

An Outcry from the West: Orthodoxy, Religious Education and the Quest for Meaning

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Abstract. This paper examines the reception of the mysticism of Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638 H/1240) among Iranian seminarians from the post-Safavid era up to the present. In various papers, the author has discussed the exposure of Iranian Sufis to the teachings of al-Shaykh al-Akbar, however, an investigation of the ways the people of the seminary (ḥawza) treated him and his theoretical mysticism is still missing. This study is relevant as it sheds light on different aspects of the seminary education system in Iran over the past centuries, including but not limited to the nature of the curriculum, the real weight of mysticism in the traditional education system in the first place, the teaching of Ibn ‘Arabī’s primary texts and the considerable bulk of commentaries and glosses that were written on his writings by those in the seminary. The paper will tackle the reasons why theoretical mysticism, despite its popularity in Iran, has never become fully integrated into the education system of the seminaries and has largely remained marginal; a development that can be best explained by the predominance of orthodoxy in the seminaries with jurist-theologians as its guardians. This also explains why the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī have never been exposed to the female students of seminaries, itself an indication of the male-dominated structure of the ḥawza and its curriculum planning. And finally, since many of these seminarians gained political positions after the revolution of 1979, the author will also study the impact of their learnings in mysticism on contemporary politics.

Keywords: *seminary, religious education, Ibn ‘Arabī, Iran*

INTRODUCTION

In spite of its colossal popularity among Sufis of medieval era; an impact that literally reshaped Iranian Sufism, Ibn ‘Arabī’s teachings in the Shī‘a seminaries is a topic that needs to be investigated. Focusing on modern era, the present writing is an attempt to discuss *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*’s intellectual presence among those seminarians who had mystical taste. There exists ample information about the impact of his Sufism as the primary material that formed *‘irfān nazārī*; a genre of Sufism that found its way to *al-ḥikmat al-muta‘ālīya* of Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 1045-46 H/1636, Mullā Ṣadrā). Ṣadrā’s *ḥikmat* tradition was a synthesis of three currents within the Peripatetic metaphysics of Ibn Sīnā (d. 428-29 H/1037), the illuminationism of al-Suhrawardī (d. 587 H/1191), and the philosophical mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabī, and was active as the mainstream school of philosophy in the post-Safavi era up to our time. One can see the traces of *‘irfān nazārī* in the philosophy of figures such as Seyyed Muḥammad Hossein Qāḍī Ṭabāṭabā‘ī Tabrīzī (d. 1402 H/1981), known as ‘Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā‘ī, and Rūḥullāh Khomeini. However, if Ṭabāṭabā‘ī had a dialogue with Ibn ‘Arabī and was critical of his mysticism in many ways, the latter can be regarded as a true heir to *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*’s legacy.

METHODS

However, before investigating these two figures, suffice it to mention another seminarian, Ayatollah Mīrzā Aḥmad Āshṭīyānī (d. 1395 H/1975), who wrote extensively on concepts such as *wilāya* from Ibn ‘Arabī perspective. In his book *Risālat ul-wilāya* (A Treatise on Wilāya), he discusses the notion of *wilāya* (sainthood, guardianship), its definition and further classifications into *muṭlaqah* and *muqayyadah* (absolute and delimited, respectively) and *‘ām* and *khāṣ* (general and specific, respectively). Āshṭīyānī’s genre of discussion is very much inspired by Muḥammad Riḍā Qumshī‘ī (d. 1306 H/1888), the *ḥakīm* of the early Qajar era and a famous member of the School of Tehran. Qumshī‘ī was a proper *Akbarīan* mystic and a *Ṣadrīan ḥakīm*, who taught *ḥikmat* and *‘irfān* in Isfahan. He moved to Tehran around 1288 H/1871 and started teaching at the madrasa of Ṣadr. His fame, both in Isfahan and Tehran, was in teaching *‘irfān* and especially *Sharḥ-e Fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam* of Qayṣarī.

Ḥasan Ḥasanzādih Āmulī (d. 2021), himself an Akbarīan mystic, narrates a memory from Ṭabāṭabā'ī, in which Ṭabāṭabā'ī says that “in the entire history of Islam, nobody has been able to bring even one line like Ibn ‘Arabī”. Germane to this is another memory from Ṭabāṭabā'ī by the same person, having been quoted in *Hezār o yek kalameh* (One Thousand and One word), where Ṭabāṭabā'ī says that “al-Shaykh al-Akbar, Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī has brought truths and gnosis in al-Fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam (Bezels of Wisdom) [2] in fist, and in al-Futūḥāt ul-Makkiyah (Meccan Revelations) in skirt” (1390 SH/2011) [1]. Which means that Ibn ‘Arabī presents divine knowledge and truths in the concise book of al-Fuṣūṣ in the form of anthologies and abstracts, and elucidates them in his voluminous al-Futūḥāt in a more extensive way.

In Khomeini's mystical writings, including his *Dīwān*, in which poetry is a medium to transmit Sufi themes and meanings, one can see a true heir from among seminarians to the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī. Khomeini wrote extensively on *‘irfān* and metaphysics. Along with *Sharḥ-i du‘āy-i saḥar* (the Commentary on the Dawn Prayer), he wrote other *‘irfānī* texts, such as *Ādāb al-ṣalāt* (the Rituals of Prayer), *Ta‘līqāt ‘alā sharḥ fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam wa miṣbāḥ ul-uns* (the Glosses on the Commentary on *Fuṣūṣ* and the Lamp of Fondness), *Tafsīr-i sūray-i ḥamd* (the Commentary on the Sūrat al-Ḥamd), *Tahzīb-i naḥs* (Self-Refinement), *Jihād-i akbar* (the Greater *Jihād*), *Miṣbāḥ al-hidāya ila-l-khilāfa wa-l-wilāya* (the Lamp of Guidance toward Vicegerency and Guardianship), and *Chihil ḥadīth* (Forty Ḥadīth). However, it was *Ta‘līqah ‘alā sharḥ al-fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam wa miṣbāḥ al-uns* (The Gloss on the Commentary on *al-fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* and *miṣbāḥ al-uns*), on one of the main texts in Akbarīan mysticism that established his name in this field.

This tradition continues in the writings of another seminarian, the abovementioned Ḥasanzādih Āmulī in his book *Ḥikmat ‘iṣmatīyah fī kalimat a-fāṭimīyah* (The Bezel of the Wisdom of Impeccability Exists in the Essence of Fāṭimah). *Al-Fuṣūṣ* is composed of twenty-seven faṣṣ (bezel), starting from faṣṣ-i ḥikmat al-ilāhīyah fī kalamat al-ādamīyah (The Bezel of the Wisdom of Divinity Exists in the Essence of Adam), and ends at faṣṣ-i ḥikmat al-fardīyah fī kalamat al-Muḥammadīyah (The Bezel of the Wisdom of Uniqueness Exists in the Essence of Muḥammad). However, to the author of *Ḥikmat ‘iṣmatīyah fī kalimat al-fāṭimīyah*, *al-Fuṣūṣ* remained incomplete until an independent chapter/bezel on the daughter of the Prophet and the wisdom exists in her essence, or the idea of *‘iṣma*, was added. A focused discussion of this work and its Fatimid-Fuṣūṣ framing is available in [3].

The account of the *‘irfān naẓarī* in the seminary tradition is not complete without mentioning the name and contribution of Seyyed Jalāl al-Dīn Mīrī Āshṭiyānī (d. 1384 SH/2005), who, despite his seminary background, successfully integrated his religious training with ḥikmat philosophy and Ibn ‘Arabī's Sufism. His entire body of writings, including the famous *Sharḥ-e muqadamay-e Qayṣarī* on *Fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam* (Commentary of Qayṣarī's Prologue on *Fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam*), is prominent. Qayṣarī's commentary on *al-Fuṣūṣ* is one of the most famous commentaries among the existing commentaries on *al-Fuṣūṣ*, and has been traditionally used as a training book for the students of mysticism. In a twelve-section prologue to his commentary (*muqadama*), Qayṣarī concisely clarifies the complex themes and concepts of theoretical mysticism. Āshṭiyānī, in line with a number of his predecessors, wrote a commentary on this prologue, famous as *Sharḥ-e muqadam*. In addition, he has written several other commentaries on classical or medieval texts in philosophy, mysticism and Qur'ānic teachings. Related studies of seminary wayfaring and Iranian expositions of theoretical mysticism provide additional context for this commentary tradition [4].

‘Abdullāh Jawādī Āmulī (1933-) is another notable seminarian, who wrote *Aqlānīyat shuhūd; taḥrīr fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam Qayṣarī* (The Rationality of Intuition; The Writing of *Fuṣūṣ ul-ḥikam* Qayṣarī), as a sixteen-volume anthology [5] of all the existing glosses, commentaries and interpretations that have been written on *al-Fuṣūṣ* so far. One can see how Iranian mystics continued to gain inspiration from Qayṣarī and his commentary on *al-Fuṣūṣ* as a window to the intricacies of the teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī. To the author's knowledge, Muḥsin Bābākhānī's *Al-Qawl ul-matīn fī tashayyu‘ al-shaykh al-akbar Muḥya al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī* (The Solid Statement in the Shī'ism of al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muḥya al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī) is one of the latest initiatives by a seminarian who locates Ibn ‘Arabī in the tradition of Shī'ī mystics and calls him a Twelver Sunni. The later Iranian reception of Ibn ‘Arabī, including the Bābākhānī case noted here, is discussed further in [6].

However, this is not the complete story of the Shī'a seminaries and their exposure to *‘irfān naẓarī*, because the mainstream ḥawza stood against it, a trajectory that continues into the present era. By the term *ḥawza*, I mean the contemporary Shī'a seminaries that came to the fore in the early twentieth century, starting with the Qom Seminary, which was built by Ayatollah ‘Abdulkarīm Ḥā'irī Yazdī (d. 1315 SH/1937) in 1301 SH/1922. Otherwise, *‘irfān naẓarī* was part of the teaching materials of traditional madrasas since Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 671-73 H/1274) onwards. It is to be mentioned that a madrasa usually covered a wide range of educational tiers, while seminary was constrained to theology, jurisprudence, Quran and ḥadīth. From this perspective, Ibn ‘Arabī's Sufism remained largely excluded

from the ḥawza curriculum and, because of the institution's male-dominated structure, was inaccessible to female students. The abovementioned figures were indeed exceptional who pursued their interest out of the formal curriculum, facing difficulties such as self-isolation or rejection by peers and authorities of the seminary. This tension between ethical-intellectual traditions and institutional orthodoxy also appears in broader discussion of modern Iranian ethical thought [7].

CONCLUSION

The manuscript shows that Ibn 'Arabī's theoretical mysticism maintained a durable but uneven presence in modern Iranian seminary culture through a series of exceptional scholars, commentaries, and independent lines of study. At the same time, its limited integration into the formal ḥawza curriculum, the predominance of jurist-theological orthodoxy, and the male-dominated structure of seminary education constrained broader curricular access. The cases discussed therefore illuminate both the intellectual continuity of Akbarian thought in Iran and the institutional boundaries within which that continuity developed.

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