

## Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alīshāh Gunābādī The Renewer of the Ni‘matullāhī Order in Iran

Sufism is the spiritual reality of Islam, even if it was not known as “Sufism” at the inception of Islam. Phenomenologically speaking, it proves to be the essence of Islam, which gives life to it, like the soul gives life to the body. In Sufi terminology, Islam has two aspects: *sharī‘at*, its outer dimension, or body, and *ṭarīqat*, its inner dimension, or soul. These two aspects were inseparably joined in the person of the Prophet, but little by little through the history of Islam, there were people who paid attention only to the *sharī‘at*, Islamic law, and even confined Islam to this. Often the *fuqahā* or *‘ulamā* took this attitude. In contrast to them there were people who emphasized the spiritual reality or *ṭarīqat*, who became famous as Sufis.

The propagation of Islam was not through the sword of the rulers, but by the heartfelt word of the Sufis. The cutting swords of Sulṭān Maḥmūd Ghaznavī or Nādir Shāh Afshār did not make Islam influential among the Hindus. It was by the spiritual attraction and life giving breath of Sufi masters such as the successors of Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī or Mir Sayyid ‘Alī Hamadānī that they became Muslim.

Whenever the Muslims were weakened and deviated from the truth of Islam, great Sufis tried to renew and revive it. Sometimes this was done explicitly, as in the case of Ghazali, whose revival finds written form in his famous *Ihyā ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), and sometimes it was implicit, as with Shāh Ni‘matullāhī Walī.

The idea of renewal in Islam was not a mere accident of history, but was foreseen by the Prophet himself. It is reported in a *ḥadīth* that he said, “Verily, at the beginning of every hundred years, God raises one for this community of Islam who renews it’s religion for it.” Regardless of the soundness of this *ḥadīth*, and whether what is mean is exactly one century, which is beyond the scope of this paper, the idea of a revival of Islam and that it must be renewed in a manner appropriate to the times, was in the minds of the Muslims.

In Sufism itself, from time to time deviations occurred. The use of expressions such as, “false Sufi claimant” and “true Sufi claimant”, in books such as Jāmi’s *Nafahāt al-Uns*, bears witness to this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Among the most prominent critics of such deviations were the Sufi masters. They were the true reformers and renewers of Sufism.

Sufism has usually suffered at the hands of two groups: (1) pseudo-Sufis who fancy that the inward aspects of Islam suffice for them and that they may consciously abandon its outward precepts; and (2) those *fuqahā* who restrict their understanding of Islam to its outward aspects and ignore its interior. Each of these groups has an incomplete understanding of Islam, one with respect to *sharī‘at* and the other with regard to *ṭarīqat*. This is why the Sufi

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmi, *Nafahāt al-Uns*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Tehran: 1373), 9-12.

shaykhs were usually confronted by these two groups. Renewal and reformation of Sufism most often required a re-balancing of *sharī‘at* and *ṭarīqat* in order to preserve its original formation. It is this effort at balancing that prompted the great Sufi shaykhs to take into consideration the circumstances of their times in order to make religious precepts appropriate to them. This enabled them to present Islam in a more complete fashion and to keep it from deviation. In a *ḥadīth* attributed to the Imams, it is reported, “One who is conscious of his times is not in danger of being confounded.”

One of the greatest reformers and renewers of Sufism was Shāh Ni‘matullah Wali. His was one of the most catastrophic times for the Muslims, especially in Iran, which had suffered through the attacks of the Mongols and the Timurids after them. In religious affairs there were Sufi pretenders on the one hand, who did not practice Sufi teachings, and hypocritical preachers on the other, who used religion for personal gain. In his poetry, Ḥāfiẓ reproaches both groups, thus bearing witness to the situation in Iran. When the religious teachers had fallen so far astray, the religious ethos of the common people of the time would also have been in a state of degeneration.

In those days, Shāh Ni‘matullāhī Wali, as master of the Ma‘rūfī Order<sup>2</sup> and successor to Shaykh ‘Abdullah Yāfi‘ī, tried to improve both the inward and the outward religious conditions. He exposed the misdeeds and pseudo-teachings of the current Sufi pretenders, and criticized both Sunni and Shi‘ite *‘ulamā*. He called upon Sunnis to return to the *sunnah* of the Prophet of love for the Ahl al-Bayt, while he reminded Shi‘ites that the main pillar of Shi‘ism is the forgotten truth of *walāyat*, rather than points of law and political issues. Thus, he refused to be a *rafiḍī* (one who rejected the Companions of the Prophet) or *khārijī* (one who rejected the leadership of ‘Ali).<sup>3</sup>

Due to the difficulties faced by the Sufis in Iran after the death of Shāh Ni‘matullāhī, the *quṭbs* of the Order moved to India at the invitation of Sulṭān Aḥmadshāh Bahmanī of the Deccan. During this time, from the end of the Ṣafavids until the end of the Zandī dynasty, because of the political upheaval in Iran, the kings’ rejection of Sufism and the sovereignty of the *‘ulamā* who had good relations with the government, most of the Sufi orders either left Iran or operated clandestinely.<sup>4</sup> Although the Safavi dynasty was itself based on a Sufi Order, the attitude taken by them was very exclusivist, so that they did not permit the free operation of other orders. This situation continued until 1190/1776, when Riḍā ‘Alishāh Deccanī, who

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<sup>2</sup> This Order goes through Ma‘rūf Karkhī to Imam Riḍā, the Eighth Shi‘ite Imam.

<sup>3</sup> Among his poems are the following lines:

O you who are a lover of the household of ‘Ali!  
You are a perfect believer, unique.

Choose the way of the *sunnah* which is our religion,  
Otherwise you will be lost and confused.

Who is the *rāfiḍī*? The enemy of Abū Bakr?  
Who is the *khārajī*? The enemy of ‘Ali.

*Kulliyāt-e Ash‘ār-e Shāh Ni‘matullāhī Wali*, ed. Javad Nurbakhsh (Tehran: 1355), 688-9.

<sup>4</sup> See Ḥājj Zayn al-‘Ābidīn Shīrvānī Mast ‘Alishāh, *Ḥadā‘iq al-Siyāḥah*, 26.

was then *quṭb* of the Order, sent two of his authorized shaykhs, Ḥaḍrat Ma‘šūm ‘Alishāh and Shāh Tāhir Deccanī, to Iran. The latter died soon after arriving in Iran, or on the way, and the revival of the Order in Iran was left to the former and one of his main disciples, Nūr ‘Alishāh Isfahānī. These two behaved in a way that attracted the attention of the people who had long forgotten Sufism. Many people, including some of the prominent ‘*ulamā*, such as Sayyid Baḥr al-‘Ulūm (d. 1212/1797) and ‘Abd al-Ṣamad Ḥamadānī (who was killed in 1216/1801 by Wahhābis), became their followers, and Sufism became current in Iran again. The opposition of some of the ‘*ulamā* to Sufism, however, continued, and they even persuaded some of the Qājārī kings to kill the Sufi shaykhs on the pretext that they sought to take over the government. One can mention the martyrdom of Mushtāq ‘Alishāh in Kerman, or that of his disciple Muzaffar ‘Alishāh in Kermanshah at the order of the influential jurist, known as the “Sufi-killer”, Muḥammad ibn Bihbihānī.

After Nūr ‘Alishāh, the Ni‘matullāhī Order became the most popular Sufi order in Iran. Whenever Sufism becomes popular, pretenders to it abound. During the time when Raḥmat ‘Alishāh (d. 1278/1861) was the *quṭb* of the Order, Sufism became especially popular, in part because the Qājār king, Muḥammad Shāh, entered the Order. After Raḥmat ‘Alishāh passed away, the Ni‘matullāhīs divided into three branches: (1) the followers of Ḥājj Muḥammad Kāzīm Isfahānī Sa‘ādat ‘Alishāh; (2) followers of the uncle of Raḥmat ‘Alishāh, Ḥājj Muḥammad, famous as Munawwar ‘Alishāh; and (3) the followers of Mirzā Ḥasan Ṣafī, famous as Ṣafī ‘Alishāh. This division first appeared due to the differences about the explicit decree of Raḥmat ‘Alishāh that he should be succeeded by Sa‘ādat ‘Alishāh. After some time, the opponents of Sa‘ādat ‘Alishāh brought another decree attributed to Raḥmat ‘Alishāh according to which Munawwar ‘Alishāh was to be the successor, despite the fact that Munawwar ‘Alishāh himself admitted that he had not received the decree personally. Ṣafī ‘Alishāh first renewed his covenant with Sa‘ādat ‘Alishāh, and denied the validity of the decree of Munawwar ‘Alishāh. However, after Sa‘ādat ‘Alishāh refused to appoint him as shaykh, he broke his covenant with him and became a disciple of Munawwar ‘Alishāh. After some time, he also rejected the leadership of Munawwar ‘Alishāh and proclaimed himself *quṭb*. In this way the Ni‘matullāhī Order broke up into three chains: first, the Sulṭān ‘Alishāhī or Gunābādī chain, which is the main and largest chain; second, the Dhul Riyāsatayn<sup>5</sup> chain; and third, the Ṣafī ‘Alishāhī chain.

The Sulṭān ‘Alishāhī chain takes its name after the successor of Sa‘ādat ‘Alishāh, Ḥājj Mullā Sulṭān Muḥammad Sulṭān ‘Alishāh, who was born in Gunābād in Khorasān in A.H.L. 1251/A.D. 1835.

He was one of the most distinguished and famous ‘*ulamā* and Sufis of his time, such that in most of the books of that time his name is mentioned.<sup>6</sup> At the age of three he was faced with the loss of his father. Even at such a tender age, his excellence was apparent to all so that among the people and tribes of Baydukht and Gunābād he was known for his intelligence, wit, dignity and poise. After finishing his elementary studies in Baydukht, due to a lack of sufficient means, he temporarily suspended his studies, but because of his enthusiasm and

<sup>5</sup> The Dhul Riyāsatayn chain is named after the successor and son of Munawwar ‘Alishāh, ‘Ali Dhul Riyāsatayn, famous as Wafā ‘Alishāh.

<sup>6</sup> There are three books about him: *Rujūm al-Shayātīn*, by his vicegerent and son, Nūr ‘Alishāh Gunābādī; *Shahīdīyah*, by Kayvān Qazvīnī; and *Nābiqah-ye ‘Ilm va ‘Irfān*, by another of his successors, *Ridā ‘Alishāh*. The last of these is the most comprehensive of the three.

eagerness, at the age of seventeen, he continued to pursue studies and made great strides, such that his local teachers no longer satisfied his scientific yearnings. Therefore, he set out by foot for the holy city of Mashhad to pursue his studies where he spent some time and benefited from the presence of the scholars there. From there, he then went to Najaf, Iraq, where he became proficient in *fiqh*, *uṣūl*, and *tafsīr* (exegesis of the Qur'an). Under famous *fuqahā*, such as Shaykh Murīdā Anṣārī, and was given permission for *ijtihād* in *fiqh*. On his return from Najaf, he went to Sabzavār, and under the direction of the famous philosopher, Ḥājj Mullā Hādī Sabzavārī, he studied peripatetic philosophy, illuminationist philosophy and Mulla Sadrā's philosophy. He distinguished himself above all the other students of Sabzavārī, and wrote marginalia to the famous book of Mulla Sadrā, *Asfār*. Attaining mastery of these sciences did not satisfy his thirst for knowledge, which he began to seek from the hearts of the Sufis. At that time, the *quṭb* of the Ni'matullāhī Order, Sa'ādat 'Alishāh, together with some of his disciples, went to Sabzavār. Mullā Hādī, who was devoted to the *quṭb*, cancelled his classes and suggested that his students come with him to visit Sa'ādat 'Alishāh. At that very first session, the late Ḥājj Mullā Sulṭān Muḥammad was attracted to the Sa'ādat 'Alishāh, even though the latter was not one of the *'ulamā*, but he did not surrender to him, and after some time returned to Gunābād. Finally, in A.H.L. 1279, he set off on foot for Sa'ādat 'Alishāh's place of residence in Isfahan. With a passionate inner fire he went to him and was initiated in spiritual wayfaring toward God. Just as Mawlavī followed the illiterate Shams Tabrizī, he became a follower of the unlearned Sa'ādat 'Alishāh. He spent little time on the various stages of the journey toward Allah, and was authorized by the master for guidance of the Sufi novices and was given the spiritual title of Sulṭān 'Alishāh. In A.H.L. 1293, Sa'ādat 'Alishāh passed away and Sulṭān 'Alishāh succeeded him as the *quṭb* of the Ni'matullāhī Order. Sulṭān 'Alishāh became renowned throughout the Islamic world for both his knowledge and spiritual guidance. This resulted in inciting the jealousy of his enemies, those who were against his way. As a result, unfortunately, in A.H.L. 1327/A.D. 1909, he won martyrdom by being strangled. His grave is in Baydukht, Gunābād.

He has written many epistles and books, the most important of which are: his great Shi'ite Sufi commentary on the Qur'an in Arabic in four oversized volumes, *Bayān al-Sa'ādat*; *Sa'ādat Nāmeḥ*; and *Majma' al-Sa'ādāt*; all of whose titles allude to his master, Sa'ādat 'Alishāh. He also authored *Walāyat Nameḥ*, *Bishārat al-Mu'minīn*, *Tambīh al-Nā'imīn*, *Iyḍāḥ*, and *Tawḍīḥ*.

As during the period of Shāh Ni'matullāh, the times of Sulṭān 'Alishāh were critical. It was the time of the encounter of Iran with modern Western civilization, when the people confronted new concepts, including scientific and social ones. Naturally, some completely rejected what was strange and new, while others superficially submitted. During this time, Shi'ite jurisprudence, which is based on *ijtihād* and the derivation of precepts in accordance with the needs of the times, had become stagnated. Most of the *fuqahā*, who were not conscious of the situation of the modern world, were zealous about the outward aspects of religion and only took into consideration the outward aspects of Western civilization, as well, which they judged to be contrary to Islam.

Sufism was also undergoing a crisis. The opposition of the *fuqahā* that began at the end of the Safavid period was vigorously maintained. The practice of the pseudo-Sufis also was apparently contrary to both the modernists as well as Islamic law. Taking all this into account, Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān 'Alishāh was confronted with three groups who opposed true Sufism: (1) some of the *fuqahā*, (2) the pseudo-Sufis, and (3) some of the modernists. All three groups were taken into consideration in his attempt to renew Sufism.

Aside from his position of leadership, Sultān ‘Alishāh was a philosopher and a *faqīh*, and both his philosophical positions and jurisprudential opinions were colored by his mysticism. He was a student of Mulla Hādī Sabzawāri, who was at that time the most famous proponent of a philosophical system based on Sufism derived from the teachings of Mulla Ṣadrā, and he himself adopted a system of philosophy that mostly followed in this tradition. In *fiqh*, he was a *mujtahid*, whose permission for *ijtihād* was granted by the great Shī‘ite *faqīh* of the time, Ayatullah Hājj Mirzā Shirāzi.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he did not issue any *fatwās* as a *mujtahid*, because he considered it necessary to keep the realms of *ṭarīqat* and *sharī‘at* separate. However, some of his juridical opinions may be found in his *tafsīr*, *Bayān al-Ṣa‘ādat*. His jurisprudential views show that he was completely aware of the need to take contemporary conditions into account when reaching decisions about Islamic law, and accordingly, he viewed music and chess as lawful, the People of the Book as essentially having ritual purity and slavery, taking more than one wife at a time,<sup>8</sup> and opium smoking as prohibited.

### The Prohibition of Opium

One of the bad habits that was becoming current in the Far East, India and Iran during that time was smoking opium. This was a result of the colonial policies of some European countries.<sup>9</sup> This practice was becoming widespread among some of the Sufis for many years to the point that it would be considered a Sufi custom. They used to say that to be a dervish one should smoke opium or hashish. To justify this, they claimed that it promoted ecstasy and the attainment of the Sufi goal of annihilation, *fanā*. They imagined that the nothingness that comes from smoking opium is the same as the nothingness of mysticism. According to Mawlānā:

In order that for a while they may be delivered from sobriety (consciousness),  
they lay upon themselves the opprobrium of wine and marijuana.<sup>10</sup>

Mystical nothingness comes from God, not from changes in physio-chemistry. Again, Mawlānā says:

Nothingness should come from God,  
So that the beauty of God may be seen in it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Nābigheh-ye ‘Ilm va ‘Irfān*, 208.

<sup>8</sup> Although this is not prohibited in Islamic law, he judged that in modern times it is impossible to maintain justice among several wives.

<sup>9</sup> Many historians of that time have pointed out this dangerous problem. For example, E‘timād al-Saltanah, the author of the famous book, *Ma‘āthir va al-Āthār*, contemporary with Sultān ‘Alishāh, says, “In these years the colonialists have brought narcotics which they have circulated in India into Iran, and they began to encourage the cultivation of it in Kerman. From this product, called the poppy, the narcotic opium is made.”

<sup>10</sup> *Mathnavī*, VI, 225. In Nicholson’s edition the couplet ends with *zamr*, meaning *minstrelsy*, but in some other editions there is *bang*, a drink prepared from cannabis.

<sup>11</sup> This couplet is not found in Nicholson’s edition of the *Mathnavī*.

The disadvantage of smoking opium from the point of view of mystical experience in Sufism is that one could confuse the hallucination produced by the use of the drug with the unveiling or opening from God for which every Sufi waits. From a social point of view, the practice led first to inactivity and then to idleness. The disadvantages for public hygiene are clear to all. For these reasons Sulṭān ‘Alīshāh strictly prohibited the use of opium among his followers at a time when its subsequent social malaise had not yet become apparent, to the extent of cursing those who smoked it. He would not accept anyone who smoked opium as a Sufi novice. In his commentary on the Qur’ān, *Bayān al-Sa‘ādat*, with regard to the verse, ﴿They ask you concerning wine and lots. Say: in both these is great sin...﴾ (2:219), he pronounced the prohibition of opium on the grounds that it violates the rights of ones faculties.<sup>12</sup> This pronouncement at that time appeared to be quite revolutionary, since none of the ‘ulamā had said anything about it. The prohibition also became a great obstacle to the activities of the colonialists who were trying to make the people weak and dependent on them.

After Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alīshāh, his grandson and viceregent, Ḥaḍrat Nūr ‘Alīshāh Gunābādī, wrote a separate book entitled *Dhū al-Faqār: On the Prohibition of Smoking Opium*.<sup>13</sup> In that book he says that since this sin, that results from the temptations of Satan, had become current in most of the cities of Iran, and none of the ‘ulamā had paid any attention to it, it is obligatory for those who are familiar with this problem to try to repel it. The language of this book is simple and lucid in a way that ordinary people could understand the evil of it.

From the time of Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alīshāh, the prohibition against smoking opium has been one of the characteristics of the Ni‘matullāhī Sulṭān ‘Alīshāhī Gunābādī Order of Sufism.

### **The Abandonment of Idleness**

In Islam, the outward is not separate from the inward. Any work done with the intention of pleasing God is considered to be an act of worship. So, occupation with worship is no excuse for abandoning worldly affairs. The Prophet said, “There is no monasticism in Islam.” In Sufism, in special circumstances, such as during the taming of the carnal soul, instructions may be given for seclusion. Before the divine commissioning of the Prophet, he spent time in seclusion in the cave of Hera. Due to divine attraction, it sometimes occurs that a Sufi abandons the world. In all of these instances, solitude is the exception rather than the rule. Occupation with the arts and crafts in traditional Islamic societies, e.g., architecture, calligraphy, etc., were integrated with the journey toward God. This is why anyone who wants to become a *fatā*<sup>14</sup> and enter the way of Sufism, had to occupy himself with a craft or art.

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<sup>12</sup> *Bayān al-Sa‘ādat*, Vol. 1, 194.

<sup>13</sup> *Dhū al-Faqār*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Tehran, 1359), 14-15. My respected friend, Dr. Leonard Lewisohn, in his article, “An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I,” published in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 61, (London: 1998), has mistakenly translated *tahrim* (prohibition) as *lauding the virtues*.

<sup>14</sup> Literally, *fatā* means a youth; but is used to refer to a person who has kindness, forgiveness, and bravery. *Futuwwat* was one of the rites in the path of Sufism.

However, there were Sufis who both intentionally and unintentionally made use of the idea of *khalvat*, or seclusion, as an excuse for idleness and begging. They made a pretext of reliance on God alone, *tawakkul*, and contentment with one's lot, *riqā*, as a Sufi manner. This is why some of the *khānaqāhs* turned into gathering places for the lazy.

During the time of Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī, this bad custom was common among many Sufis. Although he practiced seclusion many times, he instructed his followers to be occupied with some work and not to try to gain money through Sufism. He himself used to farm and praised this occupation.<sup>15</sup> He said that labor was a sort of alchemy.<sup>16</sup>

The custom of mendicancy was current among many Sufis, especially in the Khāksār Order, during the time of Ḥaḍrat Sultān 'Alishāh, who strictly prohibited all his followers from being idle and without work. He gave reasons for this prohibition based on rational argument, common sense and religious principles. He said, "Everyone should work for a living and for the sake of the improvement of the world. One should occupy himself with any work that he likes and is not against religious law, including farming, trading, or industry."<sup>17</sup> In another place he says, "Idleness is against civilization, too."<sup>18</sup>

This instruction, especially in the modern world, and with the appearance of civil society that necessitates close social relations and the occupation of each member of society with a work was much needed at that time. At the same time, as a Sufi master, he warned his followers against taking pride in worldly gains and wealth or being covetous thereof. He said, "One should consider himself poor even if one has limitless wealth.... No one takes more than a single shroud from this world. When one becomes aware of this truth, he will understand that he is poor in this world and needy to God.... Improvement of the world is by no means contrary to dervishhood."<sup>19</sup> He taught that any work, including prayer and fasting, but also trading and farming, with the intention of performing God's commands, is worship.<sup>20</sup> Earning money is not opposed to reliance on God. He says that the *faqīr* should work but consider the results of his work to be from God.<sup>21</sup>

Ḥaḍrat Sultān 'Alishāh like Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī used to farm, and he often had calloused hands. Once, someone came to his house to ask him about alchemy. He was not in the house at the time, but was in his garden. The man went into the garden, and after greeting him, before he could ask anything about it, Ḥaḍrat Sultān 'Alishāh showed his hands to him

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<sup>15</sup> See *Majmu'eh dar Tarjomeh-ye Ahwāl-e Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī Kermāni*, ed., Jean Aubin, 106.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 106. In one of his poems, he says: "Listen to a good instruction from us. Do good and you will find good as a wage. Do farming; and do not beg. Earn your living lawfully. If you are searching for alchemy, seek it from the dark earth."

<sup>17</sup> *Majma' al-Sa'ādāt*, 419-428.

<sup>18</sup> *Nābigheh-ye 'Ilm va 'Irfān*, 179.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Majma' al-Sa'ādāt*, 421.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 224, 323.

and said, “This is our alchemy! We toil and benefit from it.”<sup>22</sup> He even used to rebuke farmers who neglected their lands, saying, “If an earth that has the capacity of delivering 300 kilos of wheat, delivers only 270 kilos of wheat because of negligence, the farmer will be held responsible for the remainder.”<sup>23</sup>

After Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alishāh, the prohibition of idleness has become one of the main characteristics of the Ni‘matullāhī Gunābādī Order, and all the subsequent *quṭbs* have themselves worked and advised their followers to do so, as well.

### **The Lack of Restrictions to Special Garb**

One of the old customs among the Sufis was wearing special garments, such as woollens, a patched cloak, and other items. Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī did not restrict himself or his followers to any special clothing by which they could be designated as Sufis. He sometimes wore a white wool robe, and sometimes a long gown.<sup>24</sup> To the contrary of his practice, many of his followers again began wearing distinctive dress, as is mentioned by ‘Abd al-Razzaq Kermānī, the author of his biography: “The clothing worn by his dervishes was absolutely not worn by him or his children.”<sup>25</sup> The prohibition of dervish vestments was only temporarily cancelled several centuries later by Ḥaḍrat Riḍā ‘Alishāh Deccani for two of his authorized shaykhs, Ḥaḍrat Ma‘ṣūm ‘Alishāh and Ḥaḍrat Nūr ‘Alishāh I, whom he had sent to Iran. These two great men entered Iran wearing special dervish robes and carrying the characteristic dervish bowl and ax. This policy was enacted to attract attention to the arrival of Sufism in Iran where it had been outlawed for many years.<sup>26</sup>

Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alishāh once again prohibited his followers from wearing any distinctive Sufi clothing. He used to say: “Servitude to God does not depend on any special clothes. In the Qur’ān it is written, *‘The garment of piety (taqwā) is the best.’*”<sup>27</sup> With this rule, no difference could be made out between Sufi Muslims and the other people of the country, and their particular beliefs remained protected in their hearts. This rule is still current in the Ni‘matullāhī Gunābādī Order, which has been reissued by the *quṭbs* after Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alishāh.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Majma‘ al-Sa‘ādāt*.

<sup>23</sup> *Nābigheh-ye ‘Ilm va ‘Irfān*, 224.

<sup>24</sup> Concerning his dress, see *Majmu‘eh dar Tarjomeh-ye Aḥwāl-e Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī Kermānī*, ed., Jean Aubin, 28, 304.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> See, Ḥājj Dr. Nūr ‘Alī Tābandeh, “Ḥaḍrat Sayyid Nūr al-Dīn Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī,” in *‘Irfān Iran*, No. 15, 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> *Nābigheh-ye ‘Ilm va ‘Irfān*, 179.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see *Pand-e Ṣāliḥ*, 113.

## Social and Political Affairs

Essentially, Sufism is not a political school of thought, so it has nothing to do with politics. However, Sufis have entered into political affairs as individuals rather than as Sufis.

Generally speaking, the duties ordained by Islam have been divided by the Sufi sheikhs of the Ni‘matullāhī Order into three kinds:

- (1) Precepts of the *sharī‘at* that must be obtained from a qualified *mujtahid* (expert in Islamic law);
- (2) Precepts of the *ṭarīqat* that must be obtained from the current Sufi master;
- (3) Personal precepts to be discerned by the individual himself. One should personally discover one’s responsibilities by one’s own religious thinking and reasoning.

Thus, interference and expressing views about social affairs is outside the scope of *ṭarīqat* and the *fuqarā* do not expect instructions in such regards from the authorities of the Order. One’s works and intentions are to be made pure for the sake of Allah, and one’s own responsibilities are to be discovered. The authorities of the Order will not express views on such questions so that it is not imagined that these are duties of *ṭarīqat*.<sup>29</sup>

During the constitutional crisis in Iran in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the *fuqarā* asked Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alīshāh about their duties, he used to say, “I am a simple farmer from a village. I don’t know what constitutional and absolute monarchy mean.”<sup>30</sup> He left it to them to figure out for themselves. At the same time, he gave advice to the rulers not to do injustice to the people. For example, in his book *Walāyat Nāmeḥ*, there is a chapter entitled, “On Explaining Sovereignty and the Treatment of Subjects,” in which he severely criticized the rulers of the country, and says, “In this matter, they should take as their example the first caliphs of Islam; and if their time was too long ago, they should take as their example the rulers of the West, who do not live in luxury, make the country flourish, provide ease for their subjects and who fill the treasury.”<sup>31</sup>

Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alīshāh lived during the dictatorship of the Qājār dynasty and its opposition to the reform of the Iranian constitution. The idea of a constitution was one of the first political concepts from the West to enter Iran. Some of the *‘ulamā*, like Bihbahānī approved of it as consistent with Islam, while others, such as Faḍlullāh Nūrī, disapproved of it as against Islam. Naturally, the formation of political groups and intrigue were current. The *fuqarā* were uncertain of their duties in this regard.

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<sup>29</sup> See *The Ṣūfī Path: An Introduction to the Ni‘matullāhī Sulṭān ‘Alīshāhī Order*, ed. Shahram Pazouki, (Tehran: Haqiqat Publications, 2002), 79-81.

<sup>30</sup> *Nābigheh-ye ‘Ilm va ‘Irḥān*, 122.

<sup>31</sup> *Walāyat Nāmeḥ* (Tehran: 1380/2001), 161.

## The Revival of *Walāyat*

*Walāyat* is the inward aspect of the mission (*risālat*) of the Prophet to guide the people. It is the source of *ṭarīqat* in Islam, or Sufism. The outward aspect of this mission is bringing the *sharī‘at*, which is concerned with religious precepts. According to the Qur‘ān, the period of *risālat* came to an end with the passing away of the Prophet, but the period of *walāyat* extends until the end of time. *Walāyat* is the main pillar of both Shi‘ism and Sufism. Accordingly, both of these refer to the same truth. In both Shi‘ite and Sufi theory, the station of *walāyat* cannot be filled by the choice of the people or of an elite. The Prophet chose ‘Ali to be his successor in accordance with divine command. In the same manner, each succeeding *walī* must be appointed by the preceding one. This is why almost all Sufi orders trace their permission for guidance to Imam ‘Ali.

Over the course of the centuries, Shi‘ism became a set of theological and jurisprudential teachings coupled with a political movement, and *walāyat* was confined to a political interpretation. On the other hand, there were Sufis who completely neglected the issue of *walāyat*.

One of the main issues in the revival of Sufism is the revival of the idea of *walāyat* in Sufi books, which is especially evident after the fall of the ‘Abbasid dynasty and the weakening of the political power of the *Ahl al-Sunnah*.

Undoubtedly, the main problem addressed in works of Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī is *walāyat*, the various aspects and views about which are discussed at length in many of his works. He raised the topic of *walāyat* to such prominence that the Sufis would understand this to be the source of Sufism itself. On the other hand, he addresses the official Sunni and Shi‘ite positions, asking what it really means to be a true Sunni or Shi‘ite. He says that to be a Sunni is to follow the tradition (*sunnah*) of the Prophet, one of whose requisites is love for the *Ahl al-Bayt*. To the Shi‘ites, who were infamous at the time as *rafīḍī* (those who were considered heterodox because of their refusal to accept the authority of the first caliphs), he says that to be Shi‘ite does not mean cursing the first three caliphs, but it means following ‘Ali. In one of his poems he says:

*I am not a rāfiḍīte, but I am  
a pure believer, and enemy of the Mu‘tazilite.*

*I have the religion of my ancestor (the Prophet)  
after him, I am the follower of ‘Ali the walī.<sup>32</sup>*

He reminded the official Shi‘ites that believing in the *walāyat* of ‘Ali is not merely a matter of words. It is impossible unless there is a heartfelt connection of discipleship. In a poem he says:

*Although you do not have the walāyat of that walī (‘Ali), you boast of walāyat.  
You should know what you are boasting about.*

*We have raised the banner of his walāyat.*

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<sup>32</sup> *Divān-e Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī*, 689.

*Why should the drum be beaten while under the rug?*<sup>33</sup>

In the teachings and works of the martyr Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alishāh, the issue of *walāyat* is renewed, with the difference that in the time of Shāh Ni‘matullāh Walī, since the religion of the majority of the Iranian populace was Sunnī, primarily he addressed them, while in the case of Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alishāh, since after the Safavid period the Iranian populace was mostly Shi‘ite, his polemic was directed primarily at those who had inherited a nominally Shi‘ite affiliation. In most of his books, including his Sufi commentary on the Qur‘ān, *Bayān al-Sa‘ādah*, his main topic is *walāyat* and its different dimensions. His Persian book, *Walāyat Nāmeḥ*, is an independent treatise specifically devoted to a Sufi/Shi‘ite presentation of the topic of *walāyat*. At the very beginning of the book, he says: “Many have erred, thinking that *walāyat* is love, or the mere verbal claim of the Imamate or *walāyat* of the *Ahl al-Bayt*.”<sup>34</sup> On another book, he says: “Those whose fathers were Shi‘ite think that they are Shi‘ite because they imagine this to be no more than the verbal claim of the *walāyat* of ‘Alī.... They didn’t understand anything of Shi‘ism except its name.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, his main intention is to show the Sufi dimension of Shi‘ism, i.e., *walāyat*, to the nominal Shi‘ites who had confined it to a verbal claim or to jurisprudence and theology.

Among the important points that he made about *walāyat* is the issue of having permission for authority in Sufism. This topic became especially highlighted after the competing claims to succession following the passing away of Ḥaḍrat Raḥmat ‘Alishāh, and the failure of some to obey his authorized successor, Ḥaḍrat Sa‘adat ‘Alishāh.

As it has been said, one of the main principles of *walāyat* is that the master of the Order should have permission from his predecessor. These permissions for guidance should form an unbroken chain or series reaching back to Imam ‘Alī. This is why the word *silsilah* (chain) is used for the Sufi orders. During the time of Ḥaḍrat Sulṭān ‘Alishāh, since there were numerous sectarian divisions of the orders, and there were many who claimed to be masters without having any permission, there was an intense need to deal with this issue. He refers to this problem in many of his works. For example, he says: “Know that the tree of the shaykhs of every Sufi order of the past has been recorded.”<sup>36</sup> He continues to explain that the explicit authorization (*naṣṣ*) of the shaykh is necessary to support the claim of being a shaykh, and is needed by the novice in order to understand under the direction of whom he could enter the *ṭarīqat*. This is why the Sufi shaykhs sought to protect this authorization. In another place he says, “In every religious affair it is necessary to have the permission of the religious authority of the time.”<sup>37</sup>

Now in the Ni‘matullāhī Gunābādī Order, having explicit authorization has become the most important criterion for spiritual guidance.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 755.

<sup>34</sup> *Walāyat Nāmeḥ*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> *Majma‘ al-Ṣa‘ādāt*, 209.

<sup>36</sup> *Walāyat Nāmeḥ*, 240.

<sup>37</sup> *Majma‘ al-Ṣa‘ādāt*, 339.