The dissertation of Vahid Rafati is approved.

The Development of Shaykhī Thought in
Shī‘ī Islam

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requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Islamic Studies

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ........................................ vi

Introduction ................................................. 1

Chapter

I. The Religious, Intellectual Climate of Iran During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century 12

II. Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i: His Life and Works . . . . 36

III. The Basic Shaykhī Ontological Doctrines . . . . 69

IV. The Basic Shaykhī Eschatological Doctrines . . 102

V. Developments in the Shaykhī School After the Death of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i . . . . 102

VI. Shaykhī Teachings that Paved the Way for the Báb . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 167

VII. The Relationship of Shaykhī Doctrines to the Religious Thought of the Báb . . . . 191

Conclusion ................................................. 213

Appendices ................................................ 218

Bibliography ................................................ 221
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INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, Shi‘i Islam has witnessed numerous sectarian developments and extremes of ideological diversity. One of the most important and influential developments occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsā‘ī (d. 1241/1825) founded a new school of thought which, although still within the Shi‘i fold, became the focus of sectarian polemics. Shaykh Aḥmad maintained that the religious leaders no longer taught the truth, and that truth should be received directly from divine sources. His school was the direct result of the religious and social struggles of the period, and it, in turn, later contributed to social and religious change.

To place the Shaykhī school in the context of Islamic schism, it is useful to sketch the definition of and approach toward religious sects in general as formulated by Western scholars on the basis of study of Christian sects, and then to provide an Islamic perspective on the subject.

The term “sect” refers to a body of believers which has become separated from the main body of the religious community. While one sect of a religious body differs in nature, ideology, and purpose from other sects of the same religion, sociological studies show that sects share certain common social features: they originate out of protest, whether aggressive or nonaggressive, against the parent organization's beliefs, doctrines, or rituals; they usually consist of people who belong to a lower class than the members of the parent church and are sometimes geographically isolated; they almost always begin functioning under a charismatic leader; and they come into being as a result of the church's inability to meet the social and psychological needs of some of its members.

B. R. Wilson, a leading authority on sectarianism, has distinguished six types of sects on the basis of the sect's response to the world: (1) conversionist sects, whose “reaction towards the outside world is to suggest that the latter is corrupted because man is corrupted”; (2) revolutionary sects, whose “attitude towards the outside world is summed up in a desire to be rid of the present social order when the time is ripe—if necessary, by force and violence”; (3) introversionist sects, “whose response to the world is neither to convert the population nor to expect the world's overturn, but simply in retiring from it to enjoy the security gained by personal holiness. This type is completely indifferent to social reforms, to individual conversion and to social revolutions”; (4) manipulationist sects, which, “previously called gnostic, are those which insist especially on a particular and distinctive knowledge. They define themselves vis-à-vis the outside world essentially by accepting its goals”; (5) thaumaturgical sects, or “movements which insist that it is possible for men to experience the extraordinary effect of the supernatural on their lives”; and (6) reformist sects, which “seem to
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Development of Shaykhī Thought in Shi'ī Islam

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In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Shaykh Ahmad Aḥsāʾī (d. 1241/1825), a native of Aḥsāʾ, founded a new school of thought within the Imāmī Shi'ī. The heterodox doctrines of Shaykh Ahmad laid the foundations for a new approach to Shi'ī theology and caused the traditional Shi'ī theologians to denounce him as an innovator in their polemical works.

Shaykh Ahmad's doctrines were a synthesis of the views of the Akhbarī and the Uṣūlī schools. He emphasized the importance of the imāms and prepared his students for the advent of the Twelfth Imam or Mahdī, whose appearance had been expected for centuries.

Shaykh Ahmad wrote extensively, traveled widely and, with his erudition and personal magnetism, won over adherents from different parts of the country and from different social and intellectual backgrounds including many members of the royal family.

After Shaykh Ahmad's death, the leadership of his school fell to Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī, his close student, who continued Shaykh Ahmad's approach and, in numerous works, elaborated his thoughts. The death of Sayyid Kāẓim was followed by a series of crises, aggravated by the fact that he did not designate a successor.

The teachings, particularly the predictions, of both Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kāẓim prepared their followers for the acceptance of the expected Mahdī. When the Bāb, the founder of the Bābī religious movement, claimed (in 1260/1844) that he was the expected one, many Shaykhīs accepted his claim.

The Shaykhī school was the latter branch of the Imāmī Shi'ī, an intellectual link between Islam and the Bābī movement, and a point of departure for a series of religious and social developments in later periods which had a great impact upon the intellectual life of the Persians.
constitute a case apart. But the dynamic analytic approach to religious movements demands a category corresponding to those groups which, though sectarian in more than one respect, have affected transformations in their early response towards the outside world.}\textsuperscript{7}

In the Western literature on Islamic schism, essential terms such as "sect," "theological school," "group," and "school of law" are used inconsistently and often interchangeably. For example, the writers of articles in the Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam have used the various terms listed above to define or describe schisms with common elements and similar natures. There one finds under "al-Murājī"a," "name of one of the early sects of Islam,"\textsuperscript{8} and under "al-Maṭāzila" one reads, "the name of the great theological school which created the speculative dogmatics of Islam."\textsuperscript{9} The "Khāridjītes" are called "the earliest of the religious sects,"\textsuperscript{10} and "al-Zaidīya" are described as "the practical groups of the Shī"a.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, "Mālikīs" are called "the school of law,"\textsuperscript{12} and for the "Hanafītes" the Arabic term "madhhab"—without even its equivalent in English (which could be "school")—is used.\textsuperscript{13}

In contrast to the undifferentiated approach illustrated above, the introduction to \textit{al-Faqīr Bayn al-Firaq}, a well-known book by one of the most eminent Muslim heresiographers, Abū Mansūr ʿAbd al-Qādir b. ʿĀhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), is a good example of a Muslim scholar's approach toward and evaluation of sects in an Islamic context.

According to al-Baghdādī, a Tradition on the authority of the Prophet Muḥammad reads, "My people will be divided into seventy-three firaq [sections, groups] of which only one will be saved."\textsuperscript{14} Al-Baghdādī categorizes the Islamic sects into seventy-three, of which the only one to be "saved" is the Sunnī. He differentiates the groups into two main categories. The first category deals with theological questions such as the understanding of God, His unity, justice, and other attributes; free will versus predestination; the possibility of seeing God on the Day of Judgement; and the qualities of the Prophet Muḥammad. Each sect maintains its own attitude toward these questions, and each group, considering itself right and justified, accuses the others of being infidels. The second category comprises jurisprudential questions defined by an understanding of Quranic teachings. The jurisprudential attitudes of a sect are not considered grounds for accusing its members of being infidels.

To decide who belonged to the saved sect and who did not, al-Baghdādī had to provide a definition for the term "Muslim." He enumerates various definitions according to different sects, and then he states the definition which, apparently, is accepted by the saved sect, namely the Sunnīs.

According to the Karāmīya sect, a Muslim is one who believes in the oneness of God and in His Prophet Muḥammad.
According to another sect, a Muslim is one who believes that (1) the universe is accidental (hādith), (2) God and His attributes are eternal, (3) Muhammad is the messenger of God for the entire human world, (4) Muhammad’s religion will last forever, (5) the Qur’ān is the main source for religious order, and (6) the Ka’ba is the direction of obligatory prayer. Al-Baghdādī then asserts, as the last condition of belief, that a true Muslim does not set up or adhere to heretical doctrine (bid‘a), of which he identifies two categories. The first category of heretical doctrine causes a believer (Muslim) to become a nonbeliever. For example, the members of Bayānīya or Mughayrīya sects would not be considered Muslims because they maintain the divinity of the imāms. Belief in incarnation, or belief in the acceptability of marriage between a man and his daughter’s daughter, which was practiced by the Maymūnīya, made them cease to be Muslims, according to al-Baghdādī. Similarly, the belief that Islam would be abrogated on the Last Day was a heretical doctrine which caused the Abādīya to become non-Muslims in his view.

The second category of heretical doctrine does not cause the believer to become a nonbeliever, but it does deprive him of some social rights. For example, he can neither lead the group prayer nor marry a woman from among the saved sect, the Sunnīs.

Al-Baghdādī’s approach to Islamic sects appears to imply that only heretical doctrines concerning religious matters played a role in generating new sects in Islam. To support his claim that social and economic factors did not play any part, he contends that the controversial issues raised immediately after the death of the Prophet were also of theological or religious nature, and that Abū Bakr, who became the first successor (caliph) of the Prophet, solved them all by quoting the Prophet’s statements (hadith); thus, none of the issues caused schism in Islam at that time. Such controversial issues included the question of whether the Prophet was dead or had ascended to heaven like Jesus; whether the Prophet should be buried in Mecca, his birthplace, or in Medina, the city of Emigration where he established his religion; whether the Prophet’s successor (imām) could be a man from outside the Prophet’s clan (Quraysh) or had to be a member of the Quraysh. Although every one of these issues had immediate socio-political implications, it is significant that traditional Muslim perspective assigns merely theological value to them. In fact, two jurisprudential issues had been raised: (1) could anyone inherit from the Prophet, or did his property belong to the community? and (2) was a non-rakāt (alm) payer still a Muslim? Even the imamate, the question of who would succeed the Prophet, which split Islam, was originally perceived as a religious issue and only later developed into a social and political dispute.

In actuality, the “religious” problems that caused schism in Islam, like the issue of the imamate, could also
fall into the categories of jurisprudential, theological, and philosophical differences in the interpretation of the Qur‘an and hadith, the validity and authenticity of hadith, daily worship practices, and theological discussions about God, the prophets, the angels, and man’s predestination or free will.

The applicability of the terms “sect,” “movement,” “school,” and so on, to these doctrines depends upon the definition of these terms within the framework of Islamic history, the social function of the group, its sense of group solidarity, and the relationship of the schismatic group to the parent group. It must be borne in mind, however, that it is nearly impossible to draw a line between “sects” and “schools” in Islam, or to affix a certain term to a certain group and expect the term to be applicable in all the historical phases of that group.

The Shaykhī school has been referred to in Persian works as “firaq” (division, section) or “madhhab” (school, religious creed), but more often as “Shaykhīya,” a term consisting of “Shaykh” and the suffix “iyya” which denotes either a group of people who follow a certain person, for example, “Zaydiyya,” or a group with a certain ideological system, such as “Qadarīyya.”

In this work the term “Shaykhī school” is used, being the preferred term of the Shaykhīs themselves and appropriate to a theological study of the Shaykhī ideology, which is intended as a primary attempt at clarification of the intellectual parameters of the Shaykhī school, as well as examining the issue in its wider historical context.

The Shaykhī school, although primarily a theological school, had definite practical and sociological implications, promoted group cohesion, strengthened the moral order, and offered new approaches toward dogmatic, traditional principles of Shi‘ī thought. Although the school’s theoretical approaches were a revolution in the Shi‘a, they were strongly rooted in Shi‘ī Traditions and the utterances of the Shi‘ī ḫāls. The school reevaluated Shi‘ī dogmas, redefined the religious norms, reconsidered the traditional understanding of Shi‘ī beliefs, and introduced a series of new doctrines, not in the name of a new independent value-oriented movement or religious revolution, but as a system which claimed to be the very essence of Shi‘ī thought. Many Shi‘ī authorities did not accept this claim, however, and considered the Shaykhī school to be heresy.

The doctrines of the Shaykhī school were a syncretism of indigenous religious Shi‘ī beliefs, and were not imported from foreign cultural or religious ideologies. Of the theological, sociological, and ritual aspects that characterize the school, this study is concerned mainly with the theological aspects, for it is the theological doctrines of the school that form its strongest connection to the mainstream of Shi‘ī thought, and also constitute the most significant links between the school and the Bābī religious movement. In studying the theology of the school, only the
basic ideas of Shaykhi ontology and eschatology will be discussed. A detailed discussion of the sources which influenced the Shaykhi school, and of nature of the similarities between the ideology of the Shaykhi school and other theological and philosophical trends of thought, is beyond the scope of this work.

In spite of the fact that numerous significant social and political events took place during this era, few scholarly works about the period have been written. The religious and intellectual climate has received even less scholarly attention. The abundance of historical sources, travelers' narratives, biographical works, political documents, and religious treatises produced in this era requires careful study and presents a challenge to the scholar.

This study employs an analytical approach based on primary sources written by Shaykh Ahmad and Sayyid Kāşīn Rashtī, his successor. In discussing points of controversy between the Shaykhi school and other trends of thought, reference is made to scholarly works by specialists in the field.

Shaykh Ahmad's contribution in reconciling conflicting beliefs united a group of people from different social backgrounds and geographical regions and prepared them intellectually to accept the Bāb, who in the middle of the nineteenth century claimed to be the fulfillment of the Islamic expectation of the Mahdi and ultimately proclaimed that his was a religious system independent of Islam, with a new revealed Holy Book.

While the Shaykhi school was not a value-oriented, religious revolutionary, messianic, and charismatic movement, it contained the seeds of all these features, which were later to germinate and develop to fruition in the Bābī movement, a movement which proved to be broader in scope and more comprehensive in ideology than the Shaykhi school which had preceded it.
1. The term "Shaykhī," the adjective from the word "Shaykh," is derived from the title of Shaykh Ahmad Aḥsāʾī.


3. Ibid., p. 365.

4. Ibid., p. 366.

5. Ibid., p. 367.

6. Ibid., p. 368.

7. Ibid., p. 369.


13. Ibid., s.v. "Ḥanafītes," by W. Heffening.


CHAPTER I

The Religious, Intellectual Climate of Iran During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

The Qājār period (1193/1779-1342/1924) was characterized by the transformation of long-established institutions and the emergence of new approaches to social and religious life in Iran. It was a period of despair, of decline in intellectual creativity, and of spiritual and material deprivation. It was a period of European imperialistic designs, during which Eastern and Western cultures met and clashed. The transformation of institutions gave rise to several major political and religious reforms which, in depth, scope, and creativity, differed from many other reforms in Persian history.

Shīʿī Islam, as the fundamental element in the life, manners, and attitudes of the Persians, has had a great influence upon the mentality, character, and attitudes of the Persians in their social and private life. Islam has also played a peculiar and influential role in all aspects of the intellectual and moral climate of the nation. Therefore, no study of the socio-political history of the Persians could be attempted without a close consideration of religious attitudes.

A comprehensive study of the religious climate of the period is still to be undertaken. In such a study, the activities of the religious circles, the life and the...
contributes the individual ʿulamāʾ, and relations among
the ʿulamāʾ themselves and with the people, rulers, and
religious minorities are important elements which must be
considered in order to comprehend the roots of the religious
reforms.

The intent of the present chapter is to sketch the
basic facts in the religious life of the Persians in order
to provide a foundation for the discussion of the main
Shaykhī doctrines.

Shīʿī Islam has been a factor in the religious life of
Iran from the early period of the Islamic era. From the
Ṣafavid period (907/1501-1145/1732), to the present, except
for a short time during the Afšār Dynasty (1148/1736-1210/
1795), Shīʿa has been the official religious system of Iran.
The strong intellectual connection of the Persian Shīʿa with
the Shīʿī centers of ʿAtabāt must be emphasized. The holy
shrines of the Shīʿī imāms and the Shīʿī circles of ʿAtabāt
have always attracted the Persian Shīʿa and have been the
most respected places for Shīʿī studies in the Islamic
world. Although Iran has several well-known centers for
these studies, such as Mashhad, Qom, Isfahān, and Tehrān, it
is generally believed that the best schools and the most
qualified teachers for advanced studies in Shīʿī doctrines
are located in ʿAtabāt. Attendance at the lectures of the
Shīʿī ʿulamāʾ in ʿAtabāt and study in their circles is the
utmost desire of the Shīʿī knowledge seeker.

The curriculum of the circles consists of the study of
the Qurʾān, Shīʿī tafsīr (interpretation), hadīth (Tradition),
fīqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and Arabic grammar. The
students begin their career by memorizing the Qurʾān and by
studying the Arabic language through memorization of the
Niẓāb al-Ribāb by Ibrāhīm Abū l-Maṣūm, and Niẓāb al-Dīn
Maḥmūd b. Abī Bakr Farāḥī (d. 1208/1793). Alongside the Niẓāb, or a little later in
their studies, the Amthīla and Sārīf Mīr of Mīr Sayyid Sharīf
Jūrjānī (816/1413) are studied as basic texts for Arabic
grammar. In the literary sciences (e.g., Maṣūmī, Bayān, and
Badīʿ), the Muḥaddīṣ of Masʿūd b. Qaṭṭār, Tāḥṣībīn (d. 793/1390) is the basic text. In principles of juris-
prudence the Maṣʿūm al-Uṣūl of Shaykh Ḥasan b. Zayn al-Dīn
al-Shahīd al-Thānī, or the Qawānīn al-Muhkama fi al-Uṣūl of
Mīrzā Abū al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad Ḥasan, known as Mīrzā-ī Qomī
(d. 1231/1815), is taught. Although the basic courses
offered in each circle are almost identical, the material
covered in each course and the duration of the course
depends on the interest of the teacher.

Fields of specialization do not exist, and each learned
man can teach whatever he wishes. The teachers of higher
rank are expected to answer any questions and discuss any
religious issue. In spite of the lack of specialization in
religious studies, some of the ʿulamāʾ are better known for
their knowledge and authority in certain fields. The most
respected teachers are those who can teach different courses
to many students.

The term of study in ʿAtabāt is not fixed. Students
may stay in ‘Atabāt anywhere from a few months to five, or even seven, years. They usually complete a course by writing a treatise on a religious subject. If the treatise is approved by the teacher, the writer is awarded an ijāra (authorization, license). An ijāra is a great honor for a student and the official recognition of his academic, moral, and religious qualifications. The fame and the esteem of the issuer of an ijāra is significant for the later religious and academic life of the receiver: biographical books always provide the names of the ‘ulamā from whom the ‘Alim has received his ijāras.

In spite of the fact that the religious circles of ‘Atabāt and Iran provided religious education for hundreds of Shi’a, the general public, which was illiterate, lacked any formal religious education, and the general knowledge of the Shi’I community rarely went beyond the details of daily rituals. In such a society, the religious understanding of the individuals is based on obedience to religious leaders. The fact that in Persian society only a certain group of people receive a religious education is partly due to the fact that a person traditionally follows the occupation of his father, and, as a result, several members of one family often receive a good education, and even reach the highest ranks of religious leadership.

During this period, a great number of books and treatises were written in various fields of Islamic sciences. It is reported, for example, that Mullā Muḥammad Jafar Astarābādī (d. 1263/1846) wrote 70 books, and Sayyid Kāẓim Rāshīdī (d. 1259/1843) wrote 150. Although, on the basis of these reports, the number of religious works of the period approaches several thousand volumes, the majority of them are in the nature of marginal notes to the well-known works of the earlier Shi’I writers. Rather than encouraging originality and creativity, Shi’I scholarship has pursued various forms of taqrīb (eulogy), tahshīya (insertion), and talkhīs (abridgment) on the important works of the past. For example, among the works written by Astarābādī, fourteen are in the form of tahshīya and sharḥ (exegesis).

Very rarely did an ‘Alim concentrate his works in one field. Fame and popularity among the ‘ulamā also depended on their versatility. The result was a multitude of authors who contributed very little to the critical study of Shi’I scholarship.

The language of the scholarly texts in Islam has always been Arabic. Although during this period the tendency toward writing religious texts in Persian was beginning to increase among some of the ‘ulamā, the main works of all the distinguished ‘ulamā were still being written in Arabic.

An examination of the religious works of the period reveals that aside from a few influential and well-respected works on fiqh, such as Shaykh Muṭṭadā’ Anqārī’s (d. 1281/1864) works, greatest attention was given primarily to the minor questions of fiqh, while much less attention was given to other religious fields. This is understandable, for each mujtahid
tried to consolidate his authority as the "marja'-i taqlīd" by providing an immediate and personal framework of legal sanctions relating to a plethora of daily dilemmas in the lives of his followers. Works on fiqh were so common that it is hard to find an 'Ilm who did not write a few works on this subject. It is not surprising, then, that only a small number of them have been accepted and widely used by the entire Shi'i community.

In the field of tafsīr nothing was written that is comparable, either in length or in quality, to the earlier Shi'i tafsīrs, such as the Majma' al-Bayān by Tabrisī (d. 548/1153). The well-known books of tafsīr written in this period are commentaries on a few verses or chapters of the Qur'ān. A full, comprehensive commentary was not attempted.

The 'ulamā', collectively known in Persian society as the Jama'ī-i Ruhānīyat (the spiritual concourse), were in charge of religious rituals. The members of this group, although differing from one another in rank, all functioned as commentators on the Qur'ān and Islamic law, religious leaders, judges, teachers, arbitrators, managers of the holy shrines, and recipients of the income of the religious endowments (augār). They were also entitled to receive the khums on behalf of the imāms.

The 'ulamā' were in charge of various socio-religious affairs of the community. They were trusted by the people as representatives of the holy imāms among the Shi'a. They were also considered the true leaders, decision makers, reliable sources, and leading authorities in religious doctrine, and were thought to be the arbiters of the common good of the community. Such an attitude gave the 'ulamā' power and influence and enabled them to assume leading roles in social conflicts. The 'ulamā' were also a refuge for people who were treated unjustly. In this respect they were the main link between the ruling class and the masses.

The involvement of the 'ulamā' in various socio-religious affairs produced a noticeable competition among them for students, attendance at daily prayers, and income from augār. In most cases, it was accompanied by ideologically disputes. The most common device used against one's rivals was takfīr (accusing someone of being an infidel), which could cause the accused person to lose his following and even be put to death by the followers of the issuer of the takfīr. Takfīr was always pronounced in the name of defending and protecting Islamic interests.

The relationship between the 'ulamā' and the ruling class was not fixed and determined. It varied on an individual as well as temporal basis. As the nature of the relationship was affected by many factors, any generalization on this subject must be made with care. Since religion was the most influential factor in the private and social life of the Islamic community, naturally the 'ulamā' were the most respected and influential group. They ascribed to themselves the roles of interpreters of the Word of God and
protectors of Islam on earth. As a result of such functions, the rulers of Islamic societies needed the support of the ūlamā' to consolidate their political positions. They would obtain wider support and popularity if they could establish friendly relations with the ūlamā'. Politically or militarily weak rulers particularly required their support. It is generally true that, as the power and stability of a ruler increased, his appeal for ūlamā' s support decreased, but it must immediately be added that the personal tendencies of the ruler played a fundamental role in defining his relations with the ūlamā'. A ruler with a religious interest was more attached to the ūlamā' than a ruler lacking such an interest. From the standpoint of the ūlamā', the personal tendencies of the ūlamā' were significant in defining his relations with the rulers. While some of the ūlamā' were so detached from material involvement that they paid no heed to the rulers, others were active in political affairs. This group, which did not object to being paid by the court, carried out its commands and tended to forget their roles as spiritual leaders. It is true, however, that an ūlamā' was better able to fulfill his function if he had a satisfactory relationship with the rulers. Mutual support was, therefore, of benefit to both sides.

Fatḥ ūllāh Shāh (d. 1250/1834), who was a man with a strong religious sense,15 respected, financially supported, and paid visits to the ūlamā'. The Shāh invited Mullā Ja’far of Astarābād (d. 1263/1846) to Tehran and housed him near the royal palace, visiting him at least once a month.16 It is also reported that Fatḥ ūllāh Shāh visited Mullā ‘Abbās Mīrzā (d. 1249/1833) and Qā’im Maqām (d. 1251/1835) expressed the utmost respect for the ūlamā'. Nāyib al-Saltāna was said to attend the congregational prayer every Friday, and Qā’im Maqām would host a reception for the ūlamā' every Thursday and Friday.18 It is also reported that Muḥammad ūllāh Mīrzā (d. 1237/1821), son of Fatḥ ūllāh Shāh and the governor of Kermānšāh, invited Shaykh Ahmad Aḥsā’ī (d. 1241/1825) to Kermānšāh and paid him one thousand tomāns19 for his travel expenses. Shaykh Ahmad was also paid a monthly salary of seven hundred tomāns.20

In spite of such generosity and kindness, rulers did not tolerate any serious opposition from the ūlamā': whenever the ūlamā' threatened the security of a ruler, he would act against them.21

Doctrinal conflict and crisis was at a high level during this period and affected the entire life and attitude of the Persian Shi'a. In the year 260/873 when, according to the Shī‘a belief, the Twelfth Imām disappeared in Sāmarrā and his occultation (ghaybat) began, the Shi'a were cut off from his direct religious and spiritual guidance. Prior to that time, religious problems had been solved by asking his advice or by emulating his conduct, deeds, and words.
Therefore, the Traditions were consulted as the main sources for Islamic law. This situation continued until the end of the Lesser Occultation (which began in 260/873 and ended in 329/940). By the beginning of the Greater Occultation (329/940), the Shi'a could only refer to the Qur'an and the Traditions on the authority of the Prophet and the imams, since all material connection with the imams had been severed in 329/940. In the early decades of the occultation period, the most important collections of Traditions, which are considered to be second in validity only to the Qur'an, were compiled by Kholaynī (d. 329/940), Șadūq (Ibn Bībawayh) (d. 381/991), and Șobī (460/1067).

The occultation of the imām raised a fundamental question: who would be the center of authority and what would be the sources of legislation? Some Shi'i scholars believed it was permissible to employ "reason" to solve problems for which the Qur'an and the Traditions offered no clear solutions. Other Shi'i scholars considered the Qur'an and the Traditions to be sufficient sources for legislation and maintained that there was no need to use individual reasoning for new religious cases. In the early period, the dispute between the two groups, although important, did not create a serious rift in the Shi'i community, but in the late fifteenth century, when confessional affiliation assumed major importance in the tribal struggles for power in northwestern Iran, the gap widened until two separate groups, the Akhbarīs and the Usūlis, emerged.

The Akhbarīs identify as the earliest Akhbarī scholars Kholaynī and Șadūq, who collected and classified the Traditions. The next great Shi'i scholar was Muhammad b. ʿAli known as Ibn Abī Junhur of Aḥsā (d. about 901/1495), who appeared a full five centuries later. Akhbarī theology, with a distinct ideological system, begins with Mullā Muḥammad Amīn Astaraḵdī (d. 1026 or 1031 or 1036/1617, 1621 or 1626).

Mullā Muḥammad Amīn b. Muḥammad Sharīf Astaraḵdī was born in Astaraḵd and resided in Mecca and Medina. He was the first ʿālim to challenge the authenticity of the mujtahids' (Usūlis') judgments, and in many books, including the Fawā'id al-Madaniyā, accused the mujtahids of being the cause of corruption in Islam. Although the founding of the Akhbarī school by Astaraḵdī marks the division of the Shi'i ʿulamā into two antagonistic groups, it was not until the eighteenth century that the Usūli ideology was identified with a particular founder.

After Muḥammad Amīn Astaraḵdī, the Akhbarī school included a number of scholars such as Mullā Muḥsin Fāyḡ Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680), who wrote the Safīnat al-Najāt and criticized the Usūlis. Fāyḡ states in the Safīnat al-Najāt that religious legislation can be based only on the Qurʾān and the Traditions, not on the other sources used by the Usūlis. After Fāyḡ, the doctrines of the Akhbarī school were developed by ʿulamā such as Mullā Muḥammad Țahir of Qom (d. 1098/1686), Mullā Khalīl b. Ghāzi of Qazvīn (d. 1098/
and Shaykh Muḥammad b. Ḥasan Ḥurr ʿĀmilī (d. 1033/1623). Among these, Shaykh ʿĀmilī is the most important because of his work, Wasā'il al-Shīʿa. He also wrote the Fawāʾid al-Tosīya, a book on Akhībārī ideology which attacked the approach of the Uṣūlīs. In addition to the above works, ʿĀmilī wrote the Hadīyat al-ʿAbrār, devoted to the disputes between the Akhībārīs and the Uṣūlīs. He also wrote the Ḥidāyat al-Umma ilā Ahkām al-Aʿīma. As a major voice of "learned orthodoxy," he was opposed to the "ecstatic heterodoxy" of the Ṣūfīs. 28

The views of Astarābādī, which were supported and enriched by the later Akhībārī ʿulamā, were accepted by the majority of the Shīʿa in Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf provinces. Shaykh ʿAlī b. Sulaymān Baḥraynī (d. 1062/1651) established the Akhībārī school in Baḥrayn and was followed by Shaykh Sulaymān b. ʿAbd Allāh Māhūzī (d. 1121/1709) and his students. The intellectual activities of the Akhībārīs in Baḥrayn made the province a major Akhībārī center. The most distinguished Akhībārī scholar of Baḥrayn was Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṣāliḥ Samāḥījī (d. 1135/1722), who severely attacked Uṣūlī beliefs and went to extremes in his enmity toward the Uṣūlīs. Samāḥījī has described the views of the Akhībārīs and the Uṣūlīs in two of his works. The first, the Munvīyat al-Mumārisīn fi Ajwābat Suʿālāt al-Shaykh Yāsīn (Yāsīn b. ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn), was cited by the famous biographer Mīrzā Muḥammad Bāqir Khānsārī (d. 1313/1895) to describe the ideological differences between the two groups. The second, al-Muḥīya, clearly states that the Shīʿa are not obliged to obey the mujtahids because such an obligation is not established by God, the Prophet, or the imāms. 30

The later Akhībārī scholar, Shaykh Yūsuf b. ʿAbd Baḥraynī (d. 1186/1772), well-known for his books, the Ḥadīq al-Nawāʾira and the Luʿluʿat al-Baḥrayn, was a moderate. He criticized the extremist Akhībārīs in his work, al-Durr al-Najāfīya fī Radd al-Akhībārīya. 31 It was during the lifetime of this man that the founder of the Uṣūlī school, Muḥammad Bāqir b. Muḥammad Akmal al-Dīn of Bāhshān (d. 1205/1790), known as Wāḥīd Bāhshānī, rose against the Akhībārīs, and Shaykh Yūsuf Baḥraynī gave way to the new Uṣūlī ideology.

Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Nabī Akhībārī (d. 1232/1816), better known as Muḥaddith Nīshābūrī, was the last distinguished Akhībārī scholar. He wrote the Qālī al-Asās fī Naqḍ Asās al-Uṣūl and the Maṣādir al-Anwār fī al-Ijtihād wa al-Akhībār to criticize the Uṣūlī mujtahids. Muḥaddith Nīshābūrī was killed by the Uṣūlīs in 1232/1816 in Kaṭīmān at the age of 54. 33

The persecution of Muḥaddith Nīshābūrī and the rise of Muḥammad Bāqir Bāhshānī put an end to the Akhībārī school; Akhībārī ideology, which had for centuries dominated the religious and intellectual life of the Shīʿa in the main Shīʿa scholastic centers, was replaced by the Uṣūlī ideology.

Although the historical roots of Uṣūlī thought go back
to the occultation period, and since then there have been numerous Uṣūlī 'ulamā' among the Shi'a, Muḥammad Bāqir Behbahānī is considered to be the founder of the Uṣūlī school. The new jurisprudential system he formulated was subsequently adopted by the Shi'a, and with some modifications was accepted by well-known scholars such as Shaykh Muṭṭadāʾu Anṣārī and Mullā Muḥammad Kāẓim (d. 1329/1911), known as Ākhond Khorāsānī.

Because of his contribution to the formulation of Uṣūlī thought, Behbahānī became known among the Shi'a as Mu'āssis Behbahānī (Founder), Murawwīj Behbahānī (Disseminator), Ostād-i Akbar (Great Teacher), and Ostād-i Kull (The Teacher of Everyone). He wrote a number of books, mostly in Persian, among which the Risāla dar Ijtihād va Akhbār is significant for its repudiation of Akhbārī views and for its support of the position of the mujtahid and his functions, namely, ijtihād (individual judgment). He also wrote two other works on the same subject: Inḥisār-i Mardom bi Muttahid va Muqallid, on the theme that people are either legislators or imitators, and the Fawā'id al-Uṣūlīya, a refutation of the Fawā'id al-Madaniya of Muḥammad Amīn b. Muḥammad Sharīf Astarābādī. Behbahānī's views on the legislative authority of the 'ulamā' won universal acceptance in Shi'i circles through the work and efforts of some distinguished students of the Behbahānī circle who wrote, preached, and popularized the viewpoints of the Uṣūlīs. One of these was Shaykh Ja'far Najafī (d. 1227/1812), the author of the well-known work Kashf al-Ghīṭā. The beginning of this book is devoted to a description of the Uṣūlī approach to legislative problems. Najafī also wrote two other works on the same subject: the first, al-Haqq al-Mubīn fi al-Radd ʿala al-Akhbārīyyīn, to discuss the views of two parties and to reject the extremist Akhbārīs, and the second, another Kashf al-Ghīṭā, to refute the views of Muḥaddith Nīshābūrī. Najafī sent a copy of this book to Fāṭḥ ʿAllī Shāh to prove to him the falsity of the beliefs of the Akhbārīs and of their leading authority, Muḥaddith Nīshābūrī.

Behbahānī's views were elaborated in the works of the later Uṣūlīs, and the repudiation of the Akhbārīs continued in the works of other Uṣūlī 'ulamā' such as Muḥammad Ṭabarābī (d. 1242/1826). The dispute between the Akhbārīs and the Uṣūlīs did not remain on an intellectual level. It became so intense that the Uṣūlīs killed Muḥaddith Nīshābūrī for his Akhbārī views and fed his body to the dogs.

The polemical works of the Uṣūlīs and their violent measures against the Akhbārīs caused the Akhbārīs to lose their leadership of the Shi'i community. The transfer of religious leadership from the Akhbārīs to the Uṣūlīs was a turning point in the history of Shi'i doctrine. It gave the 'ulamā' an active role in the political and social development of the nation. The leadership of the Uṣūlī 'ulamā', such as that of Mīr Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabarābī,
known as Mujāhid, against the Russians (in 1241/1825) during the reign of Fath 'Ali Shāh, is a clear example of the part the Uṣūlīs played in shaping the destiny of the Persian nation. The crucial doctrine of the Akhbarīs and the Uṣūlīs rests on the question of the authority of the religious leader. The Uṣūlīs believe that a Shi'a can reach the position of ijtiḥād through his personal study of Islamic sciences. A man who is well educated and known for his piety, nobility, and moral standing may become a mujtahid. Whoever reaches these required qualifications is able to interpret Islamic law and legislate regulations which do not already exist in the Qur'ān and the Traditions. In addition, the Uṣūlīs believe that a mujtahid is the representative of the imām among the Shi'a and that obedience to the mujtahid is obligatory in the Shi'i community. Therefore, the personal understanding and judgment of a mujtahid, which is based on the Qur'ān and the Traditions, must be accepted and followed by the Shi'a who are the imitators (mugāllid) of the mujtahid. Thus, the Uṣūlīs believe that the "gate" (bāb) of ijtiḥād is open for the Shi'a.

For the Akhbarīs, on the other hand, the personal understanding of the mujtahid is not acceptable. While the Akhbarīs hold that only the text of the Qur'ān and the Traditions are legitimate sources for legislation, the Uṣūlīs maintain that the principles (uṣūl) from which solutions to religious problems can be derived are four:

1. the Kitāb (Qur'ān),
2. the sunna (the deeds, conduct, and sayings of the Prophet and the imāms, i.e., Traditions),
3. ijmā (consensus of the authorities in a legal question the precedent for which does not exist in the first and second sources), and
4. faqīh (reason).

Since the Traditions are substantially significant for the Akhbarīs, they give full validity to all of the Traditions collected in the Four Books of the Shi'i Traditions, namely, Kāf'il, Tabaqāt, Istibgār, and Man lā Yahduruhu al-Faqīh. For the Uṣūlīs, on the contrary, the contents of the Four Books do not have the same validity. The Uṣūlīs allow action on the basis of "opinion" (zann) when they cannot reach "knowledge" (ilm), whereas the Akhbarīs do not trust opinion. They contend that knowledge is always attainable from the Traditions and is trustworthy.

Uṣūlī doctrine maintains that there are two groups in Shi'i society: (1) mujtahids (legalists formulating independent decisions in legal or theological matters, based on the interpretation and application of the four uṣūl), and (2) mugāllids (imitators, who imitate the mujtahids as their religious guides). The Akhbarīs believe that the Shi'a must only imitate the infallible figures, that is, the imāms, and not the mujtahids, who are not infallible.

Concerning ijtiḥād, the Uṣūlīs assert that it is possible for anyone to reach the position of ijtiḥād through his personal endeavors during the occultation period (which
lasts until the appearance of the Mahdī), and whenever he has reached that position he is qualified to legislate religious regulations. The Akhbaraṣī, on the other hand, believe that perfect religious knowledge cannot be obtained during the period of occultation because knowledge must be obtained from infallible sources, i.e., the imāms: thus knowledge is obtainable only from the Traditions. Therefore, they deny that the mujtahids possess perfect knowledge and understanding on religious questions.

The 'ilm al-ugūl is a significant field of study for the Uṣūlīs and a mujtahid must be a master in this field. The Akhbaraṣī disregard the ‘ilm al-ugūl and believe that sound knowledge of the terminologies employed in the Traditions is sufficient to understand the law.

Another fundamental point of dispute between the two schools deals with the imitation of a deceased mujtahid. While the Uṣūlīs do not regard it lawful to imitate a deceased mujtahid, the Akhbaraṣī do.

Regarding the use of the Qur’ān and the Traditions, the Uṣūlīs prefer to use the esoteric meaning of these works, whereas the Akhbaraṣī are inclined to use the interpretations of the Qur’ān and the Traditions offered by the imāms, if they are available. In regard to the "chain of Traditions," while the Uṣūlīs do not allow reference to Traditions related by an authority who is not infallible, the Akhbaraṣī recognize as authentic Traditions related by ordinary people.

A comparison of the two schools shows that the Uṣūlī school believes in the individual authority of the mujtahids. The school also admits the freedom of personal understanding and, as a result, keeps the "gate" of 'ijtihād open. The flexibility of the Uṣūlī approach toward law may have been the major reason for its appeal to the majority of the Shi'a. This flexibility and the individualistic nature of the Uṣūlīs may also have aided the Shi'i law to be more adaptable to the new needs of the society.

While the social and geographical background of the leading Akhbaraṣī authorities show that they were mainly the residents of Mecca, Medina, and the Arabic provinces of the Gulf area, the Uṣūlīs were mainly Iranian, either residents of Iran or Ṣanā. In addition, because Muḥammad Bāqir Behbahānī, the founder of the Uṣūlī school, wrote mostly in Persian, and also because the Uṣūlī sulāma participated in nationalistic movements during the Qājār period, the Uṣūlīs may be considered as forerunners of the nationalistic movement which, in its early days, appeared in religious form. As such, the Uṣūlīs may perhaps be regarded as the Persian element against the Arabs, or at least against the Arabic element, which predominated in the intellectual and social background of the Akhbaraṣī leaders. The Persian nature of the Uṣūlī school was probably a reason for its popularity among the Iranians. From the intellectual point of view, it is evident that the rise of the Uṣūlīs represents the return of "rationalism" to the religious attitude of the Persians after being dominated by the fundamentalist
approach of the A khbārīs.

1. 'Atabāt, literally, "thresholds," refers to the Shi'i cities in Iraq, namely, Karbalā, Kāzimayn, Najaf, and Sāmarrā.


3. Muḥammad ʻAlī Mu'allim Ḥābībābādī, Makārim al-Āthār (Tehrān: Muḥammadī, 1377/1957), vol. 1, p. 84.

4. For a typical ijāza, see that of Mullā ʻAlī Waʻīz-i Khiyābānī in the Kitāb-i Ulāmā-i Muṣṣirīn (Tehrān: Islāmīya, 1366/1947), pp. 408-409.

5. For example, in the families of Ṭabāṭabā'ī, Behbahānī, and Kāshīf al-Chītī, a few individuals reached the highest rank of leadership.

6. E. G. Browne states that, "The literature produced by this large and industrious body of men (ʻulamā), both in Arabic and Persian, is naturally enormous, but the bulk of it is so dull or so technical that no one but a very leisured and very pious Shi'a scholar would dream of reading it. The author of the Qīṣaṣu'l-ʻUlāmā remarks that the ʻulamā often live to a very advanced age, and as their habits are, as a rule, sedentary and studious, and they devote a large portion of their time to writing, it is not unusual to find a single author credited with one or two hundred books and pamphlets." (A Literary History of Persia [Cambridge: The University Press, 1959], vol. 4, pp. 376-377.

7. Mu'allim Ḥābībābādī, Makārim al-Āthār, p. 86.

8. Ibid., p. 213.

9. E. G. Browne states that, "Many of these writings are utterly valueless, consisting of notes or glosses on super commentaries or commentaries on texts, grammatical, logical, juristic or otherwise, which texts are completely buried and obscured by all this misdirected ingenuity and toil." A Literary History of Persia, p. 377.

10. Mu'allim Ḥābībābādī, Makārim al-Āthār, pp. 87-90.
11. Husayn Karīmān shows that the term Ṭabrisī is the Arabized form of the Persian word Tafresh. Ṭabrisī, however, is commonly mispronounced Ṭabarṣī. See Husa'n Karīmān, Ṭabrisī va Majma' al-Bayān, 2 vols. (Tehrān: Tehrān University, 1340 sh), vol. 1, pp. 156-187.


14. Khuṃs is a religious tax paid to the family of the Prophet and after him to his successors, i.e. the imāms. After the occultation of the Twelfth Imām the 'ulamā' have been receiving the khuṃs as the representatives of the imāms in the Shi'i community.


19. According to Nāṣīkh al-Tawārikh (p. 214) one dirham is equal to thirty-six nokhod of silver and one dinār is equal to eighteen nokhod of gold. Nine dinārs are equal to one dinār and one dinār plus one dirham is equal to one tomān.


24. Muḥtahīd: "A legislating formulating independent decisions in legal or theological matters, based on the interpretation and application of the four usūl (Qurʾān, Sunna, Qīyas "analogy" or 'Aql "reason" in the Shi'i view, and Ijma' "consensus"), as opposed to mughallād (Hans Wehr, A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic, ed. Milton Cowan [New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976], p. 143.).


29. ʿAlī Davvānī, Ostād-i Kull, p. 98.


33. Ibid.

34. Mu'allim Ḥabīb bādī, Makārim al-Āthār, p. 222.

35. Itīhād: "Independent judgment in a legal or theological question, based on the interpretation and application of the four usūl, as opposed to taqālid." Wehr, Modern Written Arabic, p. 143.


CHAPTER II

Shaykh Ahmad Absārī:
His Life and Works

Sources on the Life of Shaykh Ahmad

Information on the life and achievements of Shaykh Ahmad Absārī, the founder of the Shaykhī school, is to be found in the main biographical works written on the life of the eminent figures of Iran in the Qājār period. In addition to the biographical works, general histories of Qājār Persia as well as encyclopedias on Iran and Islam contain information about the Shaykh and his movement.

The oldest and most authentic source on the life of Shaykh Ahmad is a short treatise written by Shaykh Ahmad himself at the request of his son, Shaykh Muḥammad Taqī. This work provides brief information about the childhood and education of Shaykh Ahmad and some facts about the social and religious climate of his society. The work was published in the Fihrist and also separately by Ḥusayn ʿAlī Maḥfūz. In addition to this autobiography, Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh, another son of Shaykh Ahmad, wrote a treatise in Arabic on the life of his father. This work was translated into Persian and published by Muḥammad Tāhir Khān. Another primary source on the life and achievements of Shaykh Ahmad was Dāʾī al-Mutahāyarīn written in 1258/1842 by Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī (d. 1259/1843), the successor of Shaykh Ahmad.

39. Algar, Religion and State in Iran, pp. 35-36.
41. For a list of the polemic works see Āqā Bozorg al-Ṭehrānī, al-Dharīʿa ilā Taqānīf al-Shīʿa, 26 vols. (Tehrān: Majlis, 1373/1955), vol. 10, pp. 182-183.
43. Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabāʾī was the son of Sayyid Ṭabāṭabāʾī and the son-in-law of Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdī Ṭehrānī. The son of Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabāʾī, Sayyid Ḥusayn, married the daughter of Shaykh al-Mulk who was the son of Fatḥ ʿAlī Shāh. This shows the relation by marriage of the Uṣūlis and the royal family. (See ʿAlī Davvānī, Ostād-i Kull, pp. 345, 356.)
44. For a full discussion of points of disputes between the Akhbārīs and the Uṣūlis, see al-Muṣawi al-Iṣbahānī, Rawḍat al-Jannāt, vol. 1, pp. 127-130.
45. A book written during this period about the qualifications of a mujtahid is the Jāmiʿ al-Funūn by Mullā Muḥammad Jaʿfar Astarābādī.
46. "In the usual classification of Muslim sciences, the uṣūl al-fiqh (ʿilm al-uṣūl) are generally defined as the methodology of Muslim jurisprudence, as the science of the proofs which lead to the establishment of legal standards in general." (Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam, 1953 ed., s.v. "Uṣūl," by J. Schacht.)
This work contains biographical information about the life of Shaykh Ahmad and the author himself. The author has included excerpts of the ijāras of Shaykh Ahmad and a list of his works. According to the Fihrist, the work was translated into Persian by Muhammad Raḍī b. Muhammad Riḍā, a follower of Sayyid Kāẓim. Another primary source on the life of Shaykh Ahmad, the Hidāyat al-Tālibin, was written in 1261/1845 by Ḥājj Muhammad Karīm Khān Kermānī (d. 1288/1871), the second leader of the Shaykhīs. This book, basically a response to the ideological opponents of Shaykh Ahmad, includes a description of the Shaykh's personality and some of his doctrines.

In addition to the above-mentioned works, a few Persian and European scholars have written about Shaykh Ahmad and the Shaykhī school. Among the Persian authors, Murtada Mudarrisī-i Chahārdehī is the leading author on the Shaykhī topics. In addition to a book entitled Shaykhīgarī, Bābīgarī az Naqṣar-i Falsafa, Tārīkh va Ijtīmā̄ on the life, personality, and principle doctrines of Shaykh Ahmad and the historical development of the movement, Mudarrisī has also published a series of articles on the subject in various Persian publications.

Sayyid Muhammad Ṭāleṣmī Zādeh published a series of historical articles on the lives of the first five leaders of the Shaykhī movement, i.e., Shaykh Ahmad Aḥṣāʾī, Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī, Ḥājj Muhammad Karīm Khān Kermānī, Ḥājj Muhammad Khān Kermānī (d. 1324/1908), and Ḥājj Zayn al-

ʿAbīdīn Kermānī (d. 1360/1941).

Among the European scholars who became interested in the Shaykhī school, Louis Alphonse Daniel Nicolas and Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau (d. 1882) are important. Nicolas' work, Ṣsai Sur Le Châikhisme, deals with the life of Shaykh Ahmad and his successor, Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī, and the main doctrines of the Shaykhī. Comte de Gobineau, although he did not devote any specific work to the Shaykhīs, discussed some of their basic doctrines in the second chapter of his Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale.

Edward Granville Browne (d. 1926) came across the Shaykhīs and their beliefs in the process of studying and writing about the Bāb. In the introduction to A Traveler's Narrative, he gives a short account of the life of Shaykh Ahmad, mentions his major works and doctrines, and very briefly discusses the development of the school after his death.

Henry Corbin, the contemporary scholar of Shi'ī theology, has written L'École Shaykhie en Théologie Shī'īte. This book provides a sketch of the life of Shaykh Ahmad and the succeeding Shaykhī leaders up to Abū al-Qāsim Ibrāhīmī (d. 1389/1969). It also contains a brief discussion of Shaykhī doctrines.

In spite of the studies which have already been made by scholars of the East and the West on the Shaykhī movement, the subject has yet to be critically studied. Such a
comprehensive study must be done on the basis of the socio-religious life and beliefs of the Persians during the Qajar period. The magnitude of Shaykh Aḥmad's achievements and his intellectual contributions are so vast, and his influence upon subsequent religious and social movements is so profound, that any mature judgment about him and his school must be made with utmost care and sound understanding of the period.

The Life of Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī

Shaykh Aḥmad b. Zayn al-Dīn b. Ibrāhīm b. Ṣaqr b. Ibrāhīm b. Ḍāghīr, known as Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsāʾī, was born in Rajab 1166/1752 in the village of Muṭayrāfī in the region of Aḥsā, a hinterland of Bahrayn. The clan of Shaykh Aḥmad belonged to the bedouin tribe of al-Maḥāshīr, which had settled in Aḥsā during the lifetime of Dāghīr (five generations before Shaykh Aḥmad, around the middle of the seventeenth century). The tribe was Sunnī, but Dāghīr and his clan, under unknown circumstances, became Shīʿī. Although Shaykh Aḥmad was raised in a Shīʿī family, it is reported that the majority of his countrymen were Sunnī and that there were also Ṣūfī orders. Thus, from childhood Shaykh Aḥmad was familiar with different trends of thought in Islam, a familiarity that played an important role in his later career. In his autobiography, Shaykh Aḥmad complains that his people know nothing about their religious obligations and duties. They can hardly differentiate between forbidden (ḥarām) and lawful (ḥalāl). This irreligiosity may have led Shaykh Aḥmad to call for a revitalization of religious life in his society.

Information about the childhood and early education of Shaykh Aḥmad is limited to his own statements and those of Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh, his son. Both sources indicate that he possessed a prodigious memory reaching back into his early childhood. He is reported to have recalled a heavy rain in his home town when he was only two years of age.

The early formal education of Shaykh Aḥmad, like that of most educated Muslims, began with reading the Qurʾān, which he could do at the age of five years. He then studied the Ajurrūmīya and the Afwāmī, two Arabic grammar textbooks, with Shaykh Muḥammad b. Shaykh Muḥsin, who was his formal teacher. Shaykh Aḥmad is reported to have been acquainted in early life with Ibn Abī Jumḥūr, the author of al-Mujtahīd, and to have received further instruction from Qūṭb al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī Dḥahabi, who subscribed to the doctrines of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 637/1240), which he apparently was teaching in Bahrayn. This seems to be the first intellectual acquaintance of Shaykh Aḥmad with the theosophy of Ibn al-ʿArabī, which later became one of the main themes in his works.

Upon completing the elementary religious courses in his native land, Shaykh Aḥmad went to ʿAtabāt to attend the academic circle of scholars such as Muḥammad Bāqir Behbahānī.
biographers and the religious authorities who issued him ijāzas.

Although Shaykh Ahmad received his education from the most learned men of his age, he was never fully satisfied with his formal education. Dissatisfaction with the social and religious atmosphere in which he grew up and his own contemplative temperament led Shaykh Ahmad to piety and meditation. As a consequence of lengthy meditations and recitation of the Qur'ān, he had recurrent dreams of the imāms. His own perception of his dream associations with the imāms constituted the spiritual cornerstone of his life, influencing his personality and creating in him an intense love for the imāms. For Shaykh Ahmad, his dreams were the source of his knowledge and inspiration. Recalling his childhood, he states that early in his life the gate of dreams was opened to him by Imām Ḥasan b. ʿAlī. In his first dream, an extraordinary experience for him, he presented several questions to the imām and received answers. It was in this first dream that the imām put his mouth on Shaykh Ahmad’s mouth and that Shaykh Ahmad drank the imām’s saliva. Shaykh Ahmad also related that he dreamed of the Prophet and drank of his saliva as well.

Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh on the authority of his father relates that the effect of such experiences on Shaykh Ahmad was so strong that he devoted more and more time to meditation, prayer, and recitation of the Qur’ān. It was now possible for him to meet with any imām he wished and to
meditating, and writing rather than to the intellectual challenges that would occupy him in the following decades of his life.

When Shaykh Aḥmad was forty-six years old, the Wahhābī attack on Ṣāfī led him to emigrate to Baṣr in 1212/1797. 48 This emigration was a turning point in his life: he never returned to his homeland, but remained in Iran and ʿAtabāt to the end of his life in 1241/1825. The period 1212/1797 to 1241/1825 was the period of his fame, popularity, and close association with the officials and religious leaders in Iran and ʿAtabāt.

The following is a brief chronology of Shaykh Aḥmad's travels: After he emigrated to Baṣr in 1212/1797, he went to the small village of Dhuraq where he stayed for about three years. He returned to Baṣr and went to Ḥabarat, a village near Baṣr, returning to Baṣr and proceeding to the village of Tanwīh and then to Nashwah, where he stayed for eighteen months. In 1219/1804 he moved to Šafawah and stayed there for a year. He returned then to Baṣr, and in 1221/1806 he went to Najaf, Kāṣīmān, and then to Iran. The period between 1222/1807 and 1229/1813 was mostly spent in Yazd. During this time he paid three visits to the shrine of Imām Riḍā in Mashhad and made a trip to Tehrān to visit Fath ʿAlī Shāh. He left Yazd in 1229/1813 for Iṣfahān and then continued his journey to Kermānshāh, arriving there in Rajab 1229/1813. He departed from Kermānshāh for Mecca in 1232/1816 and after his pilgrimage returned to ʿAtabāt.
where he stayed for about eight months; he then moved back to Kermānshāh in Muḥarram 1234/1818. This time he stayed in Kermānshāh for a few years until he left for another visit to the shrine of Imām Riḍā and went to Mashhad via Qazvīn, Qom, Tehran, Shāhrood, and Nishābūr. After twenty-two days in Mashhad he continued his journey to Yazd via Torbat and Ţabas. Shaykh Aḥmad was in Yazd for only three months when he was ordered by Imām ʿAlī, in one of his dreams, to go to ʿAtabāt. Consequently he left Yazd and went to Kermānshāh via Iṣfahān, where he stayed about forty days. After staying in Kermānshāh for one year, he departed for ʿAtabāt and Mecca. Shaykh Aḥmad died in Miḥrāb, about two stages from Medina, on 21 Dhī al-Qaʿda 1241/1825 at the age of seventy-five and was buried in the cemetery of Baqī in Medina.

According to Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh, Shaykh Aḥmad married eight women and had twenty-nine children: eighteen boys and eleven girls. Only seven of his children survived and reached maturity. Among his sons, three are themselves distinguished: Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh, who wrote the treatise on the life of his father; Shaykh Muḥammad Taqī, for whom Shaykh Aḥmad wrote his autobiography; and Shaykh ʿAlī or ʿAlī Naqī, who was ideologically in disagreement with his father. From an intellectual point of view, Shaykh ʿAlī was the most learned of Shaykh Aḥmad’s sons.

After the death of Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsaʾī, his disciple, follower, and very close companion Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī became the leader of the school. (The life and works of Sayyid Kāẓim Rashtī will be discussed in a separate chapter.) The spiritual and intellectual ties between Shaykh Aḥmad and Sayyid Kāẓim, and the Shaykh’s trust and confidence in Sayyid Kāẓim, were so obvious to Shaykh Aḥmad’s followers that, without any appointment, all of them regarded Sayyid Kāẓim as Shaykh Aḥmad’s only possible successor and recognized him as the most authentic interpreter of Shaykh Aḥmad’s doctrines. Consequently, for Shaykhī doctrine, the works of Sayyid Kāẓim are as fundamental as the works of Shaykh Aḥmad himself.

Shaykh Aḥmad’s learning and piety brought him fame, respect, popularity, and influence. He was welcomed by governors, officials, religious leaders, and the masses wherever he traveled. In Yazd, he received letters of invitation from Fatḥ ʿAlī Shāh, who had expressed his wish to visit with him personally. Shaykh Aḥmad responded positively and went to Tehran, where he was warmly received by the Shāh and his court. He was invited to make his residence in Tehran, but Shaykh Aḥmad found the invitation incompatible with his piety and simplicity of his life, and soon left the capital.

It is reported that the governor of Kermānshāh, Muḥammad ʿAlī Mīrzā, known as Rukn al-Dawla, felt so honored that he went four-farsakhs (about 134 miles) out of the city to welcome Shaykh Aḥmad to Kermānshāh. The same kind of respect and hospitality was also paid Shaykh Aḥmad by the
governors of Torbat and Ṭabas. In Isfahān, Ṣadr al-Dawla is said to have presented the village of Kamāl Ābād to Shaykh Aḥmad.

Toward the end of his life, his widespread popularity and fame as well as his doctrinal stand, which some of the ʿulamāʾ regarded as heresy, brought him the bitter experience of being denounced as a heretic—takfīr. During his stay in Qazvin, about the year 1239 or 40/1824, Shaykh Aḥmad met with the ʿulamāʾ of the city, including Mullā Muḥammad Taqī Baragḥānī (d. 1264/1847), the famous and influential religious leader of the city. In one of their meetings, Baragḥānī raised some theological questions and asked Shaykh Aḥmad to explain his views. After hearing Shaykh Aḥmad's views, Baragḥānī stated that Shaykh Aḥmad's answers were not in accordance with the universally accepted beliefs of the Shiʿa and declared Shaykh Aḥmad a heretic.

Baragḥānī's opposition was the first and most important opposition Shaykh Aḥmad encountered. Baragḥānī's opposition was the beginning of serious intellectual as well as physical conflicts which extended to ʿAtabāt during the time of Sayyid Kāẓim and resulted in a distinction between the followers of the Shaykhī school and the rest of the Shiʿi community. Although it is not clear when the appellation of "Shaykhī" was first applied to the followers of Shaykh Aḥmad, it seems that the takfīr of Qazvin contributed to the distinct identity of the followers of Shaykh Aḥmad, and the Shiʿa gave them the title in order to differentiate them from the Shiʿa. The term Shaykhī was used in contrast with the Mutasharriḥīn which, in this case, stands for the Shiʿa.

The Shaykhīs were also given the title of "Posht-i Sarīs" (literally, "behind the head"). When he visited the shrine of an imām, it was Shaykh Aḥmad's custom, as a matter of respect and politeness, to stand at the foot of the grave and not circumambulate it. This practice was adopted by his followers and came to distinguish them from other Shiʿa who, because they circumambulated the graves of the imāms, were called "Bālā Sarīs" (literally, "above the head").

The Shaykhīs are also known as Kashfīya. Sayyid Kāẓim explains that they were given this name because God lifted (kashf) from their intellect and from their vision the veil of ignorance and lack of insight into the Religion, and removed the darkness of doubt and uncertainty from their minds and their hearts. They are the ones whose hearts God illumined with the light of guidance.

Although the terms "Shaykhī," "Posht-i Sarī," and "Kashfīya" refer to a certain group of people, and were intended to distinguish them from the rest of Shiʿa, the group solidarity and identity of the Shaykhīs was in fact not so distinct as to sharply separate them from the rest of the Shiʿi community of Iran as an independent sect or even branch of Twelver Shiʿa. The Shaykhīs considered themselves true Shiʿa who thought and behaved in accordance with the teaching of the Shiʿi imāms; they did not consider them-