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THE LEGACY OF MEDIEVAL PERSIAN SUFISM (1150–1500)

EDITED BY LEONARD LEWISOHN

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The Dawning Places of the Lights of Certainty in the Divine Secrets Connected with the Commander of the Faithful
by Rajab Bursi (d. 1411)

B. Todd Lawson

INTRODUCTION

Not far from the ancient site of Babylon, in the mid-fourteenth century, Rajab Bursi was born in a hamlet situated at the foot of a mountain near the Euphrates called Burs. Shi'ite authors often call him an "extremist/exaggerator" (ghāli) because of his uncompromising view of the Prophet and the Imam as eternal principles even though many features of the venerable "extremist tradition" (ghulāw) seem to be absent from his work.1 What is clear is that his work, which pays ceaseless homage to the twelve Imams of Ithnā-'ashari Shi'ism, is suffused also with the themes and poetry of many Sufi authors and is heavily influenced by the logocentric ontology of Ibn 'Arabi. This ontology would eventually make itself felt, four hundred years later in, for example, the religio-political program of the Babi movement of mid-nineteenth century Iran whose literature also contains many references to the contents of the book under discussion. Between that time and the time of our author, his work has been quoted, commented upon, and noticed by a variety of different scholars.

Bursi's adoption of the Persianate takhallus as a means of signing his poetry appears to be his only literary acknowledgment of specifically Persian culture. His move to Iran seems to have been motivated by an attraction to the probably somewhat less doctrinaire Shi'ite community there rather than an attraction for things Persian. The petty Sufi/Shi'ite dynasty in charge of Khurāsān, the Sarbadārīs (1337–1381) which included Tus, Bursi's eventual place of refuge, was tolerated by Timur for a while even after his conquest of the area. Rajab Bursi's book is written entirely in Arabic, and none of the other titles ascribed to Bursi indicate Persian works, nor is he known to have written anything in Persian. Nonetheless, his words are often quoted by Persian authors from the Safavid period onward.2 The book under discussion here was, for example, made the object of large Persian paraphrase and commentary, by order of Shāh Sulaymān Safavi (reg.1666–1694), of over a

2. See below, page 269, note 3.
thousand pages, by a scholar from Sabzivār living in Mashhad, al-Ḥasan al-Khaṭīb al-Qārī’, dated 1090/1680.1

The presence, then, of this study in a book of essays devoted to the topic of the legacy of medieval Persian Sufism might at first strike the reader as somewhat anomalous. It was written by an Arab who seems to have been neither master nor disciple in the traditional Sufi sense; indeed, the main interest of the work is explicitly Twelver Shi’ism. However, the author and his book are both legatee and legator of a species of mystical thought that is not without interest for readers of this volume. This affinity to Persianate thought may be ultimately traceable to the strong influence of Ibn ‘Arabi in his work, (together, of course, with his Shi’ism). As is well known, the enthusiasm with which the Great Doctor’s thought was received and embellished by Persian authors is a striking fact in the history of Islamic thought.

Rajab Bursi’s Mashārīq al-anwār has been described as being of the first importance for the study of Shi’ite gnostic metaphysics. Corbīn places our author in a distinct stream of thought within Islam extending from Sījistānī (d.ca.360/972), and including such figures as ‘Alī al-Dawla Simmānī (d.736/1336), Ḥaydar Amūli (d.after 787/1385), Shah Ni’matullāh Wāli (d. 834/1431),2 Rajab ‘Alī Tabrizī (d.1080/1669-70), Qādī Sa‘īd Qummī (d.1103/1691-92), Khwājah Muhammad ibn Mahmūd Dīhdār (10th-11th/16th-17th),3 and Shaykh Ahmad al-Aḥsā‘ī (d.1241/1826).4 To this list of kindred thinkers may be added Ibn Ābi Jumhūr (d. towards the end of the 15th cent.)5 and Mullā Muḥsin Fayd Kūshānī (d. 1091/1680).6

The Mashārīq has attracted the attention of a steady stream of scholars from the late fifteenth century to the present, and the majority of these authors have been Persian. Most striking of all, is the continued popularity this book enjoys amongst the generality of contemporary Shi’ites, about which a bit more later. Insofar as the work at hand preserves and transmits medieval Sufism, the understanding of twentieth century Shi’ism and the heritage it enjoys from mediaeval times, may also be deepened through its study.

The cast of thought which characterizes this rich and complex heritage has been briefly summarized by Corbīn as reflecting a metaphysics not content with identifying real being (al-wujūd al-haqiq) with absolute being (wujūd muṭlaq), because if this being is absolute, that is to say “freed” of all condition, it presupposes a muṭlaq that frees it, and this muṭlaq is being in the real sense, so real that it transcends our category of being.1

NAME

Aghā Buzurg Tīhrānī lists our author as al-Shaykh Raḍīyādīn Rajab bin Muhammad bin Rajab al-Ḥāfiz al-Bursī al-Hillī.2 Brockelman, following Dhārī‘a, uses this latter name in one entry where he also calls him an extreme Shi’tite. But in two other places Brockelman lists him as (1) Rajab b. al-Ḥāfiz al-Brussawī;4 and (2) Raḍī al-dīn Rajab b. Muhammad b. Rajab al-Ḥāfiz al-Bursī al-Hillī.5 al-Hurr al-‘Āmili (d.1097/1682) lists his name as Rajab al-Ḥāfiz al-Bursī and adds that he was a ‘scholar, traditionist, poet, writer, and a man of culture.6 According to one scholar, there is some ground for suspecting that he was neither from Hilla nor originally a Shi’tite because the term ‘traditionist’ (muḥaddith) is not a typical designation for a Shi’tite scholar and it is unlikely that the qualification would be given to someone from Hilla.7 The biographer Khwansārī (d.1313/1895-6) refers to him in ornate fashion as the “learned master, the perfect Shaykh and Murshid, the Pole and the divine gnostic.”8 These titles, indicating his position in a Sufi hierarchy need not be taken seriously because we have no knowledge of his social connections. As will be seen however, that he be described in such a way is not due simply to the fulsome rhetoric of a late Qajar source.

Finally, about his nīshā, al-Bursi, there is some disagreement: it refers to town near Gilān, or near Turshīz in Khurasān, or the Arab hamlet mentioned above. One opts for the Irāqi town because it was an important area of Shi’ism during this time and, apart from the employment in his poetry of a Persian style takhlīlī, Bursī seems to have written nothing in Persian.9

1. EII 3, p. 319.
3. GAL. Supp. II, p. 204 under the category Der Hadīt. 4. GAL. Supp. p. 660 under the category Der Mystik.
Everything we know of his life we owe to the late Safavid biographies, especially the one by 'Abdullāh Afandi al-Jirānī written between 1107/1695 and 1310/1748.1 Rajab Bursī was born in the village Bursī in 'Irāq, a town famous for its sweet water, situated at the base of a mountain between Hilla and Kūfā around the year 743/1342 and died in or after 843/1441. He grew up in Hilla and moved (hajara) to Khurasan at the age of twenty-six. Of his birth, his teachers, his associates, his students or his death we have no certain knowledge.2 His tomb, however, is located in a garden in Ardestan near Isfahan. Bursī fled Hilla due to persecution by his fellow Shi'ites because of his 'extreme' beliefs about 'Ali. This is indicated by our author himself in his poetry.3 It is likely Bursī fled from Hilla to Khurasan because of the promise of a freer atmosphere provided by the somewhat heterodox Shi'ite Sarbadārī state there. He withdrew to Tūs (present-day Mashhad) to be near the shrine of 'Ali al-Riḍā. Here he remained, presumably occupied with his writing and other spiritual pursuits until his death.4 Other evidence suggests that his hijra did not save him from further persecution.5 Indeed, one reference to him in an anonymous Sufi work states that he was killed in Tūs.6 The circumstances surrounding such a violent end are so far completely unknown. However, Timurid authority in the region had by this time become more consolidated. It may be that Rajab Bursī's example was thought to be contrary to the Timurid political agenda. It is also quite possible that rumors of his execution or murder are just that. After all, by this time he had reached a rather advanced age.

Bursī states in an autograph manuscript of one work, possibly the Mashāriq, that he finished it 518 years after the birth of the Mahdi, that is in 768/1367, if we accept that in Bursī's view the Mahdi was born in the year 864/250.7 This means it was completed during the reign of the last Sarbadārī 'Ali Mu'ayyad. Al-Jirānī states that he wrote another work, the Mashāriq al-amān, in 811/1396-9, having seen with his own eyes a copy of this work and others in Māzandarān.

Although Bursī was a contemporary of Ḥaydār Amūlī, the latter seems not to take any notice of him.9 Apparently, the first to mention him or quote his work was al-Kaf'ami, (d.15th/9th cent.) in his collection of prayers entitled the Misbah, written in 1490/895.10 Muḥṣin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d.1091/1680), the influential Sufi Shi'ite of the later Safavid period, mentions Bursī in his Kalimāt-i moknina.11 Muhammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d.1110 or 1111/1699 or 1700), a student of the former, seems to have been the first to revile Bursī's "extremism" (ghullūw), and who because of his great prestige influenced later attitudes towards him, cited Bursī in his Bihār al-anwār.12

For a list of Bursī's works we are indebted to al-Sayyid Ni'matullāh al-Jazā'iri (d.1112/1700).4 Of these twelve titles, only one is printed, namely the Mashāriq al-anwār.

**MASHĀRIQ AL-ANWĀR**

By far the best known of his works is the Mashāriq al-anwār. It exists in a number of manuscripts.5 The first printed edition is that of Bombay dated 1833. In 1959 it was edited anonymously and printed in Beirut. Its popularity is attested by the fact that between that year and 1967 the book went through ten printings. The edition used for this discussion is designated as the tenth printing, but it bears no date.6 This publication history indicates rather persuasively that the book is important in popular Shi'ite piety. Because, as will be shown, the book teaches a number of gnostic and mystical doctrines it affords a strong insight into the durability of mediaval Sufism's legacy as it continues to be felt in contemporary Shi'ism.

The text as we have it in the printed edition is divided into three distinct parts: the 'Introduction' (pp. 5-13) which is possibly a separate work of Bursī's entitled Lawāmi't (see item # 7 in Appendix) affirming the unity of God and the sanctity of the Imams; the Mashāriq proper (pp.14-224); and a Majmū'a of his poetry derived from the Mashāriq and other sources (pp.225-247).7 The Mashāriq al-anwār proper consists of 204 chapters (fusūl) introduced with a brief Introduction and concluded with a short kāhīma. In both the 'introduction' and the kāhīma, Bursī refers to the persecution he suffered at the hands of those whose belief is corrupt (tashayyu 'fāhishah) and specifies the fūqahā' as being particularly culpable.

**Know that when I chanted to the envious, those who know nothing of true religion... from the Glorious Book... they drove me away. And when I unfolded to them some of the traditions and expounded to them their inner meanings... they became envious of me and slandered me... though I did nothing wrong. Most of what I said had to do with a hidden matter and a mysterious secret. He who is disturbed by such...**

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1. This biographical dictionary has been recently edited and published: 'Abdullāh ibn 'Iṣā Afandi al-Jirānī (d.ca.1718) Riyād al-'ulāmā' wa hīyād al-falādāl. 6 vols. (Qum 1981).
3. E.g. Mashāriq, p. 246. The Sarbadārīs, existed in the region from 1337/737-1386/788. They were one of a number of dynasties that replaced the Il-Khānids and were eventually conquered by Timur in 782/1380. But the great ruler's Shi'ite sympathies allowed the last Sarbadārī, 'Ali Mu'ayyad, to remain as governor until his death in 788/1386. See Moojan Momen, Introduction to Shi'ite Islam (Oxford 1985), p.93. See also ibid., pp. 99-104 for a useful summary of Shiism and its increasing appropriation of Sufism in the middle period, 1000-1500.
5. Cited in Fikr, p. 256.
6. Fikr, p. 253. The work was discovered by 'Abbās Qummā.
7. Fikr, p. 258 and notes.
8. I have been unable to confirm whether or not he is mentioned by Ibn Abī Jumhūr (d. at the end of the 15th/9th century). The likely place for such a reference would be his Kitāb al-Majlī on which see the reference to Madelung above.
9. In his al-Anwār al-nu'māniya (written in 1687/1098). 4
10. See the references to GAL and Dkhārī above.
11. It is possible that it is older than another edition seen by me dated 1399/1978 printed by the Dār al-Andalus, but this is doubtful. I have been told of an 11th edition dated 1978.
12. Majmū'a min shī' al-Shaykh Rajab al-Bursī (pp.225-247). This is a collection of his poetry from a variety of sources, mainly 'Iyān al-shī'a: al-Ghadir; and the Mashāriq itself.
things has a sickness in his heart while the peaceful heart is gladdened [by such things].

Some thought I was an ignorant one, but they condemn what they understand not... These were the brothers from among the fuqaha'... their minds were obscured by transmitted knowledge... God specializes for his mercy whomever he will and separates him from the envier. "And in their hearts is a sickness which God will increase." [Koran II: 10].

An indication of the Sufi nature of this work is also given quite early in the text. In relation to the topic of selflessness as a prerequisite for true knowledge, Rajab Bursi cites the following Tradition.

When God created the soul He called to it with the question "Who am I?" The soul [insolently] responded: "But who am I?" Then God cast it into the depths of the sea until it came to the Extended Alif (al-alif al-mabšūs) and it was purified of the depravities of referring to its self and it returned to its proper development. Then God called to it again with the question: "Who am I?" The soul responded this time with: "Thou art the One, the Vanquisher! [Koran XL: 16]." For this reason He said: "Kill your souls" [Koran II: 43 & IV: 66] because they will never recognize their stations except through vanquishing.

The connection here would seem to be that Rajab Bursi sees his difficulties with his fellow Hillaš as a spiritual trial which in the end will be of benefit to him. Thus the allusion to the oft-quoted (in Shi'ite literature) hadith: "The knowledge of the People of the House is exceedingly difficult (sa'b mustaqas'ab), none can bear it except a sent prophet, an angel brought nigh to God or a believer whose heart has been tested for faith."

In the khātima he also refers to his hijra due to the censure and blame directed against him and cites a tradition from the Prophet extolling the virtues of retreat: "All good is in seclusion ('uzla), and good and well-being are found in solitude (wahda) and there is blessing in abandoning people."

The many chapters of the Mashārīq vary greatly in length and subject matter. The first 22 are devoted to an exploration of the numinous content or status of letters of the alphabet which also have numerical value. In any case, it should not be inferred from this that such concerns are absent from the rest of the book. Bursi was, it may be noted, a contemporary of Faqlullah Astarabādi (1339-1401), the founder of the Hurufī sect. And it may also be that the work contains a number of cryptic references to the latter, such as the one found at the beginning of the book. As is

2. This is defined by Bursi elsewhere in Mashārīq, pp. 20-21; see also Corbin, Annuaire 68-69, p. 149.
3. Mashārīq, p. 16. 'Ali is also associated with the attribute "vanquisher" (al-Qahhār) because of his heroic military prowess at the conquest of Khaybar.
4. Mashārīq, p.16; see also Mashārīq, pp.197-198.
5. Mashārīq, p. 222.
6. It is of some interest that the Persian commentary by Mashhadi, mentioned above, neglects this material.
7. On Faqlullah Astarabādi see the article by H. Norris in this volume. Ed.
8. Here he refers to one "who is gladdened by what God has bestowed upon him and opened for him" [mubtah] bimā foqalatu Allah [sic] wa foqala lahu]. Mashārīq, p. 15.

well known, however, Bursi would have required no such contemporary validation for his letter and number speculations. By his time, such sciences had become common coin and practiced by a wide variety authors. Indeed, to the extent that such movements as the Hurufīyya were successful or posed a serious threat to the status quo, it seems reasonable to suppose that the movement spoke a language that struck a responsive chord in the general population.

The chapters are not given topic headings and are designated merely by the word faṣl. It is sometimes difficult to know how these chapters were conceived as separate elements. The majority of the material consists of hadīths and Bursi's commentary on them. These hadīths are derived from a number of sources, displaying the interest in both Sunni and Shi'ite works common in this period. Thus several are related from Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal, Abu Ḥanifa, Ibn 'Abbās, and other sources for the Sunni tradition, while numerous traditions are taken from such basic Shi'ite works as the Kitāb baṣā'ir al-darajāt.

LOGOS

Beyond the somewhat literalistic conception of Logos implied by a preoccupation with the "science of letters," there is a related theme in the work which expresses the Logos quite independent of the practice of jafar or letter speculation. This motif consists in establishing Muhammad and 'Ali as pre-eternal elements of creation. This doctrine is repeatedly asserted through the hadīths that Bursi has chosen for his collection, his commentary on these hadīth, and his poetry. It is also this doctrine, and its implications which have caused Bursi to be condemned not only by his fellow Hillaš, but also by such later critics such as Majīši and Nūri (notwithstanding that most appear to be impressed by the quality of his poetry).

In this connection, the Mashārīq has preserved certain material not found elsewhere in the books of traditions whether Sunni or Shi'ite. Some of this material, according to Corbin, was left out of compilations like the Nahj al-balāgha because the implied view of the Imam had certain 'resonances' with Ismaili thought. This hypothesis has recently been confirmed. The Ismaili author, Mu'ayyad Shirāzi, included the Khutba al-taṣāfiyya (on which see below) in his Majālis. Another typical example, included here, has been described by Corbin as one of those hadīth most characteristic of Shi'ite gnosis. It is the "recital of a visionary interview between ['Alī's] Iḥār (his divine, spiritual, celestial element) and his nūsūr (his terrestrial humanity)." It is presented without isnād:

1. Of Muhammad al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār (d.902).
4. Ed. 3, p. 150.
5. I have also been informed that some of the material which follows below may be found also in the Gujarati Ginān literature of the Ismailis.
2.
The Imām responds to the anonymous questioner: “Yes, I have seen a certain man, and until now I have been asking him questions. I ask him: ‘Who are you?’ He answers: ‘I am clay.’

“From where?”

“From clay.”

“Towards where?”

“Towards clay.”

“And me, who am I?”

“You, you are Abū Turāb (earth dweller).”

“Therefore I am Abū Turāb.

He shot back, ‘God forbid, God forbid! This is from al-dīn in al-dīn. I am I and We are We. I am the Essence of essences and the Essence in the essence of the Essence.’ Then he said: ‘[Do you] understand?’

I said, ‘Yes.”

Then he said, “So clinging (to this understanding).”

Rajab al-Bursi then comments on this ḥadīth to the effect that it represents a conversation between the divine and human worlds (lāhūtnāsūt). This discussion elucidates the difference between the body (‘the temple of man’s holiness’) and the soul, or essence of this holiness (ṣārīr).

Thus his statement, “I have seen a certain man, and until now I have been asking him questions,” is because the spirit is always attached to the body and considers it the house of its exile. And secondly, that the gnostic (‘ārāf) should ever know the difference between the station of dust and the holiness (ṣārīr) of the Lord of lords, namely that when he knows himself he knows his Lord. That is, he knows his self, its generated-ness, its poverty, its wretchedness and thus knows of his Lord’s might and greatness, and majesty. So his statement: “I am clay” is an allusion to this gnostic, ever in the station of poverty and affirming his generatedness and weakness... And his statement “You are Abū Turāb.” alludes to two meanings, one particular and the other general. The first of its meanings is the allusion to Father Educator (al-ḥab al-muraqabi), Guide (al-murshid) and the Spirit (al-rūḥ) Custodian and Trainer of this body. The second is that Abū Turāb is ‘water,’ and the meaning is that ‘ Thou art the father of all existing things and their point of origin and their reality and their true meaning because he is the Most Great Word from which appears the existent things (muṣawjudat), and it is the holy essence (ṣārīr) of all engendered things (al-kā-‘ināt).

And his statement, “I am the Essence of Essences, and the Essence in the Essences of the Essence” clearly refers to the Hidden Secret (al-ṣārīr al-makānūn) on which depends the two phases of “Be thou! and it is.” [kun fayākūn; Korān II:117] He is

the Greatest Name of God (ism Allāh al-‘azm)1 and the reality of every engendered thing (ka‘ān). The essence of every existent belongs to the essence of the Necessary Existing (wujūd al-wujūd) because it is his holy essence (ṣārīr) and his word (kalima) and his command/cause (amr) and his guardian (wali) over all things...

Thus through the solution of this riddle the disbeliever of the exaggerator (ghāhib) has been distinguished from the one who speaks properly (qālīf) as has the struggle on the path of the slackard (tālī) [been distinguished from the true striving] of the one who has accepted ‘Ali as guardian (mawālī). The method of attainment to the Exalted ‘Ali of the true knower (‘arif al-‘ilā) has thus been indicated.2

‘Ali is the connecting mystery (ṣārīr) of God in all [things and circumstances], His guardian (wali) over all because the [actual] Lord is mightily exalted above what He has exalted through His purpose (irāda) or created through His power (qudra) or His will (mashīyiyya)... to ‘Ali all allusions (ishārūt) refer by virtue of his statement “There is no difference between them and between Thee except that they are Your servants and Your creation.”...

About his statement to him, “Do you understand?” and I said, “Yes.” And he said “Cling to this!”—this alludes to the fact that when a man understands that ‘Ali is the hidden secret it is incumbent upon him to cling to this so the intellect may accept this apperception.3

KHUTBA AL-TATANJĪYA

Another tradition of a similarly gnostic flavour is called Khutbat al-tatānjiya. This hadith does not appear in Nahj al-balāgha, but is preserved in other Twelve Shi‘ite sources.4 It is related in the 144th chapter of the Mashārīq without isnād and introduced by Bursi as one of ‘Ali’s sermons about which one should be particularly careful in interpreting because of its style and content which elevate ‘Ali. This is so to such a degree that one could be tempted to class the statements below as ecstatic sayings (shāfi). Bursi says that the sermon contains that which establishes the transcendence of the Creator in a way none can bear.

The Commander of the Faithful delivered this sermon between Kūfah and Medina. He said:

“O People! ...I am hoping and that which is hoped for, I preside over the twin gulfs (Anā waqīf ‘ala al-tatānjiyān). And my gaze beholds the two wests and the two easts [Cf. Korān LV:17. I have seen the mercy of God and Paradise clearly through direct (physical) vision. And he is in the seventh sea... and in its swells are the stars and the orbits. And I saw the earth enwrapped as a garment... I know the wonders of God’s creation as no one but God knows them. And I know what was and what will be, and what occurred at the time of the primordial covenant (al-dharr al-awwāl) [viz. the yawm al-mithqāf; cf. Korān VII:172] before the First Adam. It has been disclosed to me by my Lord... and this knowledge was hidden from all prophets except the Master of this Shari‘a of yours. He taught me his knowledge and I taught him my knowledge. We are the first warning and the warning of the first and the last and


2. Còrbin observes that the later commentators have used all the resources which Shi‘ite theosophy and their Neoplatonism have put at their disposal. For example Mirzā Ahmad Ardikānī Shirāzi petitions the Hermetic idea of the Perfect Man (insān kāmil) as Perfect Nature who is the angel of every being and of whom Hermes had his vision. All agree in recognizing the extreme difficulty of this hadith; it is certain that this particular one is one of a number of texts which are the most significant for theosophic immanology, those which evoke the problem of the “two natures” posed also in Christology. Annuaire 68-9.

3. It is somewhat surprising, given the distinctive approach by our author to this topic and the other names of God, that there appears to be no need to refer to him (or others like him) in a recent studies of the divine names in Islam.

4. See Corbin, Annuaire 69-70; Dhari‘a 7, 4 989 where this sermon is identified as Khutbat al-esqālīm & Biḥār 9, p. 535 and the reference to Ibn Shahrāshūb (d.1192 in Aleppo).
Thus because of sustenance, whoever swears [and] the Lord of the Mighty Throne! If you desired I could tell you of your forefathers, where they were and what they were and where they are now and what they will be. If I reveal to you what was given in the first eternity and what is of me in the End then you would see mighty wonders and things great. I am the Master of the first creation before the first Noah. And were I to tell you what transpired between Adam and Noah, the wonders of those arts and the nations destroyed [in that time] then the truth of the statement “evil is what they have done” would be established. I am the Master of the first two Floods [Koran VII: 133]. I am the Master of the second two floods [Koran XXIX: 14]. I am the Master of the Flood [say al-‘arâm; Koran XXXIV: 16]. I am the Master of the hidden secrets (al-wujûd al-makniyûn). I am the Master of ‘Ad and the Gardens. And I am the Master of Thamûd and the Signs. And I am their destroyer. And I am their shaker. And I am their place of return. And I am their destroyer. And I am their director. And I am their two gates. I am their leveller. I am their maker to die and I am their maker to live. I am the First, I am the Last, I am the Outward, I am the Inward [Koran LVII: 3]. I am with time before time and I was with revolution before revolution. And I was with the Pen before the Pen and I was with the Tablet before the Tablet. And I am the master of the First Pre-eternity. And I am the master of Jabalq and Jabarsa. I am the director of the first world when there was no heaven and no earth.

So Ibn Sūrima (?) approached him and said: "Thou art thou, O Commander of the Faithful!" Then ‘Ali said: "I am Me, there is no god but God, my Lord and the Lord of all creatures. To Him is the creation and the command. He who directs all things through His wisdom and raises the heavens and the earth through His power... I have commanded Ishîs to prostrate... I raised Idâs to a high place. I caused Jesus to speak in the cradle. I have divided the world into five... I am that light which appeared on Sinai... I am the Master of the eternal gardens and he who causes the rivers to flow... and I fashioned the chimes by the command of the Knower and the Wise. I am that word through which all things are perfected... Indeed the hypocrites who say ‘Ali has appointed himself are wrong... ‘Ali is a created light and servant of the Provider of sustenance, whoever says other than this, God condemns his deed.”

SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Thus far we have concentrated on the so-called gnostic aspects of this work—gnostic because of the repeated emphasis on knowledge—the knowledge of the Imam and recognition of his true dignity. And more importantly, the material is gnostic because of the ‘far flung’ imagery contained in the traditions—its gnostic, outré, and deeply mysterious flavour. But of ‘standard’ Sufism? Rajab Bursi does not merit inclusion in a volume on medieval Persian Sufism simply because of the single pronouncement, in the context of a section on Islamic sects, that “the Sufis are divided into two groups (firqa): the ni‘rîyya and the khalwîyya.” Nor do the passing references to such Sufi heros as Hallâj (d. 922), Ibn al-Fârid (d. 1235), and Ibn ‘Arabi (d. 1240) suffice to establish our author as a Sufi, although such references have doubtless contributed to his widely attested reputation as a Sufi. Such references do point to a certain genuine sympathy with some of the concerns of Sufism. Where Rajab Bursi’s Sufism is most clearly in evidence is in those passages which deal with the self, specifically its knowledge and its effacement. Three chapters are specifically dedicated to this theme:

The Glorious Lord says in the Gospel: “Know thyself, O man and know thy lord. Thine external is for annihilation (fana’) and thine internal is Me.”

And the Master of the Shari‘a [Muhammad] said: “The most knowledgeable of you about his Lord is the most knowledgeable about his self.”

And the Imam of Guidance [‘Ali] said: “He who knows his Lord knows his self.”

Commentary: The knowledge of the self is that a man knows his beginning and his end, from where he came and to where he is going, and this is based upon true knowledge of ‘delimited’ existence (al-wujûd al-maqyûyåd). And this is knowledge of the first effulgence (al-fayd al-anwâl) which overflowed from the Lord of Might. Then Being flowed from it and was made Existence by the command of the Necessary Existent... And this is the single point which is the beginning of the ‘engendered things’ (kû‘ inâ), and the end of all ‘existent things’ (mawjudât) and the Spirit of things and light of the apparitional incorporeal beings (al-ashbûh)...

This is the first number and the secret (that explains the difference between) of the Inclusive Divine Unity and the Transcendent Exclusive Divine Unity (al-wâhid and al-âhad). And that is because the essence of God is unknowable for man (bashar). So knowledge of Him is through His qualities (sifât). And the single point is a quality (sifâ) of God, and the quality indicates the Qualified, because by its appearance God is known. And it is the flashing of the light (îla’î al-nîr) which shines out (sha’â’ al-nîr) from the splendour of the Exclusive Unity (al-ahdîyya) in the sign (simû) of the Muhammadan Presence. To this the following statement alludes: “Whoever knows You, knows you through this sign.” This is supported by another saying: “Were it not for us, none would know God. And were it not for God, none would know us.” Thus, it is the Light from which dawn all other lights, and the One from which appears all bodies (ajâd), and the mystery from which is generated all mysteries, and the Intellect (‘âql) from which springs all intellects and the Soul from which appears all souls, and the Tablet which contains the hidden secrets and the Throne which spreads throughout heaven and earth, and the Mighty Throne that encompasses all things, and the Eye by which all other eyes see, and the Reality to which all things testify in the beginning, just as they testified in the Exclusive Unity to the Necessary Existent. It is the highest limit of the knowledge of all knowers, the means of access to Muhammad and ‘All through the reality of their knowledge, or, through the knowledge of their realities. But this gate is covered by the veil [indicating...]

1. Mashârîq, p. 27, 177, and 21 respectively.
2. E.g. Rayhânat al-îdâb and Rawâtî al-jannät cited above. 
3. Briefly, these are two ‘modes’ of the Divine Oneness: al-wâhid refers to the Oneness that implies also ‘within’ the multiplicity of creation, while al-âhad refers to the utterly unknowable unique, transcendent singleness of God. These ideas are traced to Ibn Arabi. See below.
ed in) "But we give unto you of knowledge only a little." [Koran LXXXV:170] To this alludes the statements of the Imams: that which was given to the Near Angels of the people of Muhammad was little, so how can the world of man have more? And on this topic is the statement: "Our cause is bewilderingly abstruse; none can hear it except a sent prophet and not even an angel brought nigh." He who connects with the rays of their light has known himself because then he has recognized [the difference between] the essence of existence (‘ayn al-wujūd) and the reality of that which is made to exist (haqiqat al-mawjūd), and the absolute singleness of the served Lord (fardāniyat al-rabb al-ma’ūd). The knowledge of the self is the knowledge of the reality of 'delimited' existence. This is none other than the Single Point whose exterior is Prophethood and whose interior is Sainthood (walāya). Thus he who knows Nubūwwa and Walāya with true knowledge knows His Lord. So he who knows Muhammad and ‘Ali knows His Lord.2

This is a particularly good example of the function of the Prophet and the Imam in Bursī’s theory of knowledge. It also is a fine example of Bursī’s use of the mystical and philosophical language of ‘high’ Sufism as it had developed by his time. Obviously, the source for such terminology is Ibn ‘Arabi. Bursī’s contemporary Haydar Āmuli and the later Ibn ‘Abī Juhūrū would, in their distinctive ways, attempt a similar application of the ideas and terminology of the Great Doctor to the intellectual requirements of Shi‘ism. These authors in turn helped to prepare the way for the famous Isfahān school of philosophy that flourished during high Safavid times. To continue somewhat with Rajab Bursī’s commentary:

III

But, if the pronoun in his word ‘nafsāhī’ refers to God it means “God himself warns you that they [the Prophet and the Imam] are the spirit of God and His word and the soul of existence and its reality. So in two ways it means ‘He who knows them knows His Lord.’” Thus at the time of death he will see with the eye of certainty none but Muhammad and ‘Ali because the Real is too glorious to be seen by the eyes. And the dead one at the time of his death will testify in the Real state and station (hāl and maqām) and see nothing but them at the time of death because he sees with the eye of certainty. Thus Amir al-Mu’minin [‘Ali] said, ‘I am the eye of certainty and I am death of the dead.’ This is indicated in the Kitiāb basā’ir al-daraqārī from the Imām Ja’far: ‘No one in the East or the West dies, whether he loves or hates [Muhammad and ‘Ali], but that he will be brought into the presence of ‘Ali and Muhammad. Then he will be blessed or condemned.’ This will be at the time of the Trumpet... the soul will be returned to its body. At that time he will see none but Muhammad and ‘Ali because the Living the Self-subsistent, glorified be His name, is not seen by mortal eye, but is seen by the eye of spiritual perception. To this alludes to his statement: ‘The eyes see him not in the visible realm, but the minds see him through the realities of faith.’ The meaning is that His existence is testified to because his exterior is invisible and his interior is not hidden.4

His discussion of existence, found throughout the work is another good example of Rajab Bursī’s reliance on Ibn ‘Arabi. His introduction to the hadīth from ‘Ali:  

1. Significant variant on the hadīth mentioned above.
3. See above.

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"Have you seen a certain man," is important to notice here:

If we pursue the subject of the existent beings (ma‘ulūdāt), that they end in a single point which is itself but a quality of the Essence and cause of the existent beings, we may call it by a number of names. It is the Intellect mentioned in the statement: “The first thing God created was the Intellect.” And this is the Muhammadan Presence according to [the Prophet’s] statement: “The first thing God created was my light.” It is the first of the created existents that came forth from God, exalted be He, without any intermediary. We call it the First Intellect. Inasmuch as it is created things, it has the power to think from it, we call it the Active Intellect (al-tāql al-a‘fāl). And inasmuch as the Intellect emanates to all existent things who in turn perceive the realities of all things by it, we call it the Universal Intellect. So it is absolutely clear that the Muhammadan Presence is the point of light and the first appearance, the reality of engendered things, the beginning of existent things, and the axis of all circles. Its exterior is a quality of God, and its interior is the hidden dimension of God. It is the Greatest Name outwardly and the form of the rest of the world. Upon it depends whatever disbelieves or believes. Its spirit is a transcript of the Exclusive Unity that abides in the Divine Nature (lāhūr). And its spiritual form is the meaning of the earthly and heavenly kingdoms. And its heart is the treasure house of the life which never dies. This is because God, exalted be He, spoke a word in the beginning which became light. Then he spoke a word which became spirit. And then he caused the light to enter that spirit (or that light to enter that world.) He then made them a veil, which is his word and his light, and his spirit and his veil. And it permeates the world (sura‘ān fī tāā‘ūm), as the point permeates all the letters and bodies. This permeation is one in number, as is the permeation of speech with the alif and the permeation of all the names with the Holy Name. The [word] is the beginning of all [things] and the reality of all [things], so that all [things] speak by means of the tongue of spiritual ‘state’ and ‘station.’ It testifies to God through his primordial oneness and to Muhammad and ‘Ali of their fatherhood and sovereignty. To this points the statement: “‘Ali and I are the fathers of this community.” So if they are the fathers of this community it follows that they are the fathers of the rest of the nations, according to the proof from “the specific is over the general and the higher over the lower,” not the opposite. If it were not so, there would never be any creation to specify him through “If it were not for thee I would not have created the spheres.” So know that the Acts proceed from the Qualities, and the Qualities proceed from the Essence. And the quality which is the Leader of Qualities is in the created things, namely the Muhammadan Presence.1

One of the strongest clues to Bursī’s reliance on Ibn ‘Arabi is seen above in the word surā`yān (permeation/suffusion). A comparison with this passage and the passage in the first fāṣ of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Fūṣūṣ al-hikām reveals a strong parallelism between Ibn ‘Arabi’s language and Rajab Bursī’s. It is as if the latter were writing while reading Ibn Arabī’s book. He does not however make any explicit mention of this.2 Thus his work acquires the character of a tacit commentary on the Fūṣūṣ.

1. Mashā‘īrīq, pp. 30-32. For a more classically-based philosophical discussion see the treatise “That existence is in two parts” (Mashā‘īrīq, pp. 27-28). This section also contains a commentary on kunūt ishāzh makshfiyyān, a reference to Hallaj and Ibn Arabī’s terminology.

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CONCLUSION

The history of Islam provides Muslims with a powerful longing for that rarefied atmosphere of certainty associated with the first community established by the Prophet. One may assume that the basic feature of this cultural nostalgia is that it is directed to a time which was free of the vexing spiritual question of legitimate authority. The memory itself of the city of the Prophet, the calling to mind when Muslims enjoyed the unmediated guidance of the Messenger of God is, for example, an unfulfilling source of authentic religious and spiritual certainty.

Further, the development of Islamic religious thought may also be seen as the result of a variety of attempts to maintain this certainty by establishing certain theories of spiritual or religious authority (distinct, of course, from authoritarianism). Because in Islam certainty is supported by and intimately connected with knowledge ('ilm), the concern with our quest for certainty underlies the five types of Sufi writing outlined by Prof. Nasr in the introduction to this volume: 1) ethics, 2) doctrine, 3) esoteric sciences, 4) sacred history, 5) depiction of Paradise and the literary creation of a celestial atmosphere. Here the purpose of authority is to free the soul from the perplexities posed to it by reason. The two major divisions within Islam: Sunnism and Shi'ism, present different methods of attaining certainty and 'systematizing' religious authority as a means of freeing the soul through recapturing the vision of that time when Muslims were relatively untroubled by such concerns.

The author/compiler of the text that has been the subject of this essay has achieved a distinctive vision of the nature of this authority and also of the means whereby the believer may have access to it. In so doing, he has drawn upon all the major resources available to the greater Islamic tradition: the Koran, hadith, Kalam, Philosophy, and Sufism. The resultant synthesis would appear to be most appealing given the fact that his book went through ten printings in rapid succession during the 1960's in Lebanon. It is eminently representative of the period in Twelver history between the Mongol invasions and the establishment of the Safavids. It preserves a record of the development of this history by reacting against the ways and usages of mainstream Twelver Shi'ism, which may be seen as an attempt to dissociate itself from specific trends in more primitive Shi'ism on the one hand, by rejecting certain religious postures exemplified in some of the material translated below, and identifying more closely with Sunni Islam by adopting its system of jurisprudence. This phenomenon mirrors a similar development within Sunni Islam where Sufism may be seen as an attempt to counter the confidence placed in consensus (i'timad) as a starting point for recreating the 'celestial atmosphere' of Medina by investing in a more personalistic style of piety.

By the time our author was writing, his home, Hilla, had become the centre of Twelver Shi'ism. Hilla had been a Shi'ite centre since its establishment by the powerful Shi'ite dynasty, the Mazyadids, in 1101/1690. But it was about a century later that it really came into its own, replacing Aleppo, as the centre of Shi'ite learning. Its fortunes continued to rise in this regard until well after the Mongol invasion. Because the Shi'ite leaders of Hilla submitted without reservation to Mongol rule, life in the small city was permitted to continue undisturbed. This augured extremely well for the continued elaboration of a distinctive Shi'ite theology and jurisprudence. Momen states the case most succinctly:

While Baghdad, the centre of Sunni orthodoxy, had been devastated, Hilla, the main centre of Shi'ism, had submitted to the Mongols and was spared. The killing of the 'Abbasid Caliph threw Sunni theology and constitutional theory... into some disorder, while the occulted Imam of the Shi'tes had not been affected.1

If Shi'ism is seen in part as a protest movement in reaction to mainstream Sunni Islam, then the processes set in motion by these historical developments are ironic. Shi'ism was now irreversibly on its way to becoming another orthodoxy. That Bursi's piety shares much with the religious orientation known very generally as Sufism, another 'protest movement,' is confirmed by the fact that our author resorts to the basic terminology and categories of thought of Sufism in attempting to make clear his own chosen 'method' or vision of authority. Thus a believer is referred to as a gnostic (ʔārid) who, through his love (mahabbah), and knowledge (ma'rafa) of the Imams as the sole bearers of religious authority (walaya), both draws nearer to spiritual perfection and to an ever deepening knowledge of his own self, whose superfluous qualities will be shed in the process. The central idea of his vision or system is carried by the word walaya. Obviously, I am not suggesting that Rajab Bursi had to go outside the Shi'ite textual tradition for this word. In this instance the coincidence in terminology between Shi'ism and Sufism is not terribly meaningful. The main thrust of this terminology, both in Sufism and in the writings of Bursi, is to establish a personal, intimate link with the 'spirit' of religion. Other terms and motifs, including the considerable influence of Ibn 'Arabi, as will be seen, are more indicative of Sufi influence. But most importantly, Rajab Bursi rejects the position of the fuqaha' of Hilla as being only partially (if at all) conducive to the kind of certainty his religion demands. Again, this would seem to have a great deal in common with Sufism. In some respects, the difference in attitude between Bursi and his contemporaries may also be compared usefully with the later tensions between the Akhbaris and the Usulis, a tension which may be briefly described as one between reason and revelation.2

While Rajab Bursi has been condemned by some authors as holding an immediate belief in the Imams, most who have written about him also speak quite highly of his poetry. It is perhaps the poet in him that speaks in such strong terms. Poets, we are told, perceive reality intensely. It is therefore not surprising that they express themselves with equal intensity. While it would not be a complete mistake to attempt to classify Rajab Bursi's religious doctrine on the basis of his deeply felt experience of his love for the Imams, his book is not doctrine in the strict sense. That his mind was active and searching is clear from the above excerpts. And his recourse to "explanations" of the spiritual laws laid bare throughout the Masharik, based on Ibn 'Arabi's ideas, appealed to him possibly as much for what they said as for what they left unsaid. In the end, it would be difficult to answer the question: Was Rajab Bursi more in love with the Imams or the ideas that made this love reasonable?

2. This is however something of an oversimplification. In addition to the article by Kohlberg cited above, see also Juan Cole, 'Shi'ite Clerics in Iraq, Iran, 1722-1780: The Akhbari-USuli Conflict Reconsidered," Iranian Studies, vol. 18, no. 1 (1985), pp. 3-33.
Bursi’s works as listed in Fikr:

1) Mashāriq al-anwar (Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fi aṣrār Amīr al-Mu’mīnīn).
   Printed in India in 1303/1885-6 and 1318/1900-1 and in Beirut in 1379/1959-60.
2) Mashāriq al-amān wa lubāb ḥaqā‘iq al-īmān.
3) Risāla fi dhiqr al-ṣalāt ‘alā al-rasūl wa al-ā’imma min munsha‘at nafsihi.
4) Ziyāra li-Amīr al-Mu’mīnīn .
5) Lum’a kāšif. (Fi-hā aṣrār al-asmā‘ wa al-ṣifāt wa al-ḥurūf wa al-āyāt wa mā yunāsibuhā min al-du‘āt wa mā yuqāribuhā min al-kalimāt wa ratabahā ‘alā tartīb al-sa‘āt wa ta‘aqub al-awqāt fī al-layālī wa al-ayām li-ikhtilāf al-umūr wa al-akām).
6) al-Durr al-thamīn fī dhikr. 500 Koranic verses indicating the virtues of ‘Ali.
8) Risāla fī tafsīr ṣūrat al-īkhlaṣ
10) Kitāb fī mawlīd al-Nabī wa Fāṭima wa Amīr al-Mu’mīnīn wa faḍā’luhum ‘alayhim al-salām.
12) Kitāb al-ālifayn fī wasf sādat al-kawnayn. Excerpts of this are reproduced in the Bihār al-anwār (see above).