

Jurists and Sufis from the Mongols to the Qājārs

The conflict between the jurists and the Sufis was a fundamental characteristic of the religious life of Qājār Persia, but it had a long history behind it, which first must be reviewed and understood in its proper historical context — as a distinct sectarian phenomenon in the theological history of Iranian Islam over the preceding six centuries. In what follows I will focus on the relations between the two groups from the 13th century onwards.

From the early days of Islam to the present there have always been severe differences between the representatives of the esoteric and exoteric approaches to faith and practice. These stem from two fundamentally different religious temperaments. The jurists' legally oriented understanding of Islam, what Marshall Hodgson identifies as 'shariah-minded' Islam vs. the 'haqīqah-minded' Islam of the Sufis. Despite the efforts of several important Muslims, particularly al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), who tried to bridge the chasm between exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) faith perspectives, the divide between these two religious worldviews has been a constant since the second Islamic century. Many great Sufis such as Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī were scholars of *fiqh* and hadith and felt that the shariah was essential to hold on to but that deeper Islam must include a deep dive into the esoteric mysteries that are referred to frequently in the Qur'an.

However, particularly in the world of Shi'ite Islam, the scholars of *fiqh* generally resented and rejected the doctrines of the Sufis. The opposition to Sufism dates back to the first generation of Sufis, even before the name 'Sufi' had been adopted.¹ The early Muslims who are looked to as early masters of this esoteric understanding of Islam and are acclaimed as the founders of the Sufi way adopted an ascetic lifestyle. In doing so they were criticised by Muslim scholars, who believed that asceticism was against the tradition of the Prophet Muḥammad.² Among the early generations of the Muslim community, Sufis were not a distinct class like theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and clerics (*ulama*), and their difference from the rest of the Muslim community lay only in their adherence to certain strict codes of piety.³

As Vincent J. Cornell says, 'One of the oldest stereotypes in Islamic studies is that of the eternal conflict between scholar and Sufi, legalist and mystic, doctor and saint, or *sharī'a* and *ḥaqīqa*.'⁴ Jurists viewed Sufis as their rivals, challenging their authority, and in return Sufis condemned them for being enthralled by worldly matters. As a matter of fact, on numerous occasions during the formative period of Sufism, Sufis directly challenged the authority of clerics, as Ibn 'Arabī observed in the *Futūḥāt*:⁵ 'The name *faqih* is much more appropriate for the Tribe [i.e. the Sufis] than for the exoteric scholar, for . . . it is he [the Sufi] who calls to God "upon insight", just as the messenger of God calls upon insight.'⁶

The conflict between the jurists and Sufis also arose because Sufis claimed to have a knowledge of God/the Truth (*Ḥaqq*) that could not be gained through academic study in the seminary colleges of Islam. They claimed access to an intuitive knowledge (*ma'rifat*, gnosis or intuitive insights and *dhawq*, literally tasting) that could be gained through certain methods of spiritual guidance and by means of mystical experiences or unveiling (*kashf*).⁷ It is said that Dhū'l-Nūn (d. 246/859) was the first Sufi master to explain intuitive knowledge of God (*ma'rifat*) as opposed to knowledge of the seminary sciences.⁸ It was through the mystical experience of union that one could gain this intuitive knowledge; as Qushayrī remarked, 'Without union there can be no true knowing (*ma'rifa*).'⁹ A number of Sufi masters were illiterate and some viewed formal learning and the seminary sciences as veils to this union. They made a mockery of the clerics studying in seminary schools. They claimed that everything was revealed to their hearts from God.¹⁰ Therefore, Sufi doctrines of gnosis came to be viewed not as complementary modes of religious understanding but as direct challenges to the beliefs of the exoteric Muslim clerics that religious knowledge could only be gained from formal studies in a *madrasa*.

The early Sufis seldom challenged political authority, but merely condemned those who were involved in worldly matters. As Gerhard Böwering observes, 'The Muslim mystics of classical Sufism — from the beginnings of Islamic asceticism to the time of al-Ghazālī — did not challenge their opponents with an agenda of the just society, a blueprint of political reform or a call for an Islamic state.'¹¹ However, after the abolition of the Caliphate in Baghdad in 556/1258, Sufi masters began to lead some of the political movements.

Sufism also underwent different stages of transition. There was, first of all, an evolution in Sufism from asceticism to mystical philosophy. This occurred, as Van Ess has pointed out, once early Sufis like Junayd (d.

297/910) became concerned about defining the phenomenon of mysticism.¹² Secondly, during the 13th century Sufis started to form *ṭarīqas* or Sufi brotherhoods, a development which had been anticipated two centuries earlier in the institution of the Sufi meeting lodge (*khanaqāh*), first established in Khurāsān during the time of Abū Saʿīd Abū al-Khayr (357/967–440/1049). In the 12th century, during the Mongol period, Sufism became organised into different brotherhoods, most of which demanded unconditional obedience to their masters.¹³ In some places Sufism became affiliated with the state and in some cases an instrument for the government to control the masses.¹⁴ As the brotherhoods became more formalised, their affiliation to different sectarian and theological schools of Islam became more crucial. Shiʿite and Sunni Sufi orders became clearly distinguishable from each other.

Particularly in the Shiʿite world, the clerics were prone to accuse Sufis of being innovators in religious matters. These shariah-oriented scholars referred to traditions from the Prophet and Shiʿite Imāms,¹⁵ such as one of the most often-quoted sayings of the Prophet, ‘O Abū Dharr, those wearing wool in the summer and winter, are cursed by the angels of heaven and earth.’¹⁶ They claimed that Sufis were rejected by the Prophet and Shiʿite Imāms. They were viewed as infidels deserving to be fought with and put to death (*kāfar ḥarbī*).¹⁷

In the 16th and 17th centuries in Iran, during the period of the clerical formation of Shiʿism under the Safavids, and again in the 18th and 19th centuries with the consolidation of the Uṣūlī school in the Zand and Qājār eras, Sufis challenged the authority of the mujtahids. The ulama reacted with an inquisition of the Sufis near the end of the Safavid dynasty. This inquisition and persecution continued throughout the Qājār era. The two major figures in this anti-Sufi movement were Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110/1700) and Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī (d. 1216/1801).¹⁸ Shiʿi Sufis presented a spiritual and esoteric understanding of Shiʿism that was a direct threat to the Shiʿi ulama. As Mangol Bayat observes, ‘Refusing to acknowledge the mujtahids as the sole exponents of Shii Islam, denying them the right to represent the collective voice of religious conscience, the Sufi leaders offered their followers a spiritual alternative to the *fuqahā*’s legalistic institutionalized religion.’¹⁹

The revivalist movement of Sufism at the end of the Zand and the beginning of the Qājār periods was largely based on charismatic Sufi leaders who encouraged the enthusiastic participation of their followers in Sufi practices rather than have them focus their faith on the rulings of the exoteric clerics

whose fatwas competed among themselves for more and more arcane and pointless rules to be followed revolving round issues of ritual purity. As a result, those Muslims who were tired of the strict exoteric understanding of religion became more interested in the systematised and formalised path of Sufism presented by these masters.

During the latter half of the Safavid period, and throughout the Afsharid and Zand periods and into the Qājār era, many wandering dervishes migrated to Persia. They were known for performing miracles for which they would receive alms. They were also known for libertinism and not following religious laws.²⁰ Ordinary people believed in the charismatic power of these wandering dervishes who were treated with respect or fear. These dervishes were not organised into 'orders', so there was no mass conversion to their teachings. Their behaviour and conduct were not generally accepted by Persian society, which objected to the idea of a libertine who did not work, and some rulers and scholars viewed them as parasites on society.

However, stories about these wandering dervishes became deeply rooted in Persian culture and mythology, with tales of their feats becoming mixed with local religious practices. The history of Persia is full of fables and epics, which are extremely important for understanding Persian culture, although to the modern eye they are too unrealistic to be accepted as fact. Malcolm has an explanation for the Persian attitude to such tales and hagiographical stories:

If we desire to be fully informed of a nation's history, we must not reject the fables under which the few remaining traces of its origin are concealed. However extravagant they always merit attention. They have influence on the character of the people to whom they relate. They mix with their habits, their literature, and sometimes with their religion. They become, in short, national legends, which it is sacrilege to doubt; and to question the deeds of Roostum would raise in the breast of a Persian, all those feelings which would be excited in an Englishman if he heard a foreigner detract from the name of Alfred.²¹

Sufism was part of this culture too, as one can find in the proliferation of legendary stories about the lives of Sufi masters, such as 'Aṭṭār's *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*.²² As stories about the extraordinary acts of wandering dervishes became part of the popular and oral culture of Persia, they affected the historical views of scholars too. However, in order to understand the religious

situation of Sufism during the Zand and the Qājār periods, it is necessary to look at how Sufism had evolved in Iran several centuries earlier, when Iran was still a Sunni country. In what follows I will examine the development of Sufism in Iran during the Mongol period.

Sufism in Mongol Iran

The invasion of Persia and other Islamic lands by the Mongols at the beginning of the 13th century was a devastating event for all Muslims. As Lewisohn has pointed out, “‘Nightmarish’ is too light an adjective’ for this era.”²³ It was an era of mourning, as the ruthless Mongol commanders slaughtered untold numbers of Persians through their ‘shock and awe’ military strategy. Mast ‘Alī Shāh calls the invasion of Mongols ‘the great calamity and the major event’ in the history of Persia.²⁴ Browne pointed out that the Mongol invasion was one of the most ‘dreadful calamities’ for humanity.²⁵

Nevertheless, there were positive cultural developments during this era as well. Roger Savory has noted, ‘This event [abolishment of the Caliphate and the capture of Baghdad] not only marks a watershed in the political history of the Islamic world but had far-reaching effects on religious developments as well. For 600 years, the Caliphate had been the visible symbol of the unity of the Islamic world, and the upholder of the orthodoxy of the Islamic faith.’²⁶ It created an opportunity for those religious beliefs not in accordance with the Caliphate system of Sunnism to flourish. Sufism, Shi‘ism and messianic movements started to grow as the Sunni ideology of the Caliphate faced a military, cultural and theological challenge. Mongol rulers showed tolerance towards other religious beliefs as long as they were no political threat to the new Mongol order.²⁷

Sufism as an esoteric spiritual path which brought about hope for union with God became a sanctuary for those whose lives had been overtaken by the Mongol conquest, and thus, paradoxically, the disaster of the Mongol invasion led to a mass cultivation of Sufism.²⁸ At the same time, the Il-khanid era (654-750/1256-1335)²⁹ (that of the Mongol dynasty that ruled Persia) was a period of decline for the Islamic judicial system.³⁰

Genghis Khān did not follow a particular religion, though he felt sympathetic towards all mystics of different religions, including Sufis.³¹ This favourable attitude of Genghis Khān, and after him the Ilkhānid rulers, towards Sufism created a constructive period for the organised development and spread of Sufi movements and ideas in Persia.³² Some of the

Kubrawī masters of the period were well-respected by the Mongol rulers. Shaykh Sayf al-Dīn Bākharzī (d. 659/1261), a Kubrawī master, converted the Mongol ruler Berke (r. 1257-67) to Islam.³³ Sulṭān Ghāzān (d. 703/1304) was another Ilkhānid ruler who embraced Islam. He was known to be kind to the saints, clerics and theosophers. Shaykh Ṣadr al-Dīn Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad Ḥamūya (d. 722/1322), a Kubrawī master, was his consultant.³⁴

The Ilkhanid ruler, Sulṭān Muḥammad Khudābanda (Üljāytü) (r. 716/1316), became a Shi'ite and had a good relationship with both Shi'ite clerics and Shi'ite Sufis.³⁵ He also respected all the religious scholars from different theological and mystical persuasions within Islamic culture.³⁶ He reconstructed the shrine of Biṣṭāmī and paid homage to it.³⁷ It was especially during Üljāytü's reign (r. 703-716/1304-1316) that Shi'ites started to propagate their strongly messianic beliefs. Messianic movements, most of which were quasi-Shi'ite and quasi-Sufi, soon became popular among the general population. As Shahzad Bashir observed in this respect, 'The need for a savior arises in an unstable political environment such as after the death of a caliph.'³⁸ One of the major Shi'ite-Sufi movements against the Mongols was that of the Sarbidārān in Sabziwār.³⁹ The Sarbidār leader, Shaykh Khalīfa, preached in a mosque and claimed that his order could be traced back to Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq through Bāyazīd al-Biṣṭāmī; the latter, he claimed, had been taught by Ja'far al-Ṣādiq to rise against the tyranny of the ruler, by extension implying rising up against the tyranny of the Mongols. As a charismatic person who claimed to be a Shi'ite Sufi, he became famous among the Shi'ites of Sabziwār. This caused the religious clerics of Sabziwār to feel that their authority over the people had been challenged by followers of Sarbidār teachings. They wrote letters to Abū Sa'īd Ilkhān (r. 716-736/1316-1335) about Shaykh Khalīfa's beliefs and told him that Khalīfa deserved to be put to death. Shaykh Khalīfa was murdered under mysterious circumstances in 736/1335.⁴⁰

Theosophical Sufism

Alongside these revolutionary movements, there were a few Shi'ite-Sufi philosophers who attempted to synthesise the Sufi metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabī with Shi'ite mystical theology. Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 787/1386) was the most important figure to unite Shi'ite theology with Sufi philosophy. His main doctrine, which was especially evident in his masterpiece, *Jāmi' al-asrār*, is that true Sufism is in essence Shi'ism, and vice versa. This idea of the essential unity of Shi'ism and Sufism, which was maintained by

means of various theological, metaphysical and mystical arguments, later became very popular with pro-Sufi thinkers in Safavid Iran.⁴¹

One of the great Sufi figures of this period was Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistārī (d. 737/1337). His view was similar to that of Ibn ‘Arabī, which was that exoteric scholars were in opposition to the Sufis due to greed and spiritual ignorance. Shabistārī accused them of being enthralled by money and possessions. These criticisms of exoteric scholars clarify the relationship between the exoteric and esoteric leaders and their very different take on what is true Islam. As Leonard Lewisohn said, ‘Albeit this dislike for the anti-unitarian dogmatism of the Muslim clergy is not particular to Shabistārī; it is generally characteristic of all the Sufi poets of this period.’⁴²

In sum, Sufism flourished during the Mongol era.⁴³ This is a formative period in which many religious scholars joined different Sufi brotherhoods as they became more institutionalised.⁴⁴ It is during this period that Sufis started to gain more respect and dignity among the Sunni masses.⁴⁵ The Sufi saints developed an alternative to literalist, shariah-minded Islam by the combining of the shariah and haqiqah dimensions of Islam. In doing so they came closer to orthodoxy without relinquishing the higher mystical ground of intuitive knowing through the Sufi path as presented by its leaders.

The Jurist-Sufi Conflict in Timurid and Turkemen Persia

Timur-i lang, known to the West as Tamerlane (d. 807/ 1405), was a Turko-Mongol ruler and commander who was one of the greatest conquerors of Asia. He claimed to be a descendant of Genghis Khān and upheld his nomadic Mongol values.⁴⁶ Beside his nomadic heritage, Timur was a Muslim ruler who tried to create legitimate sovereignty for himself. Being the protector of exoteric laws (shariah) and having connections to supernatural forces were two of the most important qualifications for a ruler among Muslim elites in this era.⁴⁷ Tamerlane was a ruthless commander and he invaded Persia three times, carrying out massacres in Isfahan and other cities, and made minarets with the heads of people during his genocidal campaigns.⁴⁸

As under Mongol dominion, the harsh social and political conditions under the rule of the Timurids created an environment in which people were receptive towards mystical movements. Messianic and mystical movements became popular among Persians, and the spiritually deadening focus

on the minutiae of theoretical but impractical legal rulings by the shari'ah-minded scholars became less popular. From the Mongol to the Timurid eras, the mystical beliefs of Shi'ism and Sufism became assimilated to one another. As Shahzad Bashir has observed, 'In addition to the enhancement of Sufis' societal functions, the Tīmūrīd period is known also for a kind of rapprochement between Sufism and Shi'ism leading to messianic doctrines and other "syncretistic" ideological formations.'⁴⁹

The Sufi shaykhs adopted political roles and sometimes took on many of the roles attributed to the Shi'ite Imams. Bashir in this regard commented, 'With his religious prestige and political pretensions, the new type of Sufi shaykh now becoming common approximated more and more closely the status given to the religio-political figure of the imām in Shi'ism.'⁵⁰ So, messianic figures who appeared among the Sufis, revolted in some cases even against the ruler. For example, the movement of the Sarbidārs mentioned above, which started under the Mongols and continued under the Timurids. Other quasi-Mahdi masters of Sufism arose during this period, as Abbas Amanat pointed out:

The presence of latent messianic aspirations in Shaykh Khalīfā and Shaykh Ḥasan Jūrī (d. 746/1342), Shaykh Ishāq Khutlānī (the founder of the Ightishāshīya, d. 826/1423), Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh (d. 869/1464), and Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī (d. 834/1431) made the Sufi orders they represented a fertile ground for chiliastic speculation. Yet neither the Sufi Mahdis nor the claimants to the position of deputyship of the Imām went so far as to proclaim a new cycle of inner truth free from the exterior realities of Islamic *sharī'a*.⁵¹

Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī and Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh are the two most important figures among these Sufi masters of the Timurid period. The two well-known Sufi orders of Nūrbakhshīya and Ni'matullāhīya trace themselves back to or through these two masters. Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh was the most influential figure to rise up against the Timurid ruler Shāhrukh (r.807-850/1404-1447). Nūrbakhsh traced his order back to the Kubrawī order,⁵² which had a strong influence on mystical Shi'ite philosophy and messianism.⁵³

Some Sufi masters who professed messianic doctrines that were close to Shi'ite religious beliefs were persecuted by Timur with the support of Muslim clerics. Shaykh Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (796/1394) was a quasi-Sufi master who founded the Ḥurūfī sect (a mystical movement based on

numerology, with many similarities to Sufism).⁵⁴ His beliefs about the inner meanings of letters (*hurūf*) and their relationship to the Divine had some similarities with the Ismāʿīlī beliefs as well as with the extremist Shiʿites (*ghulāt-i shīʿī*), which provoked the animosity of Muslim clerics.⁵⁵ Mīrān-shāh (d. 810/1408), son of Timur, eventually executed Astarābādī and suppressed his sect and followers.

Muslim clerics were successful in consolidating their religious authority in society and recovered from the decline they had experienced during the Mongol era. Sufis also gained popularity among the masses, such that many Sufi orders developed into strong political, charismatic and organisational movements under the Timurids. There were occasions when Timur challenged the authority of Sufi masters.⁵⁶ However, there is strong historical evidence that Timur and Shāhrukh highly respected the Sufi Shaykhs, but only those who were no threat to their power and authority, such as Khāwja Bahā al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 791/1389).⁵⁷ The Timurid rulers showed respect to the shrine and descendants of Shaykh Aḥmad Jāmī (d. 536/1141). It has also been said that Shāhrukh respected the Naqshbandī master, Khāwja Ḥasan ʿAṭṭār (d. 802/ 1399),⁵⁸ son of the great Naqshbandī Shaykh Khāwja ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār (death date unknown).⁵⁹

In general, the Timurid rulers had a good relationship with the Sufis. In one incident, as a sign of respect, none of the Timurid princes took their seats while Naqshbandī Shaykh Khāwja ʿUbayduʾllāh Aḥrār (d. 895/1490) was present in a session.⁶⁰ According to accounts found in certain hagiographies, the Timurid Sulṭān, Abū Saʿīd (d. 873/ 1469), had a successful accession to the throne due to the spiritual support given him by Khāwja ʿUbayduʾllāh.⁶¹ Those Sufi masters who attracted many disciples often provoked the jealousy of shariʿah-minded Islamic clerics, who consequently persecuted Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī (d. 834/1431) and Sayyid ʿAlī Hama-dānī (786/1385).⁶² Although Terry Graham maintained that Timur had an ambiguous relationship with the Sufis, it can be said that if he had not felt them to be a threat to his power, he would have been more sympathetic towards Sufis.⁶³ It is related that once Timur invited Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī (d. 834/1431) to his court and asked him why he had accepted the invitation and agreed to eat with him. Niʿmatullāh said it was because Timur liked dervishes.⁶⁴ It is also related that when he received a similar invitation to visit Shāhrukh's court, the visit ended in the monarch becoming an admirer of Shāh Niʿmatullāh.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, there were certain cases where the Timurids, with the support of Muslim clerics, suppressed Sufi masters and Sufi movements.

Shi'ism and Sufism in Safavid Iran

The Safavids came to power as an influential Sufi order with a philosophy of armed revolt against the rulers of Persia. Like all other Sufi orders, they had to legitimise their order through chains of spiritual initiation, and thus they traced their order back to Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Iṣḥāq Ardabīlī⁶⁶ (d. 735/1334), who was initiated by Shaykh Zāhid Gīlānī⁶⁷ (d. 700/1301), who traced his order back to Abū Najīb Suhrawardī (d. 1168 C.E.), the founder of the Suhrawardīyya order.

Shaykh Ṣafī was the key link in the chain and a crucial figure in the development of this Sufi order. For a long time Shaykh Ṣafī held Sufi sessions and became known for his spiritual power. The Mongols venerated him, and in many cases he prevented the Mongols from harming people in his home town.⁶⁸ After Shaykh Ṣafī passed away, the leadership of the order became hereditary and his son, Ṣadr al-Dīn, was appointed to lead the Ṣafawīyya Sufi order.⁶⁹ The order was named Ṣafawīyya after Shaykh Ṣafī by his spiritual successors. Ṣadr al-Dīn continued with the propagation of Ṣafawīyya Sufi beliefs.

Junayd (d. 864/1460), the great grandson of Ṣadr al-Dīn, and Ḥaydar (d. 839/1488), the son of Junayd, are the two crucial figures in the history of the Ṣafawīyya Sufi order since they transformed its mystical ideology into a militant movement.⁷⁰ Junayd's years of exile in Anatolia were crucial for the formation of a nucleus Turcoman group, known as Qizilbāsh. These Qizilbāsh devotees considered their leaders to be divine and formed an extremist religious sect.⁷¹ As a result, what was later to emerge as 'Safavid Sufism' was more akin to a mystical path filled with extremist beliefs (*ghuluww*). It was also different from the institutionalised Shi'ism at the end of the Safavid era.⁷²

Thus, the Safavid dynasty came to power with extremist Shi'ite beliefs, which were close to extremist Sufi beliefs although their ideology did not have any systematic jurisprudence or scholastic theology. As Roger Savory notes, 'The Safavid leader was even apotheosised as divine incarnation', Safavi Sufis would address Safavid kings as "God".⁷³ As Leonard Lewisohn pointed out, 'His [Shāh Ismā'il] religion was a kind of sectarian religious totalitarianism focused on *ghulāt* Islam, the doctrines and practices of which are completely alien to both traditional Shi'ism and classical Sufism'.⁷⁴

The Safavi Sufis had exclusivist views about Shāh Ismā'il whom they viewed as the 'Perfect Master' (*murshid kāmīl*) and 'Grand Sufi' (*ṣūfī-yi a'ẓam*). Other Sufi masters were denounced and the shrines of Jāmī, Abū Iṣḥāq Kāzīrūnī and 'Ayn al-Qudāt Hamadānī were demolished on Ismā'il's

orders.⁷⁵ Shāh Ismā'īl's purpose was to weaken all other rival Sufi traditions in Persia in order to monopolise power only for himself.

The Suppression of the Sufi Orders under the Safavids

The intolerant religious policies of the Safavid Sufi order did not allow for the propagation of other Sufi orders, which were expelled from the country.⁷⁶ The persecution of Sufi orders happened gradually during the Safavid era. Shāh Ismā'īl obliged Sufi orders to decide either to accept Twelver Shi'ism or to leave Persia. Shāh Ismā'īl was hostile to rival Sufi orders; for instance, the followers of the Sufi order of Abū Ishāq Kāzīrūnī (d. 426/1035)⁷⁷ were suppressed by the Shāh's command.⁷⁴ However, the Ni'matullāhī Order was to a certain extent exempt from persecution, since Shāh Ni'matullāh's descendants, who controlled the order in Persia, were related to the Safavid court through intermarriage,⁷⁸ as the head of the order in Persia, Nūr al-Dīn Bāqī (d. 920/1514), had married a sister of Shāh Ṭahmāsb and lived with the nobles in a Safavid palace.⁷⁹ Once Shāh 'Abbās II (r. 1052/1642-1077/1666) was enthroned, the Safavid relationship with Ni'matullāhīs became less friendly. Shāh 'Abbās was heavily influenced by Shi'ite clerics, a fact which led to the suppression of Sufi orders, and most of these Sufi orders went underground.

The Ni'matullāhī Sufi order was in decline before the ascension of the Safavids, as Shāh Ni'matullāh's son and spiritual successor, Shāh Khalīlullāh (d. 862/1458), departed for India in 1447.⁸⁰ The decline of the order reached its peak when the sole deputy of Khalīlullāh and his son, Mīr Shams al-Dīn, passed away in 854/1450. There was a spiritual hiatus experienced by the Ni'matullāhī order when the Ni'matullāhī masters, blood descendants of Shāh Ni'matullāh, became more political and symbolic figures under the control of Safavids with no spiritual charisma.⁸¹

The animosity between the followers of the Ṣafawī and the Ni'matullāhī orders had a long history, which became part of the doctrinal beliefs and practices of both groups. Zarrīnkūb proposes that it started as a quarrel between two religious groups because the Ḥaydarīs, named after the Ṣafawī Sufi master Ḥaydar, had more Shi'ite tendencies, whereas the Ni'matis, named after Shāh Ni'matullāh, had Sunni tendencies.⁸² In the latter part of the Safavid era this quarrel ceased to have any religious meaning and became a ritual played out for the Safavid kings. According to Kathryn Babayan, 'By the age of Shāh Abbas I (r. 1587-1629), these spontaneous performances were

transformed into ritualized fights between two *futuvvat* factions (Ni'matulahi and Haydari), in which the monarch himself participated.⁸³

The Dhahabīyya order is known in Persian history for its contribution to the mystical and theological literature of the Sufi orders. Due to the suppression of all Sufi orders, there was a decline in the Dhahabī order as well as the other great Shi'ite Sufi orders, such as the Nūrbakhshiyya.⁸⁴ Scholars have claimed that some of the great figures who belonged to the School of Isfahan during the Safavid period were affiliated to this order.⁸⁵

The Naqshbandiyya and Khalwatiyya, which were known to be Sunni, were the first two Sufi orders to be suppressed by the Safavids. Many other Sufi orders which had Sunni spiritual chains of initiation were forced to disguise themselves and adopt an Alawī system of belief.⁸⁶ Later on, the Safavid kings were able to suppress Shi'ite Sufi orders with the support of Shi'ite clerics. As Amanat writes, 'By the end of the seventeenth century, Ni'matullahīs, Nuqṭawīs, Ḥurūfīs, and the Sufi ghulāt were systematically persecuted and removed from the political scene.'⁸⁷

The Importation of Shi'ite Clerics from Lebanon

After the consolidation of the Safavids and the declaration of Shi'ism as the state religion, there was a need for a more theological and jurisprudential religious organisation. Persian Shi'ite thought started to be formalised during this era, and as a consequence of the importation of Shi'ite ulama from *Jabal al-āmil* in Lebanon the Shi'ite clergy gained an authoritative position in the Safavid social and political system. As Mansur Sefatgol observed:

Since they [Shi'ite seminary scholars] had close relations with the state, and it, in turn, needed them for elements of its operation, the new class of Shi'ī '*ulamā*' constituted a significant proportion of the administration. The religious institution, then, occupied a position of considerable power throughout the Safavid period, and was involved in all aspects of Iranian society. In effect, the Safavid state became the defender of Shi'ism, while at the same time it used Shi'ism as a tool to legitimate their political and cultural claims.⁸⁸

Therefore, the relationship between Shi'ite clerics and Safavid kings was mutually beneficial. Again, according to Sefatgol, 'The Safavids supported the religious institution through financial aid and appointed members of the ulama to the religious offices of the state. In return, the religious institu-

tion supported the political and religious goals of the state and defended it against internal political and religious challenges.⁸⁹

Shāh Ṭahmāsb Ṣafawī (r. 930-984/1524-1576) was very enthusiastic about importing Shi'ite scholars from Shi'ite seminary schools. His support for these scholars eventually created a religious environment in which any opposition to the Shi'ite clerics was considered a blasphemous act. 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Karakī, known as Muḥaqqiq Karakī, (d. 941/1534) was among those scholars venerated by Shāh Ṭahmāsb Ṣafawī who became an influential Shi'ite scholar in the history of Safavid Shi'ism in Persia.⁹⁰ Karakī was appointed as 'Deputy of the Imām' (*nā'ib al-imām*), which legitimised his religious authority as the ultimate religious power after the Imām.⁹¹ Shāh Ṭahmāsb stated, 'It is clear that opposition to the religious verdict of highly ranked Shi'ite scholars (*mujtahidīn*), who are the protectors of the law of the master of messengers, is equivalent to polytheism (*shirk*).'⁹²

It was during the reign of Shāh Ṭahmāsb (r. 930-984/ 1524-1576) that the Shi'ite seminary scholars were given the supreme authority over religious matters, which marked the beginning of the struggle between Sufis and Shi'ite scholars. At this time Shāh Ṭahmāsb also expelled the Mevlevi Sufi order from Persia.⁹³ As Shi'ite religious sciences were being formalised in Persia, Karakī was the first scholar to revive the old animosity between the 'people of the Sufi Path' (*ahl-i ṭarīqa*) and the 'people of the religious laws' (*ahl-i shari'a*). He also was the first person to write a treatise against Sufism in Safavid Persia.⁹⁴

Qalandars and Libertinism

Shi'ite clerics during the Safavid period often denounced Sufis for their alleged 'libertinism' and for not following Islamic laws. This accusation was largely based on their distaste for the antinomianism of the wandering dervishes. Many wandering dervishes, known as *Qalandars*, had migrated to Persia from India; they were not known for following all Islamic laws and were therefore called antinomian dervishes (*darwishān-i bī-shar'*). These dervishes were not initiated into any Sufi order and did not have any firm discipline based on following the traditions of an order.⁹⁵

Indian Qalandari culture was slightly different from what are known as the classical Qalandari beliefs and doctrines. During the 7th and 8th centuries of the hejira (13th and 14th centuries C.E.), there were numerous Qalandars in India. La'l Shabbāz Qalandar (d. 672/1274) and Abū 'Alī Qalandar (d. 722/1323)⁹⁶ were the most influential figures among them. La'l

Shahbāz adopted the lifestyle of the people of blame (*malāmatiyya*),⁹⁷ and resided in the taverns (*kharābāt*) becoming popular because of his miracles (*karāmāt*).⁹⁸

The *Malāmatiyya* (the Path of Blame) was a mystical movement which began in Nishābur in the 8th century, the point of which was to mortify one's passions by incurring public blame.⁹⁹ The movement began as a reaction to the increasingly artificial, hierarchical formalisation of Sufism and the hard-line views of certain shariah-minded Sufis, which did not mean, however, that they rejected either the letter or spirit of the shariah. Nonetheless, the *Malāmātī* movement became open to misinterpretation of its philosophy, such that after a while some Sufis used *Malāmātī* doctrine as an excuse for their libertinism and rejection of shariah.¹⁰⁰ This group of Sufis, who did not follow shariah and were not initiated in any Sufi order, were known as *darwishān-i jalālī*¹⁰¹ or the *Jalālīyya*.¹⁰² Zarrīnkūb proposed that the *Jalālī* Sufis represented what remained of the Qalandari'ite culture, which involved wandering and begging.¹⁰³

The Qalandars criticised the relationship between the Sufi master and his disciple. The path of Sufis was generally considered to be separate from that of the Qalandars, as Sufis had their own codes of conduct and station, whereas Qalandars adopted a libertine path of life without any obligations. The *Qalandarī* movement soon became known for its decadence, and the name *qalandar* became a derogatory term in society, while preserving its positive value as a poetic topos.¹⁰⁴ The claim by the Qalandars and wandering dervishes to be the inheritors of the culture of Sufism provided the Safavids' Shi'ite clerics with a perfect excuse to accuse Sufis of libertinism and not following Islamic laws.

The Qizilbāsh and the Safavid Monarchs

The leaders of the Safavid movement came to power through the self-sacrifice of devout Safavid Sufis called Qizilbāsh.¹⁰⁵ During the Safavid era, the Qizilbāsh were committed disciples of the shāhs. As Ata Anzali observed, 'Qizilbash religiosity was marked by a mixture of shamanistic ideas, Sufi ideals, and a distinct messianic vision.'¹⁰⁶ They were extremist Sufis in the service of their master. They soon became an elite group of Safavid bureaucrats who wielded enormous influence on Persian social and political affairs.

After the initial period of the consolidation of exoteric Shi'ism, the Safavid kings soon perceived the Qizilbāsh as a threat to the state.¹⁰⁷ Their passion for political authority and their strongly authoritarian character made the

Safavid shāhs suspicious of their activity,¹⁰⁸ since the diehard Qizilbāsh had ultimate authority after the king. However, after the importation of Shi'ite scholars into Persia, the Shi'ite scholars became the second most important authority within the political and social systems of Persia, and successfully rivalled the Qizilbāsh. Shāh 'Abbās I (r. 1588-1629) in particular was suspicious of the Qizilbāsh and reduced their tribal and spiritual power in society.¹⁰⁹ He suppressed some of them and clearly demonstrated his dissociation with their extremist views,¹¹⁰ emphasising his reliance on Shi'ite clerics.

As Rasūl Ja'fariyān has noted, Shi'ite tradition allowed Shi'ites (especially Shi'ite scholars) to penetrate the royal court, the caliph's court or other ruling classes of society which were not part of Shi'ite society or did not follow Islamic laws.¹¹¹ Most Shi'ite scholars supported the Safavid kings, viewing them as their protectors although they had no religious legitimacy.¹¹² The last Safavid king, Shāh Sulṭān Ḥusayn (r. 1105/1694-1135/1722), was the only ruler who was himself a seminary student, and as a result he put a lot of effort into supporting the hierarchy of Shi'ite clerics.¹¹³ As a ruler, Sulṭān Ḥusayn was opposed to Sufism. He insulted, humiliated and persecuted Sufis. Sufis who practised *dhikr* were executed and many Sufi masters were banished from their homes. One of the most active and fervent supporters of Sulṭān Ḥusayn was that great Shi'ite scholar and enemy of Sufism, Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110/1700).¹¹⁴

As Mast 'Alī Shāh observed:

In every province and suburb they humiliate the people of spiritual knowledge (*ahl-i ma'rifat*) and the adepts in mystical states (*ahl-i ḥāl*). And in every land and in every place, they try to eliminate the people of certainty (*ahl-i yaqīn*) and possessors of sainthood (*ṣāhib wilāyat*). The worst part is that they think these obscene acts are good deeds and they dub their iniquity 'relieving religion of troublesome elements'.¹¹⁵

Mast 'Alī Shāh for this reason referred to Sulṭān Ḥusayn as an 'ignorant king' whose persecution of Sufis ended with the emigration of all Sufis from Persia and led to the fall of the Safavids.¹¹⁶

The School of Isfahan

Shāh 'Abbās I (r. 996-1038/1587-1629) moved the capital of the Safavid Empire from Qazwīn to Isfahan. Although Isfahan was an abandoned city after the Seljuk era (429-552/1037-1194), it flourished under the kingship of Shāh

‘Abbās. His domination of the Persian Gulf and his ability to consolidate the Persian Empire created a better opportunity for commerce and economy. Isfahan, being the capital city, became the centre of attention for Safavid kings. Numerous magnificent mosques, bazaars and monuments were built, and much effort was put into the improvement of Shi‘ite seminary schools. Isfahan became a centre for Shi‘ite seminaries and the religious sciences.¹¹⁷ All Shi‘ite sciences from jurisprudence to mystical philosophy flourished in Isfahan. Some of these philosophers taught the classical mystical philosophies of Ibn ‘Arabī and Suhrawardī, which were not part of practical Sufism.¹¹⁸

The School of Isfahan was an asylum for scholars of a Sufi temperament who wanted to be immune from clerical persecution. None of the philosophers following this school openly declared their affiliation to a Sufi order,¹¹⁹ although they had respect for Sufi ethics and beliefs.¹²⁰ These theosophers were careful to distinguish themselves in the eyes of the elite and the common people from the wandering dervishes. According to Leonard Lewisohn, “They [the highest adepts of the Iṣfahān School of theosophers] rigorously insist on distinguishing between the “vulgar” or “popular” (*awāmm*) generality of dervishes and the “high” and “elect” (*khāṣṣ*) Sufis.”¹²¹

Muḥammad Bāqir Astarābādī, known as Mīr Dāmād (d. 1040/ 1632), was the earliest figure in the ‘School of Isfahan’.¹²² He was highly respected by Shah ‘Abbas and was connected to Sufism through the philosophy of illumination (*ḥikmat al-ishrāq*) initiated by the works of Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) and Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy,¹²³ although he was not affiliated to any Sufi order. Mullā Ṣadrā (d.1050/1640), the greatest philosopher in the School of Isfahan, was also influenced by Sufi philosophical ideas and his works were full of references to Sufi masters. *The Transcendent Philosophy of the Four Journeys of the Intellect (Al-ḥikmat al-mutī‘āliya fī-l asfār al-‘aqliyya al-arba‘a)* is his masterpiece, in which work he used Sufi terms like ‘unity of being’ (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and ‘presential knowledge’ (*‘ilm-i ḥuḍūrī*).¹²⁴

Mullā Ṣadrā was highly influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī but opposed to the libertinism of Qalandar forms of Sufism. He wrote a book called *Kasr al-aṣnām al-jāhiliya fī kufr [dhamm] jamā‘at-i al-Ṣuffiyya [mutaṣawwifa]* (*Breaking the Idols of Ignorance through Refutation of Sufis*),¹²⁵ written in defence of mystical philosophies and in refutation of vulgarised forms of Sufism.¹²⁶ As Lewisohn maintains, “[The treatise] is one of the most important documents for the understanding of seventeenth-century Persian Sufism and the causes of the clerical persecution of Sufism during the period.”¹²⁷ In this treatise he condemns both pseudo-Sufism and the superficial observance of the religious laws.

In his ‘Treatise on Three Principles’ (*Risāla sih aṣl*), Mullā Ṣadrā condemns the jurists (*fuqahā*) and scholastic theologians (*mutakalimīn*) of his time and defends the ideals of true Sufism against both groups. Lewisohn points out that Mullā Ṣadrā introduced himself as *khādīm al-fuqarā* (servant of the poor—a common term for Sufis), which clearly shows his affiliation with Sufism. He also wrote about the necessity of having a master on the Sufi path.¹²⁸ One can conclude that he was an advocate of philosophical Sufism. As Lewisohn explains, ‘Mullā Ṣadrā, in this work [*Sih aṣl*] at least, is an advocate of specifically *Sufi* philosophical mysticism (*ḥikmat*), rather than some independent Shī‘ite philosophical mysticism divorced from the Sufi tradition.’¹²⁹

Another great figure in the history of mystical Safavid Shī‘ism was Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1090/1680), a disciple of Mullā Ṣadrā and his son-in-law, who had spiritual connections with Shaykh Bahā al-Din ‘Āmilī (d. 1030/1621).¹³⁰ ‘Āmilī, who was a seminary teacher, jurist, mystic (*‘ārif*) and master theosopher (*ḥakīm*),¹³¹ was a crucial figure for the connection of Sufism and Shī‘ism. There is no doubt that he was a Sufi while acting as Shaykh al-Islam of Isfahan where he was respected by all the different religious groups in Persian society.¹³²

Theosophers of the School of Isfahan accomplished their mission to a certain extent by keeping the mystical tradition and philosophy of Sufis alive in the seminary schools. Their influence is undeniable, given that Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī, who was known to be a vehement enemy of Sufism, admired Mīr Dāmād.¹³³ Mīr Dāmād, Mullā Ṣadrā and Shaykh Bahā‘ī were generally respected by Shī‘ite clerics. They were among the very small number of people who were crucial for the survival of the mystical philosophy of Sufism during the Dark Ages of the Safavid dynasty.

Clerical Opposition to Sufism in Safavid Persia

From the very first generation of Shī‘ite clerics during the Safavid era, the animosity between ‘people of the Sufi path’ (*ahl-i ṭarīqat*) and ‘people of religious laws’ (*ahl-i sharī‘a*) became evident. Karakī, one of the first Shī‘ite scholars from Lebanon, as mentioned above, was extremely anti-Sufi and wrote a treatise in refutation of Sufis. The Shī‘ite clerics were politically and financially supported by the Safavid kings, and in return the Safavid kings were theologically and religiously legitimised by Shī‘ite scholars. Shaykh Ḥur ‘Āmilī (d. 1091/ 1680) was a well-known scholar of hadith (*muḥadith*), author of an encyclopaedia of Shī‘ite traditions called *Wasā’il al-Shī‘a*,¹³⁴ who wrote an anti-Sufi treatise called *Risālat al-Ithnā ‘asharia fi al-radd ‘alā*

al-Ṣūfiyya (*The Treatise of the Twelver Shi'ites in Refutation of the Sufis*),¹³⁵ in which he referred to the Qur'ān, Shi'ite traditions and the narration of Shi'ite seminary scholars to demonstrate the heretical beliefs of the Sufis.¹³⁶

Mullā Muḥammad Ṭāhir Qumī (d. 1098/1686) was another figure among the major Shi'ite scholars opposed to Sufism and philosophy. He was contemporary to both Majlisī and known to be affiliated with the Akh-bārī school of Shi'ism. In a dispute recorded between Mullā Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī and Qumī, he vehemently refuted Sufism.¹³⁷ *Tuḥfat al-akhyār* by Qumī was among the most important Sufi refutations of Sufism written in this era.¹³⁸ His *Mūnis al-abrār* is a compilation of his poetry in praise of Imām 'Alī, in which the poet refutes Sufis. *Muḥibbān-i Khudā* is another treatise dedicated to Shāh Sulaymān in refutation of Sufism, and *Malādh al-akhyār* is yet another treatise written by him, in which disparaged the Sufis. He also wrote *al-Fawā'id al-dīniyya*, which contains a denunciation of Sufism and philosophy.¹³⁹

Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ardabīlī, known as Muqaddas Ardibīlī, (d. 993/1585), was an influential Shi'ite scholar to whom a treatise called *Ḥadiqat al-Shī'a*, partially written in refutation of Sufism, is attributed.¹⁴⁰ In this treatise all Sufis are viewed as heretical Sunnis in opposition to the Shi'ite Imāms, with traditions and sayings going back to the Shi'ite Imāms showing that the Imāms were against Sufism. The author also criticised Ḥallāj, Bisṭāmī, Ibn 'Arabī and other great figures within the Sufi tradition.¹⁴¹ Some Sufis like Mast 'Alī Shāh (d. 1253/1837) maintained that this treatise was not written by Muqaddas Ardibīlī, citing in this respect Muḥammad Bāqir Khurāsānī's (d. 1090/1679) claim that *Ḥadiqat al-Shī'a* was written by Mu'iz al-Dīn Ardīstānī (in the 16th-17th centuries).¹⁴²

However, the most serious blow to Sufism to be delivered by the Shi'ite ulama came from Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110/ 1700), who was appointed the Shaykh al-Islam of Isfahan,¹⁴³ and who, as Rasūl Ja'fariyān observed, was crucial to the campaign of the Shi'ite seminarians against Sufis.¹⁴⁴ Majlisī was a bigoted, exclusivist Shi'ite who exhibited fanatical behaviour towards all Islamic sects other than his own, and was zealously concerned with gaining a monopoly over the religious system of Persia.¹⁴⁵ As Mangol Bayat has pointed out, Majlisī was one of the first Shi'ite clerics to lay down the doctrinal basis for the supremacy of Shi'ite clerics, allowing themselves to intervene in personal lives of people.¹⁴⁶

Although *Ayn al-Hayāt* is Majlisī's best-known and most detailed refutation of Sufism, he wrote numerous books on the subject, such as *I'tiqādāt*. He maintained that all Sufis were Sunnis. However, he did not deny that

there were Shi'ites who were ascetics like Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn Ardabili, Ibn Ṭāwūs and Ibn Fahad Ḥillī, who belonged to the mystical tradition. Majlisī, however, claimed that they were not Sufis but merely held mystical beliefs.¹⁴⁷

Interestingly, Majlisī's father, Mullā Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī, held strong Sufi beliefs. Muḥammad Taqī (d. 1070/1660), known as the 'First Majlisī' (*Majlisī-yi awwal*), was born in 1003/1594.¹⁴⁸ He was a pupil of Shaykh Bahā'ī. The senior Majlisī's solid reliance on sayings and traditions said to have come from the Prophet and the Shi'ite Imāms (*akhbār* or *aḥādīth*) led to the assumption that he was an Akhbārī jurist.¹⁴⁹ Based on the first Majlisī's writings and historical evidence, it seems more than likely that he belonged to a Sufi tradition.¹⁵⁰ Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh and Mast 'Alī Shāh suggested that the first Majlisī was initiated into Sufism by Shaykh Bahā'ī.¹⁵¹ His mystical beliefs led contemporary Shi'ite clerics to oppose him. Sayyid Muḥammad Mīr Luwḥī Sabziwārī Iṣfahānī (d. after 1000/1592 before 1083/1673) attacked the first Majlisī for defending Sufis.¹⁵² One of the staunch enemies of Sufism was Mullā Muḥammad Ṭāhir Qumī (d. 1100/1689), who had harsh disputes with the first Majlisī for writing so favourably about Sufi philosophy.¹⁵³ The first Majlisī's treatise entitled *Encouragement to the Wayfarers* (*Tashwīq al-sālikīn*) is strong evidence of his Sufism.¹⁵⁴

Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī's belief about the position of his father in respect to Sufism was highly inconsistent. In some of his writings he mentioned that his father was a Sufi but repented of his beliefs at the end of his life.¹⁵⁵ In other places he claimed that he was not a Sufi but socialised with them because he wanted to guide them to the path of truth.¹⁵⁶ The relationship between Majlisī Senior and the Sufis is undeniable, and it would seem that Majlisī Junior was looking for a way to justify his father's relationship with Sufis.

In his campaign against the Sufis, Majlisī Junior banned all Sufi gatherings and the uttering of the Sufi invocation *yā hū* (O He!), such that his disciples were known publicly to smash any pots in which the blowing of the wind could create the sound of *hū*. Majlisī's campaign succeeded in turning the public against Sufism, and nearly all the seminary scholars used to curse the Sufis during their sermons in the mosque. Sayyid Quṭb al-Dīn Tabrizī wrote a letter to Shāh Sulṭān Ḥusayn stating that animosity towards Sufism was so dominant that the Shi'ite clerics damned the shāh's ancestors for being Sufis.¹⁵⁷ As a consequence of this poisonous atmosphere, the majority of the Sufi Orders emigrated to India or else went underground during the 17th century. The mystical path of Sufism continued to be represented among members of the School of Isfahan, who, however, did not publicly

declare themselves to be part of the Sufi tradition. Unfortunately, the teachings of this school were available only for the educated elite. Lastly, there were bands of wandering dervishes, whose approach to Sufi doctrine and practice was a world apart from that of the classical Sufi orders.

In conclusion, the Safavid era was one of severe decline for the entire Sufi tradition in Persia in terms of organisational development, practical teachings and mystical literature. Although nearly all religious minorities were suppressed, among them all the Sufis received the harshest treatment.

Sufism and Clerical Shi'ism during the Afsharids and the Zands

This decline in Sufism continued throughout most of the Afsharid (1148/1736-1163/1750) and Zand (1163/1750-1209/1794) periods. The chaotic nature of the period precludes any academically reliable historical account of the state of Sufism in Persia during this time, but it is clear that the majority of the Sufi orders had already emigrated out of Persia. There are very few accounts about the Sufi revival by Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh at the end of Karīm Khān's reign (1163/1750-1193/1779). As Mast 'Alī Shāh put it, for about half a century Sufism had been dormant in Persia.¹⁵⁸ About this particular period Ma'ṣūm Shīrāzī maintained, 'For about seventy years, people were distant from any spiritual merit or station. People of knowledge were pushed to the periphery. After the arrival of Sayyid [Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh], however, discussions about Sufism and the Divine Reality [*ṭarīqat wa ḥaqīqat*] reappeared among people.'¹⁵⁹ From the end of the Safavid period and into the Zand rule, seminary scholars and philosophers did not command respect among the ruling class and, as Ma'ṣūm Shīrāzī observed, 'The people of that era lived in ignorance and neglect.'¹⁶⁰

The Shi'ite clerics, despite their relative lack of authority, did not tolerate any other religious group and continued to persecute the Sufis.¹⁶¹ The scholars tried to maintain their prestige among the masses and cultivate their relationship with the royal court. As Mansur Sefatgol stated, 'The religious offices, which were a vital part of the state, survived and were operative even under Nādir Shāh. The Afsharid and Zand dynasties had their own state-religious administration, and they regularly appointed leading religious leaders to state religious offices, such as Ṣadr, Qādī or Mullābāshī.'¹⁶² These titles became formalised but the rulers, especially Nādir, did not have much respect for them, and they had little power or influence among the ruling classes.

The Afsharid Dynasty (1148-1163/1736-1796)

The mighty king of Persia and the founder of the Afsharid dynasty, Nādir Shāh (1100-1160/1688-1747), was born into a low social class in Khurāsān and was the eldest son of Riḍā Qulī Khān.¹⁶³ He was a talented man, and his brilliance as a general in battle was remarkable. Nādir's attitude towards religion was much more liberal than those of any of his predecessors or successors. He had studied the Jewish and Christian holy books¹⁶⁴ and was open to learning from other religions, accepting some aspects of other religions as divine revelation. He was interested in religious debates and gathered Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders together to debate different theological matters. He was not popular among the Shi'ite clerics, mainly because he supported reconciliation between Shi'ism and Sunnism and the idea of Shi'ism being taught within Sunni schools of laws. Nādir's views on Shi'i and Sunni disagreements were more liberal than those of other kings and rulers of that period,¹⁶⁵ although Nādir's attempt to reconcile the two sects was rebuffed by the Turks (Ottomans).¹⁶⁶

During certain periods, Nādir suppressed and reduced the power of Shi'ite seminary scholars and favoured Sunnis.¹⁶⁷ Although he built a golden dome and minarets for Imām 'Alī's shrine in Najaf, he did not favour the clerical hierarchy of Shi'ism.¹⁶⁸ Nādir seized the mosque revenues and abolished the position of high priest (*ṣadr al-ṣudūr*) in the country, while assigning him a very small pension just for maintaining the name.¹⁶⁹

Sufism was part of popular culture, but, as Malcolm said, 'The contempt of Nādir for the arts by which the dervishes, and other religious mendicants, imposed on the credulity of his countrymen, was shown on every occasion.'¹⁷⁰ Mast 'Alī Shāh in this regard commented, 'Since Nādir Shāh murdered some of the descendants of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn and harmed a number of friends of God, the kingdom of Afsharids vanished quickly.'¹⁷¹ This judgement, whether true or not, is at least indicative of Nādir's poor relationship with the Sufis, and theirs with him.

Karīm Khān Zand

Karīm Khān Zand (1116-1193/1705-1779) was the ruler of Persia and founder of the Zand dynasty. He made great effort to establish a unified kingdom while fighting his rivals. For a short period he was able to create a stable and prosperous capital city, Shiraz, in South Western Persia. Malcolm said of Karīm Khān, 'It is pleasing to recount the actions of a chief, who, though

born in an inferior rank, obtained power without crime, and who exercised it with a moderation that, for the times in which he lived, was as singular as his humanity and justice.¹⁷² Karīm Khān, not of high birth, had no authority in Nādir's army, but was capable.¹⁷³ He was the chief of a small tribe, which was a branch of the Lak tribe. Although he was an ambitious man, goodness of heart, noble courage and a forgiving personality.¹⁷⁴

According to Amanat, 'By 1757 the rise of Karim Khan Zand in the south was the only positive outcome. His regency was the most benign and durable of any attempt since 1722 to revive a nominal Safavid rule and govern in the shadow of its memory.' He rewarded and gave encouragement to all industrious classes of his subjects. Persia's cities flourished under his rule but none more than Shiraz.¹⁷⁵ The prosperity and stability Karīm brought created an opportunity for different guilds, groups and religious minorities to flourish under his rule, which in turn allowed the Sufi missionaries to return to Persia for their revivalist movement.¹⁷⁶

During the Zand period, dervishes were viewed as mystics with supernatural powers, connected to Indian culture. Jānī, a Qalandar who was against Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh (the first master in the revivalist movement of the Ni'matullāhīs in Persia), was one of the wandering dervishes from India who lived, according to the historians of time, like other wandering Sufis. In this context, Rustam al-Ḥukamā' narrates stories about dervishes of that time who were 'perfect Sufis' and spiritual kings, mentioning a certain Darwīsh Bay-rākī who was 300 years old, and could talk to animals. He used to eat bread with tobacco juice and smoke as much opium as possible. He possessed only a horse, a parrot and a ragged garment, and no shoes or hat, which are all indicative of Dervish Bayrākī's metaphysical power. Rustam al-Ḥukamā' categorised him among the group of 'pure Muslims' (*Musalmān-i pāk*).¹⁷⁷

Following the migration of Ni'matullāhī masters to India in the Safavid period, the connection between Persian Ni'matullāhī disciples and masters became extremely limited due to the geographical distance between Persia and India. However, they were not totally disconnected and a few Ni'matullāhī disciples would still go to India for visitation with their masters. It was during this era that Riḍā 'Alī Shāh (d. 1214 A.H./1799 C.E.), the Pole (*quṭb*) of the Ni'matullāhī order, received complaints from his disciples who were scattered across Persia regarding their need to be under the direction of a master to reunite the order.¹⁷⁸

Shi'ite clerics did not have much influence in the royal courts of either the Afsharids or Zands, which made it possible for Ni'matullāhī masters directly to interact with their disciples in Persia.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, teachers were

sent off to Persia to guide the Ni'matullāhī disciples and seekers of the path. As Abbas Amanat asserts, 'Some of his [Riḍā 'Alī Shāh] disciples were dispatched to Iran for the purpose of providing guidance to the remnants of the order.'¹⁸⁰ Hence, the revival movement of the Ni'matullāhī order was formed by the spiritual guides sent by Riḍā 'Alī to Persia.

Upon the Ni'matullāhīs' arrival in Persia, Karīm Khān established a good relationship with the Ni'matullāhī masters. Shi'ite clerics who did not want to lose their social authority were able, however, to spread slanderous accusations about Ni'matullāhī masters. As a result, Karīm Khān became suspicious and intolerant of the order and banished Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh and his disciples from Shiraz.¹⁸¹

There are different accounts of Karīm Khān's religious lifestyle. John Perry asserted that Karīm Khān revived traditional Shi'ism, which was suppressed by Nādir Shāh.¹⁸² It is true to an extent that Karīm Khān did not suppress Shi'ite clerics, but he did not favour them as had the Safavid kings. Malcolm said, 'The mode which Kerreem Khan took to attain and preserve his power, was different from that pursued by any former monarchs of Persia. He made no effort to gain strength with the aide of religious or superstitious feelings.'¹⁸³ He did not accept many irrational traditions narrated by the seminary scholars. One of these traditions was about the Antichrist. Once, when he was accused by Shi'ite seminary scholars of not accepting the sayings of the Shi'ite Imāms, he replied, 'The Imām never uttered irrational words, these [certain Shi'ite traditions] are attributing irrationality to the Imāms.'¹⁸⁴ On the whole, although Karīm Khān was a religious person, he made use of his own innate powers of reasoning, and did not rely on the interpretations of Shi'ite clerics *per se*; however, one cannot deny Shi'ite clerics' influence over all the classes of Persian society, including the king. However, in comparison to other kings, he was far less subject to their influence.

Malcolm notes how '[h]e built tombs over the remains of Sadi and Hafiz, which are deposited near Shiraz, and endowed these edifices with gardens and lands for the support of the dervishes, or holy men, appointed to watch over them.'¹⁸⁵ He was a powerful and strong ruler of Persia, who was always cautious lest he lose power among people and his rivals. While he never declared himself against Sufism or all Sufis, neither did he show much sympathy for Sufism.¹⁸⁶ If he felt that a certain group would challenge his authority, he would suppress it. Seeing that he was suspicious of Ni'matullāhīs claiming political authority, he banished them. Karīm Khān did not support any seminary schools or Sufi lodges during his reign. It has been said that he believed that those religious classes—Shi'ite clerics, seminary

students, wandering dervishes and sayyids collecting money for religious matters—were parasites on Persian society and refused them a pension.¹⁸⁷ Karīm Khān died in 1194/1780 at nearly 80 years old. He had been a ruler for 26 years, 20 of those without any rival to his rule. Following Karīm Khān's death, there was a three-year period of civil war (1193-1195/1779-1782), which Zarrīnkūb has rightly called 'the age of terror' (*ʿaṣr-i waḥshat*).¹⁸⁸

ʿAlī Murād Khān (r. 1195-1199/1781-1785)

ʿAlī Murād Khān Zand (d. 1200/ 1785) was the fifth Zand ruler, who spent most of his time suppressing revolts and his Zand and Qājār rivals. His approach to social, religious and philosophical minorities was not as tolerant as Karīm Khān's. He was not a humane ruler and was intolerant of religious minorities, ordering the plundering of the Church of Julfā from which he took the gold for use in minting his own coins.¹⁸⁹

The historical narratives about his relationship with Ni'matullāhīs indicate that it underwent different stages. ʿAlī Murād Khān supported the Ni'matullāhīs at the beginning of his rule.¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, since the wandering dervishes showed no respect for the Zand rulers, he eventually turned against all Sufis. ʿAlī Murād Khān's reaction to the wandering dervishes affected all other Sufis.¹⁹¹ He ordered that the ears of Ma'sūm ʿAlī Shāh and Nūr ʿAlī Shāh should be cut off and banished them from Isfahan. (A detailed account of this incident is in the following chapter.) He died in the year 1199/1785.

It was at the end of the reign of the Zands and beginning of that of the Qājārs that Shi'ite scholars became seriously alarmed about the Sufis, whom they viewed as a serious rival religious movement. The revival movement of Uṣūlī scholars took place in this era. Shi'ite seminary schools were divided into two schools: Uṣūlism and Akhbārism. The roles of Akhbārī scholars were less authoritative. On the other hand, Uṣūlī scholars considered themselves to be deputies of the Imām with more of an authoritative role towards every aspect of the lives of the Shi'ite community. The Uṣūlī scholars had faced a bitter loss of power after the Safavid era, and so fought intensely to regain their power and would not tolerate any rival theological or mystical schools. As Joanna De Groot pointed out, 'By the end of the century [during Afsharid and Zand rule], twelver ulama were consolidating an orthodoxy that buttressed the arguments for the authority of *mujtaheds* with clearer opposition to rival tendencies.'¹⁹²

The Uṣūlī scholars during the Zand period had lost the financial support of the government and so had little authority among society's govern-

ing class. As a result, the ulama entered the economic market. The chronic weakness of the state was a powerful incentive for the ulama to venture into trade, agriculture, moneylending and property speculation.¹⁹³ Even though Uṣūlī jurists such as Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī and other Shi‘ite clerics put a lot of effort into suppressing Sufism, specifically the Ni‘matullāhī order, during the end of the Zand and beginning of the Qājār period, Sufism flourished due to the revivalist movement led by the Ni‘matullāhī masters who migrated back from India to Persia.¹⁹⁴

The Jurist-Sufi Conflict in Qājār Iran: Āqā Muḥammad Khān (r. 1195-1211/1782-1798)

The founder of the Qājār dynasty, Āqā Muḥammad Khān Qājār (d. 1211/1797), was the most powerful enemy of Karīm Khān and chief of the Qājār tribe.¹⁹⁵ Following the reign of the Zands, Āqā Muḥammad Khān became king of Persia when the country faced disunity, conflict with neighbouring countries and civil war. For most of his life he had to negotiate with enemies and engage in wars with neighbouring countries.¹⁹⁶ He had had close contact and meetings with the Ni‘matullāhīs¹⁹⁷ during the time he had been imprisoned by Karīm Khān in Shiraz, and thus became sympathetic towards them. Mast ‘Alī Shāh stated that long before the reign of the Qājār dynasty, the Qājārs had had a good relationship with Sufis.¹⁹⁸

It was during these chaotic years that the Shi‘ite clerics had the opportunity to consolidate their power without reliance on the royal court. In the late 18th century, as the Qājārs wanted to control Persia, Shi‘ite Uṣūlī clerics waged their bloodiest movement against other Shi‘ite scholars whom they accused of holding heretical beliefs. The two major victims of this movement were their old enemies: the Akhbārī scholars and the Shi‘ite Sufis.¹⁹⁹

During the initial years of the formation of the Qājār dynasty, the Shi‘ite clerics of the Uṣūlī School consolidated their power and suppressed the rival school of Akhbārism. Waḥīd Bihbahānī, known as the reviver of the Uṣūlī School, was mainly responsible for the suppression. His son, Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī, continued his father’s career of intolerance and succeeded in suppressing the other movement rivalling Uṣūlism, that is to say, Sufism, and thus gained the title of ‘Sufi-killer’.²⁰⁰

These persecutions of Sufism forced Sufi masters to conceal their beliefs to safeguard themselves from complete annihilation by the Uṣūlī scholars. Despite this clerical hostility different parts of the Qājār state witnessed

a revival of Sufism. During the reign of Fath 'Alī Shāh (r. 1212-1250/1797-1834), the Uṣūlī Shi'ite clerics who viewed Sufis as dangerous rivals to their authority became influential in the government. One such influential figure was the aforementioned scholar, Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī, who was the champion of the anti-Sufi movement.

These clerics were alarmed about the danger that Sufism posed to their authority. They also knew that some of the Qājār princes had sympathy for Sufis, and were aware that some Sufi masters such as Rawnaq 'Alī Shāh (d. 1225/1810) did not hesitate to criticise them.²⁰¹ According to Rawnaq, the Uṣūlī scholars did not have any legitimate spiritual permission from the Imām to guide the masses, nor were they his deputies.²⁰² Shi'ite clerics were more often than not victorious in these quarrels, which usually ended in the banishment, flogging or execution of the Sufis. Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh was thus, for example, executed by Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī, an episode that will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

Fath 'Alī Shāh, the second Qājār monarch, is known to have been a religious man, interested in following those exoteric Islamic laws which provided religious legitimacy for the Qājār dynasty. As Kamran Aghaie indicates, 'Like the Safavids before them, the Qājārs used Shī'ī religious symbols and rituals to promote their legitimacy.'²⁰³ These efforts by Fath 'Alī Shāh created a mutually beneficial relationship between the Shi'ite clerics and the monarch. In fact, it is said that Fath 'Alī Shāh used to say that he was the deputy of Shi'ite clerics. As Amir Arjomand observes, 'Fath 'Alī Shāh showed his gratitude for the clerical support of the new dynasty with deference, stating "our rulership is on behalf (*bi-nīyābat*) of the *mujtahids* of the age".'²⁰⁴

Many Shi'ite scholars emphasised the religious role of the king, with some believing the monarch to be the deputy of the twelfth Imām. The ulama believed their seminary studies qualified them to be the best interpreters of the tradition of the Shi'ite Imāms and gave them spiritual authority from the Hidden Imām as the living guides for society.²⁰⁵ In this capacity, they also collected religious taxes and alms as representatives of the Imām. Therefore, they became financially powerful and limited the role of the king.

Shi'ite scholars successfully influenced Fath 'Alī Shāh and convinced him to embrace their animosity towards the Sufis. As Abbas Amanat declares, 'Despite their great though ephemeral popularity, the Sufis were losing ground to the ulama, who under Fath 'Alī Shāh (1797-1834) enjoyed even greater support. Fath 'Alī Shāh's attitude toward Sufis was one of reticence and suspicion, which no doubt contributed to the increasing hostility of the ulama and was reflected in their numerous anti-Sufi refutations.'²⁰⁶ Some

of these clerics, such as Āqa Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī and Mullā Aḥmad Narāqī, wrote poetry and treatises in refutation of Sufism. These scholars tried to maintain a friendly relationship with the Qājār king because they were concerned that the Sufis would penetrate into the Qājār court, thereby directly challenging their authority. This behaviour ended in the suppression of both Sufism and all other Shi‘ite schools of thought. They practised excommunication, as Joanna de Groot narrates:

One expression of professional identity was the expanded use of ‘orthodox’ *mujtaheds*’ exercise of *takfīr* — the act of declaring opponents *kāfir*/infidel or heretical. These powers were used against *Sufis* in Kirmān in the 1790s, Kirmānshah in the early 1800s, in Gilan in 1819–20 and Tehran in the reigns of Fath ‘Alī Shah (1797–1834) and the pro-*Sufi* Muḥammad Shah (1834–48). While this did not eliminate Sufi interests and beliefs, it sharpened ideas or boundaries of orthodoxy and the *‘ulama*’s power to establish them.²⁰⁷

In this context, Mast ‘Alī Shāh quoted a wise man, without mentioning his name, who laconically opined that one can summarise Shi‘ite beliefs as the damnation of all other Muslims.²⁰⁸ Mast ‘Alī Shāh indicated that Uṣūlī scholars believed that all other followers of the Prophet Muḥammad besides themselves, meaning all the Islamic groups and Shi‘ite groups other than the Uṣūlī school of law, were debauchees (*fāsiq*) and infidels. They also believed that they were the only true heirs of the Prophet Muḥammad.²⁰⁹ As Mangol Bayat says:

The bitter Akhbari-Usuli controversy that dominated Twelver Shia circles in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries must be viewed as a reaction to the power acquired by the mujtahids. Some leading Sufi masters and theologians also strongly resented the mujtahids’ dominance of the Shia intellectual scene, and objected to the limitations imposed by the official Usuli determination of Shia doctrines. Some of them echoed the Akhbaris in charging the mujtahids with literalism and a narrow-minded interpretation of the holy text.²¹⁰

As will be discussed in detail, in certain cases Ni‘matullāhī masters echoed Akhbārī views on certain issues such as *taqlīd* (imitation) and challenged the authority of the *mujtahids*. Mast ‘Alī Shāh is among those Sufi masters who always complained about exclusivist Uṣūlī views.

Mast 'Alī Shāh remarked about the Uṣūlī clerics of his time, 'The majority of the scholars in that city [Karbalā] are Uṣūlī and people imitate them. All of them are enemies of Sufis and Akhbārī Shi'ites. They follow the path of taunting and damnation toward these two groups or any other Muslim group. [Their enmity is to the extent] that they would annihilate anyone who belongs to one of these two groups in Karbalā.'²¹¹ Even a conservative seminary scholar and Sufi like Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh (d. 1234/1818) was not protected from persecution.²¹² As mentioned earlier, the Uṣūlī scholars were intolerant towards any Shi'ite scholars who had mystical tendencies. Mullā 'Abd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī is among those few seminary scholars who became disciples of the Ni'matullāhī masters. However, he was persecuted by the other seminary scholars after his initiation into the Ni'matullāhī order.²¹³

Most of the wandering dervishes and *Khāksār* Sufis (known as Jalālis) during the Qājār era traced themselves back to Ghulām 'Alī Shāh Hindi (Indian), for whom there exists no biography or dates. It is clear that he was of Indian origin and inheritor of the Indian Qalandari culture.²¹⁴ Shi'ite Sufis like Mast 'Alī Shāh vituperated the antinomian behaviour of Qalandars in an effort to clarify their own respect for and belief in Islamic laws.²¹⁵ The masters of the organised Sufi orders were well aware of the accusation of jurists about the libertinism of all Sufis.

Ghuluww (religious excess and exaggeration) about the Shi'ite Imāms was another accusation made by Shi'ite scholars to refute those Sufis who were Shi'ites. However, masters like Mast 'Alī Shāh responded by claiming that extremism had always been a part of Uṣūlī Shi'ism and not Sufism.²¹⁶ However, Uṣūlī clerics deliberately made generalisations that all Sufis practised *Ghuluww* and condemned them as heretics.

As mentioned above, Āqā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī (118-1205/1706-1790) is recognised as the founder of the modern Uṣūlī school, and his views led to its triumph²¹⁷ and the imposition of absolute religious authority on society.²¹⁸ Bihbahānī and his disciples developed the Uṣūlī school into a methodological theory for the emerging body of the mujtahids trained in the 'Atabāt (the holy cities of Najaf and Karbalā in Iraq) madrasas. His efforts resulted in consolidation of the power of *ijtihād*, which became restricted to them alone, the so-called mujtahids.²¹⁹ Besides the theological disputes between Uṣūlīs and Akhbārīs, Bihbahānī often resorted to physical violence to enforce his views.²²⁰

Bihbahānī had his own executioners (*mīr ghazab*) to persecute his rival Akhbārī scholars and later on his son, Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī, followed a similar path in relation to the Sufis.²²¹ The final blow to the Akhbārī School was

accomplished at the end of the 18th century at the hands of Āqā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī and his son, Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī, known as the ‘Sufi-killer’.

Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī (the eldest son of Bāqir Bihbahānī)²²² became a well-known scholar, largely due to his zealous campaign against Sufism. In a brief fatwa issued on the question of the Ni‘matullāhīs’ activities he declared, ‘Beyond any doubt, the deviation of this damned group from the path of rightfulness and true guidance, and their efforts to provoke discontent and to corrupt people of the cities, have become obvious and apparent.’²²³ Bihbahānī bluntly declared, ‘The responsibility [for] such acts [punishment of the Sufis] falls only within the jurisdiction of the ‘*ulamā*’ and the executioners of the holy law.’²²⁴ The powerful minister, Hājji Ibrāhīm Khān I‘timād al-Dawla (d. 1216/ 1801), arrested two Ni‘matullāhīs and sent them to Kirmānshāh, stating, ‘We send them . . . to be delivered over to you [Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī], whom we consider as wisest, the most learned, the most virtuous of all the *oulāmāhs* [‘*ulamā*’] of our kingdom. Put them to death, confine them, or punish them in the way you deem most proper and most consonant to the decrees of the holy religion.’²²⁵ Mast ‘Alī Shāh remarked that the enmity of Ibrāhīm Khān, ruler of Kirmān, and other rulers towards Sufis was due to their overwhelming ignorance (*jahl-i murakkab*) and prejudice (*ta‘āṣṣub*). The governor of Kirmānshāh, Muṣṭafā Qulī Khān Zanginih, thus supported Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī in the execution of Ma‘ṣūm ‘Alī Shāh.²²⁶

Mast ‘Alī Shāh maintained that Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī was second only to Mullā ‘Abd Allāh Kirmānī for murdering Sufi masters during this period,²²⁷ although the former was more active in propagating the execution of Sufis in Persia. In certain cases, he used his powerful connections to capture Sufi masters such as Ma‘ṣūm ‘Alī Shāh and Muẓaffār ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1215/1800).²²⁸ From his letters to the Qājār rulers such as Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh, it is clear that he had a good relationship with the ruling class of Persia.²²⁹

The two-volume treatise written by Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī in 1796 and entitled *Risāla-yi Khayrātīyya* constituted the harshest refutation of Sufism penned during this era and is still quoted by bigoted anti-Sufi Shi‘ite mullahs in modern-day Iran.²³⁰ Mast ‘Alī Shāh complained that the Shi‘ite scholars did not see any problem with accusing other Muslims, even if their accusations were not true, justifying their bigotry by a tradition from Imām Naqī to the effect that Shi‘ites are supposedly permitted to slander Sufis. Bihbahānī in his *Khayrātīyya* everywhere resorts to this technique of pious blanket slander of his Sufi opponents.²³¹

Bihbahānī was apprehensive about the popularity of Nūr 'Alī Shāh, Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh, Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh, calling them 'the beasts of the path' or 'the wolves attacking the lambs of Islam,' in particular fiercely criticising Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh for his 'corrupt' beliefs.²³² He accused them all of 'misguiding' the public and of 'undermining the rules of the applied *sharī'a*'. He also condemned Sufis for being tolerant towards other religions.²³³ In a couple of places in his treatise, Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī calls Ma'sūm a *Chūkī* (yogi), connecting Ma'sūm to 'heretical' Hindus and Indian Sufis.²³⁴

He sent letters to Shi'ite scholars and governors warning them about the dangers of the Sufi movement in Persia. He did not mind at all using force to physically suppress the Sufis. He described in detail his own view about the formation of Sufism as being an innovation in religion,²³⁵ and referred to the traditions of the Shi'ite Imāms in the refutation of Sufis and Sufism.²³⁶ He tried to demonstrate that Sufi masters were careless about observing Islamic laws (*sharī'a*)²³⁷ and permitted what should have been prohibited by Divine Law.²³⁸ His treatise has two main chapters: one on the erroneous beliefs of Sufis and the other on the infidelity of Sufis.²³⁹ The subtitles in reference to Sufi masters give an indication of the sort of poisonous jargon and vituperative tone of the work: '[c]iting some of the nonsensical beliefs of Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabī and others'.²⁴⁰ The greater part of this book is dedicated to biographies and explanations of Sufi masters' lives, but the tone of the work reflects the author's conceited bigotry and intolerance. Being pervaded by foul language and insults towards Sufi masters and Sufism in general, any dignity which he may have had as a scholar is lost, so that his work sinks to the basest level of personal polemic. Despite Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī's knowledge of poetry, his poems against Sufism are trite and superficial. His son, Āqā Muḥammad Ja'far Āl-i Āqā (d. 1259/ 1843), followed his father's path by writing a book in refutation of Sufism, which is almost a complete copy of his father's treatise.²⁴¹

Another well-known opponent of the Sufis was Mullā 'Abd Allāh Kirmānī, who lived through the end of the Zand and beginning of the Qājār eras and was an influential cleric among the people of Kirmān. Although there are no accounts of his life in the well-known biographical books of Shi'ite scholars such as *Qīṣaṣ al-ʿulamāʾ*, Mast 'Alī Shāh states that he was the first seminary scholar who dared to order the murder of Sufi masters in Persia.²⁴² Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh even predicted that he would be killed by Mullā 'Abd Allāh Kirmānī, who in fact issued the death sentence on Mushtāq in 1206/1792.²⁴³

Mīrzā Abū al-Qāsim Jāpulqī, known as Mīrzāy-i Qumī²⁴⁴ (d. 1231/1816), also wrote a treatise in refutation of Sufism. He was a contemporary of Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh, and accordingly there will be a detailed explanation of this treatise in the chapter on Majdhūb. From the correspondence between Qumī and Fath ‘Alī Shāh it is clear that they had a friendly relationship. Royal princes and courtiers had a lot of respect for Qumī.²⁴⁵ Qumī was always anxious to prevent the penetration of Sufis into the king’s court.²⁴⁶ He maintained that the path of Sufism did not conform to the divine law of Shi‘ism.²⁴⁷

Conclusion

The animosity of Shi‘ite scholars in general and Uṣūlī clerics in particular towards Sufism during the 18th and 19th centuries has been a prominent feature in the social and religious history of early Persia over the past 300 years. There were apogee points of the persecution of Sufism during this period. After the formalisation of the Shi‘ite seminary sciences at the end of the Safavid era, the inquisition of Sufism led by Shi‘ite scholars was championed by Majlisī Junior in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. His polemics succeeded in causing the emigration of all the Sufi orders from Persia. During the Afshār and Zand eras, the power of the Shi‘ite clerics waned, and Persia experienced political instasbility, providing an opportunity for Sufi masters to revive their spiritual doctrines and practices in the main towns of Persia.

However, at the end of the Zand dynasty and at the beginning of the reign of the Qājārs, Uṣūlī scholars consolidated their power and started to persecute the Sufis again. The champion of this second inquisition of Sufism was Āqā Muḥammad ‘Alī Bihbahānī. Sufis were the indirect victims of the libertinism of the Qalandars and wandering dervishes, whose lack of observance of Islamic laws was used by the Shi‘ite scholars as a reason to refute all Sufis. They were also direct victims of their main rivals, the formalist Uṣūlī Shi‘ite clerics, who were extremely zealous in maintaining their social and religious authority over the populace at all costs. As a result, it became customary for most Persians to be against Sufism. Rejection of Sufism was no longer just a religious act but became a prestigious and fashionable intellectual position for elites and men of learning to hold, a position which is still largely maintained by intellectuals in contemporary Iranian society today.²⁴⁸

The seminary scholars were thus largely successful in their campaign to marginalise Sufis and Sufi masters from the greater society of Persia.²⁴⁹ Mast 'Alī Shāh confessed that the majority of the Persian people were against Sufism due to the power of the Uṣūlī clerics over the masses.²⁵⁰ In his chapter about Isfahan, Mast 'Alī Shāh stated that although many Sufi masters came from that city, during his own time the majority of the people were against Sufis. He commented as well that:

The general tradition of Persians is that whoever talks about self-mortification, spiritual striving, improvement of morals, and disciplining the carnal soul or follows the path of perfection of the soul, actualization of the spiritual path, purification of the heart, and refinement of the soul, and whoever mentions the term 'Sufi Path' (*ṭarīqat*), or 'Divine Reality' (*ḥaqīqat*), or the tradition of gnosis, or follows the path of asceticism, piety, submission, acceptance, poverty, and annihilation is to be declared an infidel and heretic without any proof or evidence.²⁵¹

It is undeniable that the clique of anti-Sufi mujtahids delivered a strong blow to both the survival and the revival of the Sufi orders in Persia, especially to the Ni'matullāhī order during the Zand and Qājār periods. But unlike in the Safavid era, the Ni'matullāhīs did not emigrate from Persia during the Qājār period, but rather made superficial changes in their appearance and practices in order to adapt to the oppressive anti-mystical milieu that surrounded them. After Riḍā 'Alī Shāh passed away, many of the later Ni'matullāhī masters adopted the wearing of the garments of Shi'ite scholars and decreased their emphasis on Sufi practices that might draw public attention to them. As an example, silent *dhikr* replaced the practice of loud *dhikr* sessions. This tactic of dissimulation made them less vulnerable to persecution by Shi'ite scholars who opposed them.²⁵²