

Hidden Khomeini

Mysticism and Poetry

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss an important but all-too-frequently neglected dimension of Ayatollah Khomeini's worldview; namely, his perspective on mysticism. Some observers witness reflections of this outlook throughout the whole of his life. Indeed, it has even been claimed that Khomeini believed he himself had achieved mystical union. It will be argued in this chapter that the idea of mystical union was discussed by Khomeini in great detail in the 1930s. His works from this period betray the legacy of Ibn Arabi and Mulla Sadra, and Khomeini combined the *'irfani* ideas of these thinkers with elements of Shi'ism so that his message became more palatable to the Iranian milieu. Subsequently, Khomeini remained silent on the mystical tradition until the 1980s, when a small volume of his *ghazals* reflecting the deep stylistic influence of Hafez was published. More intriguingly, in a letter prefacing the *ghazals*, Khomeini categorically denied that he had ever experienced anything mystical through his study of Ibn Arabi's works. This chapter argues that if this statement is to be believed, it falsifies the claim of Baqer Moin that Khomeini himself had completed the so-called four journeys to perfection, and undermines the argument of those who witnessed the lifelong influence of *'irfan* on Khomeini, which of course has profound political implications.

The juxtaposition of Khomeini as a *faqih* whose authority is on the basis of the ability to determine the probable will of the Hidden Imam with that of the mystic who is able to commune with the divine appears to be somewhat incongruous. In essence, the problem can be summarised as one that pits the fallible knowledge of the *faqih* against the assured

and verified experiential claims to truth of the mystic. Such a conflict has been at the heart of a dispute that has raged within the Islamic world for centuries. It has not been confined to the Shi'i world, as within the Sunni tradition, too, there is ample evidence of the antipathy of jurists (and also theologians and other learned scholars) towards the Sufi tradition.¹ In general, much of the hostility has been directed at the innovations of certain Sufi practices (such as the *sama'*) and ontological world views (in particular, those that promoted the idea of existential unity) such as the so-called unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*), which have provoked considerable ire.²

The influence of Sufism was dramatically curtailed with the establishment of Shi'ism as the state religion of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1501, and the subsequent rise to power of clerics who were able to legitimise the authority of the Shah in the absence of the Hidden Imam (who was understood to be the rightful possessor of spiritual and temporal power). Many of the Sufi orders were ruthlessly purged, and in order to survive Sufis had no choice but to leave the region or adopt Shi'ism.³ Although the orders (*tariqa*) suffered irretrievably under the Safavids, mystical scholarship (*'irfan*)⁴ thrived; speculative *'irfan* combined philosophy and Shi'ism that developed within the School of Isfahan, and is epitomised by the writings of scholars including Mir Damad (d. 1631), Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) and Shaykh Baha' al-Din al-Amili (d. 1621).⁵ However, the Persian Sufi tradition never achieved the same degree of sociopolitical and religious impact and prestige that it had enjoyed in the medieval period. With the onset of modernity and increasing influence of Western thought in Iran, Sufism faced new challenges to its "irrational"

¹ See Frederick de Jong and Bernd Radtke (eds.), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1999).

² On which, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

³ Said Amir Arjomand, "Religious Extremism (Ghuluww), Sufism, and Sunnism in Safavid Iran (1501–1722)", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 15 (1), (1981), 1–35.

⁴ *'Irfan* refers to the intellectual approach to mystical questions of an epistemological and ontological nature. Although Sufism may also incorporate *'irfani* approaches, it also includes specific rituals (which proponents of *'irfan* regarded with distaste) and is often considered to be more of a populist nature.

⁵ On Mulla Sadra, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Mulla Sadra and his Teachings," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 643–662; Leonard Lewisohn, "Sufism and the School of Isfahan" in Leonard Lewisohn and David Morgan (eds.), *The Heritage of Sufism*, vol. iii (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), pp. 63–134; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The School of Isfahan" in M. M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. ii (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), pp. 904–961.

and “superstition-bound” world view, which the ascendant Usuli school of Shi’ism was able to meet because of its insistence on the use of scripture and reason to reach decisions of legal and theological importance.⁶ Nevertheless, the mystical tradition could not be completely eradicated from Iran, and although the Sufi orders were increasingly weakened, the mystical world view remained strong among some of the most respected scholars, including Hajji Mulla Hadi Sabzawari (d. 1878).⁷

But the juxtaposition of *fiqh* and *’irfan* in Khomeini’s world view is not as strange as it may appear at first glance, especially as celebrated Shi’i thinkers including Shaykh Baha’i and Sabzawari also wrote on *hikmat* (philosophical mysticism) and jurisprudence. Nevertheless, the pursuit of *’irfan* in the *madrassa* environment when Khomeini was a student in Qum remained beyond acceptability, for as Vanessa Martin has noted, it was considered a “challenge to established authority.”⁸ Opposition to *’irfan* and Sufism reached the extent that “mollahs openly advised their followers to avoid books such as Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, which had to be removed with pincers from the homes of pious Muslims.”⁹ Indicative of this is that in Mashhad during the 1920s, Badi al-Zaman Furuzanfar (the scholar who was to become the leading expert of Rumi in modern Iran) could not find a copy of Rumi’s *Diwan-i Shams*.¹⁰

KHOMEINI’S EARLY PROSE WRITINGS ON ’IRFAN

In his early years in the seminary, Khomeini met a series of scholars learned in *’irfan* who were prepared to teach him. When one of these died, Khomeini referred to the suspicion surrounding his teacher’s *’irfani* views,

⁶ For an example of Usuli thought compared with the other major Twelver Shi’i school, the Akhbaris, see Robert Gleave, *Inevitable Doubt: Two Theories of Shi’i Jurisprudence* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2000).

⁷ On Sabzawari, see Mehdi Mohaghigh and Toshihiko Izutsu (trans.), *The Metaphysics of Sabzawari* (Delmar: New York, 1977). It is not insignificant that one of Sabzawari’s disciples, Mirza ’Ali Akbar Yazdi, was one of Khomeini’s first teachers in Qum. See Hamid Algar, “Imam Khomeini, 1902–1962: The Pre-Revolutionary Years”, in Burke and Lapidus (eds.), *Islam, Politics and Social Movements* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 268.

⁸ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 33.

⁹ Baqer Moin, *Khomeini* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 46.

¹⁰ Franklin Lewis, *Rumi, Past and Present, East and West* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p. 555. The kind of opposition faced by Khomeini in the 1920s and 1930s continued into the 1940s and 1950s, as ’Allama Tabataba’i experienced the same difficulties teaching the same texts on *’irfan* in Qum. See Hamid Algar, “’Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i: Philosopher, Exegete, and Gnostic,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 17 (3), (2006), p. 334.

which necessitated a preacher declaring from the *minbar* that the individual in question had actually been seen reading the Qur'an.¹¹ Nevertheless, Khomeini's interest and pursuit of *'irfan* continued unabated, and by 1929 he had composed his first work on the topic. This was a commentary on a Shi'i prayer, *Tafsir Du'a'-yi sahar* (*Dawn Supplications*).¹² In this work, Khomeini supposedly demonstrated the compatibility of the *shariah* with *irfan*. The commentary also revealed Khomeini's debt to Ibn 'Arabi (the great master of *'irfan* from Andalusia whose work has fascinated Sufis and mystics since the thirteenth century). Khomeini discussed the "Perfect Man," an individual whose function had been elaborated on by Ibn 'Arabi and his followers in great depth.¹³ Simply put, the Perfect Man acts as a conduit between God and His creation, and through whom all of God's attributes may be witnessed.¹⁴

Khomeini's subsequent work, *Misbah al-Hidayat* (*The Lamp of Guidance*),¹⁵ further revealed his attachment to the *'irfani* tradition and perfection of the human being. In a language dense in Akbarian terminology and themes,¹⁶ he "demonstrated an intimate awareness of Ibn 'Arabi's problematic,"¹⁷ and amalgamated these with certain ideas that had been formulated by Mulla Sadra. Ibn 'Arabi (and the school associated with him) had elaborated on the theme of the descent and return to God, and the classification of existence in to "presences"¹⁸ by which the underlying unity of existence in its absolute and single form (God),

¹¹ Algar, "Imam Khomeini, 1902–1962: The Pre-Revolutionary Years", p. 269.

¹² *Tafsir dua-yi sahar*, translated from Arabic into Persian by Ahmad Fihri (Tehran: Nihzar-i Zanan: 1359/1980).

¹³ See Reynold A. Nicholson's chapter entitled "The Perfect Man" in his *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), pp. 77–142, in which he investigates the concept according to al-Jili; see also William Chittick, "The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jamī," *Studia Islamica*, 49 (1979–1980), pp. 137–157.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the Perfect Man, see Masataka Takeshita, *Ibn 'Arabi's Theory of the Perfect Man and its Place in the History of Islamic Thought* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1987).

¹⁵ *Misbah al-Hidayat ila al-khilafat wal-walayāt* (Arabic text and Persian translation by Ahmad Fihri), (Tehran: Paygham-i azadi, 1360/1981).

¹⁶ The term "Akbarian" refers to Ibn 'Arabi, who is also known as the al-Shaykh al-Akbar (or "greatest shaykh").

¹⁷ Alexander Knysh, "'Irfan Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy", *Middle East Journal* 46 (4), (1992), p. 365.

¹⁸ For the way in which the presences were understood by the first few generations of Ibn Arabi's followers, see William Chittick, "Five Divine Presences: From al-Qunawi to al-Qaysari", *Muslim World*, 80 (2), (1982), pp. 107–128. Khomeini's discussion of the presences is far less elaborate or sophisticated in his section on the four journeys.

and also in its diverse manifestations (creation), may be comprehended. Khomeini's synthesis of these topics within Mulla Sadra's four journeys (*asfar arba'a*)¹⁹ assumes great significance for some scholars because it legitimised social engagement and political involvement. That is to say, Khomeini's passion for 'irfan was not an otherworldly diversion from the harsh realities of life in Iran under Reza Shah. Khomeini may have inherited such a persuasion from his master in 'irfan, Mirza Muhammad 'Ali Shahabadi (d. 1950), who "did not believe in public quietism and was one of a small group of mollahs who actively opposed Reza Shah's policies."²⁰ To unpack the full significance of Khomeini's *Misbah al-Hidayat* and its political implications it is necessary to summarise and see how the individual – or rather, the Perfect Man – travels from creation to God and back again, and also focus on the identity of such an individual and the outcome of his journey.

Although Khomeini's elaboration of the four journeys is relatively brief, its very location as the terminal point of *Misbah al-Hidayat* is highly significant. The first journey commences from creation (i.e., mundane existence) to the delimited Truth (*haqq-i muqayyad*), where the beauty of the presence of the Truth is witnessed through the active manifestation of the Truth in the world of existence. In other words, the traveller witnesses the whole of creation as a manifestation of the presence of the Truth.²¹ During the first journey, he casts aside three veils: those of his carnal soul (*nafs*), his intellect ('*aql*) and his spirit (*ruh*). This permits the annihilation of the self, and he also makes ecstatic utterances (*shathiyat*) "which are condemned as infidelity."²²

This description of the first journey (like the others that follow) manifests Khomeini's debt to the Sufi tradition. Although there is much terminology from the Akbarian tradition, his all too brief treatment of annihilation and ecstatic utterances reflect knowledge of the wider and more general Sufi tradition. Annihilation (*fana'*) became the central doctrine of Sufis in the early medieval period, and it generally meant the stripping away of impermanent, temporal concerns from the wayfarer (inferring that what subsisted was divine). In this process, the wayfarer would often utter ecstatic statements, which are the seemingly

¹⁹ Mulla Sadra was not the first to discuss the four journeys. They are mentioned in passing by Husayn Wa'iz Kashifi in his *Futuwwat nama-yi Sulṭani*, M. J. Mahjub (ed.), (Tehran: Bunyad-i farhang-i Iran, 1971), p. 245.

²⁰ Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 43.

²¹ *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic, p. 207; Persian, pp. 208–209.

²² *Ibid.*, Arabic, p. 204; Persian, p. 206.

“outrageous” declarations made by famous Sufis such as Hallaj’s “I am the Truth” or Abu Yazid’s “Glory be to Me! How great is My majesty.”²³ According to the Sufi world view, at the height of mystical experience, the Sufi is unable to control his actions, and the statements that emerge from the mystic reflect the reality of an underlying unity between lover and beloved.

The second of Khomeini’s four journeys is an expression for travelling from the delimited truth to absolute Truth. In Khomeini’s terms, the Truth Most High discloses Himself in the station of complete unicity (*maqam-i wahdaniyyat*).²⁴ Another way that this second journey is described is travelling from the Truth towards the Truth by means of the Truth.²⁵ This means that the traveller voyages from the delimited God (or the presence that represents God’s knowledge of everything) to the Absolute God (which is the presence that transcends all but conceptual knowledge of its ultimate existence). In fact, Khomeini declares that this is the station of annihilation from annihilation, which resembles the doctrine of the celebrated Sufi Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910),²⁶ by which he probably meant that the wayfarer is not even aware of annihilation or himself because his essence, attributes and acts are annihilated in the essence, attributes and acts of the Truth.²⁷ Khomeini warns his readers that ecstatic utterances may emerge at this stage, too, and as such reflect imperfections in the spiritual wayfarer, and for this reason he argues that a guide is necessary. Such a guide does not step outside of the legally permitted ascetic discipline (*riyadat-i shar’i*).²⁸ The explanation of the second journey indicates that Khomeini was very much a sober-minded advocate of *’irfan*, perhaps one that eschewed some of the traditional Sufi practices and rituals. Perhaps Khomeini’s personal path was a simple form of spirituality that included prayer and scrupulous attention to external and inner purity, in addition to the study of speculative mystical writings.

The third journey commences through divine favour: the spiritual traveller starts from the Truth and moves back to the real creation (*al-khalq*

²³ For a discussion of these kinds of ecstatic utterances, see Carl Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).

²⁴ *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic, p. 207; Persian, p. 209.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Arabic, p. 204; Persian, p. 206.

²⁶ For Junayd see Ali Hassan Abdel-Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd* (London: Luzac, 1976). Junayd’s complicated and intricate doctrine of annihilation (*fana’*) and annihilation of annihilation are contained in his own letters (which are included in Abdel-Kader’s book, pp. 152–174).

²⁷ *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic, p. 204; Persian, p. 206.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Arabic, p. 207; Persian, p. 209.

al-haqqi) by means of the Truth. Khomeini offers another expression by which to understand this third journey: the wayfarer journeys from the presence of inclusive unity (*al-ahadiyya al-jami'iyya*) to the presence of the immutable entities (*al-a'yan al-thabita*). These terms would be familiar to scholars of the so-called *wujudi* tradition of Ibn Arabi. The first refers to the presence of the Absolute Truth, and the second is God's knowledge of all the things that have the potential to exist in their particular modes. Thus, the immutable entities are every single thing in creation, which are not universals in the Platonic sense.²⁹ Having passed the stages of annihilation in the first journey, and annihilation of annihilation in the second journey, in the third journey the wayfarer subsists through God. Again, the terminology is typically Sufi: according to medieval Sufi texts, subsistence (*baqa'*) becomes apparent as the wayfarer's existence is annihilated, revealing a pure and obedient individual that lives, acts and knows through God. Moreover, according to Khomeini, at this stage the traveller manifests a complete sobriety (the inference being that no ecstatic utterances are made). Importantly, Khomeini mentions that it is in this journey that the wayfarer yields a portion of prophecy, although he is not permitted the station of legislative prophecy.³⁰

The fourth journey is from creation to the creation by means of the Truth. To use another expression used by Khomeini, it is from creation (or the Truth, as the presence of the immutable entities) to the creatures (which are the entities that have an outward disclosure [*al-a'yan al-kharijiyya*]). The traveller is able to witness the beauty of the Truth in all of these entities. Moreover, it is in this station that he brings religion and the law (*din wa shari'a'*), makes exoteric commands pertaining to the body and esoteric laws pertaining to the heart and informs the people about God and His attributes and names, encouraging them to turn to their Lord.³¹

The fourth journey is not solely the preserve of the prophets, as Khomeini states that these four can be yielded by the perfect friends, such as Ali and his immaculate children (the twelve Imams): "Know that these journeys are also yielded for the complete friends, even the fourth journey, just as they were yielded for our master, the Commander of the Faithful and his immaculate children (God's greetings upon them)."³² He

²⁹ Ibid., Arabic, pp. 205, 208; Persian, pp. 207, 209–210.

³⁰ Ibid., Arabic, p. 205; Persian, p. 206.

³¹ Ibid., Arabic, p. 208; Persian, p. 209.

³² Ibid., Arabic, p. 211; Persian, p. 212.

legitimises his position with reference to his spiritual teacher, Shahabadi, whom he terms the perfect gnostic (*al-arif al-kamil*)³³: “If Ali had appeared prior to God’s prophet he would have manifested the *sharia* of Islam.”³⁴ It is highly significant that Khomeini does not include any other individuals among those who could complete the four journeys. Ali and the immaculate Imams were able to do so because (according to Shahabadi) they shared the same spirituality and exoteric and esoteric stations with the Prophet.

In the history of Sufism and *’irfan* there has been considerable debate relating to the spiritual levels of the Prophet and the Sufis (also known as the Friends of God). Ibn Arabi is a good example of this, for just as he stated the normative Islamic belief that Muhammad was the seal of the prophets (i.e., the last and best of the prophets), so, too, was there a seal of the Friends of God who enjoyed the same spiritual level as the Prophet, although he did not possess prophetic and therefore legislative authority. Moreover, Ibn Arabi claimed that he was the Seal of the Friends of God.³⁵ Although Khomeini’s debt to the Great Shaykh is clear in his discussion of the four journeys, he does not specifically identify a Friend of God or gnostic after the twelve Imams who can complete these four journeys. The significance of this point should not be underestimated, especially as different opinions have emerged on the very topic of the political ramifications of Khomeini’s discussion of the four journeys. The next section will examine three main perspectives on the issue. The significant point is whether Khomeini believed that he himself had completed the four journeys; that is to say, that he had travelled to God, and returned to creation and implemented the divine laws.

The first perspective is that Khomeini did not believe that he completed the four journeys. Typifying this view is Hamid Algar, who has a favourable opinion of the *Misbah al-Hidayat*. He states, “[It] ... is less important for the wide erudition it displays than for the complete practical mastery of the art of *irfan* that underlies it; it is not a digest of received opinions and formulations but the manifest fruit of a powerful and original vision.”³⁶ This last sentence may make it seem that Algar believed that

³³ Another scholar for whom Khomeini uses this term is Aqa Muhammad Rida Qumsha’i, who briefly taught Shahabadi (see Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 32).

³⁴ *Misbah al-Hidayat*, Arabic; p. 212; Persian, p. 212.

³⁵ For more on this subject, see Michel Chodziekiez, *The Seal of the Saints: Prophecy and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn Arabi*, translated by L. Sherrard (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).

³⁶ Algar, “Imam Khomeini”, p. 270.

at the very least the Ayatollah had “knowledge by presence”;³⁷ however, a recent email exchange with Algar has clarified the matter. I asked Algar whether the *insan-i kamil* or Perfect Man (the individual who completed the four journeys) referred to the prophets and Twelve Imams alone. Algar confirmed:

Insofar as *insan-i kamil* [the perfect man] represents a principle rather than an identifiable individual – although it was indeed manifested in identifiable individuals such as the *Maūmīn* [the infallible Twelve Imams] – it is a principle which may be striven after if not fully attained ... the assertion that Imam Khomeini believed that he had completed the four journeys and therefore attained the status of *insan-i kamil* is, I think, unwarranted.³⁸

Algar’s perspective seems to be supported by Alexander Knysh, who has also studied the *Misbah al-Hidayat*. His analysis of Khomeini’s writings indicates that he considered Khomeini more of a “theoretical mystic” than one who had “knowledge by presence.” Knysh described the *Misbah* as “the work of a beginner ... lacking in focus ... embracing a great deal of important, yet often poorly digested information. It seems likely that, at the beginning, young Khomeini was too overwhelmed and fascinated by the tradition to make a coherent rendition of it.”³⁹ However, he also claimed that Khomeini’s ideas of vicegerency and sainthood rested “on an inextricable fusion of personal experience and putatively objective ontological thinking.”⁴⁰ The personal experience may refer to both Khomeini’s ascetic spiritual practice and his belief in some kind of spiritual unveiling.⁴¹ However, it is unknown to what extent Khomeini engaged in “practical gnosis” (*irfan-i ‘amali*), which would have involved “a strict regimen of ascetic self-purification leading to a direct perception

³⁷ See Mehdi Ha’eri Yazdi, *Knowledge by Presence* (Tehran: Cultural Studies and Research Institute, 1982).

³⁸ Email correspondence, dated 8 June 2011.

³⁹ Knysh, “*Irfan Revisited*”, p. 371.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

⁴¹ Knysh observes that “it seems likely that he adopted a number of ascetic practices ... renunciation of worldly delights and desires, self-imposed poverty, scrupulous discernment of the ‘lawful’ and ‘forbidden’”. “*Irfan Revisited*”, p. 634. All scholars mention Khomeini’s ascetic persona, and his admiration for like-minded clerics, such as Mudarris. Khomeini’s repudiation of wealth and worldly attachments was a theme that has been highlighted by the Islamic Republic since his death. When I visited Jamaran (Khomeini’s residency in Tehran) which receives visitors from around the world, a guide described how Khomeini had received Eduard Schevardnadze, then the foreign minister of the Soviet Union, in a small antechamber (rather than a plush meeting room), where they drank a simple glass of tea together.

of the suprasensory realm,”⁴² and included rituals such as the *dhikr* (the ritualised repetition of God’s names), night vigils and various supererogatory acts of devotion.⁴³ Ever since the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini has been more commonly associated with “speculative gnosis” (*irfan-i nazari*), perhaps because of the negative connotations made about practical gnosis among some clerical circles of Sufism.

The second perspective relating to Khomeini’s putative completion of the four journeys is one that errs on the side of caution. An example of this is present in the work of Martin, who focuses on the identity of those who had completed the four journeys:

Khomeini’s precise position on these ideas was ambiguous. The references in *The Light of Guidance* suggest that he identified a perfect man as one who has the status of prophets and imams. He says that the one who understands the fourth journey reaches the level of legislative prophecy, again implying that it is highly unlikely to be possible for ordinary believers. There is however, a hint that the status of perfect man may be achieved by ordinary mortals, but only the rarest few.⁴⁴

Martin subsequently suggested that Khomeini’s understanding of these ideas influenced his implementation of the *velayat-e faqih*, which will be discussed in the next section.

However, Khomeini’s passage within his sections on the four journeys is transparently clear: those who complete the journeys are the prophets and the Imams. The doctrine of the Perfect Man holds that there can only be one at any given time:⁴⁵ only a single individual can manifest the totality of the divine attributes and names that reflect the reality of unity in multiplicity. If two such perfect individuals existed, then unity would be negated. This Sufi belief converges with the Shi’i principle that the Twelfth Imam serves this very function. He is the *Khalifa*, albeit in occultation, but present and alive. From this perspective it would be unthinkable for Khomeini even to suggest that the Perfect Man, who has completed the four journeys, could be anyone other than the prophets and Imams. The conflict surrounding the Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Man and the Twelver

⁴² Algar, “Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai”, p. 330.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 331. Algar assumes that these are the practical rituals that were adopted by Tabatabai.

⁴⁴ Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ This was discussed by Aziz Nasafi, a thirteenth-century Persian Sufi who analysed many of the themes that were also present in the *wujūdī* worldview. For his understanding of the Perfect Man, and there being only one at any one moment, see Lloyd Ridgeon, *Aziz Nasafi* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), p. 176.

Shi'i understanding of the Hidden Imam was recognised by one of the leading Persian Sufis of the late nineteenth century, Safi Ali Shah, who reconciled the difference by stating that true authority lies with the Twelfth Imam, to whom all obedience is due. However, if the gnostic has mystical contact with the Hidden Imam in occultation, the latter's guiding function devolves practically on the *qutb* (or Sufi master). In other words, it is the Imam, in occultation, that is the Perfect Man and appears mystically in dreams or visions to lesser mortals.⁴⁶

A third perspective relating to the possibility of Khomeini completing the four journeys was highlighted in the West soon after the Islamic Revolution by *Time Magazine*, which named Khomeini their Man of the Year for 1979. In an article entitled "Man of the Year: Portrait of an Ascetic Despot," it was observed:

[F]rom discussions with former students, talks with Western scholars who have visited Khomeini, profiles prepared by Western intelligence analysts, and the speeches and interviews he has given during this year on the world stage, it is possible to gain some insight into the Ayatullah's thinking. First and foremost, all sources agree, he is an Islamic mystic who believes that God tells him directly how to apply the principles of the Koran and the Shari'aa (Islamic law) to life and politics.⁴⁷

Sharing this view are scholars such as Baqer Moin, who have no qualms claiming that Khomeini believed he had undergone all four of the journeys. Moin made this public in an obituary for Khomeini that he wrote for *The Independent* in 1989:

Khomeini's strength and self-righteousness, which enabled him to withstand the enormous pressure of swimming against the tide, was on the basis of his mythical view that he had been through the four journeys sought by the Sufis, to reach absolute unity with God: first, "man to God" leaving behind carnal desire; "from God to God" annihilation in God; from "God to man" returning with Godly attributes to man; and finally from "man to man" merging with the people and God at the same time. Whoever has experienced these journeys becomes the Logos, the "Perfect Man", the "centre of the universe". ... What is certain about this contradictory personality was the charisma, sense of expediency and mysticism

⁴⁶ See Lloyd Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 15. For the correlation between the Twelfth Imam and the Sufi concept of the Perfect Man, see Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Shi-ite Islam*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (trans.), (Albany: SUNY Press, 1975), p. 114. His comments in *The Kernel of the Kernel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003) are also significant, for he witnesses the concrete manifestation of the Divine Names and Attributes in the world of existence, and the "reality of the Imam is the same as the Names and Attributes of God" (p. 109).

⁴⁷ *Time*, "Man of the Year: Portrait of an Ascetic Despot", p. 15.

of a man who maintained that he was the people and God rolled into one, a belief which under certain circumstances could have led to his excommunication.⁴⁸

In his biography of Khomeini published in 1999, Moin was more circumspect, observing that the Ayatollah had never “openly” claimed to have completed the fourth journey. However, it is evident that Moin believed that Khomeini had indeed achieved this feat, noting the usual hesitancy of mystics to reveal their state. Moreover, he cited the opinion of Mehdi Hairi Yazdi, the son of a former student of Khomeini, who was of the opinion that Khomeini had reached the conclusion of the mystical journey.⁴⁹

THE LEGACY OF KHOMEINI’S INTEREST IN IRFAN

Scholars agree that the tradition of *’irfan* had a profound impact on Khomeini, who continued to write on the theme.⁵⁰ Moreover, during the 1940s he even held his own classes on *’irfan*, which were restricted to a few select individuals that would later become leading figures in the revolutionary movement and the creation of the Islamic Republic.⁵¹ Although Khomeini subsequently started to focus on other areas of teaching, particularly ethics (*akhlaq*), scholars have recognised that the legacy of *’irfan* and its imperative of social engagement remained with him. During the 1930s and 1940s, he was linked (albeit tangentially) to a number of cases that resisted Reza Shah’s reforms. Although Martin claims “he was not ... notably activist,”⁵² it is possible that as a junior cleric Khomeini felt obliged not to overstep the mark and toe the more quiescent line adopted by more senior clerics. Nevertheless, there is much truth in Algar’s

⁴⁸ Baqer Moin, *The Independent*, 5 June 1989.

⁴⁹ Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 51. Unfortunately, Moin does not say how this information was obtained.

⁵⁰ These works included commentaries on several texts that were composed by Ibn Arabi’s followers, including al-Qaysari’s own commentary on Ibn Arabi’s *Fusus al-hikam*, and al-Fanari’s *Misbah al-Uns* which was a commentary on *Miftah al-Qayb*, a work by Ibn Arabi’s leading disciple, Sadr al-Din Qunawi. For full details of these commentaries of Khomeini see Knysh, “*Irfan Revisited*”, p. 375, n.1.

⁵¹ One of these, Murtaza Mutahhari, was to write a book entitled *al-Insan al-Kamil*, in which he describes the Perfect Man from the perspective of the philosophers, the Sufis (as opposed to the gnostics such as Ibn Arabi) and “normative” Shiism. This work was nowhere near as sophisticated as Khomeini’s treatment of *’irfan* and the Perfect Man because Mutahhari’s populist work was intended for a very different readership. See Murtaza Mutahhari, *Perfect Man*, translated by Aladdin Pazargadi (Tehran: Foreign Department of Bonyad Be’tat, n.d.).

⁵² Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 30.

observation that the “early and intense cultivation of *hikmat* and *’irfan* should not be regarded as a passing episode, for it contributed powerfully to the formation of his total persona as religious and political leader.”⁵³

The events of Khomeini’s life in the 1960s and into the 1970s, and his unflinching opposition to the Pahlavi regime in particular, have been copiously documented in a number of works. With the success of the Islamic Revolution and the institutionalisation of the *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), some would argue that the *’irfani* imperative had yielded its logical conclusion. Moin, for example, rightly argued that a *faqih* could not claim a legislative right (which according to Khomeini was the prerogative of the prophets having completed the four journeys). However, Moin used the term *wilayat-i irfani* (“mystical guardianship”) to describe how Khomeini believed the jurist had “power over the precepts of religion, even to the point of suspending them, which is exactly what he did in 1987.”⁵⁴ According to Moin, “This view clearly contradicts the orthodox view of Islam in which the divine rules cannot be tampered with.”⁵⁵ His reference to events in 1987–1988 reflects what Said Arjomand terms “the Constitutional Crisis of the 1980s and Khomeini’s Second Revolution,”⁵⁶ in which the full extent of power that the Islamic government could exercise was revealed. Khomeini observed:

Government is a branch of Muhammad’s absolute vice-gerency, and is one of the first precepts of Islam. It takes precedence over all religious practices such as prayer, fasting or the hajj pilgrimage. ... I openly say that the government can stop any religious law if it feels that it is correct to do so ... the ruler can close or destroy the mosques whenever he sees fit ... the government can prohibit anything having to do with worship or otherwise if [these things] would be against the interests of the government.⁵⁷

This declaration should not be considered a major innovation in Khomeini’s thought, as he had criticised the constitution of the nascent

⁵³ Algar, “Imam Khomeini”, p. 270. Other scholars do not recognise the ethical and political implications of *Misbah al-Hidayat* and the *’irfan* tradition. For example, Ervand Abrahamian in *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993) states that Khomeini’s first political tract was *Kashf al-asaar* (1943). *Misbah al-Hidayat* is not mentioned at all in his book.

⁵⁴ Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 296.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Said Amir Arjomand, “Authority in Shiism and Constitutional Developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran”, in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), p. 309.

⁵⁷ Cited in *Middle East International*, no. 317, 23 January 1988, p. 18.

Islamic Republic in 1980, which perhaps did not sufficiently reflect his own views regarding the extent of *velayat*.⁵⁸ At the heart of Khomeini's declaration is the desire to protect and preserve the interests of Islamic government. If precedents are needed to legitimise such a position (as many observers considered this an innovation, tantamount to heresy),⁵⁹ the concept of *darurat* or necessity provides a way for the exercise of temporary expedient measures.⁶⁰ The call for the establishment of Islamic government had been given by Khomeini when he was resident in exile in Iraq back in the 1960s and 1970s, and it was the preservation of this primary goal that legitimised his (in)famous declaration of 1987–1988. Although *darurat* is a little-discussed concept in the Shi'i tradition, preservation of the Islamic government might have been considered a self-evident necessity, even by those who had little knowledge of the esoteric Islamic tradition so avidly studied by Khomeini as a young man. But some scholars (such as Moin) linked this declaration to the four journeys, and others stated that it is the best manifestation of “the hidden influence of the *irfan* tradition.”⁶¹

'*Irfan* IN KHOMEINI'S POETRY

Throughout his life, Khomeini had a deep affection for Persian poetry, which includes a rich vein of mystical verses. Indeed, the popularity of classical Persian poetry has transcended continents, as it has been frequently observed that during the 1990s the bestselling poet in the United States was Rumi.⁶² Indications of Khomeini's inclination for poetry appeared in his early years at Qum in the 1920s,⁶³ and he started to compose his own verses presumably at the same time. Some of these have been preserved, and they reveal Khomeini's mystical sentiments⁶⁴ and

⁵⁸ Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution I: Writings and Declarations* (ed., trans. Hamid Algar), (London: Mizan Press, 1986), p. 342.

⁵⁹ Godfrey Jansen, “Khomeini's Heretical Delusions of Grandeur”, *Middle East International*, no. 317, 23 January, 1988, pp. 18–19. This statement in which Khomeini claimed that government has the authority to abrogate Islam's basic pillars, according to Jansen, “has no basis whatsoever in the Quran and is an artificial construct by Khomeini which he tailored to fit his own personal ambitions”. Ibid.

⁶⁰ Y. Linaut de Bellefonds, “Darurat” *EI2*, vol. ii, 1965, pp. 163–164, who observes that the concept is “almost exclusively used” in the Shafi'i Sunni school.

⁶¹ Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 41.

⁶² This is based on a cover article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (25 November 1925).

⁶³ Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 29.

⁶⁴ Marin, *Creating an Islamic State*, p. 32.

political concerns.⁶⁵ The fact that he also littered his prose Arabic works with verses penned by Persian mystical masters is again indicative of his predilection for the poetic tradition.⁶⁶

But Khomeini's prose work by far dominated his literary output, and the explicitly *'irfani* element diminished over time to be replaced by ethics, jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and politics. With a few exceptions,⁶⁷ this trend continued during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s after the success of the Islamic Revolution. It came as a surprise – perhaps even a shock – when soon after Khomeini's death, Iranians learnt of a publication entitled *Bada-yi 'ishq* (*The Wine of Love*), which was a collection of twenty-three of his *ghazals*.⁶⁸ Traditionally, the *ghazal* was used by Sufi poets to express sentiments of love for God, and non-Sufis had used the genre to convey their desires for a more secular beloved. The most celebrated Iranian composer of *ghazals* in the academic and popular imagination is Hafez of Shiraz (d. 1390), whose *ghazals* continue to evince a range of interpretations; from those who understand his praise of wine and the young serving boy in a literal sense to those who see them metaphorically.⁶⁹

The literary merit of Khomeini's *ghazals* is beyond the scope of this article,⁷⁰ a sour subject matter is Khomeini's own consideration of *'irfan*

⁶⁵ Algar, "Imam Khomeini", p. 275.

⁶⁶ See, for example, *Misbah al-Hidayat*, p. 203.

⁶⁷ See Khomeini's "Lectures on Surat al-Fatiha" broadcast in 1979–1980. These have been translated into English and published by Hamid Algar, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations* (London: Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 363–434.

⁶⁸ *Bada-yi 'ishq* (Tehran: Sida wa sima-yi jumhuri-yi Islami-yi Iran, 1368/1989–90). All translations from *Bada-yi 'ishq* in this article are my own. An English translation of the *ghazals* has been made by Muhammad G. Legenhausen: www.rkhomeini.org/eBook/dis-pContents.cfm?book_id=133&start_page=0. A further eight *ghazals* (written in the last two years of Khomeini's life) were published under the title *Sabu-yi 'ishq* (*The Pitcher of Love*). These have been translated by Muhammad G. Legenhausen, and appear on the same website given previously.

⁶⁹ Compare the work of Khomeini's student Murtaza Mutahhari. *Tamashagah-i raz* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Islami, 1980), which views Hafez as a mystic, with that of Ehsan Yarshater, "Hafez: An Overview", *Encyclopedia Iranica* (15 December 2002, retrieved from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-i>), who considers that the poet also wrote much that pertains to the sensory world.

⁷⁰ Those in Iran who disliked Khomeini and everything the Islamic Republic came to represent were not impressed by his poetry. For more on this, see Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). See Appendix iii, "The Imam's Blasphemystic Ghazal", pp. 451–454. The poems have been severely criticised by some: "The poetry was a poor imitation of Hafez and other mystic poets, often awkwardly and inconsistently applying conventionalized imagery" (Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, p. 451). In fairness to Khomeini, he stated that he had never possessed a talent for composing poetry (*Bada-yi 'ishq*, p. 15).

and how, and if, this affected his world view. What is worthy of consideration is a letter (included as a preface to *Bada-yi ishq*) written by Khomeini to his daughter-in-law, who instigated the Ayatollah to compose the *ghazals*, in which he discusses mystical experience. Written in the final months of his life, the letter reflected on a mis-spent youth, and Khomeini admitted candidly that “with all of its pages ‘The Four Journeys’ detained me from the journey to the Friend, and ‘The [Meccan] Openings’ yielded no opening, and ‘The Bezels of Wisdom’ offered no wisdom.”⁷¹ This apparent denial of having experienced anything mystical is subsequently reconfirmed in Khomeini’s *ghazals*:

*The Asfar and Shifa of Ibn Sina did not solve
Our difficulty, in spite of all of their profundity and deep discussions.*⁷²

And again in another *ghazal*:

*Release me from these countless pains,
From a heart cut in pieces and a breast [pierced like] a kebab.
[My] life has passed in sorrow due to separation from the Friend’s face,
I am a bird in a fire and a fish out of water.
I had no share of mystical pleasure (hali na-shud) for all of [my] pain and life,
Old age has come, engulfed in inertia after youth.
I got nothing from the lessons and discussions in the seminary,
Who can reach the ocean from this mirage?
Whatever I learnt and whatever page I turned
Was nothing but veil after veil.*⁷³

This example is typical of most of the *ghazals* in Khomeini’s collection, which in general reflect a disappointment that the Friend has remained absent during Khomeini’s lifetime, so that it is only with death that the meeting will finally occur.⁷⁴

*The end of [my] life is coming, but the Friend has not yet come!
My story has reached a conclusion, but this pain has no end.
The chalice of death is at hand, and I never even saw a chalice of wine.
The years have flown by me, and I have still to feel the sweetheart’s gentleness.*⁷⁵

⁷¹ *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 11. “The Four Journeys” (*Asfar a-arba’a*) refers to the book by Mulla Sadra; “The Meccan Openings” (*Futuh al-Makkiya*) and “The Bezels of Wisdom” (*Fusus al-hikam*) are perhaps the two most famous of Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings.

⁷² *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 43.

⁷³ *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 49.

⁷⁴ See, for example, the *ghazals* in *Bada-yi ishq*, pp. 33, 41.

⁷⁵ *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 25. A similar sentiment is expressed in another *ghazal*:

*I followed all those of the heart, who head music, who had states
But no music at the feast I heard of the beautiful waitress. (Sabu-yi ishq, see note 68).*

Such verses stand in stark contrast to the rapturous and ecstatic verses of Hafez, who brazenly declared,

*Hair dishevelled, perspiring, smiling, drunk,
[Her] shirt rent open, singing, glass in hand,
With her challenging eyes and mocking lips,
She sat down at my pillow last-night at midnight
And leaning over me, in a sad voice
She whispered, "O my old lover! Are you asleep?"*⁷⁶

It is worth considering whether Khomeini's regret at the Friend's absence should be accepted at face value. That is to say, are there any valid reasons for supposing that Khomeini may have experienced something of a mystical nature in his lifetime, but was reluctant to reveal this? Was Khomeini attempting to stifle the veneration that some felt for the leader of the Islamic Revolution that for many observers resembled a form of untrammelled fanaticism? Or was Khomeini, in the last months before his death, being completely truthful, because as an old man approaching the meeting with his maker, he had nothing to lose and less to hide?

Khomeini's *ghazals* bear a certain imprint of one of the major themes found in Hafez's *diwan*; namely, a categorical refusal to accept the validity of other individuals and groups to claims of ultimate truth. Hafez regarded ascetics, Sufis, philosophers and legal scholars as hypocrites who desired "to set themselves up as guardians, judges, and examples of moral rectitude."⁷⁷ Instead, he praised those who were on the margins of society – who did not hide their sins but were honest in their endeavours (whether worldly or otherwise). These were the beggars, the debauch (*rind*) and the *qalandars*. The same feature occurs in Khomeini's *ghazals* with regularity, begging the question of just who could be a legitimate guide, if not the very same *qalandars*. For Khomeini, the issue was not related to the promotion of non-Islamic morality, but the condemnation of what he viewed as hypocrisy:

*We are at war with the Sufi, the Gnostic and the dervish,
We are in dispute with the philosophy of systematic theology
We have fled from the seminary and escaped from the people
We have been ostracised by the wise and shunned by the common.*⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *Diwan-i Hafiz*, edited by P. N. Khanlari (Tehran, n.p., n.d), no. 22, p. 44.

⁷⁷ Ehsan Yarshater, "Hafez: An Overview" (15 December 2002, retrieved from <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-i>).

⁷⁸ *Bada-yi ishq*, p. 53.

Khomeini's ghazals reflect his desire for an intimate encounter with God, and it is this meeting that informed much of his writing from the 1930s onwards. There is a considerable consistency in Khomeini's mystical works, but conclusive evidence regarding his own completion of the four journeys is lacking. It appears far more likely that Khomeini's *'irfani* tendencies remained purely theoretical, and in this fashion were able to remain within the normative framework of Twelver Shiism. This does not mean that he denied the possibility of mystical encounters, but it appears likely that Khomeini's belief was that only the prophets and Imams could complete the four journeys. A final point is that Khomeini's *'irfan* reflects a trend that has been witnessed in many locations in the traditional heartlands of Islam. That is, whereas Sufi activity tended to be focused within orders, the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in "intellectual Sufism," which was assisted with the increase of publications of Sufi and *'irfani* works. Khomeini's own spiritual quest and descriptions of the mystical journey are divorced from discussions of ecstasy and ritualistic practices. Indeed, ecstatic statements are rejected as imperfections, and it is the sober and reflective speculative *'irfan* that is endorsed. This was a message that was more appropriate for the modernising Iran of the twentieth century, and is worthy of comparison with developments in "Salafi-Sufism."⁷⁹ The development of Salafi-Sufism is a form of Sufism that emphasises ethics and inner purity, rather than focusing on mystical rapture at the meeting with God. It is typified in some Egyptian Salafi circles that selectively appropriate the works of great medieval masters such as Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ It is of interest to compare Khomeini's *'irfan* with the ideas of other Sufi "reformers", such as the Kurdish Syrian Muhammad Sa'īd Ramazan al-Būṭī. See Andreas Christmann, "Transnationalising Personal and Religious Identities", in Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (eds.), *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 31–47.

⁸⁰ See the forthcoming work of Richard Gauvain, *Salafi Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God* (London: Routledge).

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