

Ibn ‘Arabī in Contemporary Iran: Some Currents and Debates¹

Çağdaş İran’da İbn Arabî: Bazı Akım ve Tartışmalar

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Abstract

Iran’s historical and complicated social situation has led to diverse attitudes toward Sufism and interpretations of Ibn ‘Arabī’s legacy. Many of Ibn ‘Arabī’s prominent followers and commentators were originally from Iran; however, many of his notable opponents were also from Iran. These two historical currents of followers and opponents of Ibn ‘Arabī are still quite alive. Other currents with unique attitudes toward Ibn ‘Arabī also have been established recently in Iran. In this article, different attitudes towards Ibn ‘Arabī in contemporary Iran are presented and contextualized. Attitudes represent not only the scholarly tendencies of Iranian academics and Islamic scholars but also their role in forming diverse collective identities.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī, Akbarian tradition, Sufism, Sufism in Iran, Iranian Studies, Sufi studies.

Özet

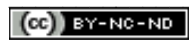
İran’ın tarihsel ve karışık sosyal durumu, tasavvufa ve İbn Arabî’nin mirasının yorumlanmasına yönelik farklı tutumların ortaya çıkmasına neden olmuştur. İbn Arabî’nin önde gelen takipçilerinin ve yorumcularının çoğu İran kökenlidir; ancak önemli muhaliflerinin çoğu da yine İranlıdır. İbn Arabî takipçileri ve muhaliflerinden oluşan bu iki tarihsel akım hâlâ oldukça canlıdır. Yakın

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zamanda İran’da İbn Arabî’ye yönelik özgün tutumları olan başka akımlar da ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu makale, çağdaş İran’daki İbn Arabî’ye yönelik farklı tutumları sunmayı ve kavramsallaştırmayı hedeflemektedir. Sözü edilen tutumlar sadece İranlı akademisyenlerin ve İslam âlimlerinin ilmî eğilimlerini değil, aynı zamanda farklı kolektif kimliklerin oluşumundaki rollerini de temsil etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn Arabî, Ekberî gelenek, tasavvuf, İran’da tasavvuf, İran araştırmaları, tasavvuf araştırmaları.

Introduction

Although several academic studies have been published on Sufi Studies in the West, specifically in North America,² the current status of Sufi studies, particularly Ibn ‘Arabî studies, in Iran, has been neglected in academic literature.

This brief study is restricted to a more specific field, that is to say Ibn ‘Arabî studies, and to the short period after Iran’s 1979 revolution and so far. Major currents regarding their contribution to Ibn ‘Arabî studies and their role in interpreting and opposing him are considered. I have limited my scope to some more currently influential figures, which means that some other figures were excluded, who are still worth considering. In addition to studying and contextualizing some intellectual currents, a hotly debated polemic will also be discussed and contextualized, a polemic that plays an extensive role in forming the Shia mentality concerning Ibn ‘Arabî.

The Legacy of Tehran University

A scholarly current emerged in the mid-twentieth century at the University of Tehran,³ focusing on literary aspects of Sufism. Works of Badî‘ al-Zamān Forūzānfar (d. 1970), Jalāluddīn Homāyī (d. 1980), and their students and colleagues, such as ‘Abd al-Ḥossein Zarrīnkoob (d. 1999)⁴

² Alexander Knysh, “Historiography of Sufi studies in the West and in Russia,” *Written Monuments of The Orient*, 4 (2006): 206-238; Marcia Hermansen, “The Academic Study of Sufism at American Universities,” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 24, 3 (2007):24-45; Atif Khalil & Shiraz Sheikh, “Sufism in Western Historiography: A Brief Overview,” *Philosophy East and West* 66, 1(2016), 194-217.

³ Hossein Kamaly, *God and Man in Tehran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 168.

⁴ Zarrīnkoob is the author of an important book-length article, among many others, on Persian Sufism.

A. H. Zarrīnkoob, “Persian Sufism in Its Historical Perspective,” *Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies* 3, 3-4 (1970): 139-220.

brought some already well-known Sufis such as Jalāluddīn Muḥammad Balkhī Rūmī (d. 1273) and ‘Attār of Nīshāpūr (d. 1221), a famous Sufi poet, into scholarly attention.

These forefathers of the academic study of Sufism at Tehran University were mainly trained in Persian literature and their prime objective was critical editing of Persian Sufi literary works,⁵ history of Persian literature, literary criticism, and composing monographs on some Persian Sufi figures. The legacy of Tehran University’s academics, their tendency toward critical text editing, their emphasis on the Persianate aspects of Sufism, and their concentration on the aesthetic elements of Sufism, passed to the next generation. Among others, these three figures are worth considering due to their undeniable influence on academic Sufi studies in contemporary Iran.

Moḥammad ‘Alī Movaḥed (b. 1924) is usually known for his works on Rūmī and Shams. Besides *the Discourses of Shams al-Tabrīzī (Maqālāt-e Shams-e Tabrīzī)*, he made a critical edition on *Mathnavī*. In 2006, an annotated translation and commentary of the first ten chapters of *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* was published by Moḥammad ‘Alī Movaḥed in collaboration with his brother, Ṣamad Movaḥed. His translation and comments on *Fuṣūṣ* have made it more accessible to a wide range of readers. Movaḥed’s translation starts with a lengthy introduction to Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, and Akbarian tradition; an introduction which well-represents his attitude towards Ibn ‘Arabī. Although he does not express sympathy for Ibn ‘Arabī and his commentators, he acknowledges his intellectual character.⁶

Movaḥed’s criticisms fall into two categories. His criticism of Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutics is quite accustomed and familiar: “Ibn ‘Arabī vacates the texts and quotations which he cites from every simple and sensible meaning.”⁷

To be more straightforward, Movaḥed holds that Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutics led to the misinterpretation of holy texts, and therefore, he and his followers put their own words in the

⁵ The modern method of critical manuscript editing was introduced to Iranian by the late Mohammad Qazvini (d. 1949).

⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al- Ḥikam*, trans. Moḥammad ‘Alī Movaḥed & Ṣamad Movaḥed (Tehran: Kārnāmeḥ: 1400 sh./2021), 111.

⁷ Ibid., 53.

mouth of God and his Prophet.⁸ Beside questioning Ibn ‘Arabī’s hermeneutics, Movaḥed expresses his antipathy towards Ibn ‘Arabī’s language and style by comparing him with one of the most well-known representatives of Persian Sufism, ‘Aṭṭār of Nīshāpūr: “‘Aṭṭār’s expression, unlike Ibn ‘Arabī, is infused with love and enthusiasm. Ibn ‘Arabī’s problematic praise in *Futūḥāt*, ‘Praise whom he manifested things and he is identical with them’ is insipid, arid, and cold to be just indeed.”⁹

Neglecting Ibn ‘Arabī’s enthusiastic poems and writings,¹⁰ he extends his criticism of Ibn ‘Arabī’s language to his followers, whom he calls “Ibn ‘Arabīsts”: “Regretfully writing in an obscure language [...] was the most convenient thing that Ibn ‘Arabī’s disciples learned from him.”¹¹

Nearly the same unsympathetic approach towards Ibn ‘Arabī repeats itself in the writings of **Moḥammad-Rezā Shafī‘i Kadkanī** (b. 1939), who is perhaps the most well-known Persian literature scholar of the time. He studied at the Mashhad seminary¹², the Ferdowsī and Tehran Universities. His works are mainly associated with ‘Aṭṭār and some other important Persian poets.

Kadkanī distinguishes between two types of Sufism in his writings: *Hurāsānī*¹³ and Ibn ‘Arabī Sufism, a distinction which he considers as “the first major contrast”¹⁴ in the history of Sufism: “*Hurāsānī ‘erfān*¹⁵ is an aesthetic attitude toward religion; a religion that has both worldly and otherworldly aspects, a religion that has both inward and outward aspects. But Ibn Arabī’s *‘erfān* is an aesthetic attitude toward a religion, which merely cares about the invisible world [...] and neglects the human world thoroughly.”¹⁶

⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰ Besides numerous poems scattered in his writings, Ibn ‘Arabī’s *The Translator of Desires* (*Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*) is notable in this respect, which is a collection of romantic poems. Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Translator of Desires*, ed. & trans. Michael Sells (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2021).

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² As it will be discussed, the Mashhad seminary is one of the most important strongholds of anti-philosophers in Iran, one could arguably express that Kadkanī’s tendency towards non-metaphysical aspects of Sufism rooted in his intellectual background.

¹³ *Hurāsān* is the name of a great region in the north east of Iran.

¹⁴ Moḥammad-Rezā Shafī‘i Kadkanī, *Zabāne she ‘r dar nashr-e sufiyye* (Tehran: Soḥan, 1392 sh./2013), 362.

¹⁵ The mere transliteration of Persian pronunciation of “‘*irfān*” have used intentionally to emphasize that, as we are going to see, using “*taṣawwūf*” is uncommon among the majority of Iranian academics and even Ibn ‘Arabī scholars of seminary.

¹⁶ Ibid., 519.

The question is not whether this dichotomy, which will be discussed more, is valid from a historical perspective, whatever we mean by “validity.” My main consideration here is the intentionality of this dichotomy and its role in the formation of Ibn ‘Arabī studies in contemporary Iran.

The formal and aesthetic dimensions of Sufi texts play a significant role in Kadkanī’s understanding of Sufism.¹⁷ According to him, *Hurāsānī ‘erfān* or Sufism is an “artistic approach to theology or religion,”¹⁸ therefore Western/Akbarian Sufism, which, from his perspective, lacks artistic or aesthetic value is dismissed as an absurd or, at best, an irrelevant form of Sufism.

Kadkanī criticizes Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical approach to Sufism, which, according to him, results in detachment from everyday life of human beings. This detachment from the human world and tendency toward the invisible, non-humanly world drives Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufism toward an obscure and non-humanly language:

Hurāsānī ‘erfān offers many values for contemporary human beings: It reduces bigotry, it praises unconditional philanthropy, and it extinguishes the fire of human egoism, to relieve its desolater flames [...] But the ‘*erfān*’ which is usually presented in Iran [...] will corrupt the Iranian race and will not leave any place for reason, human will, and human agency. [Ibn ‘Arabī’s] ‘*erfān*’ is a limitless collection of wordplays; it is a ‘*erfān*’ which its followers can watch thousands of youths and olds be slaughtered and then explicate that: ‘it was the manifestation of God’s one-onliness (*aḥadiyya*) as the name of avenger (*qahhār*) [...] or other nonsenses which a computer can make up a billion of them.’¹⁹

Much like his elder colleague, he acknowledges the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s language in later Sufism as “the most important and the very last gradation in the language of Sufism,”²⁰ although he criticizes the Ibn ‘Arabī’s vague language.

¹⁷ His formalistic approach towards Sufi texts, and the way in which he considers them as literary devices is rooted in his enthusiasm for the Russian School of formalism. Moḥammad-Reżā Shafī‘i Kadkanī, *Rastāḥīz-e Kalamāt (Resurrection of Words: Lectures in the Literary Theory of Russian Formalists)*, (Tehran: Soḥan, 1391 sh./2012).

¹⁸ Kadkanī, *Zabāne she‘r*, 78.

¹⁹ Ibid., 99-100.

²⁰ Ibid., 150.

Like the two previous members of this scholarly current, **Nasrollah Pourjavady** (b. 1943) concentrates on non-metaphysical²¹ aspects of Sufism. His scholarly attitude is historical rather than philological and formalistic. Most of Pourjavady's deep and vast works concentrate on pre-Ibn 'Arabī Persianate Sufism, which he usually calls neo-*Hallājī* Sufism.

Although he admits the essential role of *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* in Sufism, he does not hesitate to question one of the most fundamental claims of Ibn 'Arabī's in *Fuṣūṣ*:²² "Ibn 'Arabī's claim should not deceive us [...] his imagination made up an angel or invisible messenger, it is not the case that someone dictated him a book [...] that is a literary device which he used."²³

Although Ibn 'Arabī's claim could be understood and contextualized as a way of representing and asserting a God-given spiritual and epistemic authority, it does not logically follow that the whole story is a fictional work of Ibn 'Arabī's creative imagination. His claim could be true, and at the same time, it could play a symbolic and epistemic role in legitimizing his *Fuṣūṣ*.

Following the same line in demystifying Ibn 'Arabī, he argues that Ibn 'Arabī was heavily influenced by his primary sources:

Ibn 'Arabī, with all his glory, just as any other authors [...] repeated the mistakes of his sources, and sometimes because of relaying on unreliable copies, he added some mistakes to the mistakes of his sources [...] besides quoting these mistakes, he tried to justify those mistakes by fantasizing about them.²⁴

²¹ The distinction between metaphysical and non-metaphysical aspects of a phenomenon such as Sufism sounds problematic, since they are quite interconnected.

²² Ibn 'Arabī in his introduction to *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* asserts that he received *Fuṣūṣ* from Prophet Moḥammad: "I saw God's Messenger in a vision during the latter part of the month of Muḥarram in the year 627 (1229) in Damascus. Seizing in his hand a book, he said to me: 'This is kitāb *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*; take it and bring it to people so that they might benefit from it. I said: 'I hear and obey God, His Messenger and those in authority among us as we are commanded.' Therefore, I implemented the Messenger's wish with sincere intention and pure aim and aspiration and made this book manifest as God's Messenger determined without increase or decrease." (Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, trans. Binyamin Abrahamov (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 14.)

²³ The transcription of his speech about Mowāḥed's translation of *Fuṣūṣ* is published at the end to Mowāḥed's translation. See Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 731.

²⁴ Nasrollah Pourjavady, "Seyre İştelâḥâte Şufiyan az 'Nahj al-Ḥāṣe Abumānşūr İşfehānī tā Futūḥâte Ibn 'Arabī," *Ma'āref* 48 (1999): 51.

As he put forward, Ibn ‘Arabī’s works are rooted in prior Sufi texts. Therefore, they are not rooted in his mystical visions to some extent. Much like the two abovementioned scholars, he criticizes Ibn ‘Arabi’s language and terms as arid and uninspired.²⁵

In terms of their presumptions in the study of Sufism, the mentioned scholars are perfectly aligned with the early orientalist who, as Carl Ernst observes, understood Sufism “as a spiritual movement that reached its apogee during the medieval period of Islamic history, with its crowning achievement being the *brilliant* literary productions in Arabic and Persian that became the classics of the Sufi tradition.”²⁶ Considering the classical period of Sufism, in which the great literary works of Sufism were composed, as the so-called “golden age” of Sufism,²⁷ roots in reducing Sufi tradition merely to its literary heritage and neglecting its other cultural manifestations.

This tendency towards monopolizing literary texts as the source of understanding Sufism originated in the background, training, and intellectual tendencies of the aforementioned scholars. Their mastery, specifically of the first two figures, in Persian literature has led them to prioritize Persian sources over Arabic and others.²⁸ Their emphasis on the Persianate manifestations of Sufism, accompanied by so-called non-metaphysical aspects, has led them to a profoundly critical approach toward Ibn ‘Arabī. This is because he was neither a Persian speaker or writer, nor was his writing as lucid or non-metaphysical as that of others.

Dividing Sufism into two geographical parts as Eastern/*Hurāsānī* Sufism and Western/Akbarian Sufism, ends up neglecting the aesthetic aspect of Western/Akbarian Sufism and on the other hand the metaphysical dimension of so-called Eastern/*Hurāsānī* Sufism.

²⁵ Nasrollah Pourjavady, *Qūt-e Del wa Nūše Jān* (Tehran: Nashr-e Now, 2019), 349.

²⁶ Carl Ernst, *It’s Not Just Academic! Essays on Sufism and Islamic Studies* (Tamil Nadu: Sage, 2018), 391.

²⁷ Kadkanī expresses: “With the decline of language (i.e. literally value of texts) in Sufi works, Sufis’ spiritually declined [...] it’s quite ridiculous to assert that a Sufi had an elevated spiritual status, but his literary language is lacking creativity and passion [...] as Sufi texts indicate from 12-13th centuries and so on there is nearly nothing new in Sufism.” (Kadkanī, *Zabāne*, 245-6, 261)

²⁸ As Ernst justly asserts: “The study of Sufism also tended to privilege the ‘classical’ sources in Arabic and Persian over the ‘folk’ manifestations of Sufism in Turkish, Urdu, and other.” (Ernst, *It’s Not Just Academic*, 392) In the case of mentioned scholars, even Arabic sources usually stands out of their scope.

It should be clear by now that my intention is not to show that these simplistic dichotomies (classical/non-classical, Eastern/Western) are invalid from a historical perspective, which I think actually are. I intended to emphasize the function and role of these dichotomies in contextualizing scholars' understanding of Sufism and Ibn 'Arabī. In contemporary Iran, Ibn 'Arabī is the subject of not only the academic attention but also non-scholarly intentions.

An Ideological Return to Ibn 'Arabī

The need to form a whole new Islamic identity and legitimize Iran's 1979 revolution brought some neglected dimensions of Islamic culture to the attention of ideologues. As Kamaly put forward: "After the 1979 revolution, *'erfān* provided a framework for legitimizing the modern nation-state [of Iran]."²⁹ A nation-state whose opposing with the "West" is an essential part of its identity.

Among many ideologues of the Islamic Republic of Iran, **Aṣḡar Ṭāher-Zādeh** (b. 1951) is considerable for his deep compassion with Ibn 'Arabī, as he is the only ideologue in favor of Iran's revolution who wrote a commentary on *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. In challenging the "West," which, according to Ṭāher-Zādeh, represents humanism and materialism, he relies on the mystical dimension of Islam: "The *'erfān* of Ibn 'Arabī can deliver us from modernity. In encountering with West and returning to Islam, *'erfān* should be considered."³⁰

Ṭāher-Zādeh, after studying geology, fell under the influence of Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989), and he studied Islamic sciences, specifically theoretical mysticism (*'erfān-e naẓarī*)³¹ and Islamic philosophy, on his own. Composing more than 70 books, nearly half of which are concerned with Iran's revolution and the West, and giving lectures on a weekly basis have made Ṭāher-Zādeh the most active and famous intellectual heir of Aḥmad Fardīd (d. 1994) in Iran. Ṭāher-Zādeh blended Fardīd's legacy, which was a fusion of Martin Heidegger's philosophy and Ibn 'Arabī's philosophical Sufism, and his discourse of Westoxication,³² with his deep sympathy for Iran's 1979

²⁹ Kamaly, *God and Man*, 172.

³⁰ Aṣḡar Ṭāher-Zadeh, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Isfahan: Lobb al-Mīzān, 1399 sh./2020), 10-11.

³¹ Philosophical Sufism is usually called *'erfān-e naẓarī* (theoretical mysticism) in Iran.

³² For Aḥmad Fardīd and his discourse and legacy, see Ali Mirsepassi, *Iran's Troubled Modernity; Debating Ahmad Fardid's Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

revolution, which he ([i.e.,] Ṭāher-Zādeh) considers “the Reality of this epoch” and “self-disclosure of the Being.”³³

Using Ibn ‘Arabī’s *‘erfān*, Ṭāher-Zādeh intends to pass from the state of Westoxication, which “is ignorance of West’s essence, an ignorance which ends up in self-alienation,”³⁴ and return to Islam, an Islam which manifested in Khomeini, who is “the holy intellect of the contemporary epoch.”³⁵ A return which is “nor possible with Salafism and neither with following the West”³⁶ but with considering Ibn ‘Arabī’s *‘erfān*.

Ideologizing Ibn ‘Arabī to create an Islamic and anti-Western identity contrasts with the tendency of some scholars to form an “Iranian” identity.³⁷ It’s considerable to note that both currents use Ibn ‘Arabī in making identities: Ṭāher-Zādeh by ideologizing him and using his language and terms, the latter, Movaḥed and Kadkanī, by underestimating and neglecting him.³⁸

Continuity of Akbarian Tradition: Ibn ‘Arabī in Iran’s Shia Seminaries

Although Shia seminaries of Iran have been anti-Sufi strongholds, specifically after the Safavid era,³⁹ the deep compassion of Iran’s 1979 revolution leader, Ruhollah Khomeini with Ibn ‘Arabī, and Seyed Muḥammad Ḥusein Ṭabāṭabāī’s (d. 1981) efforts in teaching Islamic philosophy and mysticism, constructed a circle in the Shia seminary of Qom which somehow supported unofficially Iran’s government as well.⁴⁰ However, it should be emphasized that although the

³³ Aşgar Ṭāher-Zadeh, *Güş Sepurdan be Nedaye Bī-şedaye Enqelābe Islāmī* (Isfahan: Lobb al-Mīzān, 1398 sh./2019), 23-24.

³⁴ Aşgar Ṭāher-Zadeh, *Enqelābe Islāmī va Jahāne Gom-shode* (Isfahan: Lobb al-Mīzān, 1399 sh./2020), 40.

³⁵ Aşgar Ṭāher-Zadeh, *Sulūk zeyl shaḥṣṣīyat emam Khomeini* (Isfahan: Lobb al-Mīzān, 1390 sh./2011), 55.

³⁶ Aşgar Ṭāher-Zadeh, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ*, p 12.

³⁷ Ṭāher-Zadeh’s ideological return to Ibn ‘Arabī could be contextualized in the terms of the efforts of Iran’s state in constructing so-called Islamic humanities versus Western humanities, which is considered as a part and parcel of establishing a grand Islamic civilization.

³⁸ It is notable that this phenomenon was accrued in Indian Subcontinent too, where opposing Ibn ‘Arabī, by emphasizing on Sirhindī, used to fulfil a growing sense of Muslim ideological considerations. (See William C. Chittick, “Waḥdat al-wujūd in India,” *Ishraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook*, 3 (2012): 29-40.)

³⁹ As Asghari and others point out: “the post-Safavid inclination of the Shī‘ī seminaries has been officially dominated by opponents of Sufism.” (Seyyed Amir Hossein Asghari, “Replacing Sharī‘a, Ṭarīqa and Ḥaqīqa with Fiqh, Akhlāq and Tawḥīd,” *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 9 (2020): 203.)

⁴⁰ In efforts to legitimizing Iran’s state founded numerous institutions in the past 40 years in Iran. Take *Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute* as way of example, which was founded by Moḥammad-Taqī Meşbah-Yazdī (d. 2021), an institute which financially promoted by Iran’s government.

government somehow supports them, they are still the minority in the Shia seminary, and the currents against Sufism and philosophy, as will be discussed, have the upper hand.

In addition to some books and treatises on theoretical and practical mysticism based on Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufism,⁴¹ Khomeini expressed his sympathy for Ibn ‘Arabī in his lectures on *Surat al-Fātiḥa*,⁴² courses which were broadcasted by Iran’s official national television; the lectures stopped after five sessions at the request of some of Mashhad’s ‘ulamā. In addition to his lectures, his acknowledgment of Ibn ‘Arabī is evident in his letter to Mikhail Gorbachev.⁴³

The tradition of teaching and learning Akbarian works constructed a chain of ‘*erfān*’ masters in Iran, specifically in Isfahan and Tehran and then in Qom.⁴⁴ The characteristic of these ‘*erfān*’ teachers was their mastery on Islamic philosophy, particularly on the transcendental philosophy of Mūllā Ṣadrā and the writings of later followers of Ibn ‘Arabī. There is not a clear distinction between philosophy and ‘*erfān*’, and subsequently between a philosopher and ‘*āref*’ (gnostic) in this tradition. It sounds surprising but the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī himself has been scarcely read in Iran, he is rather known through the works of his later followers such as Dāwūd Qayṣarī’s commentary on *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, which provides a highly philosophical account of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufism. Notably, this integration between philosophy and Sufism is also manifested in the later history of this tradition.

Seyed Muḥammad Ḥusein Ṭabāṭabāī’s significant role in transmitting philosophy and ‘*erfān*’ should not be underestimated. Besides composing several books and treatises on Mūllā Ṣadrā’s

⁴¹ Besides, he composed super-commentaries on *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* and Fanārī’s *Miṣbāḥ al-Uns*.

⁴² For study of Khomeini and his reception of Sufism, see Alexander Knysh, “‘Irfān’ Revisited: Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy,” *Middle East Journal* 46, 4 (1992): 631-653.

⁴³ “I will not tire you further by mentioning the works of mystics, in particular Muḥyi’-d-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabī. If you wish to make yourself acquainted with the doctrines of this celebrated mystic, send a number of your brilliant scholars, who are well-versed in this field, to Qum so that, by reliance on God, they may glimpse the depth of the delicate stages of gnosis after a couple of years. It would be impossible for them to acquire this knowledge without making such a journey.” (<http://emam.com/posts/view/4129>)

⁴⁴ For a study of some of key figures of this tradition, see Reza Pourjavady, *Philosophy in Qajar Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

philosophy⁴⁵ and ‘*erfān*, he is the central connecting ring of Seyed ‘Alī Qāzī’s (d. 1947) circle with the Qom Seminary.

Ṭabāṭabāī was initiated into Sufism, or ‘*erfān*, by Seyed ‘Alī Qāzī. Qāzī’s spiritual lineage goes back to Seyed ‘Alī Shūshtarī (d. 1864), who was the disciple of Ṣadr al-Dīn Kāshef al-Dezfūlī (d. 1842), who was a *Dahabī* Sufī master and a disciple of Muḥammad Bīdābādī (d. 1783).⁴⁶ The followers of this spiritual order usually conceal their connections with *Dahabī* and other Sufi orders to prevent accusations of anti-Sufis of the seminary.⁴⁷ In doing so, they prefer not to use the term “Sufi” in naming themselves; instead, they prefer to be called “‘*āref*.” This phenomenon is rooted in hot Safavid polemics over Sufism,⁴⁸ which are still common today, even after the revolution in Iran.

Ṭabāṭabāī’s tendency toward Ibn ‘Arabī and Islamic philosophy passed through his students, specifically Ḥassan Ḥassan-Zādeh Āmolī (d. 2021) and ‘Abdollāh Javādī Āmolī (b. 1933), to the next generation. Nowadays, most distinguished ‘*erfān* and philosophy teachers of Qom Seminary are their students.

Metaphysical discussions are still pretty alive and hotly debated even in 21st-century Iran’s seminaries.⁴⁹ The aforementioned current should not be regarded as an academic phenomenon; rather, it should be considered as a continuation of a long-standing tradition within the field of philosophy, commonly referred to as ‘philosophical Sufism, Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabī followers such as Qūnawī (d. 1274), Kashānī (d. 1335), and Qayṣarī (d. 1350). The essential characteristic of this current is their philosophical attitude towards Ibn ‘Arabī.

⁴⁵ Two philosophical books that seminary students have to read, *Bidayat al-Ḥikma* and *Nihayat al-Ḥikma*, was composed by him.

⁴⁶ Asghari, “Replacing Sharī‘a, Ṭarīqa and Ḥaqīqa with Fiqh, Akhlāq and Tawḥīd,” 207.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁸ For the historical roots of this transformation, see Ata Anzali, *Mysticism in Iran: The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept* (University of South Carolina Press: Columbia, 2017).

⁴⁹ As Toshihiko Izutsu observed, “Eastern scholasticism has had a much longer life [...] than its Western counterpart. Metaphysical problems raised long ago in the Middle Ages were still being hotly discussed and seriously considered in the nineteenth century [and they are still being discussed].” Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Fundamental Structure of Sabzewari’s Metaphysics* (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 2000), 11.

Perhaps the most well-known and distinguished master of philosophy and theoretical mysticism in Qom is Seyed Yadullāh Yazdān-Panāh (b. 1963), one of Ḥassan-Zādeh and Javādī Āmolī's disciple/students, who composed several books on Islamic philosophy and *'erfān*, including a lengthy groundbreaking book on theoretical mysticism.⁵⁰ His philosophical approach to Ibn 'Arabī is evident in the introduction of his book: "In our seminary tradition, students study theoretical mysticism after philosophy [...] specifically after studying teachings of Mūllā Ṣadrā in *Asfār* [i.e., Mūllā Ṣadrā's major philosophical book]."⁵¹

It may not sound appropriate to put Mūllā Ṣadrā before Ibn 'Arabī, for he not only lived hundreds of years before Mūllā Ṣadrā, but also became an inspiration to him as he drew upon Ibn 'Arabī's teachings in developing his own transcendental philosophy. But Yazdān-Panāh's traditionalistic approach⁵² to Islamic intellectual history allowed him to do so. On legitimizing this seemingly undermined curriculum, Yazdān-Panāh expresses: "The depth and complexity of theoretical *'erfān* from one hand, and the role of Mūllā Ṣadrā's teachings in understanding theoretical mysticism from another hand [...]"⁵³ are two factors that justify this curriculum. Yazdān-Panāh's account of the history of theoretical mysticism should be illustrated to explicate the role of Mūllā Ṣadrā in understanding Ibn 'Arabī:

The history of theoretical mysticism can be divided into three eras: the first era, from the beginning [of Sufism] to Ibn 'Arabī [...] second era was the era of Muḥyeddīn mystical school, which began with Ibn 'Arabī [...] by whom theoretical mysticism was presented as a coherent and majestic system and reached to the perfection. With the emergence of Mūllā Ṣadrā's transcendental philosophy, a third era of theoretical mysticism began. The significant characteristic of the third era is the total adaption of philosophy and theoretical mysticism.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Seyyed Yadullāh Yazdān-Panāh, *Mabānī wa Uṣūle 'erfāne Naẓarī* (Qom: Moasseseye Imam Khomeini, 2014).

⁵¹ Ibid., 21.

⁵² By "traditionalistic approach" I do not refer to the school of Traditionalism, founded by French philosopher René Guénon (d. 1951), although methodologically speaking they seem quite similar. I merely mean a historical approach which neglects the history, context, and genealogy of ideas, and consider them as universal and ever-lasting truths which are being repeated throughout the history. Holding this position, Yazdān-Panāh can confidently assert that there is no need to study Mūllā Ṣadrā in the light of Ibn 'Arabī, since somehow both of them are expressing relatively same things, although with distinct expressions.

⁵³ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁴ Seyyed Yadullāh Yazdān-Panāh, *Muḥtaṣāte Ḥekmate Mut'ālīye* (Qom: Āle Aḥmad, 2020), 409-10.

According to Yazdān-Panāh, Mūllā Ṣadrā philosophized Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘*erfān*; the transcendental philosophy of Mūllā Ṣadrā is a synthesis of philosophy and theoretical mysticism, Yazdān-Panāh sums up the attempts of Mūllā Ṣadrā in presenting a philosophized ‘*erfān* as such:

Mūllā Ṣadrā, with coining new terms and bringing already coined philosophical terms into perfection [...] made the way to express the mystical teachings. Secondly, the principal foundations of his philosophy, such as the primacy of Being (*iṣalate wujūd*), gradation of Being (*tashkīk wujūd*), and [...] the personal oneness of Being (*waḥdate shaḥsī wujūd*), seem quite adequate for expressing mystical teachings, and they were principally designed for this purpose.⁵⁵

To sum up, seminary scholastics can be considered as the continuity of Akbarian philosophical Sufism.⁵⁶ They concentrate on the metaphysical aspects of Sufism rather than the aesthetic aspects. Ibn ‘Arabī often considered a philosopher by them. Mysticism and philosophy are unified in this current, so we cannot easily distinguish between philosophy and mysticism. Using ‘*erfān* instead of Sufism, they try to differentiate between themselves and the Sufis to be preserved from ‘*ulamā*.

Ibn ‘Arabī and ‘*Ulamā*

Although historically speaking we can distinguish between anti-Sufis and Ibn ‘Arabī’s opponents, this is not usually the case in contemporary Iran. In addition, Ibn ‘Arabī’s opponents in Iran often have intense antipathy towards Islamic philosophy. The Sufi-‘*ulamā* controversy is quite fierce in contemporary Iran, a controversy that dates back to the Safavid era.⁵⁷ This debate can be contextualized as the Shia ‘*ulamā*’s tendency to monopolize their religious perspective and, therefore, their power. Even after Iran’s revolution, the traditional side of the Shia seminary, either in Iraq or in Iran, has not changed its attitude toward Sufism.

⁵⁵ Yazdān-Panāh, *Mabānī*, 59.

⁵⁶ Yazdān-Panāh is not alone in presenting a philosophized account of Ibn ‘Arabī. The continuity of philosophical Sufism can be traced to other seminaries such as Isfahan, Mashhad, and specifically Tehran. Few masters are left in the long-standing philosophical and mystical school of Tehran, among whom Gholamreza Avani (b. 1943) and Manūcheher Ṣadūqī Sohā (b. 1948) are worth mentioning. The essential role of Iranian Research Institute of Philosophy, founded by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) in 1974, in reviving philosophical Sufism in Tehran should not be underestimated. The Akbarian tradition continued in Mashhad through the well-known philosophers Seyed Jalāluddīn Aṣṭīyānī (d. 2005) and Seyed Muḥammad Husein Tehrānī (d. 1995), who was a student/disciple of Seyed Muḥammad Husein Ṭabāṭabāī and Seyed Hāshem Ḥaddād (d. 1984). Tehrānī’s intense sympathy for Ibn ‘Arabī passed to his sons and from his older son to Muḥammad Ḥasan Vakīlī (b. 1980), one of the most active *Maktab-e Tafkīk*’s opponents in Mashhad.

⁵⁷ For historical basis of this conflict, see Reza Tabandeh, *The Rise of the Ni‘matullāhī Order* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021), 47.

Iran's government, distinguishing between Sufism and 'erfān, and interpreting Sufism as a false 'erfān,⁵⁸ supports Shia 'ulamā's antipathy to Sufism.⁵⁹ 'Ulamā's intense dissent to Sufism is crystal clear from their *Fatāwā*.

Seyed 'Alī Sistānī (b. 1930), the most well-known, respected, and influential Shia source of emulation (*marja*'), is originally from Mashhad. Although he lives outside Iran, his authority over Iran's alleged orthodox Shias is undeniable. In a question and answer issued a few years ago,⁶⁰ Sistānī expressed his attitude toward Ibn 'Arabī as follows:

Question: You are sincerely demanded to give your opinion regarding the 'erfān of *Fuṣūṣ*'s author [i.e. Ibn 'Arabī].

Answer: I believe in the way of great Twelver 'ulamā [...], which corresponds with the Quranic verses and the *Ahl al-Bayt*'s sayings [...], and I do not admit the above-mentioned way.⁶¹

By highlighting the identification of 'ulamā's way and the Qur'ān and *hadīth*, Sistānī asserts the unorthodoxy of Sufism and points out that he is not alone in opposing Ibn 'Arabī and Sufism.

'Ulamā's negative attitude towards Sufism evident in their *Fatāwā* does not conclude with Ibn 'Arabī. They regularly express their intense antipathy toward Sufism, even toward some famous and popular figures such as Rūmī, whenever they observe a slight tendency toward Sufism, specifically among the masses. The role of the sources of emulation should not be underestimated, for these kinds of *Fatāwā* play an extensive role in forming the typical Shia mentality.⁶²

⁵⁸ As Anzali put forward: "The regime has become increasingly obsessed with drawing clear and fast boundaries between "genuine," Khomeini-style 'irfan and "pseudo-'irfans." (Anzali, *Mysticism in Iran*, 6).

⁵⁹ The Supreme leader of Iran is a source of emulation himself with seemingly not interest in Sufism. In the past decades Sufis have been repressed by Iran's regime, As Anzali addressed: "The first major clash between the regime and the orthodox Sufi networks happened in May 2006, when one of the most important Ni'matullahi centers, located in the holy city of Qum, was confiscated and razed to the ground in the aftermath of a bloody clash between the Ni'matullahi dervishes and the Basij militia." (Anzali, *Mysticism in Iran*, 7). Another bloody conflict between *Gonābādī* Sufis and regime took place in 2018 in Tehran.

⁶⁰ One of the most accessible ways for anti-Sufis to oppose with Sufis and Ibn 'Arabī, is to use the authority of the sources of emulations, therefore they ask for the source of emulation's idea on controversial topics and then they broadcast the answer.

⁶¹ "Official Website of Seyyed 'Alī Sistānī," accessed April 6, 2024, <https://www.sistani.org/persian/qa/02273/>.

⁶² In a considerable instance, a movie series about Mawlānā was stooped because of a source of emulation's interference, who called Sufis misguided and misleading and enemy of Shia Imams.

"Exploring Ibn Arabi," accessed April 6, 2024,

Makārem Shīrāzī (b. 1927) takes a step further and accuses the followers of *Wahdat al-Wujūd* (oneness of Being), a Sufi doctrine associated with Ibn ‘Arabī and the Akbarian tradition, of heresy:

Question: What is the oneness of Being, and what is the judicial status of who believes in it?
Answer: The oneness of Being has many meanings; what is invalid and believing it counts as heresy [...] is asserting that there is only one Being in the world and holding that God is identical with existents. And claims that there is no [duality between] creator and nor creatures, and there is no [duality between] worshipped and worshippers.⁶³

Although it is highly questionable that Ibn ‘Arabī considered the oneness of Being as such, the oneness of Being is often depicted in a rather exaggerated form and has been ascribed to Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers by *‘ulamā*.

Besides *‘ulamā*’s long-standing and influential approach, the school of Detachment is considerable in terms of its opposition to Ibn ‘Arabī. The term “*Maktab-e Tafkīk*” (the school of Detachment) was coined by Muḥammad Reḍa Hakīmī (d. 2021) to name the scholarly current of Mahdī Isfahānī (d. 1945) and his students in Mashhad.

Isfahānī experienced a life-changing mystical experience that caused a U-turn in his intellectual life. In his vision, he saw the twelfth Imam (*mahdī*) and received a letter from him, saying: “To not seek knowledge from our (*Ahl al-Bayt*) way is identical to denying us.”⁶⁴ He interpreted the phrase “not demanding knowledge from our way” as demanding knowledge from philosophy and mysticism, making him suddenly to turn his back on both. After spending seven years reconsidering his previous beliefs, he went to Mashhad in 1921 and started to give lectures on Islamic law and basics of jurisprudence and then theology. Isfahānī’s antipathy toward philosophy and Sufism was transferred to his students, among whom Mojtabā Qazvīnī (d. 1967) was the most notable, from whom the legacy of *Tafkīk* passed on to Seyed Ja‘far Seyyedān (b. 1934).

<https://ebnearabi.com/14640/%d8%a2%db%8c%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84%d9%87-%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%db%8c-%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%ae%d8%aa-%d9%81%db%8c%d9%84%d9%85-%d8%b4%d9%85%d8%b3-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa.html>

⁶³ “Official Website of Makārem Shīrāzī,” accessed April 6, 2024,

<https://makarem.ir/main.aspx?typeinfo=21&lid=0&catid=44744&mid=272784>.

⁶⁴ Mahdī Isfahānī, *Abvāb al-Hudā* (Mu‘seseye M‘āref Ahl al-Bayt: Qom, 2016), 17-28.

With expressing the differences between revelation and *‘erfān*, Seyyedān undermines Ibn ‘Arabī’s legitimacy:

‘Erfān is true in itself, but the so-called *‘erfān* of Ibn ‘Arabī expresses that God is identical with things, and it has indicated that whatever you worship, you have worshipped God in real [...], but God in the school of *Wahy* (revelation) does not have any resemblance. The so-called *‘erfān* is opposed to the school of *Wahy*.⁶⁵

In addition to underlining the dissimilarity between Ibn ‘Arabī and the school of *Wahy*, which is quite enough to banish someone out of the mainstream Shia seminaries, align with the majority of Ibn ‘Arabī critics, Seyyedān considers Ibn ‘Arabī’s method of allegorical interpretation as a misleading one. The only way of reaching the inward aspects of the Qur’ān and Islam is through the Prophet himself and Twelver Shia Imams. According to Seyyedān, “although it is evident that Quranic verses have inward dimensions [...] the inward dimensions and allegorical interpretation can only be discussed by Prophet Muhammad and Imams.”⁶⁶

In addition to the two abovementioned currents, a new current has emerged, perhaps the fiercest opponent of Ibn ‘Arabī and philosophy in the seminary of Qom: Ḥassan Mīllānī (b. 1959) and his circle, which should be considered as the continuity of some Shia anti-Sufi theologians such as Muḥammad-Bāqer Majlesī (d. 1699). Notably, Mīllānī has a strong antipathy to *Maktab-e Tafkīk* as well: “The school of detachment [...] intensely oppose philosophers and mystics apparently, but in time they express philosophers and mystics misleading beliefs.”⁶⁷

Putting all diverse philosophical and mystical schools in the same basket and labelling them as non-Islamic schools, Mīllānī expresses:

⁶⁵ “Official Website of Seyyed Ja‘far Seyyed ān,” accessed April 6, 2024, <http://seyyeddan.org/fa/news-details/2964/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%8C%D8%8C-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86-%DA%A9%D8%B3%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%81/>

⁶⁶ “Official Website of Seyyed Ja‘far Seyyed ān,” accessed April 6, 2024, <http://seyyeddan.org/fa/news-details/1835/%D8%AA%D8%B0%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86/>

⁶⁷ Ḥassan Mīllānī, *Ma‘rifat Allāh Ta‘alā billāh* (E‘teqāde Mā: Qom, 1394 sh./2015), 254.

In terms of principals and foundations, there isn't any difference between diverse philosophical and mystical groups. The "Peripatetic school," the "Illuminist school," the "Transcendental philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā," "Indian mysticism," "Buddhism," "Greek mysticism," "Ibn 'Arabī" and etc. all hold the same idea.⁶⁸

"The same idea," according to Miḥlānī, is nothing but the oneness of Being or the identification of God and his creatures. Despite his lack of engagement with the academic literature on Sufi studies, he does, however, share certain presuppositions with early orientalists, such as the association of Sufism and non-Islamic currents.⁶⁹

Notwithstanding their differences, these three anti-Ibn 'Arabī groups have much in common. Considering the Qur'ān and *hadīth* as true and infallible sources of knowledge, they dismiss any other sources, including mystical experience. Besides questioning Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutics, their harshest criticism concerns the oneness of Being, on which their interpretation seems highly questionable. Their primary consideration is to defend alleged Shia orthodoxy. As previously discussed, Ibn 'Arabī is most criticized for his religious creed, which plays an extensive role in either welcoming or dismissing him.

Ibn 'Arabī; Shia or Sunni?

Perhaps one of the most controversial debates on Ibn 'Arabī in Iran is whether he was a Sunni or Shia. Although it may sound irrelevant, the religious creed of Ibn 'Arabī plays a crucial role for both followers and opponents of Ibn 'Arabī in Iran. In the so-called orthodox Shia seminaries, following someone who is ostensibly a Sunni (e.g. Ibn 'Arabī), is a great malefaction. Ibn 'Arabī's followers in the Shia seminaries consider his teachings the most elevated form of *'erfān*, and use his teachings in understanding and interpreting the Qur'ān and *hadīth*,⁷⁰ using an outsider's teaching in interpreting the Qur'ān, and *hadīth* exposes Ibn 'Arabī's followers in the Shia seminaries to be accused of misinterpretation of religious sources and gaining religious knowledge from a Sunni. Therefore his followers have to internalize Ibn 'Arabī to not be accused by his opponents.

⁶⁸ Hassan Miḥlānī, *Farā-tar az 'Erfān* ('Ahd: Qom, 2016), 92.

⁶⁹ For a study of early orientalists' concepts of Sufism, see Ernst, *It's Not Just Academic*, 463-483.

⁷⁰ "Ibn 'Arabī's works is the key of understanding *Nahj al-Balāqah*, *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* of Ṣadūq and etc." (Muḥammad Ḥasan Vakīlī, *Mohyeddīn; Shī'aye Ḥāleṣ [Ibn Arabi; A pure Shia]* (Mashhad: Moasseseye Moṭāle'āt Rāhbordī, 2019), 12)

The controversy over Ibn ‘Arabī’s religious creed should be considered a polemic rooted in a difference in understanding Sufism/ *‘erfān*. In addition, religious exclusivism plays a significant role in discussing Ibn ‘Arabī’s religious creeds. Followers of Ibn ‘Arabī in Shia seminaries are usually exclusivists; therefore, according to them, the only way to salvation and to achieve a profound spiritual state is to believe in Shiism. However, they cannot ignore Ibn ‘Arabī’s profound spiritual state. Hence, to defend Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual state, in other words, to protect their position in the Shia seminary, they had to put forward a Shia conceptualization of Ibn ‘Arabī.

The most well-known and influential current of Ibn ‘Arabī followers in Mashhad is rooted in Muḥammad Ḥusein Tehrānī’s teachings, as well as in his textual, and spiritual heritage. Vakīlī’s exclusivist understanding of Ibn Arabī’s religious creed can be traced back to his intellectual father, Tehrānī, who points out that: “Throughout history, it is the case that non-Shias either were not mystics (*‘āref*) or they were both *‘āref* and Shia, and they concealed their religious creeds since they were afraid of Sunnis.”⁷¹

Following an identical line, Vakīlī admits that Ibn ‘Arabī was born in the Sunni part of the Islamic world; therefore, he was initially a Sunni. However, regarding his profound spiritual state, it was the case that he perceived the spiritual status of the first Shia Imam and admitted his superiority over others. In his youth, he met the twelfth Imam and all twelve Shia Imams at the end of his life. Such a person, who has witnessed the spiritual status of twelve Imams, is a Shia in its true sense.⁷²

By emphasizing the “true sense” of Shiism, Vakīlī admits that Ibn ‘Arabī was a Sunni based on standard and widely accepted criteria, but he was a Shia in a certain sense. Ibn ‘Arabī was Shia in its esoteric meaning but Sunni in its exoteric meaning. In other words, although Ibn ‘Arabī followed the Sunni school of jurisprudence, he was a Shia since he admitted twelve Imams’ profound, exalted, and uncompetitive spiritual state.

That being said, Shia opponents of Ibn ‘Arabī hold that he was a prejudiced Sunni. They also emphasize that one should not read Ibn ‘Arabī selectively to put forward a Shia conceptualization

⁷¹ Seyyed Muḥammad Ḥusein Tehrānī, *Rūḥe Mojarad* (Mashhad: ‘Allāmeḥ Ṭabātabāī, 2004), 348-350.

⁷² Vakīlī, *Ibn ‘Arabī*, 24.

of him: “Some Shia scholars find a few scattered texts in the works of Ibn ‘Arabī implicating his belief in Shiism, but numerous texts imply not only his belief in Sunni Islam but also, his deep sympathy for it.”⁷³

Shia opponents of ‘Arabī have specifically found some highly controversial beliefs of him, beliefs that cannot be expressed by any Shia. According to Ṭayeb-Nīyā, Ibn ‘Arabī, quite the opposite of mainstream Shia, held that the Prophet did not choose anyone as his successor in particular.⁷⁴ Besides, like any other faithful Sunni, he considered Abu Bakr as the first caliph, and he praised the first two caliphs after the Prophet⁷⁵ to the extent that he believed in the infallibility of ‘Omar (the second caliph).⁷⁶ Last but not least, all groups of Shia, specifically Twelvers, are considered the friends of the Devil by Ibn ‘Arabī.⁷⁷ Vakīlī and others, on the other hand, suggest that these beliefs expressed by Ibn ‘Arabī in his books should not be considered his own beliefs, since he was living in a time in which one could easily get killed by expressing a slight tendency toward Shiism. Thus, he had to conceal his beliefs.⁷⁸

Ṭayeb-Nīyā, in the opposite camp, emphasizes that Ibn ‘Arabī was not in the position of concealment: “*Taqīye* (concealment of belief) is to conceal a belief or to speak and write opposed to beliefs in some quite scarce and difficult situations. But if a speaker or author expresses a belief frequently and emphasizes on, it could not be considered otherwise.”⁷⁹

To sum up, the everlasting controversy over Ibn ‘Arabī’s religious tendencies should not be considered merely a scholarly argument. Shia followers of Ibn ‘Arabī, who have been accused of

⁷³ Sayed Ja‘far Murtaḍā al-‘Āmelī, *Ibn ‘Arabī Sunnī Mut‘eaşib* (n.p: al-Markaz al-Islāmī lldirāsāt, 2007), 9.

⁷⁴ Seyyed Mohsen Ṭayeb-Nīyā, *Ibn ‘Arabī az Negāhī Digar* (Qom: Dalīl-e mā, 2015), 83.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 96. Asserting that Imam ‘Alī was the first true caliph after the Prophet, is the very core idea of traditional Shiism.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 112. Ṭayeb-Nīyā, in his lengthy book, listed sixteen beliefs expressed by Ibn ‘Arabī, which are plainly opposed to Shia beliefs. Ibid., 83-123.

⁷⁸ Vakīlī, *Ibn ‘Arabī*, 25.

⁷⁹ Ṭayeb-Nīyā, *Ibn ‘Arabī*, 90.

following a non-Shia figure, should preserve and defend their position as a respected part of Shia Seminary, which cannot be done unless by the construction of a Shia Ibn ‘Arabī.⁸⁰

Conclusion

After the Iranian Revolution, Ibn ‘Arabī once more became a focus of academic interest. More than a thousand graduate theses and dissertations on Ibn ‘Arabī are listed on an official website.⁸¹ Many students of philosophy, religious studies, and even some of Persian literature tend to work on Ibn ‘Arabī and Akbarian tradition. This tendency results in critical editions of Akbarian works, comparative studies of Ibn ‘Arabī and other philosophers or mystics, and monographs on related topics and figures.

Sufism and Ibn ‘Arabī have also entered Iran’s popular culture. Distancing from fundamentalist approaches to Islam, an increasing number of people have found themselves sympathetic to Sufism rather than the official form of Shia Islam, represented by the sources of emulation and the state of Iran. This tendency can be observed in the popularity of some figures, such as Rūmī and Ibn ‘Arabī.⁸²

Ibn ‘Arabī and Akbarian tradition still play a significant role in the intellectual trends of Iran. On one hand, those who seek to preserve Iranians from the corruption of philosophical Sufism have to criticize Ibn ‘Arabī for the sake of their sympathy for Iranian Sufism. On the other, being the

⁸⁰ Besides already mentioned book of Vakīlī, another lengthy book was composed by another follower of Ibn ‘Arabī in Mashhad. See Qasim Tehranī, *al-Qawl al-Matīn fī Taṣayy‘e Šeiḡh al-Akbar Muḥyeddīn I&II* (Beirut: Dar al-Maḥajāt al-Bayḏā, 2003).

⁸¹ “Iranian Research Institute for Information Science and Technology (IranDoc)”, accessed April 6, 2024, https://ganj.irandoc.ac.ir/#/search?basicscope=1&keywords=%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%86%20%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%DB%8C&sort_by=1&fulltext_status=1&results_per_page=1&year_from=0&year_to=1402&page=1

⁸² On the academic level, Qasem Kakayī’s “The oneness of Being According to Ibn ‘Arabī and Meister Eckhart,” a lengthy comparative study on Ibn ‘Arabī and Eckhart, is quite considerable. The complete Persian translation of *Futūḥāt*, by Muḥammad Ḥājāvī have achieved a great fortune in Iran, as well as other works and translations of Ḥājāvī. Several Persian translations of *Fuṣūṣ* and other works of Ibn ‘Arabī have been published in recent decades. Even the famous poem collection of him have been translated into Persian verse recently by Amīr Ḥossein Allāh-Yarī, who have translated several other works of Ibn ‘Arabī as well. Regarding novels on Sufis; Elif Shafak’s novel, titled “The Forty Rules of Love,” has been translated and published by over **twenty publishers** in Iran. The main publisher of the book, Qoqnoos Publishing House, has published the Persian translation of the book **122 times** till 2021. Mohammed Hasan Alwan’s “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Small Death” has been translated twice and have published more than ten times. Seyyed Yahyā Yaṭrebī, a specialist in Islamic philosophy and Sufism, composed three best-seller novels concerning three figures: Shahābuddīn Suhrawardī, Ḥallāj, and Rabi‘a. A novel, titled *Kahkeshāne Nistī* (The Universe of Nothingness), concerning Seyyed Ali Qāḏī, was published 21times till 2021.

greatest representation of Sunni Sufism, and therefore the sworn enemy of Shia *‘ulamā*, Ibn ‘Arabī should be condemned to prevent young Shia clergies from bending toward Sufism. However, followers of the Akbarian tradition seek to create a Shia Ibn ‘Arabī to legitimize reading and teaching his works in the Shia seminaries.

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