

Shi'ism, Sufism and Gnosticism¹

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“My Lord! Expand my breast for me, and make easy for me my work, and loosen the knot of my tongue that they may understand my speech.”²

Concerning Shi'ism and Sufism—two words denoting the same reality—contemporary scholars, especially Westerners, have made many mistakes. These mistakes have either been made out of ignorance or were intentional. From the start, the mission of some of them was to create corruption within Shi'ism and to instigate sectarianism within Islam, as well as to provide information for their own colonialist apparatus. Many of them came to the same conclusion sincerely, although they were exploited by others.

The first mistake that they made about this problem was with regard to what they called the date of the historical appearance of Shi'ism. Some say that it began after the passing away of Imam 'Ali, peace be with him. Others say that it appeared after the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, peace be with him. There are other opinions of this sort, as well. Their mistake is a confusion between the appearance of a name with the appearance of its denotation. While a name can appear or gain currency at any time, this plays no role in the main issue. When a school of thought is at issue, one should not pay attention to mere labels. Just as the Shi'ites were sometimes called the Shi'ites of 'Ali and sometimes the *Shu'ubites*,³ for the Shi'ites clung to this verse of the Qur'an in which God says, “*O people! Verily We have created you of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes (shu'êb) that you may recognize each other. Verily, the most honored of you with God is the most God-wary.*”⁴ This was because there were non-Arabs who converted to Islam and who expected no difference to be made between them and the Arabs. Unfortunately however, among the caliphs, except for Imam 'Ali and Imam Hasan, such differences were more or less made. In reaction to this, the Shi'ites referred to this verse. There was also a period during which they were called *Rafidi*, meaning “those who abandoned their religion”. In this way, the Shi'ites were called by a variety of names, but, as was mentioned, the appearance of a name is no reason for the previous absence of its denotation.

1 This article was written in response to a letter inquiring about the relations among Shi'ism, Sufism and Gnosticism. The author has explained himself in simple language at the request of the correspondent. It was published in Persian in the Journal *Erfân-e Iran*, (2000) Vol. 2, No. 7, 11-23.

2 Qur'an (20:25-28)

3 This word comes from *sha'b* meaning folk, nation or tribe. [Tr.]

4 Qur'an (49:13).

We have to see the difference between the Shi'ite and Sunni views within Islam, and what are their principles so that we can discern when Shi'ism originated on the basis of the appearance of its principles.

After the passing away of the Prophet, 'Ali, 'Abbas the uncle of the Prophet, and perhaps some of the other Hashimites busied themselves with his burial. While they were busy with this, a group gathered in a place known as Saqifah Bani Sa'idah, and appointed Abu Bakr as caliph in a process narrated in history. Abu Bakr thus became the first caliph. After Abu Bakr, 'Umar became caliph, and after him 'Uthman. The fourth was 'Ali, peace be with him.

From the very beginning, after the passing away of the Prophet, those who disapproved of the event of Saqifah Bani Sa'idah said that just as the Prophet was not selected by us, but was chosen by God, likewise, his successor should not be selected by the people, and the people have no right to do that, but it should be according to God's will. They continued that since our Prophet is the last of the prophets, there is no further revelation, but because whatever the Prophet said amounts to revelation, as is explicitly affirmed by the verse "*Nor does he speak of his own inclination. It is naught but a revelation revealed unto him,*"⁵ whoever the Prophet appoints is appointed by God Himself. The Prophet appointed 'Ali to be his successor at various times during his mission. Therefore, the successor of the Prophet is 'Ali, not anyone appointed by the people.

Those Sunnites who accept the event of Saqifah say that since the people were gathered there and chose the caliph, their choice is valid, and he is the caliph (although, this position has also been subject to criticism, since all the people or the chiefs and decision makers were not present).

Historically speaking, there is no doubt but that after the Prophet, Abu Bakr, then 'Umar, then 'Uthman, then 'Ali, and then Imam Hasan became caliph. But the Shi'ites say that the real succession to the Prophet, that is, his spiritual caliphate, is the right, or rather, the duty of 'Ali. The major difference and disagreement arises from this point. The followers of Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman were named Sunnites, while the followers of 'Ali and Imam Hasan were called Shi'ites. So, the main difference between the Shi'ites and the Sunnites is that latter allow the people to select the caliph while the former believe that the caliphate should be determined according to the order and decree of the Prophet.

It is obvious that 'Ali was appointed after the Prophet, and since there must always be a divine representative on the face of the earth, after 'Ali, whoever he appoints is the caliph, and so on and so forth. If we take this difference into consideration, we will see that the basis of Shi'ism came into sight immediately after the passing away of the Prophet, but one cannot say that it came into existence then. The difference was already present, but during the lifetime of the Prophet, it did not emerge because there was no case for it. After the passing away of the Prophet, the different inferences became apparent.

5 Qur'an (53:3-4).

Thus, Shi'ism appeared right from the time of the passing away of the Prophet. But later, Shi'ite and Sunnite Islam absorbed other materials and ideas as they moved forward through the course of history so that each of them was transformed into a system of rules and ideas. The basic principles of Shi'ism are those mentioned above. We could say that every poet, writer and Sufi is a Shi'ite who believes in the *walayah* of 'Ali, that is, that 'Ali is the immediate and true successor of the Prophet, and that this is his exclusive right. Taking this point into consideration, people like Sa'di, Hafiz and Rumi, and in general, all the great Sufis were Shi'ites.

If they differed according to their jurisprudential precepts, this difference is irrelevant to the basic issue, just as there are numerous issues of Islamic law about which Shi'ite and Sunni jurists disagree that are also among the Shi'ite jurists themselves. However, the basic point is that anyone who believes in the *walayah* of 'Ali may be considered Shi'ite. Therefore, as we have mentioned, Shi'ism appeared right after the passing away of the Prophet, although its teachings were already present. This was not apparent because there was no opponent to deny them.

When foreign non-Muslim scholars investigate an idea, they do not engage the school of thought itself and its principles; rather, they focus on its outward phenomena. Therefore, since 'Ali sometimes helped the caliphs to carry out the rules of Islamic law, such scholars do not consider this period to be that of the existence or emergence of Shi'ism. They take as their criterion for the emergence of Shi'ism the time when differences arose between 'Ali and the caliphs. Of course, this mistake has also insinuated itself among Muslim researchers, especially those who are ignorant of the basic spirituality of the first Muslims. Throughout the course of history there have always been numerous disagreements between these two ideas—the Shi'ite idea of appointment of the leader, and the Sunnite idea of election. The caliphs were constantly busy with destroying the Shi'ite idea through various means, and they even persecuted the proponents of this idea, the Shi'ites, so that they practiced dissimulation (*taqiyyah*) during the entire period of the Imams, and even later. This is the cause of the encouragement of dissimulation among the Shi'ites. In this regard there are famous stories, such as that about 'Ali ibn Yaqtin who was a minister of Harun al-Rashid and practiced dissimulation.

In this way, a number of the Shi'ites were forced to retirement in order not to be found out and so that they could organize their ideas and beliefs and guide others. They found another name in the history of Islam, that name was Sufi, and little by little the term *tasawwuf* (Sufism) became current. It makes no difference what the etymology of the word *Sufism* is. What is usually said and referred to, is that *tasawwuf* stems from the root *suf*, meaning wool, and that the meaning of *tasawwuf* is wearing woolen garments. Sufis usually wore wool and it is reported that the prophets also dressed in wool. Since wool is especially coarse, and it is uncomfortable to the body, one cannot sleep much with it, and is kept awake to pray. It is from this that a story in the book *Tadhkirah al-Awliyya*⁶ was written, according to which someone (Sufiyan Thuri) came across Imam Ja'far Sadiq, peace be with him, on the road. He saw that the Imam was wearing expensive cloth woven of silk and

6 Shaykh Farid al-Din 'Ain al-Qadiri *Tadhkirah al-Awliyya*, Mu'ammad Isti'lami, ed. (Tehran: Zawar, 1363/1984), 15.

wool (*khazz*),⁷ so, he came to him and after greeting him said, “O son of the Apostle of Allah! It is not appropriate for you, as the son of the Apostle of Allah, to wear such luxurious soft clothing.” The Imam took his hand and placed it under his sleeve. He saw that the Imam was wearing a coarse woolen undergarment that irritated his arms. The Imam said, “This one is for God,” as he indicated the woolen garment; “and that one is for the people,” he said, pointing to the soft garment (*khazz*). The very occurrence of such a story and such an encounter, even if we do not believe it really happened, in the writing of Shaykh ‘Attar, which says that the woolen garment is for God, indicates that the great Sufis, the head of whom at that time was Hazrat Ja‘far Sadiq, considered the rough woolen garment to be a sign of worship and preparation for worship.

In any case, it is apparently more suitable to take the word Sufism (*tasawwuf*) as being from the root *suf* (wool). In fact, it is another name that has been applied to this group, [that is, the Shi‘ites] which has gained currency. In the same way, we see that today, for example, in a country whose government is against Islam and that proclaims itself to be secular, they disband an Islamic party and destroy its name; but the same group under a different name forms another party, and for a while continues its activities. Shi‘ism has proceeded in the same manner, that is, in the history of Islam, Shi‘ism has shown itself under another name, the name of Sufism.

The basis of Sufism from the beginning, as regards doctrines, was that the successor of the Prophet is ‘Ali, and that among the companions of the Prophet, ‘Ali was the most excellent. However, in practice they had various styles of life, in the same way as the Shi‘ites believe that every age has its own requirements. ‘Ali, for example, had an outwardly humble life of poverty. In spite of the fact that he founded many palm groves through his own labor, he endowed all of them and did not make use of them himself. In contrast, Imam Ja‘far Sadiq had an outward life of luxury and wealth. It is up to the Imam, the great person of his time, to decide according to the demands of the times how to live.

Thus, in the course of history we find that sometimes Sufism takes the form of asceticism and seclusion, and at other times, or in the case of certain persons, it appears as social activity and struggle. In the same way, we have observed different styles of life through the course of history, but none of these is the basis of Sufism. The foundation of Sufism nothing but executorship (*wasayat*)⁸ and *walayat*, not other extraneous matters. The other matters came about through the course of history because of the demands of the times. The same error that has arisen regarding Shi‘ism and the word *tashayyu‘* has also appeared regarding Sufism. Some say that for the first time it appeared in the second/eighth century. Accordingly, every writer seems to have his own theory, however, Sufism is the very essence and meaning of Shi‘ism.

7 There is a reason for the differences in the lives of the Imams, for example Hazrat Ja‘far Sadiq and Imam Hasan with ‘Ali, and this is another problem that we have to pass over for the moment.

8 *Wasayat* means that the successor should be appointed according to the final testament of the predecessor, not by the election of the people.

In the history of Shi'ism, some people paid more attention to the rules of Islamic law, and presented their theories in this regard. They are the *fuqaha* (jurists of Islamic law). Another group of Shi'ites gave priority to doctrinal issues and to the way of perfection toward God. They are the Sufis. In fact, they are, as the expression goes, like the two arms of one body. However, many times, without noticing this, some hold that there is opposition between these two groups. Many orientalists do the same, because the more opposition there is among them, the more the orientalists benefit. The basis and spirit of Islam is in Shi'ism and the spirit of Shi'ism is in Sufism. Sufism is nothing other than Shi'ism, and real Shi'ism is nothing other than Sufism.

It is here that researchers have found another ground, but a ground that also creates schisms. Only God knows whether this was deliberate or unintentional. In any case, some have said that Sufism was created in order to destroy Shi'ism and to spoil Islam. They made some pseudo-Sufis their criterion, and they referred to some pretenders to Sufism who either paid no attention to spiritual matters, or whose links to their source was broken. Since in Sufism, according to the principles of Shi'ism, only those who have been explicitly appointed by the previous guide and *pir*, deserve leadership and guidance of the people, and all are agreed that this permission for guidance will continue until the day of the resurrection. However, the twelver Shi'ites believe that during the occultation of the Imam, one who is appointed by the Imam only has the right to make *bay'at* with the believers. He also has the right to appoint his successor, so that this chain continued. Therefore, one whose permission reaches from hand to hand to the Imam has legal and legitimate leadership and guidance, and otherwise his chain is broken. How many there have been whose chain was broken but based on their own personal opinions they propounded matters as Sufism that are no part of Sufism. There are a small number of researchers who have noticed this. For example, in a book that has been translated into Farsi, *Mystics and Commissars*,¹⁰ the authors, Alexander Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, review Sufism in the former Soviet Union and say that Sufism is neither a sect nor a movement of renegades, but is an inseparable part of true Islam. Western analysts, in particular, are apt to close their eyes to this reality, and they repeatedly refer to Sufism as a phenomenon foreign to Islam, and even as a deviation from it. Since in the former Soviet Union forces opposing religion were in power in the government, the researcher who investigates the conditions in the Soviet Union will come to this conclusion [that Sufism is not separate from Islam].

Another argument often mentioned by some orientalists is that Shi'ism, and according to others, Sufism, was a way in which Iranians combated the governance of the Arabs after the Arabs conquered their country and defeated their royal dynasty and government. They argue that it was in this way that the Iranians showed their reaction, and that the history of much of the Sufi resistance makes it clear that it was this that led to the liberation of Iran from the chains of the foreigners. However, it should be noticed that it was not the Arabs but Islam that conquered Iran. For example, when the armies of Islam came to Iran, they succeeded in their conquest

9 For *bay'at*, see the article by the same author.

10 Translated into Farsi by Afsaneh Munfarid (Tehran: 1998), p. 214.

until the city of Rayy, and the people became Muslims. Afterward, everyone accepted Islam willingly.

A comparison of two matters paves the way to an understanding of the cause of this. On the one hand, it is narrated that Anushiravan invited the rich merchants of the bazaar and asked them to lend him money to carry out the war. After he finished his speech, a shoemaker said, "I am ready to give you the entire amount you need, not as a loan, but as a gift. There is only one condition, that you allow my son to become literate and to study." Anushiravan became angry: "I should allow the son of a shoemaker to study!?" He did not accept. On the other hand, Islam commands "Searching for knowledge is obligatory for all Muslims." Likewise, after the Battle of Badr, when the captives were brought and their families came to pay ransom for them, the Prophet said, "Any of these captives who teach reading and writing to seven Muslims will be freed."

Compare these two matters—aside from the spiritual aspect, if you just look at the outward aspect—when two armies, one with the former sort of thinking and one with the latter, confront one another, which will be victorious?

In any case, it is Islam that conquered Iran. Iranians were always fond of Islam and the Muslims. All their revolutions made against the governments of the foreigners, if they were carried out while preserving Islam, they reached their aims, like the rising of Abu Muslim Khorasani, or the rising of the Sarbedaran [against the Mongols], or the Safavids, the latter two of which were Sufis, and others. Those who made a revolution only for the independence of Iran but who were really against Islam, were not victorious. People like Hashim ibn Hakim (known as al-Muqna'), Maziyar, Babak and Afshin are of this kind. For this reason, their dynasties did not last and many of them disappeared after a short time. There is not even a trace of their thinking left. However, the orientalist ignore all these facts, and consider Sufism and Shi'ism as Iranian uprisings against Arabs and they interpret them as weapons of this struggle, although Sufism is the same as Shi'ism and Shi'ism is the same as Islam. Historical evidence for this is found in the fact that the uprising of the Safavids caused Shi'ism to dominate Iran.

Another matter that causes confusion and mistakes about the issue is that it is said that Sufism is something other than *'irfan*. True, with regard to the words, they are two things: *Our expressions differ, but Your beauty is one.*¹¹ This doubt was created long ago; even many of the opponents of Sufism who wrote refutations of it have expressed their approval of *'irfan*. They admit that some scholars consider *'irfan* and Sufism to be the same, but they deny it.

Now, let's briefly see what *'irfan* is. Literally, *'irfan* is knowing. Knowing has different stages. For example, Abraham, peace be with him, who *knew*, that is, by his own innate nature (*fitrat*) he understood that this world has a God, and that God governs all things, had some knowledge. When he saw a star, he said, "This is my god." It was the bright star said to have been Sirius. But when the star set, he said, "I

11 This is an Arabic saying, commonly used in Iranian as well as Arab culture.

do not like the setting ones.”¹² When the moon appeared—which, as a rule, was a full moon—he said, “This is my god.” But after it set, he again thought and said, “This also set. So, it, too, is not the God of the world.” This means that he had reached a stage in which he knew that there is a God, and that this God has power and greatness, but that in his primitive imagination he held that this God was corporeal. Then the sun rose. He said, “Certainly this is God.” It also set, and he then said, “I do turn my face toward the One Who has created the heavens and the earth.”¹³ At that time he recognized and understood that the God for Whom he was searching is not a body and is not corporeal, and that it is He Who created the heavens, the star, the moon and the sun.

These are gnostic (*‘irfani*) stages. The most primitive stage of gnosis (*‘irfan*) was that first one, in which Abraham did not know whether the God Who created him was corporeal or not; what sort of God is He? Gradually, he came to the point where God in the Qur’an says: “*In this way We showed Abraham the kingdom (malakut) of the heavens and the earth.*”¹⁴ Thus, everyone who knows God and realizes that there is a God has a degree of gnosis, because gnosis is not an absolute matter. It is something that, as the philosophers say, is graduated (*tashkiki*), such as light and faith, which have degrees. It starts from the least degree, and if God grants success, it reaches higher degrees. For example, imagine someone in a desert in which there is no habitation. From a distance he sees a black spot in the clear air (this clear air should be understood as his pure intention). He only knows that it is a black spot, and to that extent he knows only that there is something there. When he goes towards it a bit, he sees that this black spot becomes a straight line. Then he recognizes, that is, he acquires gnosis, that the thing over there is a long body. If he continues further and goes forward a bit more, he sees that the body has different branches. He finds out that it is a tree with branches. As he advances further, he sees that on the branches there are spots like leaves. He notices that the tree has leaves, that is, it is alive. He sees that it shakes and rustles. He understands that it is affected by wind. By going further he realizes that there are things hanging from the tree. He realizes that the tree bears fruit. When he advances further, he sees that the fruit is apple, or such and such a fruit. Thus, he finds gnosis (*‘irfan*). When he gets near to it and tastes the apple or whatever fruit there is, he finds out that it is sweet.

The same degrees of gnosis will appear for one who takes the course of knowing God. Gnosis and knowing God occurs in the same way. Therefore, when someone is called a gnostic (*‘arif*) it does not mean that he has something of which others are absolutely deprived, that he has it all. Being a gnostic also has degrees. There is the gnostic and the one who is more of a gnostic. The way to reach perfect gnosis, that is, the perfection of gnosis, is called Sufism. This means that Sufism is the practical way of reaching gnosis (*‘irfan*).

¹² See Qur’an (6:76).

¹³ See Qur’an (6:79).

¹⁴ Qur’an (6:75).

Thus, Sufism and gnosis (*'irfan*) are two words signifying the same thing, or they may be thought of as two sides of the same coin, or it may be said that the former shows the way and the latter the result of wayfaring. In any case, they are both one and two.

The opposition that sometimes now is claimed in Iran to exist between gnosis and Sufism might be due to the bad political situation. They cannot say bad things about gnosis (*'irfan*) because so many of the great figures have appreciated it, and it is generally beloved. On the other hand, they cannot accept Sufism because it might damage their worldly life. Hence, they say that gnosis (*'irfan*) is something other than Sufism. There are even people who previously were following the way of Sufism and later became opposed to it and have written rejections of it. In order to fortify their rejections and to disassociate themselves from their pasts, they say that gnosis (*'irfan*) is good, but that it is other than Sufism. They continue to the extent that many of the older generation were mistaken and thought that these two were one. From this it is apparent that many of the great figures of the past have attested to this truth.
