

The Life and Works of Mast ‘Alī Shāh

Introduction

Ḥājj Zayn al-‘Abdīn Shīrwānī, better known by his spiritual title Mast ‘Alī Shāh, was born on 15 August 1780 C.E. (15 Sha‘bān 1194 A.H.) in Shamakhi, a district of Shīrwān in Azerbaijan.¹ Mast ‘Alī Shāh came from a family of scholars. Iskandar, his father, was among the class of Shi‘ite seminary scholars in Shamakhi.² The Uṣūlī scholars Sayyid ‘Alī Ṭabāṭabā‘ī (d. 1231/1816),³ known as Ṣāhib Rīyāḍ, and Aqā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī (d. 1205/1790),⁴ known as Waḥīd (the ‘Unique One’), appointed Mast ‘Alī Shāh’s father as their deputy in Shamakhi.⁵ Mast ‘Alī states that many of the Sunnis, whom he called by the pejorative term *Bakrī wa ‘Amrī*, were converted to Shi‘ism through the efforts of his father.⁶ Through these accounts, which are to a large degree hagiographical, Mast ‘Alī tried to legitimise his father as having been an influential seminary scholar in the Shamakhi district. At the age of 5, Mast ‘Alī went to Iraq with his family and spent his childhood in the city of Karbalā. Over the next 12 years he studied literary and other seminary sciences.⁷ One night, during a long period of spiritual contemplation, he realised that the seminary sciences were not enough to gain gnosis.⁸ He realised that it was only through direct spiritual realisation and ‘self-disclosure’ or ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*) that one could gain the gnosis of God.⁹

He writes that it was during this period that he started to search (*ṭalab*)¹⁰ for the truth.¹¹ Mast ‘Alī met gnostics (*‘urafā*) and scholars, and in Baghdad he met Sunni scholars.¹² For 28 years¹³ he travelled and lived among Turks, Kurds and Indians, and met their saints and sages,¹⁴ writing long accounts of his meetings and conversations with them, which demonstrate his ecumenical views and his willingness to initiate a dialogue with members of other faiths and to open his ears to the beliefs and thoughts of people outside his own culture and civilisation. Near the end of his life, he summed up his views as follows: ‘I saw the world as a mirage and an appearance without being. There is no credit for its honour and no value for its hardship.’¹⁵ This

sentence clearly represents his Sufi detachment from the concerns of the material world.

It was during his travels that he heard about Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh. He heard that Sayyid 'Alī Bihbahānī,¹⁶ Ja'far Najafī (d. 1227/1813)¹⁷ and Aqā Muḥammad 'Alī Kirmānshāhī had issued religious verdicts to the effect that Ma'sūm 'Alī and Nūr 'Alī must be excommunicated and their beliefs vilified.¹⁸ Mast 'Alī decided to research the Sufis to gain first-hand knowledge of them.

Mast 'Alī spent time with Sufis and did not encounter anything other than goodness and piety, which eventually led to his initiation into the Ni'matullāhī order by Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh.¹⁹ Afterwards, he accompanied Nūr 'Alī Shāh to the 'Atabāt in Iraq and became his disciple. Later, he received spiritual lessons from Rawnaq 'Alī,²⁰ who was also his guide during his initiation (*dalīl-i rāh*). He also met Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and became his close companion.²¹

Majdhūb ordered Mast 'Alī to reside in the province of Fars in order to guide spiritual seekers (*sullāk*), and in 1235/1819 Mast 'Alī was married there.²² During his stay in Fars, according to several of his autobiographical accounts, he was constantly persecuted by the clerics and harassed by the inhabitants of the province.²³ During his last visit to Majdhūb, Majdhūb mentioned that he was about to travel to Azerbaijan and that he was not coming back, meaning that he was about to die. Mast 'Alī begged Majdhūb to take him with him to the afterlife, and Majdhūb replied that Mast 'Alī had to stay in this world for a while, until his time came.

In the year 1239/1823, when Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh passed away, there were disagreements about succession within the order. However, the majority of Majdhūb's disciples became Mast 'Alī's disciples. So he became the spiritual Pole (*quṭb*) of the Ni'matullāhī order and remained in that position for about 14 years.²⁴ During his decade and a half as leader of the order he became a very well-known master. He tried to avoid worldly folk and sought out the company of people of faith and piety. He avoided as much as possible visitations from members of the Qājār court and from the social elite and nobility. He explained that it was not his manner to flatter courtiers; therefore, it was better if he stayed away from them. In 1253/1837 he passed away at the age of 57, while returning from hajj.²⁵ He was known for living as an ascetic. Shīrāzī quoted from Riḍā Qulī Khān Hidāyat about Mast 'Alī Shāh's generosity and kindness, 'I have seen very few people like him being content with as little food as possible and simple clothes.'²⁶

The majority of his contemporaries harboured prejudices towards those holding opposing beliefs, while he exhibited broadmindedness towards

them. His extraordinary literary writings are indicative of open-mindedness to other religious groups, beliefs and philosophies. In his writings he treated other religious beliefs, practices and customs with an honesty and an objectivity unusual in his day and age, his approach standing in vivid contrast to contemporary exoteric Shi'ite religious authorities who usually sought to refute beliefs and ideas different from their own.²⁷ He was an emotional person, as is evident in his writings, particularly when he talks about historical events concerning Sufism and Shi'ism. He was subjected to attacks and accusations by those who opposed his Sufi beliefs, which sometimes provoked angry reactions in his writings.

As explained in previous chapters, Fath 'Alī Shāh was a superstitious and sharia-minded ruler who did not have a good relationship with Sufis in general, although he treated them with unexpected kindness on certain occasions. One can refer to Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's meeting with Fath 'Alī Shāh in Chapter Four as an example. Fath 'Alī Shāh was attracted to Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's religious attitudes and admired him for his personality. Because of these unexpected reactions of Fath 'Alī Shāh, Shi'ite clerics were always anxious about Sufis entering the royal court, which challenged the clerics' authority. Their jealous and oppressive behaviour ended in the persecution of Sufi masters like Mast 'Alī, who was not always protected by the political and religious elites of society. For instance, the Nizārī Ismā'īlī Imām had a friendly relationship with Mast 'Alī,²⁸ and some believed that the Ismā'īlī Imām had become a disciple of Mast 'Alī. Mast 'Alī even took refuge in the Aqā Khān's house in Maḥallāt from the persecution of Shi'ite seminary scholars.²⁹ Although it seems contradictory, this relationship did not affect his theological views about Ismā'īlīs in general, because he categorised them as being among the rejected groups of extremist Shi'ites (*ghulāt*).

Fath 'Alī Shāh did not favour Mast 'Alī and, in certain situations, Mast 'Alī was persecuted by the agents of the Qājār government. However, as a frequent traveller, he was welcomed by rulers and monarchs of other regions. For instance, he was welcomed by the Mughal king, Akbar Shāh II (d. 1252/1837). Although Mast 'Alī did not mention his name, he did indicate that he had a friendly relationship with the governor of Egypt.³⁰ His eagerness to meet political, intellectual, philosophical and religious elites introduced him to many Europeans as well. He admired Westerners (*farangīyān*) for their generosity and manliness, and he spoke highly of their progress in technological matters. This way of speaking about Westerners created a misrepresentation of Mast 'Alī Shāh, as scholars like Ḥā'irī asserted that he

was a Western instrument and had direct relationships with Western countries such as Austria and England.³¹ This was, in fact, a malevolent conclusion. Mast 'Alī Shāh admired many other ethnicities and countries, including the more positive aspects of their cultures and religious systems, which was indicative of his non-judgemental attitude. For example, he admired Hindus for being tolerant of other religious minorities.

The Works of Mast 'Alī Shāh

Mast 'Alī Shāh's contribution to the theological, philosophical and mystical milieu of Persia is not as well known as Majdhūb's. However, he was one of the most influential spiritual masters of his time due to his sociability and keen perceptions of other philosophical, ethnic and religious groups. As Leonard Lewisohn has pointed out, 'Zayn al-Ābidin Shirvānī ("Mast 'Alī Shāh") was by far the strongest nineteenth-century Ni'matullāhī master.'³²

His experiences of travelling to different places and countries made him more of a cosmopolitan person. Leonard Lewisohn notes how '[h]is prodigious literary output shows a warm personality whose universal concerns and broadminded cosmopolitan humour are largely absent in his immediate predecessors and contemporaries.'³³ He was keen to have dialogues with the sages and scholars of other cultures and religious systems. He travelled from North Africa to Bengal and became familiar with their different cultures and religions; at one time he claimed to have knowledge of about 100 different religions. His visit to India (1216/1801) demonstrated his conciliatory conduct towards other religions. He admired the people of India for respecting different religions and for living in peace with them. He thought highly of Hindus for not harming anyone for their religious beliefs and practices. He eagerly explained that in India Hindus worshipped their own gods and Muslims went to their own mosques, each peacefully respecting the other.³⁴ He was fascinated by this religious diversity. Mast 'Alī Shāh's travelogues are a great contribution to the better understanding of the religious, ethnic and social life of the era.

He was famous for composing three different travelogues: *Rīyāḍ al-sīyāḥa* (*The Meadow of Travel*), *Ḥadā'iq al-sīyāḥa* (*The Walled Garden of Travel*) and *Bustān al-sīyāḥa* (*The Garden of Travel*). These three very large volumes comprise the accounts of his travels in India and the Middle East, but often repeat content so that the three travelogues sometimes appear to be merely rewritings or slightly different versions of his travel stories.³⁵

Nonetheless, each of these travelogues allows the reader better to understand the socio-religious and political milieu of the time as well as Mast 'Ali's attitude to other beliefs, religions, schools of thought and ethnicities. They are old-style anthropological and geographical studies of different places and people in which Mast 'Ali shared his observations of their conduct and beliefs as well as other aspects of their social life.

Disclosure of Gnosis (Kashf al-ma'ārif)

Kashf al-ma'ārif is a short, apologetic treatise that explains Mast 'Ali's mystical beliefs.³⁶ It is similar to, but not as scholarly and well-organised as, Majdhūb's *'Aqā'id*. Mast 'Ali explained that he called this treatise *Kashf al-ma'ārif* (*Disclosure of Gnosis*) because in it he narrates the traditions of the 'gnostics of religion' (*'arifān-i dīn*) and the 'scholars of certitude' (*'ālimān-i ahl-i yaqīn*).³⁷ The treatise consists of three chapters and an epilogue, and while it appears to be a summary of Majdhūb's *'Aqā'id*, it does have a few differences. His views on the Shi'ite Imāms as perfect Divine manifestations, his rejection of heretical Sufis and his views about the school of intuitive philosophy are all in accordance with Majdhūb's views. This is important because, in a sense, his *'Aqā'id* is something of a short autobiography.

Mast 'Ali's *Kashf al-ma'ārif* belongs to a tradition of treatises written by apologetic mystics like Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, Mullā Ṣadrā and Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, who opposed libertinism, incarnation and other heretical Sufi beliefs. One of the important points in this treatise is that, although some scholars rejected Mullā Ṣadrā and Fayḍ Kāshānī as part of organised Sufism, Mast 'Ali accepted them and suggested that their beliefs were part of the Ni'matullāhī Sufi tradition.

The Meadow of Travel (Rīyāḍ al-Siyāḥa)

The first travelogue written by Mast 'Ali was *Rīyāḍ al-Siyāḥa* (*The Meadow of Travel*).³⁸ Mast 'Ali was well versed in anthropological studies of different races and cultures, which made him less prejudiced in comparison to other scholars, considering the extremely conservative social and religious context of his era. It is notable, though, that his personality as a devout Sufi and a Sufi master did affect his writing.

In this volume the names of the places he visited are arranged in alphabetical order. *Rīyāḍ* consists of six chapters: one Place of Beauty (*khuld*), four Gardens (*rawḍa*) and one Spring (*bahār*). The first chapter is called

heaven (*khuld*) and is an explanation of the geographical divisions of the earth based on the traditional geographical sciences. The first division or *rawḍa* explains different regions within Iran, and the second *rawḍa* is about *Tūrān* (the Persian term used for Turkish Central Asia), *Kabulistān* (north-east of Afghanistan, centred on Kabul) and *Kashmīr* (the region located between Pakistan and India, located in the north-west of the Indian peninsula). The third *rawḍa* is about the region of *Rūm* (Asia Minor). Finally, the fourth *rawḍa* is about the Arabian Peninsula, *Shām* (Syria), and Egypt. The last chapter, which is called *Bahār*, is an explanation of the social, religious and geographical region of the Indian Peninsula.

He wrote *Ri'yāḍ* during a 20-month period of exile in Qumsha, near Isfahan.³⁹ Throughout his life he faced discrimination from members of the royal court, and so during the third decade of the 19th century had been exiled there. The book was dedicated to the prince Muḥammad Riḍā Mīrzā (d. 1287/1870), son of Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh. Mast 'Alī wrote in particular in this book about different tribes, especially those that ruled Persia, like the Afshārs and Qājārs. He also wrote about kings and various rulers.⁴⁰

The Walled Garden of Travel (Ḥadā'iq al-Sīyāḥa)

Ḥadā'iq al-Sīyāḥa was written starting on 13 July 1827 (18 Dhul-ḥajja 1242) in the city of Shiraz.⁴¹ This book is organised according to a different method from the other two travelogues. The names of the places are organised in the alphabetical order of *tahjī*, according to the Arabic system. This book includes one garden (*bustān*), which is an introduction. Then there are 28 walled gardens (*ḥadīqa*) and one orchard (*gulistān*), the very terms used by Mast 'Alī for chapters of his book. This book's structure is more like the structure of *Bustān al-Sīyāḥa*. However, as these two books were written during different periods of his life, there are a few minor differences.

The Garden of Travel (Bustān al-Sīyāḥa)

Bustān al-Sīyāḥa is the most extensive and famous treatise written by Mast 'Alī.⁴² A draft of this work was written in 1247/1831 and its final version was finished in 1248/1832.⁴³ In this work he explains clearly his beliefs about different sects in Islam and other religious traditions while detailing his travels. The *Bustān* is a masterpiece, a work that is crucial for understanding the circumstances of the Ni'matullāhī order during the 19th century, in which his views about different Shi'ite schools of thought are elaborated.⁴⁴

In *Bustān* the names of the places he travelled to are arranged in alphabetical order, and whenever there was a well-known person (a Sufi master or a scholar) in a certain city, he provided his biography.⁴⁵ The book has 28 chapters called gardens (*gulshan*) and one chapter called spring (*bahār*).⁴⁶

Mast ‘Alī Shāh’s Mystical Theology and Sufism

As the heir to Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh and supreme leader of the Ni‘matullāhī order, Mast ‘Alī Shāh tried to follow Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh’s mode of spiritual practice, mystical teachings and philosophy. Nevertheless, there are certain differences in their personal and seminary backgrounds which lead to differences between their teachings and practices. An important difference between them is how Mast ‘Alī Shāh’s frequent travels to different countries made him a cosmopolitan person, relatively accepting of other religions and philosophies.

Mast ‘Alī Shāh’s conduct towards and relationship with Shi‘ite seminaries and Shi‘ite clerics was different from Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh’s. Majdhūb studied seminary sciences before devoting his life to Sufism, and he was therefore a well-versed seminary scholar as well as a Sufi master. Mast ‘Alī Shāh did not have this background, which made it easier for some malicious seminary scholars to persecute him. Mast ‘Alī Shāh was not conservative at all; his warm and emotional personality made him aggressive in his conduct towards Shi‘ite clerics, such that he made direct and harsh criticisms of the seminary scholars in his *Kashf al-mā‘ārif*, *Bustān*, *Rīyāḍ* and *Ḥadā‘iq*.

Mast ‘Alī Shāh’s Views on Shi‘ism

As far as formal Shi‘ite theology and doctrines were concerned, Mast ‘Alī mostly followed the example of his predecessors and, like Majdhūb, firmly emphasised his Shi‘ite beliefs. After all his travels, he concluded that the only way to be rescued was to board the ship of salvation, which was called ‘the ship of love for People of the House [of the Prophet]’ (*ahl al-bayt*), a reference to a tradition spoken by the Prophet Muḥammad: ‘[m]y family among you are like Noah’s Ark. He who sails in her will be safe, but he who refuses to board her will perish.’⁴⁷ Mast ‘Alī mentioned the twelve Imāms of Shi‘ism as his Imāms and spiritual guides, and indicated that the Twelfth Imām was alive and was his master (*murshid*).⁴⁸ He used the term *murshid*

for the Twelfth Shi‘ite Imām, which was the same Sufi term for ‘spiritual master’. Thus, the distinction between the Sufi master and the Shi‘ite Imām becomes ambiguous in his writings, although he clearly affirmed that the guidance from the Shi‘ite Imām was superior to that offered by Sufi masters. By believing in the superiority of Shi‘ite Imāms, he also elaborated his own views about the Shi‘ite messianic belief in the return of Mahdī (the Twelfth Imām) from occultation,⁴⁹ stating that the time of his appearance is destined by God’s Will, and that he will bring justice to the world when that is full of injustice and tyranny.⁵⁰ He also believed that the Shi‘ite Imāms were the best guides after the Prophet Muḥammad, and that they were immaculate and protected from committing sins (*maṣūm*). However, he specified that they were created beings in order to distance himself from Shi‘ite extremists (*ghulāt*). He also stated his belief in the intercession (*shifā‘at*) of the Imāms, and that he decided to base his life on the traditions of the Shi‘ite Imāms.⁵¹

Uṣūlīs and Akhbārīs

Mast ‘Ali Shāh’s views on the Uṣūlīs and Akhbārīs are similar to Majdhūb’s.⁵² Majdhūb was an Uṣūlī Shi‘ite, but he criticised both schools. His views on *taqlīd* are closer to those of Akhbārī scholars. In the strictly doctrinal sense, therefore, neither Mast ‘Ali nor Majdhūb ‘Ali Shāh was theologically affiliated to either of these two schools. Mast ‘Ali followed the same path as his master. However, he issued a frank refutation of both schools, referring to the tradition that scholars were the heirs of the Prophet. Then he stated that there were three major groups among the Shi‘ites: the Uṣūlīs, the Akhbārī scholars and the Sufis.⁵³ Mast ‘Ali refuted both Uṣūlīs and Akhbārīs and said that Akhbārīs did not have the power to discern the Divine Reality (*ḥaqīqat ilāhīyya*).⁵⁴ Mast ‘Ali affirmed his strong ties to the Shi‘ite Imāms in his refutation of these schools.

Sufi Apologetics

As Royce notes, ‘There is a strong apologetic tone to Mast ‘Ali Shāh’s writings. The Ni‘mat Allāhīs are portrayed as patient friends of God who are tormented by his enemies.’⁵⁵ However, Mast ‘Ali Shāh’s knowledge of theology and general seminary sciences was not as vast and profound as Majdhūb ‘Ali Shāh’s, and he was fortunate to have Majdhūb’s teachings and writings

to draw on after succeeding him as the spiritual master of the Ni‘matullāhi order. His mystical teachings and philosophy were influenced by Majdhūb, to the extent that most of his apologetic writings are simply rewritings of Majdhūb’s works. Sometimes his style of writing is less scholarly, and as a consequence of his lack of nuance, his style is harsher in tone and certainly more opinionated than that of his master, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill.

In his apologetic treatise, *Kashf al-ma‘ārif*, he wonders whether the people who accuse him of having heretical beliefs are enamoured with the material world and overwhelmed by carnal desires.⁵⁶ Mast ‘Ali recites traditions which state that the real Muslim must conceal the faults and deficiencies of others. He refers to sayings of the Imāms, claiming that they did not condemn or excommunicate their close companions who had heterodox beliefs. Instead, the Imāms tried to direct them to the straight path. Mast ‘Ali complains that these seminary scholars claim to be the followers of the Imāms, and yet they excommunicate others. Like his master, Majdhūb, he tells the story of Shaykh Mufīd (d. 413/ 1022) and Sayyid Murtidā (d. 436/1044) whose theological disagreements never led to either attempting to excommunicate the other.⁵⁷ Using this example, he reproached Shi‘ite clerics for issuing excommunication verdicts against other Muslims.

Mast ‘Ali contends that every member from every level of the Shi‘ite community probably will have minor heterodox beliefs for a certain period of their life, so seminary scholars should not issue religious verdicts against them. Only the Shi‘ite Imāms were immune to any deviation. Mast ‘Ali asserted that the Shi‘ite Imāms did not issue verdicts against those hypocrites who professed to be Muslims.⁵⁸ Therefore, fundamentalist Shi‘ite seminary scholars issuing jurisprudential edicts of excommunication had strayed from the path of the Shi‘ite Imāms. Mast ‘Ali also narrates traditions from Shi‘ite Imāms that explained why no one could accuse other Shi‘ites of debauchery (*fisq*), because even though some of them might be guilty of wrongdoing, they should be pardoned due to their Shi‘ite beliefs.⁵⁹

The Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*)

The philosophy of the unity of being was extremely important among Sufis in Qājār Persia. In the previous chapter, some of the key concepts of this mystical vision of the world were discussed. The followers of this

school believe that all existence is a manifestation of One Being. Therefore, everything exists through One Being, which is God.⁶⁰ This means that nothing exists other than God. As Chittick states, 'When "existence" is discussed, it is contrasted with a thing or entity that exists. Hence one speaks of the existence of the cosmos or of a tree. But the term "Being" refers strictly to God in Himself and cannot be juxtaposed with any entity other than Being, since God's "thingness" or entity is Being Itself.'⁶¹ God reveals Himself to creation through manifestations as the whole of creation is composed of different forms of divine manifestations.⁶² Mast 'Alī Shāh's conception is very close to the philosophical School of Isfahan and largely follows that of his teacher, Majdhūb. He refers to Majdhūb using the clause '[m]y master [Majdhūb] says . . .',⁶³ and began by emphasising the issue of God's transcendence, affirming that no one, including the prophets, gnostics (*'urafā*) and theosophers (*hukamā*), could have any perception of the Divine Essence. He refers to different traditions from Shi'ite Imāms that are indicative of the impossibility of perceiving God's Essence.⁶⁴ He refers to God as 'the Necessary Existent' (*wājib al-wujūd*), which is the reality of Being, and everything else is made up of 'contingent existents' (*mumkin al-wujūd*). The 'contingent existents' rely on 'the Necessary Existent'. The reality of their existence is the emanation of God, which was like a light that emanates from the sun. The divine light from God was the reason for the manifestation of all objects in the world.⁶⁵

Next, he explains the issue of God's action (*fi'l Allāh*), which is the first emanation from the essence of God, but it is not part of the Essence, as no one can reach the realm of divine essence. He says that the First Emanation is called the 'Act of God' (*fi'l Allāh*) or the 'shadow of God' (*ẓil ul Allāh*). The 'Act of God' is like the light from the sun, though it is not the sun itself but only something through which the sun can be perceived. One can perceive God through the 'Act of God'.⁶⁶ He also refers to it by using the term 'Muhammadan Light' (*Nūr-i Muḥammadi*), which is exactly the same terminology as that used by Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh. He also uses the term 'Ever-expanding Being' (*wujūd-i munbasit*), meaning that all beings emanate from this realm.⁶⁷ He emphasises that this was the realm of the lights of the Shi'ite Imāms.⁶⁸ As this philosophy was fundamental for Ni'matullāhi Sufism, Mast 'Alī could not disregard it; however, because he was not as well-versed as Majdhūb in mystical philosophy, he just followed his master, rewriting what Majdhūb had written in his theological treatises.

The Perfect Man (*insān-i kāmīl*)

The philosophy of the Perfect Man in the Sufi tradition was explained in the last chapter. Mast ‘Alī’s own views are again similar to Majdhūb’s. According to Majdhūb, the final apex of creation is the human being, and the ultimate goal in the creation of human beings is one’s annihilation in the Divine Being.⁶⁹

According to Mast ‘Alī, there has to be a perfect man at all times for the continuity of the world. The world is nurtured, sustained and kept in harmony by the grace of this being, who is the deputy of God on Earth; this Perfect Man was the Prophets, Imāms and saints.⁷⁰ Sufis call this person the Great Deputy (*khalīfa a‘zam*), the Pole of the Poles (*quṭb al-aqtāb*), the true human being (*Ādam-i ḥaqīqī*), the Perfect man (*insānī kāmīl*) or the First Intellect (*‘aql-i awwal*).⁷¹ Mast ‘Alī emphasises that the perfect man is the Shi‘ite Imām; hence, the 12 Imāms are called the Pole of Poles, whose deputies take Imāms’ position during the time of occultation. These deputies are the Sufi saints. Mast ‘Alī writes, ‘*Sufī walist wa walī Sufist wa munkir īshān kamtar az kāf kūfist*’, which means that ‘a Sufi is a friend of God and the friend of God is a Sufi and anyone who rejects them is of less worth than the letter “K” of a heretic from Kūfa.’⁷² Sufis are here presented as deputies of the twelfth Imām during the time of occultation. Therefore, those who reject and cast aspersions on the Sufis, by which he meant the exoteric Shi‘ite seminary scholars, are, spiritually speaking, utterly despicable.

Sainthood (*wilāyat*) and Prophethood (*nubuwwat*)

One of the essential doctrines of both Shi‘ite and Sufi thought during the Qājār period was the symbiotic connection between the cycles of sainthood and prophecy. As Michel Chodkiewicz states, ‘Sufism and saint-hood are inseparable. In the absence of saints there is no Sufism; it is born of their saint-hood, nourished by it, and led to reproduce it.’⁷³ Dhabīḥu’llāh Ṣafā believed that the major reason seminary scholars opposed the Sufis was their different interpretation of sainthood. The Shi‘ite clergy believed that the divine guidance of humanity was through the Shi‘ite Imāms and the ulama who, due to their religious training in the sharia, hadith and fiqh, are the true deputies and intermediaries between the Shi‘ite masses and the Imāms. In contrast, the Sufis believed that sainthood was achieved through the mediation of their masters that combines both the esoteric (*bāṭin*) and

exoteric (*ẓāhir*) dimensions of the Shi'ite faith (*dīn*) necessary for guiding the community of believers.⁷⁴

Mast 'Alī explains how the prophet has both an esoteric and exoteric mission.⁷⁵ This tradition of a prophet as spiritual guide and receiver of Divine revelation had been elaborated among Shi'ites long before Mast 'Alī Shāh's time. From the time of Adam, the first prophet, down to the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, the succession of Imāms as divine guides was continuous, such that the earth was never without an Imām. Moojan Momen cites a hadith from the fifth Imām, Muḥammad al-Bāqir: '[b]y God! God has not left the earth, since the death of Adam, without there being on it an Imām guiding (the people) to God. He is the Proof of God to His servants and the earth will not remain without the Proof of God to his servants.'⁷⁶ Mast 'Alī also explains the divine and spiritual role of the Imām. He believes that the Imām receives divine inspiration by the grace of angels, whereas prophets receive direct divine revelations.⁷⁷ The question whether the Imām receives divine inspiration (*ilhām*) or divine revelation (*wahy*) was discussed and debated among Shi'ite seminary scholars, theologians and philosophers from the very first formation of the Shi'ite sect as an independent theological school of thought. There is a tradition attributed to Imām Bāqir that says, 'It is not the *wahy* of prophethood but, rather, like that which came to Mary, daughter of 'Imrān and to the mother of Moses and to the bee.'⁷⁸ Most Shi'ite mystics have believed that the Imāms receive divine inspiration. The traditions of saints receiving divine inspiration pre-dates Mast 'Alī Shāh. The Shi'ite and Sunni mystics have held that the spiritual ear, *gush-i jān*, was the recipient of divine inspiration. As Rūmī says:

Then the spiritual ear becomes the place where inspiration descends.

What is inspiration? A speech hidden from sense-perception.

The spiritual ear and eye are other than this sense-perception, the ear of (discursive) reason and the ear of opinion are destitute of this (inspiration).⁷⁹

Great Sufi figures like Rūmī used the term 'divine inspiration' with respect to the saints (*awliyā*). There were qualifications for receiving these revelations and inspirations. One needed to be purified to become spiritually ready. Just as the Shi'ite Imāms were known to be immaculate through divine inspiration, the Sufi saints were protected (*maḥfūẓ*) from sins as they received divine revelation from God. Rūmī says:

His (Bāyazīd) guide is ‘the guarded tablet’ [*luwhih mahfūz*]. From what is it guarded? It is guarded [*mahfūz*] from error.

The inspiration of God is not (like) astrology or geomancy or dreams – and God best knoweth what is right.

The Sufis in explaining (their doctrines) call it (the divine inspiration) the inspiration of the heart, in order to disguise (its real nature) from the vulgar.

Take it to be the inspiration of the heart, for it (the heart) is the place where He is seen: how should there be error when the heart is aware of Him?

O true believer, thou hast become seeing by the light of God: thou hast become secure from error and inadvertence.⁸⁰

Mast ‘Alī Shāh’s view is close to that of classical Sufism; however, he was careful to integrate his Shi‘ite beliefs with his Sufism, affirming that the Shi‘ite Imāms are the ultimate source of divine guidance and the Sufi saints are their intermediaries and their inheritors. Mast ‘Alī says that sainthood is at the core of prophethood, and sainthood and prophethood are at the core of messenger-hood, which does not mean that saints are higher than prophets. Prophets are saints (*awalīyā*) and prophets (*anbiyā*) at the same time, enabling them to have both spiritual graces to guide others. However, their sainthood is a nobler state than their prophethood, as sainthood is regarded as the core of prophethood.⁸¹ Ḥakīm ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Tirmidhī (d. 295/ 908) was among the first Sufi figures who elaborated on the relationship between sainthood and prophethood, and he indicated that ‘*Walāya* is superior to *nubuwwa* or *risāla* in the persons of the prophets and messengers; it is the hidden and enduring face of their being; and the mandate which they execute here below represents only its external and transitory aspect.’⁸² Later on in the history of Sufism, Shāh Ni‘matullāh indicated that prophethood (*nubuwwat*) is the exterior aspect of spiritual guidance, whereas sainthood (*wilāyat*) is its inner aspect. Therefore, Muḥammad (the perfect representation of prophethood) was the exterior phase of the greatest (Divine) Name of Truth (*ism a‘zam-i Haqq*), whereas ‘Alī (the first saint after the seal of prophethood) was the core meaning of the greatest (Divine) Name of Truth.⁸³

Sufi writings such as *Khatm al-awliyā*’ by Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī support the view that Sufis believed sainthood was in this sense superior to prophethood because of its inner dimensions. However, Mast ‘Alī was careful in this case to explain clearly that prophets were in a higher state than saints,

drawing the boundaries between the Shiʿite Imāms and the Sufi saints. The Shiʿite Imāms are held to be the ultimate source of divine guidance, whereas the Sufi masters received their light of guidance from the light of the Shiʿite Imāms.⁸⁴

Mast ʿAlī followed the same path as Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 787/1385) who believed that prophethood was perfected in the Prophet Muḥammad, making him the Seal of prophethood.⁸⁵ However, sainthood continued through the Shiʿite Imāms, and would reach its perfection with the advent of the Messiah, who was the Twelfth Imām expected to reappear at the end of time. Mast ʿAlī used the same terminology as Āmulī,⁸⁶ calling the Mahdī the Seal of Muhammadan Sainthood (*khātam wilāyat Muḥammadiyya*).⁸⁷

The term ‘Seal of Sainthood’ (*khatm al-wilāya*) was one of the most important theological terms developed within Sufism, and great importance was given to this term in Shiʿite Sufism in particular. Ibn ʿArabī was one of the first Sufi thinkers to use this term, and his successors continued to elaborate on this philosophy. Before him, Ḥakīm Tirmidhī (d. 295/908) was one of the first mystics to use the term in his book, *Seal of Sainthood* (*Khatm al-wilāya*).⁸⁸ Āmulī also used the term ‘*khatm al-wilāya*’ in reference to ʿAlī as the Seal of Sainthood, so that ʿAlī’s role of being the first saint after Muḥammad became emblematic of the ‘Seal of Sainthood’. Āmulī criticised Ibn ʿArabī, Dāwūd Qaysarī (d. 751/1350) and Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī for attributing sainthood to others and not to the Shiʿite Imāms.⁸⁹ In addition to following the same path as Majdhūb, Mast ʿAlī focused on the Akbarian philosophy of sainthood that had been adopted by Shiʿite mystics of this school such as Ḥaydar Āmulī, who highly influenced him through his master Majdhūb.

Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*)

Formalist Shiʿite clerics usually criticised the Sufis for the alleged deviance and heresy of their beliefs concerning the Muslim dogma of divine Unity. The Sufis believed that the ultimate goal was to reach the station of annihilation in God (*fanāʾ fī Allāh*), where the veil of duality between human beings and divinity is lifted. As Ḥallāj (d. 309/ 922) says:

In the religion of God I have become an infidel.
But upon me infidelity is incumbent,
Even if unto the Muslims it be hateful.⁹⁰

Literalists, rationalists and legally oriented clerics of Islam accused Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers of holding pantheistic beliefs. Mast ‘Alī was well aware of this accusation and the strong opposition that Shi‘ite scholars had for the Sufi understanding of divine Unity. Therefore, he was always precise in explaining that the unity of God is a unity on the level of the divine Essence (*waḥdat-i dhātī*).⁹¹⁹⁹ Mast ‘Alī also pointed out that God was free from both the denial of the Divine Attributes (*ta‘tīl*) and anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*). Both of these accusations were levelled against Shi‘ite extremists and Sufi mystics. The Shi‘ite extremists (*ghulāt*) were known for believing in anthropomorphism.⁹² Hushām ibn Ḥakam (d. 179/795) was among the first Shi‘ites who believed in anthropomorphism.⁹³ Mast ‘Alī was, however, careful to distance himself from the heretical beliefs of both the Sufis and the Shi‘ite extremists.

Vision of God

Another theological concept was the vision of God, which was always connected to the subject of anthropomorphism. The Shi‘ite Imāms believed in a spiritual vision of God which was beheld through the heart. The majority of Sufis adopted this belief. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, the most influential Imām and thinker of Shi‘ism, wrote a mystical interpretation of the Qur’ān, which was included in a commentary written by a Sunni Sufi, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Sulamī (d. 412/ 1021). Ja‘far states, ‘No eye can see him, no heart attain him, and no intellect intuit him.’⁹⁴ This general belief that ‘no eye can see him’ was held by the majority of Shi‘ites. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq undoubtedly rejected the concept of the perception of God in this world. He believed that the corporeal eye did not have the capability of beholding God’s vision.⁹⁵ Shi‘ite scholars Shaykh Ṣadūq and ‘Allāma Ḥillī (d. 726/ 1326) followed him in believing that there would be a spiritual vision of God instead of a physical vision.⁹⁶

Abū Ḥamid Ghazālī (d. 504/ 1111), whose great influence on the development of Sufi theosophy is undeniable, believed that a physical vision of God was possible in the afterlife, while only a spiritual vision was possible in this world, saying that the perfection of spiritual disclosure (*kashf*) was spiritual vision.⁹⁷ Mast ‘Alī’s views about the vision of God in this world and the hereafter represented a *via media* between Sufis who expressed a belief in being able to see God and Sufis who denied it, which was in accordance with Shi‘ite orthodox beliefs about the impossibility of any corporeal vision of God. Although Mast ‘Alī indicated that no one could perceive the Divine

Essence, he drew clear boundaries between the ‘Essence of God’ (*dhāt*) and the human perception of it.⁹⁸ These beliefs did not contradict the views of the Shiʿite clerics in the seminaries.

Knowledge (*ʿilm*)

Mast ʿAlī Shāh believed that the quest for knowledge (*ʿilm*) was a religious obligation for everyone, based on the traditions narrated from the Prophet and Shiʿite Imāms. His interpretation of knowledge was similar to Majdhūb’s: he believed that the source of real knowledge was the light of the Shiʿite Imāms.⁹⁹

His interpretation of the science of jurisprudence (*ʿilm-i fiqh*) was mystical too. Because jurisprudence was a prerequisite for knowledge of the spiritual path of Sufism (*ṭarīqat*), he maintained that it would eventually lead to Divine gnosis. Although jurisprudence comprised an introductory path to Sufism, Mast ʿAlī complained that during his time jurisprudence had been corrupted by its emphasis on the material and worldly matters of marriage, commercial transactions and divorce, whereas real knowledge (*ʿilm-i ḥaqīqī*) was esoteric knowledge (*ʿilm-i bāṭin*).¹⁰⁰

Mast ʿAlī divided religion into inner Sufi aspects (*ṭarīqat*) and outer legalist aspects (*shariʿat*). He believed that the contribution of scholars of the exterior (*ʿulamāy-i ṣāḥir*) dimensions of religion was not fundamental because it did not end in the attainment of gnosis of the self (*maʿrifat-i nafs*).¹⁰¹ In this respect, citing the authority of the first Majlisī, he maintains that Shiʿite-seminary-trained scholars who do not have interior gnosis and who lack the ‘divine faculty’ (see below) are subject to the wiles of Satan and are among the worst of human beings.¹⁰² Therefore, those scholars without mystical gnosis cannot lead people to the path of God.

Mast ʿAlī’s opinion about Shiʿite seminary scholars was important because, following the occultation of the twelfth Shiʿite Imām, those sharia-minded scholars who recited the legal injunctions (*aḥkām*) did not actually possess this gnostic knowledge. These scholars had the ability to understand the exterior aspects of Islamic laws only as a result of their seminary knowledge; however, they did not have the gnosis needed for a deeper understanding of religion. The gnostic scholars (*ʿulamāy-i ʿarīf*), who are the knowers of religious injunctions, on the other hand, are the possessors of this knowledge. These scholars are not just narrators of the traditions; they are the scholars of certitude (*mujtahidān-i ahl-i yaqīn*).¹⁰³ Mast ʿAlī believed

that the realised gnostics (*'urafāy-i muḥaqqiqīn*), who had received the blessings of the Imāms, had the innermost understanding of the secrets of religion. Through their obedience to God they had received these graces from the Imāms and their spiritual state had been elevated to such a supreme extent that it was beyond description.¹⁰⁴ Mast 'Alī viewed Sufi saints as being the true inheritors of the Prophet. He also referred to Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (d. 908/ 1502) who said that the children of the Prophet Muḥammad were divided into two groups: the first were his physical children and the second were his spiritual children.¹⁰⁵ The physical ones were the children of 'Alī and Fatima, and the giving of alms to them was forbidden. The second were saints (*awlīyā'*), spiritually poor men (*fuqarā*) and gnostics (*'urafā*).¹⁰⁶

However, due to their non-mystical approach, the exoteric scholars were blind to the saints and unaware of their states. In this respect, Mast 'Alī refers to the tradition, attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad and Imām Ḥusayn, that '[s]cholars are the heirs of prophets'.¹⁰⁷ Mast 'Alī's interpretation of this tradition was different from that of the majority of the narrators. He believed that the word 'scholars' (*'ulamā'*) did not refer to the scholars of Shi'ite seminary schools, for among them there were disagreements; and, therefore, they could not be the real heirs of prophets. As well, this tradition did not address any other seminary scholars of Islam because there were quarrels between the seminary scholars of Shi'ism and Sunnism. Nor did it address the scholars of Shi'ism because Zaydis, Ismā'īlīs and Ithnā 'asharīs did not agree with one another. It also did not address the Twelver Shi'ites (*ithnā 'asharī*) because arguments existed between the two schools of Uṣūlī and Akhbārī scholars. In order to introduce the word 'scholars' (*'ulamā'*), he first explained the term scholar (*'ālim*).¹⁰⁸ He referred to Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh and the fact that the scholars referred to in this tradition were not the exoteric jurists (*fuqahā-yi zāhir*), because they had confessed that they did not have knowledge of the secrets and their judgements were based on personal presumptions, guesswork and their subjective juristic preferences. He mentioned that whenever they were with their disciples, they mocked the Sufis by saying that they went on nocturnal journeys (*mi'rāj*) every night.¹⁰⁹

Mast 'Alī's definition of a person with religious qualities who was a scholar was in accordance with that of Majdhūb and Kāshānī, as explained in the previous chapter. A student could not become a scholar of religious sciences just by going to a seminary school. He believed that seminary scholars had not received this eternal favour (*'ināyat-i azalī*);¹¹⁰ a lack of which designated them as belonging to an inferior class to the knowers (*'urafā*), who were the Sufis. Mast 'Alī criticised those scholars who issued

verdicts against Sufis. He referred to a book written by Muḥammad Kāzim Hizār Jarībī (d. 1238/1823) in which he refuted Sufis.¹¹¹ According to Mast ʿAlī, Jarībī was a dilettante who dabbled and played with the principles of religion (*uṣūl-bāz*), and because he led common people astray he was a destroyer of the faith (*īmān-barandāz*).¹¹²

The Divine Faculty (*quwwa qudsiyya*)

The concept of the ‘Divine Faculty’ (*quwwa qudsiyya*) as being the key qualification for a student to become a true scholar of the religious sciences was explained in detail in the previous chapter on Majdhūb. In brief, the ‘Divine Faculty’ is gained through spiritual gnosis, which itself is gained through the path of Sufism. Mast ʿAlī Shāh believes that a person of religious qualities must be a deputy of the Imām; therefore, it is mandatory for the scholar of religious sciences, one who issues religious verdicts, to be Shiʿite.¹¹³ The scholar who was a deputy of the Imām also had to have the attributes of the Imāms, to a certain extent.¹¹⁴ Similarly, Āmulī holds that a Sufi saint has to possess a divine manner (*akhlāgh-i ilāhiyya*) and be endowed with Divine Attributes.¹¹⁵ Mast ʿAlī’s view is closer to that of the Shiʿites because he sees the Imāms as being the perfect manifestation of the Divine, whose attributes the scholars must be endowed with. Mast ʿAlī indicates that scholars must possess the Divine Faculty (*quwwa qudsiyya*), and those scholars who do not cannot issue any *fatwās*.¹¹⁶ Mast ʿAlī points out that although the Akhbārīs and Uṣūlīs believed that religious scholars must have the Divine Faculty, their understanding of it was incorrect.¹¹⁷

Mast ʿAlī Shāh declares that the exoteric Shiʿite clerics are, in fact, utterly impoverished as regards understanding true scholarship, and he denigrates them as ‘poor helpless scholars’ (*ulamā-yi bīchāra*) because their judgements are based on purely exterior considerations and they did not have inner perception. Therefore, they need to engage in mystical exercises to gain true spiritual insight in order to become real scholars.¹¹⁸ Mast ʿAlī further notes that the Divine Faculty can be gained through inner purity; he refers to a tradition from Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq which states that a man of religious background is not qualified to issue religious verdicts unless he has inner purity.¹¹⁹

Mast ʿAlī specifies that if jurists are looking for salvation they must come to the people with an inner knowledge of religion who are in possession of the Divine Faculty. He stresses that the final fruit of *ijtihād* has to be Divine Faculty, which can be gained only through the companionship

and guidance of Sufi masters, or at least one who had spiritual permission from a person endowed with the Divine Faculty to issue religious verdicts. Mast 'Alī points out that Sufis are superior to seminary scholars because they possess these inner insights, which are the core meaning of religion. In sum, although Shi'ite clerics are allocated a high position in the social and religious milieu of Persia, Mast 'Alī bravely challenged their status and questioned their importance, speaking unfavourably and disparagingly of those seminarians who lacked mystical gnosis. On the other hand, he accorded a Sufi who had some learning in the seminary sciences the highest religious rank, should that Sufi have actualised the 'Divine Faculty'.

Imitation (*taqlīd*)

The issue of imitation in Twelver Shi'ism was explained extensively in the previous chapter on Majdhūb. Mast 'Alī Shāh's view is similar. He condemns imitation that lacked any knowledge of the spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*), that is Sufism. He observes that, in the quest for spiritual realisation, those people who followed the religion of their ancestors were no better than a blindfolded ox.¹²⁰ Blind imitation can lead to some terrible consequences. If, for example, a certain scholar declares that a certain Sufi was an infidel, others often immediately condemn that Sufi merely out of their respect for and in imitation of that scholar's authority without bothering to investigate the matter for themselves. Mast 'Alī considers these sorts of bigoted judgements as blatant religious transgressions, which are quite beyond the purview of an ordinary scholar's authority.¹²¹ He asserts that those who follow blindly the scholars' excommunication verdicts destroy the faith of others.¹²² Shi'ite seminary scholars were protective of their position in the Persian community and of course did not tolerate Mast 'Alī's challenge to their authority.

The Spiritual Path (*ṭarīqat*)

From the very earliest development of Sufi theology, Sufi masters have emphasised that there are two dimensions of religion: the exoteric aspects (*sharī'a*) and the inner aspects, which make up the mystical path (*ṭarīqa*). This theological position was developed and theorised through generations of mystical philosophers and Sufi theologians.¹²³ Abū al-Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) was among the first great mystic theologians who spoke of this

distinction between esoteric and exoteric forms of Islam in his *Revivification of the Sciences of Religion (Ihyā' 'Ulūm dīn)*.¹²⁴ Mast 'Alī Shāh, in line with Ghazālī's philosophy, asserts that there is a path beyond the *sharī'a* taught in seminary schools.¹²⁵

Master and Guide

Mast 'Alī Shāh emphasises the necessity of prophethood for the guidance of humanity towards divine gnosis. Although prophethood was sealed by the Prophet Muḥammad, the need for guidance did not end. He asserts that after Muḥammad, the Shi'ite Imāms took on the role of being guides for humanity. Mast 'Alī Shāh argues that it had become customary for Muslims to imitate the path of their ancestors in religious matters without searching for the inner meaning and the truth of these beliefs and practices. However, in order to find one's spiritual path (*ṭarīqa*) following the precedent of one's ancestors does not work, because the first stage on the path is for an individual to search for a master, regardless of what their ancestors have done. This path is not an easy one and the individual has to exercise serious effort if he wants to attain his spiritual goal. Mast 'Alī states, '[Common Muslims believe that] nothing is safer than staying with the beliefs and practices of their ancestors, and not troubling to put more effort [in search of truth]'.¹²⁶

He believes that spiritual wayfarer must pray and ask for the blessing of the Prophet and Imāms to help him find a real guide. He considers that the gnostics (*ārifān*) are the real guides after the Imāms.¹²⁷ He uses the phrases 'following the religion of their fathers' and 'the path of their ancestors', comparing them to idol-worshippers of the Prophet's day. The Qur'ān says, 'When it is said to them: "follow what God has revealed," they reply: "No, we shall follow only what our fathers had practised," even though their fathers had no wisdom or guidance!'¹²⁸ Mast 'Alī asserts that these people were ignorant that this spiritual guidance taught by Sufis brings spiritual gnosis. However, in order to avoid incurring the condemnation of Shi'ite clerics, he was extremely cautious and conservative in these criticisms.

The Muslims and the Faithful (*mu'min*)

There are some verses in the Qur'ān that hint at the differences between the two terms *muslim* and *mu'min*. The distinction between the two terms became

a theological theme which Muslims, philosophers, mystics and theologians elaborated in detail. As Schimmel has points out, '*Islām* is the complete and exclusive surrender of the faithful to God's will and his perfect acceptance of the injunctions as preached in the Koran, whereas *īmān*, "faith," constitutes the interior aspect of Islam. Thus, a *muslim* need not be a *mu'min* "one who has faith," but the *mu'min* is definitely a *muslim*.'¹²⁹ Therefore, the faithful believers are the followers of the inner path of Islam. Mast 'Alī Shāh also differentiated between the two terms, the faithful and the Muslims, indicating that while many Muslims confess Islam with their tongues, not all have faith in their hearts. Mast 'Alī's definition of 'the faithful' was slightly different from that of other Islamic scholars because he emphasises that some Muslims hypocritically follow Islam while not truly being Muslims at heart.¹³⁰

His explanation of the term 'faithful believer' is elitist, arguing that he is a Sufi saint rather than simply a spiritual Muslim. He believed that the real faithful believers were as scarce as red sulphur (a metaphor used for Sufi saints), and if one found such a believer one should follow him. Therefore, he limited the term 'real faithful believer' to the religious elites of Islam who are qualified to guide others spiritually. His definition does not include traditional Shi'ite clerics among this group.

The Tried and Tested Faithful Believer (*mu'min mumtaḥan*)

The term 'the tried and tested faithful believer' was first used by Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, and later adopted by Shi'ite mystics. Āmulī referred to the traditions in which Shi'ite Imāms said that their command can be realised by an archangel (*malik muqarrab*), by prophets or by the tried and tested faithful believer (*mu'min mumtaḥan*).¹³¹ Āmulī said that the archangels were the real Shi'ites and Sufis who received the divine secrets from the Shi'ite Imāms.¹³² Mast 'Alī refers to Āmulī to prove his point that the real guides are the realised faithful believers, rather than making direct references in his text. Āmulī claimed that the real Sufi was one of the tried and tested faithful believers of whom it was said that he was the bearer of religious secrets. The seminary sciences were not part of the religious gnosis, and therefore one could not discover the spiritual secrets of religion through them. However, those who are intimate companions and followers of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*), that is, true Shi'ites, always conceal their beliefs in the secrets of religion, secrets which are only for that elect company who have started the spiritual quest for the path of truth ending in gnosis, which was Sufism.¹³³

In his explanation of sainthood (*wilāyat*), Mast 'Alī claims that through the blessings of the members of the Prophet's household (*ahl al-bayt*) he has perceived that sainthood belonged to the Imāms.¹³⁴ He asserts that sainthood is the most important principle in religion and itself is the fruit of the tree of religion. One is required to take an oath of allegiance (*bay'at*) to the Imāms as they did with the Prophet. He emphasised that the Twelfth Imām in occultation (*ghayba*) had appointed some scholars to teach certain exoteric religious sciences such as the lore of Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), but that there had to be a deputy of the Imām for the esoteric part of religion, who was one of the tried and tested faithful believers (*mu'min mumtaḥan*).¹³⁵

Mast 'Alī clearly mentioned the Akhbārīs' claim that the tried and tested faithful believer was a narrator of religious traditions (*akhbār*). The Uṣūlīs, however, claimed that the mujtahids were the tried and tested faithful believers, while illuminationist philosophers believed it was the philosophers. Nevertheless, Mast 'Alī asserts that they are all wrong because those who merely refer to the traditions of the Imāms, who base their judgement on jurisprudential opinions or who base their opinions on human intellect, cannot be the realised faithful. Only those who had personal experience of theophany, who had received spiritual realisation and inspiration directly from God—that is, those who were real gnostics (*'arīf*)—qualified as being genuine tried and tested faithful believers.¹³⁶ During the time of occultation, the presence of a tried and tested faithful believer is a must, in order to serve others as a spiritual guide. That can only be done by the traditions of the people of the house; its knowledge is only possessed by the gnostics.¹³⁷

Authentic Sufis (*ṣūfiyya ḥaqqa*)

As we have seen, after the Safavid era the Sufis of Persia changed the expression of their beliefs and every aspect of their practice and conduct was affected by Shi'ism, and the concept of Shi'ite Imamology in particular became dominant.¹³⁸ However, Shi'ite mystics, especially the followers of the school of Isfahan, tried to maintain their adherence to the philosophy of the Akbarian school and reconcile it with Shi'ite theology. Even before the Safavid era, scholars like Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī and Maytham Baḥrānī (d. 678/1280) introduced the mystical philosophy of the Akbarian school and assimilated it with Shi'ite theology. This process of reconciliation con-

tinued through to the Qājār era. The return of the Ni‘matullāhīs to Persia was another historical turning point in the integration of Sufi beliefs with Shi‘ite theology. The Ni‘matullāhiyya had already been familiar with Akbarian theology from the time of Shāh Ni‘matullāh,¹³⁹ and were known for their strong ties to the people of the house (*ahl al-bayt*) from that time as well.

Mast ‘Alī’s views regarding who the genuine and authentic Sufis are were similar to Majdhūb’s. He referred to Wā‘iz Kāshifī’s *Rashaḥāt*,¹⁴⁰ which said that the real Sufis were a group of elect mystics from among the whole community of Muslims.¹⁴¹ Sufi masters had the highest status after Shi‘ite Imāms, because they recognised the reality of sainthood,¹⁴² and among all the Sufi orders he believed that the path of Shāh Ni‘matullāh was the most pious (*aṣḥaḥ*) of the spiritual paths, implicitly declaring the superiority of the Ni‘matullāhī Sufi order.¹⁴³ Mast ‘Alī also refers to a tradition attributed to Imām ‘Alī which provides 12 definitions of Sufism. Mast ‘Alī interpreted these 12 meanings as metaphors for the 12 Imāms on the basis of which he argued that there was no Sufi other than Twelver Sufis. That was the reason all the true Sufi orders were connected to one of the Shi‘ite Imāms.¹⁴⁴ However, as explained earlier in this chapter, there were some beliefs held by Shi‘ite Sufis that differed from mainstream Shi‘ism. For example, in the *Rīyaḍ*, Mast ‘Alī mentions that mainstream Shi‘ites believe that the immaculacy of the Imāms was acquired, whereas Shi‘ite Sufis believed that it was their inborn (*fitri*) quality.¹⁴⁵

He also followed Majdhūb in believing that Sufi masters like Shāh Ni‘matullāh were Shi‘ites. Majdhūb inherited this belief from Qādī Nūrollāh Shūshtarī, where Shūshtarī tried to reinterpret the lives and writings of all the great Sunni Sufi masters as being crypto-Shi‘ite. Mast ‘Alī even indicates that the Sufi orders like Ni‘matullāhiyya, Nūrbakhshiyya, Safawīyya, Baktāshiyya, Khalwatīyya and Shaṭṭārīyya did not have a Sunni master in their entire spiritual chain. Although the majority of Sufi masters living prior to Shāh Ni‘matullāh were known to be Sunnis, Mast ‘Alī asserts that the realised gnostics (*‘urafāyi muḥaqqiqīn*) did not recognise Sunni Sufis as genuine Sufis, and he rejects all Sunni Sufis.¹⁴⁶ Mast ‘Alī did not refute other Shi‘ite Sufi orders; he only believed in the superiority of the Ni‘matullāhī order over them all. He explicitly stresses the importance of Islamic laws for the Sufi, describing the real Sufi as a person who follows Islamic Law and he further argues that the practices of self-mortification were in complete accord with Islamic Law and the traditions of the Imāms.¹⁴⁷

The School of Illumination (*ishrāq*)

Mast ‘Alī’s position regarding the School of Illumination (*ishrāq*) is, again, similar to Majdhūb’s. He argues that Sufi practices are in accord with the religion and the Prophet of their time. However, the followers of the School of Illumination were not necessarily followers of the Prophet, and their practices were based on their philosophical practices.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Mast ‘Alī expresses sympathy for them and he does not categorise them among the heretical philosophies.

Intuitive Philosophy (*dhawq-i ta‘aluh*)

The school of ‘Intuitive Philosophy’ (*Dhawq-i Ta‘aluh*) was explained in detail in Chapter Five. The followers of this school believed that the Being was a single reality in which there is no multiplicity. Therefore, absolute unity is the reality of being.¹⁴⁹ The followers of the school of Unity of Being believe that there is no entity (*mawjūd*) and everything is being, but the school of *Dhawq-i Ta‘aluh* considers that there is only one Being and the entities (*mawjūdāt*) are multiple. Mast ‘Alī gives a detailed explanation of the philosophy of this school, making reference to Majdhūb’s own explanation of it, which is similar to his own. He believes that Jurjānī, Dawānī and Shūstari followed this school,¹⁵⁰ as did many other spiritually realised adepts. He warns, however, that some of the school’s beliefs are not in accordance with religion,¹⁵¹ such as the doctrine that the entities were multiple but Being itself is one.

Sufism and Pseudo-Sufism

Mast ‘Alī indicates in his writings that one cannot reject Sufism just because some Sufis held heretical beliefs, just as no one should reject Shi‘ism due the presence of extremists.¹⁵² He refers to Āmulī who wrote that real Sufis could not be blamed for the ones who called themselves Sufis but were not so in reality. Mast ‘Alī said that the followers of antinomianism (*mubāḥiyya*), the proponents of incarnationism (*hulūliyya*) and of unity of the divine with the human (*ittiḥādīyya*), and the agnostics (*mu‘aṭala*) are not real Sufis but are, in fact, extremists (*ghulāt*) just like the Kaysāniyya, Zaydiyya and Ismā‘iliyya Shi‘ite sects. According to the historical narratives, there is evi-

dence illustrating the close relationship between the Nī'matullāhīs and the Ismā'īlis. It has been suggested that Nūr 'Alī and Mushtāq Alī were supported by Ismā'īlī notables.¹⁵³ Mast 'Alī Shāh is known to have had a very close relationship with the Ismā'īlī Imām, and once took refuge in Maḥallāt, and he benefited from the hospitality of Āqā Khān, the Ismā'īlī Imām.¹⁵⁴ Their relationship was so close that once Mast 'Alī said, 'I have a *murīd* like Āqā Khān who himself has thousands of *murīds* in most countries (*bilād*) of the world.'¹⁵⁵ Although this may appear to be a boastful claim from Mast 'Alī, it does give a hint of his close relationship with the Ismā'īlī Imāms. In *Ḥadā'iq al-siyāḥa* he wrote a short biography of Ḥassan 'Alī Shāh ibn Shāh Khalīl Allāh (d. 1298/1881) in which he claimed that Ḥassan 'Alī Shāh was adorned by the 'perfection of spirituality' (*kamāl ma'nawī*).¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, Mast 'Alī Shāh refuted Ismā'īlī's beliefs and philosophies and categorised them among the rejected groups of *ghulāt*.

Mast 'Alī asserts that scholars like Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, Sayyid Murtiḍā Rāzī¹⁵⁷ and Aḥmad Ardabīlī (also known as Muqaddas) had divided Sufis into 6 or 12 groups, which Mast 'Alī rejected them as pseudo-Sufis. Real Sufis are, in his view, those who guide humans with the permission of God.¹⁵⁸ Those who claim to be Sufi but wear patchwork cloaks to gain fame in public are acting against Sufi customs. He believed that there were hypocrites among all classes and levels of people, and it did not matter if they were Sufis or any other type of Muslim.¹⁵⁹

Mast 'Alī is very precise in his explanation of the traditions espoused by the Shi'ite Imāms in refutation of Sufis. While not rejecting their authenticity, he notes that these sayings were addressed to Sufi heretics, who denied the sainthood of the Shi'ite Imāms. At the same time, he notes that there are also other traditions handed down from the Prophet Muḥammad and Shi'ite Imāms that praise Sufis.¹⁶⁰

Mast 'Alī believes that the Umayyads and Abbasids supported this group of Sufi heretics in order to reduce the sainthood of Shi'ite Imāms.¹⁶¹ He even cites the poetry of Ḥāfiz and Rūmī as proof of his claim that heretical beliefs are not part of Sufi beliefs.¹⁶² He uses terms like pseudo-Sufis (*mutiṣawwifā*) and evil pseudo-Sufis (*mutaṣawwifay-i khabītha*). Mast 'Alī denounced the followers of incarnationism (*ḥulūl*), antinomianism (*ibāḥa garī*) and transmigration of the soul (*tanāsukh*), calling them heretics.¹⁶³ However, unlike Majdhūb, he did not give a detailed explanation of these beliefs.

In *Rīyaḍ* he offered the following definitions of pseudo-Sufism given by scholars in refutation of Sufism. Those believing in the Unity of Being (*waḥdatiyya*) were the ones who believed in the essence of God as the being of all

creatures. Those believing in indwelling of the divine (*ḥulūliyya*) believe in the incarnation of God in humans. And those believing in unificationism (*ittiḥādīyya*) hold that humans become united with God. The school of the ‘United’ (*wāṣilīyya*) believes that if one is united with God, there is no need to follow Islamic laws. The lovers (*‘ushshāqīyya*) are those who believe that one should not busy oneself with the sayings of prophets and must focus on God alone. The believers in the transmigration of souls (*tanāsukhiyya*) reject belief in heaven and hell, believing that spirits are eternal. He indicated that he did not have any doubt that all these groups must be rejected and asserted that there was only one group of real Sufis.¹⁶⁴

Mast ‘Alī refers to Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, quoting from ‘Allāma Ḥillī, who refuted the belief in incarnation held by Sunni Sufis. Ḥillī also refuted those Sufis claiming to be united with God and not following Islamic laws. Mast ‘Alī indicates that the Sunnis who believe in incarnation are not real Sufis, thus concluding that Ḥillī was not against Sufism.¹⁶⁵ It should be noted that Mast ‘Alī did not hesitate to criticise Shi‘ite Sufi orders such as Ahl-i Ḥaqq and ‘Alī allāhī which were known to be extremists (*ghulāt*). He also criticised the Dhahabī Sufi order, which was close to mainstream Shi‘ism, and had actually met their master, Aqā Muḥammad Kāzīrūnī.¹⁶⁶ He said that it had been years since there had been a real spiritual guide among the masters of the Dhahabī order as the leadership had become hereditary. The masters performed exterior rituals based on Islamic law with no inner spirituality.¹⁶⁷

Imitators of Sufis (*mutishabihān*)

Mast ‘Alī Shāh divided the imitators (*mutishabihān*)¹⁶⁸ into two groups. The first group was right and acceptable (*muḥiq*), whereas the second was false (*mubṭil*) and was refuted by him.¹⁶⁹

Upright Sufi Lookalikes (*mutishabihāni muḥiq*)

Mutishabiha muḥiq is that group of people who are familiar with the beliefs and states of Sufis and yearn to practise Sufism, but are unable to overcome their carnal souls and reach the state of purity; therefore, they are unable to acquire gnosis.¹⁷⁰ Although these people are not technically followers of

Sufism, their beliefs are not heretical since they yearn to be real Sufis. Mast ‘Alī Shāh divides this rightful group into five categories.

1. Those who are similar to the people who could rightfully claim to be drawn to the ocean of divinity on the basis of divine attraction (*mutishabiha muhiq bi majdhūbān*). They have the zeal and longing, they witness some lights, but are unable to put aside carnal desires, and are not pure enough to enter onto the path.¹⁷¹
2. Those who rightfully claim to be the people of blame (*mutishabiha muhiq bi malāmatīyya*); they follow the obligatory laws of religions and perform the prayers, but their outward appearance is criticised by the public. These people are called *qalandariyya*¹⁷² and their difference from the people of blame (*malāmatīyya*) is that the latter also performed all of the supererogatory acts.¹⁷³ Mast ‘Alī does not use the term *qalandariyya* in its pejorative sense. In addition to praising ‘the people of blame’, he also praises those who yearn to be part of this group and calls them *qalandariyya*. However, he notes that they follow the sharia in order not to confuse them with libertine Sufis.
3. Those who rightfully claim to be ascetics (*mutishabiha muhiq bi zuh-hād*), but whose delight in the material world has not been completely overcome, in spite of their efforts.¹⁷⁴ Though at certain periods of history Sufis distanced themselves from complete asceticism, they always condemned any reliance on the material world. Therefore, those longing to give up their attachment to the material world are admired by Sufis.
4. Those who aspire to being similar to the spiritually poor (*mutishabiha muhiq bi fuqarā*), suppressing the longing for wealth.
5. Those who claim to be similar to Sufis and who rightfully claim to be worshippers (*mutishabiha muhiq bi ‘ubād*), who spend most of their time performing prayers, litanies and spiritual remembrance, though sometimes they are prevented from doing so by their carnal desires.¹⁷⁵ Mast ‘Alī does not categorise these people as heretical Sufis, but rather admires them for striving to be on the Sufi path.

The False Sufi lookalikes (*mutishabihān-i mubṭil*)

Mutishabihān-i mubṭil are those who claim to be Sufis but whose beliefs are heretical. Mast ʿAli again divides them into five groups.

1. Those who falsely claim to be people drawn into divine love by divine attraction (*mutishabiha mubṭil bi majdhūbān*) and claim to have reached the state of annihilation (*fanā*), to which they attribute all of their acts. Mast ʿAli says their claim merely represents an attempt to conceal and an attempt to justify their prohibited acts.¹⁷⁶
2. Those who falsely claim to be similar to the people of blame (*Mutishabiha mubṭil bi malāmatīyya*); this group has committed prohibited acts and also molested other people.¹⁷⁷ These people claim that their sins did not offend God and, therefore, there was no need to follow Islamic Law (*sharīʿa*). The first two groups were those who were known as *qalandars* and wandering dervishes among the common people.
3. Those who are false lookalikes to ascetics (*mutishabiha mubṭil bi zuh-hād*); these people avoid the material world for the sake of rank and dignity.¹⁷⁸
4. Those who are false lookalikes of the poor (*mutishabiha mubṭil bi fuqarā*); their external appearance indicates that they are longing for spiritual poverty but, like the third group, they have done this for the sake of appearances and social rank.
5. Those who are false lookalikes of worshippers (*mutishabiha mubṭil bi ʿubād*), in whose hearts no light of faith could be found and who are known to be hypocrites.¹⁷⁹

Thus, Mast ʿAli concludes that the first two groups of false lookalikes are heretics, not Sufis, whereas the beliefs of the other three groups are at least a kind of imitation of Sufi conduct and doctrines. However, because they practise these beliefs for the sake of material and social rank, their conduct is classified as ‘rejected Sufism’.

The Naqshbandī Order

Mast 'Alī Shāh explains the history of the Naqshbandīs and the order's main figures, examining their two chains of spiritual masters (*silsila*), one of which went through Abū Bakr, the first Sunni caliph. Mast 'Alī tries to prove that the order's spiritual lineage actually went first through Salmān al-Fārsī and then to Abū Bakr. However, this was impossible because Salmān was a Shi'ite, in the eyes of Shi'ites as recorded in Shi'ite texts. Mast 'Alī also emphasises that this could not be a Sunni order because the name of the sixth Shi'ite Imām, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, appears in the lineage of the order. He refers in this respect to the well-known Naqshbandī scholars whom he respected. However, Mast 'Alī did mention Shūshtarī's claim that the Naqshbandī order was an innovative order because of its claim to be a Sunni Sufi order, and Mast 'Alī agreed with him.¹⁸⁰

Although Mast 'Alī spoke disparagingly of this Sufi order for following Sunni traditions, he acknowledged that they practised the ritual of spiritual remembrance according to the traditions of the Imām.¹⁸¹ Mast 'Alī Shāh was, in certain cases, much more moderate than Majdhūb towards 'heretical' Sufi Orders. Nevertheless, he affirmed that the only real Sufis were those who believed in God, the prophets and the Shi'ite Imāms, and thus were the bearers of the secrets of Shi'ite Imāms during the occultation of the twelfth Imām.

Mast Ali Shāh and Jurist-Sufi Conflict in Qājār Iran

Mast 'Alī Shāh sometimes openly criticised the scholars of the exterior sciences of religion, for which he was more heavily persecuted than Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh by the political and religious authorities of the day. Practically everywhere he travelled he was excommunicated by Shi'ite clerics, and intimidated and insulted to the extent that he had to escape from some cities.¹⁸² Despite this, he gained much fame among the followers of the Ni'matullāhī order and attracted the support of some members of the royal court.

He continually mocked the scholars of the exterior sciences, calling them stupid idiots (*kuwdan*). The following statement gives a good taste of his attitude: '[n]ow, in the country of Īrān I hear much incoherent discourse: Sufis are called apostates and atheists, Akhbārīs are named debauchees . . . A thousand bravos to this scientific knowledge, this faith and

this religion! God be praised for this *ijtihād* and justice. We give thanks to God for this accusing a pious fasting and praying Muslim to be an infidel and ordering of his execution!¹⁸³ Mast 'Alī believed that the Shi'ite scholars were taking revenge on the Sufis simply out of jealousy. He observed how '[a]ll the Sufi lodges built by Safavid kings were destroyed and its dervishes banished, and thus they took revenge on Sufis.'¹⁸⁴

Mast 'Alī always complains in his writings about suffering oppression from Shi'ite clergy. Occasionally he criticises all Muslims. He relates a story about a wise Christian who built the first *khānaqāh*. Then he praises the Christian sage and reproaches the Persian Muslims for making Persia an unbearable place for Sufis and dervishes to live.¹⁸⁵ He remarks likewise, 'People of all classes! People of the court! See how they use their power to harm and persecute of the adepts of the heart [Sufis].'¹⁸⁶

Once during Majdhūb's life when Mast 'Alī went to Ray, he related how the king summoned him to his court and told him that Sufis were damned and were to be banished from his country and, therefore, Mast 'Alī also had to condemn them. They debated for a while, and Mast 'Alī agreed to condemn only those who did not follow the Islamic laws and did not believe in the sainthood of the Shi'ite Imāms. Consequently, the king expelled him from Ray. Mast 'Alī claimed that after this incident he was not welcome in any city in Persia.¹⁸⁷

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Majdhūb ordered him to reside in Fārs, where he set about confronting the clerics. He was persecuted again and again by the people of Fārs¹⁸⁸ and subjected to accusations by the city's seminary scholars.¹⁸⁹ Clerics wrote a request to the Qājār prince, Ḥusayn 'Alī Mirzā (d. 1250/1835), shortly before the death of Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh, that he expel Mast 'Alī from Shiraz, and he was thus expelled from the province of Fārs for a period.¹⁹⁰ By contrast, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, who were more cautious in expressing their views, had relatively tranquil periods of leadership.

Conclusion

Mast 'Alī Shāh's role in the spread of the Ni'matullāhī order in Persia was quite different from that of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh. He was more of a traveller and an acute observer of other cultures than a seminary scholar. When explaining the different schools and philosophies, he exhibited less bias than other scholars of his time, which made him a

more accurate and reliable guide. He closely examined different cultural and religious practices, which makes his work an important source from that era. The majority of Shi'ite Sufi orders had extreme, exclusivist views of religious beliefs and sects other than their own, which they inherited from their Shi'ite seminary background. The Ni'matullāhī Sufi order was not immune to this exclusivism. Mast 'Alī did not criticise the Shi'ite philosophical schools and, in certain cases, he did not refute the Naqshbandi order, as his predecessors had done.

He was more oppressed and persecuted than his two predecessors in the Ni'matullāhī order, as can be seen from the way in which he was expelled from Tehran, Fārs and several other cities in Persia. He was more vulnerable to attack because he did not have sufficient knowledge of the seminary sciences and did not write as an expert on religious sciences. Most of his books were more like travel diaries (*Siyāḥat Nāma*) than works on Sufism, and his work *Kashf al-ma'ārif* was his only apologetic treatise. Majdhūb, by contrast, was well versed in the religious sciences, and therefore his books had a larger audience among the ulama. Mast 'Alī's contribution was, for the most part, to elaborate on the beliefs of Majdhūb.

Mast 'Alī clearly stated his Sufi beliefs and he openly criticised and confronted Shi'ite clerics. He provoked outrage among Shi'ite clerics with his belief that Sufis were superior to Shi'ite ulama, because the Sufis had first to gain gnosis under the guidance of Sufi masters.

It should be noted that he was a recognised Sufi and was respected by other Sufi masters during his day. He gained popularity within the Ni'matullāhī order when disagreements regarding succession began to emerge, and was very popular among the common people of his time who were not influenced by the verdicts of Shi'ite scholars. While his contribution to Sufism was not as influential as Majdhūb's, his travel diaries remain an invaluable resource on the geographical, historical, social, ethical and mystical milieu of that era.

