

THE MYSTIC AS A POLITICAL LEADER

The Impact of *'Irfān* on Imam Khomeini's Political Doctrine

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Imam Khomeini was a significant Shi'i jurist who justified his claim to political authority on the grounds of being one of the deputies of the Hidden Imam. But it can also be argued that the Islamic mystical tradition (thereafter *'irfān*) to which he was a devotee played an important role in the formation of his general worldview, particularly the role of the mystical wayfarer in the teleology of creation and the responsibility he has of orienting people towards the sacred realm through establishing a just political order on Earth. That a political theory, *Wilāyat al-Faqīh*, can be legitimized on the basis of gnostic and metaphysical notions is indeed an important and fascinating issue in today's world. This is what the article below aims to argue.

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Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) was a Shi'i jurist and revolutionary leader who justified his claim to power on the grounds of being the deputy of the hidden Imam who is believed by Shi'i Muslims to be in occultation (*ghaybah*) and is due to reappear towards the End of Time to establish a just order in the world. While there was general agreement among Shi'i jurists that the expert on divine law enjoyed a measure of authority in the age of the occultation, which ranged from guardianship over orphans and widows to distribution of the religious tax (Sachedina 1998), it was Khomeini alone who declared that this authority should extend to all affairs with which the hidden Imam himself was charged, including the setting up of a divine order on Earth. It was this outlook which informed his political worldview. It provided the background for his struggle against the Shah's regime and was responsible for the formation of his most important political theory, *Wilāyat al-Faqīh* (Guardianship of the Jurist) which later became the blueprint for the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Notwithstanding, it seems that there was a subtler, even ontological, background which influenced Khomeini's worldview in general and the role of the mystical wayfarer in it. For

apart from being a jurist and political activist, Khomeini was deeply attached to the Islamic mystical tradition, more commonly known as Sufism.

THE SHI'Ī MYSTICAL TRADITION

The relationship between Sufism and Shi'ism is complex and multi-faceted. Although they differ from each other exoterically, in that the majority of the Sufi orders adhere to the Sunni legal schools, both traditions have a lot in common esoterically. Both are representatives of Islamic esotericism and have influenced each other in profound and varying ways. In the words of the well-known expositor of Islamic esotericism, Sayyid Hossein Nasr,

The esoteric dimension of Islam, which in the Sunni climate is almost totally connected with Sufism, in one way or another colors the whole structure of Shiism . One can say Islamic esotericism or gnosis crystallized into the form of Sufism in the Sunni world while it poured into the whole structure of Shiism especially during its early period.¹

There was a general consensus among early Muslims about the special spiritual status of the household of Prophet Muhammad even among those who did not support their claim to the political leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet. These were to be known later as the Sunni, the “majoritarian,” branch of Islam. Most of the cultivators of the mystical path in early Islam were either devotees of the Shi'ī *Imāms* or among their close associates .² There was a recognition among these devotees that the Imams were channels of divine grace; were possessors of the esoteric or hidden meaning of the Qur'an; that they were privy, through gnostic unveiling, to the mysteries of the world and that they had the prerogative to intercede on behalf of the errant believers on the Day of Judgment. The famed French orientalist Henry Corbin would later devise the term “Imamology”³ to refer to the above qualities Shi'ī *Imāms* were thought to possess. Imamology is synonymous with *wilāya* (initiatory sainthood), a term central to the cosmogony of Khomeini, as we shall see.

This close association between the early mystics and the Shi'ī Imams was to continue until the time of the eighth Imam, 'Alī al-Riḍā or Reza (766-818 CE) when the mystical tradition among adherents of the Sunni legal schools began to systemize into Sufism, with its peculiar Sufi orders having special attire and places of worship and becoming a distinct social group.

Theoretical Sufism was to find its most elaborate formulation at the hands of the Andalusian theosophist Ibn 'Arabī (1165-1270) central to whose metaphysical system is the notion of the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) according to which the names and attributes of God mediate between the essence of God, which is an unknown and unknowable mystery, and the cosmos .⁴ The process of self-manifestation is carried out through emanation. According to Ibn 'Arabī, everything in the cosmos represents a Name of God, signifying knowledge, mercy, power, majesty or wrath. Whereas everything in the cosmos symbolizes an aspect of the divine names, Man alone, endowed with consciousness, has the capacity to represent the names of God in their totality. Every human being has the potential to reach this position but only a select few, among them the prophets and saints, actualize this potential. In

Gnostic parlance they belong to the category of the *Perfect Man*, a notion central to Islamic esotericism as a whole.

Starting in the early 14th century, there was a process whereby Shi'i gnostics began incorporating the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī within a Shi'i theosophical system. The most important figure in this arena was Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (1319-1385) who claimed that every true Sufi is a Shi'a. The term to gain currency from then to refer to Shi'i Gnosis was *'irfān*. Such seminal Sufi ideas like the *Qutb* (spiritual Pole of the universe) began to be associated with the Shi'i Imams as was the notion of *wilāya* which represented the continuation of divine grace and guidance through the imams after divine revelation has ceased with the passing of the Prophet. According to Nasr, this was proof of the strong relationship between Sufism and Shi'ism whereas for Corbin this process was simply the Shi'a getting back their own Sufism, for him of Shi'i origin and import.⁵ The process instigated by Āmulī was to find its culmination in the works of Mullā Ṣadrā (1571-1640) who introduced a theosophical system he named Transcendent Theosophy, where he brought harmony between the Qur'anic teachings, the heritage of Greek philosophy, and Sufi Gnosis, all within the parameters of Shi'i theology. According to Mullā Ṣadrā the mystical wayfarer undertakes a journey which consists of four mystical travels that culminate in the mystic achieving annihilation, then subsistence by God, and then return to the world to be a guide.

THE MAKING OF A MYSTIC

Khomeini was drawn into the intellectual atmosphere briefly delineated above. This was soon after he came to the religious seminary in Qum as a young scholar in 1922. Apart from doing the traditional curriculum which revolved around jurisprudence and its principles, Khomeini showed a strong interest in Ethics, Philosophy, and *'Irfān* (Gnoseology). With the arrival in Qum of Ayatollah Muḥammad 'Alī Shāhābādī, who became his most important teacher in *Irfan*, 1928 began a seven-year period in which Khomeini embarked on an intense cultivation of both the theoretical and practical aspects of the discipline. He was introduced to *Manāzil al-Sā'irīn* (*Stations of the Wayfarers*), by 'Abd Allah al-Anṣārī (1006-1088) by Shāhābādī, his "esteemed master, to whom my spiritual life is indebted".⁶

The product of his mentorship with Shāhābādī included the two most important books Khomeini authored on *'irfān* which were to shape his Gnostic worldview and the role of 'the mystic wayfarer', both spiritual and social, in it. These were respectively *Miṣbāḥ al-Hidāya ilā'l-Khilāfa wa'l-Wilāya* (*The Lantern of Guidance to Deputyship and Sainthood* [hereafter *Lantern of Guidance*]), and *Ta'liqāt 'alā Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam wa Miṣbāḥ al-Uns* (*Glosses on the Explication of the Bezels of Wisdom and the Lamp of Proximity* [hereafter *Glosses*]). Both of these books betray Khomeini's indebtedness to the cosmogony of Ibn 'Arabī. Central to that worldview is the theory of Emanation according to which God, the Absolute, makes Himself known through a process of self-manifestation culminating in the appearance of the cosmic world and all creatures in it. Each stage of manifestation according to Khomeini,⁷ represents a *khalīfa*⁸ (deputy or vicegerent, more commonly associated with the word caliph) of the previous stage. For instance, the second major stage of manifestation, that of *al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā* (the Beautiful Names of Allah, which include the Merciful, the Knower,

the Proud, the Punisher, etc.) is, according to Khomeini, the deputy of the initial stage of *Aḥadiyyah* (Unity of God) in which God is an unknown and unknowable mystery. At that primordial stage God is referred to in Gnostic parlance and poetry as the Vanishing Phoenix, the Mystery of Mysteries, and the Hidden Treasure. The deputy of the Beautiful Names of Allah forms the third stage of manifestation, that of “the Immutable Entities”. For learned Japanese interpreters Akiro Matsumoto (who has advised me personally on these matters) and Toshihiko Izutsu (whom I quote here), these Entities are “ontological models which are eternally established and upon which the phenomenal things are produced in the empirical dimension of time and space” .⁸ The last stage represents the emergence of the cosmic world. This process of the self-manifestation of God is called the *Arc of Descent*.

It is a common point of Islamic Gnoseology that the ontological reality of Prophet Muhammad was present in this process from the second stage onwards. Once in this world, the Prophet embarks upon his spiritual journey towards God which culminates in his nocturnal journey to the heavens where he achieves closest proximity to God. The process in the opposite direction, from this world to God, is called the *Arc of Ascent* and it is also accessible, to a certain level, to ordinary wayfarers, men, and women, who are not prophets or Imams. The important point Khomeini makes in his *Lantern of Guidance* is that the *wilāya*, which according to him means closeness and proximity to God and which is achieved through mystical wayfaring, forms the esoteric content of *khilāfah* which denotes deputyship and vicegerency. The closer in proximity to God a mystical wayfarer gets, the more he is invested with deputyship. In *The Glosses*, Khomeini makes the point that the *welāya* is accessible to ordinary wayfarers:

Know well that the servant wayfarer who traverses the path towards Allah with the foot of servitude, if he departs from the abode of nature, migrating to Allah, and becomes subject to the divine attractions, the Truth may manifest Himself to him... and then he will be adorned with the gift of *wilāya* .⁹

Hence, the nexus between Gnosis and political philosophy. In one of his later books, he sets out the issue in no unclear terms, thus: “the true spiritual traveller, after completing his journey towards God and for the sake of God, tries to perfect the servants of God and embarks on reform and development of society” (quoted in Damad 2000: 34) .¹⁰

In discussing the metaphysical system related to the mystical journey towards God, Khomeini came to adopt a methodology which incorporates Mullā Ṣadrā’s teachings about the *four* (mystical) *travels* within the cosmogony of Ibn ‘Arabī which places the *Perfect Man* at the pinnacle of the stations related to proximity to God. For Khomeini the *Perfect Man* is the person who has accomplished the fourth travel in his mystical journey and after having achieved annihilation in God and then sobriety through God, “comes back”, as it were, in order to guide humanity. The foremost authority on Ibn ‘Arabī, William Chittick, describes the status and function of the *Perfect Man* in the following way:

On the level of the outward, corporeal world, *perfect man* may not appear different from other human beings, certainly not in the eyes of deniers and misbelievers. The Koran reports the words of some of Prophet Muhammad’s contemporaries as “what ails this Messenger that he

eats food and goes into the markets?” (25:7). But the corporeal is but the distant sun reflected in dust. The real fullness of the *perfect man*'s existence must be sought in the inward domains, the innumerable intermediate worlds that lie between his sensory shell and his divine kernel. He is in fact the interworld who encompasses all interworlds, the intermediary who fills the gap between Absolute Being and absolute nothingness. His cosmic function is everything because in effect he is identical with the cosmos. In *perfect man* the microcosm and the macrocosm have become one through an inner unity. In other terms, the macrocosm is the body, *perfect man* the heart.¹¹

Among gnoseologists, Khomeini included, there is general agreement that the *fourth travel*, which denotes social responsibility congruent with the spiritual proximity to God, is the preserve of Prophet Muhammad. It is most probable that it was this point that led some scholars, based on a partial investigation of Khomeini's legacy, to conclude that he does not go as far as thinking that there is a nexus between mystical wayfaring and political philosophy as far as the ordinary seeker is concerned. Thus, according to them, a case cannot be argued for a mystical background to Khomeini's revolutionary movement and later theorization for *Islamic Government*, even his later assumption of the leadership of the Islamic republic.¹²

KHOMEINI'S UNDERSTANDING OF 'IRFĀN AND ITS IMPACT ON POLITICS

In reality only a thorough study of Khomeini's mystical output and political views and how these shaped his revolutionary movement, and what he saw as the role of the mystical wayfarer in it, would lead to a clearer view about the Gnosis/politics connection. What emerges clearly from Khomeini's central gnoseological ideas, dispersed throughout his books on the relevant topics, is that *wilāya*, which according to him is associated with nearness to God gained through mystical wayfaring, forms the esoteric dimension of *khilāfa* which implies deputyship and social responsibility. In addition to that, Khomeini saw that the station of the *Perfect Man* is a hierarchical position with the Prophet and Imams situated at the top, followed by other gnostics and wayfarers, and indeed pious people in general, each according to his level. In the 22-volume compendium *Ṣaḥīfah-ye Imām* which includes all his speeches, directives, edicts and interviews, Khomeini uses the term *perfect man* to refer to people who are not Prophets or Imams 19 times. For instance, in an address to university students on the first anniversary of the victory of the Islamic revolution, Khomeini had this advice to his audience:

Strive hard to serve your nation, to serve Islam. Strive hard to carry out the greater jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*) to its conclusion in order to become a *perfect man*, an Islamic man, a committed man, so that you may be beneficial to yourself, your country, and your nation.¹³

On another occasion, Khomeini offers this advice to the Iranian people on whom to elect for high office: “After you have studied closely his file and found that he is a *perfect man*, a person who wants to serve this country and serve Islam, then you should elect him” .¹⁴

Having completed seven years of intense study of *‘irfān* with his mentor Shāhābādī, Khomeini started giving lessons of his own on the topic and related subjects like Ethics and Philosophy to a select group of students after his teacher left the Qum seminary for Tehran. Many of these students, like Husayn ‘Ali Muntazirī and Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, would later become key figures in the Iranian revolution and would occupy leading posts in the Islamic Republic.

It is instructive that the first ever political statement Khomeini made, which in 1944 was directed against the Iranian King Reza Shah, the father of the last Shah of Iran, was replete with Gnostic undercurrents and imagery. Bearing all the hallmarks of Khomeini’s political speeches and directives that would fuse gnoseological motifs with the political, it is worth quoting at some length. The statement starts with quoting the Qur’anic verse: “Say: I enjoin upon you, that you rise up for Allah in pairs and singly, and then reflect” (34:46). Indeed the very verse by which Ansari begins his crucial chapter on the “Gate of Awakening” in *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn*, the work on spiritual wayfaring he studied in depth under Shāhābādī (Algar 2015: 17) .¹⁵ Then Khomeini continues:

Allah has demonstrated in this holy speech the mission of humanity from the first station of the dark nature to its consummation. And it is the best counsel which Allah has chosen from all counsels. He proposed to humanity this single statement in which is contained the way to reform the two abodes, and that is rising up for Allah which made Abraham, Friend of the Merciful (*Khalīl al-Raḥmān*), reach the station of eternity and released him from the different manifestations of the world of nature. Abraham has plunged into the Knowledge of Certainty (*‘Ilm al-Yaqīn*) until he said, “I do not like the disappearing ones”. Rising up for Allah is what made *Mūsā al-Kalīm* (Moses the one to whom God spoke) victorious over the people of the Pharaoh and enabled him to destroy their thrones and crowns, and made him reach the Appointment with the Beloved (*Mīqāt al-Maḥbūb*)...¹⁶

Khomeini continues to enumerate the sad social and political conditions that were the result of neglecting “*the rising up for Allah*”. He goes on:

Rising up for the self (*qiyām barāye nafs*) is the cause of the lifting of the veil of chastity from the heads of the chaste Muslim women (a reference to Reza Shah’s Uniform Dress Law). Rising up for personal interests made the newspapers, which act as a means for spreading moral corruption, implement the plans which are the product of the retarded mind of the illiterate Reza Khan .¹⁷

Significantly, Khomeini’s main activity in the period from the mid-1940s until his open confrontation with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, consisted in teaching jurisprudence and its principles to a group of his students. It should be stressed, however, that for Khomeini teaching these topics was never solely an academic concern. In fact, he used the teaching sessions to train a generation of scholars who would become his revolu-

tionary lieutenants and would later occupy leading positions in the Islamic Republic. One such student, Muhammad Javad Bahonar (1933-81), who attended those classes, and who went on to become prime minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran shortly before he was assassinated, would later describe the lectures' impact on him in the following manner:

The Imam (Khomeini) would instill in us a sense of spiritual nobility, of responsibility and commitment, of spirituality and intellectual richness, his words would resound in our ears for many days after we left Qum to go preaching during Ramadan (quoted by Algar 1988: 28).¹⁸

Moreover, the subject of jurisprudence was never divorced from other aspects of Islam especially the mystical one, as far as Khomeini was concerned. According to one long-time student, Sayyid Ahmad Fehri, who was also the editor and translator of many of Khomeini's books on Gnoseology, Khomeini's methods in those classes was to "demonstrate the conformity of the sharia to the logic of *Irfan* as well as the conformity of *Irfan* to the logic of the sharia".¹⁹

In the early 1960s Khomeini embarked on a process of open confrontation with the Shah's regime that would lead to his imprisonment and then exile first to Turkey and then to Najaf in Iraq in 1965. It was there that he introduced his most important political theory, *Guardianship of the Jurist*, which provided the justification for the setting up of an Islamic government. It was in Najaf also that he gave a series of lectures later collected in a volume entitled *The Greater Jihad*.

Khomeini was to return triumphant to Iran in February of 1979 to assume the leadership of Iran after the success of the Islamic revolution. He saw the nascent Islamic republic through a bloody insurrection waged by leftist organizations that had previously participated in the struggle against the Shah but then parted ways with the clerical leadership. He also saw a crippling war with Iraq. Towards the end of his life Khomeini issued a corrective to a statement by 'Ali Khamene'i, the present leader, in which the latter declared that the Islamic government can operate only within the framework of the shari'a, implying that this was the opinion of Khomeini himself. Replying that such an understanding "contradicts my views completely," he added: "Our government is a branch of the absolute *wilāya* of the Messenger of Allah and is one of the primary precepts of Islam. It takes precedence over all secondary precepts like prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage" (*Sahife-ye Nur*, vol. 20. p. 170).²⁰ The absolute *wilāya* of the Prophet is nothing but his mystical position, part of which devolves on the mystical wayfarer.

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NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, 238.
3. Henri Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, vol. 1: *Aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).
4. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989).
5. Corbin, *En Islam Iranien*, 219.
6. Khomeini, *Ṣaḥīfeh-ye Nūr* (Anthological Compendium) (Tehran: Sāzmān Asnād wa Madārik Inqilāb-e Islāmī, 1990), vol. 18, 78.
7. Khomeini, *Miṣbāḥ al-Hidāya ilā'l-Khilāfa wa'l-Wilāya* (Beirut: Al-Wafaa, 1983), 20.
8. Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Being* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1970), 52.
9. Khomeini, *Ta'liqāt 'alā Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam wa Miṣbāḥ al-Uns* (n.p: n.d.), 39-40.
10. Quoted in Mustafa Damad, "The Spiritual Sovereignty of the Perfect Man," *Message of Thaqaalayn* 5, no. 3 (2000), 34.
11. William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 30.
12. See Lloyd Ridgeon, "Hidden Khomeini: Mysticism and Poetry," *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 200-203.
13. Khomeini, *Ṣaḥīfeh-ye Imām* (Tehran: Institute for the Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, n.d.), vol. 18, 30.
14. *Ibid.*, vol. 15, 450.

15. Hamid Algar, *Imam Khomeini: A Short Biography* (n.p.: Create Space Independent Publishing, 2015), 17.
16. *Şahīfeh-ye Nūr*, vol. 1, 24-25.
17. *Ibid.*, 25.
18. Quoted in Hamid Algar, “Imam Khomeini, 1902-1962: the Pre-revolutionary Years,” in *Islam, Politics and Social Movements*, ed. Edmund Burke III and Ira Lapidus (Berkeley: University of California Press), 28.
19. Ahmad Fehri, (introd.), Ayatollah Khomeini, *Sharḥ Du‘ā al-Sahar* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Wafā’, 1982), 11.
20. *Şahīfeh-ye Nūr*, vol. 20, 170.