered good tidings to the hungry, poor, and simple soldier that someday he would be king (Van den Bos 2002, 88). In 1939 the Gonābādī Sufi master Moḥammad-Ḥasan Šāleh-‘Alī-Shah (1891–1966) prepared a booklet of advice, *Pand-e Šāleh*, intended to integrate the Gonābādī Order as a religious organization. This provided at once a code of moral conduct and a spiritual plea for national unity (Tahririyeh 1988).

Many other Sufi masters similarly instructed their disciples to abstain from all forms of political machination. In fact, many of the builders of the modern nation-state of Iran maintained ties to Sufism (Van den Bos 2002, 90–91). Several high-ranking government officials, especially members of the parliament, belonged to some Sufi order. In their eyes, personal and spiritual devotion to God was fully compatible with dedicating one’s energies to

formulating and implementing modernizing policies, benefiting from the windfalls of worldly power in the meantime. Eyewitnesses have claimed that, during the 1930s, “almost the whole of the class of the junior government clerks [nationwide] . . . belonged to the . . . Gonābādī order,” and that many merchants, landowners, members of the Majles, and statesmen were Gonābādī affiliates (Van den Bos 2002, 86). More generally, the contribution made by Sufi orders to develop a sense of loyalty to the nation as loyalty to God, and to seeing service to the nation as service to God, was welcomed.

The Fraternal Society took another decisive step, of utmost theoretical as well as practical importance, by actually removing the *qoṭb* position from its organizational chart. This turning point occurred under Seyed Moḥammad Entezām-al-Saltāneh (ca. 1860s–1932), who succeeded Ṣāḥīr-al-Dōleh as head of the Fraternal Society in December 1923.

Son of a devoted disciple of Ṣafī-‘Alī-Shah, the new head of the Fraternal Society was a graduate of Dār-al-Fonūn, a veteran chief of police, a high-ranking official at the Interior Ministry, and owner of expansive estates in the capital (Van den Bos 2002, 96). Entezām-al-Saltāneh was a man of the state if not a statesman. Ṣāḥīr-al-Dōleh bestowed upon him the Sufi title “Bīneš-‘Alī-Shah” (Van den Bos 2002, 84). And a man of insight, or Bīneš, he was. For years, he had served on the society’s council. Finally, when the time came for him to take over the helm, Bīneš-‘Alī-Shah declined to claim the mediatory role of *qoṭb* for himself. He went a step further and abolished the rank of *qoṭb* within the Fraternal Society altogether (Homāyūnī 1992, 326–26). He remained the leader of the council, in principle as the first among equals (Van den Bos 2002, 106–7; for members, see Rā’īn 1978, 495–96). Bīneš-‘Alī-Shah did not appoint a successor. Instead, he left the twelve men on the council to run the Fraternal Society after him. Contrary to most other Sufi orders, the society acknowledged the right of its members to make independent discretionary decisions without the permission of higher-ranking authority (Van den Bos 2002, 100). Reference to traditional tokens of legitimization was minimized; for example, receiving instructions from the Fourteen Infallibles or other spiritual authorities through dream-visions was deemphasized, and this had far-reaching implications for Sufism (Van den Bos 2002, 107–8).

As the rising authority of the centralized nation-state called for a rethinking the notion of *qoṭb* within Sufism proper, an important voice in negotiating the new status of Sufism belonged to the charismatic Keyvān

Qazvīnī (1861–1938) (Čahārdehī 1981, 108; Van den Bos 2002, 81–84). Born in Qazvin, some hundred miles northwest of Tehran, Keyvān had traveled widely and affiliated himself with several Sufi orders, including the Šafī-‘Alī-Shāhīs and Gonābādīs. For years he had served as an itinerant delegate of Sufi masters, journeying as far as India, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Arabian Peninsula. He had picked up some *madrseḥ* training in the ‘*atabāt* and considered himself a qualified *mojtahed*. But, eventually, after years of clashing with rival Sufi masters, Keyvān suddenly severed all ties to the institution and, as of 1926, became Sufism’s ardent critic.

In his sharp critique, Keyvān went beyond questioning the authority of individual Sufi masters or specific Sufi orders. His principle compelled a rejection of all Sufi masters’ claims of God-given authority, *walāya* or *velāyat*. Theoretically speaking, he, too, was targeting mediatory theology, in the same way as Kasravi, Sangelajī, and many other contemporaries did. Like them, he protested individuals becoming subservient to other individuals they regarded as poles of the universe, or *qoṭb*.

Keyvān’s critique of Sufism combined theological and social concerns. A standout work in his oeuvre, his *Book of Mysticism* (‘*Erfān-nāmeḥ*), speaks of Sufism as a symptom of decadence:

[Sufism] came forth in the era of decline of sovereign rule in Iran, during the time when the Zands and the Qajars fought each other. It then split into myriad branches. As of this writing in 1928, twenty Sufi Orders exist across Iran. They flaunt one another with sarcasm and except for negating one another they have no ground to substantiate themselves. (Keyvān Qazvīnī 1930, 307, 311–13)

As much as Keyvān disavowed the formal structure of Sufi orders—with their poles, Sufi masters (*morāds*) and disciples (*morīds*)—he did not give up on the idea of an authentic ‘*erfān* or true Sufism. He pitted the formalistic and customary (*rasmī*) Sufism of the day against what he called real ‘*erfān*, which he conceived as a modern, rational, and scientific enterprise. As meager as Keyvān’s substantive knowledge of modern science was, he insisted on explaining human agency and subjectivity in terms he believed to be natural and scientific. He used an organic metaphor to comment on human society and social relations: “Classes in society are like organs in the body, each class must be present in the society to the extent that it fulfills a necessary function, no more and no less. Otherwise, society would

become defective like the man with four eyes and one hand, or four feet and one tooth” (Keyvān Qazvīnī 1930, 311–12). He objected to the most fundamental Sufi desideratum of dissolving one’s personal agency in the presumably superior will of the Sufi master, because he saw no rational basis and no scientific justification for it.

Kasravi, Sangelajī, and Taqī Arānī had similarly targeted Sufism, blaming it for a range of problems, from moral decadence to theological backwardness and intellectual bankruptcy (Arānī 1934; Kasravi 1943b; Sangelajī 1943). Compared with them, Keyvān had deeper acquaintance with Sufism. Nevertheless, like them and a majority of contemporary public intellectuals, he held the individual accountable for choices made in life, emphasizing ethics over metaphysics. Keyvān, like most others, advocated a form of ethics-based religion that complied with the mandates of political centralization. In keeping with the spirit of the times, Keyvān acknowledged the nation-state as the primary beam of authority. Adopting a teleological stance, he viewed every major achievement in contemporary history—from the defeat of the Régie tobacco monopoly (1891) to the Constitutional Revolution—as a stepping-stone leading to the establishment of the nation-state in Iran (Keyvān Qazvīnī 1930, 269). He too placed behavior above belief and was keen on contributing to the formation of modern Iran as a nation of behavers, not merely believers.

Keyvān is said to have had thousands of pupils and admirers during his lifetime, among whom flickered several well-known literati of his day (Čahārdehī 1981, 109; Van den Bos 2002, 82). With their pointed criticism, he and other public intellectuals changed the face of Sufism in twentieth-century Tehran. In their eyes, Sufism no longer had the appeal it once had. A few Sufi orders survived the social antipathy that was reflected in the negative assessments of Sufism in the works of Keyvān, Kasravi, and others. In particular, the Šafī-‘Alī-Shāhī and Gonābādī Orders continued to operate, adapting to the demands of the centralizing nation-state apparatus. The key to their survival lay in making themselves relevant to the nation-state and redefining their terms of spiritual and ethical self-improvement, the very same ideas that critics of Sufism had advocated.

At the same time as criticisms of traditional Sufism unfolded, as the idea of *qoṭb* and strong Sufi mediatory theology gave way to virtue ethics and an emphasis on individual character and conscientious conduct, many of the

‘*olamā-rōḥānīs* weighed in to support and celebrate this transformation. The wedding of ‘*erfān* and virtue ethics is clear and present in the special case of Khomeini. He was less a mystic than Ṣafī-‘Alī-Shah and, compared with Qomṣeh’ī, less a philosopher. Nevertheless, not only did he compile a treatise on ethics based on the teachings of the Fourteen Infallibles (Khomeini 1939), young Khomeini also commented on Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Bezels of Wisdom* (Ibn al-‘Arabī ca. 1240) and Mollā-Ṣadrā’s *Four Journeys* (Khomeini 1936; Knysh 1992). Above all, he always emphasized moral discipline and self-purification (*tazkieh*), providing a religious foundation for virtue ethics. Nonetheless, as a representative voice from the *ḥozeh* in Qom, Khomeini continued to defend mediatory theology, and that in its strong formulations. This comes through in the ‘*erfān* commentaries he penned on Muslim prayer and Twelver Shia litany (Khomeini ca. 1928, 1939), and even more strongly in his principal work on *ḥekmat* where he delved into the esoteric meanings of divine authority (*wilāya*) and deputyship (*kilāfa*) (Khomeini 1931). Among the critics of mediatory theology, he bashed Kasravi and Sangelaji in harsh terms (Khomeini 1944).

The Grand Ayatollah Borūjerdi’s efforts at streamlining religious authority aimed to muffle strong mediatory claims made in Sufism and ‘*erfān*. To him, the direct embodiment of God-given authority by any fallible human agent was untenable. Khomeini’s refusal to comply with Borūjerdi’s interdiction against the teaching of philosophy stemmed from a theological as well as a political difference in worldview. Continuing to lecture on Ibn ‘Arabī in a manner reminiscent of the contents of Qomṣeh’ī’s treatise on divine deputyship and his commentary on the *Bezels of Wisdom* underscored the role of individually embodied conduits for divine authority (*qoṭbs*), or the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), in Ibn ‘Arabī’s expression. Khomeini formulated a strong mediatory theology in his *Light of Guidance on Divine Authority and Deputyship* (Khomeini 1931). This is a short but sophisticated treatise on ‘*erfān*, a detailed discussion of which would require a digression from the historical focus of the present study. The author makes references to his teachers in *ḥekmat*, mainly to Shāhābādī and Āštiyānī, and to Qomṣeh’ī and earlier philosophers back to Aristotle (Khomeini 1931, e.g., 37, 78, 98, 148, 153). While postulating a direct connection with Khomeini’s later political doctrine requires more substantive elaboration, it is worthwhile to take notice of the political subtext of these early philosophical inquiries.

Khomeini may have capitalized on the idea of *qoṭb*, or Perfect Man, using it as a new key for unlocking and augmenting the authority of the jurists, or the most learned among them. This theological platform may have provided the grounds for his formulation of the doctrine of *velāyat-e faqīh*, sometimes translated as the “guardianship of the jurist,” which he fully articulated during the 1960s (see Kazemi-Moussavi 1992; Mavani 2001; Şāleḥī-Najafābādī 1984). However, during the 1930s, insistence on regarding a living individual as the locus of God’s authority in the world seemed out of place against the backdrop of centralizing efforts in the state apparatus.

Letting go of the *qoṭb*, the Fraternal Society sailed through the rip currents of modernization, raising its spinnaker of national spirituality. Its influential members threw their support behind the young Moḥammad-Rezā Shah, focusing their social interests principally on the moral education of the nation (Van den Bos 2002, 108). Its prominent members and affiliates, like those of other major Sufi orders, occupied parliament seats and government posts. As it continued merely to warn against political rebellion as a grave danger to spiritual peace and cosmic harmony, the once-progressive Sufi organization became all but socially irrelevant by the late 1950s.

In the years after the overthrow of the nationalist prime minister Moṣaddeq in 1953, the insecure but increasingly autocratic shah turned to supportive allies from the ranks of quietist Sufi sympathizers and apolitical members of the *‘olamā-rōḥānīs*. He found an unlikely intersection of interests and ideals shared by some madraseh philosophers and lay admirers of Sufism. Some had ties to Sufi orders, but most did not. The amalgam of *ḥekmat*, *‘erfān*, and state patronage placated segments of the *‘olamā* and recruited some laymen for subduing parts of the secular, mostly leftist, opposition.

A multipronged cultural initiative undertaken as of the 1950s focused on celebrating the national Sufi heritage, in literature as well as philosophy. Part of this enterprise, which unfolded at the University of Tehran, primarily focused on highlighting the literary legacy of such luminaries of the Sufi tradition as Sanā’ī, ‘Aṭṭār, and Rūmī. Led by the scholar Badī‘-al-Zamān Forūzānfār (1903–1970) and his students and colleagues, notably ‘Abd-al-Ḥossein Zarrīnkūb (1923–1999), this academic push aimed to bring together the essential elements of what it identified as Iranian Sufism. Another angle, pursued by Seyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) and Henry Corbin (1903–1978), was

mentioned in the previous chapter. Together, these efforts led to a major recovery of the textual tradition of Sufism, *ʿerfān*, and *ḥekmat*.¹

Besides advising the Franco-Iranian Institute, Nasr supervised other publications on his own. The two were selective in their editorial treatment: the works of the rationalist madraseh philosopher Abu-ʿl-Ḥasan Jelveh and even those of a similar bent such as Āqā-ʿAlī Modarres were not included, while the *ʿerfān*-laden works of Qomšehʿī and Zonūzī were. Similarly, the cryptic works of ʿAyn-al-Qoṣāt Hamadānī (1098–1131) and the mystical illuminationist philosophy of Shahāb-al-Dīn Sohrawardi (d. 1191) received ample attention, while the works of Ibn Sīnā or Naṣīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī, even those in Persian, remained marginal. No doubt, choices were driven by intellectual preference, but the role of political prudence should not go overlooked in this process. At the time, privileging material that appealed more to the apolitical Sufis and quietist *ʿolamā* served the interest of the state. Whatever political potency Sufism and madraseh philosophy had a couple of generations earlier, and as recently as the time of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, was to be neutered.

On some level, the rehabilitation of *ʿerfān* aimed to delegitimize any strains of bellicose criticism against the status quo that came mainly from the left and to arrest any political unrest. More importantly, it was meant to mitigate the alienating effects of rapid modernization and to provide a robust foundation for spiritual fulfillment, reintroducing the sacred into modern life by drawing on the teachings of what was extolled as perennial philosophy (Guénon 1945). In hindsight, a contradiction lurked in the details of this plan.

Nasr advocated the revival of a certain nuanced iteration of what he identified as traditional Islam (Nasr 1966, 1987). Seeking to inculcate his own sense of veneration for tradition in his countrymen, he censured those Westernized Iranians who swooned over contemporary European philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre but knew next to nothing about their own Ibn Sīnā, Sohrawardi, or Mollā-Ṣadrā.

Ironically, Nasr, the Western-educated philosophy enthusiast, diagnosed modernity as a malady that could be—and should be—cured with a regimen of some traditional elixir. With as much fervor, Corbin objected to the “reign of quantity” in the West. A scholar of Iran’s later Sufi history describes the collaboration between Nasr and Corbin as the perfect

illustration of how to deploy “non-political and transhistorical definitions of religiosity [to] serve exterior and temporal political purposes” (Van den Bos 2002, 22). At least in part, their instrumentation of traditional Islam and esoteric philosophy was devised for real-world combat. In the heat of the Cold War, the Pahlavi court counted on ‘*erfān*’s virtues as a weapon in the fight against the Marxist-Leninist ideology, along with what the state called Islamic Marxism as well as other various forms of intellectual dissent. Eventually, in 1973, concurrent with widespread crackdowns of the secret police SAVAK on political dissenters, the state-funded Imperial Academy of Philosophy begat “Iranian Islam,” a notion that Corbin had adumbrated, and Nasr was its strong advocate (Algar 1980, 316n48; Corbin 1971; Wasserstrom 1999, 134, 150–52).

However, the conception of traditional Islam or Iranian Islam spawned the very antithesis of what its originators intended. It raised a question of authenticity. To the general public, including university students who were the primary targets of the rehabilitation of ‘*erfān*, madraseh philosophy, and Sufism, the question of authenticity led to a contradiction. Who could authentically speak for traditional Islam? The court, the Imperial Academy of Philosophy, the ostensibly secular professoriate at the University of Tehran, or the *hozeh*, the ‘*olamā-rōhānīs*, and the Muslim intellectuals?

‘Ali Shariati (1933–1977), the leading spokesman of revolutionary Muslim intellectuals at the time, deployed Sufi ideals to tear down the status quo. The master of the art of articulating ideas in bite-sized morsels, he averred that “all history . . . converges on three royal pathways—Freedom, Justice and ‘*erfān*” (Shariati 1977, 2:59–90). For him, Shia Islam and mysticism, in its real essence, was not the manner and gesture of court mandarins but the faith and religion of the oppressed masses. Far from being politically inert, it was in fact revolutionary and messianic. While detaching himself from the Sufi label, Shariati connected the Sufi ideal of the dissolution of the self, *fanā*, with the Shia ethos of martyrdom, *šahādat*.

With his inimitable skill at reformulating old concepts in novel terms, Shariati proposed *šahādat* as an exemplary witnessing attained through sacrifice and self-abnegation, insisting that this ultimate act of selfless sacrifice elevates the martyr, the *šahīd*, to stand as a lofty witness or *šāhed* to vital matters for the community of faith, the *ommat* (Talebi 2013). He explained that by going through tribulations in the path of God, standing witness to divine truth, and offering his or her life as the ultimate sacrifice,

the *šahīd* transcends into a higher realm of everlasting existence. A martyr rebels against injustice and corruption, and in doing so stands as a witness to the cause of justice and testifies to the truth. Because this process revolves around the community of faith commemorating, venerating, and ultimately emulating the selfless sacrifice of martyrs, it constitutes a collective duty for the faithful. Like the heart beats inside the human body, the martyr circulates life within society and history. Therefore, martyrs, in their spirit, enliven and embody the ideals of the community of faith, and the life of the community depends on keeping the martyr alive, in memory, and in emulative action.

The plea for conscientious protest and collective action led Shariati to dismiss both intellectual dilettantism and democratic uncertainty as frivolous vanities. From his perspective, democracy—decision making by headcounts—was a Hellenistic farce. Individual wayfaring couldn't amount to anything until self-indulgent scruples disappeared. The image of Muslims from all nationalities and backgrounds joining together in pilgrimage and indistinguishably circumambulating the Kaaba in Mecca, God's very House on Earth, with barely a stripe of white cloth on their back, compelled from him:

O . . . Nothing!
 O trifling drop. . .
 Join the torrent of the People . . .
 Flow (Shariati 1977, *Hajj*, 32–89)

In his lines, Shariati used the Sufi “drop in the ocean” metaphor with a caveat. Sufis only sought dissolution in the ineffable reality of God, the font of being, the sea of light. To the Sufis, fading into the anonymous multitude of a crowd fell far short of their lofty ideal. Shariati, in agreement with earlier public intellectuals—from Ākundzādeh to Ahmad Kasravi and Taqī Arānī—with whom he had little else to share, brushed off the metaphysics of classical Sufism. What set him apart from those and many other public intellectuals was that he meant to prescribe a Sufi-based cure for the distinctly modern malady of alienation: first prepare the self through disciplined self-exertion and protest, then submerge it in the community of believers, the *ommat*, for returning to God can only occur in collectivity (Amir-Arjomand 1982; Shariati 1977, *Hajj*, 26–240).

Among religious and nonreligious dissidents and advocates of armed rebellion, a readiness for martyrdom served as a primary weapon in the fight against perceived injustice. As a goal, martyrdom defined a course of ethical life and a course of ethical death, where life becomes an offering to the cause of justice, when living ethically is rendered impossible. The young Marxist Bīḡan Jazani (1937–1971), one of the earliest advocates of armed guerrilla warfare against Moḥammad-Reḡā Shah and the ruling class in Iran, who was also a talented painter, titled one of his paintings—perhaps his best—“Ḥallāj” in honor of the renowned tenth-century Sufi martyr. For Islamic groups, including but not limited to the Mojāhēdin-e Ḳalq Organization, resisting enslavement to tyranny signaled one’s submission to God, and martyrdom, the strongest form of resistance, was understood as the ultimate act of servitude. They heard this firsthand from Shariati.

After the 1979 revolution, *‘erfān* provided a framework for legitimizing the modern nation-state as an embodiment of divine will. The spiritual head of the state, the leader of the revolution, the *valī-e faqīh*, was not merely regarded as a superior expert in Shia jurisprudence but revered as a representative of God—a *valī* or *qoṭb* in the Sufi sense (Algar 2003; Knysh 1992; Martin 1996). As political agents, authorities of the state and ordinary citizens alike owed loyalty and service to the nation and God at the same time. This mystical formulation of the relationship between man and God in terms of that between citizens and the state spurred, among other things, a transformation in martyrdom’s meaning.

During the Iran-Iraq War, 1980–1988, the state propaganda apparatus reassured soldiers of the state, more commonly dubbed the warriors of Islam, that fighting the war was an act of religious devotion. Frequently that devotion was likened to love (Fahīmī 2003, 2:63; Seyed-Gohrab 2012). Drawing on the language of Sufism and *‘erfān*, soldiers—most of them in their twenties, but thousands as young as fifteen or younger—were cheered on as lovers and Gnostics who strove for union with the beloved (Fahīmī 2002b, 1:94–95). They were doing God’s work, routinely being reminded of this heartening verse in the Qur’an: “You did not fight them; rather, it was God who fought them; and you did not throw when you threw, rather, it was God who threw” (part of Q. Anfāl 8:17; Fahīmī 2002a 2:51). In their holy struggle to combat evil, inside the soul and out on the battlefield, martyrdom defined the consummate act of self-annihilation (*fanāʾ*). The fallen soldier, the martyr, reached the pinnacle of faith, choosing God above all else,

and delivering the ultimate promise. By virtue of this self-sacrifice, the finite human subject came as close to divine infinity as possible, rising above transitory earthly life to defy death itself. A particularly consoling passage from the Qur'an that came to adorn the logo of the fast-growing, state-operated Martyrs' Foundation (Bonyād-e šahīd) decrees: "Do not suppose those who were slain in the way of God to be dead; no, they are living and provided for near their Lord" (Q. Āl-ʿImrān 3:169).

Another Sufi idea that exalted the prospects of the human subject rising to a position of doing God's work in the world was expressed in the form of a promise made by God: "As my servant draws nearer to Me through supererogatory actions, I shall show him love. And when I love him, I shall be his hearing with which he shall hear, his sight with which he shall see, his hands with which he shall hold, and his feet with which he shall walk" (Kulaynī ca. 941, 2:352). This passage, historically favored by the Sufis and found with minor variation in early Shia sources, became a reference point in identifying soldiers, especially martyrs, as agents of the divine. Some of the most theoretical teachings of *ʿerfān* were put into practice during the war. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the state continued to name streets, highways, and buildings after martyr-warriors, adorning high walls and billboards across Tehran with their larger-than-life portraits. However, as the more mundane but no less urgent reality of postwar reconstruction set in, the tone and content of state propaganda changed. The ethos of self-annihilation quickly gave way to self-enrichment and self-engagement on multiple levels. The movie *The Wedding of the Blessed*, which was funded by the Martyrs' Foundation in 1989, captures the moment of transition. In the opening scene, the camera looks through the windscreen of a luxury car with the recognizable brand marker cutting through faded writing on the wall of a decrepit dwelling place, quoting Ayatollah Khomeini's promise to honor the poor, the unjustly down-trodden masses, and to privilege them over the rich. The irony was hard to miss.

The movie *Wedding of the Blessed* screened first in Tehran mere weeks after Khomeini *ghazal*, cited in the beginning of this chapter, was published. Earlier that year, in January, the leader of the Islamic Revolution drew on his background in *ʿerfān* to chime in on the diminuendo of the decades-long Cold War between communism and the West, sending an official letter to the chairman of the presidium of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The leader of the Islamic Republic advised Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev

(b. 1931) to educate himself in the truths of Islam, specifically as formulated in Islamic philosophy.² Paying homage to Ibn ‘Arabī, Mollā-Ṣadrā, and Ibn Sīnā by name, he advised the communist-in-chief to fill the ideological vacuum created by the fall of Marxism with God: “The main problem confronting your country is not that of private ownership, freedom and economics. Your predicament results from the absence of true faith in God.”³

Gorbachev neither replied to the letter nor gave it any weight in his *Moral Lessons of the Twentieth Century* (Ikeda and Gorbachev 2005). Not only did the missive fall short of shaking its foreign recipient into action, even closer to home, Ayatollah Khomeini’s exhortation of mystical philosophy to the communist leader raised some incredulous eyebrows. Detecting weakness in the leader on the eve of his acquiescence to ending the war on less-than-ideal terms, his conservative detractors who were also staunch critics of madrasah philosophy and ‘*erfān* jumped at the opportunity to make their voices heard (Moin 2000, 275). In addition to them, mistrust of mysticism was on the rise from several other directions. The posthumous publication of his *ghazal* was also a rejoinder to the critics and a reminder to the base.

However, during the years 1989–2004, collectively referred to as the eras of reconstruction and reform, the gripping appeal of sober cost-benefit analyses prevailed. Neither the state nor most of the public intellectuals vouched for asceticism, self-denial, or similar ideas and practices, as was done before. These were driven to the margins of social and intellectual life (Varzi 2006, 2008). Still, some called for rethinking, redirecting, and modernizing the mysticism, branding an unlikely product as modern mysticism, or rationalist mysticism. So far, the most tangible outcome has amounted to remolding and adaptation of some of the classical teachings of ‘*erfān* to modern psychology, epistemology, and ethics. Compared with Żahīr-al-Dōleh’s turn-of-the-twentieth-century Fraternal Society, or the 1940s ethical turn in Qom, little practical progress has occurred. However, a theoretical paradigm shift has taken place, reversing the old negative valuation of the self (*kod*, *nafs*) in Sufism and ‘*erfān*, dropping the emphasis on ascetic self-negation, and pushing instead toward the cultivation of individual success. This paradigm shift may prove to be temporary or not, but a point of no return has been passed, requiring a reformulation of the perceived relation between the self, society, and God.

Keen on suppressing any alternative to officially state-sanctioned moral, spiritual, and religious authority, the Islamic Republic disapproves of the

spectrum of modern forms of mysticism that have emerged in Tehran over the past three decades, ever since the publication of Khomeini's parting *ghazal*. In practice, these self-enhancing and self-empowering ideologies of success may open avenues for thinking and conducting life more freely, providing opportunities for expressing intellectual and artistic dissent in art, music, poetry, and fiction. Some will last, and some will perish, but these and other forms of questioning dominant ideational frameworks continue to inform debates about selfhood, identity, and alienation in contemporary Tehran.

7. VARIETIES OF SKEPTICAL EXPRESSION

5. *Mehr* no. 1, 1327Š/1948, p. 4.
6. See Kayhan-e Farhangī, no. 8 (Aban 1368/October 1989): 2.
7. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Iran-nameh* 9: 667–80.

6. Sufism Returns, and with a Vengeance

1. The works published by the Franco-Iranian Institute under Corbin's supervision included ones by Sohrevardi (d. 1191), Rūzbehān Baqlī (1128–1209), ‘Azīz al-Dīn Nasafī (d. ca. 1295), Seyyed Ḥaydar Āmolī (d. ca. 1390), and Šadrā (d. 1630s).
2. “Study Islam, Khomeini Suggests to Gorbachev,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1989; and Moin 2000, 274f.
3. See *Šahīfe-e Emām* 21:220–26, <http://farsi.rouhollah.ir/library/sahifeh?volume=21&tid=130&sc=220&q=%DA%AF%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%DA%86%D9%81>. For an English translation, see <http://www.ghadeer.org/english/imam/letter%20Imam/callto/callto2.html>.

7. Varieties of Skeptical Expression

1. See the periodical *Kiyan*, no. 28:46.

GOD *and* MAN *in* TEHRAN

Contending Visions of the Divine from
the Qajars to the Islamic Republic

HOSSEIN KAMALY



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