

## The ‘Irfan of the Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (a)’

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All of the major branches of Islamic mysticism, ‘irfān, refer to Imam ‘Ali (‘a) as a major source for their teachings and practices. Hence, we begin with a review of how the mystics viewed Imam ‘Ali (‘a). After this we consider some controversies about the nature of ‘irfān and its relationship to Sufism, for the terms have been used in different ways. Then we turn to the sources on the basis of which claims may be defended about the ‘irfān of Imam ‘Ali (‘a). The conclusion is that the ‘irfān of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) may be characterized by the following features: (1) ‘irfān consists of both knowledge by presence and conceptual knowledge of God. The conceptual knowledge may be divided into theoretical and practical knowledge as reflections upon the experiential knowledge of God and the way of achieving and deepening it; (2) the way to ‘irfān is the path from the outward to the inward, from zāhir to bāṭin; (3) Imam ‘Alī (‘a) is a fully realized human being who has achieved this knowledge at its most profound level, and who serves as a guide in this quest for those who seek God; (4) the knowledge possessed by the Imam makes him a place for the manifestation of the divine Names and Attributes; (5) the way requires God-wariness (taqwā), renunciation of the world, setting one’s sights on the ultimate goal, worship, obedience, the acquisition of virtue, and self-knowledge; through the remembrance (dhikr) and contemplation (fikr) of God one polishes the heart and sets out on the inner journey; (6) the way is perilous. Misunderstandings occur when one learns of truths beyond one’s capacity; (7) different people are capable of various degrees of knowledge.

**Keywords:** ‘irfān, Sufism, Imam ‘Ali (‘a), spiritual path, theoretical mysticism, practical mysticism, remembrance of God, contemplation of God.

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## Introduction

In order to understand the *'irfān* of Imam 'Alī (a), we have to know what *'irfān* is, and how it is related to Imam 'Alī (a). I assume that there is no need to introduce Imam 'Alī (a), although a few brief words about him may help to highlight the aspects of his personality that are relevant to the discussion of *'irfān*. *'Irfān* is knowledge, but it is used in the sense of a special esoteric knowledge (*ma'rifah*) of God and the way toward him, in some ways akin to the Greek concept of gnosis. The knowledge sought by those who follow the way of *'irfān* is ultimately knowledge of God. The term *'irfān* is also used for the path that leads to this knowledge, as well as the theoretical speculation on theological topics based on the knowledge gained by those who have advanced on the path. Sometimes the term *Sufism* (*taṣawwuf*) is used in a manner synonymous to *'irfān*.

There are many different strands of thought in Islam about the personality of Imam 'Alī (a), and about *'irfān*. I will allude to some of the controversies, but by no means all of them, to the extent necessary for a general overview. Although these topics have frequently been the cause of divisiveness among Muslims, I believe that they may also serve to bring Muslims of different schools of thought together; and one of the aims of my discussion is to explore how. However, the account I offer is not a neutral one. The views presented reflect a specific tradition of thought that is at once Shi'ite, philosophical, and *'irfānī*, although I will begin by considering some examples of how Imam 'Alī (a) was viewed by Sufis who, with regard to jurisprudence, were Sunni.

## Imam 'Ali

Regardless whether they are Sunni or Shi'ite, Muslims revere and love Imam 'Alī as the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad (s). Sunnis regard him as the fourth of the rightly guided caliphs (*al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn*); the Shi'ah consider him the first of the immaculate Imams (*al-a'immaḥ al-ṭāhirīn*); and the Sufis of all the major orders trace their chains of initiation to him. According to the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century Sufi author of the first Persian text on Sufism, 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān Hujwārī:

His renown and rank in this Path (of Sufism) were very high. He explained the principles (*uṣūl*) of Divine truth with exceeding subtlety, so that Junayd said: "Alī is our Shaykh as regards the principles and as regards the endurance of affliction," i.e. in the theory and practice of Sufism; for Sufis call the theory of this Path "principles" (*uṣūl*), and its practice consists entirely in the endurance of affliction.... This question is connected with the severance of the heart from all things

save God, who keeps His servants in whatever state He willeth.... 'Alī is a model for the Sufis in respect to the truths of outward expressions and the subtleties of inward meanings, the stripping of one's self of all property either of this world or of the next, and consideration of the Divine providence. (Hujwīrī 1911, 74)

Later in this text, when Hujwīrī seeks to explain knowledge of God (*ma'rifat Allāh*, which Nicholson translates as *gnosis*), he again mentions Imam 'Alī:

When the Commander of the Faithful, 'Alī, was asked concerning gnosis, he said: "I know God by God, and I know that which is not God by the light of God" (Hujwīrī 1911, 269).

Imam 'Alī is also lavishly praised by the great 6<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet 'Aṭṭār, who, after praising the virtues of the first three caliphs, says:

Were there an Imam from East to West it would be the Commander of the Faithful Ḥaidar.<sup>2</sup> With the thrust of his lance he conquered this present world; the tale of the three loaves passed beyond the other world. He was initiated in the mysteries of giving; and seventeen verses of the Qur'ān are devoted to the three loaves.<sup>3</sup> Those three round loaves were like the discs of the moon and sun, and therefore like the moon and the sun he entertains the two worlds at his table for all eternity. If thou be continually showered with arrows it is sufficient to know that 'the love of 'Alī is a shield.' The Prophet said to him: 'O light of my eyes, we were both created from one light.' Since 'Alī is of one light with the Prophet they are as one person with no trace of duality. As gate to the city of knowledge his is with good reason the gatekeeper of Paradise.<sup>4</sup> So absolutely was he given over to poverty

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2. I.e. the Lion, one of the Titles of 'Alī. [Boyle's note.]

3. The story is told in Baiḍāwī's commentary on Sūra XXXVI. 8-10: 'It is related that Hasan and Hosein, Mohammed's grandchildren, on a certain time being both sick, the prophet among others, visited them, and they wished Ali to make some vow to God for the recovery of his sons: whereupon Ali, and Fātema, and Fidda, their maid-servant, vowed a fast of three days in case they did well; as it happened they did. This vow was performed with so great strictness, that the first day, having no provisions in the house, Ali was obliged to borrow three measures of barley of one Simeon, a Jew, of Khaibar, one measure of which Fātema ground the same day, and baked five cakes of the meal, and they were set before them to break their fast with after sunset: but a poor man coming to them, they gave all their bread to him, and passed the night without tasting anything except water. The next day Fātema made another measure into bread, for the same purpose; but an orphan begging some food, they chose to let him have it, and passed that night as the first; and the third day they likewise gave their whole provision to a famished captive. Upon this occasion Gabriel descended with the chapter before us, and told Mohammed that God congratulated him on the virtues of his family.' See Sale, pp. 432-3, note x. [Boyle's note.]

4. A reference to the words of the Prophet: 'I am the city of knowledge, and 'Alī is its gate.' See *Mathnavī* VII. 216. [Boyle's note.]

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that he was irrevocably divorced from gold and silver. Though silver and gold were highly valued, they were as a calf to the people of ‘Alī.<sup>5</sup> How should a calf ever have dared to match itself against a lion such as he? It is related that he had a coat of armour of which the front and the back were simply a window. If his back was as exposed as his face it was because he depended upon the Prophet as his armour. He said once: ‘Though I should be slain, none shall see my back on the battlefield.’ If thou become the dust beneath his feet, this is an excellent place of refuge, for he is both the ‘Father of the Handsome One’<sup>6</sup> and the ‘Father of Dust’.<sup>7</sup> He said: ‘If by God’s command I were set up in a pulpit and given the office of judge, I should always judge between the peoples of the world in accordance with the Four Books.’<sup>8</sup> Whatever he said he uttered out of the sea of certainty. One day he opened his mouth and said: “‘If the covering were uncovered” assisted me, otherwise how could I worship Him without seeing Him?’ Hurrah for that eye, that knowledge and those words! Hurrah for the Sun of the Law, that swelling sea! The breath of the Lion of God penetrated to China; because of his knowledge the musk-deer produced the musk in its navel. Therefore it is that they say: ‘If thou art just and pious, go from Yathrib to China in they search for knowledge.’ Leo is the navel of the house of the sun, hence the pure musk in the breath of the musk-deer. But I am wrong. I speak not of the musk of Cathay, but of that produced by the Lion of God. Were his knowledge to take the form of a sea, the Black Sea would be but a single drop in it. He could not endure to be in debt; therefore he hired himself to a Jew. Someone said to him: ‘Why hast thou done this?’ He was angry and wielding his tongue like a sword he answered: ‘I had rather remove rocks from mountain-tops than be in the debt of men. They say to me: “It is shameful to work for one’s lining.” But I say: “it is shameful to stoop so low as to beg.”’ (‘Aṭṭār 1976, 25-27)

Some of the most famous Sufi poetry in praise of Imam ‘Alī, however, is by Mawlavī Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī. At the end of the first *daftar* of the *Mathnawī*, over the course of almost three hundred couplets, Rūmī repeatedly returns to the virtues of Imam ‘Alī. There is too much to be directly quoted here, so I’ll just mention some of the major themes. The section on ‘Alī begins with the words:

شیر حق را دان مظهر از دغل      از علی آموز اخلاص عمل

From ‘Alī learn purity (or sincerity) of action

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5. A reference to the Golden Calf (Koran, xx. 90), and also to the exclamation of ‘Alī upon beholding the riches of the public treasury at Basra: ‘O yellow metal, O white metal, seduce others, not me.’ See Mas‘ūdī, IV. 336. [Boyle’s note.]

6. Abu ‘l-Ḥasan, i.e. Father of Ḥasan. [Boyle’s note.]

7. Abū al-Turāb, the Father of Dust, a title allegedly given to ‘Alī by the Prophet.

8. The four books are the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, and the Qur’an.

Know that the Lion of Truth was purified of deceit. (Mathnawī, I:3719)

Rūmī has 'Alī (a) describe his servitude to God as so complete that he was free from the demands of the passions: "I have removed the baggage of self out of the way; I have deemed what is other than Ḥaqq to be nothing" (Mathnawī, I:3789). He was thus able to make himself into a complete instrument of God (Mathnawī, I:3788).

Imam 'Alī (a) was not only recognized by Sufis in poetry and in their *chains* of authorization (*silsilah*), he was also recognized as a model of virtue by the brotherhoods associated with various crafts that emphasized *futuwwat* (chivalry). The term *futuwwat* derives from *fatā*, a young man, and was associated with selflessness, courage, generosity, and honor. Of 'Alī it is narrated that the angels cried:

لافتى الا على لا سيف الا ذوالفقار

There is no youth (hero) but 'Alī; there is no sword but Dhū al-Faqār.

One who seeks to emulate 'Alī with regard to *futuwwat* should manifest valor and self-sacrifice in the path of God and His friends. He should consider his wealth, reputation, and even his very life as insignificant. For the Sufis or '*urafā*', the two edges of the sword of 'Alī are *dhikr* and *fikr*, remembrance and contemplation of God.

## 'Irfān

Although '*irfān*' is sometimes translated as *gnosis*, I would caution against confusion with ideas associated with early Christian Gnosticism. Christian Gnosticism is believed to have its origins in the second century. While those who are called Gnostics did not constitute a cohesive sect, scholars use the term for those who believed that matter is evil and opposed to spirit, that the Creator of the material world is an evil demiurge, and that Christ (a) came to give the elect the *gnosis* needed to escape the bondage of material existence. Sometimes the term is used with a broader, more inclusive meaning, but to avoid misunderstandings, it is better to avoid it in discussions of Islam.

Among Muslims, the question is often raised of the relationship between '*irfān*' and Sufism. In an article on this topic,<sup>9</sup> Ayatollah

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9. See Misbah Yazdi (2006).

Misbah Yazdi directly addresses the question of whether *'irfān* or *taṣawwuf* are to be regarded as heretical innovations, permissible innovations, or rather as the very kernel of Islam. The view he defends in the article is that *'irfān* or *taṣawwuf* is

the kernel and spirit of it [Islam] which comes from the Qur'an and prophetic *sunnah*, just as the other parts of Islam. It is not that it was adapted from other schools of thought and trends, and the aspects common to gnosis in Islam and other religions is no reason to hold that Islamic gnosis was derived from them, just as the similarities between the religious law (*sharī'ah*) of Islam and the heavenly religious laws of the previous religions does not mean that the former was derived from the latter. We approve of the last response to the question, and we add that the assertion of the originality of Islamic gnosis is not to condone whatever has been called gnosis or sufism in Islam. (Misbah Yazdi 2006)

We might elaborate this idea somewhat differently: The ideas and practices that have come to be associated with Sufism (or *'irfān*) over the course of the centuries are rich and varied. Among them, there are some that should be rejected as heretical, some that may be considered as permissible innovations, in accordance with Qur'an 57:27 ﴿“And as for monasticism, they invented it themselves; we did not prescribe it for them, except for seeking the pleasure of Allah.”﴾ And, finally, some of these ideas and practices have been present in Islam from its origins and constitute its kernel and spirit. Likewise, with regard to the original elements of *'irfān* in Islam, some will be developed for the first time by Muslims; some will be found in common with other religions; and some might even be said to be reaffirmed by Islam while also found in Jewish or Christian traditions. For example, the idea of complete obedience to God was taught by Judaism and Christianity and reaffirmed by Islam, and this complete obedience is one of the elements of practical *'irfān*.

*'Irfān* means knowledge, and knowledge can be of various types. The Muslim philosophers have divided knowledge into *al-'ilm al-ḥuḍūrī* (knowledge by presence) and *al-'ilm al-ḥuṣūlī* (acquired knowledge). Knowledge by presence is what is directly known through one's experience of the object while *al-'ilm al-ḥuṣūlī* is representational or conceptual knowledge. There are philosophical debates among the Muslim philosophers about how exactly to understand the difference between these two sorts of knowledge; for example, Ibn Sīnā and Suhrawardī had different views about what could be the object of knowledge by presence. The difference is often illustrated by the difference between knowing that sugar is sweet and knowledge through tasting the sweetness of the sugar. We have

knowledge by presence when we taste the sugar. In tasting we know the sweetness. Even if one had never tasted sugar, it could still be known from reports that sugar is sweet, but this would only be a theoretical or conceptual knowledge.

Given the difference between knowledge by presence and conceptual knowledge, we may ask: which of these sorts of knowledge is *'irfān*? The answer is: both! The *'ārif* (literally, *knower*) is one who achieves direct presentational knowledge of God. The literature through which the *'ārif* attempts to communicate to others the path to such knowledge and its aim conveys conceptual knowledge. The term *'irfān* is used both for the immediate knowledge by presence of God, and for the conceptual knowledge pertaining to what is uncovered by the *'ārif*. The term *'irfān* is thus used ambiguously for the direct experiential knowledge of the *'urafā*, and for the theories they developed about how to acquire this knowledge and its theological significance.

Wisdom (*ḥikmat*) is customarily divided into theoretical wisdom (*al-ḥikmat al-naẓariyya*) and practical wisdom (*al-ḥikmat al-'amaliyya*). Sometimes the term *ḥikmat* is also used for philosophy. Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophical view is called *al-ḥikmat al-muta'āliyah*, transcendental wisdom. In this view, elements of philosophy and *'irfān* have been brought into harmony. Like *ḥikmat*, *'irfān* is also customarily divided into theoretical *'irfān* and practical *'irfān*. Sometimes the term *'irfān* is used for theoretical *'irfān*, and Sufism, or *taṣawwuf*, is used for practical *'irfān*. In Qom, if one says that one is studying *'irfān* with a professor, it is generally assumed that what is meant is *theoretical 'irfān*, usually meaning the Sufi theory developed by Ibn 'Arabī and those who subsequently developed his ideas. Although Ibn 'Arabī's views may constitute the most famous form of Sufi theory, there are many others. All of these views together are examined and debated by the students of *al-'irfān al-naẓarī*.

*Al-'Irfān al-'amalī*, or practical Sufism, is often called *sayr wa sulūk*, spiritual wayfaring. It is also called *faqr* or poverty. What is meant here is not being without sufficient money, but realizing one's complete neediness before God. One who travels the path toward God is sometimes called a *faqīr*, a poor person, or a *sālik*, a wayfarer. The way that is followed is called the *ṭarīqat*, and this term is also used for the various Sufi orders. As a term of honor, one who has advanced on the spiritual path is called an *'ārif*, but authors who have written authoritatively on *'irfān* are also called *'urafā*'. Today, the terms *Sufi*, *faqīr*, and, less frequently, *darvīsh* are usually reserved for those who have been initiated into any of the various Sufi orders, while *sālik* is

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applied more generally.

*ʿIrfān* has various stages ranging from the elementary to the most profound. Practical *ʿirfān* or *taṣawwuf* is the way by which a person moves from the superficial to the profound, from the exoteric to the esoteric, from the exterior to the interior, from *ẓāhir* to *bāṭin*. Sufis have compared this movement to the polishing of a mirror. The heart is like a mirror and when it becomes purified of all pollutions and obstructions, it reflects the divine light.<sup>10</sup> So, the pure soul sees God. Hence, when ‘Alī (a) was asked: “O Commander of the Faithful! Do you see the Lord when you devote yourself to worship?” He replied, “Beware! I would not worship a God that I could not see.” He was asked how he could see God, and he replied: “Beware! Eyes cannot see him with a glance; it is rather the hearts that see Him through the realities of faith.”<sup>11</sup>

One whose heart is free of all pollution so that it perfectly reflects divinity acts completely as the instrument of God, so that he becomes a locus of the manifestation of the divine attributes. So, in reading about the life of Imam ‘Alī (a) we find his knowledge a reflection of God’s knowledge, his self-control a reflection of God’s power, his mercy toward his opponents a reflection of God’s mercy on sinners. This point is explained well by a contemporary Muslim author:

According to Islamic mysticism, one's knowledge of God as the most beautiful and perfect being and the source of all good things that one has and successively one's love for God who is love and mercy gets so strong and encompassing that it will occupy all one's heart. At the same time, knowledge of one's weakness and deficiencies in front of God gets so intensive and deep that finally he will feel emptiness and nothingness. As such a person loses his sense of *I-ness* and becomes selfless, he will be identifiable with every type of goodness. From nothingness, one reaches the position of everythingness. He will feel no limitation or restriction. (Heydarpoor 1380/2001)

### Controversies

Among the Shi‘ah there has been an unfortunate history of hostility between some of the scholars of jurisprudence and some of the Sufis

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10. See Schimmel (1994, 45, n. 81) and Arberry (1966, 113), where ‘Aṭṭār reports that Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī used this image. Imam ‘Alī is also reported to have used this image in his *Khuṭbah al-bayān* found in Bursī’s *Mashāriq anwār*, although there is controversy about the authenticity of this sermon. For a translation of the sermon and discussion of the controversy see Shah-Kazemi (2006, 187, 206-7).

11. This narration is found in Kulaynī’s *Uṣūl al-kāfi* and in Shaykh Ṣadūq’s *al-Tawḥīd*. See Amir-Moezzi (1994, 47).



since the time of the Safavids, that is, at least since the seventeenth century. There was also political motivation for the hostility. The Safavid dynasty itself had begun as a Sufi order, and once it had come into power, it looked upon the other orders as potential threats. For their part, some dervishes had become infamous for pretending that they had become so spiritually advanced that they no longer needed to abide by the precepts of the Law or *sharī'at*. This led many of the jurists to view all Sufis with suspicion. Most Sufis, however, have followed the maxim of Ḥaydar Amulī that there can be no *ṭarīqat* without *sharī'at*. Among the '*ulamā*', spiritual wayfaring is usually found among those who are not attached to a specific initiatic Sufi order, but who follow instructions that are similar to those given in the orders for contemplation and the remembrance of God. Imam Khomeini and 'Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī were both revered as '*urafā*' by some, but condemned as Sufis by others, although their renown has muted the condemnations greatly.

One of the sources of this controversy stems from the fact mentioned earlier about knowledge having various levels. Those who are more advanced on the path will have knowledge that cannot be properly understood by those less advanced. This provides a dodge for those who have strayed from the path—they will offer the pretext that they are misunderstood and that their accusers are superficial or at least have not arrived at the necessary depth. Reason should serve as a guide here. Spiritual advancement should not be taken as an excuse for moral failings or twaddle.

The importance of the use of reason is emphasized by Imam 'Alī in the first sermon of *Nahj al-balāghah*, where he states that one of the purposes of the mission of the prophets has been to show them what is hidden in the intellects. Ayatollah Javādī Āmulī explains this by saying that human reason is like a mine into which one must dig in order to extract its treasures, and that one of the purposes of the prophetic mission has been to show us where to dig (Āmulī 1386/2007, 77). In another sermon from *Nahj al-balāghah*, Imam 'Alī says: "The intellects have not been informed of the extent of His attributes, but He has not concealed from them the knowledge they need of Him" (*Nahj al-balāghah*, Sermon 49; Āmulī 1386/2007, 211). Reason is a guide, but it has various levels. Sometimes different names are given to the different levels of the intellect,<sup>12</sup> and the lower

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12. The term '*aql*' is used for the faculty of discursive reason (Plato's *dianoia*) as well as for the faculty of intellectual intuition (*nous*). Sometimes these two aspects of '*aql*' are distinguished and sometimes different terms are used for them.

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levels are mocked by Sufis like Rūmī. The deeper levels of reason will not undermine what is soundly established at the less penetrating levels, even if what is deeper cannot be understood at lesser levels. So, to use Rūmī's analogy, if one uses a stick to discern that there is an obstacle before one, turning on the light will not make the obstacle disappear. To attempt to use the stick to discern the color of the obstacle, however, would be a mistake, and to speak of colors to one whose faculty of perception never surpassed the stick would be pointless, and analogies, such as "red is like heat; blue is like coolness" could be misleading. Hence, there is a need to withhold and divulge knowledge in accordance with rational capacities.

The Commander of the Faithful (a) said: "I have plunged into a secret knowledge; if I revealed it, it would disturb you with a disturbance like that of a long rope hanging in a deep well." And he (a) said, while pointing to his chest: "Here there is much knowledge. If only I could meet one who were able to bear it!"

And Sayyid al-'Ābidīn (a) said: "If Abū Dharr knew what was in the heart of Salmān, he would kill him." And he [Imām 'Alī (a)] said:

I hide the substance of my knowledge

So the ignorant do not see the Truth and go astray.

And in this regard Abū l-Ḥasan [Imām 'Alī] was prior

To Ḥusayn, and to the trustee prior to him, Ḥasan.

If I were to publicize the substance of my knowledge

It would be said that I was of those who worship idols,

And the Muslims would consider it lawful to spill my blood,

They see that what I take to be evil they consider to be good.

(Kāshānī 1386/2007, §2)<sup>13</sup>

There are also serious controversies specifically over the *'irfān* of Imam 'Alī (a). First, there are differences about the *walāyah* of Imam 'Alī (a).<sup>14</sup> At one extreme, there are those who deify the Imam; this and other heretical expressions of belief were explicitly condemned by the Imams themselves as *guluww* (extremism).<sup>15</sup> At the other extreme, there are those who consider the *walāyah* as a relatively ordinary form of divine friendship, and who either deny the Imamate altogether or consider it to be little more than a designation for a social or spiritual status of rather limited authority.

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13. All references to Kāshānī are to the section in which the passage occurs. *Kalimāt-e makhnūnah* is divided into one hundred sections or *kalimāt* (words). The translations are mine.

14. In early Shi'ism *walāyah* is the special and close friendship of the Imam with God and the Prophet (s), and at the same time it signifies that the Imam is the chief (*mawlā*) of the believers. Secondly, it signifies the love of the Shi'ah for the Imam. See Amir-Moezzi (1994, 159).

15. See Amir-Moezzi (1994, 125-31).

It is reported that the Commander of the Faithful (a) said, "Consider me inferior to lordship, then say whatever you are able of my virtues, and the sea will not dry up and the secret of the unseen is unknown and the word of Allah is not described" (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §59).

Among Sufis who followed Sunni *madhāhib* with regard to the exoteric aspects of religion, a similar controversy developed with regard to the status of the *qutb*, and a doctrine of the *al-insān al-kāmil* (perfected human being) was elaborated, most notably by Ibn 'Arabī.<sup>16</sup>

There are a number of other controversies regarding the 'irfān of Imam 'Alī (a), about the nature of his knowledge and how it was obtained and transmitted, and to whom. These questions pertain to the status of the Imam, and also to historical matters. In addition, there are controversies about what later developments are and are not consistent with the 'irfān taught by Imam 'Alī; but a detailed discussion of these controversies would only distract from the texts upon which any notion of the 'irfān of Imam 'Alī (a) must be founded.

### The 'Irfān of Imam 'Alī (a)

There are many sources by which one may become acquainted with the 'irfān of Imam 'Alī (a). For a review of the earliest narrations and their transmission, Modarressi's work is an indispensable guide to serious study. In English, there are narrations that Modarressi refers to as *esoteric* attributed to Imam 'Alī in *Nahj al-balāgha*, in the collection of prayers called *al-Ṣaḥīfah al-'Alawīyyah*, in Amir-Moezzi's *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, and in other standard collections of Shi'ite narrations that are gradually finding their way into English in various compilations of selections from Shaykh Ṣadūq, Kulaynī, Majlisī, and other compilers of narrations. An admirable work introducing the spirituality of Imam 'Alī (a) that includes many of the important esoteric traditions has been written by Reza Shah-Kazemi. I have relied in what follows on my own unpublished translation of Fayḍ Kāshānī's *Kalimāt-e makhnūnah*. One should be cautious about attributing narrations. Historians point out that there are reasons to be suspicious about the narrations collected in even the most well known collections. The selection of narrations offered below does not aim at historical accuracy, but merely to an acquaintance with the sorts of esoteric narrations commonly attributed to Imam 'Alī (a) on the basis of which some very general points may be observed about what we may call his 'irfān.

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16. Further research is needed on the interrelations between Shi'i and Sufi concepts of *walāyah*.

*Irfān* in the sense of knowledge by presence of God cannot be transmitted by words. Words can only help to show the way by giving clues about what to look for, and instructions to sharpen awareness. Often metaphors are used. Because of the ambiguity inherent in metaphors, a certain talent or training is required to understand properly what is taught by them.

It is reported that with regard to those who have wisdom, Imam ‘Alī (a) said:

Knowledge of the realities of affairs pounces upon them, and they touch the spirit of certainty. They find easy what the pleasure seekers find hard. They become familiar with that of which the ignorant are terrified. They have dealings with the world by means of bodies whose spirits are attached to a higher place. They are the stewards of Allah on earth who invite to His religion. Oh! Oh! If only I could see them! (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §98)

The same narration is found in slightly different wording addressed to Kumayl in *Nahj al-balāghah*. Imam ‘Alī (a) tells Kumayl that the earth is never devoid of those who openly or secretly stand up for God with authority. It is knowledge (*‘ilm*) that brings them to true insight (*ḥaqīqah al-baṣīrah*) until they associate with the spirit of certainty (*rūḥ al-yaqīn*). “They are of this world corporeally, while their spirits belong to a superior realm” (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §98; *Nahj al-balāghah*, ḥikmat 147).

An example of how the Commander of the Faithful (a) provided knowledge of God through dialogue and the use of metaphor is given in the following report:

[H]e was asked about the face of the Lord, the Exalted, then he called for fire and wood, and when it was burning he said, “Where is the face of the fire?” The questioner said, “Its face is on every side.” ‘Alī (a) said, “Thusly is this fire arranged and crafted, yet its face is not known, and its Creator is not even like this, “And Allah’s is the East and the West, therefore, wherever you turn, there you find the face of Allah” (2:115); nothing is hidden from our Lord.” (Ṣadūq 1416/1995, 182; Kāshānī 1386/2007, §14)

One of the most beautiful of the narrations that displays the *‘irfān* of Imam ‘Alī is the following conversation alleged to have taken place between him and his devoted disciple Kumayl. It is reported that Kumayl asked Imam ‘Alī (a) about the truth (*ḥaqīqah*).

Then [Imam ‘Alī (a)] said, “What’s it to you, the Truth?” Then Kumayl said, “Am I not one of your confidants?” He (a) said, “Yes,

perhaps that which overflows from me may trickle upon you.” Then Kumayl said, “Would someone like you disappoint one who came to you with a question?!” Then the Commander of the Faithful (a) said, “The Truth is the disclosure of the glories of Majesty without means of allusion.”

Kumayl: Explain more to me about this.

Imām ‘Alī (a): The elimination of the imaginary with the sober consciousness of the known.

Kumayl: Explain more to me about this.

Imām ‘Alī (a): Rending the veil for the conquest of the mystery.

Kumayl: Explain more to me.

Imām ‘Alī (a): The attractiveness of Oneness due to the Attribute of *tawhīd* [Divine Unity].

Kumayl: Explain more to me.

Imām ‘Alī (a): A Light which is luminous from the dawn of eternity and shines on the temples of *tawhīd* which are its effects.

Kumayl: Explain more to me.

Imām ‘Alī (a): Put out the lamp, for morning has broken. (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §11)

There are a number of points to ponder in this narration, and there have been a number of commentaries written on it. Here, in connection with the issue of secrecy we might notice that the conversation with Kumayl was private and the Imam considered Kumayl to have reached a capacity for understanding greater than most of his followers so that he would allow some of what overflowed from him to slake Kumayl’s thirst for knowledge. So, the narration should not be considered a full report of everything that was said in the conversation; rather, it is a schematic outline of the guidance of a disciple in the form of dialogue.

Veils of doubt and uncertainty obscure the ordinary human understanding of divinity, and so we seek the guidance of the Imams, even if we fall short of the capacity of a Kumayl. The Imams are free from such doubts, as it is reported in a narration that the Commander of the Faithful (a) said, “If the veil were removed, my certainty would not be increased” (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §59).

Because of his esoteric knowledge, the Imam is best able to interpret the verses of His book. In *al-Tawhīd*, it is reported that interpreting Qur’an 101:6, 8 (“Then as for him whose scales are heavy/And as for him whose scales are light”), the Commander of the Faithful (a) said, “The good deeds are what is heavy in the scale, and the evil is what is light in the scale” (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §72).

In the book *Baṣā’ir al-darajāt* it is reported that al-Aṣḥāgh ibn Nubātah said, “I was sitting with the Commander of the Faithful (a)

when a man came and said to him, ‘O Commander of the Faithful! What does this [āyah] mean: “And on the heights shall be men who know all by their marks” [Qur’an 7:46]?’ ‘Alī (a) said to him, ‘We are the heights, and we know our helpers by their marks, and we are the heights such that Allah is not known except through knowledge of us, and we are the heights such that we stand there on the day of resurrection between the garden and the fire. No one enters the garden unless he knows us and we know him, and no one enters the fire unless he denies us and we deny him, and this is because if Allah, the blessed and exalted, wanted, He could make Himself known to people, so that they would know Him and come to Him through His gate; however, He made us His gates, His path, His way and the gate of entry to Him”’ (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §81).

As for the practical way by which ‘*irfān*’ is achieved, Fayḍ Kāshānī records the following:

The Commander of the Faithful (a) is said to have spoken these words: “Verily, among the most beloved servants of Allah is the servant whom Allah has assisted against himself, so that he becomes aware of sorrow and puts on the garment of fear. Then the lamp of guidance is ignited in his heart.... He removes the shirt of lust, and empties himself of every endeavor except for one endeavor to which he devotes himself exclusively. Then he takes leave of blindness and dealings with the folk of desire, and he becomes a key to the doors of guidance and a lock against the doors of wickedness. He has seen the way (*ṭarīqah*) and he fares his path. He knows the lighthouse, he cuts off the flood and he clings to the firmest rope and the strongest mountain. He has certainty, as of the shining of the sun.”

In another report the Commander of the Faithful (a) said, “He enlivens his heart and kills his self, until its magnificence becomes fine and its coarseness becomes subtle, a flash full of lightning flashes for him, and the way is illuminated for him and it draws him along the path, it repels him from other doors to the door of health, the abiding realm, his feet are made firm by corporeal calm in a place of security and comfort, by the employment of his heart and its pleasing his Lord.” He (a) also said, “Knowledge is not in the heavens so that it should descend unto you, nor is it below the earth so that it should be brought out of it for you, rather knowledge is a propensity in your hearts.” Train yourselves by the manners of the spiritual people and it will appear to you. Something like this is found in the words of Jesus, peace be upon our Prophet and his folk and on him. (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §99)

It is reported that the Commander of the Faithful (a) said, “Our *ḥadīth* is hard and makes for hardship, is tough and makes for trouble.

So, give the people a little, and increase it for whoever understands, but stop for whoever denies it. Only three can bear it: the cherubim, a commissioned prophet, and a believer whose heart has been tried by Allah for faith” (Kāshānī 1386/2007, §97).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, even with regard to this very brief introduction, it is possible to list the following features as being characteristic of the 'irfān of the Commander of the Faithful (a):

1. *Irfān* consists of both knowledge by presence and conceptual knowledge of God. The conceptual knowledge may be divided into theoretical and practical knowledge as reflections upon the experiential knowledge of God and the way of achieving and deepening it.
2. The way to 'irfān is the path from the outward to the inward, from *zāhir* to *bāḥin*.
3. Imam 'Alī (a) is a fully realized human being who has achieved this knowledge at its most profound level, and who serves as a guide in this quest for those who seek God.
4. The knowledge possessed by the Imam makes him a place for the manifestation of the divine Names and Attributes.
5. The way requires God-wariness (*taqwā*), renunciation of the world, setting one's sights on the ultimate goal, worship, obedience, the acquisition of virtue, and self-knowledge. Through the remembrance (*dhikr*) and contemplation (*fikr*) of God one polishes the heart and sets out on the inner journey.
6. The way is perilous. Misunderstandings occur when one learns of truths beyond one's capacity.
7. Different people are capable of various degrees of knowledge.

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