

Being Human: The Shaykhiyya

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'The human form is the greatest proof of God.'

– Ja'far al-Şādiq¹

Abstract

The word 'humanism' can and does mean different things in different contexts. Secular humanism or materialistic humanism is often the demon of religious fundamentalists who see it as the opposite of godliness. Such a simple-minded view is challenged by the teachings of the Baha'i Faith, especially those teachings having their roots in the philosophical theology of the Shaykhi school. Here the human being is a locus of unbounded potential and knowledge precisely because of the unutterably lofty station of firstly, the divine manifestations (who for Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i included the Imams) through whom, secondly, God himself is 'known' or, more precisely, 'indicated'.

Keywords

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Whatever humanism may be in its ideal definition, it is worth noting that the topic of humanism in the Islamic world is already quite venerable and has been studied from a number of angles.² Surely there is a connection between interest in a distinctive Islamic humanism and the scriptural sources of the religion. Here it is important and perhaps even timely to observe that amongst the various ways in which the Qur'an distinguishes itself amongst the holy books of the world is the degree to which it is concerned with something it calls humankind or humanity (*al-nās*, 'people'; *al-insān*, 'man, human being, humanity'). From these words, for example, developed the Persian usage: *insāniyat* as denotative of humanity, courtesy, civility, politeness and urbanity – what may be thought indispensable features of any civilized society, whether Eastern or Western. In the Qur'an, the first word occurs 240 times throughout the text, the second 65 times (*Allāh* occurs 980 times).

It has been said that the Qur'an and Islam are more concerned with revelation than they are with God, as such. The positive content of the Qur'an seems focused on the prosperity and happiness of human beings, humanity, the human community. The attainment of salvation in Islam is coordinated with the performance of humans in the here and now in their attempts to live a good life in harmony with nature and their species. It is not surprising, given this emphasis, that God in fact seems to disappear altogether in certain discussions and theological formulations. Islam is not the only scriptural monotheism to reflect this development. The same process and phenomenon are observable amongst the exponents of

German mysticism, Eckhart (d. 1328) and Boehme (d. 1624). The latter, for example, is on record as follows:

When I ponder, what God is, I then say: He is One in contrast to the creature, as an eternal Nothing.³

We see an analogous theological ‘erasure’ in Islam, especially in certain philosophies of Shi’ism. The most splendid example may be in the writings of that movement which arose during the first half of the Qajar dynasty following the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i (d. 1826) and dubbed by its critics, the Shaykhiyya, but who recognized itself as the Kashfiyya (the followers of mystical disclosure). We will return to the Shaykhiyya below.

Islam as such is uncompromisingly apophatic: it acknowledges the existence of a God that cannot be described – a God sometimes ‘characterized’ as ‘beyond both being and non-being’. The classical source for Islamic negative theology is Sura 112: The sura of Purity or Transcendence: *He is One, Eternal, He was not begotten nor does He beget. Nothing is in any way comparable to Him.* In Shi’ism, especially but not exclusively, Imami Shi’ism, this supreme absence is countervailed by the incandescent and frequently quasi-divine presence of the Imam.⁴ Particularly, but certainly not exclusively, in the wake of the efflorescence of the cult of the Perfect Man in both Sunni and Shi’i Sufism, this particular apotheosis was tracked and cultivated through what Corbin coined ‘Imamology’. In the most intense iterations of Shi’ism, the Imam is neither a member of the human species nor is the Imam God, but an inter-species of which he is the only example. This is analogous with the role and status of the Qur’an, it represents a class or ‘species’ of book for which it is the only example. The ‘presence’ of the *Deus Absconditus* – the Absent God – may be felt in the following hymnodic expression, penned by Baha’u’llah, writing from within an Iranian religious context, around the middle of the 19th century, after the teachings of Ahmad al-Ahsa’i had permeated much contemporary imamological discourse.

To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent, descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. ‘NO VISION TAKETH IN HIM, BUT HE TAKETH IN ALL VISION; HE IS THE SUBTILE, THE ALL-PERCEIVING’ [Q. 6:103]. No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He stands exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness. No sign can indicate His presence or His absence; inasmuch as by a word of His command all that are in heaven and on earth have come to exist, and by His wish, which is the Primal Will itself, all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the realm of being, the world of the visible.

... How could there be conceived any relationship or possible connection between His Word and they that are created of it? [The holy words:] *God would have you beware of Himself* [Q. 3:28] unmistakably bear witness to the reality of our argument, and the [sacred hadith]: ‘*God was alone; there was none else*

beside Him' [is] a sure testimony to its truth. All the Prophets of God and their chosen Ones, all the divines, the sages, and the wise of every generation, unanimously recognize their inability to attain unto the comprehension of that Quintessence of all truth, and confess their incapacity to grasp Him, Who is the inmost Reality of all things (*jawhar al-jawāhir*).⁵

Such a severe, uncompromising, stark (yet somehow vibrant and “living”) apophaticism is based on the direct teachings of the Imams, following the Qur'an. Another good example, is this Tradition ascribed to the first Imam, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib:

'Alī, in the Sermon of [Divine] Orphanhood (*Khuṭbat al-Yatīmiyya*: here God is the 'orphan'), said: 'If you say: "Of what is He [made]?" He has, as a result, already transcended all created things (*fā-qad tabāyana al-ashyā' kulla-hā*). And if you say: "He is He," the "H" and the "E" are His own speech, [and are only in the nature of] an attribute that indicates Him, not an attribute that reveals Him. And if you say: "He has a limit," the limit is automatically other than He. And if you say: "He is like the air," the air itself is his creation (*ṣan'*). And the whole discussion goes from attribute to attribute. Blindness of heart is from [faulty] understanding (*fahm*). And [faulty] understanding is the result of [insufficient] awareness (*idrāk*). [Insufficient] awareness is from [lack of] penetrative vision (*istinbāt*), while the kingdom perdures in the kingdom and a created thing terminates in its like. So [from the outset] the quest is destined to end in that which resembles [the seeker, or his faculties]. To barge ahead in such a search ends only in futility. So the meaning is lost. And the struggle is in vain. And communication is cut off. And the path is blocked. And the quest is frustrated. His proofs are His signs, and His existence (*wujūd*) is Its own corroboration (*ithbātu-hu*). Thus it is [only] apparent *wujūd* [which is known] to the contingent world, while that existence of His which is His self [as in the statement] "none but He knows Him, Exalted be He," – none knows how or what it is except Him.'⁶

Classical Shi'i sacred lore (i.e. the teachings of the Imams) is replete with such allusions and characterizations that may be understood as casting the earthly, humanoid Imam in the role of pontifex, bridge-builder between mankind/creation and God. However, in the process, it may seem that the Imam becomes the very bridge *and its Destination*.⁷ This is in line with their words: '*We are both the treasurers and the treasure*', the early teaching preserved and venerated by the Shi'a as the direct teaching of the 12 Imams. However, in order to accomplish this elevation of the spirit and form of the 'proof of God' (*ḥujjatu'llāh*) a certain amount of theoretical scaffolding had to be elaborated. Key here is the subject of humanity itself. Since the Imam assumes the human form, or perhaps more accurately inhabits the human form,⁸ this form had to be seen as worthy of the high calling it was being summoned to host. Perhaps influenced by the veneration and elevation of humanity found mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'an, perhaps influenced by the anthropology of other cultures foreign to the Arabic, Shi'ism came to concentrate on the beauty and nobility of the human form. Thus:

The human form is the supreme evidence by means of which God testifies to his Creation. It is the Book he has written with his own hand. It is the Temple

he built with his wisdom. It is the meeting place of all the forms of all the worlds. It is the compendium of the disclosed knowledge of the Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*). It is the visible witness, answering for all that is invisible (*ghayb*). It is the guarantee, the proof opposed to all who deny. It is the Straight Way (*al-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*, Q. 1:6) between paradise and hell.⁹

Naturally, as scripture such statements become the object and subject of a wide variety of commentary and interpretation. Much of this interpretation is directed towards the nature and role of the Imam himself, as if Shi'ism wishes to understand the nature of humanity by seeing the Imam as a touchstone. Again, however, attitudes vary. According to some views, the Imam is the embodiment of the station and vocation designated as the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*). This seems to be the clear position of Muḥ sin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1680), his immediate intellectual forebears and successors. One implication of this view is that all humans are, ipso facto, less than perfect but may aspire to perfection by emulating and obeying the Imam. The idea of the Perfect Man would thus be understood as one who has complete spiritual or gnostic understanding, as is indicated in the title of the influential classic book on the topic by the later follower of Ibn 'Arabi, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1424): *The Man with Complete Understanding of First Things and Last Things*.¹⁰ Thus knowledge is key. Another view, represented by the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'i and his following is that the Imam may 'occupy' a human form, but cannot be considered human therefore. Rather for the Shaykhiyya, the Perfect Man is the one who recognizes the Imam. As such, the classic example of the Perfect Man is Salmān the Persian, not the Imam. It seems that this doctrine is a direct result and pillar of the unrelenting negative theology – apophaticism – taught by Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'i.

The Shaykhiyya

The intense apophaticism of this school renders the vocable 'God' nearly empty of content, while the anthropology is simultaneously elevated to the theomorphic: man is now in the shape of the divine manifestation. The result is both a divinized humanism and a humanized theology: all knowledge is conditioned by and for the human 'form' and its faculties. Such an apperception is not new, especially in Islamic intellectual culture. Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsā'i has been referred to in a recent substantial study as the greatest Muslim philosopher after Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640).¹¹ Indeed, Shaykh Ahmad commented on and criticized the dense and difficult philosophical writings of the latter and his intellectual and spiritual progeny. The apple of discord may be described precisely with reference to theology. For Shaykh Ahmad, the earlier Shi'i philosophers had erred grievously in the way in which they wrote and thought about God. His views may be summarized from a commentary on a celebrated hadith found in his *Commentary on the Most Great Tablet of Visitation (Shāḥr ziyārat al-jāmi'a al-kubrā)*, which serves to affirm the absolute transcendence (*tanzih*) of God and also points to the fundamental mystery of being, which, according to Henry Corbin, goes beyond the ontological theories of the highly influential *Ishrāqī* tradition.¹²

Shaykhi ontology provides for the metaphysical pre-existence of the Imams. Here, as in Isma'ili metaphysics, God is quite outside and beyond

whatever may be considered under the category of Being (*wujūd*). “Zayd” stands by virtue of the appearance in him of the ‘quality’ of standing. But this quality appears in Zayd only as a result of the divine command, which brings together the two aspects (i.e. Zayd and standing) of the ‘being event’ known together as ‘stander’ (*qā’im*). Without this command the two would remain separate, and both elements would remain unknown. This command (*amr*) comprises two aspects. One is completely transcendent (i.e. the active command, *amr fi’li*), which proceeds from the unknowable God. The other aspect is a passive one (i.e. the passive command, *amr maf’ūli*), which is this same imperative as activated in the first creatures (i.e. the Imams), and appears in the world through the bearer of the divine quality, analogous to Zayd as “stander” (*qā’im*). The *amr maf’ūli* is also designated by the Shaykhis as the *Nūr al-anwār*, the *Ḥaqīqat muḥ ammadiyya*, or the ‘pleroma’ of the 12 Imams. The *amr maf’ūli*, as issuing from the *amr fi’li* or the unknowable divine Essence, is therefore a ‘secret veiled in a secret’. The difference between the Shaykhis and, for example the *Ishrāqīs*, is that the latter identify the *Nūr al-anwār* directly with God.¹³ The Shaykhi theory would appear to accomplish two distinct but related tasks: the first is an obvious exaltation of the station of the Imams to the degree of bringing down upon their teaching the condemnatory accusation of ‘extremism’ (*ghuluww*);¹⁴ the second is a virtual removal from the human mind of any positive content for the word ‘God’. It is difficult to determine which of the two results, if either, is pre-eminent. This first level of discourse has as its aim the establishment of God’s utter transcendence, which as has been seen, can only be spoken of by reference to Being (but for that, this transcendence is not diminished). The Imams, as representatives of this transcendence, are the focus for the believer, but the believer must never lose sight of the unseeable “point” beyond the Imams. This is why, says Shaykh Ahmad, it is towards the inaccessible divine Essence man is constantly turning even though he will never be able to actually find It. Nonetheless, he continues to search for It even though It remains forever inaccessible to him.¹⁵

The primordial existence that is brought into being by the divine passive command (i.e. the *amr maf’ūli*) is the primordial Light of Lights, also referred to as the Light of Fourteen Flames, the ontic reality of the 14 members of the People of the House (*ahl al-bayt*) who are recognized as bearers and indeed embodiments of divine authority and guardianship (*walāya*): the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima and the 12 Imams, beginning with ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) and ending with the hidden Imam Mahdi, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (disappeared 874). This ‘pleroma’ forms one sole primordial essence as the same Light from which proceeds the light of the angelic Intellects or the ‘Angels of the Veil’, and the light from which the prophets were created. The light which constitutes the being of the prophets is that from which the faithful believers have also been created.¹⁶ Corbin’s translation of an important passage by Shaykh Ahmad summarizes this idea:

Aucune réalité n’est créée d’une essence qui lui soit inférieure. Toute réalité inférieure est créée de l’irradiation d’une réalité qui lui est supérieure. Une réalité supérieure, c’est par exemple, le soleil lui-même; la réalité inférieure,

c'est son irradiation illuminant la surface de la Terre. Chaque réalité existe en son sens vrai (*ḥaqīqat*) au rang qui lui est propre, est par rapport à ce qui est au-dessous d'elle; elle est symbole et figure (*majāz*), effet opéré, par rapport à ce qui est au-dessus d'elle.¹⁷

No reality is created from the irradiation of an essence that is inferior to it. Each inferior reality is created from another reality that is superior to it. A superior reality is, for example, the sun itself; an inferior reality, is its light shed on the surface of the Earth. Each reality exists in its own true sense (*ḥaqīqat*) at a level that is proper to it and in relation to that which is below it. It is therefore in actuality a symbol and a figure (*majāz*), of that which is above it.

The doctrine of the Perfect Shi'i was inseparable from Shaykhi apophatic theology and implied a virtual deification of the 14 Pure Ones of orthodoxy: Muhammad, Fatima, 'Ali, Hasan, Husayn and the remaining Imams of Twelver Shi'ism. This statement must be tempered by reference to the innumerable assertions of the servitude of Muhammad and the Imams to the essence of God. It would be misleading in the extreme to suggest that this 'Imam-apotheosis' represents incarnationism. God here is eternally unknowable (rather than remote) and makes His will known through various stages. Eternally crucial to this process is the twofold institution of Prophethood/Imamate, and whenever any positive statement about divinity is made, its proper reference is to this institution which goes by the technical name Guardianship (*walāya*). The Prophet and Imams are a different order of creation as mediators between God and Man. They are separated from the divine essence by a line of apparently infinite tensile strength and flexibility. In Corbin's terms they represent the *Deus Revelatus*: the Revealed God, as complementary to and distinct from the *Deus Absconditus*, which is referred to as the 'unknowable essence' and by other terms, and for which a convenient but not utterly coterminous word in Arabic is *allāh*.¹⁸

The Perfect Shi'i acts as mediator between the Imams (represented by the 12th, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan) and Man. Therefore when the Bab claimed to have received the *Tafsīr sūrat Yūsuf* from the Imam, and even though he did not explicitly claim for himself the title of Perfect Shi'i, those Shaykhis – or better Kashfīs – were his first readers were already convinced of the necessity for such a link as *bāb* ('gate'), even if they were not agreed as to who was best qualified to act as such, or less important what the exact name for such a link should be. E. G. Browne states the importance of the doctrine of the Perfect Shi'i for the success of Babism in its early stages:

He [the Bab] did not invent this term [*bāb*], nor was he even the first to revive it, for it was used in the same sense by ash-Shalmaghānī, a Messiah of the 10th cent. of our era, and by others. So far as recent times are concerned, however, it was the Shaykhī school ... which revived the idea that among the faithful followers of the Twelfth Imam there must always exist one, whom they entitled *Shī'a-i-Kāmil* [*sic*] ... 'the Perfect Shī'ite', who was in direct spiritual communication with him. Neither Shaykh Ahmad nor his successor Sayyid Kāzīm ... made use of the title 'Bāb', but their conception of 'the Perfect Shī'ite' was practically identical with the idea connoted by that title. On the death of Sayyid Kāzīm his followers were naturally impelled by their doctrine concerning 'the Perfect Shī'ite' to seek his successor.¹⁹

What Browne does not emphasize here is that it is important to appreciate one of the more significant results of Shaykhi theology in order to understand the eventual claim made by the Bab. The pleroma of the Prophet, Fatima and the Imams, had in one sense replaced God (*Deus Absconditus*) for Shaykh Ahmad. As a result, the hierarchy of God, Prophet, Imam, Bab, Shi'i was sounded in a higher register or 'octave', each element being 'promoted' as it were, to fill the gap produced by the distinctively relentless Shaykhi view of divine transcendence (*tanzih*). As a result, a claim to be the *bāb* of the Imam, may be seen as functionally identical to a claim to *imāma* as usually understood.

The study of the Shaykhiyya seems to be pursued by two distinct types of humanist. In the first place there are those who wish to see in the Shaykhi vaunting or deifying of the Imam a concomitant vaunting and elevation of the human being as such. While the Imam is beyond species as such (cf. Boehme's assertion that Adam was neither male nor female) and therefore unqualifiable in every way by the designation 'Perfect Man', there is an unmistakable concomitant elevation of the 'human' whose vocation is seeker and pursuer of that which is higher, even if that which is higher is relatively (and therefore paradoxically) non-existent (cf. Boehme's statement quoted at the beginning). In this instance it is Salman the Persian (*Salmān Fārisī*) who is the Perfect Man, perfection being expressed in the act of correctly recognizing that which was superior to himself, namely his discovery/recognition of the Prophet Muhammad. The main problem facing the strictly humanist reading (in what might be considered a Western or European sense) of the Shaykhiyya is bound up with an attendant hierarchical vision of the cosmos. One of the achievements of European humanism was the eventual disestablishment of the medieval metaphysical hierarchy sometimes referred to as the Great Chain of Being. This hierarchy served a number of sacerdotal and epistemic purposes, from providing a logical and structural basis for the authority of the Church, to an understanding of the way in which the universe came to be. Thus Copernicus's theorizing of the heliocentric model (and most importantly, the abandonment of the geocentric model) augurs eloquently for the eventual tenor and form of European/Western humanism which will come to be emblemized in the centreless universe of the post-Einstein age. Islamicate humanism has a much different cultural context and genesis, largely because in Islamic culture there was never a serious divide between what we now call faith and reason, science and religion. For example, the Qur'an itself is full of many observations on how God causes the natural world to develop. Rather than having been taken as proof that there is no need of God (cf. 19th-century scientism) these processes and developments are generally taken as signs of God's overwhelming 'miraculous' power, signs that should be studied as deeply as possible. How else could such polymaths as Avicenna, al-Biruni, al-Ghazzali and thousands of other less well-known daughters and sons of Islamic culture practice their various 'natural sciences' and not been challenged as far as their faith was concerned? On the contrary, they emerge as heroes of Islamic faith, rather than the opposite.²⁰

The distinguishing features of the Shaykhi school, as is the case with most Muslim religious groups, are related to the manner in which spiritual authority is to be defined and mediated. The active controversy carried

on by the partisans of the Usulis and the Akhbaris is a case in point. The debate was based on the question of whether *ijtihad*, 'exerting individual effort to form an opinion', rather than wholesale acceptance of the guidance contained in the preserved statements of the Prophet and the Imams (pl. *akhbār*), was the best way to resolve the questions of religion, which would of course include questions of law. Finally, the Usulis, those in favour of *ijtihad*, won the day and for the past two hundred years this basic attitude toward the written sources of the Islamic religion has held sway over most of the Shi'i world.²¹ Shaykh Ahmad had grown up in one of the few bastions of Akhbari Shi'ism, and his synthesis may be seen, in part, as an elaboration of this method. Through propounding a doctrine of the *Nāṭiq Wāḥid* (a single authoritative voice) and the Perfect Shi'i, perhaps an echo of the Sufi idea of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), Shaykh Ahmad was able, at least in theory, to circumvent the restrictions imposed by other methods and approaches and arrive at what he considered a much less fettered and more independent position vis-à-vis the reinterpretation of the raw material of the Islamic religion – the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet and the teachings of the Imams which were preserved in the Traditions (*akhbār*). It may be that Shaykh Ahmad's early exposure to the ideas of the Dhahabi Sufi order is in part responsible for his elaboration of the idea of the Perfect Shi'i.²²

Much work remains to be done on the Sufism of Shaykh Ahmad. But, an example of such intellectual freedom is exemplified in Shaykh Ahmad's response to those who charged him with relying upon strange and unsound hadiths to support of his ideas. Shaykh Ahmad serenely responded that he could distinguish a sound hadith from a weak one through its 'fragrance'.²³ Such a response is, in fact, an adamant critique of *taqlid* which here is not merely 'imitation' but 'blind imitation' in matters religious. So vehement was his repudiation of *taqlid* that some have seen him as a precociously modern (not to say post-modern) democrat and proponent of secular humanism. But there are alternative characterizations:

Generally speaking, Shaikhism contains a stronger Shi'ite theological 'impetus' and is more purely 'religious' than philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā were. Iqbāl's statement ... that shaikh Aḥmad was an enthusiastic reader of Mullā Ṣadrā's works is based on a misunderstanding: the Shaikhīs studied Mullā Ṣadrā but did not always approve of what he said; in fact, on some points (for example, questions concerning the knowledge of God) they returned to less philosophical and more religious positions ... [341] If the complex theological position of the Shaikhīs could be summed up in a few words I would say that it is based on two points, one deeply religious and the other with rational tendencies ...[and][342] to symbolic explanations (which sometimes go beyond the realistic symbolism of Ṣadrā) to enter into a truly rationalist allegory of the miraculous aspect of traditional theological legends. ... [343] Everything is easily resolved by transposing the historical reality of the facts of revelation onto metahistorical planes (*Muḥammad*, 'Alī, etc. = First Creature): it is here, and not in a humanistic rationalism, that the secret of Shaikhī symbolism lies.²⁴

So, how to understand the rejection of *taqlid* in the 'key' of Shaykhism and what are the implications for such an Islamic humanism? It seems,

on the one hand, that the only truly or perfectly 'human' is the Imam. All others fall short, somehow. As a paradox, such a teaching lends itself well to the mystical and literary tastes of the time and place. Even if Shaykh Ahmad posits something called a Perfect Shi'i, this perfection is clearly predicated upon that Shi'i's ability to recognize the superhuman Imam. But the nature of knowledge and perception, according to not only the masters of the Shaykhi school, but a general Islamicate epistemological premise, is that one perceives and knows only according to what one is, or what is already inside one. For Salman to recognize Muhammad there must have been something of Muhammad already alive inside of him. This principle is found fully endorsed in the Bab's oldest extant work, the *Risālat al-sulūk*, mentioned above (note 18). It is the intellect of the Imam, not of the average believer, which serves as a locus for the manifestation of God. In his advice to a student, Shaykh Ahmad says:

[Y]ou should take [current] philosophical theology (*Hikmat*) and align it with the *Hikmat* of the *People of 'Iṣma*, [namely, the Imams], upon them be peace. Then, the meaning will be sound. If you would make Their words your guide, and become a divinely instructed follower, do not disregard Their teaching by turning to the words of the Philosophers (*ḥukamā'*) and the Theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and the Sufis (*ahl al-taṣawwuf*). Do only what They desire, upon them be peace. It is not as the Sufis and Philosophers say, contrary to what [Fayḍ Kāshānī] would have us believe in his books.²⁵

The exhortation to his questioner is most interesting. Among other things, he tells him that the Sufis, the *Ḥukama* and the Theologians are not proofs (*ḥujjāt*, like the Imams), that they are not his Imams, and that he must imitate the Imams directly.²⁶ Not, however, the way some do through ignorance and error. Rather, his questioner should practise such emulation (*taqlid*) of the Imams with reason, so that he does not blindly follow. If the questioner protests that their words do not conform to reason, Shaykh Ahmad responds:

I say to you, their words are a divine binding reality (*ḥaqq*), and your reason is a divine binding reality (as long as you do not corrupt it with mirky knowledge) and the correcting principles are a divine binding reality because they are all of 'THE DIVINE NATURE UPON WHICH HE FASHIONED MANKIND (*fiṭrat allāh al-latī faṭara al-nās 'alayhā*)' (Q. 30:30). So, I do not want you to practice 'pure *taqlid*' as some vainly imagine it should be practiced. Rather, read Their words as rational indications [of thought and action] through your own powers of understanding, completely detached from the understanding of others. If you understand my words, and act according to my directions you will find that what I tell you is a useful tool for solving abstruse problems. By God, this is my teaching and that which should represent me (literally, 'be my successor – caliph') after I am gone.²⁷

Shaykh Ahmad, as we know, was not the only one preoccupied with the identity of the true believer in divine unity (*al-muwahhid*) during the late 18th and 19th centuries. The Wahhabi threat to Sufism and extremist/*ghuluww*

Shi'ism and philosophy of all kinds was not only a theological issue, but also a matter of life and death in some regions. The ironic development is, however, that in the process of Shaykh Ahmad's argument the Imams become God revealed, taking His place. The real but starkly apophatic God is removed further from contemplation than one might have thought possible, (unless of course one happens to be a classical Isma'ili philosopher).

One of the results of this elevation of the Imams, an elevation that automatically raises Divinity immeasurably higher, is that the answer to the question, 'What does it mean to be human?' becomes in some ways more interesting than it was before. The Imams, according to Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i – and Isma'ili thought – are neither human nor divine, but a different order of being, a separate and distinct species. The Perfect Man, in Shaykhi thought is not the Prophet, contrary to a traditional Sufi teaching rooted in the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi;²⁸ nor is the idea of the Perfect Man represented by the Prophet and the Imams, contrary to the common Twelver Shi'i adaptation of this doctrine.

Rather, for Shaykh Ahmad, the Perfect Man is the one who recognizes the spiritual and ontological dignity of these figures. It is Salman – not Muhammad – who represents the prototype here.²⁹ Shaykh Ahmad was held in high esteem by the clerical and the political communities of Iran: Fath 'Ali Shāh tried unsuccessfully to persuade him to live in Tehran nearer the court. And, the story is told of how the governor of Kermanshah felt so honoured by Shaykh Ahmad's decision to visit his city that he travelled several miles out from Kermanshah for the sole purpose of greeting the famous scholar and escorting him into town. It may be that Shaykh Ahmad was so warmly welcomed by the political and religious leaders of Iran because his views offered a rationally sustainable mystical interpretation of standard twelver Shi'ism which served as a powerful alternative to what was becoming a disturbing interest in more purely Sufi doctrine, as propagated by the leaders of, for example, the Ni'matullahi order who in turn had very cordial relations with the Imams of the Qāsimī-Shāhi Nizārī Isma'ili community.³⁰ Shaykh Ahmad, as an accomplished and renowned Twelver *mujtahid* would have served as an 'orthodox' guarantor for the type of profoundly mystical religion so at home and traditionally celebrated in Iran, where mysticism is as much an expression of the human as it is of the divine.

Suggested citation

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Endnotes

1. Mullā Muḥammad Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1680), *Kalimāt-i Maknūna min 'ulūm ahl al-hikma wa'l-ma'rifa*, Tehran, 1963, 125: *al-ṣūrat al-insāniyya akbar ḥujjat Allāh 'alā khalqihī*: 'The human form is the greatest proof of God to His creation'.
2. The first example which comes to mind is Mohammed Arkoun, *Contribution à l'étude de l'humanisme arabe au IVe/Xe siècle: Miskawayh (320/325–421)=(932/936–1030), philosophe et historien*, Paris: Vrin, 1970.
3. 'Wenn ich betrachte, was Gott ist, so sage ich: Er ist das Eine gegen der Kreatur, als ein ewig Nichts; er hat weder Grund, Anfang noch Staette; und besitzt nicht, als nur sich selber: er ist der Wille des Ungrundes, er ist in sich selber nur Eines: er bedarf keinen Raum noch Ort: er gebaeret von Ewigkeit in Ewigkeit sich selber in sich: er ist keinem Dinge gleich oder aehnlich, und hat keinen sonderlichen Ort, da er wohne: die ewige Weisheit oder Verstand ist seine Wohne: er ist der Wille der Weisheit, die Weisheit ist seine Offenbarung.' (*Jakob Böhme's Sämmtliche Werke*, 7 vols., herausgegeben von K. W. Schiebler, Leipzig, 1832–60, bd. 5: *Mysterium Magnum*, p. 7, translation is that found in N. A. Berdayev (Berdiaev), 'Studies Concerning Jacob Boehme Etude I, The Teaching about the Ungrund and Freedom' a translation by Fr. S. Janos (2002) of the original Russian article 'IZ ETIUODOV O YA. BEME. ETIUD I. UCHENIE OB UNGRUND'E I SVOBODE', *Journal Put'*, No. 20 (Feb. 1930): 47–79, accessed 25 July 2009 at: http://www.berdayev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1930_349.html#1-- .
4. On this phenomenon, see M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 'Une absence remplie de présences. Herméneutiques de l'occultation chez les Shaykhiyya (Aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine VII)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 64(1), 2001, 1–18. See also the same author's 'Only the man of God is human: theology and mystical anthropology according to early Imami exegesis (aspects of Twelver Imamology IV)' in *Shi'ism*, ed. E. Kohlberg, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.
5. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitāb-i mustaṭāb-i ṭiqān*. Cairo, 1934, pp. 73–4, the English is from Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (trans.), *The Kitāb-i-ṭiqān: The Book of Certitude Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette, IL, 1970, pp. 98–9.
6. As found in a ms. copy of a work by Sayyid 'Ali Muḥammad Shīrāzī, 'Tafsīr sūrat al-baqara', Browne Collection, F10, Cambridge University Library, f.92r. I have been unable to find this *khuṭba* elsewhere. The literature of Imamology, however, is full of such pronouncements underlining the absolute unknowableness of God.
7. See the valuable discussion of this in M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le shīisme originel: aux sources de l'ésotérisme en Islam*, Paris, 1992.
8. 'We are the mysteries of God which have been deposited in human bodies'/'*naḥnu asrār Allāh al-mūda'a fī ḥayākil al-bashariyya*', Kāshānī, *Kalimat-i Maknuna*, 124.
9. Kāshānī, 125, on the authority of the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-ṣādiq (d. 765). The opening words are: *al-ṣūrat al-insāniyya akbar ḥujjat Allāh 'alā khalqihī wa ḥiya kitāb al-ladhī katabahu bi-yadihi wa ḥiya ḥaykal al-ladhī banā;ahu bi-ḥikmatihī wa ḥiya majma'a suwwar al-'ālamīn*. 'The human form is the greatest proof of God to his creation for it is the book which he wrote with his own two hands and it is the temple that he raised through his wisdom as it is the meeting place of all the forms of all the worlds of God'. My translation.
10. *Al-Insān al-kāmil fī ma'rifat al-awākhir wa al-awā'il*. Cairo, 1949.
11. James W Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne – An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
12. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 4 volumes, Paris: Gallimard, 1971–2, vol. 1, 192.
13. See also Landolt, 'The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Suhrawardī', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107(3), 1987.
14. Vahid Rafati, 'The Development of Shaykhī Thought in Shī'ī Islam', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979, 194–6.
15. Corbin, 1:194.
16. Cf. the frequently quoted statement: 'The believers are the rays of the prophets'.
17. Corbin, 1:205. This passage is from Shaykh Ahmad's *Sharḥ al-mashā'ir*.

18. Corbin, 1:300–1.
19. E. G. Browne, 'Bâb, Bâbîs', *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 2, Edinburgh, 1909, 300. It is important to note the [sic] here. If translated literally, it would mean the Perfect Community of Believers (*Shī'a*), and this may indeed turn out to be the correct teaching of the Shaykhis. See Todd Lawson, 'The Bâb's Epistle on the Spiritual Journey to God', *The Bahá'í Faith and the World Religions*, ed. M. Momen, Oxford: George Ronald, 2003, 231–47.
20. This is not to ignore the countless doctrinal battles amongst Muslims that raged around and because of such an energetic and productive life of the mind and of course the famous 'destruction of philosophy' at the pen of this same Ghazali. But such philosophy only 'died' in the Islamic West. It remained very much alive in Iran and Irano Islamicate regions such as the Ottoman and Mughal Empires and their historical issue.
21. On this subject see now Robert Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam: The History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shī'ī School*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2007.
22. As suggested in Rafati, 'The Development of Shaykhī Thought'.
23. Corbin, 4:259.
24. Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'u'llah*, translated by J. M. Marchesi, New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 2003, 340–4.
25. Aḥmad al-Aḥsa'i *Risāla* 174.
26. Aḥmad al-Aḥsa'i *Risāla* 151–2.
27. Aḥmad al-Aḥsa'i *Risāla* 152. For a rich discussion of 'reason as sovereign' and 'reason as vicegerent' in Islamic culture, see John Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
28. For example, Roger Arnaldez, '*al-Insān al-Kāmil*', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014.
29. Cf. M. A. Amir-Moezzi, 'Aspects de l'Imamologie Duodécimaine I: Rémarques sur la Divinité de l'Imām', *Studia Iranica* 25 (1996) 193–216.
30. See Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990) 502–7 and references for a discussion of the dynamics of this relationship and insights into the religious views of Faṭḥ 'Alī Shāh himself. See Aḥmad al-Aḥsā'ī, *Risāla fī kayfiya al-sulūk ilā Allāh* (Beirut: 1414/1993) for distinctive interpretations of standard Sufi practices and topics such as *dhikr*, *ṣuḥba*, etc.