80 Diwan, Maṣād, 150–2; cf. Mullā Ṣadrā, Asfar IX, 175.
81 However, the poem is not found in any of his edited collections and might be a pseudo-tribution.
82 The opening verse refers to the intimate connection between wujūd (existence) and wilāya.
83 These verses stress the continuity and differing manifestation of wilāya among the many prophets and messengers sent by God for man's guidance.
84 This verse refers to a well-known hadīth of the Prophet referring to Imam 'Ali as so close to him that he is the same flesh and the same self.
85 Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Fātih (the scribe of the Prophet) refers to the common Shi'i taṣfīr of Q3.61, the ‘āyat al-mubāhila on the phrase anfusamā. See al-Ḥasan al-Daylāmī Irshād al-quālā (Beirut, 1978) 231 and Qummi, Taṣfīr I, 112.
86 'Allī's sources suggest that 'Ali was present on the mīrāj with the Prophet. See 'Daylāmī, Irshād, 233–4.
87 The first hemistich of the last verse attempts to refute a possible objection that such talk is heresy since it seems to place 'Ali at the godhead. But the point that Rūmī (or whoever the poet might be) is making is that the continuity in existence is of 'Ali qua manifest of wilāya and not the historical 'Ali.
88 Qumshāhi, Ḍhayl Fass Shībī, 11–12.


7

ORTHO DOXY AND HETERODOXY IN TWELVER SHI‘ISM

Aḥmad al-Aḥsā‘ī on Fayd Kāshānī (the Risālat al-‘Ilmiyya)

for Norman Calder

Todd Lawson

Everyone translates what is transmitted to him into his own language, that is, he makes it into something of the same nature as his person.

(Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsā‘ī)¹

The polemical work by Aḥmad al-Aḥsā‘ī² known as the Risālat al-‘Ilmiyya³ is a relatively long and at times repetitive expression of Shi‘i doctrine of much interest to the history of Qajar religious thought because it comprises numerous issues and themes that were bound to be refracted in various manifestations throughout the life of the dynasty. These themes and topics are joined in the service of a single idea, that the knowledge of God, or more precisely, God's knowing, is identical with His essence and as such is completely beyond the ability of human beings to describe or discuss. Or, in the familiar phrase from medieval Ismā‘īli philosophical theology: God is beyond both being and nonbeing.⁴ Further, it is important to note that the polemic itself is directed against Mullā Muḥṣin Fayd Kāshānī (d.1680). It has been suggested that Aḥsā‘ī’s preoccupation with this topic as a pretext for refuting the ideas of Kāshānī is a natural outcome of his exposure to a strong anti-Hikmat mood prevailing in the ‘Attabī during the time that he spent there in study with various senior mujtahids.⁵ To the extent that this is true, it would tend to present Aḥsā‘ī as an ultra-orthodox Twelver Shi‘ī — an unlikely identification given the reputation he acquired in later Qajar theological circles, beginning with his excommunication (takfīr) in 1824 (1239–40AH) by al-Shahīd al-Thālith — the Third Martyr', Mullā Muḥammad Taqī Baraghānī (d.1264/1847),⁶ and perhaps culminating in his role as the intellectual and spiritual progenitor
of not only the heretical Bābī movement but also the later and in some respects even more scandalous Bahā'ī movement. If the consolidation of the image of Kāshānī as champion of orthodoxy is partly a product of Qajar scholarship, then it may be asked to what degree this may have been an oblique response to Aḥṣā'ī's vehement and notorious critique of him? And to the degree that it is, we have yet another example — however multiplex — of 'heresy' producing 'orthodoxy'.

Before turning directly to the Risāla, it will be useful to offer a few general words on the biographies of the two 'antagonists'. Mūllā Muhammad ibn Murtaḍā Muḥsin Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (1597–1680) is well known as one of the pillars of post-Qājār Shi'i religious culture. He produced a number of important books on Twelver doctrine and practice: the Shi'i version of Ghazālī's Iḥyā' known as the Mubājjāt al-bayyādā (in eight volumes), the collection of hadith (akhbār) known as al-Wāfi in (three volumes in folio); the Tafsīr al-sāfī (in five volumes), and, further, he also produced a number of smaller works concerned with right belief, such as 'Ayn al-yaqīn, the Ḥaqiqāt and the Qurrat al-wiyān, all of which more or less presented Kāshānī as an 'orthodox' Shi'i. In addition, Fayḍ Kāshānī was the most prolific student of the great Mūllā Sadrā, producing two important and influential works on Hikmat, the Kalimāt-i ṭaknānā and the Uṣūl al-māmārī. He was also the student of Sayyid Mājīd al-Bahrānī, the avid Akhbārī scholar. Al-Kāshānī's formation combined salient features of the Akhbārī approach to fiqh with the Sadrīan metaphysics and ontology. This latter also involved a further advance in the Shi'i domestication of the thought of Ibn 'Arabī, a process that may have begun as early as Maytham al-Bahrānī (d. c.1280). These elements, there can be no doubt, also combined with tariqa-type Sufi influences, although he did not apparently commit himself to any particular order. Whatever the reality of Mullā Muḥsin's true Sufi allegiances, he has become known in later scholarship as the 'Ghazālī' of post-Qājār Twelver Shi'iism.

The author of the Risāla under discussion — the eponymous master of the Shaykhīyya, or the Kashfīyya as its adherents prefer to be designated — was Shaykh Ahmad b. Ṣayn al-dīn b. Ibrāhīm b. Ṣaqr b. Ibrāhīm b. Dāghīr al-Aḥṣā'ī. He was born in 1166/1753 in al-Mutayrāfī, a small village in Bahrain, apparently of pure Arab lineage. His family had been followers of the Shi'i version of orthodoxy for five generations. From his early childhood, it was clear that Shaykh Ahmad was strongly predisposed to the study of religious texts and traditions. By the age of five, he could read the Qurān. During the remainder of his primary education, he studied Arabic grammar and became exposed to the mystical and theosophical expressions of Ibn 'Arabī and the less well known Ibn Abī Junbūr (d. after 906/1501), author of the Kitāb al-mujāli. His teachers in his homeland included the Ḥanāfī ijtihādī Qūṭb al-Dīn Muhammad Shirāzī through whom he possibly gained his first exposure to the work of Ibn 'Arabī. In 1186/1772–3, Shaykh Ahmad left his home to pursue advanced religious studies in the 'Atabāt shrine cities of Kāshān, Tahtā, and Karbala. In 1209/1794–5, he received his first iṣṭaṣa from the renowned scholar Sayyid Muhammad Mahdi ibn Murtaḍā al-Ṭabātabā'ī Bahr al-Ultum (d.1212/1797), and eventually six others from various recognized teachers.

In 1793/1212, at the age of forty-six, Shaykh Ahmad took up residence in Basra, seeking refuge from the Wahhābî attack on his native al-Aḥṣā'. From this time on, Shaykh Ahmad remained in either the region of 'Atabāt or in Iran. He travelled widely and gained the respect of the Iranian religious and political elite. From 1222/1807 to 1229/1813, he lived mainly in Yazd. It was during this period that he was invited to visit the ruling Qajar monarch, Fath 'Ali Shāh (r.1212/1797–1250/1834). In 1229/1813 he moved from Yazd to Kermanshah where he lived until 1232/1816. At this time he went to Mecca on pilgrimage after which he returned to the 'Atabāt. He eventually moved back to Kermanshah where he remained, except for a few visits to other Iranian centres, from 1234/1818 until he departed for another pilgrimage to Mecca. It was during this journey that Shaykh Ahmad died, not far from Mecca, in 1241/1826. He was buried in the Bāqi' cemetery in Medina.

While he was highly regarded in many learned circles during his lifetime as the 'Philosopher of the Age' and leading commentator on the works of Mullā Sadrā, Aḥṣā'ī more and more became the object of scorn as the Qajar period continued to unfold. In addition to the takfīr of al-Baragḥānī, one of the more frequent disparagements of his work was that he was simply not equipped to understand the challenging philosophical theories of Hikmat, for if he had he certainly would not have designated the likes of Sadrā and Fayḍ corrupters of religion.

It would appear from everything we know of Aḥṣā'ī's thought... and it is certainly not enough... that what others consider philosophical sophistication our author himself would view as irreligion, an abuse of the holy laws of intelligence. Certainly, this is the conclusion supported in the treatise at hand, the Risāla al-ilmiyya, the 'Treatise on the Problem of God's Knowing'. In contrast to the erroneous method commonly known as Hikmat, Shaykh Ahmad insists that he is teaching only the way of the sinless Imams, and this way is at the same time true philosophy or hikma. The work was completed on 5 Rabi‘ al-Thānī 1230 AH (Tuesday 17 March 1815) in Kermanshah, the city in which Aḥṣā'ī's most important works were composed. But Aḥṣā'ī had first encountered the target of his commentary in the year 1228/1813 while travelling, probably from Yazd, through Isfahān on his way to 'Atābāt to perform ziyāra. As an indication of the kind of response Aḥṣā'ī's radical vision elicited, the illustrious Mullā Ḥādī Sabzavārī (d.1878) who was for a short while in 1817 his student in Isfahān, would much later find it necessary to compose a refutation of it.

The Risāla was written in response to questions from Mīrzā Bāqī Nawwāb who is directly addressed throughout the text. Many of the
the definition of true philosophy – Hikmat. It is acknowledged that Hikmat originated from revelation starting with the prophet Seth and was passed on to Idris and then from one philosopher to another, presumably in pure form, until it came to Plato. Here, the philosophers split into two groups. One group, the Ishrāqīs, understand Plato in symbols and allusions, the other group is the Peripatetics and they study him from the outward meaning of his words. These latter imagine that they are walking in his footsteps. The first of these was Aristotle, then his student al-Fārābī and after him his student Ibn Sinā. Another problem complicating the transmission of philosophy from this time forward is the fact that it was in Greek and translated into Arabic, and in the process of translation many errors crept in. He then gives examples of the three types of mistakes made. His counsel to his interlocutor is:

This is the reason you should take [current] Hikmat and align it with the Hikmat of the People of Isma. Then, the meaning will be sound. If you would make their words your guide, and become a divinely inspired follower, do not disregard their teaching by turning to the words of the Hikmat and the Mutakallimin and the people of Tāṣawwuf. Do only what They desire. It is not what the Sufis and the Hikmat want, contrary to what our author (Fayd) would have us believe in his books.

The polemical tone of the Risāla is of course one of its most striking features. The other is the reliance on the akhbār of the Prophet and his family. The major point being, for Shaykh Aḥmad, that one can only say about God that which is stated in the Qurʾān or in the hadith. It happens, of course, that both he and Kāshānī rely on similar and in some cases identical traditions to make their respective points. The most prominent tradition, transmitted from the sixth Imam Jaʾfar al-Sādiq (d.765), is quoted several times throughout the Risāla. Its first few lines are most important:

Our Lord, mighty and glorious, was/is will be ever a knower, and this knowing is his essence even though there be no object of knowledge. When an object of knowledge comes to exist, then this knowing falls upon it from it [i.e., his essence].

kāna rabbunʿazza wa jallāʾilīm wa al-ʿilmu dḥāṭīhu wa lā māʾīlim falammā wujīda al-māʾīlim waṣāda al-ʿilmu minbuʾalā al-māʾīlim

For Shaykh Aḥmad, a recurrent, powerful metaphor and heuristic analogy of this particular doctrine of God’s knowledge is that of the sun. The sun, in relation to humanity, may certainly be thought ancient and pre-eternal (or sempiternal), serenely disengaged from and unencumbered by such worldly burdens and distractions as ‘time’ and ‘place’. The light of the
sun, thus, has ever been radiating from its essence, even though there were no earth and no humanity upon which these rays might fall. This is exactly the way one should understand God’s knowing. God’s knowing is the same as his essence. Since this essence has always been (namely is azali), then God’s act of knowing has always been, even when there is no object of knowledge external to the divine essence upon which this knowledge might fall, to which it might ‘occur’ (waqada). This Isma‘ili-esque analogy runs as follows:

[The sun] is luminous in itself, even if nothing exists to reflect or receive this luminosity. If something exists, then its rays fall upon it, but if it does not exist [the sun] is still luminous. It is not possible to say that the sun has fallen (waqada) from the fourth heaven to the earth. Rather, we say that the effects of the sun are manifest upon (waqada) this material object. The meaning of waqāt is the appearance (zubūr) of [the sun’s] effects which are its rays (isbrāq) upon the earth. And its effects are [also] other than it. Its effects are its acting.39

Understand what I have said to you, that knowing can exist when there is no object of knowledge, like the parable of the sun which is luminous even if there is nothing for its light to fall upon (as is the case when it continues to exist at night but there is no luminosity because of the things between it and us). This is exactly like you who are hearing, even when there is no object of hearing or no one is speaking. Thus, to be hearing is your essence . . . This is why we say ‘you are hearing even when there is no sound’. But, we do not say that you hear [something] at a given moment when there is nothing for you to exercise your power of hearing over. It is the same for the sun when there is no material object to illumine. It is still the Master of Light, but it is illuminating nothing . . . Nonetheless, light is the essence of the sun and therefore one can only say that it shines . . . Briefly, it is not permitted to qualify a thing by its operational reality (waqāt) or its relationality (iqtiwrī), except when these things are in operation. Thus, the sun is only radiant upon a receiver of its radiance.40

According to Ahsā‘ī, God is simply and completely unknowable. And while one doubts whether Fayḍ Kāshānī would actually disagree with this statement expressed thus, Shaykh Ahmad is ranked by several of Kāshānī’s formulations which may be interpreted as violating the ever unknowable essence of God. From the very beginning of the treatise, Ahsā‘ī is dogged in his pursuit of Kāshānī’s panentheism (or perhaps better, ‘theomonism’44), even to the extent of castigating him for citing the Qur’an in a corrupt fashion. Kāshānī opens his Risāla with the words:

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Praise be to God, the knowers the wise, he from whose knowledge not even the weight of an atom is missing in all the heavens or in the earth. [Q34.3]42 And praise be upon Muhammad and the people of his house, the Pure Ones, those who inherited authority from each other in unbroken succession.43

What might otherwise appear to be a purely unexceptionable statement of belief in doxological form, is seized upon by Ahsa‘ī for the purpose of demonstrating, in no uncertain terms, the corrupt nature of the particular beliefs behind it. Because God’s knowing is the same as his invariable essence, nothing at all can be said about ‘it’ apart from the assertion that ‘it’ exists, and even here one must be very careful how one uses the word ‘is’.44 The problem, according to Ahsa‘ī is whether Fayḍ understands this ‘falling upon the object of knowledge’ to be the actual essence or the divine acting.45 If he says ‘his essence’ then he is a kāfir (ja‘īna dhātuhu kafa‘ara). And if he says ‘his acting’ he negates everything else he has said. And if he says ‘nothing falls’ he gainsays the Imam, and gainsays the saying of God.

Shaykh Ahmad says that the ostensive meaning of ‘knower’ is an attribute referring to essential knowledge, which is identical to his essence. In Fayḍ’s quoting the verse, ‘nor fall from his knowledge the weight of an atom’, etc., if he means essential knowledge, he is wrong, because if that which is intended in the holy verse is essential knowing then those objects of its knowledge that are in heaven and earth would also be in it.46 This is unthinkable because there can be no connection between the divine timeless essence and the world of generation.47 There are only two possibilities: eternity (azal) or generation (hadath):

We hold [for the purpose of argument] that these objects of knowledge are: (1) the same as his essence without change, or (2) the same as his essence with change, or (3) other than his essence . . .
It must be thought that these objects of knowledge are in time (hadath) and contingency (ismā‘) and there is no mediator between the necessary and the generated . . .

The traditions prove this, and it is a correct position, since the objects of knowledge are other than his essence . . . We say: The knowledge of a thing must be commensurate with the object of that knowledge, or incommensurate, or connected to the object of knowledge, or not connected, or happening to it or not happening. It is either known or not known. If it is commensurate and you mean by this that the divine essential knowledge is commensurate with the object of knowledge, then you must also say that the divine essence conforms to you yourself . . . God be exalted above such a thing!
If you say it is not in conformity, then you must say that there is no knowledge of it because it is not permitted that a knowledge be other than in conformity with the object of knowledge. For example, if the object of knowledge is long, then the knowledge is ‘long’... And if you say ‘through wasīṭ’ then it is necessary that the divine essence ‘happen’ to you. And this is also absurd.

The difficulty arises when there is a failure to recognise that there are in reality two types of knowing: God’s essential timeless knowing, and the pale mimesis of this referred to as man’s knowing. That it is so removed is indicated in several traditions, among the most interesting of which is the passage insisting that thinking is really a metaphor for something that has no real cognate or equivalent in the Divine instance. The first type is ‘the knowledge that does not change’, as in the Imam’s statement: ‘His knowledge of a thing before its existence is as His knowledge of the same thing after its existence.’

And while the Mullā himself quotes such a tradition (whose plain meaning refutes his own position)... His understanding of ‘and knowledge wasīṭ will be his essence’ is along the lines of the wahdat al-uisjād Sufis, namely that ‘all created things’ are in and of the divine essence.

On the other hand, Ahsâṣīā calls this knowing ‘ilm rājiḥ al-uisjād, or ‘ilm inkānī – a potentially confusing designation. The second type, our author calls ‘ilm akuwānī, or knowledge pertaining to the various existentiated things.

In Western scholarship, it has become customary to yoke the grand intellectual topos of ‘hermeneutics’ with the Shaykh’iyah, and while there is no doubt every good reason for this in many cases, one cannot help making the observation in the present context that it is clear that Shaykh Ahmad esteems himself as performing no act of interpretation at all in his reading of the Qurān and the hadīth. He is simply learning and transmitting the pure unchanging meaning of these texts. One is struck, therefore, by the intensity of Shaykh Ahmad’s unwavering confidence in his own ‘noninterpretation’ of the Qurān and hadīth so crucial and basic to his argument. The source of this certitude is experiential: the ‘ālam al-mithāl, an interworld of dreams and visions with its own time and space, which is paradoxically more real than the world of ‘normal’ experience. The idea of an interworld, while certainly not new with Shaykh Ahmad, can be considered to have reached a theological and philosophical prominence (if not apotheosis) previously unknown in his writings. It was in this world that Shaykh Ahmad received his ability to understand directly from the Imams themselves. Therefore, his certitude that he understood the nature of God’s knowledge and knowing as perfectly as possible in

this sub-lunar realm was utterly unshakeable, even though (or perhaps because) such certitude is based ultimately on the aporia of God’s absolute unknowable essence.

Corbin translated ‘ālam al-mithāl by the Latin expression mundus imaginalis, emphasising that the realm in question must not be considered as merely imaginary – a ‘fantasy world’. Rather, the term denotes a realm which is accessible only by means of the God-given, sacred faculty of imagination: khayāl. Khayāl may be thought of as a true ‘sixth sense’, through which this world, ‘located’ between the world of sense perception and a purely spiritual world, may be encountered. As such, the distinction of the adjective ‘imaginal’ from ‘imaginary’ is most appropriate.

We are not dealing here with irreality. The mundus imaginalis is a world of autonomous forms and images (moallaqa, ‘in suspense,’ that is, not inherent in a substratum like the color black in a black table, but ‘in suspense’ in the place of their appearance, in the imagination, for example, like an image ‘suspended’ in a mirror.) It is a perfectly real world preserving all the richness and diversity of the sensible world but in a spiritual state.

For the Shaykhīs, beginning with Shaykh Ahmad himself, the ‘ālam al-mithāl, sometimes referred to as Hūrgalāy, had pre-eminent importance as the abode of the hidden Imam, and as the place of bodily resurrection. The hidden Imam, residing in the ‘ālam al-mithāl, is accessible through the spiritual imagination of those members of the Shi‘a who are capable of purifying their consciences to a degree that would allow the hidden Imam, or Qā‘im, to appear to (or: rise up from within) them (namely, the Perfect Shi‘a). Shaykh Ahmad attributed a great deal to several visions he had experienced, beginning at quite an early age. In these visions, either the hidden Imam, or some other member of the ahl al-bayt would appear to him. During one such vision, the Imam bestowed upon Shaykh Ahmad twelve ijāzāt, one presumably from each of the Imams. By appealing to such experiences, Shaykh Ahmad made it clear that the only religious authority he would submit to would be the Imams themselves as opposed, say, to any marja‘ al-taqlid of the Usūlis. This also implied that his own knowledge, thus derived directly from the Prophet and the Imams, was qualitatively superior to that of others. Shaykh Ahmad was not the only personality to make much of such experiences. The phenomenon was common enough for those who experienced it to be designated by the term ‘usayysi.’

Shaykh Ahmad was not the only one to uphold the reality of the imaginal realm. Indeed, his opponent Fayḍ Kāshānī has written one of the clearest and most important discussions on the topic. Though both Kāshānī and Ahsâṣīā agree on the value of the ‘ālam al-mithāl, one assumes that there would be serious disagreements with regard to important details.
Ahsātī does not directly comment on Fayḍ's version here,\(^{60}\) and, of course, it would be very interesting to study more closely just how the two authors differed in their understanding of the topic. (For example, Fayḍ does not seem to speak of meetings with the Imam in his version of the mundus imaginalis.) It would be most instructive to know in which ways Shaykh Ahmad saw Fayḍ as 'misunderstanding' the ontological nature and function of the Imaginal Realm, even if it seems clear that they both would have to agree on certain of its eschatological qua cosmogenic functions.

The ‘ālam al-mithāl is indispensable to Shaykhī eschatology, in which a corporeal resurrection is denied in favour of a complex recourse to this separate reality, where a resurrection of one's spiritual or subtle (latif) body, undergoes a process designated by such terminology as mālād and qiyāma. Ahsātī was also a 'scientist' and we may assume that there is an emphasis here on the denial of the scientifically untenable bodily resurrection, which so many Muslim philosophers prior to Shaykh Ahmad also found impossible to believe.\(^{61}\) Shaykh Ahmad's solution is in the form of a sufficiently detailed and therefore appealingly possible alternative: even the most hard-bitten sceptic could never completely deny the logical possibility of the totally spiritual process which Shaykh Ahmad propounded. Ahsātī refers briefly to the ‘ālam al-mithāl in the Risāla in discussing the descent of being as a result of the dynamic between the divine acting and the divinely-acted-upon (cf. fīlmafi'l mentioned above). Here absolute being is the acting and delimited being is the acted-upon.\(^{62}\) This is precisely the kind of discussion that betrays the strong attraction of Ahsātī for the profoundly mystical and unitive visions sometimes associated with Ibn 'Arabi and his school, modulo of course certain confessional adjustments. It is doubtful that any other believer (according to Ahsātī) believer in uwhdat al-wujūd would or could but recognise their own views in the recent accurate characterization of Ahsātī's ontology, namely: 'As existence unfolds, the acts of becoming constitute the very acts of responding to, yielding to, and riding the flow of existence.'\(^{63}\)

But, in fact, there may be more profit in comparing Ahsātī's thought with that of 'Ala' al-Dawla Simnānī (d.1336). Over thirty years ago, Landolt observed an intriguing similarity between the influential Iranian Sufi, and Aḥmad al-Aḥsātī: both heavily criticised uwhdat al-wujūd and sought to replace it with a dynamic view of the divine act (fi'l), even as both were accused of having misunderstood uwhdat al-wujūd in the first place. In some ways, it is even more remarkable that both shared, as Landolt points out, similar views about a 'subtle body'.\(^{64}\) It may be that Ahsātī was directly influenced by Simnānī on these characteristic subjects, but so far, evidence of such an influence has not been encountered.\(^{65}\) Is it possible that both authors, one from the fourteenth the other from the nineteenth centuries were ultimately indebted to the Ismā'ili tradition for their ontological views? It has recently been observed that the figures who come closest to prefiguring Simnānī's cosmological scheme are the

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Ismā'ili philosophers... as-Sijistānī (d. between 386/996 and 393/1003) and... al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020)\(^{66}\). Simnānī's distinctive attachment to the family of the Prophet\(^{57}\) may represent nothing more than rashayyī ĥasan. But could it be that the same theological 'fragrance' that contributed so much to Simnānī's influential legacy and great popularity, contributed to Ahsātī's fall from grace as the 'philosopher of the age'? It was, after all the threat of Ismā'ili Islam that was one of the most important formative factors in the birth and development of Twelver Shi'ism. Can there have been an inbuilt genetic resistance in Twelver theology to such stark apophaticism?

Or is it more likely that the identical 'morphology' of the beliefs of the two men functioned in different ways in their respective milieus, namely to safeguard the utter transcendence of God who can only be 'thought of' in terms of a dynamic (yet aniconic) reality as distinct from an ontic reality: in Simnānī's case, from the Buddhists at the Il-khan court\(^{68}\); in Ahsātī's case, from the Ḥikmat philosophers Șadrā and Kāshānī? This of course raises the question: what was the original 'function' of this same philosophy articulated by the classical Ismā'ili thinkers?

Here, it is of more than passing interest that it is possibly thanks to Muḥṣin Fayḍ that an important source-text of Ismā'ili philosophical theology\(^{69}\) was rescued from oblivion. The Khubbat al-tātanjīyya, which forms much of the lengthy chapter on 'Sublimity'(šulūkiyya) in his Kalimāt-i mahkīna,\(^{70}\) would become one of the more important objects of meditation for Sayyid Kāẓim Rashīd, Shaykh Ahmad's successor, and it would continue to enrich the thought and imagery of both the Bābī and Bahā'i corpuses. Indeed, the version of this sermon most widely available has enjoyed countless reprints in Twelver Shi'i communities in Lebanon,\(^{71}\) though it tends to be dismissed as ghulūluw by representatives of the learned classes.\(^{72}\) And, to add further to the complexity (or perhaps the impertinence) of applying the enduring and somewhat alien conceptual synsyy 'orthodoxy/heterodoxy' to the case of Ahsātī, it should be mentioned that the contemporary editor of the Risāla expends a certain amount of serious effort in an attempt to demonstrate that our author's ideas are in perfect harmony with the teachings of the late Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini.\(^{73}\)

The dialogue between Ahsātī and Kāshānī is, of course, a dialogue completely controlled by our Qajar scholar, since Kāshānī is represented only by a text, and this text is mediated through the prism of Ahsātī's concerns and goals. That Ahsātī's general argument was severely condemned fifty or so years later by the most celebrated post-Șadrā philosopher, Mullah Ḥādī Sabzavārī (d.1872), indicates that it touched an important nerve in the general body of Qajar Shi'ism, in both its philosophical and more purely religious modes.\(^{74}\) But, it is also true that as a result of Ahsātī's critique of Fayḍ Kāshānī the latter becomes more Usūli, more 'orthodox'. As our author says himself in response to one of Kāshānī's assertions that all of the divine attributes are existent in the essence:
And he calls himself an Akhbari — namely, one whose views accord perfectly with tradition, especially those traditions that are agreed upon (muttafif) and for which there is no contradictory tradition. But all of these are quite clear: the will and the purpose come from God as two generated things (hadithbatan) because they are active attributes. God does not have a pre-eternal will and purpose. Whoever claims that God, mighty and glorious, has always been willing and purposing is not an affirmer of the divine unity (julaya bi-muwahhid).73

Ahsa'yi, as we know, was not the only one preoccupied with the identity of the true muwahhid during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Wahhabi threat to Sufism, ghulam Sh'iism and philosophy of all kinds was not only a theological issue, but also a matter of life and death in some regions. The ironic development is, however, that in the process of Shaykh Ahmad's argument against Fayd Khashani the Imams become God revealed, taking the place of the God of Fayd Khashani. The real but starkly apophatic God is removed further from contemplation than one might have thought possible, unless of course one happens to be a classical Isma'ili philosopher.

One of the results of this elevation of the Imams, an elevation that automatically raises the divinity incommensurately higher, is that the answer to the question, 'What does it mean to be human?' becomes in some ways more interesting than it was before. The Imams, according to Ahsa'yi — and Isma'ili thought — are neither human nor divine, but a different order of being, a separate and distinct species.76 The Perfect Man, in Shaykhi thought is not the Prophet, contrary to a traditional Sufi teaching rooted in the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi77; nor is the idea represented by the Prophet and the Imams, contrary to the common Twelver Shi'i adaption of this doctrine.78 Rather, for Shaykh Ahmad, the Perfect Man is the one who recognises the spiritual and ontological dignity of these figures. It is Salmān — not Muhammad — who represents the prototype here.79

For Shaykh Ahmad there is absolutely no doubt that Khashani's religious vision shares much in common with Ghazali's, but for Ahsa'yi, this is no commendation or point of honour. Though perhaps not a 'card carrying' kāfir, Khashani can hardly be seen as a continuer of the pure teachings of Ithnā 'Ashari Shi'ism. Not only is Khashani derided for continuing the Sufi-infected distortions of true religion propagated by his master Mullā Sadrā, he is also blamed for having ignored true philosophy, namely the teachings of the Imams. And, on the topic of God's knowing, the true teachings of the Imams are as straightforward and clear as they are uncompromising.

Ahsa'yi's effort to rescue the unknowable God of Islam from the degeneracies of contamination through Islam's unforgivable sin, shirk, may indeed be inspired by contemporary religious developments in Arabia. The terms of the argument are interchangeable, except, of course, that Ahsa'yi was an avid Imami Shi'i, and the Wahhabiyya equally avid Sunni Muslims. But the temperament is strikingly similar, however much both Ahsa'yi and Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) might be horrified to read this.80 The main object of their opprobrium was none other than wahdat al-wujud: existential monism, understood by them to violate the utterly transcendent essence (dhāt) of God. Ahsa'yi quotes as follows against those who profess wahdat al-wujud: 'It is rather as our Imam, the Commander of the Faithful, has said: "The created thing ends only in its likeness and the resort of the quest is only in its simulacrum. The road [to the essence] is forever blocked, and the search for it is eternally barred."81 The question, though, is would those who esteem themselves as professing wahdat al-wujud disagree with this hadith?

It should be remembered that Fayd Khashani is not the first major Safavid thinker to be pilloried by Ahsa'yi. Mullā Sadrā — Khashani's mentor and father-in-law — was also the object of his purifying gaze. It was in connection with his critique of the 'Arshiyya, for example, that charges of Ahsa'yi's lack of philosophical sophistication were perhaps first voiced and recorded.82 It is obvious that his concern with Khashani is an essential part of his programme to purify the true faith from the deleterious effects of an excessive interest in a mysticism (yet he is profoundly mystical) gone overripe and a philosophy (yet he is an avid philosopher) badly construed.

Shaykh Ahmad was held in high esteem by the clerical and the political communities of Iran: Fathi 'Ali Shah tried unsuccessfully to persuade al-Ahsa'yi to live in Tehran nearer the court. And, the story is told of how the governor of Kermanshah felt so honoured by Shaykh Ahmad's decision to visit his city that he travelled several miles out from Kermanshah for the sole purpose of greeting the famous scholar and escorting him into town. It may be that Shaykh Ahmad was so warmly welcomed by the political and religious leaders of Iran because his views offered a quasi-populist mystical interpretation of standard Twelver Shi'ism which served as a powerful alternative to what was becoming a disturbing interest in more purely Sufi doctrine, as propagated by the leaders of, for example, the Nifatullahi order who in turn had very cordial relations with the Imams of the Qasimi-Shah Nizari Isma'ili community.83 Shaykh Ahmad, as an accomplished and renowned Twelver mujtahid, would have served as an orthodox guarantor for the type of profoundly mystical religion so at home in Iran. As the creative force behind the distinctive Qajar era religious ramifications associated with the name of the Shaykhyya, Ahmad al-Ahsa'yi was partly responsible for a number of influential developments of the period. Included here are the several groups that continued to be identified from the outside as Shaykhi. This was, in any case, a term of opprobrium used by opponents to evoke the spectre of the odious and dangerous Sufism whose followers, according to the criticism, gave to a mere shaykh the kind of devotion and obedience properly owed to
what he considered a much less fettered and more independent position vis-à-vis the reinterpretation of the raw material of the Islamic religion – the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet and the teachings of the Imams which were preserved in the akhbar. The freedom I am speaking of is exemplified in Shaykh Ahmad’s response to those who charged him with relying upon strange and unsound hadith to support his ideas. Shaykh Ahmad solemnly responded that he could distinguish a sound hadith from a weak one through its ‘fragrance’. Such a response is, in fact, an adamantine critique of taqlid which is here not merely ‘imitation’ but ‘blind imitation’, in matters religious.

However much Ahsā’ī might have been stigmatised by his colleagues for his teachings about the ascension of the Prophet and resurrection of the body, and however much his own gothic and architectonic hypotheses – which betray a kind of philosophical horror vacui – might have scandalized his fellow believers, his criticism of Fayd Kāshānī on the problem of God’s knowledge may be thought to reflect faithfully a strong wariness – perhaps particularly among the Shi’ā of the ‘Atabāt – about common interpretations of wabdat al-wujūd that were seen as tainting the otherwise laudable – if not indispensable œuvre of Fayd Kāshānī. He just may be cursing Fayd for his Sufism and corrupt philosophy to a Wahhābī audience (؟ back home). Why else would an otherwise devout Shi’ī such as Ahsā’ī make bold to invoke the ijma’ of the entire Muslim world against his opponent?

Kāshānī and Ahsā’ī appear to represent two ends of a spectrum: the one a ‘panentheist’ or wabdat wujūdī, the other ‘perfectly orthodox’. We are, of course, immediately suspicious of such a typology. As every one knows, Shaykh Ahmad was the heretic and Fayd Kāshānī the upholder of orthodoxy. It is doubtful – because of the implications of his staunch Ismā‘īlī-like theology – that Ahsā’ī would have long remained the ‘philosopher of the age’ in Qajar times. The allergy to such permutations of gbulmunw was simply too strong, even if it frequently circulated in the writings of both the orthodox Kāshānī and the heretic Ahsā’ī. It is almost as if the confession of wabdat al-wujūd functions as an anti-Ismā‘īlī shibboleth in this Twelver Shi’ī context, even as its condemnation functions in this time and place as a philo-Wahhābī shibboleth.

Whatever the relationship of the form and contents of the Risāla might be to the Sitz im Leben, it is clear that it is also not only a product of its time and place. The discussions of the exact nature of God’s knowing are as old as Islamic theology and philosophy. It has been seen that Ahmad Ahsā’ī’s solution to the problem shares much in common with the teachings of the classical or medieval Ismā‘īlī philosophers and with the later ardent critic of Ibn ‘Arabī, the Sunni Sufi, Alā al-Dawla Simnānī. In this respect, the Risāla may be thought a typical example of early Qajar hybrid theological and philosophical discourse.
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Notes
1 Ahmad al-Albānī, Sharḥ al-arāḥiyāt quoted in Henry Corbin, translated as Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth (N. Pearson (trans.): Princeton, 1977) 211; originally published as Terra céleste et corps de ressurrection: de l'iran mazdeen à l'Islam Shī'ite (Paris, 1930).


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Mangol Bayat Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran (Syracuse, 1982) 37–58. Although his scholarship is frequently disparaged (e.g. by Bausani, Religion, 340 and Corbin, Islam IV, 213), one should also mention the even earlier works of Nelson on the Shaykhī school (see note 3). They are certainly not completely without value.

3 This work is more properly entitled Sharḥ risāla fi ’īlm al-labb. Throughout this chapter it is referred to simply as Risāla reflecting the title of the most recent printed version in Muhammad ‘Ali labīb (ed.) al-iljma al-muḥt l-Allāh bi ‘ādāt al-Dīn, al-Asbāb (Beirut, 1413/1993) 149–278 which is based on the lithograph found in Ahmad al-Asbā’ī Jawāmī’s al-kalin, 3 vols in 2 (Tābriz, 1385–6) 1, 166–200. For a list of various manuscripts of this work see Moojan Momen The Works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Asbā‘ī: a bibliogra phy based upon Fihrisī [sic] kutub Mashayikh [sic] of Ahī al-Qāsim Ibrāhīmī Kirmānī (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1991) 47 where its official title is Risāla fi Sharh Risālat al-’īm. It has been partly translated in Alphonse L. M. Nicolas Essai sur le Chékhâshîisme IV: La Science de Dieu (Paris, 1911) i–ii corresponding to Risāla, 150–70, minus a few omissions and with an addition or two. Nicolas typically gives no information about the text he used. Discussions illustrated with a few translated excerpts may also be found in Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, 167–75 (cf. references on Risāla, 205–8).

In Muhammad Muṣīn Aghā Buzāṛ Tīrānī al-Dharrī l’lā taṣ'ānīf al-Shī‘ā, 25 vols (Quum, 1341h) XIII, 287–8 it is listed as #1046 Sharḥ risāla al-īm and said to have been completed in Kermanshah on the morning of Friday 8 of Rabī’ al-Thānī, 1320h. Tīrānī, Dharrī XV, 322 #2071 locates Fayd’s original, relatively short work of ‘100 verses’ as Risāla fi ’īlm Allāh ‘īlam, in the library of al-Khwānsārī and the library of Shaykh ‘Alī Kāshīfi al-Ghiṭā. Here the author of Dharrī’s erroneously says that Shaykh Ahmad’s commentary on it is named al-Lubb. Unfortunately, I have not had access to the original of Khwānsārī’s Risāla and rely here on quotations from it found in the text of Ahī’s commentary. See also the commentary on Shaykh Ahmad’s treatise listed at Tīrānī, Dharrī II, 180 #667.

4 See, as one example from among many, the edition and translation of Nasir Khusraw’s (the d. 1072) Gushībiyāt wa Rābāhīyāt: Faqir M. Hunzai Knowledge and Liberation: A Treatise in Philosophical Theology (London, 1998) 41–3. Although it has been mentioned and alluded to in several earlier studies of Shaykhī thought, the fascinating and important question of its exact relationship with classical Ismā‘īlī theology remains to be fully studied and elucidated. See, in addition to Corbin’s observations referred to above, Wilfred Madelung ‘Aspects of Ismā‘īlī Theology: The Prophetic Chain and the God beyond Being’ in S. H. Nasr (ed.) Ismā‘īlī Contributions to Islamic Culture (Teheran, 1399/1980) 51–65. It seems clear, at this stage, however, that there are several points of agreement, beyond the above-mentioned correspondence, regarding the nature of Ismā‘īlī theology. The Risāla under discussion would be an excellent candidate for a thorough comparison of a more purely philosophical and theological nature. It is not impossible that these Ismā‘īlī resonances – which perhaps enhanced a perceived anti-governmentality attributed to Rābi’ al-Thānī’s works – the death of Rābi’ al-Thānī’s “conquest” (Amanat, Resurrection, 206) have been quite overstated. The Risāla under discussion would be an excellent candidate for a thorough comparison of a more purely philosophical and theological nature. It is not impossible that these Ismā‘īlī resonances – which perhaps enhanced a perceived anti-governmentality attributed to Rābi’ al-Thānī’s works – the death of Rābi’ al-Thānī’s “conquest” (Amanat, Resurrection, 206) have been quite overstated.
that developed under the influence of Shaykhī thought (Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', notes 5 and 7) are at least partly responsible for Aḥšāʾī's eventual and perhaps inevitable fall from grace. See also Cole's other related articles: Juan Ricardo Cole ' Casting Away the Self: The Mysticism of Shaykh Ahmad al-Asbaʾī', in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds) The Twelver Shiʾī in Modern Times (Leiden, 2001) 25–37; Juan Ricardo Cole 'New Perspectives on Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in Egypt', in Rudi Mattheis and Beth Baron (eds) Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie (Costa Mesa, 2000) 13–34; and, Juan Ricardo Cole 'The World as Text: Cosmologies of Shaykh Ahmad al-Asbaʾī' Studia Islamica 80 (1994) 145–63.

5 Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 22, 30–31, bases this broad characterization on the views of the admittedly influential Yūsuf al-Tabarī (d. 1772). See the conflicting evidence presented in Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 59 and the tantalizing comments at p. 37. He does not mention any specific sources however. Leonard Lewisohn 'Sufism and the School of Isḥāqī: Tāʾalluʾuʾf and Irfān in Late Safavid Iran' in L. Lewisohn (ed.) The Heritage of Sufism, Volume III: Classical Personate Sufism: The Safavid and Mughal Period (Oxford, 1999) 63–64 (references here are to a typescript kindly provided by its author) 46ff., maintains just the opposite, that the major thrust of opinion on Fadl has been to downplay his interest in esotericia and other 'extra-orthodox pursuits' (like Hikmat), to produce a picture of him as the champion of Twelver orthodoxy. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Mulla Muhammad Muḥsin Fadl al-Kāshānī, ʿUṣūl al-maʿārif (J. D. Ashtiyānī (ed.): Mashhad, 1333) 5–6 of the English 'Preface', who maintains Kāshānī has been misrepresented by the later Twelver scholastic tradition which saw him as having not continued the teaching of his master, Mullā ʿṢadrā, but as having been solely concerned with 'orthodox' Shi'ism.

6 Rafatī, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 47 and Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 34. The general consensus in modern scholarship is that this taṣfīr was the result of a personal animus on the part of Barāṁī who, as a matter of fact, would later be assassinated by either a militant Bābī or Bābī sympathizer (Amanat, Resurrection, 322). Note that his honorific places him firmly in the line of Twelver Shiʾī 'orthodox' marṭuṭyology. The first Sahāḥī was Shams al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī al-jizzānī (d. 1384), the second was Zayn al-Dīn ibn ʿAlī al-ʿĀmilī al-jubānī (d. 1558). See also MacEoin, 'Barāṁī'.

7 Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 52–5, is quite certain, building on the theories of Jorge Gracia, specifically his text: Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience (Albany, 1996) that Aḥšāʾī suffered a kind of retroactive condemnation as a result of the Bābī and Bahāʾī 'audience'. He offers the hypothesis that if it had not been for the Bābīs and Bahāʾīs (false) claiming a relationship to the teachings of the Shaykhīyya, Aḥšāʾī would still be esteemed by the majority of (Iranian Shiʾī) scholars as one of the greatest philosophers of his time. For a thoughtful and pertinent discussion of the complex relationship between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, particularity in relation to the Shaykhīyya vis-à-vis the later Bahāʾī faith, see MacEoin 'Orthodoxy'.


9 See below, note 60, for these works by Kāshānī

10 See the biographical sketch in 'Aṭīr Husayn al-Ǧābirī al-Fikr al-safāʾiʿiʿ ʿind al-Shīʾī al-ībnuʾʿ ʿasbārī (Beirut and Paris, 1977) 326–6. See also E. Kohlberg 'Some Aspects of Akhbārī Thought' in N. Levzioni and J. Voll (eds) Eighteenth

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Century Renewal and Reform in Islam (Syracuse, 1987) 133–60 for an importantnuancing of Kāshānī's particular version of Akhbārism.


13 Lewisohn, 'Sufism', 44–66 is the most thorough inquiry into the Sufism of al-Kāshānī available. See especially Lewisohn, 'Sufism', 48ff. for a discussion of Kāshānī's controversial Nūrakshī affiliation, and Fayd's reputation in court circles for being an authority on Sufism and Hikmat, namely: šāhī-tāriqān va māstītānā yā māstītānā.

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15 See Aḥšāʾī, Riṣāla, 226, where Shaykh Ahmad directly quotes Ibn Abī Junbūhī, specifically from his book al-Muṣṭafī, a habith on the authority of the Prophet: 'All existents appeared from the bāʾ of the ṣamāʾ (zhāhir al-mawjudāt min bāʾ bismillāh al-rāmān al-raʾūn). Aḥšāʾī adds that this is a symbol (raʿma) for the Preserved Tablet, al-luḥūm al-maʿṣīḥī (cf. Q5:22). See Todd Lawson 'Ibn Abī Junbūhī' Elv VII, 662–3 where this hadīth is discussed and Todd Lawson, 'The Terms Remembrance (dhihr) and Gate (bāb) in the Bab's Commentary on the Sunna of Joseph', in M. Momen (ed.) Bābī and Bahāʾī Studies in Honour of H. M. Bahνazi (Los Angeles, 1989) 56 where the influence of this tradition via the Shaykhīyya is noted in the Bab's commentary of Q 5:22. See now, Sabine Schmidtke-Theolmel, Physische und Mystik im zwölferschüüsichen Islam des 9./10. Jahrhunderts: die Gedankenwelten des Ibn Abī Qumshū al-Ashfaʾīs (sím 838/1434–35/1906/1501) (Leiden and Boston, 2000) 30–1, note 93, for references to other discussions of traces of Ibn Abī Junbūhī's influence on Shaykh Ahmad in Chahardīh, Corbin, Cole and Hamid. The similarities between several specific formulations in al-Muṣṭafī to the language of the writings of both Aḥšāʾī and Ṣaḥṭī are presented in Lawson, Qurʾān, 67, 118–20, 189–91, 205–6, 332. See also Rafatī, 'Development of shaykhī Thought', 22 and 40.

16 Rafatī, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 40, although he could have become acquainted with him through the works of Ibn Abī Junbūhī.


18 For the names of those who issued the several iṣṣāṭī to Shaykh Ahmad see Rafatī, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 41. See also the relevant chapters in Amanat Renewal and MacEoin, 'Charismatic Renewal'.

19 Rafatī, 'Development of Shaykhī Thought', 44–5. According to Amanat (Resurrection, 67), Aḥšāʾī's departure from Iran and the 'Atābāt was precipitated by the enmity of a growing number of high-ranking Shīʿī ʿulamāʾ. See, for example, the remarks quoted by Mullā 'Alī al-Muḥsin al-ʿĀmilī al-Muḥsinī al-Muḥsinī al-Ḥasanī al-Aṣīʿī al-ʾĀmilī Aṣīʿaʾ al-Shīʾī (11 vols (Beirut, 1406/1985) II, 391. Corbin's brief response to such slanders is compelling, if not completely convincing (Corbin, Islam IV, 212–13).

20 There may have been other reasons for this visit. Aḥšāʾī says he 'arrived in Isfahan, a city protected from current events, and met with its distinguished ʿulamā', may God protect them from the changes and chances of the world
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22 M. Mohageheh and L. Izutsu The Metaphysics of Sabzavārī (New York, 1977) 14. The main part of this book is a translation of a portion of his Ghurar al-fara'id known as the Shahr-i manzūm, with an Introduction by Izutsu, based on the philosopher's work and his autobiography, from which comes the following commentary: '[Ahsās] was unrivalled in his ascetic ways, however his graces [i.e. hadīth = intellectual gifts < 'scholarship'] were not evident to the other scholars of Isfahan.'

23 For Sabzavārī's refutation, see note 74.

24 'Mīrzā Muhammad Bāqir ibn Muhammad al-Lāhījī, resident of Isfahan and later Tehran. He had held the post of vāzīr to Sultan Ja'far Khān Zand and was held in high esteem by Fath-Allāh Shāh who asked him to write a tsafār of the Qurān in Persian in a manner that had not been done before. He wrote Tāfsat al-Khādīqān. He also wrote a shahī of the Nabi al-Balāgha in Persian for Fath-Allāh Shāh. He died in Tehran 1240.' Momen, The Works, 45.

The introductory exhortation to his question is most interesting. Among other things, he tells him (Ahsā's, Risāla, 151-2) that the Sufis, the Ḥujwārī and the Theologian are not proofs (like the Qasas), that they are not his Imams, and that he must imitate the Imams directly. Not, however, the way some do so through ignorance and error. Rather, his questioner should practice taqlid of the Imams with reason, so that he does not blindly follow. If the questioner protests that their words do not conform to reason, Shaykh Ahmad responds: 'I say to you, their words are a divine binding reality (baqqa), and your reason is a divine binding reality (as long as you do not corrupt it with mirky knowledge) and the correcting principles are a divine binding reality because they are all of the divine nature upon which He fashioned mankind (fiṣṭat Allāh al-latif fatara al-nās 'alayhā)' (Q30.30). So, I do not want you to practice pure taqlid as some vainly imagine it should be practiced. Rather, read their words as rational indications [of thought and action] through your own powers of understanding, completely detached from the understanding of others. If you understand my words, and act according to my directions you will find that what I tell you is a useful tool for solving abstruse problems. By God, this is my teaching and that which should ['alone'] represent me after I am gone (khafīfīt).' Note the error in Ahsā's, Risāla, 152: al-mašfād for Ahsās, Jawāmī, 167 al-mašfād.

25 Though there seems to be some exceptions, namely his distinctive use of the term 'daffatan' ('all at once' = tout a coup') to designate the simultaneity and unicity of one aspect of cosmogonic movement (see, e.g., Ahsā's, Risāla, 256-8; see also Sabzavārī's critique of this mentioned below, note 74) while a companion technical term abad 'fariyyat 'perpetual freshness' (Ahsā's, Risāla, 268) does occur in the later work (see Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 175). On daffatan (sic) toḥūdīdātān as a key technical term in classical Islamī philosophical, see Madelung, 'Aspects', 56-7. The essentially and deeply mystic view of time and creation issues from and is coordinated with such hadīth as: kāna Allāh wa lā shay' màshūh; al-ān kamā kāna (frequently ascribed to the third Imam, Ḥusayn, but also ascribed to Junayd). See the discussion of this influential hadīth in Lawson, Qurān, 194-5: 'God was originally alone, there was no other thing with Him; He is now as He was.' Shaykh Ahmad offers a correction of 'misinterpretations' of this hadīth such as those found in Kāshānī (see the discussion of a slight variant in Ahsā's, Risāla, 189) which led the latter to what Shaykh Ahmad deems the pernicious doctrine of meteyā 'pre-eternal withness another misunderstanding of the intentions of the Imams (Ahsā's, Risāla, 227). Intimately connected with Shaykh Ahmad's theory of space and time is the highly distinctive, mystical and existentially challenging reading of Q7.172 that emerges from it (e.g. Ahsā's, Risāla, 214-5, 259, 264). This doctrine of the Covenant, which reflects the preoccupations of an original Shi'ism (Mohammed Ali Ami-Moezzi The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam (D. Streight (trans.): Albany, 1994) s.v. index 'mithaq', first published as Le Guide divin dans le šī'isme originel (Paris, 1992)) deserves separate treatment. It seems clear that most, if not all, elements of Ahsā's's thought revolve around it, no matter how apparently irrelevant to this theme any given element might otherwise appear. His teaching here emerges from the Akhbārī reading of the verse which sees it as having been corrupted from its original form in which God explicitly designates 'Alī as Guardian (wali) of the community. See Todd Lawson 'A New Testament' for the Safavid Round of Table, Edinburgh, 1998.

26 This reading is supported throughout the text. Cf. Ahsā's, Risāla, 151: al-ārif al-mutāqin, and Jawāmī, 166 al-ārif al-muttaqan.

27 Ahsā's, Risāla, 181; kufr: Ahsā's, Risāla, 274, 275 and 276 respectively.

28 Ahsā's, Risāla, 151. Note that the Arabic: fa-abbabtu an... evokes (and perhaps identifies, however unwittingly, our author with) the voice in the famous hadīth qudsī: kuntu kanzan makhyfīyy.

29 He is ridiculed by our author for his statement: 'nothing in the East or the West budge even the distance of a finger-tip except through my might and power.' Ahsā's, Risāla, 162.

30 wa kullu shay'n siwākta qa'ma bi-amrika: Ahsā's, Risāla, 247; also noted in Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 147.

31 For evidence of a concern among the masters of the Bāb school with the theme of metaphysical (always with historical implications) symmetries of light and dark, good and evil, see Todd Lawson 'Coincidentia Oppositorum' in the Qurān Commentary of the Bab: the terms 'Point' (muqta), 'Pole' (qurt), 'Center' (markaz) and the Khubbat al-tamānijāa Occasional Papers in Baha'i Bab and Baha'i Studies V.1 (January, 2001) and references. Available at www.b-net.msu.edu/ bahai/bpaperstr.htm. See also the brief but highly pertinent remarks in MacEoin, 'Cosmogony', 326b.

32 Norman Calder 'The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy' in F. Daftary (ed.) Intellectual Traditions in Islam (London, 2000) 76-8 where the example of the Bāb serves as a proof case for the general thesis that the orthodoxy of a generic work of Islamic religious discourse (in this instance the genre is tsafīr) depends upon the degree to which the historical scholarly experience of the community is acknowledged within it. This nineteen-page essay is itself a typically learned and profound contemplation of a controversial topic in Islamic studies — a choice example from the author's prematurely diminished legacy.

33 The phrase is Corbin's (Islam I, xviii-xix). See also Amir-Moezzi, 'Une absence'. Ahsā's discussion of time here (Ahsā's, Risāla, 211, 230, 240-2) is central to the problem of God's knowledge, cosmogony, ontology and eschatology and adumbrates the more systematic treatment in his Shahr al-fawā'id see the very useful discussion in Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 244-9, though the author neglects to make the connection that here again there is much that is suggestive of classical Ismā'ili thought. Cf. e.g. Hunzai, Knowledge and Liberation, 30-4. See Corbin, Islam IV, 294-9 for a rich discussion of the temporal and spatial in Ahsā's and its homologous relationship with certain classical Ismā'ili ideas. See also Lawson, Qurān, 230-40. There is no space here to examine the topic fully. (See the comments above at notes 4 and 25.) While apparently uninterested in this specific problem, the recent study of this problem, the recent study of the Shakhbiyya by Sayyid Muhammad Ḥasan Alī al-Talaghānī al-Shakhbiyya
43 Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 152.
44 See above, notes 32 and 1, and the references to Ishâ’i’s theology.
46 Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 152.
47 Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 153.
48 Based on a hadîth from al-Bâqir stating that thinking is a quality of creation ‘and God is not like that’ quoted Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 187.
49 Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 152.
50 Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 275.
51 Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 153; the distinctive terminology does not seem to be derived from Ibn Abî Jumîhîr, (see Schmidtke, Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik, 37-114) or for that matter Ibn Maytham (see Oraibi, ‘Shî’i Renaissance’). See Hamid, ‘Metaphysics and Cosmology’, 547-8 for a useful gloss. On the logical problems involved here, see the pertinent discussion of Naṣîr al-Dîn al-Tûsî’s commentary on a Risalat al-îlîm by one of the teachers of the above-mentioned Maytham al-Bâhîrânî, Ibn Sa’îda (d.1274) in Oraibi, ‘Shî’i Renaissance’, 36-8 and 64-73. This commentary, together with the original Risâla, is published as Sharh ma‘âlîîat al-îlîm (Masshad, 1966) which was unavailable to me.
52 For the history of the idea, see Henry Corbin ‘Mundus imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginari’ Spring (1972) 1-19. (First published in French in the Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme 6 (1964) 3-26.; Henry Corbin ‘Dream, Imagination and ’Alam al-mithâlî and Fazlur Rahman ‘The Visionary Dream in Islamic Spirituality’ both in G. van Grunebaum and R. Caillois (eds) The Dream and Human Society (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966) 381-408 and 410-19 respectively; and Corbin, Spiritual Body. Historical precedents are studied in John T. Wulbridge III The Science of Mystic Lights: Qutb al-Dîn Shîrâzî and the Illuminationist Tradition in Islamic Philosophy (Cambridge, MA, 1992) 126ff. is an important analysis of the idea in the work Shirâzî (d.710/1311), whom the author describes as possibly the first Islamic philosopher ‘to have made a determined effort to work out the philosophical implications of the concept’.
53 See, e.g., Henry Corbin Le Paradoxe du monothéisme (Paris, 1981); Corbin has elsewhere quoted Shaykh Ahmad’s own summation of the existential predicament as follows:
‘C’est pourquoi, dit Shaykh Ahmad, c’est bien vers l’Essence inaccessible que l’homme se tourne, bien qu’à tout jamais il ne puisse la trouver; et cependant il ne cesse de la trouver, alors même qu’à tout jamais elle lui reste inaccessible.
Corbin, Islam, 1, 194
54 Corbin, ‘Mundus Imaginalis’, 1-2. It is also referred to by Shaykh’s authors and others as ‘the eighth clime’ outside and beyond the seven regions or climes of classical geography. See, e.g., Ahşâ’î, Risâla, 246 and Corbin, Spiritual Body, passim.
ORTHOXY AND HETERODXY IN TWELVER SHI'ISM

(Albany, 1999). Unfortunately, Knyst seems here completely uninterested in the rich and important Shi'i dimension of the topic.

Even though the original sources are now better accessible than they were thirty years ago, no one it seems has taken up Landolt's original suggestion to pursue a comparative study of Simnawi and the Shaykhis (Landolt, 'Der Briefwechsel', 63).


His veneration of the ahl al-kiswa, his spiritual pedigree through the Imams from 'Ali b. Rida to the Prophet (skipping al-Hasan ibn 'Ali), his citation of the Nahil al-balaghah, certainly do not need to mean more than this. Cf. Hartwig Cord Die sitzung der 'Ala ad-dawla as-Simmimi (Zurich, 1977) 232-9. That one of his students was Shykh Khalifa Mzandarani, the founder of the radical Shi'i Sardadari movement may mean nothing in this context. See also Elias, Throne Carrier, 51-3. A focused study on the question of Simmimi's real attitude to Shi'ism is perhaps needed. See the suggestive discussion in Joseph van Ess, 'Simmimi', 75 and 76. An earlier and perhaps under-appreciated discussion is Marjani Moteh 'Les Koubraiyya entre sunnisme et shiaisme aux huitieme et neuvieme siecles de l'Hegire' Revue des Etudes islamiques 29 (1961) 61-142.

van Ess, 'Simmimi', 76.


Kashani, Kalmhiu-maknina, 196-205. Note the editorial warnings (on p. 196) on the soundness of the traditions quoted by Kashani.

Rahbar the Bursi Mashhiri amwir al-qayita fi asar Amir al-Mu'mini (Beirut, 1979).


Ahmadi, Risala, 269.

Mullah Hadi Sabzavar al-Muhakammt wa al-mughammat: radd bar Sharb risalat al-'Imam Baharayni in Majmi'a ra'i'il (J. D. Askiiyani: ed.); Tehran 1366h 649-75. Sabzavari's disagreements with Ahlasi are many and profound and there is no space here to outline his criticism fully. He disparages Ahlasi's theory of time and motion, symbolised by the word da'ana (Sabzavari, Muhakammt, 650) saying that it is at complete odds with the teaching of Mulla Sadra, namely harakat-i jaubariyya. He indicates in several places that Ahlasi's insistence on there being no connection whatever between the divine essence and everything else, tacitly accusing him of spiritual myopia (Sabzavari, Muhakammt, 671 and 677). For it can correctly be said that God's speech is of the divine essence (Sabzavari, Muhakammt, 668). It is necessary to judge

Ahmadi, 'Risala, 246.

Hamid, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 236.


TODD LAWSON

56 Ahlasi, Risala, 246. The question remains open whether or not this private appearance, as discussed by the Shaykhis (especially in the earliest days, just prior to the Shi'i millennium) was the only one to be expected by the Shi'a, or whether the masters of the Shaykh school also hoped for an imaginal (as distinct from unreal) subhir of such intensity that it entailed an actual advent of the Imam on the plane of history. This raises the vexed question of the doctrine of the Fourth Support (al-rukn al-rabi). This term does not occur in the Risala although it does occur in the last major work of Ahmad al-Ashari, Ahlasi, Javani It 304. For recent discussions see Amiri-Moezzi, Une absence... 238; Ahmad Kazemi-Mounsaivi Religious Authority in Shiite Islam: from the Office of Mufti to the Institution of Marja (Kuala Lumpur, 1996), s.v. index 'rukni rasbi'; Lawson, Qur'an, passim.

57 MacBoin, Orthodoxy, 327 and Cole, Sources, 86-7. It may be useful to make the common-sense observation that such profound certitude is susceptible of being mistaken for arrogance and spiritual pride, a factor that might also have contributed to rejection.

58 Corbin, Islam IV, 221. The term implies 'unlearned knowledge' and derives from the Arabic al-ummi, Uways al-Qarani, whoever met the Prophet yet converted to Islam while living in Yemen. It may also apply to a person with unusual knowledge. See now Julian Baldick Imaginary Muslims: The Uwaysi Sufis of Central Asia (New York, 1993) for a general discussion noteworthy for its complete avoidance of any Shi'i subject-matter, although he does devote a paragraph to Corbin's concern with the 'alam al-mithab in the conclusion (Baldick, Imaginary, 222).

59 Corbin, Spiritual Body, 176-9 and 180-221. In light of the relentless castigation here of Kashani by Ahlasi one is struck by the irony of Corbin's linking them so closely in the same book.

60 Mulli Muhammad Mushin Fayd al-Kashani Kalimati-mu'minina min 'ulam ahl al-bikma wa'l-ma'rifah (Tehran, 1383/1963) 70-3 translated in Corbin, Spiritual Body, 176-9. The Kalimati mu'minina is the subject of recent scholarship: Rasul Jafariyan, Dina va sardat dar dawar va-safi (Qum, 1370/1991) ch. 10; Todd Lawson The Hidden Words of Fayz Kashani in M. Szuppe et al. (eds) Actes du 4e Colloque de la Societe Iranologique Europee, Paris, septembre 1999 in vol. 2, Cahier de Studia Islamica (Leuven, 2002) and Shigeru Kamada 'Walata in Fayd Kashani' in T. Lawson (ed.) Islamic Thought: Papers on Historiography, Sufism and Philosophy in Honor of Hermann Landolt (forthcoming). Kashani's work is quoted and referred several times here by Ahlasi: Risala, 173-6, 181, 190, 216, 221, 248, 233. Other works of Kashani, e.g. 'Ala'i-Wafi and al-Safii, are also frequently cited by Ahlasi throughout the Risala.

61 For references to his interest in natural science and experimentation, see Rafaji, 'Development of Shaykh Thought', 41-2 and references and Haym, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 32.

62 Ahlasi, Risala, 246.

63 Haym, 'Metaphysics and Cosmology', 236.

such matters according to importance. Of course, there is truth to the assertion of the remoteness of the existence, but there is also truth to the assertion of its 'accessibility'. It is important to look at such things with 'two eyes' (Sebzavārī, Muḥākamāt, 677) and not merely one.

75 Aḥṣāṭ, Risāla, 206. Here Aḥṣāṭ cites a tradition from Imam al-Ridā concerning the generation of al-irāda: 'It is not knowing [ilm], God does not have a pre-existent irāda that results in his following it. To God there is neither will nor purpose in a pre-existent state (qadima). Nay, rather these are two generated things.' Al-Ridā said: 'The will and the purpose are attributes of the acts. Whoever imagines that God has always been purposing and willing is not a believer in the divine unity.' Aḥṣāṭ 'Abd Allāh said, in answer to a related question: 'A purpose can only exist when there is also an object of the purpose. God has ever been knowing and powerful, then he willed.'

76 Ahmad al-Aḥṣāṭ, Sharḥ al-fawa'id, ch. 10 (Hamid edition). It is puzzling why this pivotal discussion receives such scant attention in this recent, and in many respects, very fine study of this important work.

77 E.g., Roger Alnalde, 'al-Insān al-Kāmil', Elh III, 1239.


81 Aḥṣāṭ, Risâla, 217. Incidentally, this happens to be a suggestive and felicitous Arabic paraphrase of the Greek idea contained in the word aporia (i.e. 'path strewn with obstacles'). The observation is not meant to suggest any kinship, genetic or otherwise, between Shaykh Ahmad and certain contemporary trends in literary criticism and theory.

82 See above, the reference to 'Ayyân at note 20 above. For an extensive and invaluable study of this critique see Corbin, Pénétrations, s.v. index 'Aḥmad al-Aḥṣâṭ (Shaykh)'s. For Corbin, the accusations against Shaykh Ahmad are beneath contempt. Corbin, Islam IV, 212-13.

83 See Farhad Daftary 'The I'smâ'ilis: Their History and Doctrines' (Cambridge, 1990) 502-7 and references for a discussion of the dynamics of this relationship and insights into the religious views of Fath 'Ali Shâh himself. See Ahmad al-Aḥṣâṭ Risâla fi kayyâria al-sulik iṣâ Allâh (Beirut, 1414/1993) for distinctive interpretations of standard Sufi topics and practices such as dhikr, sâbâbā, etc. Shaykh Ahmad's popularity, as Cole, 'Sources', 91, has recently written, was due in large measure to his remarkable achievement: 'preserving the warm heart of the Shi'ism amidst a welter of competing scholasticisms. However, the existence of such works as Mullâ Muhammad Taqî al-Majlîs Risâlah tashwîq al-sâlihîn (n.p., n.d.) reminds us to be ever alert to precedents for Aḥṣâṭ's synthesis.

84 Peter Smith and Moojan Momen 'The Bâbî Movement: A Mobilization Perspective' in P. Smith (ed.) In Iran: Stories of Bâb and Bâbâ History vol. 3 (Los Angeles, 1986) 39-93.


86 Pace Corbin, Islam IV, 213. He just seems to protest too much the irrefutable historical and doctrinal connection with and derivation from Shaykh teachings of the Báb and Bahâ'í phenomena. Cf. e.g., the nearly phobic: '[i]ls ne peuvent absolument pas être considérés comme des 'rejetons' de l'école shi'yât ... Quand on bâche au sultanisme, on se sent mieux à l'aise hors du sultanisme. Lorsque les bahâ'îs'affirment leur admiration pour Shaykh Ahmad Aḥṣâṭ, on ne peut que les approuver. Mais lorsqu'ils le revendiquent comme leur ancêtre spirituel on ne peut que dénoncer cette prétention abusive.' Perhaps Corbin was so adamant about this because of the post facto (i.e. post Bahâ'î) nature of much of the dismissal of Shaykhism by the 'islâm' of Iran who took seriously the claim of the Bahâ'îs' genetic relationship to the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad. Recently, this idea has been stressed again; see above note 7. It is a topic for further discussion; see MacEoin, 'Orthodoxy'. Corbin seems to have never referred to an actual work of Báb or Bahâ'í authorship in his numerous writings. It is one to deny that Báb and Bahâ' thought is an accurate reflection of the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad, it is quite another to presume to know more about the spiritual and intellectual genealogy of a family than the actual members of the family one is studying without providing convincing evidence.

87 On the former see Bayat, Mysticism and Cole 'New'.

88 See, for example, the many works of refutation, published and unpublished, listed in Tâhirih, Dhâri'a.

89 It may be that Shaykh Ahmad's exposure to the ideas of the Dhuha'bi 'Suff order is perhaps part responsible for his elaboration of the idea of the Perfect Shi'a as suggested in Cole 'Sources'. Much work remains to be done on the Sufism of Shaykh Ahmad. See also MacEoin, 'Charismatic Renewal', 4-5.

90 Corbin, Islam IV, 259.

91 So vehement was his repudiation of taqlîd that several scholars have seen him as a democrat, hardly beyond the domain of 'secular humanism'. Bausani, Religion, 340-44 offers an alternate characterization:

'Generally speaking, Shaykism contains a stronger Shi'ite theological 'impeccable' and is more purely 'religious' than philosophers such as Mullâ Sadrâ were. Iqâlib's statement ... that shâkh Ahmad was an enthusiastic reader of Mullâ Sadrâ's works is based on a misunderstanding: the Shâkhîs studied Mullâ Sadrâ but did not always approve of what he said; in fact, on some points (for example concerning the knowledge of God) they returned to points less philosophical and more religious positions ... If the complex theological position of the Shâkhîs could be summed up in a few words I would say that it is based on two points, one deeply religious and the other with rational tendencies ... to symbolic explanations (which sometimes go beyond the realistic symbolism
of Sadrā) to enter into a truly rationalist allegory of the miraculous aspect of traditional theological legends... Everything is easily resolved by transposing the historical reality of the facts of revelation onto metahistorical planes (Muhammad, 'Allī, etc. = First Creature): it is here, and not in a humanistic rationalism, that the secret of Shaikhī symbolism lies.

92 Ahsâ‘ī, Risāla, 278.
93 Ahsâ‘ī, Risāla, 191.
95 See the explicit condemnation of Ismā‘īlīs by none other than the influential formulator of ‘orthodox’ Shi‘ī wasbat al-unjūd, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī La Philosophie Shi‘îte: 1. Sommes des doctrines ésotériques (Jām‘ al-‘asrār) 2. Traité de la connaissance de l’Être (2nd edn: Tehran, 1989) 47, 217, 221, 238, 388 (textes publiés avec une double introduction et un index par H. Corbin and O. Yahia, introduction traduit en persan par Seyyed Javād Ṭabātabāi, Centre de Publications Scientifiques et Culturelles et Institut Français de Recherche en Iran (vol. 16 of Bibliothèque Iranienne, dirigée par H. Corbin (1905–1978) first published in 1968)). The main criticism is against their tendency to consider the bātin (i.e. wakliya, i.e. ‘Allī) greater than the zāhir (i.e. ṭabwaw, i.e. Muhammad).
96 I am grateful to the British Institute of Persian Studies for a grant that enabled me to pursue research pertinent to this chapter.

8

ANTI-AKHBĀRĪ
SENTIMENTS AMONG THE QAJAR ‘ULAMĀ’

The case of Muḥammad Bāqir al-Khwānsārī (d.1313/1895)

Andrew J. Newman

My 1992 article on the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī polemic noted that in his biographical work Rawḍat al-jammāt Muḥammad Bāqir al-Khwānsārī (d.1313/1895) abridged into 29 the original 40 points of disagreement between the two schools as listed by ‘Abd Allāh al-Samāḥi (d.1133/1723) in his Mun‘ayt al-mumārīsīn.1 Reliance on al-Khwānsārī’s abridgement, which omitted key details on the nature of the dispute in the late eleventh/seventeenth and early twelfth/eighteenth century, could only have left readers with the impression that the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī dispute was an essentially esoteric debate over finer points of jurisprudence with few, if any, implications for the broader, practical life of the community. The very few extant copies of al-Samāḥi’s original suggests it may not have been that widely available and that for too many the abridgement may have become the authoritative version.2

Conventional accounts of the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī dispute highlight the series of attacks against the Akhbārīyya by Aqā Muḥammad Bāqir al-Bibbīhānī (d.1203/1791), himself a ‘reformed’ Akhbārī, and suggest that following the murder of Mīrāẓ Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Nabī al-Naysābūrī in 1233/1818 ‘the Akhbārīyya disappeared almost completely’.3 Such an account of the Akhbārī demise suggests little ostensible reason for al-Khwānsārī, later in the same century, to have been so concerned with the polemic as to have given anything less than a completely accurate, i.e. unabridged, account of al-Samāḥi’s discussion of the key points of disagreement between the two schools prevailing nearly two centuries before. In fact, however, it is arguable that Akhbarism, so often seen as originating in the Safavid period, never attracted so much attention within Twelver Shi‘ism, or generated so much enmity and rancour, as after the Safavid period, and most especially after the death of Naysābūrī.4

The present chapter suggests that al-Khwānsārī’s concern with, and hostility towards, Akhbarism is also evident elsewhere in Rawḍat al-jammāt
RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN QAJAR IRAN

Edited by Robert Gleave

Proceedings of the conference held on 4-6 September 2000 in Bristol and jointly organised by Bristol University (Department of Theology and Religious Studies), The British Institute of Persian Studies, The Iran Heritage Foundation, The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the University of Bristol Faculty of Arts.
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