

1 Sufism in Iran, Iran in Sufism

We find certain scholars . . . denying the validity of mysticism and thus depriving themselves of a form of knowledge. It is regrettable. . . . It is regrettable that some of the *ulama* should entertain those suspicions and deprive themselves of the benefits to be gained from the study of mysticism. . . . Those who wear cloaks and turbans and denounce the mystics as unbelievers do not understand what they are saying; if they did, they would not denounce them.

AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI, *ISLAM AND REVOLUTION* (1981)

It was always difficult to discern which moments of my time in Iran comprised “fieldwork” and which didn’t; more often than not they snuck up on me.

I had missed my friend’s Nahid’s birthday party, and I wanted to stop by to see her and give her a small present. She worked as a teller in a bank and usually got home around 4 p.m., so I met her at her house a little while later. After some time, Nahid’s sister Farahnaz, a middle school teacher, stopped by, wanting to borrow a dress to wear to a wedding. I had met her only before in passing, and she joined us now for tea. She inquired about my research and, after I gave her an overview, she nodded and thought for a moment, then remarked: “That’s very interesting. You know, I’m kind of like a Sufi.” To this her sister gave her a look, somewhere between skepticism and bemusement. “Really? Since when are you a Sufi?”

“Well, see, isn’t my bachelor’s degree in Persian literature? And I used to go to those poetry meetings at Mrs. Nabavinejad’s house, with that guy with the beard who played *daf* [frame drum]? Now that guy was really a Sufi!”

Nahid remained unconvinced: “That just means you like *adabiyat* (Persian literature)!”

“No, but those meetings with that man, those were different! With his *daf* drum, he sang those poems, we would go into a state [*hal*], and he was always very calm. And remember for a while, right after college, I would only wear a white *rusari* [a headscarf]?”

At this her sister laughed heartily. “Oh, well then, a white *rusari*! This means a *real* Sufi! See, Seema, your research is done! Right here before you is the great mystic [*darvish*]! Truly Madame Professor [*khanoom ostad*] can tell you all you need to know!”

Farahnaz laughed too, embarrassed now, and said, turning to me, “So rude, this one! Come on, I just said I was *like* a Sufi!”

An interest in poetry, the wearing of white, the slow collapse into a heightened emotional state (*hal*) . . . all cues that conveyed the spirit of a more enigmatic form of Islamic worship for Farahnaz (if not enough to convince Nahid). What defines a mystic, or mysticism in general, in Iran is not so easily delineated and, beyond the confines of this sisterly debate, has in fact been a point of contention within Iran for centuries. Indeed, sometimes these murky definitions result in debates like the one expressed here by Farahnaz and Nahid, where the line between mysticism and New Age ideals gets blurred, a topic thoughtfully explored by Alireza Doostdar,¹ and other times the stakes of what is and what is not mysticism can be much higher.

There is first the term *sufigari*, which most closely approximates what might be called “organized Sufism.” In addition to *sufigari*, however, is the much more nebulously defined category of “mysticism” in all its myriad instantiations—primarily understood to involve the categories of *erfan* and *tasavvuf* alongside that of *sufigari*. Each of these terms provides a site of contested meaning, with disparate political and theological entities laying claim to possessing the definitive version. The contestations over these terms goes back until at least the early modern Safavid era (AD 1500–1720), and these assertions over the definition of mysticism have led to lasting effects in the ways that the categories of Sufism, *erfan*, and *tasavvuf* are viewed in Iran today. While *erfan* and to a lesser extent *tasavvuf* are

accepted as essential and revered elements of Iranian culture (*farhang*), *sufigari* will elicit a much more mixed response, with some denouncing it and others defending it.

At this point, however, I would like to be clear that when I discuss denouncements of *sufigari* it is something quite different than a dismissal of mysticism as a whole. Too often Sufism and especially mysticism are labeled the “heterodox” counterpart to the “orthodoxy” of the Shi’i clergy (*ulama*), but really any such statements are nothing less than a gross mischaracterization. There is a long history of mystical ideas being discussed within the seminaries in the twentieth century, which continues today. Similarly, certain sheikhs and *qotbs* within Nimatullahi Iranian Sufi Orders had ties to the seminaries, expressing interest in those conceptual matrices such as law and ethics which are not typically understood to be the jurisdiction of Sufis (at least by those unfamiliar with the cross-pollination of ideas between mystics and nonmystics).

Moreover, that which may be categorized as “mysticism” in Iran has been discussed and advocated for by those in the highest seats of power and the most vulnerable members of society, both before and after the advent of the Islamic Republic, from the supreme leader (*rahbar*) to the homeless wanderer (*qalandar*). In the medieval periods political leaders would sometimes compete to curry favors with Sufi sheikhs,² and in the early modern era the authority of the influential Safavid dynasty arose partially out of their claims as Sufi Seyed, or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.³

To assume a certain political orientation of an individual who espouses mystical thought, in any of its instantiations, is presumptive and misguided. This is especially true in North American and European popular media, where Sufism is frequently posited as the warm and fuzzy branch of Islam, interested only in “introspection” and other forms of nonsocially oriented worship deemed acceptable by neoliberal (read: Protestant) idealizations of religion.⁴

While I hope the other chapters of this book demonstrate how contemporary mystical thought, here unknowing, influences and is influenced by the sociotheological sphere, my goal with this opening chapter is to explore the complexities behind the category of “mysticism” within Iranian intellectual and political history, the legacies of this complex history, and the prevalence of mystical thought outside of Sufi circles. In other words, to explore Sufism in Iran, and Iran in Sufism, or how that which is called “Sufism” has developed in Iran, and in particular how certain political machinations have influenced Sufi practices and formulations, and likewise how

the sociopolitical and theological landscape of Iran has been shaped by Sufi groups, especially in the early modern era. I first trace the emergence of *erfan*, and how it came to impinge upon, and in some instances replace, the term “mysticism” (*tasavvuf*/Sufism) in Iran. I then provide an overview of the history of the relationship between some branches of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order and the reigning political and theological authorities in Iran since the early modern era, marking how it has varied drastically over time. From there, I briefly look at the position of *erfan* in Iran in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including an explication of Ayatollah Khomeini’s experience with the study of gnosis (*erfan*) while a student and teacher at the religious seminaries in the city of Qom, the advocacy of esoterically inclined hermeneutics by other prominent and up-and-coming clerics operating in the seminaries today, and mysticism in the popular imagination as seen through self-help movements and popular fiction. I conclude this last section with an extended description of a typical session (*jalaseh*) of a Nimatullahi Order today. In doing so, I hope to emphasize the point that to assume a certain political stance of a Sufi group—and by this I mean an allegiance to certain political parties or ideologies, that they are always counter to the state or offer a heterodox viewpoint—is grossly misguided. I ask that the four cases that follow this chapter be read with this larger framing chapter in mind.

Sufism versus Mysticism versus *Erfa*n: Contested Terms

Before delving into the genealogy of *erfa*n, it is important to recognize the vastly disparate responses that people will provide when asked to define the word today. More specifically, their definition of the word may very well reflect their religious affiliation and training. To a literate non-Sufi—that is to say, the overwhelming majority of the population—*erfa*n does not mean mystical knowledge, but refers primarily to a distinctly Iranian literary tradition, namely the poetry of a canon of the medieval Persian-speaking poets Hafez, Sa’adi, Rumi, and Ferdowsi, and at times to Iranian traditional music (*musiqiye asil-e Irani*). Thus, to say that you are studying *erfa*n means for the majority of Iranians that you are studying literature and/or a literary tradition (*adabiyat*), and almost always something distinctly Iranian. This nationalist bent that is often associated with *erfa*n is a phenomenon that demands much further analysis than afforded here, but for now I would only highlight that, outside of Sufi and clerical discourses,

the category of *erfan* is not always immediately associated with Sufi or even Shi'i theologies.

In contrast, if you were to ask a religious seminarian, a member of the clergy, or a more highly educated person to define the term, they would tell you that *erfan* refers to a field of study or is related to a field of study, namely that of Islamic mysticism (*tasavvuf*), which has a distinct history within Shi'i theosophy and theology. For some, it would also indicate that form of "intuitive" or "esoteric" knowledge of the divine, a form of knowledge championed by prominent twentieth-century Shi'i thinkers like Allameh Tabatabai, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and Mohammad-Taqi Bahjat. This understanding of *tasavvuf* and *erfan* bears striking similarities to that of epistemologies of my interlocutors.

One of the most significant divergences between the theologians and the Sufis, however, relates to the term "Sufism" (*sufigari*). For most of my interlocutors, *erfan*, *tasavvuf*, and *sufigari* are all one and the same, while for many theologians they connote different realities. In other words, while all believe in the importance of esoteric knowledge, in the intuitive knowledge of the divine, as it is sometimes known, a large segment of theologians do not believe that collectives that call themselves Sufi orders (*tariqat*) are concerned with such pursuits, accusing them of focusing upon "idleness," "opium smoking," and "begging" instead. For many members of the clergy, individuals involved with organized Sufism (*sufigari*) either do not understand mysticism or willfully ignore the proper formations, therein casting such people as poseurs or, more violently, charlatans. Intriguingly, to explain this seemingly artificial discrepancy between the terms *erfan*, *tasavvuf*, and *sufigari*, one must look beyond theological debates and into the arena of politics.

The Rise of the Idea of *Erfa*n in Early Modern Iran

Having briefly touched upon the contested nature of the definition of *erfan* that exists today, the question now arises as to how and why these contestations surrounding the conceptions came to be.

To understand why, one must look to the period of history when the Iranian plateau first became a Shi'i stronghold: the early modern period. Contrary to contemporary misconceptions, both Western and Iranian, Shi'ism only became truly widespread in Iran during the Safavid era (AD 1500–1720). It was at this time that the Safavids, *themselves* originally a

mystical order with Shi'i leanings (extremist [*ghulluw*] though they may have been in their earliest instantiations),⁵ began consolidating religious and political power, the Shi'i becoming the dominant force in the Iranian plateau and the surrounding areas. It was also at the same time that many Sufi orders were either expelled or left the country,⁶ as such groups were viewed by the Safavids as unwelcome alternatives to their own designated spiritual authority figures and hence political power as well.⁷ The Nimatullahi Order left Iran around 1450 CE, and at the invitation of Sultan Ahmad Shah Al Wali Bahmani spent roughly the next three hundred years in exile in Bidar, India, and the surrounding areas.⁸

Given the widespread forced and unforced migration of the vast majority of Sufi orders, one might assume that that would be the end of mystical thought in Iran for the time being. As Ata Anzali has demonstrated, however, this was not to be the case.⁹ With the publication of his *"Mysticism" in Iran: The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept*, Anzali has written the most authoritative interpretation of why, when, and how *erfan* and Sufism (*sufigari*) became distinct concepts.¹⁰ According to Anzali and others, mystical epistemologies were never expelled from Iran entirely, but rather the mystical epistemologies that had been circulating during this era were subsumed under the new Shi'i leadership, so much so that the theology of the Safavid era is often known as "Esoteric Shi'ism."¹¹ The men writing these esoteric philosophies were all jurists, however, with official posts in the hierarchy; they did not bear the title of "Sufi," and were indeed the respected legal scholars of their time. Moreover, this mystically tinged form of Shi'i scholarship was allowed to thrive due to the patronage of Shah Abbas I (d. 1629), the leader whose very dynastic forebears had driven out many of the organized mystic orders.

This esoteric Shi'ism, also known as Shi'i theosophy, reached its apex with the School of Isfahan,¹² a so-called renaissance of Islamic philosophy that was composed of such famous Shi'i thinkers as Sheikh Bahai (d. AD 1621), Mir Damad (AD 1630), and most notably, Mulla Sadra (d. AD 1640), one of the most famed theologians in all of Iranian history, who is today memorialized in contemporary Iran with streets and squares bearing his name. Mulla Sadra was particularly well versed in the writing of the famed Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi, and adopted Ibn Arabi's *insan-i kamel* (perfected man) and *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of existence) as major interests,¹³ synthesizing them with other schools of thought, such as those of the Illuminationists (*hikmat-e eshraq*) and Twelver jurisprudence.

What explains this seeming contradiction? In other words, why would the Safavid authorities condone and act as patrons for the mystically oriented works of the School of Isfahan but strongly condemn and quell Sufi orders? The answer lies in the fact that the actual theological orientation of the Sufis was not the primary concern, but rather the fact that organized collectives of the Sufis posed a threat to the sovereignty of the Safavids, a threat that was not entirely unfounded.¹⁴

To distinguish between the two groups then, what happened was that the category of *erfan* (mystical knowledge) largely replaced that of *sufigari* (Sufism), all the while perpetuating the study and advocacy of many of the same themes. Despite the obvious common grounds, so clear was the bifurcation between *erfan* and *sufigari* in that era that Mulla Sadra himself wrote a treatise against Sufism, wherein he railed against the wandering, drug-taking *darvish* who begged for alms—largely the only self-identified Sufis who remained at the time.

Certainly, this is only a cursory overview of a complex genealogy of the terms *erfan*, *tasavvuf*, and *sufigari*. For our purposes, however, what I wish to emphasize here is that, within the Iranian context, not only does the word mysticism (*tasavvuf*, *erfan*) exist at times as a separate and distinct category from Sufism, but Sufism's critics would contend that Sufism is also distinct from mysticism/*erfan*/*tasavvuf* (a criticism that the Sufis themselves would vehemently deny). This is not to say that Sufism in Iran has been routinely and categorically condemned since the sixteenth-century Safavid era; far from it. Merely that, due to this religio-political maneuver of the Safavids, there has been the opportunity to create sharp distinctions between the categories of *erfan*/*tasavvuf* and *sufigari*, which may not have otherwise existed from a theological standpoint. For this reason, the Shi'ism of Iran shares a long history with mystical knowledge (*erfan*), but not Sufism (*sufigari*).

This politically motivated bifurcation of these theological categories has imparted a legacy that remains today. Namely, while the term *Sufi* or even *sufigari* is far from taboo, and sometimes studied as a topic of inquiry, it has come to mean something much more specific than the far-reaching *erfan*, which is the term known by most literate peoples, even if understood as referring to a specific literary tradition. For while the mystics themselves understand the word Sufism as synonymous with mystical epistemologies/gnosis, for those outside of mystical circles it refers primarily to the fraternities or organizational entities.

Currently, *erfan* is offered as a field of specialization at many religious seminaries (*howzeh*) and secular universities in Iran today. Mysticism

then, at least in its *tasavvuf/erfan* form, is understood to be a serious topic of study and, with the exception of a few prominent clerics,¹⁵ is not condemned in and of itself. Indeed, even Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, a member of the Assembly of Experts and often purported to be one of the most “hard-line” and conservative clerics, has written on *erfan*.¹⁶ Sufism too, is a topic of inquiry, although usually from a historiographical perspective. It is thus important to remember that the championing of *erfan* does not necessarily equate the condemnation of Sufism, merely its diminishing, and the vulnerability that such diminishing allows.

Indeed, the interest in *tasavvuf/erfan* and the perpetuation of its themes in seminaries and society at large continues undaunted and has continued to attract many students since the time when Shi‘ism became the state religion of Iran. In fact, perhaps one of its most famous adherents lived during the twentieth century: Ayatollah Khomeini himself. Beyond Khomeini, figures invested in political Islam, including Mortaza Motahhari and Ali Shariati, have also expressed interest in mysticism, and it is their ideas I turn to now.

The Gnostic as Supreme Leader (*Rahbar*) and Mystical “Political Islam”

Ruhollah Khomeini began his studies in mysticism while a seminary student, initially under the tutelage of Mirza Ali Yazdi (d. AD 1926), who was himself a student of Husayn Sabzavari, the author of *Shahr-i Mazuma*, one of the most foundational texts on gnosis in Shi‘ism.¹⁷ Khomeini’s primary teacher, however, was Muhammad Ali Shahabadi (d. AD 1950), under whose instruction he studied *erfan* for six years. As Hamid Algar notes, Shahabadi initially denied Khomeini’s request to work with him, instructing him to study the more rationally oriented Islamic philosophy (*hekmat*) instead, but Khomeini was so insistent on studying *erfan* that he managed to convince his teacher.¹⁸

In Alexander Knysh’s “‘Irfan’ Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy,”¹⁹ he conducts a close reading of some of Khomeini’s earlier writings on mysticism. Khomeini was an admirer of Mulla Sadra, that early modern “nonmystic,” and his work *Kitab al-Asfar* (*Book of Journeys*), which is Sadra’s account of the four stages of mystical wayfaring,

and tracks the movements and oscillations between self, God, and world. What is noteworthy about this is that the final stage marks the enlightened self, traveling from “man to man, bestowing on his community a new dispensation of spiritual and moral order.”²⁰ Khomeini’s studies also highlight his interest in one aspect of the Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi’s *insan-e kamel* (ideal man), wherein a religious leader leads a community of believers.

In addition to his studies, Khomeini eventually wrote his own mystical treatise, entitled *The Lamp Showing the Right Way to Viceregency and Sainthood* (*Misbah al-hidaya ila al-khilafa wa al-wilaya*) in 1930, in which he remarked upon the supremacy of the gnostics: “In contrast to them [the theologians], the gnostic [*arif*], unveiling the divine one [*elah*] . . . is possessor of both eyes.”²¹ His interest in Sufism continued after he began his teaching position in the seminary at Qom, and it was for his teaching in mysticism and ethics that he first drew attention.²² In addition, at the time, and even after he had assumed the position of supreme leader (*rahbar*), Khomeini famously always lived simply, eschewing luxury and living in a modest home until his death, perhaps embracing the ascetic life espoused by certain Sufis.

And while Khomeini’s interest in mysticism was eventually overshadowed by his political activism, he never once disavowed his early teachings and writings, nor did he dismiss them as the misguided interests of a young man. In fact, he himself personally granted explicit permission for his supercommentaries and treatises on mysticism to be published in the 1980s after his rise to power.²³ Finally, it is of great significance that Khomeini also made reference to a Nimatullahi Gonabadi *darvish*, Mulla Sultan Ali, during a series of televised lectures on *Surat al-Fatiha*,²⁴ the opening chapter of the Qur’an. He mentions him during his first lecture, “Everything is a Name of God,” when he speaks of “mystics” who wrote well on the chapter, as well as clerics (*ulama*) who also did a good job, but that none represent a “complete interpretation.”²⁵ In essence, Khomeini uses the examples of these two categories of thinkers—along with several others—to relay the point that a complete interpretation of the Qur’an is nearly impossible, and that even his own interpretation within the lecture series is “based on possibility, not certainty.”²⁶

Ayatollah Khomeini was also a composer of mystical poetry, which he wrote throughout his life. Ahoo Najafian has provided the first close reading and analysis of Khomeini’s mystical poetry, as well as its publication, in her dissertation “Poetic Nation: Iranian Soul and Historical Continuity.”²⁷ In

her research, Najafian notes that while the majority of Khomeini's poetry was kept hidden from the public for most of his life, upon his passing his daughter-in-law published his most recent compositions, meaning those that he had written during the last few years of his life.²⁸ Although there was some initial outcry at the publication, the poetry has been continually published since then, and by none other than the Institute for the Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, the official institution for publishing Khomeini's written work. The institute has even gone so far as to publish some of his poems online and in translation,²⁹ with excerpts like the following being made available online:

I have become imprisoned, O beloved, by the mole on your lip!
I saw your ailing eyes and became ill through love.
Open the door of the tavern and let us go there day and night
For I am sick and tired of the mosque and seminary.

The dramatic professions of love, the relinquishing of the mosque for the tavern: it is easy to see why certain compatriots of Khomeini might feel uncomfortable with such declarations being made public, especially if they are unfamiliar with the mystical tradition or would be concerned that the general public might misconstrue the supreme leader's words. And yet the institute published and continues to publish these words—the objections of any naysayers not enough for the Imam's *divan* to be hidden from the light of day. Ayatollah Khomeini's exploration of very common mystical themes such as intoxication, imprisonment, all-consuming love, and the rejection of the rational (the seminary, the mosque) in favor of the ecstatic (the tavern) shows not only an awareness of the potentially more “controversial” concepts within the mystical tradition, but an enthusiastic engagement with them. From the information available to us, from his time as a young seminary student to his last years as the most powerful individual within the Iranian nation and an internationally recognized proponent of what is often called “political Islam,” Ayatollah Khomeini never saw his interest in mysticism falter in any serious way, nor did he ever view it as contradictory to his theological and political aims.

Ultimately, I have wished to briefly touch upon Khomeini's interest in and embrace of *erfan* to highlight the ways in which mysticism and Iranian Twelver Shi'ism are not only not oppositional to one another, where to declare one the “heterodox” counterpart to the other “orthodoxy” is a gross simplification of matters, but also to demonstrate that they have in

fact been deeply intertwined for long stretches of Iranian/proto-Iranian history, and sometimes overlapping in the most unexpected of places.

Mystically Inclined Clerics in Twentieth-Century Iran

Beyond Khomeini, there are a number of key clerical figures and schools of thought within or adjacent to the seminary system who embraced an esoterically inclined form of Shi'ism.

The most famous and perhaps most influential is Allameh Sayyed Mohammad Tabatabai (d. AD 1981). Originally from Tabriz, Tabatabai studied in Najaf under Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Mohammad-Hossein Naini Gharavi and Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Qadi Tabatabai, himself a renowned teacher of mysticism, and from whom he learned about the importance of studying mysticism alongside philosophy and theology.³⁰ While Allameh Tabatabai is perhaps best known for his massive, twenty-seven volume of Qur'anic exegesis, *Tafsir Al-Mizan*, he made many other contributions in the field of *tafsir* generally, including his twelve-volume analysis of Hafez and on the works of Mulla Sadra.

When he began teaching Mulla Sadra's *Hikmat Al Muta'alyahfi-l-asfar al-'aqliyya al-arba'a* in the Qom Seminary, the classes proved so popular that he felt compelled to make them open to the public.³¹ It was then that he received pushback from the powers that be in Qom to not offer public classes on a potentially controversial topic. In response, Tabatabai penned the following letter to Ayatollah Borujerdi, head of the seminary:

I came from Tabriz to Qum only in order to correct the beliefs of the students on the basis of the truth and to confront the false beliefs of materialists and others. . . . But today every student who comes to Qum comes with a suitcase full of doubts and problems. We must come to the aid of these students and prepare them to confront the materialists on a sound basis by teaching them authentic Islamic philosophy. I will not, therefore, abandon the teaching of the *Asfar*. At the same time, however, since I consider Ayatollah Borujerdi to be the repository of the authority of the *sharia*, the matter will take on a different aspect if he commands me to abandon the teaching of the *Asfar*.³²

In other words, he declared that he would continue to teach the material unless Ayatollah Borujerdi commanded him to do so in his position as a religious authority. What I find particularly compelling in his letter is his

assertation that “we must come to the aid of these students and prepare them to *confront the materialists on a sound basis* by teaching them authentic Islamic philosophy” (emphasis mine). Here, Tabatabai seems to be making a case that it is not only the imparting of wisdom that he is invested in, but it is important for his students to be educated in such matters in order to be better positioned to wrestle with the forces of materialism. There seems to be an element of a more outward-looking stance adopted here by the esoteric philosopher, one who wished his students to be prepared for potentially hostile forces at play in the world.

And Tabatabai had some students who went on to become hugely influential figures in Iranian history. For while Tabatabai is very well known for his embrace of mysticism (*tasavvuf*), many of his students are less known for embracing such a perspective, despite their deep respect and reverence for him. Indeed, one such student, Mortaza Motahhari, is known much more for his political activism before and immediately after the 1977–79 revolution, especially in English-language scholarship. Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that he never wavered far from his teacher’s lessons (despite Allameh Tabatabai’s lack of involvement in any revolutionary activities). Here I turn again to the work of Ahoo Najafian. Najafian has shown us how Mortaza Motahhari, a key ideologue of the Iranian Revolution and student, supporter, and later close advisor of Ayatollah Khomeini, was deeply invested in defending *erfan* against its detractors, who claimed it was anti-Islamic. Most notably, he does so by demonstrating the mystical and philosophical underpinnings of the poet Hafez, rallying against those who consider him “just” a literary figure. Beyond simply positing Hafez as mystically oriented, a common if debatable stance to take, according to Najafian it was Motahhari’s aim to establish the Sunni Hafez as an esoterically oriented Shi’i above all else. He bases this claim on the idea that certain themes prevalent within Hafez’s oeuvre—ambiguity, secrecy, the unseen, paradox, and more—are also key concepts within Shi’i cosmologies. In doing so, Motahhari renders not only Hafez as mystically inclined but posits Shi’ism *itself* to be contingent upon esoteric ideas. Last, Najafian points out how the stakes of this claim are made all the higher by the fact that Motahhari’s interpretation of Hafez was inspired, at least in part, as an attempt to reclaim Hafez from nationalist and Marxist readings, understanding him instead as a sort of crypto/proto-Shi’i.

Beyond the extremely high-profile clerics Motahhari and Tabatabai, there are other less famous but still influential figures within the semi-

nary who embrace esoteric Shi'ism. Seyed Amir Asghari's dissertation, "Islamic Philosophy and Sufism in the Contemporary Shia Seminary and their Opponents (1850–present),"³³ provides the most in-depth analysis of the position of mystical thought within the modern Iranian seminary. Asghari uses previously unexplored source material to outline the debates between proponents of teaching mystical thought within the seminary and its detractors. More specifically, he analyzes the works of the "School of Self-Knowledge" (*Maktab Ma'rifat al-Nafs*), a school that advocates for a more esoterically inclined form of Shi'ism to be taught within the seminaries, from the late nineteenth century through the present day, as well as exploring the school's strong ties to two Sufi orders outside the seminary system. Indeed, the School of Self-Knowledge was an institutional version, or perhaps counterpart, to the Zahabiyya Sufi Order, and Asghari suggests that the Zahabiyya Order had its very origins within the seminary. Qutb al-Din Nayrizi and Mulla Ali Nuri, the Mulla Sadra revivalist, are among its famous members. Asghari also offers intellectual biographies of figures like Mulla Husaynquli Shavandi Hamadani and Shaykh Muhammad Bahari (AD 1907), both certified *mojtaheds* trained in *fiqh*, who championed the importance of teaching mystical treatises like divine love and wayfaring (*suluk*). Ultimately, Asghari's work challenges the notion that Sufi thought only developed outside the seminaries.

Such rich and productive debates continue today. In the contemporary era, key figures within the seminary and the university system continue to champion mystical thought, including Ayatollah Hassan Hasanzadeh Amoli (b. AD 1928), Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli (b. AD 1933), Seyyed Mohammad Husayn Husayni Tihrani (d. AD 1995), Mohammad Hasan Vakili (b. AD 1980), and Sayyid Mohammad Musavi, to name a few. Tihrani was particularly influential in promoting esoterically oriented Shi'ism, establishing the Mashhad seminaries as perhaps *the* place to study Shi'i mysticism within Iran, and his biographies of the Iraqi mystic Sayyid Hashim Haddad (d. AD 1984) and his own teacher Allamah Tabatabai are among the most widely read tomes of Shi'i mysticism.³⁴ The young *mojtahed* Mohammad Hasan Vakili has noted that he decided to attend the Mashhad Seminary because of the legacy of figures like Tihrani,³⁵ and his recent publication explores the Shi'i inclinations of Ibn Arabi, a favorite subject of Tihrani.³⁶

Another Mashhad-based proponent of esoterism, Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ashtiyani (d. 2005), was a student of Allameh Tabatabai and a professor

who taught at both the University of Mashhad and the Mashhad Seminary for many years. Ashtiyani was a staunch defender of esoterism, and harshly criticized Sufism's detractors, such as his colleague Mirza Mahdi Isfahani, a member of the antiphilosophy and antimysticism Tafkiki (Separation) School, for failing to properly understand Sufism and lashing out due to an inability to fully comprehend it.³⁷

Finally, Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli is also a compelling figure among the contemporary seminarians, with more than just a passing interest in mystical thought. A former member of the Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Javadi Amoli has not only held a prominent role in the Qom seminary (*howzeh*) for many years, but also has been highly active in politics, publicly commenting on issues related to Iran's nuclear programs and elections, consulting with the Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, and acting as a long-standing critic of Iran's banking sector and policies.³⁸ Alongside this, he has published extensively on *erfan*, with a particular interest in the role of *velayat* as it pertains to mysticism. Javadi Amoli has also spoken on what he views to be the mystical dimension of Khomeini's thinking, which he always refers to as the *erfani* dimension, in talks such as "The Mystical Characteristics of Khomeini."³⁹ At a meeting with the Society for the Ahlul-Bayt, his institute on the subject of mysticism in 2019, the Ayatollah stated, "The epistemology of true mysticism (*erfan*) is the intuition of essence. There stands no veil between God and creation except for creation itself (شهود حقیقی، عرفان شناسی معرفت) (خلق خود مگر نیست حجابی هیچ خلق و خدا بین/است ذات)."⁴⁰ Such a statement, situated within a conversation on how the true meaning (*mozu*) of mysticism (*erfan*) is the presence of infinite truth, would not be out of place coming from any Sufi sheikh. Indeed, Javadi Amoli goes on to state that with this worldview and understanding of mysticism, "the whole world becomes an *aya*" (*kol-e jahan mishavad ayat*), or a verse of the Qur'an. Here, we see the world as text, and text as world.

I offer this brief overview of these esoterically inclined clerics—some prominent, some up-and-coming—within the seminary and university systems in order to demonstrate the prevalence of mystical thought outside of Sufi orders in Iran today. The Iranian seminary system is a place of enormously rich and complex debates, with creative thinkers and prolific writers producing a theoretically, politically, and philosophically diverse range of materials, and so for those familiar with the recent output it is unsurprising that it contains advocates of mystical thought.⁴¹ These advocates are not without their detractors, of course; there are many who write

against the role of mysticism as a hermeneutic device or its place within exegesis or “serious” scholarly research. Such debates do not give evidence to a blanket condemnation of mysticism as some sort of “heterodox” aberration, however, but are rather just that: debates, therein demonstrating the seriousness with which esotericism is considered. From Khomeini and Motahhari to Shariati to local groups of self-identified *darvish*, the question of mystical thought, whether in its iterations of *erfan*, *tasavvuf*, or *sufigari*, is to be found throughout an array of theoretically and politically diverse intellectual circles.

Non-Sufi Mystical Thought in Contemporary Iran

I have previously described mysticism in Iran as a shape-shifter, but it might also be thought of as something like an infiltrator. Outside of the seminaries, universities, Sufi groups, and poetry circles, mystical thought can be found in a wide variety of settings. Niloofar Haeri’s nuanced ethnography of middle-class women’s prayer circles has shown how their interpretations of Islam have been affected by education—both formal and informal—in Persian poetry.⁴² In particular, she highlights how certain concepts taken from the poetry of Rumi, Hafez, and Sa’adi influence the women’s understandings of Islam and their relationship to God. These concepts like “the beloved” and “presence of the heart” (*hozur-e del*), very common tropes of mystical thought found within Persian poetry, are what allow the women to feel a particular emotional closeness and intimacy with God, such that the moment of prayer is transformed into a time for close engagement with the divine, rather than the rote and mechanized practice that prayer is often purported to be. As such, these mystical ideas, typically associated with poetic works, then influence the women’s interpretation and experience not only of prayer but of religion as a whole. Lastly, Haeri also analyzes the genre of popular literature and essay writing that she categorizes as “simple *erfan*,” works expounding upon mystical epistemologies written by nonexperts, typically women. While the category itself is already of interest, Haeri points out that these works of “simple mysticism” are organized in the prayer books (*ketab-e dua*) section of bookstores, indicating that popular mysticism is not considered out of place in the presumably more sober arena of prayer.

In another example of the reach of mystical thought, Alireza Doostdar’s exploration of contemporary occult practices in Iran also demonstrates the popularity of debates and discourse surrounding the question of the unseen

(*al-ghayb*). In sharp distinction with my interlocutors, who continually stress the *limits* of rational thought (*aql*), Doostdar's interlocutors' focus is the underscoring of the rational and scientific elements of occult practices, as they work to dispel accusations of charlatanism and superstition (*khoraфа*) leveled against them. Despite the differing analytical stance of our interlocutors, both this book and Doostdar's demonstrate the intellectual investment in unseen realms; whether it be through spiritualist practices of the occult or Sufi striving toward the Unreal, the otherworldly is of interest. Moreover, Doostdar has highlighted the influence of esoteric ideals among the interlocutors, including a movement called "Cosmic Mysticism" (*erfan-e keyhani*), an Iranian "spiritual-therapeutic movement"⁴³ that was shaped by a wide array of influences including Western esotericism, Buddhist ideals, self-help gurus like Wayne Dyer, the fiction of Paulo Coelho, radiation therapy, and, if less explicitly, Sufi ideas.⁴⁴ For although the Cosmic Mystics do not discuss traditional Sufi concepts (*fana*, wandering) or sources (the writings of sheikhs, poetry, etc.), they are interested in alternative forms of consciousness, the importance of revelation, and of course the unseen—all ideas well within the wheelhouse of many Sufis. As Doostdar astutely points out in an analysis of the writings of Mohammad Taheri, leader of the Cosmic Mystics—himself a *pir*-type figure—what Taheri is essentially arguing for is that "scientific knowledge about the world may be received in the form of revelation or mystical thinking,"⁴⁵ and these are ideas that have been prevalent within Iranian thought for centuries, including within Sufi circles. In other words, the Cosmic Mystics are engaged with and pulling from religio-scientific discourses that have long existed within intellectual circles in Iran, and these religio-scientific discourses have long been influenced by and influence Sufi epistemologies.

While I would in no way argue that this spiritual-therapeutic group is a type of "neo-Sufism," not least because the group themselves bristled against accusations of them as wannabe or pseudo-Sufis, and nor do I think such an "are they or aren't they" would be particularly productive or interesting, what I do wish to point out is the investment in esotericism. What I find compelling is that, despite the differences between the New-Ageists, occultists, spiritualists, and so forth, and the Nimatullahi Sufis, they share an affinity for exploring esoteric lines of inquiry, even if the *answers*, or sometimes solutions, they ultimately arrive at are quite different.

The last arena of Sufi infiltration I will mention is that of contemporary poetry. While tracing the presence of mystical ideas within contemporary

poetry in Iran is a book-length project in and of itself, I will touch upon one work that has investigated such trends. I have already mentioned Niloofar Haeri's astute analysis of "simple erfān" literature and essay writing. In another recently published work, Fatemeh Shams offers a close examination of contemporary poetry, some state-sponsored and some not, that is explicitly supportive of the ideals, events, and leaders of the Islamic Revolution. The themes and ideas that Shams unpacks in this rich examination of an understudied corpus of contemporary Iranian literature are many, and among them are what she calls "mystic combative poetics."⁴⁶ This refers to forms of poetry and poetic writing focused on war—both the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88 specifically as well as war in general—that use mystical motifs to extol battlefield-worthy virtues such as journeying, sacrifice, and more, so that they might "turn war into a path-of-love (*rah-e eshq*)."⁴⁷ For example, Shams observes how the poet Hamid Sabzevari makes reference to the "seven valleys of the quest of love" from Attar's Sufi classic *Conference of the Birds* (*Mantag-al Tayr*), which is typically understood to be a story a journey of self-discovery and recognition, and a refutation of the idea of ego. Sabzevari instead uses the references to Attar's "quest of love" as a way to shed light on "the hardship and adversities of revolutionary insurgency . . . as an invitation to join the revolutionary crowds."⁴⁸ Shams also briefly touches upon the mystical interpretations of death and martyrdom in war poetry, describing how wine and intoxication are equated in certain works with blood and death to formulate a sort of "enchantment of death,"⁴⁹ implying death is a heady, enriching, and ultimately desirous event. As Shams's work demonstrates, mysticism holds appeal not only for women's poetry groups and New Age and occultist healers, but also for war-hardened veterans and patriots of the Islamic Republic.

In these sections, I hope to have highlighted recent important scholarship that touches upon the far reach of mystical epistemologies outside of Sufi circles in contemporary Iran, from the seats of revolutionary power and the authority of the seminaries to the living rooms of lay people to the witchy practices of exorcists, all are at least partially familiar with (and some extraordinarily conversant with) mystical concepts and conceits, writings and reflections. In emphasizing these trends, I hope to again impress upon the point that to categorize mysticism as a form of "heterodox" Islam overlooks, in an incredibly egregious fashion, the deep and myriad ways that esoteric ideas have influenced so many facets of Iranian artistic and intellectual output.

The History of the Nimatullahi Order

With this understanding of the conflicted history of the category of *erfan*, we will turn our attention to the history of the Nimatullahi Order. In this way, we may see how the bifurcations of *erfan* translated into the sociopolitical sphere beyond the Safavid era.

The Nimatullahi Sufi Order was founded by Shah Nimatullah Vali (d. AD 1431) at the turn of the fifteenth century.⁵⁰ Born in Aleppo in AD 1330 to a Syrian father and an Iranian mother, he left his hometown while still a youth and spent many years traveling throughout the Muslim world in search of a spiritual teacher. Finally, he encountered Sheikh Abdollah Yafe'i in Mecca, and proceeded to study with him for a period of seven years. Following this period of instruction, Shah Nimatullah began his second round of travels, now in the role of teacher and guide rather than "thirsty seeker."⁵¹ His travels took him through Egypt, Central Asia, and then to Samarkand. He initially wished to cease his travels and stay in Samarkand, but its ruler, Tamerlane, forced him to continue on his journey, not being "appreciative" of his teachings. He continued on. First to Herat, and then ultimately westward to Kerman, in the southwest of Iran. As the story goes, after politely refusing offers of residence bestowed upon him by sultans and great men of learning, he chose to stay in Kerman at the request of an old beggar woman, who served him bread and yogurt and asked him to stay. There he remained for the rest of his long life. Once in Kerman, Shah Nimatullah received hundreds of disciples, who traveled from lands as far as India and Andalusia to study with him. He was a prolific writer, and it was said he wrote three hundred compilations and treatises on scientific, gnostic, and literary works in both Farsi and Arabic. Shah Nimatullah was the composer of his own collection of poetry (*divan*), and was primarily interested in the works of Ibn Arabi, in particular Ibn-Arabi's *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fusus al-Hikam*). After living to be over a hundred years old, Shah Nimatullah died in 1430 and was buried in the small town of Mahan, about thirty-five kilometers from Kerman. An elaborate tomb was erected by the ruler Ahmed I Vali in the years immediately following Shah Nimatullah's passing, and today it remains a highly popular pilgrimage site for the Nimatullahi Order.

Following the passing of Shah Nimatullah, his son Shah Khalilullah succeeded him as the order's leader. At this time, as previously discussed, the Safavids were beginning to coalesce their power in Iran, and subsequently

to expel or consolidate any potential rival factions. In order to avoid this possible threat, Shah Khalilullah moved the entire order to Bidar, India, at the invitation of the sultan of Bidar, Ahmad Shah Al Wali Bahmani, who had been a follower of Shah Nimatullah. The majority of the order would continue to stay in India for nearly another three hundred years, until the disintegration of the powers of the Safavid dynasty left a power vacuum, as well as the opportunity to return.

A Return: The Nimatullahi in the Qajar Era

The return of the Nimatullahi Order from Bidar to Iran marks the beginning of the current instantiation of the order and the revival of organized Sufism in Iran as a whole. As the Safavid dynasty fell into disarray, its state-approved ulama no longer held exclusivity over the positions of spiritual authority, and what followed was a period of contestation and vying for power among the clergy. Indeed, with the advent of the Qajar dynasty (AD 1785–1925) came a time of weakened centralized state power, resulting in the flourishing of locally based spiritual leaders and jurists throughout Iran, including various Sufi sheikhs. Among them, of course, was the Nimatullahi Order, whose numbers swelled during this time.⁵² Indeed, so popular did it prove in certain regions that the governor of Kerman vastly expanded the shrine of Shah Nimatullahi.

This is not to say that there were not challenges involved in their initial return. Most significantly, it was also at this time that the order first declared itself to be a Shi'i order, largely to comply with the reigning Shi'i ulama.⁵³ Indeed, the return of the Nimatullahi Order to Iran was largely the result of the efforts of three men: Husayn Ali Shah, Majdhub Ali Shah and Mast Ali Shah, who were able to carefully maneuver the theologico-political landscape at the time.

Husayn Ali Shah, in particular, was very strategic in this regard, and extremely mindful about even disclosing his identity as a Sufi. He was in fact a trained jurist, having studied in the seminaries of Isfahan, and wore the robes of his fellow clergy, thereby appearing indistinguishable from the others. His primary goal was to distinguish the Nimatullahi Order from the wandering, "libertine" Nimatullahi *darvish* who had remained in Iran, and in a sense to reestablish their reputation as a "legitimate" and respectable order. His major treatise was a response to a Christian missionary

named Henry Martyn, in defense of Shi'i theology.⁵⁴ Ultimately, while his philosophical writings were limited, his main legacy was the reintroduction of the Nimatullahi Order to the seminaries of Iran.

His successor, Majdhub Ali Shah, was in contrast a hugely prolific writer who expounded explicitly Sufi ideas with much more conviction, while at the same time arguing that such mystical ideals were resolutely Shi'i as well. Trained in the seminary sciences, Majdhub Ali Shah's greatest contribution was positioning Sufism as a legitimate topic of debate within the seminary systems, holding his own against attacks from vehemently anti-Sufi clerics like Aqa Muhammad Ali Behbehani.⁵⁵ In addition to this, it was under his rule that the ranks of the Nimatullahi Order greatly increased, due in large part not only to his scholarship and leadership but also to the decrease in tension between the political authorities and the Sufis as a whole at the time.⁵⁶ Indeed, throughout Iran there were Sufis who were now under the protection of local Qajar leaders, even "sharing them" at times with rival jurists or other Sufis.⁵⁷

The final influential *qotb* from that era was known as Mast Ali Shah. Mast Ali Shah differentiated himself from his predecessors in two ways: (1) he was not a jurist, nor had he received much seminary training at all, and (2) he traveled extensively during his life, spending some thirty years in India, Turkey, and the Kurdish regions, speaking with many sheikhs and sages of various religions and creeds.⁵⁸ As a result, most of his writings are in fact travelogues (*siyahat name*) rather than treatises.⁵⁹ As such, while on the one hand Mast Ali Shah was known for his open-mindedness, given his conversations with disparate groups of people throughout the world, in Iran he was often critical of the Shi'i jurists and "exterior sciences," declaring that any scholar who disregarded "interior Shi'ism," that is, Sufism, was not fit to be a leader on the path.⁶⁰ As an outcome of these public declarations, he perhaps unsurprisingly faced much more persecution than his predecessors, given his vocal criticism of the Shi'i authorities.

Ultimately, the late Qajar era marked the time when Sufi orders were in the most direct conversation, and at times heated debate, with the Shi'i ulama. In addition, given the decentralized nature of the Qajar state, there were times Sufis closely aligned with local leaders, as in Kerman and other regions. In one instance, the alliance was such that an order was given the title of "peacock order" or "gnostics of the peacock" (*tavus-ol urafa*),⁶¹ with the peacock being the symbol of the monarchy. Alessandro Cancian has also written that, although the order generally advocated for political quietism,

certain early twentieth-century *qotbs* of the Nimatullahi Gonabadi Order encouraged their faithful to consider political activism.⁶² Following this era, however, never again would the Sufis be so deeply engaged with both state and clerical power, at least in this explicit a fashion. Finally, as a result of the localized nature of Sufi practice at the time, the Nimatullahi Order fractured into many different subsets, resulting in the dozen or so orders that all claim lineage to it today.

Inside and Outside: The Nimatullahis during the Pahlavi Regime

Following the rise to power of the military commander Reza Shah Pahlavi in the early 1920s and the subsequent centralization of power, many Nimatullahi Sufis largely retreated from openly engaging with political life, as many of their previous benefactors were no longer in power. In addition, Reza Shah's dismantling of the Shi'i clergy's religious institutions undoubtedly proved a motivating factor for the Sufis to step away from engaging in the public sphere in an organized and deliberate fashion. This is not to say that they were not involved and in dialogue with figures of social and political authority, merely that that was done on a much more individualized level. As such, the orders became more self-contained and structured at this time.

For the scope of this project, I will highlight only a few instances that were key to the development of the Nimatullahi Order during the Reza Shah Pahlavi era (1925–41). The first is the reorganization of the system of Sufi practice. Essentially, the Nimatullahis partially drew away from the master-disciple/teacher-student (*pir-morid*) structure at this time, leaving a less formal (*rasmi*) structure in its place. In addition, under the leadership of the *qotb* Saleh Alishah (1891–1966), the order increased in number and reputation, drawing not only more followers but also more patrons to them, as several members of the local aristocracy were also said to have joined. At this time, they were said to number around forty thousand,⁶³ a huge number. With this increase in funds, they initiated a number of public works projects, especially in the small city of Gonabad, where the order had a large following. These works included the founding of a library, the Ketabkhane-ye Soltani, a hospital, an adult literacy and education program, and the construction of water canals (*qanats*).⁶⁴

This increase in size and public activity did not go unnoticed, attracting the attention of none other than the monarch himself. According to my interlocutors, while Reza Shah was not antagonistic to the Sufis initially, he became suspicious after they had grown substantially in popularity. The minister of culture, Ali Asghar Hekmat, paid an official visit to the order to ensure that they were not “smoking opium, and bribing judges.”⁶⁵ Upon receiving reassurance that they were not engaged in illicit activities, Reza Shah demanded a text outlining the basic tenets of the Nimatullahis.

What resulted was *Saleh's Advice* (*Pand-e Saleh*), which remains to this day one of the foundational texts of the Solantalishahi Gonabadi Nimatullahi Order. If you enter any library or bookstore of a Solantalishahi meeting place (*khaneqah*) and say that you know nothing of mysticism but wish to learn, this is one of two texts they will hand to you. *Saleh's Advice* has been translated into various languages and, as will be further elaborated upon in chapter 2, is available for free online. It is significant to note, then, that one of the most widely read writings by an Iranian Sufi in the twentieth century came into being as a result of the state's inquiry into contemporary mysticism.

Despite Reza Shah's comparatively lenient view toward mystical orders, there were many intellectual and clerics at this time who denounced Sufism vehemently, describing it as antithetical to the project of modernism. The most vocal and vociferous of these critics was of course the public intellectual Ahmad Kasravi, who, in his texts entitled simply *Sufism* and *Shi'ism*, decried both modes of Islamic thought and their “evil teachings,”⁶⁶ and accused them of promoting factionalism rather than a strong centralized state. Certain other intellectuals and writers at the time, including Sadeq Hedayet, Ali Dasti, and Tariq Arani, also looked down upon Sufism, although more for what they called its antisocial behavior and charlatanism, and considering more the begging *darvish* than organized orders. Within the clerical establishment, Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi was perhaps the most vocal opponent to both Sufism and *erfan*.

At this time, there were of course other Sufi orders active within Iran—including others that claimed Nimatullahi lineage—and a number of these remained more immediately involved with the monarchy, especially during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, the son and successor of Reza Shah. In particular, the Safialishahi claimed the interest of Mohammad Reza Shah's younger brother Ali-Reza, and his twin sister Princess Ashraf was instrumental in the opening of a meeting place (*khaneqah*)

for the Zahir od-Dowle Order.⁶⁷ Finally, Shahbanou Farah Diba, the empress of Iran, who spent vast amounts of royal funds promoting the arts, literature, and cultural heritage projects throughout the country,⁶⁸ funded the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. This academy was headed by the philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the famed orientalist Henry Corbin, who championed a Sufi-heavy, quietist form of Shi'i Islam.⁶⁹

Despite these instances of royal interest in mysticism, the Nimatullahi Order remained largely free of royal patronage, and essentially operated as a self-contained entity within the larger civil society, surviving off of the financial contributions of its members, both rich and poor. Indeed, perhaps its greatest influence came in the form of travels by its members to India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, visiting with other Sufi orders. As such, the order remained outside of the reigning political authorities and disinterested in public debates until late 1968, with the publication of a particular treatise by the current *qotb* of the order, Reza Ali Shah.

In what was been described to me as a "sudden gesture," Reza Ali Shah began to publicly criticize the government of the Shah in the late 1960s. Most significantly, at the 1968 International Conference on Human Rights in Tehran, which was presided over by the Shah's twin sister, Princess Ashraf, he presented a paper entitled "Religious Perspectives on the Human Rights Declaration." In this paper, he not only criticized the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as failing to meet its goal but in particular criticized its lack of Islamic values, saying the values had been diluted by the "politics of strangers,"⁷⁰ the disregard for religious holidays in Iran, the divorce law, the prevalence of indulgence in substances, and, most strikingly, the influence of Westernization or, as was the popular term at the time, "Westoxification" (*Gharbzadegi*).⁷¹ Needless to say, it was unequivocally the most political and the most oppositional text written by a Nimatullahi Sufi in decades, and placed the order firmly in the position of supporting Khomeini and his compatriots. As the Nimatullahi continued to have sheikhs in their ranks who were also trained jurists, or at least those who had spent time in the seminary, there is no doubt that the order's elders were well aware of the debates that were happening at the time. More significantly, it has been reported that Reza Ali Shah sent Khomeini a congratulatory letter upon his release from prison in 1964,⁷² and, as a current sheikh relayed to me, there was a brief meeting between Reza Ali Shah and Khomeini himself in 1978.

Despite Reza Ali Shah's writings on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and his personal overtures to Khomeini, the Sufis maintain

that they have never taken an interest in the political realm. Indeed, when asked about further involvement with the Islamic Revolution, I was given no further information, nor was I able to locate any such documents in my research. Indeed, what was made very clear to me and what I wish to emphasize here is that the various instantiations of the Nimatullahi Order do not possess any interest in politics; neither now, nor in years past.

Sufism in the Islamic Republic

During and immediately following the Islamic Revolution, the Sufis continued to meet throughout Iran, although in more sporadic fashion given the disruption caused by the events of the time. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Nimatullahi Order was able to largely carry out its activities undisturbed, given its ties to Khomeini and the regime. In particular, Khomeini's son Ahmad was said to have strong sympathies for and ties to the order.

The prime example of anti-Sufi activity occurred on the night of November 30, 1979,⁷³ some eight months after the passing of a referendum establishing an Islamic republic, when the primary Sufi meeting place (*khaneqah*), the Ali Suleiymani Mosque in Tehran, was set on fire in what was perceived to be an act of arson. The mosque was eventually rebuilt, but the Sufis are still reluctant to talk about the incident. Van den Bos expresses encountering a similar sentiment in his research surrounding the incident, noting, "Although I have been unable to ascertain the real course of events, the fact that . . . silence was melancholic in resignation, deliberately not angry, excludes the reading that has the rhetoric of silence, in any power context, as a token of resistance."⁷⁴

There were reports of events in other areas of the country, in particular in Gonabad, where local paramilitary (*basij*) groups had accused the local order of not having pledged allegiance to Khomeini and the government of the Islamic Republic. In actuality, Reza Ali Shah had cemented his ties with Khomeini, and other sheikhs and prominent elders had attempted to further demonstrate their allegiance by attending the funerals and mourning sessions of key members of Khomeini's circle and administration.⁷⁵ In addition, the name of the Sufi meeting place, *khaneqah*, was changed to *hosseiniyeh*, or "place of Hossein," referring to the third Shi'i Imam, thereby making very explicit their status as a Shi'i order.

Lack of Legal Clarity

Despite these affiliations and attempts at ingratiation, however, the fact remains that within the Islamic Republic there is no official policy toward Sufism or mysticism as a whole, so its practitioners remain neither condemned nor condoned by the state.

The ambiguity of their status is made all the more noteworthy because the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran does in fact lay out specific guidelines regarding the status of religious minorities within Iran in Article 13. In its entirety, it states: “Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education,”⁷⁶ thereby affirming both the recognition of these groups as well as the rights accorded with such standing.⁷⁷ The term “only” here is perhaps a bit misleading, as non-Shi‘i Ja‘fari Muslims are also afforded formal recognition.⁷⁸ Specifically, it is laid out in Article 12:

The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja‘fari school, and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafi, Shafi‘i, Maliki, Hanbali, and Zaydi, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites. These schools enjoy official status in matters pertaining to religious education, affairs of personal status . . . and related litigation in courts of law. In regions of the country where Muslims following any one of these schools of *fiqh* constitute the majority, local regulations, within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils, are to be in accordance with the respective school of *fiqh*, without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools.⁷⁹

Thus, we see a direction not only to affirm the position of other Islamic schools of thought, but to carry out “local regulations” in compliance with the appropriate jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The other group that might bear comparison is the Baha’is, another group that goes unmentioned in the constitution. Unlike the Sufis, however, the Baha’is have faced consistent oppressive measures since the inception of the Islamic Republic,⁸⁰ a fact that is said to be due to their association with British imperialist forces,⁸¹ as well as the members’ more “radical” idea of their founder as a form of messianic figure. Moreover, within the founding documents of the Islamic

Republic there exist myriad examples of negative opinions by state officials of the Baha'is, while no such comparative paperwork regarding Sufism is said to exist.⁸²

As there exists no litigation currently in place or any active campaign on the part of the Sufis to achieve some form of formal recognition, it would be unfair to say even that they exist in a state of limbo, as such a state suggests a form of waiting and anticipation. To be in limbo implies that there is an end point that should have been reached, but one is instead caught in a space that was always meant to be transitory, and hence the increasing discomfort for those whose stay in it grows increasingly difficult the longer they occupy it. As the experience of the transitory undergoes its unnatural metamorphosis into that of permanence, those in limbo become increasingly uneasy in their experience of waiting, as if watching time being held hostage. In contrast, there is no anticipatory feeling among the Sufis, as theirs is not a problem with an explicit temporal dimension. Indeed, the question of their legal recognition is not even specifically addressed, but is rather evaded.

One might suggest at this point, however, that “evaded” is perhaps too strong a term. In most cities, the Sufi meeting places, the *khanegahs* and *hosseiniyehs*, are not only actively used but their status as part of a *vaghf*, or their status as part of a larger religious endowment, where some sort of charitable donation, most typically land, is made to a religious institute, is still being honored. So, the *vaghf-nameh*, the document of entitlement, or the deed, so to speak, allows the land and the buildings used upon it to remain in Sufi hands, and this is the most striking legal indicator of the position of organized mysticism within Iran.⁸³ Since the Islamic Revolution, perhaps the biggest obstacle they have faced has come in the form of publication and circulation of texts and sermons. Essentially, when one became too popular, someone from the Ministry of Culture (Ershad) would intervene, bestowing a strongly worded cease-and-desist order in the form of a human messenger.

Over the past five years, however, there has been an unfortunate and noted increase in the harassment of Sufi orders by local governments, primarily in the form of the closure or “discouragement” of large meetings. As such, the Sufis’ avowed disinterest in asserting themselves in the sociopolitical sphere has been tested as of late, and has caused, if nothing else, more particular strategizing. I do not delve further into these recent events at the request of my interlocutors.

Instead, at this point I would like to go into more detail about the current routines, rituals, and manners of a Nimatullahi Sufi Order in Iran today. In this way, we might be able to understand the order's operations in greater depth, viewing it not only through the lens of the larger sociopolitical realm but also as its own more self-contained and autonomous entity.

Scene from a Meeting

On holidays the space is always more crowded, as devotees from out of town use the opportunity to come to see the *qotb*, and today is no exception. At 6 a.m., a handful of men and women, those who are more active in the organization, will come and open the doors, give the space a quick cleaning, dusting carpets and setting out a few chairs, and brew tea and arrange dates or pastries to distribute. The crowds begin to gather around 6:45 a.m., with the *qotb* scheduled to speak at 7:30.

The meeting place is a two-story house on a quiet, tree-lined street in an upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood in North Tehran. Originally a residential property, the house has been used by the Sufis for about fifteen years and is still a privately owned property with the deed in the name of one of the prominent families of the order.⁸⁴ As people file in, several men stand outside and keep a lookout, for any “government types” (*yeki az dowlat*) or “busybodies” (*fozul*),⁸⁵ they say. Upon entering, women are handed a chador, although most are already wearing them. These are not the typical sweeping, black variety, however, but colorful, lightweight, thin cotton sheets in colors from pink to brown, decorated with small polka dots and intricate floral patterns. As is the case with all *mahdaviyes*, the space is gender-segregated, with the women upstairs and the men on the first floor. The *darvish* find seats on the floor, older folks sit in chairs or against the wall, and the rooms fill up quickly.

It's a warm day in early autumn, and the temperature rises as more and more people pack into the space. Sure-footed servers step gingerly between the people, balancing trays, bending down to offer their teas and sweets, navigating the crowded room and forming crooked paths as they weave around the seated faithful. The servers' smiles break the atmosphere of serious anticipation. Most attendees enter quietly, often with a companion or two, although occasionally people will recognize one another, quickly stringing together a number of salutations:

“Salam, how are you? Are you well? God willing everything is well.”

No one ever waits for an answer.

A few, however, stand and greet each other with a special handshake, unique to the Sufi order, involving clasping and kissing of the hands. If you wish to submit a question to the *pir* too, you must speak with one of these women who has clearly mastered the aforementioned handshake.

This session (*jalaseh*) will take place in two parts: first, the *pir* will deliver a sermon that will last for twenty or thirty minutes. Following this, he will privately read a number of questions that have been written down on paper. He will then respond to the men’s questions, staying downstairs among the men while the women listen to his responses upstairs. The men will then leave and go outside the building, and all the women will come downstairs and the *pir* will respond to their questions.

In order to submit a question, one must write it down and seal it in an envelope. On the outside of the envelope, a particular line of poetry must be written in order for the question to be accepted.⁸⁶ In addition, the question must also be written in the proper format, meaning it must be clearly directed to the *pir* and possess the proper honorifics before his name. If the questioner is illiterate, they must speak to one of the helpers before the session. Usually, there are no more than a dozen questions submitted in one session.

But first: the sermon. And now the room is so densely packed that the floor is no longer visible, people perched on windows and standing in the doorway. A stereo system has been set up so that the *pir* speaks into a microphone, amplifying his frail voice and broadcasting to both upstairs and downstairs. The men stand as he enters, but quickly sit down. The women know the sermon is about to begin from the noise coming from downstairs, sounds of shuffling and shifting around, punctuated by cries of “Ya Ali!” and “Ya Hazrat Agha!”⁸⁷

The *pir* begins the sermon. His speech quickly reveals a person of advanced age, with a rasping voice that breaks and is often strained, a sound creased with auditory wrinkles. He occasionally draws long breaths as if coming up for air. Because of its fragility, his voice offers not a stern authoritarianism, but a gentle earnestness, as if he has run a long way to tell us something, and needs to tell us no matter how exhausted. Still, despite the tired quality of his voice, the assured and measured cadence of the speech is undeniable. He speaks extemporaneously, a storyteller of the highest order, weaving together the central themes of his sermon with narratives of sheikhs long gone, excerpts of mystical poetry, and passages (*ayas*) from

the Qur'an. The tone is pedagogical and steady, his speech peppered with questions and delivered in simple colloquial language so that all may be able to comprehend. And again the voice, so fragile as to give it an air of vulnerability.

As he speaks, a handful of women begin to cry. While some do so quietly, tears rolling silently down their faces as they rock back and forth, others end up sobbing loudly by the sermon's end, their shoulders shaking up and down as even their bodies are overtaken by grief. This outpouring of deep emotion is typical of Sufi gatherings: Regardless of the content of the sermon, although perhaps more frequently when recounting tragic stories during holidays of mourning, people will begin to cry. Perhaps they are mourning some tragedy in their lives, perhaps they are moved by the words of the *pir*, or even just his presence, perhaps they have gone into *hal*; whatever the reason, it is not unusual to do so.

After the *pir* concludes, everyone recites the *salavat* prayer out loud. There is some shuffling about, and a brief pause of several minutes. Downstairs, he is reading the men's questions, silently, and to himself. After he is done, he begins again.

He still speaks with the microphone so that the women may listen upstairs. The questions are answered in the form of another sermon, the various inquiries and appeals for advice blended into a seamless act of oration,



FIGURE 1.1 Imam Ali birthday (*moludi*) celebration in a *khaneqah*, unnamed for anonymity.

as though reading a monologue. Even though the rest of the *darvish* have not read the questions, it is not difficult to discern the topics that are being addressed by the *pir*'s response. Inquiries about college admittance, performance on exams, health and healing, and even romantic inquiries are all addressed. When he concludes, the names of those whose questions were not addressed are read, and they are instructed to come to a more private meeting to be held later in the week, at a similarly early hour.

Following this, it is the women's turn. The men leave the house. Having all the occupants of the densely crowded upstairs slowly make their way down the narrow staircase, only to refile into the downstairs room, takes time. People both stand and sit, knowing they will spend less time here, and arrange themselves messily. Some women complain about not being able to see, others speak in harsh tones to one another, a third intervenes: "This is not a place for fighting." Crying continues.

The *pir* is seated on a sturdy armchair in the front of the room. His hair is thick and white as snow, he wears a robe (*abeh*) but not a turban (*am-mameh*).⁸⁸ After the *pir* has finished addressing the women's questions, those whose inquiries went unanswered are directed to come to another meeting. Then he slowly gets up to leave, first leaning forward before pulling himself up.

The women begin to get excited, and reach out to touch him, even as they part ways to clear a path for him. Suddenly people convene quickly around the chair, crowding around, dragging their hands across it as if to feel the presence he has left behind. Others grab bits and pieces he had with him—a tissue is pocketed, as is a napkin and the plastic tea cup. Others roll their eyes at this activity. There are muffled sobs now, others praying furtively under their breath, wishing good health and good fortune for the elderly holy man, watching as he holds his thin cloak around him as he makes his way out, as slowly as he came in. . . .

(Seyed-Gohrab, ed., *Metaphor and Imagery in Persian Poetry*). I would argue that there is a stark difference between such valorization of metaphor/obscured meaning as a puzzle to be resolved and what the Sufis would believe: namely, that obscured meanings are there not to be solved but to allow for further—nay, endless—opportunities for engagement.

33. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*; Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls*.

34. The distinction between a Sufi philosopher and a Sufi poet is not necessarily an easy one to make. Here, I base the distinction on the different written forms employed by the two groups as the key determining factor.

35. Junayd Baghdadi and Ahmad Ghazzali are considered sheikhs of the order and, given their prolific output, are hence a natural reference for the sheikhs. Ibn Arabi, a self-identified Sunni from Al-Andalus and perhaps one of the most influential and widely read Sufis of all time, is more curious. His popularity is due not only to the widespread analysis of his writings in Iran at the time, particularly for the jurists of the School of Isfahan, but also that Shah Nimatullah Vali, the namesake of the order, in fact translated Ibn Arabi's masterwork, *Bezels of Wisdom (Fusus al-Hikam)*, into Persian and commented upon it (see Nasr, *Sufi Essays*).

36. Tamimi Arab, "A Minaret of Light," 136–63. Lee, "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space," 86–100.

37. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*.

38. Hirschkind, "Hearing Modernity"; Larkin, "Techniques of Inattention," 989–1015; Khan, "The Acoustics of Muslim Striving," 571–94; Spadola, *The Calls of Islam*.

39. Erlmann, "But What of the Ethnographic Ear?," 1–20; Bull and Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader*.

40. Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," 12.

41. Attali, *Noise*.

42. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*.

43. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xix.

Chapter One. Sufism in Iran, Iran in Sufism

1. Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals*.

2. Safi, *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam*.

3. Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*.

4. Megan Specia, "Who Are Sufi Muslims and Why Do Some Extremists Hate Them?" *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2017.

5. The Safavids date back to Safi-ad-din Ardaabil (d. 1334), who transformed the Zahediya Sufi Order to bear his name. It was only when Shakyh Junayd assumed leadership in 1447

that they turned to vying for political power at all, until the Safavid Shah Ismaili took power, beating out several rival groups in the wake of the collapse of Timur. Melville, *Safavid Persia*.

6. Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*; De Jong and Radtke, *Islamic Mysticism Contested*.

7. Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*; Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*.

8. Chahardahi, *Selsel-ehha-yi Şufiyah-e Iran*.

9. Anzali, "Mysticism" in *Iran*.

10. I should note that Anzali's theory is in contrast to that of Zarrinkub, one of the preeminent historians of Sufism in Iran. In his classic 1972 work, *Iranian Sufism in Historical Perspective*, Zarrinkub argues that the disdain for the category of *sufigari* arises because of Iranians' inherent dislike for organized Sufism, therein eschewing *sufigari* for the more dispersed phenomenon of *erfan*. Zarrinkub, alongside other figures like literary historian Shaf'i Kadkani, also use *erfan* and *tasavvuf* interchangeably, failing to note a serious difference between the terms. See Zarrinkub, *Tassavof-i irani dar manzare tarkhie-an*; Shaf'i Kadkani, *Advar-e shehr-e farsi*.

11. Corbin, *En Islam Iranian*, vol. 1, *Le Shi'isme duodécimain*; Corbin, *The Voyage and the Messenger*; Nasr, "Philosophy in Islam," 57–80.

12. Corbin, "Confessions extatiques de Mir Damad," 331–78, and "La place de Molla Sadra Shiraza dans la philosophie iranienne," 81–113; Nasr, "The School of Işpahān," 904–32; Anari, *Maktab-e Eşfahan dar şahr-sāzi*. See also Khatami, *From a Sadraean Point of View*.

13. As Knysh points out, Ibn Arabi never used "*wahdat al-wujud*" himself but is largely credited with the phrase. Knysh, "Irfan' Revisited," 631–53.

14. Indeed, there were some groups that were vying for political power. Remember that the Safavid themselves arose out of a Sufi order that then turned its attention to the political realm. See Abisaab, *Converting Persia*.

15. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*.

16. Yazdi, "Irfan va Hikmat."

17. Sabzavari, *Shahr-I Mazuma*.

18. Algar, "The Fusion of the Gnostic and Politics in the Life of Imam Khomeini."

19. Knysh, "Irfan' Revisited," 631–53.

20. Knysh, "Irfan' Revisited," 634.

21. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Misbah al-hidaya ila al-khilafa wa al-wilaya*.

22. Fischer, *Iran*, 242.

23. Knysh, "Irfan' Revisited," 651.

24. A series of five televised lectures broadcast from December 1979 to January 1980; see Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*.

25. Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, 365.
26. Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, 366.
27. Najafian, "Poetic Nation."
28. According to Najafian, what is available from Khomeini's poetry is from two eras: the love poems (*ghazals*) he wrote as a young man, and the poetry he composed in the late 1980s during the final period of his life. The fifty-five years' worth of poetry he composed in between, however, remains lost, or at least unpublished.
29. The translations are credited to Dr. Ghulam Reza Avani.
30. Tihrani, *Shining Sun*.
31. Ehteshami and Rizvi, "Beyond the Letter," 443–60.
32. Tihrani, *Shining Sun*, 70.
33. Asghari, "Islamic Philosophy and Sufism in the Contemporary Shia Seminary and their Opponents (1850–present)."
34. Tihrani, *Ruh-e Mujarrad*.
35. Vakili goes into detail about this on his personal website: <https://mhva.ir/about/>. The site is titled "Shaykh Mohammad Hassan Vakili: The Source for Information on the Hojjat-al Islam al-Muslameen (Shaykh Mohammad Hassan Vakili: Paygha Etelaat Resani Hojjatalislam al-Muslameen)." It houses a number of Ostad Hojjat al-islam Vakili's publications, links to purchase his books, audio, and visual recordings of his various sermons and lectures, his biography, and links to his social media accounts.
36. Vakili, *Mohayaldin; Shi'i Khales*. See also Vakili, *Maktab-I Tafkiki: Tarikh va Naqd*.
37. See Ashtiyani, "Naqd-i Tahafut-i Ghazzāli." For an introduction to his work, see Ashtiyani, *Erfan*. For more on the anti-Sufi Tafkiki school, see Rizvi, "'Only the Imam Knows Best,'" 487–503.
38. For more on Amoli's views on everything from jurisprudence to the role of Mahdism in the contemporary, see the website of his foundation, the Esra International Foundation of Revelatory Sciences, <http://javadi.esra.ir/home>.
39. "Vijegi-haye Erfani-e Imam Khomeini Az Manzar-e Ayatollah Javadi Amoli," <http://javadi.esra.ir/-/املی-جوادی-الله-ایت-منظر-از-سر-قدس-خمینی-امام-عرفان-های>. The official website of Ayatollah Javadi Amoli features recordings of his sermons, his latest statements, ways to contact his office, and of course his writings.
40. <http://javadi.esra.ir/-/حجابی-هیچ-خلق-و-خدا-بین-است-ذات-شهود-حقیقی-عرفان-شناسی-معرفت>. خلق-خود-مگر-نیست.
41. For more, see the work of Odabaei, "The Outside (Kharij) of Tradition in the Aftermath of the Revolution," 296–311, and "Giving Words."
42. Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*.
43. Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals*, 3.

44. Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals*, 149–51.
45. Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals*, 153.
46. Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 189.
47. Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 202.
48. Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 194.
49. Shams, *A Revolution in Rhyme*, 194.
50. Hazrat Nur'Ali often added a caveat to labeling Shah Nimatullah Vali as the “founder” of the order for, despite it bearing his name, Nur'Ali claimed that the real founder was in fact Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad.
51. Anonymous, *Zendigename Shah Nimatullahi Vali*.
52. Another theory holds that the Nimatullahi Sufis of Iran felt disconnected from their spiritual leader in the Deccan, prompting them to request a representative be sent from India. See Pourjavady and Wilson, “Isma'ilis and Ni'matullahis,” 113–35, for more on this period.
53. Indeed, Shah Nimatullah and his successors were Sunni. In subsequent years, the Nimatullahi would explain this small fact away by noting that (1) Shah Nimatullah recognized Imam Ali as the beginning of the chain of succession (*silsileh*), thereby providing enough evidence for Shi'i qualifications according to later *qotbs*; and (2) Shah Nimatullahi also traced his own lineage back to Imam Musa Kazem, the seventh Shi'i Imam, giving him the status of *seyed* (or descendent of the prophet), to further pad his Shi'i bona fides.
54. Tabandeh, “The Rise of Nimatullahi Shi'ite Sufism,” 126–43.
55. Mottahadeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*; Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War*.
56. Tabandeh, “The Rise of Nimatullahi Shi'ite Sufism,” 165. See also Tabandeh, *The Rise of the Ni'matullāhi Order*.
57. Rizvi, “Before the Safavid-Ottoman Conflict,” 113–26.
58. Anonymous, *Zendigename Shah Nimatullahi Vali*.
59. Shirwani, *Kashf al-Ma'arif*.
60. Tabandeh, “The Rise of Nimatullahi Shi'ite Sufism,” 240.
61. Chahardahi, *Selsel-ehha-yi Sufiyah-e Iran*; Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 77.
62. Cancian, “I'm Only a Village Farmer and a Dervish,” 136–38.
63. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 88.
64. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 87; Saleh Ali Shah, *Pand-e Saleh*, 7.
65. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 89.
66. Kasravi, *Sufigari*.

67. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 122.
68. Eilers, "Educational and Cultural Development in Iran During the Pahlavi Era," 310–31.
69. Eilers, "Educational and Cultural Development in Iran During the Pahlavi Era," 303–31; Lewisohn, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part II," 36–59.
70. Reza-Ali Shah, *Nazar-e mazhabi be e'lamiye-ye huquq-e bashar*, 48.
71. The term was coined by Ahmad Fardid and made popular through the highly influential 1962 essay of the same name by Jalal Al-e Ahmad.
72. The story is also recounted in a 1994 sermon of Mahbub Ali Shah. See also Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 141.
73. Mahbub Ali Shah, *Khorshid-e Tabande*, 81.
74. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*, 156.
75. Given the number of assassinations that occurred in the years following the revolution, there were unfortunately plenty of opportunities for such activities; see Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*; Keddie, *Modern Iran*.
76. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 13, Section 1, "General Principles."
77. Despite this legal recognition, these groups have at times faced difficulties, especially in regard to inheritance laws and public ceremonies. For more see Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, vol. 13.
78. The Twelver Ja'fari school, the official religion of Iran, is a form of Shi'i Islam. It is so named because of its recognition of the twelve Imams who claim lineage to Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and refers to the influential sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadeq.
79. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 12, Section 1, "General Principles."
80. Momen and Smith, "The Baha'i Faith 1957–1988," 63–91.
81. Tavakoli-Targhi, "Refashioning Iran," 77–101; Keddie, *Modern Iran*. Others have refuted these claims: Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 2004.
82. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*.
83. For more, see Hermann and Rezai, "Constitution en vaqf d'une 'mosquée sanctuaire' ne'matollāhi à Téhéran à l'époque pahlavi," 293–306.
84. The practice of using residential spaces for religious ceremonies organized by lay people, without the help of any official channels or clergymen, is extremely common among Iranians and is certainly not exclusive to Sufis. It is more often used for *azadari* (mourning or lamentation) or *roozekhaneh* (literally house of prayer). Typically, it is owned by a person of some wealth, one who is able to afford an extra house or apartment, and then is used by a wide network of family and friends. In certain instances, the house that children may inherit from parents may be used for *mahdaviye*. More often than not, however, these ceremonies are simply held in people's own homes, the complaints of

neighbors notwithstanding. The name *mahdaviye* is derived from the name of the twelfth and final Imam, Imam Mehdi, so that it means literally “place of Mehdi.”

85. The word *fozul* translates as both adjective and noun, “nosy” and “busybody,” usually indicating a harmless, if irritating, person. Sometimes, however, as in the usage here, it is meant to suggest something a bit more sinister, an individual who may report any sort of activity they may deem suspicious to a wide array of authorities, most likely the Ershad or Komiteh, both official policing bodies that monitor “un-Islamic activities.”

86. I was asked not to reveal this line. In decades past, the particular quatrain changed from week to week, but the practice eventually became too complicated.

87. This is the honorific most commonly used to address the spiritual leader. The word *hazrat*, Arabic for “presence,” is used often in reference to the twelve Imams and other holy figures, i.e., Hazrat Zahra. When used here, it can be translated as roughly “His Presence,” the word “agha” meaning “sir” or “mister.”

88. This is significant as it marks a distinction from the dress of the clerical establishment, who wear both the brown robe and the turban to mark their clerical status. Tellingly, the Sufi sheikhs and *pirs* have voluntarily stopped wearing the *ammameh* during the past twenty years in order to demonstrate their distinction from the clerics.

Chapter Two. Unknowing of Text, Unknowing of Authority

1. For more on modern *doreh* circles, see Haeri, *Say What Your Longing Heart Desires*; Tawasil, “The Howzevi (Seminarian) Women in Iran”; Osanloo, *The Politics of Women’s Rights in Iran*.
2. Imam Jafar al-Sadeq is a key historical figure in many Sufi and Shi’i discourses, and, among other things, is known for emphasizing the idea of political quietism and esotericism within Shi’ism. For more see Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi’ism*.
3. For more, see Lewisohn, *The Heritage of Sufism*.
4. Kiani, *Tarikhe Khanegha Dar Iran*.
5. Van Den Bos, *Mystic Regimes*; Anzali, “Mysticism” in *Iran*.
6. Green, *Sufism*; Ridgeon, *Morals and Mysticism in Persian Sufism*; Karamustafa, *Sufism*.
7. Odabaei, “Giving Words.”
8. As previously mentioned, Sheikh Noroozi is part of a very extensive tradition of Sufis who advocate for thinking beyond the intellect and there are strains of more esoterically inclined Shi’i *tafsir* where one can find similar sentiments. For example, the idea of learning through *kashf*, which is typically translated as unveiling but can also operate as a form of epistemology. And Sayyed Haydar Amoli argues for a spiritual unveiling (*kaṣhf ma‘navi*) as a means to bypass the limitations of the intellect and reality, and it is only through this bypassing that one is able to comprehend the divine (Amoli, Jami’ al-asrar wa-manba’ al-anwar lil-ma‘arif al-muta’liah al-wali). Allameh Tabatabai has also

Unknowing and the Everyday

SUFISM AND KNOWLEDGE IN IRAN

Seema Golestaneh

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