

Continuity and Change in the Role of Mysticism under the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract

The current study will evaluate the role of *'irfān* [the inner perception of knowledge; combining elements of philosophy, theosophy, mysticism and Shi'i thought] within the Islamic Republic of Iran as a significant component of Iran's cultural heritage. It will focus on several prominent clerics and intellectuals who represent the regime's diverse political factions. This article will demonstrate that under the Islamic Republic, *'irfān* evolved from a marginalized area to a central phenomenon and became a tool to debate the political direction of the state and the relationship between its revolutionary and republican elements. While mysticism in the service of politics was more widespread among the reformist camp, ardent supporters of the regime resorted to *'irfān* to enhance an exclusive perception of authority based on the rule of the Supreme Jurist. It also created a shared spiritual basis among the Islamic State's diverse voices. The result was a new blend between mysticism, philosophy, Western thought, politics, Islamic law, and even messianism, within an inter-connectivity between the mystical path and the Shari'a. Consequently, a complex understanding of *'irfān* has to take into consideration the multiple fusions between Islamic mysticism and other trends and evaluate the result in a specific socio-political context.

Keywords

Islamic Republic – mysticism – culture – factions – conservatives – reformists

Introduction

The following paper will explore the place of *'irfān* under the Islamic Republic of Iran through the lens of prominent scholars in Iran, including both clerics and intellectuals, focusing on the post-Khomeini era. The notion of *'irfān*, deriving from the Arab verb *'arafa*, denoting a unique insight, encompassing elements of philosophy, theosophy, mysticism, and Shi'i thought. It is an inner and hidden perception of knowledge that reflects a human, subjective and individualist recognition of God. Historically, there was an ambivalent position towards *'irfān* within the Shi'i centres of learning, due to their emphasis on Islamic law. The Islamic Revolution advanced Khomeini's doctrine of *velāyat-e faqīh* (the guardianship of the supreme jurist), as the main tenant of the new Islamic state. With its legalist notion of authority and its universal Islamic worldview, the Islamic Republic began persecuting Sufi orders deemed as a threat to the exclusive worldview of the new regime, yet, provided space for theoretical mysticism known as *'irfān*.

The current study will evaluate the role of *'irfān* within the Islamic Republic since the 1990s, through the prism of prominent clerics and intellectuals. Iran's political elite is divided into informal and dynamic factions, representing different approaches to domestic and foreign policy within multiple perspectives to questions of culture, socio-economic development, and relations with the West. This study will focus on several leading members of the political elite who represent the regime's conservative zealots with their emphasis on the revolutionary ethos and the all-encompassing authority of the Supreme Jurist. It will also evaluate the thought of several reform-minded individuals in their call for greater freedoms and the rule of law, in accordance with the republican facet of the state. The paper will assess the relationship between mystical notions, revolutionary ideology and factional politics in the post-Khomeini era, through these influential members of the Iranian political and intellectual elite, in their discourse on *'irfān*.

Iran's history from the pre-Islamic period and into the Islamic era, reflects a broad attachment to mysticism, in its diverse understandings. Renowned Persian poets such as Nizami, Rumi and Hafez displayed a clear bond with Sufi notions in their allegoric description of nature, love, and loss of senses, reflecting man's spiritual journey towards the Creator. Sufism succeeded in mitigating sectarian boundaries, enabling both Sunnis and Shi'is to join Sufi orders, over the centuries. Iran reflected a unique merger between mysticism, messianic beliefs, theosophy and legal-based Shi'ism. Sufi orders remained active in Iran over the centuries – both Sunni and Shi'i (Anzali 2017, Abisaab 2004) – and they still maintained a minor presence in Iran even after the revolution.

Following the revolution, the Islamic Republic began persecuting members of Sufi orders.¹ Nevertheless, Sufis still maintained presence in Iran even under the Islamic Republic.

Key members of the revolutionary camp reflected an affinity with *ʿirfān*. Khomeini embraced mystical notions speaking about ‘the world of the unseen’, emergence of ‘the perfect man’, the wayfarer and the lamp of guidance (Knysh 1992: 631–653, Martin 2000: 29–37, 75–81, 100–128, Anzali 2017: 196–228, Doostdar 2016: 322–349). ‘Alī Sharīʿatī (1933–1977) – who was among the leading ideologists of the revolution – also engaged with *ʿirfān*. His thought reflected a holistic approach to Islam within a unique blend between Muslim philosophy, revolutionary action, and Western thought, particularly existentialism (Machlis 2014: 183 – 211). Sharīʿatī resorted to the notion of light or illumination to portray the relationship between man and God, nature and beyond nature, endorsing some mystic ideas without fully endorsing the structure of the orders (Rahnema 1998: 144–60, Benson 1991: 9–26).

The significant place of mysticism within Persian culture and the emergence of a distinct Shiʿi mystical discourse, paved the way for legitimizing *ʿirfān* even under the Islamic Republic, with its focus on the authority of the Supreme Jurist. This reflected continuity in the unique evolution of Shiʿism in Iran over centuries, where jurisprudence was merged with the less-rational aspects of Shiʿa Islam, including messianic tendencies and mysticism. The result was a unique blend between *ʿirfān*, with its intuitive basis, and Islamic jurisprudence, with its rational core. While *ʿirfān* existed over centuries, it evolved under the Islamic Republic from a marginalized area to a central phenomenon.

***ʿIrḡān* and Politics in the Post-Khomeini Era: the Conservative Discourse**

This exchange between *ʿirfān* and politics became much more wide-spread in the post-Khomeini era. Following the revolution, the regime began promoting philosophy and *ʿirfān* through courses in the Shiʿi learning centre in Qom and through various state-affiliated institutes (Eshkevari 2013: 47–68, Rizvi 2012: 487–503). Khomeini gave a series of lectures broadcasted on Iranian TV, in which he provided commentary on the Qurʾān from the perspective of *ʿirfān*. He even wrote a book of poetry that advanced key esoteric notions, including references to the path, stations, veiling, spiritual vision, and mystical love (Farhosh-van Loon 2016: 59–88). The regime also began marking the Mollā

1 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/24/iran-sufi-activists-convicted-unfair-trials>.

Sadra day (May 22). Philosophy and mysticism were also promoted through the activities of the Research Institute for Islamic Culture and Thought. Another example was the Institute of Eshrāq and 'Irfān, established in 2007. These numerous institutions aimed at controlling the cultural domain, while advancing a state-sponsored Islamic discourse.

Ayatollah Abdollah Javādī-Amolī (b. 1933), was a leading cleric who engaged in philosophy, theology, and Qur'an commentary. In 1989, Javādī-Amolī was assigned by Khomeini as his personal envoy to Gorbachev. He served as a member of the Assembly of Experts (an 88-member body of Islamic jurists empowered with appointing, monitoring, and dismissing the Supreme Leader), as well as President of the Revolutionary Court, and a member of the Supreme Judicial Council. Javādī-Amolī asserted the place of the Qur'an as the primary source of knowledge, exposing its hidden and visible levels. Expressing a traditional notion of *'irfān*, Javādī-Amolī said that the Prophets and the Imams were the first travelers in the spiritual quest of Islam (Javadi Amuli I 2011: 33–50, Javādī-Amolī 1387/2008, Dahlén 2003: 126–142). Delineating the stages in the wayfarer's journey, Javādī-Amolī, began with the belief in God, continued with steadfastness or persistence, followed by intention (*nīyya*), as Javādī-Amolī offered a mystical understanding to the important legal concept of *nīyya* (Javadi Amuli I). Javādī-Amolī argued that one does not need to remove himself from society, but to leave space in one's mind to reflect on the divine existence (Javadi Amuli II: 35–62, Javadi Amuli III: 45–67). His emphasis on the correlation between body and soul, devotion and mysticism, reflected Javādī-Amolī's identification with *'irfān* together with a strong commitment to the Shari'a. Javādī-Amolī grounded his worldview in a sublime cosmos, in which revelation encompasses all facets of existence. Javādī-Amolī stressed the link between knowledge and action, and the harmony between reason and revelation, speaking also about man's divine spirit (Dahlén 2003: 103–143; Idris 1990: 99–110).

A similar recourse to *'irfān* was reflected by Meşbāh-Yazdī. Representing the inner circle of the regime, Meşbāh-Yazdī served as head of the Imam Khomeini Educational Institute as well as a member of the Assembly of Experts. Meşbāh-Yazdī supported Ahmadinejad during the presidential elections of 2005 and continued to back him throughout his years in office. In his writings, Meşbāh-Yazdī embraced key mystical notions, including *kashf* (unveiling), *sulūk* (spiritual path), *jamāl* (divine beauty) and *ḥaqīqa* (truth, essence). Man must guard his soul and ground it in spiritual qualities. Nevertheless, Meşbāh-Yazdī emphasized that worshiping God is the highest value, attained through spiritual perfection, demonstrating clear commitment to the Shari'a (Mişbāh al-Yazdī 1393/2014–5). Gnosticism does not contradict

reason. While both spheres are linked, reason is not an autonomous faculty but a means to comprehend God's omnipotence. *ʿIrḡān* is a form of knowledge acquired through the insight of the heart and not through the rational faculty or through experience by the senses (Mişbah al-Yazdī 1992: 21). This inner knowledge can only be achieved through spiritual purification, piety, and training. The spiritual quest must be undertaken through the efforts of a trainer (*murabbī*) (Mişbah Yazdī 2015: Lecture 1 + 2). Reason alone cannot provide a true understanding to the essence of God, Meşbāh-Yazdī explained. Shari'a without *ʿirḡān* is the outward manifestation of Islam devoid of the heart (Meşbāh-Yazdī 1376). Meşbāh-Yazdī promoted an exclusionist view of the Supreme Jurist as the ultimate leadership that overrides representative institutions (Meşbāh-Yazdī 2006).

A *vālī*, or divinely ordained ruler, does not need to wait for an emerging conflict in order to intervene in matters of state and public interests; and can thus issue binding directives whenever and wherever he sees fit

MIŞBAH YAZDĪ, THE ROLE OF TAQLĪD IN HUMAN LIFE

In this description, the *vālī* as a divinely ordained ruler, holds supreme authority that overrules any other claims to leadership (Misbah Yazdi, A Cursory Glance at the Theory of Wilayat al-Faqih). 'The leadership of the gnostic guide led to the victory of the Islamic revolution', as he linked the gnostic notion of *ʿarīf* with the judicial and political authority of the Supreme Jurist (Misbah Yazdi 1998). The doctrine of the Imamate established the special qualities of the Imam including its mystic cosmic quality, as the first light revealed in creation. This 'Muhammadan Light' is the source of revelation and ultimately the foundation of all knowledge. It forms the basis for the Imam's quality of infallibility, in spiritual and religious matters. With his return, the Mahdi as the Savior will assert the place of Islam for all mankind. He will also bring wisdom by revealing the esoteric secrets of sacred Scriptures (Amir-Moezzi 1994: 29–60).

Meşbāh-Yazdī grounded his mystical worldview in Shi'i cosmology, shifting from clerical insistence on awaiting till the End of Times, to active Messianism. Breaking away from traditional notions of *ʿirḡān*, Meşbāh-Yazdī went even further than Khomeini in his understanding the Guardianship of the Supreme Jurist as an extension of the authority enjoyed by the Prophet and the Imam, without linking this notion to awaited Imam:

God almighty has given us an Islamic government that He has not given to any other nation for 1400 years. *Velāyat-e faqih* is the greatest blessing

that God has given to the Iranian people. There is no other country where someone is accepted by the Imam of the Age

MEŞBĀH-YAZDĪ 2019

Whether the people accept the *faqīh* or not it is irrelevant. He does not lose his legitimacy if they refuse to offer him their recognition

MEŞBĀH YAZDĪ 1999

In a statement in August 2009 following the contested reelection of President Ahmadinejad, Meşbāh-Yazdī extended the absolute legitimacy of the Supreme Jurist also to position of the president:

when the president receives control from *velāyat-e faqīh*, obedience to him is like obedience to God.

MEŞBĀH-YAZDĪ 2009

Meşbāh-Yazdī uttered these words in August 2009 following the suppression of the Green Movement and the shift to Ahmadinejad's second term in office. Obedience to the president derived from the absolute authority of the Supreme Jurist, in its indorsement by Awaited Imam. Extending this supreme notion of authority to the entire system of governance, Meşbāh-Yazdī declared:

A soldier in the police force is a soldier in the system of guardianship of the Awaited Imam so we should behave in such a way that he is satisfied with us. Even the consent of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution is a sign of Awaited Imam's satisfaction

MEŞBĀH-YAZDĪ 2018

Given this comprehensive notion of authority, Meşbāh-Yazdī was overly critical of the reformists for promoting what he defined a legal ruling based on one's own opinion, in their call for greater political freedoms. Freedom cannot be an absolute notion as accepted in the West, but a reflection of the true values of Islam (Alāma Mişbāḥ 1398, Meşbāḥ Yazdī 1394).

Irfān provided a tool to establish the absolute legitimacy of the Supreme Jurist but also to delineate the path towards spiritual salvation:

One of the most principal differences between man and animal is that human desires are boundless...they are all finally brought together; and their ultimate satisfaction is summed up in one thing: relationship with the infinite source of Knowledge, power, beauty, and perfection...

MISBAH YAZDI, QURB PROXIMITY WITH ALLAH: 24

Thus, man's true development consists of a scientific movement within the soul to reach a state where it can see itself dependent on and linked with Him (Ibid., 46).

Essentially true mysticism is only realised for an individual who is on the path of servitude and who strives sincerely for the truth

MIŞBĀH YAZDĪ 2006, 15

In Meşbāh-Yazdī's understanding, the individual had a role to play in hastening the return of the Imam:

The light emanating from the Twelfth Imam is eternal and everlasting. What is important is that we should prepare our hearts, removing all rust so that Twelfth Imam's light may shine on our hearts and his everlasting grace may rain upon us.

MIŞBĀH YAZDĪ 1384/2005–6: 44

Reiterating a similar line, Rezā Dāvarī-Ardakānī stressed commitment to the rule of the Supreme Jurist, yet without indorsing Meşbāh-Yazdī's Messianic worldview. Acknowledged as the leading pro-regime philosopher (b. 1933), Dāvarī was a distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of Tehran, who served as a dean at the faculty of literature and humanities, and as the president of the Iranian Academy of Sciences. A virtuous society, according to Dāvarī, must be based on Guardianship and Prophecy. The Islamic Republic is the only political system that follows the true path of Islam through the comprehensive authority of the Jurist. Khomeini was not only a jurist and a mystic who pursued these fields theoretically; but prepared himself spiritually and mentally for this mission. Dāvarī spoke about the ability to merge knowledge – and particularly religious knowledge – with one's soul. Knowledge and practice are not separate; if one engages in politics, his politics reflects the emergence and manifestation of the soul. Emphasizing Khomeini's unique role, Dāvarī stated:

Imam Khomeini was a jurist, a religious scholar, a commentator of the Qura'an, a mystic and a theologian; yet all of these [fields] were not packed in separate and unrelated boxes...

MAQĀLAH REZĀ DĀVARĪ-ARDAKĀNĪ DAR BĀRA-E EMĀM KHOMAYNĪ 2017

For Dāvarī, *'irfān* in its deeper sense was not only a theoretical field but a means for spiritual perfection. Consequently, the all-inclusive authority of the Jurist reflected a merger between politics, morality, knowledge, and mystic

contemplation, as a vehicle for action. Man's true essence is not in a self-centred humanism but in annihilation of the self, which brings man to seek Truth, through his relationship with God (Vahdat, 2003: 599–631). His thought reflected a deep interest in Western philosophy from its classical period until the contemporary era, which he approached through in-depth research and a critical methodology (Dāvārī-Ardakānī 2015). Nevertheless, Dāvārī argued that when humanity is the center and man considers himself worthy of ultimate power, the result is despotism, confusion, and egoism, as man is lost in a meaningless world (Roohani, Aghahosseini and Emamjomezade, 2014: 555–561, Kamrava 2010: 65–69; Vahdat 2002: 182–198). Dāvārī rejected the use of philosophy for political purposes arguing that merging these two fields leads to confusion over the meaning of freedom, law, and ethics (Dāvārī Ardekānī 2020). Nevertheless, Dāvārī himself employed philosophy to support the Islamic revolution and the doctrine of the Supreme Jurist.

While affirming Khomeini's all-encompassing authority the question was how to define true *'irfān* and denigrate mystical deviations.? Khomeini as the Supreme Leader and founder of the Islamic Republic succeeded in combining these multiple fields of knowledge. Yet, there were dangers in studying *'irfān* by less able individuals. In February 2005, Khamenei ordered state institutions to address the activities of 'deviant individuals' operating under the disguise of mysticism (Doostdar 2018: 183). Khamenei spoke about 'the threat of false mystics who are infiltrating universities', which he attributed to the 'penetration of forces from abroad' (Hoshdār Ayatollah Makārem Shīrāzī 2013). Nevertheless, he also recognized the significance of the inner dimension of Islam, adding that the path towards God can only be attained through piety (Bayānāt dar didār-e mo'alleman va-asātid-e dāneshgāhā-ye Khorāsān Shomālī 2012).

One of the threats that may have led to these warning was the activities of Mohammad 'Alī Ṭāherī, founder of the Mysticism of the Circle institute in the 2000s.² Introducing his theory of Inter-universal Mysticism, Ṭāherī promoted alternative medicine, based on a mind-body curing method (Ali Taheri 2014: 75–79, Ali Taheri 2007). Ṭāherī was arrested in 2010 and served nine years for charges of 'insulting the sacred', 'immoral contact with women' and 'carrying out illegal medical procedures' (Shiite Mystic Released from Prison in Iran after Serving Nine Years 2019). Although there were no accurate figures on the numbers of his followers, Ṭāherī's harsh sentence and the Khamenei's own statement on the threat of false mysticism, is indicative of his widespread popularity, prior to his arrest. The rise of this New Age tendency was related

2 For Ali Taheri's biography see, <https://www.interuniversal.eu/about/>. See also Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals*, 145–154.

to the relative liberal atmosphere under President Rafsanjani (1989–1997) and Khatami (1997–2005) (Doostdar 2018: 145–154). In reaction to this social threat, the regime silenced Ṭāherī, while also advancing ‘true *‘irfān*’, compatible with the ideology of the state and promoted by leading pro-regime scholars.

***‘Irfān* and Politics in the Post-Khomeini Era: the Reformist Discourse**

A similar reliance on the inner dimension of Islam was apparent among members of the reformist camp and particularly by religious intellectuals. The main agenda of the reformists was religious renewal, providing a more dynamic and human-centred perspective to the relationship between knowledge, reason, and mysticism, in comparison with their conservative counterparts. These religious intellectuals resorted to theosophy to contest the conservative discourse, while seeking to remain within the boundaries of an acceptable *‘irfān*. In their view, Iran’s national interests were inseparable from the regime’s Islamic identity.

Former president Mohammad Khatami exemplified this tendency. Khatami held a BA in philosophy from Isfahan University and gained his clerical status from Qom. Joining the revolutionary camp from its early days, Khatami served as Iran’s Minister of Culture and was elected as President in 1997. Serving for two terms until 2005, Khatami sought a new path in relations with the West through his ‘dialogue between civilizations’ (Tazmini 2009: 9–17).

Demonstrating a clear inclination towards *‘irfān*, Khatami resorted to mystical terminology, stressing that the believer must travel in the path of the heart. Islam does not reject material existence, but seeks to lead man towards a higher existence, towards spiritual fulfilment (Mohammad Khatami 2000: 30–45, Mohammad Khatami 1998: 39–48). Man’s role as vicegerent on earth comes into play in his desire to implement values of justice, and freedom. True Islam, Khatami emphasized, is in the intricate interconnectivity between mysticism, reason, knowledge, and reality (Vahdat 2005: 650–664).

Khatami was a leading member of the reformist camp, but also an integral component of the system and a member of the inner circle of the regime. As a result, Khatami did not question Khomeini’s notion of the Supreme Jurist, arguing instead for the correlation between freedom, reason, and spirituality. In his understanding, Western individualism is detached from morals and values. Islam, on the other hand, advances a more positive notion of freedom, in which one connects to one’s inner self, as a reflection of a transcendent existence, without totally shunning the material world (Khatami 2000: 4–9).

While praising the achievements of 'the great Islamic revolution', Khatami spoke about the dangers to the revolution, but also about the significance of 'real Islam', Islam of progress and development (Khatami 1998: 17–48, 97–123). Different forces in Iran, Khatami stated, were far removed from the spiritual message of the revolution (Muḥammad Khātāmī 2000: 112).

The Islamic Revolution is a call for the revival of monotheism, Islamic belief, and spirituality (Khatami 1998: 144). Khatami endorsed the Islamic system, but also voiced criticism of 'dogmatic religious belief'. He called to combine religion and intellectualism, a divine mission and freedom, focusing on the dynamic aspect of religion (Ibid., 49–79). Khatami pronounced Khomeini as a 'revolutionary mystic', while referring to 'God of *ʿirfān*', God that is magnificent and majestic' (Ibid., 85–86, 144).

In his emphasis on the inner dimension of Islam, Khatami incorporated mystical terminology speaking about 'the path of the heart' and even defining Khomeini as a 'revolutionary mystic'. Furthermore, God himself was pronounced as 'God of *ʿirfān*'. Nevertheless, this was a generalized reference to *roḥāniyyat* (spirituality) without clearly defining this concept. For Khatami, *roḥāniyyat* incorporated a mystical inclination and a transcendent existence but also the 'spiritual message' of social justice (Khātāmī 2000: 105–110). This was a call for a deeper understanding of Islam, in an implied critique of the conservative circles in Iran, with their rigid and narrow focus on legalism and obedience. Consequently, while both Khatami and Meṣbāh-Yazdī pronounced Khomeini as a revolutionary mystic, each of them relied on Khomeini's example to promote contrasting worldviews.

Khatami even incorporated the inner path of Islam into his mission of 'dialogue between civilizations'. His call for rapprochement with the West was based on a perception that truth can only be attained through the heart and not through the intellect, stressing the significance of emotional contact, trust, and coexistence (Mirbagheri 2007: 305–316). Participating in 'Islam, Iran and the Dialogue of Civilizations Symposium' (Germany, July 2000), Khatami spoke about Goethe's fascination with Hafez and his broader interest in Iranian mysticism. He resorted to the following verse by Hafez:

Excuse the war of seventy-two sects
For they, having failed to see the truth, went astray...

KHATAMI 2001: 3

This notion of truth needs to be understood in its mystical understanding given the strong influence of Sufism on Hafez's poetry (Ghomshei 2015, 77–106).

Ḥaqīqa (truth or mystical path) is one of the four stages of the wayfaring which includes the *sharī'a* (exoteric path), *ṭarīqa* (esoteric path), and *ma'rīfa* (the ultimate mystical knowledge).

Hafez's poem alludes to the Hadith of 72 sects:

It was narrated from Anas b. Malik that the Messenger of Allah said:
The Children of Israel split into seventy-one sects, and my nation will split into seventy-two, all of which will be in Hell apart from one, which is the community (<https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah/36/68>).³

By quoting Hafez's poem, Khatami laid out the basis for dialogue with the West: mutual respect between components of a profound truth. Khatami transcended the religious boundaries of Hafez's poem with its basis in the Hadith, shifting from internal divisions with the monotheistic faiths to a call for dialogue between two equally acknowledged civilizations. In essence, Khatami was questioning one of the main principles of the revolution, its anti-Western agenda based on a mystical worldview that provided space for reconciliation between holders of one truth. In place of the revolutionary enmity with the West, Khatami relied on the rich Persian cultural heritage, in this poem on the seventy-two sects. Hafez's poem continued with the following verse:

Thanks to God, between me and Him, peace chanced,
The cup of thankfulness, the angels, dancing, cast...

GHAZAL OF HAFEZ SHIRAZI PART 1 2001: 170

Mehdī Hāerī Yazdī (1923–1999), a prominent Shi'i cleric, a philosopher, and the son of the founder of Qom seminary, also advanced a moderate spiritualist message

Exploring notions of knowledge, being and existence, Hāerī Yazdī discussed the meaning of a mystical experience, speaking about its unique nature as a unitary awareness and a form of knowledge by presence. Incorporating Plato's notion of vision and Ibn Sina's Philosophy of Illumination, Hāerī Yazdī described the mystical experience as the descending light of existence, beginning from the First Principle and emanating to the lower beings; but also vice versa, from an ascending light towards its Principle (Hai'ri Yazdi, 1992,

3 See also, Kadir Gömbeyaz, "The Influence of the 73 Sects Ḥadīth on the Classification of Theological Sects in Islamic Heresiographical Literature", *Dini Tetkikler Dergisi Journal of Religious Inquiries*, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/605573>.

The Principles of Epistemology. Mehdī Hāērī Yazdī, *‘ilm kullī: falsafa mā ba’da al-ṭabī’a* (mu’sasa wa ‘az wa tablīgh islāmī, Jan. 1956).

Hāērī Yazdī elaborated on the last stages in the wayfarer’s journey, shifting away from a total emersion with the Divine existence, towards a more monotheistic message (Hāi’ri Yazdi 1992: 156–158). Relying on Mollā Sadra, Hāērī Yazdī contended that the role of the Supreme Jurist is not limited to jurisprudence but must encompass the mystical and spiritual aspects of Islam. Creating a direct link between Islamic philosophy (*ḥekmat*) and governance (*ḥokūmat*), Hāērī Yazdī argued that running the state cannot be solely based on the authority of the jurist, since political authority is not grounded in divine command. Instead, it should be based on an agreement between holders of private ownership – the citizens. The creation of a government is the product of a joint agreement between the people, to transfer some of their powers to an agreed representative, in order to organize their affairs. An agency contract ensures that the government is committed to advance the joint interests of the individuals (Rajaei 2007: 193–245, Vahdat 2004: 51–70; Hāi’ri Yazdi 1992). Consequently, the notion of the Supreme Jurist is highly questionable since it is not based on an all-inclusive perception of knowledge and does not comply with the Islamic notion of private ownership. Relying on Muslim philosophers but also on Kant’s notion of positive freedom, Hāērī Yazdī stressed that freedom and ethics reflect the rights of the individual and his autonomy (Badamchi 2014: 519–534).

An even stronger attack on this doctrine was expressed by Abdolkarim Soroush, the internationally acclaimed Iranian intellectual, who argued for the institutional separation between religious and political authority. Religious knowledge is not divine by nature and should be viewed as only one branch of multiple fields of knowledge. In some of his writings he presents *‘irfān* as the highest form of religious practice while in other treatises he positions gnostic understanding on the same level of religious experience or illumination. The lowest level of religious practice, according to Soroush, is the expedient level, as reflected in shallow perception of the masses who view Islam as a mere tool to achieve earthly goals (Soroush 2000, Soroush 2009: 37–43, 123–131).

Speaking about ‘divine beauty’, Soroush created a link between ethics, esthetics, and mysticism, to emphasize Islam’s moral message. While embracing mystical notions and providing examples from Rumi’s poetry (Soroush, *Ekhhlāq*), Soroush was critical of formal Sufism which he associated with ‘immorality, passivity and irrationality’. In essence, his writings reflected an unresolved tension between mysticism and reason or between the inner dimension of Islam and philosophical reason (Soroush 2000, Soroush 2009: 123–131, Soroush, *Ekhhlāq, Zibā – e Ērfān*, Matin-Asgari 1997: 95–114). Emphasizing the

centrality of the individual, Soroush expressed his criticism of the Supreme Jurist, noting the clash between the absolutist nature of this Islamic system and popular sovereignty. Soroush confined the place of Islamic jurisprudence and the authority of the jurists to the sphere of secondary deductions and not to the essentials of belief. He called for a broader understanding of Shari'a by embracing a wide-ranging approach to religious knowledge. In place of the Islamic Republic, Soroush advocated what he defined as a 'religious democracy', based on freedom of faith (The Beauty of Justice 2007: 8–12, Soroush 2009: 37–62, 264–267).

Soroush sought to replace the political doctrine of the Supreme Jurist with a spiritualist and individualist notion of guardianship. His aim was to expose the problematic juxtaposition of guardianship, Imamate, and governance:

The ruling clergy in Iran wishes to benefit from the mystical theory of guardianship, the theological theory of the Imamate and the rational theory of government based on pragmatism. It wished to roll all these things into one without paying due attention to the hidden contradictions...

SOROUSH 2009: 266

Another influential member of the reformist camp is Mohammad Mujtahid Shabestari (b. 1936), a highly regarded intellectual and a former professor at the University of Tehran, who was an acknowledged *mujtahid*. One of his significant contributions was in his critical interpretation to the Qur'an, which he viewed as a product of a particular historical context (Mojtahid Shabestari 2000, Mojtahid Shabestari 1388). Religious knowledge should be understood as an 'endless dialogue between man and God'. God's relationship with man is not based on domination but on a relationship of love. Shabestari did not embrace the notion of annihilation but instead saw the culmination of the journey in affirming man's significance. This is a 'journey towards a spiritual sphere' where 'the ray of light' is transformed from God's word to man. "...God does not limit and negate man; he does not confine or eliminate man. God is the Absolute Universal Essence through whom man becomes man" (Vahdat, 2000: 31–54). Shabestari spoke about a dialogue between the divine message of revelation and the human receiver, within a relationship of love between man and God. Consequently, Islamic jurisprudence cannot provide solutions for all contemporary circumstances since it denies the place of human knowledge in organizing society and running state affairs; and undermines the inherent exchange between man and God (Mujtahid Shebestari, Religious Pluralism: 381–445, Mujtahid Shebestari, Political Jurisprudence: 161–183).

Conclusion

Mysticism which was embraced by Khomeini and other members of the revolutionary camp assumed an even stronger presence under the Islamic Republic, particularly since the 1990s. The regime provided space for theoretical mysticism but was overly critical of established Sufism. Politicization of the Shi'a and its emphasis on the leadership of the Supreme Jurist created opposition against Sufism with its focus on the inner-dimension of Islam. On the other hand, Iran opened the door for individual scholarly debate, for rationalism, for textual interpretation and for theoretical mysticism. The result was a new fusion between mysticism, philosophy, politics, Islamic law and even messianism, within an inter-connectivity between rationalism and mysticism; the inner path and the Shari'a. Clerics and intellectuals sought to prove the compatibility between these two seemingly opposing trends, by incorporating a theosophical debate, while stressing commitment to orthodoxy.

Incorporating the inner-dimension of Islam reflected both a continuation of the strong mystical tradition of Iran, but also a new political reading to *'irfān*. Furthermore, with the shift towards greater pragmatism since the 1990s, there was more room for multiple perceptions of knowledge, within a dialectical engagement between knowledge, reason, and mysticism. Opening up the cultural space created a backlash among the ardent supporters of the regime, who sought to undermine more dynamic interpretations to the Islamic system, calling to return to the true values of the revolution and emphasizing commitment to the Supreme Jurist.

Both pricipalists and reformists employed traditional mystic notions such as unveiling, illumination, intuition, path of the heart, journey, and stages. However, this similar perception of wayfaring was given different readings in support of diverse political agendas. Key members of the scholarly elite including both clerics and intellectuals provided a loose reference to spiritualism to reflect the inner meaning of Islam, a mystical path and the true values of religion. Reliance on mysticism for political means was more widespread among members of the reformist faction. Nevertheless, the regime's zealots also resorted to *'irfān* to enhance an exclusive perception of authority, based on a divine law-system and on the doctrine of the Supreme Jurist. Conservative scholars relied on Western thought to promote their mystical message, depicting an apologetic undertone. They portrayed Islam as compatible with progressive universal values, while expressing their criticism of Western notions, including its human-centred orientation and its relativity. Reformists on the other hand, applied a similar discourse to provide greater space for the human agent, within a more multiple approach to the question of governance. Both

principalists and reformists demonstrated an in-depth exposure to Western thought, including ideologies and philosophy, reflecting their broader education and deep familiarity with Western notions.

This emphasis on the inner path among the more radical and moderate currents in Iran reflected a continuation of the historical Muslim debate on mysticism, interwoven with modern concepts and revolutionary thought. Traditional notions of *'irfān* were merged with rationalism, new knowledge and politics, within a dialectical exchange between theosophy, mysticism and Western thought. This was a debate on the true message of Islam, on commitment to orthodoxy and on the political model. Nevertheless, the fact that Islamic mysticism in its orientation of *'irfān* can be open to so many diverse and even contradictory tendencies, questions our understanding of this trend in its contemporary manifestations. A complex understanding of *'irfān* has to take into consideration the multiple fusions between Islamic mysticism and other trends and evaluate the result in a specific socio-political context.

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