

# The Many Faces of Iranian Modernity



# **The Modern Muslim World**

8

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# **The Many Faces of Iranian Modernity**

**Sufism and Subjectivity in the Safavid and Qajar  
Periods**

**Robert Landau Ames**

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## INTRODUCTION

On the twenty-seventh of Ramadan, 1206/1792, worshippers at the Friday mosque in Kirmān stoned a musician known as Mushtāq ‘Alī Shāh to death after a cleric, Mullā ‘Abd Allāh, ruled that his execution was a religious duty. The condemned was a devotee of one Ma’sūm ‘Alī Shāh, a follower of the Ni‘mat Allāhī Sufi path who had been dispatched to Iran from India roughly twenty years prior. Based on this stoning and events like it, Leonard Lewisohn concludes that “the intrigues and animosities between Iranian clerics and mystics” are the defining feature “religious life in Iran today” just as they were at the time of the stoning or in 1795, when “the fanatical Shi‘ite cleric Āqā Muhammad Bihbahānī” (“the chief villain of this drama,” according to Lewisohn) “secretly poisoned” Ma’sūm ‘Alī Shāh, whose follower died in the 1792 stoning.<sup>1</sup> He thus frames today’s conflicts between clerics and Sufis as perfectly continuous with those in the eighteenth century. A similar impulse has also operated in the wider scholarship on the development of modernism and reformism in Iran, which has also detached Sufism from its modern context. Scholarship like Lewisohn’s separates the Sufis of a given period from their historical context by framing competitions between them and clerics as “intrigues” that are the same in the twenty-first century as they were in the eighteenth. Similarly, claims that Sufi doctrine has

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<sup>1</sup> Lewisohn, Leonard. “An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I: The Ni‘matullāhī Order: Persecution, Revival, and Schism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* Vol. 61, No. 3 (1998). p. 441.

undermined the development of properly modern senses of individuality or rationality in Iran also imply that such doctrine is unchanging and inescapably bound to pre-modern intellectual traditions assume that it must be so fundamentally separate from modernity as to stand in its way.

Fereshteh Ahmadi's anthropological study *Iranian Islam: the Concept of the Individual* provides ready evidence of this second view. She claims, "any idea about individuality is meaningless in Persian Sufism," because "the philosophy of Ibn Arabi" affirms "the supremacy of the Universal Self over the individual self," which has caused Iranian artists to favor "conformity rather than individuality," while "the Sufi tradition of self-inhibition" has led to "Iranians' reluctance to speak of their personal life."<sup>2</sup> Ahmadi's claims reflect long-standing assumptions about Sufism's place in modern Iran.

During the Constitutional Revolution, a jurist wrote that Iranians "have no wealth" because "they have no profession but begging, or being derwishes and wasting their time with Sufism."<sup>3</sup> The links this quote from a constitutionalist *'ālim* draws between Sufism and begging speak to a wider opposition between Sufism and modern subjects of modern nation-states; such subjects would, presumably, know "the exact meaning of wealth" and pursue it industriously, living up to the spirit of capitalism at modernity's heart.

In the face of these claims that it is responsible for the underdevelopment of a properly modern sense of self, I follow Nile Green in conceiving of Sufism "as primarily a tradition of powerful knowledge, practices, and persons," but would add that in using the phrase "powerful knowledge," I mean that this knowledge has adapted to the particular arrangements of power at work in different

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmadi, Nader and Fereshteh, *Iranian Islam: The Concept of the Individual* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). pp. 82–83, 89.

<sup>3</sup> Khalkhālī, Sayyid 'Abd al-'Azīm 'Imād al-'Ulāmā' and Hamid Dabashi (trans.), "Two Clerical Tracts on Constitutionalism" in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, S.A. Arjmoand (ed.). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988. p. 343.

period.<sup>4</sup> This tradition participated in periods' wider cultures of knowledge and the political and social influences that shaped intellectual authority in a given period. I would, moreover, add that this model of knowledge, and in particular its hierarchical arrangement can incorporate the study of practices and persons into this model of Sufism. It can be understood, generally, as what Louis Brenner has termed an "esoteric *episteme*;" in such a system, knowledge transmission occurs "in an initiatic form" that is "closely related to devotional praxis," with the knowledge in question hierarchically arranged and progressively available to a decreasing number of more and more gifted, pious specialists, who themselves can become objects of devotion as models for this knowledge, as expressed in piety or charisma.<sup>5</sup>

To frame this conception of Sufism in Foucauldian terms, I position Sufism as a technology of the self. Foucault's "technologies of the self" are those practices upon subjects' "own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being," that allow them "to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as "the ways in which we relate ourselves to ourselves," these technologies "contribute to the forms in which our subjectivity is constituted and experienced, as well as to the forms in which we govern our thought and conduct."<sup>7</sup> It bears noting, though that these forms in which we govern our thought and conduct reflect specific periods' expressions of power and formulations of knowledge.

To paint in admittedly broad strokes, in what follows, I will argue that the texts I study (including Timurid works by Husayn Vā'iz Kāshifi, Safavid ones by Mullā Sadrā and Mu'azzin Khurāsānī, and

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<sup>4</sup> Green, Nile. *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester, West Sussex and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Brenner, Louis. *Controlling Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Technologies of the Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson, Arnold I. "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought" in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994). p. 119.

Qajar ones by Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī, Safī ‘Alī Shāh, and his disciple Zahīr al-Dawlah) frame Sufism (or at least those elements of it that they endorse) as a discipline that offers subjects knowledge in exchange for adherence to the disciplinary practices and ethical transformations these texts take to lay the groundwork for this discipline. Framing these texts as snapshots of discrete moments in Iranian history with particular expressions of power-knowledge addresses two lingering problems in Sufi studies: first, the definition Sufism as mysticism, which has lead writers on Sufism to treat it as apolitical in a number of cases, and second, Sufism’s troubled relationship to modernity in many secondary sources, a relationship these sources usually express in narratives of decline.

A critical reader could fairly object to an appeal to Foucault on the grounds that his later work on the care of the self deals with texts drawn from periods and traditions quite different than those I study here. I, however, would contend that the texts discussed in what follows lend themselves to the use of terms like “the government of the self” despite their temporal, cultural, and geographical differences from the texts Foucault discussed in his later period. I claim this for two basic reasons: first, because these texts often instruct their readers in practices and attitudes aimed at either refining their character or prompting further moral reflection (and thus direct their attention to the self) and second, because these texts’ authors often had relationships with rulers (often, patron-client relationships) and were therefore linked to the governments of their eras. In light of these two points, it seems reasonable to suggest that these texts’ directions regarding their readers’ conduct may reflect the norms of government prevalent in the period in which they were composed. This point aside, it bears noting that I mainly frame my engagement with Foucault as a problem-solving device. His evaluation of Greek philosophy as entailing practices of reflection that yielded knowledge of the self, a teacher-student relationship that reflected power relations of the wider period, the simultaneous formulation of the self as a subject of knowledge and object of ethical concern, and the recognition that full knowledge of the metaphysics of the system in question resulted from these rather than preceding them not only strike me as applicable to the explanations and defenses of the Sufi path, but, they also seem to be a way of affirmatively formulating a Sufi ac-



count of the self. I take this account to solve the aforementioned problems in the secondary literature, (the above claims that Sufism either ignores selfhood or devalues knowledge).

These decisions ultimately stem from the basic recognition not only that Sufism is a system of knowledge, but that claims to knowledge are historically situated is also recognizing that they're embedded in the power dynamics of their periods. Sources sympathetic to Iranian Sufism de-historicize it and especially seem to downplay Sufis' active participation in their periods' competitions for prestige or influence, which I take to be the foundation of their claims to and about knowledge. Secondary treatments of the Safavids are particularly glaring in this regard: first, these accounts take Sufi orders' apparent loss of prestige following the Safavid conquest of Iran as emblematic of a wider loss of religious tolerance and victory for fanaticism and/or dictatorship. This figures Sufi networks as innocent victims of politics rather than as collections of political actors with their own interests whose claims can reflect those interests.

## REFORM, REVIVAL, AND EARLY MODERNITY

The assumption that social or political influence is a deviation from true mysticism seems to inform presentations of the relationship between Sufis and the Safavid state. Lewisohn, for example, is quite ready to frame "the Sufi mystical vision in Persia" as a casualty of "the baleful influence of the *mujtabid* cult and the ideologization of religion to suit their particular political agenda," which takes up the aforementioned assumption that mysticism is properly a matter of personal experience and therefore ought to be apolitical.<sup>8</sup> In this, he operates under assumptions similar to those scholars who first conceived of neo-Sufism as an object of study. Lewisohn's contrast between Iranian Sufis of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and their contemporaries in the Arabic world seems to rest upon long-

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<sup>8</sup> Lewisohn, Leonard. "Sufism and the School of Isfahan: *Tasawwuf* and *ʿIrḡān* in Late Safavid Iran," in *The Heritage of Sufism, Volume III: Late Classical Persianate Sufism, 1501–1750*, Leonard Lewisohn and David Morgan (ed.) (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 1999). p. 132.

standing assumptions about the proper role of Sufis in society. His survey of Sufism in modern Iran begins in 1750 and presents the period that began that year as an attempt to restore the pre-Safavid “cultural and political glory” of Persian Sufism, which “had little to with the phenomenon of Neo-Sufism;” for Lewisohn, Sufism in eighteenth-century Iran contrasted with the “‘neo-Sufi’ trends in Arab-speaking Sufism” because of Iranian Sufis’ resistance to clerical intolerance.<sup>9</sup> He thus takes up the assumption that the “alliance” between revivalist Sufis and legalists in the rest of the Muslim world was somehow novel. For Lewisohn “neo-Sufism” refers “to the discontinuity of ‘neo-Sufi’ doctrines with—and their reinterpretation along Wahhabite principles altogether hostile to—classical Sufism.”<sup>10</sup> However, this reflects long-standing, colonially-informed assumptions about Sufism’s proper (apolitical) role in society and neglects other scholars’ reconsiderations of neo-Sufism’s viability as a category.

As Radtke and O’Fahey explain, “The neo-Sufi idea has its roots in the Western colonial encounter with Islam:” European colonial administrators and scholars needed to explain the fact that some Sufis led groups resisting colonization. One explanation “was the notion of a certain type of reformist Sufi leader imbued with fundamentalist and pan-Islamic ideas who *consciously* created and led organizations whose *raison d’être* was resistance to Christian invaders;” scholar-administrators contrasted these organizations with the Sufi groups organized around “localised, more ignorant and therefore more pliable marabouts,” who more readily conformed to colonial administrators’ preconceptions of Sufis’ proper role in society, preconceptions likely shaped by the equation of Sufism to mysticism and of mysticism to a depoliticized mode of spirituality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lewisohn, “An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I: The Ni‘matullāhī Order: Persecution, Revival, and Schism,” p. 439.

<sup>10</sup> Lewisohn, “An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I: The Ni‘matullāhī Order: Persecution, Revival, and Schism,” p. 439, note #15.

<sup>11</sup> O’Fahey, R.S. and Bernd Radtke. “Neo-Sufism Reconsidered,” *Der Islam* 70:1 (1993). P. 61

Even other sources that present a form of the decline narrative make claims that undermine the notion that Sufism is necessarily apolitical. It is difficult to see how Schimmel's claim that Hasan of Basrah was a "pious conservative" who saw government as evil could make sense without accepting that Hasan was situated within a decidedly political context that could make it possible to comprehend resistance to the Umayyads as a form of piety. However, by taking up the neo-Sufi model, Lewisohn seems to assume that it was Iranian Sufis' commitment to remaining properly mystical according to this colonial definition (which is to say, apolitical and disinterested in legal questions) that kept them from taking an active role in the politics of Early Modern or Modern Iran.

A great deal of scholarship equates Sufism to mysticism, which has in turn been taken to be apolitical and experiential (rather than rational or reflective of the politics of its time). According to these associations, mystics can only do a few things upon their entry into the *polis*. They can: appear as victims innocent of the interests that shaped the politics of their day (as in Lewisohn's account of the 1792 stoning), impede the development of rationality and individualism in their culture (as in Ahmadi), or they can stop being truly mystical by taking an assertive or even militant role in politics (as in both the neo-Sufi cliché and the framing of the Safavids as traitors to real Sufism).

## SUFISM AND THE PRACTICE OF KNOWLEDGE

Texts discussing the practice of Sufism have claimed that it, being a science (*ilm*), yields knowledge, but knowledge of a very particular sort: experiential knowledge of God and oneself, which results from adherence to its disciplinary system of self-formation. This treatment of knowledge as the result of adherence to a disciplinary regime appeared early in Sufism's development. This regime involved worship, contemplative techniques, and the stylization of personal behavior in reference to a spiritual director whose very person represented a connection to prophetic authority.

In one of the earliest treatises explicitly dedicated to expounding Sufi doctrine, al-Qushayrī's *Risālah fī 'ilm al-tasawwuf* (*Epistle on the Science of Sufism*) the author quotes the *tābi'ī* (member of the generation of Muslims born after Muhammad but whose lifetime

overlapped with that of the companions who survived him) Ibrāhīm al-Khawwās as saying “...the knower is rather he who follows up on his knowledge and employs it and follows the example of the *ṣunan*, even if he possesses little knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> Knowledge depends on moral conduct, but conduct is not simply moral by virtue of acts themselves. Rather, acts are made good by their roots in another’s behavior. Knowledge is to follow “the example of the *ṣunan*,” which is to say, it is to become like Muhammad—to act as he acted and thereby model oneself on him. Qushayrī also quotes the early ascetic Junayd of Baghdad’s definition of knowledge as a “regimen” (*ṣiyāṣah*) independent of “the knowledge of scholars.”<sup>13</sup> These quotes connecting knowledge to discipline and moral formation call to mind Foucault’s technologies of the self.

Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240), to whose “philosophy” Ahmadi attributes late twentieth century Iranians’ supposedly underdeveloped individualism, fits in well with these other representatives of Islamic mysticism, as his epistemology also focused on subjects preparing themselves for experiential knowledge by assessing themselves by way of their behavior’s similarity to a religious norm. He presented his system in opposition to the excessive dependence on discursive knowledge he found in both scholastic theology (*kalām*) and Greek-derived philosophy (*falsafah*) by terming it “the school of realization.”<sup>14</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi’s own discussions of knowledge in his doctrinal works suggest that they occur within Brenner’s esoteric *episteme*. His magnum opus, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyah* (“The Meccan Openings”) connects true knowledge to devotional praxis. He describes knowledge of worldly matters as rust on the heart of the believer, suggesting that in contrast, a heart free of rust is one possessed of otherworldly knowledge. And it is “remembrance” of God that pol-

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<sup>12</sup> Rosenthal, Franz. *Knowledge Triumphant* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 165.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenthal, p. 173.

<sup>14</sup> Chittick, William. “Ibn Arabi”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition). Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/ibn-arabi/>. Accessed 20 February 2015.

ishes the mirror of the heart, thereby freeing it from its worldly rust.<sup>15</sup> We should remember here that in Sufism, “remembrance,” *dhikr*, is a technical term for a meditative practice, rather than the recollection of the past as understood in everyday speech. This is all to suggest that Sufism possesses a collection of techniques that supply a vocabulary in terms of which practitioners can come to regard themselves as subjects possessing knowledge, knowledge as measured in moral and ethical transformation.

In contrast to this framing of Sufism as knowledge, a number of secondary sources have defined Sufism as mysticism, a definition that has made the study of Sufism as a historical phenomenon considerably more difficult than it need be, especially given the difficulty in defining “mysticism.” Evelyn Underhill posited that mysticism was “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood,” but also recognized that it “had been freely employed as a term of contempt” applied to “every kind of occultism, for dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism, religious or aesthetic sentimentality, and bad metaphysics.”<sup>16</sup> The notion that mysticism is properly individualistic (and therefore unconcerned with “external” matters like politics or social organization) is implicit in Underhill’s definition, given that it restricts its focus to relationship between the human spirit and the transcendental order as opposed to relationships between different humans, or between people and institutions. So, because of Sufism’s equation to mysticism, and the assumption that proper mysticism is individual-centered and apolitical, Sufism’s postclassical and Early Modern popularity, political influence, and institutionalization appear in much secondary literature as symptoms of decline or deviation from true mysticism, while “real” Sufis are assumed to have been necessarily apolitical.

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<sup>15</sup> Rosenthal, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> Underhill, Evelyn. *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1912), p. x.

### MYSTICISM, OR: SUFISM DEPOLITICIZED

Nile Green has argued that the “mystical” label was central to the “model of classicism and decline” by which many earlier scholars of Sufism conceptualized its history. For previous luminaries like A.J. Arberry, “the tension in the model of a ‘mystical’ and a ‘popular’ Sufism was resolved through a narrative of decline:” the earliest Sufis comprised “a genuinely ‘mystical’ movement of individuals seeking personal communion with God,” which “was corrupted in the medieval period into a cult of miracle-working saints which had nothing in common with ‘true’ Sufi mysticism.”<sup>17</sup> In Nicholson’s *The Mystics of Islam*, the word “Sufi,” represents “the word ‘mystic,’ which has passed from Greek religion into European literature.”<sup>18</sup> Like Nicholson before him, J. Spencer Trimingham takes up the equation of Sufism to mysticism in 1971’s *The Sufi Orders in Islam*. In Trimingham’s usage, Sufism “embraces those tendencies in Islam which aim at direct communion between God and man,” regarding it as “a sphere of spiritual experience which runs parallel to the main stream of Islamic consciousness deriving from prophetic revelation and comprehended within the *Shari‘a* and theology.” Mysticism, meanwhile, “is a particular method of approach to Reality,” one which makes use “of intuitive and emotional spiritual faculties which are generally dormant and latent unless called into play through training under guidance.”<sup>19</sup> Sufism is thus mysticism in that it emphasizes direct experience as given to emotion or intuition. In *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Annemarie Schimmel calls Sufism “the generally accepted name for Islamic mysticism;” and notes that, being mystical, Sufism “contains something mysterious, not to be reached by ordinary means or by intellectual effort.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Green, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. *The Mystics of Islam* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914). p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), p. 1.